



STATISTICAL COMMISSION  
Eighth session  
Item 11 (g) of the provisional agenda

PROGRESS REPORT ON VITAL STATISTICS ACTIVITIES  
(Memorandum prepared by the Secretary-General)

1. At its seventh session, the Statistical Commission gave its approval to the Principles for a Vital Statistics System (E/2365, annex 3). These recommendations for the improvement and standardization of vital statistics were subsequently approved by the Economic and Social Council at its fifteenth session by resolution 469 (XV) D. This memorandum is a progress report on the continuing programme of the Statistical Office in the field of vital statistics and on the activities for the implementation of the Principles.

CONTINUING PROGRAMME

2. Among the functions of the central statistical unit of the Secretariat (E/39, Chapter IV), as set forth by the Statistical Commission at its first session in 1946 were (1) the collection, critical examination, evaluation and publication of statistics; (2) the co-ordination of statistical activities; and (3) the promotion of development and improvement of statistics. Work in each of these functions goes on continuously and simultaneously.

Collection and publication:

3. The collection, examination, evaluation, and publication of vital statistics have been carried on systematically since 1947. The incidence and characteristics of live births, stillbirths, deaths, infant deaths, marriages, and divorces have been published regularly in the five issues of the Demographic Yearbook, in the

quarterly Population and Vital Statistics Reports (Statistical Papers Series A), and in the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics. The contents of the Yearbook have varied from year to year as different subjects receive special emphasis but in the basic and recurring tables the geographic coverage has increased steadily until, for example, in the 1953 Yearbook, 143 geographic areas appear in the tables of annual live-birth and death rates in contrast to 94 for which data were published in the 1948 issue.

4. In respect of evaluation, a "quality" code has been developed for live-birth, death, marriage, and divorce statistics, which classifies national data as (1) those stated to be complete or virtually complete, and (2) those stated to represent incomplete coverage or to be subject to considerable irregularity of registration. This classification is admittedly rather crude and elementary, but it is hoped that in the future progress may be made toward a more uniform, objective, and detailed appraisal.

Co-ordination:

5. In the field of statistical co-ordination, the Statistical Office and the World Health Organization have arranged a detailed agreement for the systematic exchange of information and co-ordinated publication plans. A similar arrangement exists with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and with branches of the Secretariat, under which the Statistical Office provides demographic data needed by these agencies.

Promotion of improvement:

6. International recommendations - The promotion of the development and improvement of vital statistics has involved a number of facets, chief of which is, of course, the completion of the Principles for a Vital Statistics System and their publication as Statistical Papers Series M, No. 19, in English, French, and Spanish. As a first step in implementing the Principles, copies were distributed to all Member Governments; to all central statistical offices throughout the world; to all national departments of health which have responsibilities in the vital statistics field; and to national registrars of births, deaths, and marriages. Individuals with particular interest in demographic

statistics, as well as statistical consultants in the field and participants in the first international Conference of National Committees on Vital and Health Statistics, were also provided with copies. As a consequence of this wide circularization, requests for additional supplies have been received from several National Committees, as well as from such widely separated institutions as the School of Public Health in Seoul, Korea and that at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, both of which will use the Principles as the text for the vital-statistics course. They also formed the basis of the course on vital-statistics methods presented at the Inter-American Centre of Biostatistics in Santiago, Chile from 2 April to 16 July 1953 (see para. 9 below).

7. Handbook - In response to a Commission recommendation (E/1696, para. 88) the Secretariat has in final stages of preparation a Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods, which incorporates the findings of the study of methods of registration and compilation of vital statistics in 66 sovereign countries of the world.

8. Since the Principles for a Vital Statistics System (see above) were also developed from the same study of national procedures, the Handbook is, in a sense, an elaboration of the bases of each of the Principles and a presentation of the extent to which the recommendations have been adopted in each country. The forthcoming edition will, therefore, constitute a general course of study in vital statistics methods, as well as a reference handbook on country procedure.

9. Training and demonstration - The Inter-American Centre of Biostatistics in Santiago, Chile is an example of a co-ordinated programme of training and demonstration in the field of biostatistics. The Centre, which was formally opened 21 August 1952, is sponsored by the Government of Chile, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations (the Technical Assistance Administration and the Statistical Office) and has as its objective the improvement of vital statistics and health statistics in Latin America. The instructional methods used are a combination of the academic and the practical. Full-time experts in vital statistics and in health statistics are working with the Government of Chile in improving the national statistical services in these fields so that they may serve as demonstration services for officials from all parts of Latin America. The academic part of the programme is carried on in the School of Public Health of the University of Chile, utilizing both Chilean and non-Chilean personnel.

A 9-month course, which includes vital-statistics methods, health-statistics methods, statistical methodology, machine tabulation methods, a field project, and a supervised individual research problem, is given each year. During the first year (1953), 30 regular and 13 special trainees from 15 different Latin American countries attended the course. Those complying with the established requirements receive a certificate conferred by the University of Chile through the Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty under which the School of Public Health functions.

#### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PRINCIPLES

##### Demonstration project:

10. The "continuous" nature of the process of improving statistics both quantitatively and qualitatively is well recognized. In the field of vital statistics, the definite need for such continuing action was clearly brought out in the analysis of Types of Vital Statistics at Present Available in Different Countries (WHO-UN/Conf. Nat. Com/8) presented at the Conference of National Committees on Vital and Health Statistics mentioned previously. According to data presented in that paper, even the most basic and summary types of vital statistics, i.e., total live births and total deaths, are available for only about 50 per cent of the world's population. In the face of such inadequate world coverage, it is clear that some method must be found to stimulate the production of at least summary counts of births and deaths in many parts of the world.

11. One method of attacking the problem in areas where data are not readily available is to concentrate available national resources, both professional and financial, in selected areas instead of disbursing them ineffectually over the entire national area. As noted in the vital statistics Principles, these "areas" may be selected according to degree of development, i.e., those already producing statistics which meet certain national criteria of adequacy, or they may be selected by a sampling procedure designed to produce statistics representative of the country as a whole.

12. The need for exploring the possibility of applying sampling methods to the reporting, collection, and compilation phases of the vital statistics system was expressly pointed out by the Commission at its seventh session (Principle 107). The idea was also considered at the Conference of National Committees on Vital and Health Statistics (WHO-UN/Conf. Nat. Com/15). The applicability of the theory will need to be tested by setting up demonstration projects in appropriate areas. It is emphasized, however, that the use of sampling to secure vital statistics on a national basis is in no way a substitute for the establishment of a vital registration system and the obtaining of vital statistics by the registration method. It is simply an interim measure designed to produce estimates of the summary data and to stimulate development by example until such times as these data can be obtained more efficiently from the conventional vital statistics system.

Population registers:

13. In vital statistics Principle 109, the Statistical Commission noted that, although the value of inter-relating vital records into a continuous register system of population accounting was well recognized, the establishment of such systems should be contingent upon an evaluation of the statistical advantages to be obtained. At its sixth session, the Commission had indicated the advisability of "making a detailed study of the population-accounting systems now in use, so that Governments desiring such information could receive advice on the purposes served by such population registers, and the procedures for developing and maintaining them" (E/1994, para. 35). A start has been made on this project in the sense that bibliographical references to available material have begun to be assembled and a file of materials initiated. However, no attempt has been made to launch the study on a systematic basis. In view of the interest attached to this project and the limited resources available, the Statistical Commission may wish to indicate its continuing interest and the form which the study should take.

Recommendations for less developed areas:

14. When the Principles were considered and approved at its seventh session, the Commission expressed the view that they should not be considered as limited

to any particular group of countries but rather should be considered as a goal or target for countries developing vital statistics by the registration method. Nonetheless, it was fully recognized that the problems of countries not yet at a stage where the registration method is completely applicable require more detailed study and, to meet this need, the Secretariat is continuing the analysis of procedures and methods now on file for 48 non-self-governing territories. This analysis is in accord with the proposal of the Commission at its sixth session, when in the course of the discussion on draft recommendations for improvement of vital statistics, attention was called to the "advisability and urgency of broadening the project of developing principles in the field of vital statistics to include advice for countries which were not yet at a stage of development where they could contemplate the adoption of the conventional registration system and for which, therefore, alternative methods of collecting vital statistics must be considered" (E/1994, para. 34). The exploratory work on a demonstration project for the development of vital statistics, envisioned in paras. 10-12 above, would necessarily be closely integrated with this study.

-----