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NOTES FOR DISCUSSION ON STATISTICAL DEVELOPMENT

1. The following notes relate to the working paper, Statistical Development in Africa (E/CN.14/CAS.4/DEV/1), and are intended to suggest some of the points which may require further examination. The notes are based on the views expressed by recent sub-regional meetings of African statisticians, which considered a shorter version of the paper, and on comments received from other sources. It is, however, hoped that the Working Group of Statisticians and Planners will be able to make a very much wider examination of the whole field of statistical development under African conditions. The arrangement of the notes corresponds with that of the text of the working paper.

Information requirements and uses

2. It has been suggested that the principal requirement for planning purposes is a statistical account which gives reasonably wide coverage of economic and social structure and current activities and which pays particular attention to the relationships between sectors. This is, of course, related to the more comprehensive approach to planning, where development priorities and the probable effects of projects are assessed within the context of the overall situation.

3. However, it must be appreciated that planning is often approached in a somewhat different way by first examining the feasibility of possible individual projects and then trying to incorporate them in a co-ordinated plan. The question is whether such an approach gives rise to any different statistical requirements and it is suggested that it does not, at least so far as central statistical offices are concerned. Collection of data for

evaluation of individual projects is normally carried out by the ministries immediately responsible and a comprehensive statistical account is needed in achieving co-ordination between projects.

4. For the reasons indicated above and in the working paper, it has been proposed that a comprehensive and highly integrated statistical programme should be the principal objective. The status of national accounts has been examined in this connection because the accounts are the only available means of amalgamating data relating to a wide variety of subjects and the working paper concludes that they do involve a considerable part of any statistical programme. In particular, they are concerned with much of the information relating to production and distribution, household transactions, public finance, capital formation, balance of payments and external trade.

5. The items not directly covered by national accounts statistics are structural data on human and material resources, quantities of current production and distribution, and specialised data of a financial nature. Nevertheless, much of this information is closely associated with the compilation of national accounts estimates.

6. To complete the picture of essential statistical requirements it is also necessary to take into account the information needed for purposes other than planning. It has been suggested that the principal items include the more detailed trade data needed by commercial firms and information on particular problems and projects to which a statistical office may be required to devote special attention. Perhaps mention should also be made of the data needed in making day-to-day decisions, e.g. crop forecasts which form the background to current trade policy. However, such data usually fall outside the scope of work of a central statistical office.

7. The above considerations help to indicate the desirable content of a statistical programme and the way in which its various branches are related, thus providing a means of developing a well balanced information service. However, apart from a few basic elements, such as balance of payments, capital formation, and demographic statistics, no attempt has been made to suggest priorities within the programme. This is because countries have

specifically stated that decisions on this matter have to be taken at the national level. Nevertheless, it might be possible to say something about the intensity of investigations needed in analysing particular economic sectors and about the different planning objectives which would influence the balance within statistical programmes.

8. The balance of a work programme is not, of course, entirely dependent on objectives connected with data applications. The difficulties and costs of collecting information are another important factor and problems in this connection arise principally in respect of data which have to be collected by direct means. For this reason the development of household statistics is proceeding rather slowly and the coverage of industrial statistics is often incomplete and inadequately measured. A further point is that the importance of some subjects, particularly household statistics, may be under-estimated.

Statistical organisation

9. Most of the topics considered under the heading of statistical organisation have already been examined in some detail by previous meetings and it is therefore necessary to consider only those questions where differing views still exist. Some of these are indicated below.

10. It has been suggested in the working paper that, with certain exceptions, statistical services should be highly centralised in the early stages of development. Recent discussions have, however, indicated that, although countries may be in agreement with this as a general principle, particularly with respect to general economic and social data, many are not actively working towards centralisation because of staff shortages in statistical offices and the feeling that statistical work can be developed more rapidly if use is made of technical personnel in other ministries. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that there should be strong central co-ordination of all statistical activities and committees are being widely used for this purpose. It may perhaps be worth considering whether such committee operations can be fully effective without taking up a great deal of time of

professional staff. These remarks are, of course, applicable to statistical services in the earlier stages of development and it is appreciated that the expansion of activities in the later stages might tend to lead to less centralisation.

11. The suggestion that design of enquiries, drafting of questionnaires, etc. and the planning of processing procedures should be concentrated in a statistical planning unit in the central statistical office has already brought to light some differences in outlook and the position is as follows. One country already has a technical planning section which prepares draft schemes for wider consideration and another is developing a methods and standards unit. In other countries, shortage of professional manpower has resulted in technical planning becoming largely the responsibility of the head and senior staff of the statistical office. Nevertheless, there is a feeling that, as soon as conditions permit, it is desirable for professional officers in charge of individual sections to have a high degree of responsibility for the planning of work in their own fields. Considerable importance is attached to the use of a committee stage before the implementation of important operations to enable all interested persons to express their views on the final arrangements and to provide the means of making detailed modifications where necessary.

12. In the comments dealing with the initial arrangement of substantive work it has been suggested that a national accounts section might be established at an early stage of development. This is because the accounts provide a useful means of indicating gaps in the statistical programme and thus give guidance in achieving its balanced development. They also constitute a first attempt at comprehensive economic analysis. It is appreciated that estimates compiled in the early stages would be very crude and certainly should not be published. However, a number of countries take the view that it is better to concentrate first on the development of basic series and to leave national accounts until a later stage. This is somewhat different from what has been said in the working paper, which suggests that a satisfactory programme of statistics can be developed only if the general pattern of requirements is kept in view from the very beginning of operations. The question therefore needs further consideration.

13. The arrangement of substantive subjects at a later stage of development is important in that it is a continuing administrative problem in many statistical offices. However, there are many solutions which can be effective because the arrangement is necessarily a compromise between the nature of the subjects and the methods of data collection. It may be possible to suggest some improvements in the list of subjects shown in paragraph 126 of the working paper.

Programme of work

14. After the general consideration of statistical requirements and the practical aspects of organising the work in the earlier parts of the paper, this section discusses the development of individual subjects in more detail.

15. One general comment made about this section is that more reference might have been made to the development and uses of specific series. This has not been done in the working paper because many of the essential series are listed in Annex II and because the aim is to present the general objectives and practical arrangements in respect of each subject as concisely as possible, bearing in mind the need to achieve an integrated programme of work. The introduction of too much detail on individual series would reduce the possibility of giving a comprehensive view of the situation and it would not be desirable to repeat details which are already published in international manuals, etc. dealing with the various subjects. However, there may be some important omissions which need to be corrected.

16. The other points referred to below concern comments on specific items and no attempt is made to review the position for each subject, although this should, as far as possible, be done during the course of the discussion.

17. The status of national accounts in relation to statistical programmes has already been referred to elsewhere in these notes. Comments made in the working paper may need to be revised in the light

of the recommendations of the Working Group which meets from 14 to 20 July to examine the revision of the SNA under African conditions. It is also necessary to give some consideration to the suggestion that input-output analysis might be approached through an arrangement which does not initially take full account of inter-industry transactions.

18. The collection and compilation of satisfactory data on financial flows and balances is a problem of particular difficulty and is important in view of the development efforts in African countries. More specific guidance needs to be given on how this work might be approached.

19. Although there is growing interest in the use of sample population surveys, few countries have so far carried these enquiries on a large scale except in conjunction with a complete enumeration of population. In paragraph 171, the working paper suggests that, under suitable circumstances, such surveys might be an effective substitute for the traditional census and would have the advantage of enabling more intensive investigation of economic and social characteristics. It is necessary to consider whether this suggestion is, in fact, justified under present African conditions.

20. In the case of investigations designed to produce vital statistics, reference is made in paragraph 175 to retrospective surveys and to surveys taken at different points of time with the object of recording changes. It should perhaps be pointed out that these are not necessarily alternative methods and that there is a growing feeling that they should be used in conjunction if satisfactory results are to be achieved.

21. Manpower statistics are of significance for development planning, but the working paper does not place great stress on them because few countries have so far attempted to develop special enquiries for this purpose. The position needs some further examination, bearing in mind that these enquiries can be fairly expensive if carried out on a large enough scale to be effective.

22. In paragraph 241 of the working paper it has been suggested that there would be advantages in obtaining employment statistics by means of the same questionnaires as are used for current industrial statistics. This would reduce the number of separate enquiries directed to business firms, but there are several objections to the arrangement. The first arises from the nature of the records maintained by enterprises. Data on production, transactions, etc. might be centralised in head offices, but information on employment is often available only at establishment level. It is also felt that employment statistics should relate to a single point of time for all branches of industry and that this is easier to achieve if their collection is a separate operation. Finally, it has been pointed out that information on employment is easier to obtain than that on other aspects of industrial activity and therefore provides a useful means of co-ordinating less complete industrial statistics, provided questionnaires relating to the latter contain a limited amount of employment data. Many countries consider that this advantage outweighs any disadvantages arising from the use of separate enquiries and duplication in data collection. Under these circumstances it appears that the suggestion concerning the collection of employment and industrial statistics in one operation may be unsatisfactory, at least under present conditions.

23. Statistics of enterprises have been considered in three groups according to methods of data collection. There are the larger enterprises which keep accounts and can be recorded in a permanent register. These can supply information largely by postal questionnaires. Secondly, there are the smaller enterprises which may not keep adequate accounts and cannot be registered on an up-to-date basis. They call for investigation by direct enumeration, usually by means of area samples. Finally, there are the enterprises which are closely linked with household activities and cannot be identified as separate units. These also need direct enumeration. It is appreciated that, for practical purposes, some further breakdown is required within these groups, but the question is whether the general approach

is satisfactory. It should also be noted that there has been some criticism of the suggestion that transactions associated with household enterprise and domestic activities need to be investigated in the same enquiry since households make no adequate distinction between them.

24. For household statistics it has been suggested that, in the initial stages, surveys should utilise rather intensive records which give a full account of all activities and enable the development of suitable methodology. Only after this has been done is it possible to introduce simpler and less expensive methods with some confidence. Secondly, it has been suggested that surveys should aim at reasonably wide geographical coverage. This involves some sacrifice of accuracy in respect of activities in which only a small proportion of households are engaged or which have uneven geographical distribution. If these suggestions are accepted, the result is a general type of household survey with transactions records as its central theme and which is aimed at producing a crude but comprehensive account of activities in the whole sector. It should be noted that this type of survey also accommodates the collection of a considerable amount of structural information during the enumeration of the first stage of the sample and it is also possible to achieve co-ordination with more specialised investigations such as the collection of current agricultural statistics.

25. Some of the comments received on the household statistics section in the working paper suggest that more might have been said about alternative survey arrangements. However, under the circumstances described above, alternatives are somewhat limited. Experience indicates that very careful work is necessary in the initial stages if possibilities of failure are to be avoided, while, at the same time, wide geographical coverage is required if results are to be useful. In addition, it must be remembered that the number of different kinds of survey which can be undertaken in any given period is also strictly limited. Bearing in mind the scarcity of resources, particularly at the supervisory level, the aim should be survey arrangements which

are relatively simple to operate, but which do, nevertheless, provide the essential framework of information.

26. There is one final point relating to household statistics which has already been mentioned in paragraph 8 above. Households are responsible for a large proportion of existing African production, they supply labour for new industrial development and their welfare should be the principal ultimate objective of planning. It would therefore appear that information about households is important for development efforts, but this branch of statistics nevertheless remains relatively underdeveloped in most countries. It is necessary to consider whether this is due entirely to practical difficulties and costs or whether there is some other reason.