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SILVER JUBILEE ANNIVERSARY MEETINGS
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STATISTICAL SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Executive summary*

* The present document constitutes the main document for consideration.

CONTENTS

	<u>Paragraphs</u>	<u>Page</u>
I. INTRODUCTION - - - - -	1 - 2	1
II. BACKGROUND- - - - -	3 - 8	1
III. CONSTRAINTS ON STATISTICAL DEVELOPMENT-- -	9 - 16	2
IV. IMPROVEMENT OF AFRICAN STATISTICS - - -	17	3
A. The Government - - - - -	18 - 23	3
B. National statistical service - - -	24 - 26	4
C. International agencies - - - - -	27 - 28	5
V. RECOMMENDED ACTION BY THE CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS - - - - -	29 - 30	5

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Conference of Ministers is invited to consider the role of quantitative information in African development, particularly in the context of the Lagos Plan of Action. The main thesis of the present paper is that effective implementation of the Plan requires a satisfactory supply of economic and social data for all countries of the region. Without such information, development efforts and attempts to solve current problems have to rely largely on guesswork which, together with other constraints, cannot lead to economic and social advancement.

2. The paper therefore summarizes the main factors affecting the performance of national statistical services, which are the agencies responsible for producing the necessary quantitative information, and proposes the action required to improve that performance. It should be understood that the situation is complex and the problems and solutions identified are not necessarily relevant to all African countries. Nevertheless the problems are sufficiently general to be a matter of serious concern to the Conference of Ministers. If they can be eliminated, there will be greater prospects not only for better national planning but also for further achievements by subregional groupings and for the success of regional development efforts.

II. BACKGROUND

3. All recent reports have indicated that African economies are facing great difficulties and that some are actually deteriorating. The ECA Executive Secretary has warned of an economic crisis likely to develop in the mid-1980s. Economic problems are necessarily reflected in social conditions, which are thus equally adverse.

4. One response of ECA member States to this situation has been the Lagos Plan of Action which calls for collective self-reliance while maintaining all normal external relationships. The Plan prescribes study of the more important aspects of economic and social conditions but its implementation clearly requires integrated and comprehensive data which show not only the relative magnitudes of the problems to be solved but also the interrelations between them.

5. Many attempts have been made to provide a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the African economic situation and ECA does so regularly in its annual Survey of Economic and Social Conditions.

These efforts have achieved only limited success. One reason is of course the diversity of conditions throughout the region which makes any kind of comprehensive analysis difficult, but the main trouble is lack of basic data.

6. The shortfall in data for analysis at the regional level is due to the meagre supplies of information from individual African countries. National statistical services have certainly improved since independence but progress has been too slow and data output is too small for both regional purposes and national development efforts.

7. Problems of African statistics have been examined carefully by the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers. At its first

session in 1980 the Joint Conference came to the conclusion that better data analysis would not only make statistics easier to use but also ensure closer collaboration between data producers and users. This was a step forward but it is now clear that data applications are a more fundamental consideration in statistical development. The position will be explained later in this paper.

8. The Conference of Ministers has also reviewed the African statistical situation regularly through reports presented to it and has approved action on some specific topics relating to surveys, training, etc. However the time has now come when the over-all question of priority in the collection and use of data must be faced squarely. In a situation where existing pragmatic planning is clearly not proving successful, the Conference may feel that the problem merits some thought.

III. CONSTRAINTS ON STATISTICAL DEVELOPMENT

9. African Governments have invariably affirmed the importance of statistical information but the priority given to collection, processing, analysis and use of data remains low. There is still a preference for more visible projects in both government budgets and external aid programmes.

10. In the absence of a consistent effort to improve the supply of data, governments have adopted a pragmatic and non-technical approach to planning, which itself perpetuates a low demand for data. Unfortunately this approach has not proved satisfactory and developing countries have found it difficult to compete in the adverse trading conditions of the present global recession and to achieve effective internal economic and social structures. In addition it has to be noted that some people still genuinely believe that quantitative data are not necessary for planning purposes.

11. No one would claim that better statistics can supply a complete answer to current problems but at least they can put the problems in their proper perspective and help in examining their causes.

12. The low priority attached to quantitative information has had a notably adverse effect on many national statistical services. One problem is a continuing brain drain at the professional level which has not been offset by the training of new staff. Staff losses at the senior level have led to management weaknesses which have resulted in underutilization of available statistical resources. This is the main cause of late data delivery, particularly from surveys, and has itself discouraged Governments from taking greater interest in statistical development.

13. In a situation where they are not receiving active encouragement, many heads of statistical services have tended to concentrate on day-to-day work, neglecting the establishment of contacts with other government organizations and with the local representatives of international and bilateral agencies. This has placed many statistical services in a relatively poor position to claim priority in the allocation of government budget resources and in external assistance programmes.

14. Two other problems should also be noted. An additional factor leading to the slow production of statistics is a bottleneck at the data processing stage which arises largely because statisticians have not kept themselves adequately informed of rapidly developing computer technology. The result is a separation of the data collection and processing functions, with additional organizational problems and an uneven flow of work.

15. There is also a problem of separation at the international level. Various different agencies are responsible for providing technical assistance in their own fields of activity and, in spite of efforts by the United Nations Statistical Commission, the work is not always co-ordinated as well as it should be. In addition, international statistical recommendations tend to stop short at the data processing and tabulation stage and do not give enough guidance on data analysis and applications which have to be regarded as a separate issue.

16. The over-all position in the light of the foregoing comments is that there is certainly an awareness of the need for quantitative information but its production and use is by no means satisfactory. The faults lie with both the producer and the users of data and a special initiative is needed to accelerate the process of statistical development. This need not be very expensive and the main lines of action are outlined in the next section.

IV. IMPROVEMENT OF AFRICAN STATISTICS

17. The action needed to ensure faster development of national statistical services can be classified fairly easily into three groups which indicate the responsibility for such action: the government, the national statistical service itself and international agencies. However it must again be emphasized that conditions differ widely between countries and the steps to be taken in each country have to be worked out on an individual basis.

A. The Government

18. Much greater emphasis should be placed on the end-product of statistical operations, which is data applications. If the ways in which statistics will be used for specific purposes can be properly identified, it becomes much easier to determine the kinds of analysis to be carried out and, in turn, the processing and data collection requirements. It is appreciated that there is an interaction between the supply and use of data because additional applications emerge when new data become available, but a conscious effort to identify the applications can do much to accelerate the production of data.

19. In order to do their work satisfactorily, statistical services must have an adequate supply of trained personnel. Progress is already being made in this connexion through the Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA) and a detailed study of statistical organization and training needs is being undertaken in collaboration with the European Economic Community (EEC). However training alone is not sufficient and Governments must have a good working environment, which means that their assignments have to be challenging and interesting.

20. Data processing facilities and other supporting resources (paper, printing, transport, etc.) must be assured to avoid operational delays in data production. In one African country recently, work on foreign trade statistics was halted for lack of paper for computer printouts. Such problems derive not so much from budgetary constraints as from inefficient procurement.
21. In order to view statistical activities in their proper perspective and assign a clearly understood priority to the work, countries should prepare statistical development programmes and incorporate them in their national development plans. This is an important recommendation of the Lagos Plan of Action and has implications for the local financing of national statistical activities. It should be borne in mind that the cost of statistical services in Africa, when developed effectively and including field survey organizations, is not likely to exceed 0.5 per cent of the central government budget.
22. The statistical development programme should specify the objectives to be achieved during the period of the national plan and the means by which this will be done. In addition the programme should provide a basis for monitoring the performance of the statistical service. It is necessary to check continuously on the implementation of new developments and on whether outputs are delivered in good time.
23. To ensure that the most effective use is made of data, government planning agencies, both centralized and in specific ministries, should be encouraged to adopt a more systematic and technical approach to their work, which would also overcome the disadvantages of the present ad hoc pragmatic planning arrangements. It follows that better training of planners has to be considered along with the training of statisticians.

B. National statistical service

24. More use should be made of national statistics committees for the planning and co-ordination of activities and for the preparation of realistic and integrated statistical development programmes. One of the aims of these committees should be to improve day-to-day contact between statistical services, their user clients and the suppliers of data.
25. Statistical services must demonstrate the ability to issue regular statistical publications and reports on surveys, etc., in a timely manner. In many countries this requires an improvement in managerial performance rather than additional resources and is essential for gaining government confidence in statistics. It can moreover be achieved through the preparation of annual work programmes within the context of the statistical development programme.
26. To help in overcoming existing serious delays in the production of data, there should be increasingly close involvement of statisticians in computerized data processing. This has to be dealt with in both basic training and subsequent courses, as well as generally in working arrangements.

C. International agencies

27. In organizing external assistance, a more integrated approach is required in examining the statistical needs of individual countries comprehensively instead of treating the various subject fields as separate entities, e.g. the existing special interests in price, national accounts and environment data. There is thus need for further improvement in interagency co-ordination, but it should be noted that multi-subject programmes such as the National Household Survey Capability Programme (NHSCP) and data needed for rural development are an additional strong integrating factor. More use could be made of the United Nations regional commissions in achieving a properly consolidated account of the situation and requirements in individual countries.

28. International statistical recommendations should be extended beyond data collection, processing and tabulation to encompass data analysis and applications. Again this implies a co-ordinated inter-agency effort and would greatly assist Governments in achieving a clearer understanding of data uses and the need for statistics.

V. RECOMMENDED ACTION BY THE CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS

29. The Conference of Ministers is requested to advise on the basic policy issue of whether higher priority should now be accorded to the collection and applications of quantitative information in the region to clarify current economic and social problems and assist in accelerating development. The Conference is further requested to indicate whether it believes the action proposed in the preceding section of this paper to be a satisfactory means of improving African statistics.

30. The Conference is also invited to consider prospects for action in individual countries. It is suggested that Ministers should review the position with their own directors of statistics to ascertain the extent to which statistical performance could be improved without any significant change in resources and also what resources are needed for further development. The ECA secretariat will be prepared to take supporting action in respect of the conclusions reached.