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THE NEW FORMAT OF THE SURVEY OF ECONOMIC  
AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN AFRICA

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1. Origin and Function of the Survey: The Survey of Economic and Social Conditions in Africa is prepared by ECA since 1968 in direct compliance with its terms of reference which require that it:

" (a) Initiate and participate in measures for facilitating concerted action for the economic development of Africa, including its social aspects, with a view to raising the level of economic activity and levels of living in Africa, and for maintaining and strengthening the economic relations of countries and territories of Africa, both among themselves and with other countries of the world;

(b) Make or sponsor such investigations and studies of economic and technological problems and developments within the territories of Africa as the Commission deems appropriate, and disseminate the results of such investigations and studies;

(c) Undertake or sponsor the collection, evaluation and dissemination of such <sup>1/</sup> economic, technological and statistical information as the Commission deems appropriate.

It is quite evident that to promote development and co-operation among African countries, the ECA must ground itself on the continuous study of the development process in the African region, and that the results of this study must be distributed among member States.

The Survey is in this respect one of the most important documents published by the ECA Secretariat, since it is the instrument through which, the development process in the African region is monitored on a regular and systematic basis, the problems encountered and the results achieved, analysed, and a basis thus established for policy formulation. In addition, the fact that planning, despite its shortcomings, has become willy-nilly, the main instrument of government action in the development field, renders it imperative to take stock at regular intervals of the course of development in order to compare objectives and achievements and take any corrective measures required. Of course, the contents of an economic survey are more or less determined by its very nature and there is not much room in fact for variations, but improvement is possible in many respects and several formats are possible from a review of past trends to the outlook form or what is called "budget économique" in the French system. In the following parts of this paper an account will be given of the development of the Survey of Economic and Social Conditions. The new format chosen since 1980/1981 will be discussed and some suggestions given as to the support expected from planning offices in the preparation of the Survey.

<sup>1/</sup> Source: Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure of the Economic Commission for Africa, E/CN.14/III/Rev.3.

2. Brief History of the Survey: The first Survey publication by the ECA was in 1968 and covered the period 1960-64. It was preceded by the landmark "Survey of Economic Situation of Africa since 1950" prepared in 1959 by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and by the ECA Economic Bulletin which had been covering the African economy since ECA's inception in 1958. The 1968 Survey was followed in 1969 by the "Survey of Economic Conditions in Africa, 1968" which covered developments in the African economy during 1960-1967 and from then the Survey became a regular yearly publication. The pattern was established that the Survey published in a specific year will cover developments in the past year, since information was at best available for that period. In fact, this was not in most cases feasible because there was at least a two-years (and still is) gap in the information available. This information constraint limited the Survey to an analysis of past trends, something which was not in itself a serious limitation since policies and programmes have to start from the knowledge of the past. Moreover in the conditions existing in the late 1960s forecasting even the most basic macro-economic variables was not possible in view not only of the lack of data, but even more because of the poor quality of what was available.

Starting from 1969, in addition to the review of economic trends, a special study was prepared dealing each year with a specific development issue. In 1969 the topic chosen, was the typology of African economies, a study carried out by Prof. Pickett of Strathclyde University in Britain. The special study was intended to be of a research character and to be a contribution to the study of African development problems at a deeper level than the review of past trends.

A further innovation was introduced in 1975, the Survey covering from then on social developments as well as economic ones. Moreover, it was decided to develop the country coverage of the Survey and to publish both a regional analysis and a country by country analysis of the economic and social situation. The time coverage of the Survey was focused on the two first-years preceding publication, so that along with complete data on the penultimate year, at least provisional data and if possible forecasts were given for the year preceding the year of publication.

One drawback of the changes introduced was that if the Survey apparently became more relevant—since it was giving now country per country information — it was also very bulky and in practice very difficult to assimilate. Moreover the country reviews were perforce very limited in scope and the loss in readability of the whole document was not made up for, by the additional information given by the country reviews. For these reasons starting from the 1980-1981 Survey, it was decided to eliminate the part on country reviews (though they are still prepared by the staff) and enrich rather the regional analysis as far as possible by country information and country case studies. At the same time, a statistical annex supplying, on a country basis, the most important economic variables and social indicators was added. Also for the first time a forecast of the main macro-economic variables for the region as a whole and for the main country groupings was introduced. This latter exercise was not very successful as shown by the results published in the 1981-1982 Survey. In this latter

Survey, the forecasting method was changed to produce hopefully more realistic figures and the price base for national accounts moved to 1980 which is a better base than 1970 since it incorporates the vast changes in the price system since 1975.

The Survey is now a self-contained document organized in the following way:

1. an over-all analysis of the economic situation in the region with forecasts for the year following the year of publication;
2. an analysis of the situation and trends in the main production sectors;
3. an analysis of the foreign balance situation with foreign resources flows;
4. a study on one aspect of the social situation which will change with the year;
5. a special topic chosen in consideration to the development problems facing the region;
6. a statistical annex giving in a concise way the most important development indicators for all the member States of the Commission.

The objective is to make of the Survey an efficient tool for policy makers in African countries, assisting them in identifying problems and drawing up appropriate policy measures. It is hoped that, with time, progress will be made towards the outlook format, where the emphasis is on forecasting and on the policy measures associated. This will be a slow process given the data situation and the difficulty of covering 50 independent member States.

4. Assistance Required from member States: Progress will anyway be possible only if the necessary support is obtained from member States and specifically from the planning and statistical offices. In the present situation information for the Survey is collected in the following way:

- (a) through sending a questionnaire to the planning offices according to resolution 404 (XVI) and resolution 460 (XVIII) of the Conference of Ministers. The questionnaire includes statistical information and a short review of the economic situation of each country. The response to this questionnaire has been unfortunately very poor.
- (b) through field missions by the staff of the Socio-economic Research and Planning Division: this is a practice started since 1975 and which involves visits every year 25 to 30 countries. The countries are chosen in accordance with criteria like GDP, population, region, etc. in order to supply the best coverage possible. But the limited funds available make it sometimes necessary to exclude "small" countries.
- (c) through country consultants: in some countries, economists working in the planning ministry or other related institutions have been hired to write surveys of their countries. This has created some problems because of the poor quality of the work in some cases and of the long delays of compilation. However the small number of country consultants which have been retained (i.e. in Ethiopia, Tunisia, Ghana, Togo and Morocco) have produced high quality work and the

- (d) through documents sent to the Commission by countries and through other sources (other international organizations, private organizations, the economic press).

To overcome the above problems and to consistently upgrade the Survey it is imperative that:

- (a) countries supply information through the questionnaire in a continuous way;
- (b) that field missions sent by the Research Division be given more support in the countries by the planning offices in order to gather information and have more organized contacts and more discussions on substantive matters with the institutions concerned by economic policy.

Some countries are experiencing difficulties in filling up the questionnaire which may be too detailed. In this respect the Secretariat hopes that planning offices will send their written comments on the questionnaire. On this basis a more adapted questionnaire will be drawn up and put into use.

Formal links should be established between the Secretariat through the Socio-economic Research and Planning Division and a contact planning office official who would be responsible for relations with the Secretariat and who would then follow-up questions related to the supply of information and the organization of the work concerning the Survey.

An additional step should be to co-ordinate the Survey work carried out by each country and the Survey made at the Secretariat level. In this way not only exchange of information would take place but also Secretariat missions would have the opportunity to exchange views with the Survey team, of each country. These contacts could then go beyond the analysis of the current issues, to include policy measures envisaged by the governments.