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ECLAC
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

**BRIEFING NOTE ON THE FIRST UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY
TECHNICAL COORDINATION MEETING ON REGIONAL
STATISTICAL INFORMATION**

(Santiago, Chile, 8 May 2001)

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Place and date

The First United Nations Inter-Agency Technical Coordination Meeting on Regional Statistical Information, which was convened by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in accordance with the agreements reached at the Second United Nations Inter-Agency Coordination Meeting for the Latin American and Caribbean Region (15 May 2000), took place at ECLAC headquarters on 8 May 2001. The goals of the meeting were the exchange of ideas, consensus-building and the identification of short- and medium-term actions which would give rise to a gradual harmonization and rationalization of the statistical management activities which are carried out in the region both by United Nations organizations and by regional and sectoral bodies dealing with statistics.

Attendance

The meeting was attended by representatives of the United Nations Secretariat and of the following United Nations programmes and specialized agencies: Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNSAID), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Civil Aviation Organization (CIAO), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The following regional and subregional organizations were also represented: Latin American Integration Association (LAIA), Andean Community, Central American Monetary Council, Inter-American Statistical Institute (IRAs) and Latin American Energy Organization (LOAD).

Agenda

The participants adopted the following agenda:

1. Welcome
2. Adoption of the agenda
3. Background and objectives of the meeting
4. Discussion of:
 - 4.1. International statistical information gathering
 - 4.2. Presentation and dissemination of statistics and indicators by international organizations
5. Conclusions and future actions

Summary of proceedings

After welcoming the participants, the Executive Secretary of ECLAC gave a brief account of the events leading up to the United Nations inter-agency coordination meetings for the Latin American and Caribbean region, as well as the main definitions which had been established at those meetings.

The main objective of the First United Nations Inter-Agency Technical Coordination Meeting on Regional Statistical Information was to make progress towards the harmonization and rationalization of statistical activities. The meeting participants included representatives of regional and subregional organizations which, without being part of the United Nations system, played an important role in the collection, management and dissemination of statistical information in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The achievement in the short term of a clear reduction in the number of requests made for data from the countries would be an important result, but would acquire even greater significance if methodological and data presentation criteria could also be established. The speaker said it was important to maximize the use of the resources assigned to statistical work by each organization, and he invited the organizations to exchange information on that subject.

The Director of the Statistics and Economic Projections Division, after reiterating the importance of the present first inter-agency meeting, emphasized its timeliness, as it was taking place one day before the Statistical Conference of the Americas of ECLAC. He also suggested a procedure for dealing with the various agenda items which was approved by the participants. He then requested the representative of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations to take the floor to report on the efforts being made to achieve statistical harmonization and rationalization between United Nations organizations.

The representative of the United Nations Statistics Division noted that the coordination that they were trying to achieve was very important, and he congratulated ECLAC for its initiative and for having taken into account institutions not belonging to the United Nations system that were dealing with statistics at the regional and subregional levels. He offered to share the experience acquired by his division in 1995 and 1997, when an inventory had been taken of data collection activities in the framework of the Sub-committee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), as it could serve as a starting point for the region in compiling the inventory that was being planned.

He also reported on the discussions relating to the rationalization and harmonization of indicators that had taken place within the Economic and Social Council and on the work being done by his division, together with a group of national experts, in connection with a technical evaluation of the preparation of methods, concepts and methodologies for about 300 official indicators that had been referred to in the various action plans resulting from the world summits and conferences convened by the United Nations in recent years. If harmonization were to be achieved, it would be extremely important to use the same concepts, methods and

nomenclatures; he also offered to share information on that project with the Statistics and Economic Projections Division of ECLAC.

Finally, he said that it was an appropriate time to try to establish coordination links in the field of statistics, as it was clear that there was sufficient political will to achieve that goal, and that the Statistical Conference of the Americas of ECLAC would now be the natural forum in which to continue that coordination.

The participants then all took the floor in turn, describing in their statements a series of proposals and suggestions that should be taken into account in the proposed process of statistical harmonization and rationalization. Those considerations are summarized below.

It was emphasized that the organizations and institutions represented at the meeting were mostly users of information prepared by the countries and that it was therefore very important for the data to be processed according to criteria that would ensure their international comparability. It was thus essential to distinguish between primary data and data summaries, which were based on different macro-statistical schemes.

It was suggested that basic statistics should be harmonized first, as the process would then be simpler and could be carried out more promptly; it was also recognized that it was the statistical summaries that raised the greatest problems in terms of comparability and harmonization. Consideration should thus be given to the possibility of having ECLAC establish the norms to be applied to such data. Similarly, it was emphasized that two factors which affected comparability were the low or almost non-existent level of dissemination of the relevant meta-data and the lack of regional-level purchasing power parities; those issues would have to be resolved as soon as possible.

The participants also agreed that the number of requests made of national reporting offices had to be reduced and that mechanisms should be established to help achieve that objective; it was also agreed that greater interaction between producers and users should be encouraged in order to ensure optimum use of the existing information.

Other problems identified by the delegates included the lack of coherent environmental data and information and the charges which sometimes had to be paid for access to the few existing environmental databases.

The participants recognized the importance of promoting the establishment of harmonized databases in each country to which international organizations could have free access, as the data currently used by those organizations were not sufficiently comparable and in some cases, the countries did not agree with their figures.

Reference was also made to the fact that, as a result of globalization, national data were often no longer sufficient to explain certain local events, as they did not cover the full extent of the actions of transnational corporations.

The participants noted that it was important to improve the representativeness of data at very specific geographical levels, especially in the case of information relating to childhood, health and education, as well as to promote the use of "micro" information, i.e., information at the local or institutional level.

In the opinion of the delegates, the need for the production of highly specialized information and its timely provision by national statistical offices was an unresolved issue. They also observed that those organizations whose work was based on such information were obliged to collect it directly, even through bodies not linked to the national statistical system.

International organizations should specify, with the necessary advance notice, what information they needed and how often and how quickly it would be required. One of those organizations should be designated to assume the responsibility of collecting such information and disseminating it in a timely manner. The participants recognized that the development of practical approaches to the application of international standards and their dissemination for use by the countries in the preparation or presentation of certain basic statistics had proven to be an effective instrument for statistical harmonization at the regional level.

The representative of WHO reported that his institution was using a procedure for collecting basic statistics from the countries that was proving very satisfactory and made it possible to maintain an updated database of 117 indicators which, when disaggregated, amounted to 417. That achievement was the result of a systematic effort that had begun with the preparation of technical guidelines and glossaries. That material had then been provided to the national offices responsible for statistics in that field so that they could organize their databases using uniform criteria and in such a way that the necessary indicators could be obtained by electronic means.

The participants noted that for some time international organizations had been requesting, with increasing insistence, the countries to keep their databases up to date and allow those organizations to access them directly to obtain the necessary information instead of having to request it in the traditional manner. To that end, the establishment of data platforms was also being encouraged so that the countries could be assured that when data were downloaded, the levels of confidentiality required by the countries would be respected. It was also suggested that the statistical offices' Web pages should be the main means of disseminating national data and that international organizations should have access to those data free of charge.

It was recognized that the provision of data by the countries and organizations responsible for their collection was a serious issue in terms of complying with the schedules of statistical activities undertaken by the international organizations that were users of that information. Each international organization participating in the harmonization process also needed to know exactly what the statistical tasks and responsibilities of the others were.

The participants agreed that it was important to have the political will of the countries and relevant national institutions in order to pursue statistical harmonization processes and emphasized that the issue of the timeliness of data should always be borne in mind. An effort had

to be made to ensure that the results of household and business and establishment surveys were made available in a more timely manner.

Another concern mentioned by the participants was the lack of an analysis of how information was collected and of how long it took to make it available to users, as well as of the shortcomings of national statistics in areas such as households and unpaid employment.

Social surveys also contained large gaps in primary information, particularly in respect of gender-related aspects. As viewed from the gender perspective, national statistics had to take account of such aspects as the use of time and unpaid domestic work.

The participants noted with great concern that in various countries there had been a significant deterioration in systems for the collection of primary data on vital events.

A more timely and less costly way would have to be devised for interested parties in each country to access manuals, classifications and technical standards relating to the production of statistics. The participants also underscored the need to promote the development of all aspects of a statistical culture at different national and international levels.

When all those wishing to comment had done so, the secretariat suggested the following summary of the conclusions and recommendations of the meeting, which was subsequently approved by the participants:

There was agreement as to the need to improve coordination among the different international and regional organizations, it having been recognized that they were, at one and the same time, users, collectors, producers and also sources of statistical information for many other users.

There was also explicit recognition of the fact that uncoordinated requests by international organizations imposed an additional workload on the national offices responsible for assisting them. In addition, the dissemination of what were sometimes inconsistent indicators created confusion both for them and for other users.

The bodies and organizations should intensify their efforts in the region to strengthen the countries' capacities for generating basic statistics, to rationalize the resources available both in the relevant organizations and the countries, to improve the use of existing information, and to promote the dissemination and use of methodologies for producing internationally comparable statistics. It was also considered important to encourage the improvement of the timeliness, transparency and quality of data; to that end, the countries should be given more support, and coordination should be improved both within and among the statistical offices of the participating international, regional and subregional organizations. Steps for encouraging work on meta-data, promoting a culture of statistical information use and identifying areas of work and potential for cooperation were also suggested.

The Statistics and Economic Projections Division of ECLAC offered to compile an inventory of statistical information collection and dissemination activities carried out by international, regional and subregional organizations and institutions. In that connection, note was taken of the offer made by the United Nations Statistics Division to share the experience and background information it had gathered in the course of preparing the worldwide inventory in 1996, as well as the results of the recent work that had begun on the rationalization of indicators with a view to establishing a new architecture for those indicators and the necessary data, based on the analysis and harmonization of concepts, methodologies and nomenclatures for the 300 indicators identified in the official documents of United Nations conferences. It was also agreed that a greater exchange of information among international organizations and bodies would be encouraged in order to create a greater awareness of the activities that each of them was conducting in the region.

In order to undertake those tasks, research would also be carried out on the use of available instruments and experience, such as those systematized by the Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) and the Common Country Assessment, within the United Nations system, as well as the experience of the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA), which held an annual coordination meeting for that purpose.

Annex

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**A. Secretariat of the United Nations**

División de Estadística/Statistical Division (UNSD), Departamento de Asuntos Económicos y Sociales/Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)

- Stefan Schweinfest, Chief, Statistical Development and Analysis Section

B. United Nations Bodies

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

- Manuel Rojas, Regional Advisor for Monitoring and Evaluation

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

- Haishan Fu, Chief of Statistics, Human Development Report Office

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

- Kaveh Zahedi, Acting Regional Coordinator

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

- Guadalupe Espinosa, Regional Director for Mexico, Central America, Cuba and the Dominican Republic

C. Specialized Agencies

International Labour Organization (ILO)

- Fabio Bertranov, Social Security Expert

International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)

- Ledda O. Urbani, Statistical Assistant, Statistics Section, Air Transport Bureau

World Health Organization (WHO)

- Enrique Loyola, Epidemiologist, Special Program for Health Analysis

United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

- Ghislain Robyn, Director, Statistics and Information Networks Branch

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

- Juan Carlos Palafox, Consultant, Regional Project on Education Indicators

D. Other Intergovernmental Organizations

Latin American Integration Association (LAIA)

- Luiz Gonzaga Coelho Junio, Director of Information Department

Andean Community

- Guillermo Lecaros, Manager of Statistics

Central American Monetary Council (CMCA)

- Carlos Manuel Blanco Odio, Economist

Inter-American Statistical Institute (IASI)

- Evelio Fabbroni, Technical Secretary

Latin American Energy Organization (OLADE)

- Gabriel Hernández Suárez, Director of Energy Information

E. Secretariat

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

José Antonio Ocampo, Executive Secretary

Enrique Ordaz, Director, Statistics and Economic Projections Division

María Elisa Bernal, Regional Advisor, Executive Secretary

Juan Carlos Feres, Chief, Social Statistics Section

Fernando Bravo, Officer in Charge, Documents and Publications Division

Luis F. Yáñez, Legal Advisor, Executive Secretary