

PART C STATISTICAL ORGANIZATION

Statistical Offices of International Agencies

by Dudley Seers

This discussion turned out to reveal quite strong feelings on the part of some government statisticians, including Directors of Statistics, that they were being put under pressure by international agencies, especially those which had money to lend (such as IBRD and IMF).

Their complaints were twofold, that they were forced to produce data which they would not otherwise compile and which in many cases they felt were too unreliable to justify publication, and that they were induced to adopt statistical standards and conventions (e.g. definitions and classifications) which seemed to be devised primarily to suit the needs of developed, industrial countries. (Examples can be found elsewhere in this paper, e.g. in the section dealing with national accounts).

It was argued, on the other hand, that there was really no conflict between statistical offices and international agencies (though if one party believes that a dispute exists, that very fact creates a *prima facie* evidence for its existence). Certainly some of the official statisticians present sprang to the defence of the agencies and denied that in their case they felt under unwelcome pressure. Indeed, sometimes outside pressures are useful in convincing governments that additional resources were necessary.

It seems to me that the complaint has sufficient basis in reality to be taken seriously by the agencies. One Director of Statistics claimed that Ministers felt that national prestige suffered if no figures were shown for his country in international handbooks of statistics. Yet really a country should be proud of *not* providing bad data. Another way in which priorities were sometimes dictated was through experts and funds being available more readily for some fields of special interest to the developed countries, e.g. fertility surveys. It was argued that 'developing' countries are fully consulted on statistical norms. However, some participants claimed that this was true more in form than reality. An example cited was the second revision of the Standard International Trade Classification. Many governments had a considerable interest in this, both so that they could get appropriate classifications for leading export commodities and because for most of their economic policies such as import and tariff policies — as well as for national accounts — they needed an end-use classification (distinguishing between

finished consumer goods, finished capital goods, intermediate products, etc.)¹. Although in principle national statistical offices could have intervened, they lacked the resources to take an effective part in the discussions, which went on for months and produced hundreds of pages of documentation.

One practical suggestion was that statistical offices in developing countries should arrange for somebody, e.g. from the UNCTAD secretariat, to attend such discussions with a watching brief to alert them when their interests were involved, and on occasion to intervene on their behalf. But perhaps the most important requirement is that the discussion should be set up in a framework which ensures that their voice will be given due weight.

While there were differences in the interpretation of what the role of international statistical agencies actually is in the field of international standardization, there was a good deal of concensus on what it *ought* to be — to draw up conventions, in the light of worldwide experience, sufficiently flexible to suit the needs of any country whatever its structure (in either political or economic terms), and to warn national offices of the need to treat their own national needs, not international procedural manuals, as the starting point. Some claimed that this flexibility was a reality,² others said that it usually amounted only to a mere phrase or two in a manual to the effect that special treatment might be needed in different countries, and the manual then went on to treat implicitly all countries as having identical needs. My own conclusion is that the bulk of the space in statistical manuals should only be written after exhaustive field tests, and that they should then be devoted to describing the procedures that would be appropriate in a few different types of country.

There was concensus on the need for national statistical offices, once their own national needs were met, to conform to international standards as much as possible, so as to avoid international anarchy. Several speakers also claimed that it was the duty of national statistical offices to contribute to the pool of knowledge of the 'community of nations', a pool from which they themselves need to draw, on occasion, in order to compare their own experience with that of other countries; and also in order to analyse external developments that affected them, or might do³.

Others denied, at least by implication, the concept of a 'community of nations', since there was no

¹ One version of this is available as a subsidiary alternative classification to SITC.

² See the note of dissent by Mr. A. Aidenoff.

³ See the note by Professor C.T. Saunders.

equity in the relations between governments, nor effective international law. In its absence, governments of poor countries would do well to guard their statistical sovereignty. Their statistical offices should be under no obligation to undertake work for the benefit of a non-existent common interest.

Some speakers went on to say that if the governments of the industrial countries wanted world-wide information because of their commercial, political and strategic interests, they should pay for it. Another argument was that the real *quid pro quo* would be for governments of rich countries to publish full information about their multinational corporations, since these benefitted greatly at the moment from the asymmetry between the information published by themselves and by the overseas governments with which they negotiate.

Looking at this discussion as a whole, it seems to illustrate the principle that in some fields the only way of conserving something is to reform it. Unless international agencies are less defensive and make a more sensitive response to the needs of countries of the Third World, which in some respects they will themselves need to anticipate, they may find that national statistical offices become increasingly autarchic.

Notes

(i) *A. Aidenoff*

The conference was informed about the approach to, and process of formulation of international guidelines and standards by the Statistical Office and Commission of the United Nations.

Guidelines and standards are designed primarily to meet the statistical requirements and circumstances of groups of countries. The significant differences in those respects between developing and developed economies result in differing but co-ordinated guidelines and standards on a world-wide and, in many instances, on a regional basis. The Statistical Commission had emphasized that special attention should be given to the statistical needs and circumstances of the developing countries. Meeting the international requirements for statistics is considered to be a by-product of the collection and compilation of data for national purposes.

The formulation of guidelines and standards involves extensive consultations and discussions with the national statistical authorities of the developing, as well as developed, countries at each stage. The preparation of the first draft is based on detailed study of their statistical requirements, circumstances and practices. The views and recommendations of the developing and developed countries are gathered as successive drafts are prepared. This is carried through correspondence

with national statistical offices, through regional meetings and in certain instances through expert groups in which experts from developing countries participate. The Statistical Commission also considers successive drafts of the guidelines and standards: the large majority of the members of the commission are from developing countries.

Thus, the participation of the developing countries in the formulation of guidelines and standards is extensive and influential, not nominal, and results in world-wide and regional recommendations which reflect their priorities and circumstances. Nor can it be said that a conflict exists between these recommendations and the national statistical requirements, circumstances and possibilities. The international recommendations and suggestions not only are adapted to groups of developing countries, but also are made flexible and general enough so that individual developing countries may further adapt them to their own situation. The guidelines and standards are designed to furnish a kit of concepts and tools from which countries may choose and adapt those appropriate to their own circumstances, and it is recognized that the data reported to international agencies must come from the series gathered and compiled for national purposes.

(ii) *C.T. Saunders*

As a participant less involved than some, I would like to put on paper some reflections about the 'conflict' between the functions of national statistical offices and those of the international organizations. I certainly feel that the report oversimplifies and gives undue weight to this issue.

That some conflict is felt to exist is clear from the views expressed by some members of the workshop and by other participants in the conference. The sentiment is natural and probably unavoidable in present circumstances. It is not altogether different from the problems of an understaffed enterprise confronted with demands, or requests, from a national statistical office for information which does not flow from the enterprise's own accounting system, and which seems to the management an unnecessary distraction from its proper business. The statistician normally replies that in an open society it is part of the business of an enterprise to give information about its activities for the general benefit of the society. How can this principle be sensibly applied on the international level? That is the real issue.

It is a pretty severe indictment to imply that international information is collected for the benefit of the *international organizations* themselves, 'imposing their own priorities'. I could not agree with this formulation. The principle is surely