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COORDINATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL WORK IN THE UNECE REGION

UNSD comments on the paper "Review of population statistics" (ECE/CES/2007/3)

Submitted by United Nations Statistics Division

1. The note prepared by the UNECE secretariat points to the lack of international standards or best practices for: a) producing annual population statistics at national level, b) dissemination by international organizations, c) demographic projections and d) intercensal population estimates, for countries that apply annual updates as defined in the note based on previous year population, births, deaths and migration.
2. The purpose of the paper is to initiate a discussion on the introduction of uniform concepts that would improve comparison at international level. As such, it raises relevant issues about the true meaning of the term "population" and how to measure it. It lists some of the deficiencies and particularities in national practices that disable full international comparison.
3. The paper asserts a lack of international standards or best practices to assist countries in the production of annual population statistics (paragraph 37). Nevertheless, for each of the components of annual population estimation, i.e. the benchmark population, births, deaths and migration, the United Nations Statistics Division issues, maintains and updates methodological guidelines and standards in the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Principles and Recommendations for Vital Statistics, and Recommendations for Statistics on International Migration respectively. On the other hand, the consistent and continuous implementation of these standards at national levels is clearly a concern, as the paper rightly points out.

4. Related to the issue of standards and concepts, the paper emphasizes (paragraph 10) that, for the purpose of defining the population benchmarks, the concept of usual residence is more relevant for planning purposes. These advantages of the usual resident population count are elaborated in details in the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2, while also emphasizing the need of countries to ensure the provision of service population count – relevant where a significant proportion of the population is providing or using services in areas where they do not reside. Indeed, from the point of view of administering small areas, this count can be of crucial importance for planning transportation and other facilities (sewage, solid waste removal, etc.) Therefore, for internal consumption, just the usual resident count would not be sufficient and should be complemented by other relevant counts as well. The current set of international guidelines clearly emphasizes the need for usual resident count for international consumption; yet, their implementation is subject to national circumstances and different practices thus emerge when counting residents temporarily out of the country, nomads and other populations.

5. The paper notes (paragraphs 32 and 33) that there are no international standards in the field of population projections and that such standards may be inefficient given the differences in national circumstances. It is necessary to mention here the World Population Prospects produced by the United Nations Population Division every two years. The methodology applied for these estimates and projections is documented in special editions accompanying each release. But nevertheless, some guidelines or standards on national practices would be useful.

6. Another conclusion of the paper related to international dissemination of population statistics states that there is no tool for systematic and timely dissemination (paragraph 39). It is said that the UN Demographic Yearbook does not provide a complete picture of demographic trends in the region, but the paper should be more precise on that point. The Demographic Yearbook presents, on an annual basis, detailed population statistics, including population estimates by age and sex, births by age of mother, late foetal deaths, infant mortality by age and sex, deaths by age and sex, expectation of life, marriages by age of groom and bride and divorces. It also presents, on the website, data from population censuses, as well as special topics, which are detailed statistics on fertility, mortality, nuptiality and migration. The Demographic Yearbook displays all these statistics for all countries that provided them at the request of the United Nations Statistics Division and the users are able to group all these countries according to their respective needs (the UNECE region, for example). In addition to the Demographic Yearbook, the United Nations Statistics Division regularly publishes the Population and Vital Statistics Report and updates it on the website every two weeks, so that all the updated population estimates, number of births, deaths and infant deaths are readily available to users. If this is not satisfying the needs of UNECE users, we should better understand what should be done to better satisfy the needs.

7. In general, it is not very clear whether the paper addresses issues related to the population statistics in general or those pertaining to the UNECE region only. This distinction is important from the point view of the content, since some of the statements may apply to the situation in the UNECE region - in the case of data dissemination, for example; since this is not explicitly stated, the reader may be uncertain on whether to interpret this as a global issue or not. In some parts of the paper this distinction is straightforward (on births and deaths, paragraphs 11-15), but in

others it is not so obvious.

8. Finally, the paper raises several important issues, but stresses mainly the lack of international standards. Actually, there is a body of international principles and recommendations and accompanying manuals and handbooks adopted by the UN Statistical Commission in this field of population statistics. It would be useful to analyze on what points these standards need to be extended. It is also important to understand the reasons why not all the countries are implementing them and how to best rectify this situation, including the emphasis on metadata as a crucial component for user understanding statistics.

9. To conclude, no doubt there is scope to improve population statistics. But we should build on what clearly exists rather than starting afresh.

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