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Forty-fourth plenary session
(Paris, 11 - 13 June 1996)

FERTILITY AND FAMILY SURVEYS

Note by the secretariat

1. The Work Session on Fertility and Family Surveys was held in Geneva from 29 to 31 January 1996. It was attended by: Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Russian Federation, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the United States. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) was also represented.
2. The provisional agenda (Working Paper No. 1) was adopted.
3. Mr. L. Ostby (Norway) was elected Chairperson and Ms. M. Sircelj (Slovenia) Vice-Chairperson.
4. The following substantive topics were discussed at the Work Session:
 - a. Experiences gained by countries conducting fertility and family surveys;
 - b. Innovative research and measurement of fertility behaviour;
 - c. Fertility and family data from population registers versus surveys.
5. The topics were discussed on the basis of 13 papers prepared by Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Norway, Switzerland, the United States and the ECE. Additional written material submitted by the Russian Federation and the United States served as a supplementary basis for discussion.

6. It is planned that the Population Activities Unit's Informal Working Group, which will guide the comparative research of the third phase of the UNFPA sponsored project on Fertility and Family Surveys, will meet annually. For the next few years this Group will be an appropriate forum in which countries can discuss fertility and family statistics. The meeting, therefore, recommended, that the following text be included in the work programme of the Conference of European Statisticians:

Activities of ECE:

Work Session on Fertility and Family statistics (timing and terms of reference to be proposed later by the secretariats of the ECE Statistical Division, the ECE Population Activities Unit and Eurostat).

7. The main conclusions reached by the meeting are presented in summary form in English only in the Annex to this note.

8. The participants adopted the report of the meeting at its closing session.

ANNEX

**Summary of the main conclusions reached at the
Work Session on Fertility and Family Surveys
(Geneva, 29-31 January 1996)**

(as adopted by the meeting at its last session)

I. EXPERIENCES WITH RECENT FERTILITY AND FAMILY SURVEYS

A. Overview and future plans of the FFS project

1. The work session appreciated the summary overview provided in Working Paper No. 2 of the implementation status of the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) project to date. They noted that the project now had 21 participating countries and that Standard Recode Files (SRF) are available for some 10 countries. An additional eleven countries had announced their plans for compiling SRFs in the next couple of years.

2. The meeting was also told about the arrangements for archiving and sharing the individual-level data which currently is being brought together in a database managed by the Population Activities Unit (PAU) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. The data are fully protected and will not be released without permission of the supplying organization. Anyone wishing to use the data has to sign a pledge of confidentiality. To date, seven countries have submitted data, six of which have made arrangements for sharing the information for research purposes.

3. The meeting was also informed about plans for a third phase of the FFS project which will involve cross-national comparative research on reproductive behaviour and family change in countries in the ECE region. Plans for this third phase were contained in a preliminary note (Working Paper No.5) drafted by the PAU following earlier consultations with selected participating countries during two consecutive ad-hoc expert group meetings.

4. The discussion of the note concentrated in part on some of the limitations inherent in the overview of comparability scores of national questionnaires attached to the note. For instance, national population registers may complement SRF data or even serve as alternative data sources for some tabulations. Consequently, a low score for some countries does not necessarily imply that comparable data are not available outside the FFS source. The meeting was informed that much more detailed information on each question included in the surveys was available at the PAU, for all participating countries. To evaluate fully the availability and comparability of data between participating countries, researchers should consult this.

5. The upcoming (18-20 March, 1996) meeting of the FFS Informal Working Group would have to find a management structure of the comparative research programme which is not too heavy and formal, in order to avoid any delay in making the data available to potential users. The need to promote the widest possible use of the data stored at Geneva was underlined by the participants. Also discussed was the need for the planned Steering Committee to coordinate

the work of the various research groups carrying out the programme of comparative research.

6. A final point raised was the temporal comparability of surveys conducted up to ten years apart as will be the case in the FFS project once the last countries have finished their field work. It was generally felt that as long as a cohort perspective was maintained, comparative studies would still be possible. It was also a fact that the participating countries were at different stages in the demographic processes.

7. The purpose of the next meeting of the FFS Informal Working Group is to discuss the programme for comparative analysis of the FFS data and to adopt a management structure of the programme. Once adopted, the report with the decisions would guide the Informal Working Group's programme of comparative research in the years ahead. The participants requested that copies of the report of this and future meetings be circulated outside the Informal Working Group, in particular to National Statistical Offices.

B. National experiences of countries in conducting recent fertility and family surveys

8. A number of participants whose countries had already conducted their FFS survey field work shared their experiences with the meeting. The Swiss representatives briefed the meeting on the complexity of their FFS involving a tripartite division of labour between the National Statistical Office, an external fieldwork agency, and two Swiss universities. Other complicating factors were that fieldwork relied in part on CATI, CAPI and other interviewing techniques and that training and data collection had to be carried out in three different language areas.

9. In the absence of representatives from Estonia and Lithuania, the ECE secretariat, on the basis of the Working Papers the two countries had submitted, informed the participants about the outcome of the recent FFS surveys undertaken in these countries.

10. Canada informed the meeting on the two surveys through which it participates in the FFS project - one based on its 1990 General Social Survey (Cycle 5) and one on Cycle 10 of the same survey undertaken in 1995. Both of these telephone surveys employed random digit dialling, and the 1995 survey used CAPI. Possible consequences for international comparability of different types of answers and non-response rates as a result of different interview techniques used in national surveys were discussed. The meeting stressed the need that the practice followed in each national sample survey be fully documented in the Standard Country Report.

11. The Russian delegate informed the meeting that his country had originally considered using the PAU-designed questionnaire but had renounced it due to problems of sensitivity they expected to have with certain population groups. Their 1992 family survey had finally been limited to young families (spouses less than 25 years of age) that in Russia account for 80 per cent of all births. The purpose of their survey was to collect information on the size and composition of the families, their economic well-being, as well as their future fertility intentions.

12. The meeting was told that Statistics Sweden, in collaboration with Stockholm University, has developed two computer programs for analyzing longitudinal data: CreoNova and RocaNova. Both are easy to use Windows programs allowing multidimensional analysis of longitudinal data. A demonstration of the software was offered to participants on the last day of the meeting and countries interested in further information on the use of the programmes were requested to contact Statistics Sweden.

II. INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND MEASUREMENT OF FERTILITY BEHAVIOUR

13. The meeting heard with interest the experiences of the United States in carrying out surveys relating to fertility, family and reproductive health through five major surveys: the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG); the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH); the National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM); the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY); and the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health. These surveys collect information on processes within families, causes and consequences of change in family and household structure, fertility, adult family transitions, cohabitation, contraceptive use and abortion. The meeting was told that in the United States fertility and family research has benefited from being integrated into agencies with health concerns. For example, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development is a major provider of financial support for fertility research through grants to outside investigators on selected topics.

14. The United States will participate in the FFS through the NSFG Cycle 5. In the case of the NSFG, which has been going on since 1973, traditional fertility questions have been maintained to allow continuity while new questions on pregnancy planning have been added to improve the quality of reporting. One of the puzzling findings of the NSFG was that, in a period of increased use of effective contraception, the proportion of births that were reported as unwanted or unplanned also increased. It was suggested by some participants that, in addition to possible misuse of contraceptive methods and women's ambivalent feelings, these changes could be due to an increased awareness of individual choices about pregnancy planning status.

15. The meeting was also told of a number of innovative methods which have been introduced in these surveys such as the use of audio computer-assisted interviewing techniques (A-CASI), where respondents could answer questions on sexual experiences and other sensitive topics in a self-administered interview by listening to spoken questions over headphones and entering responses directly into a lap-top computer. This eliminated interaction with the interviewer and permitted self administration, even by respondents with low literacy levels. It also offered more privacy for the respondents and allowed greater response as well as more complete information to be provided. The use of this method has resulted, for example, in a much higher (approximately double) reporting rate of induced abortions in a pilot study of the NSFG.

16. Another interesting development is the joint collection of demographic and health information as in the NSAM where urine specimens were collected from respondents and analyzed for two common sexually transmitted diseases (STD), with the aim of providing an added check on self-reports of sexual behaviour and information about the determinants of STD infection among young

American men. Despite initial doubt about the viability of collecting biological specimens from survey respondents, the proportion of respondents providing specimens had been close to 80 per cent.

17. Future research still faces challenges in a number of areas: the integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods; the study of inter-generational processes and research on families and children through linking two scientific disciplines with common interest but different methodologies; the inclusion of men in government-sponsored fertility surveys; and the rapid and widespread use of data through electronic means which raises the need to ensure the confidentiality of research data and the development of procedures to guarantee the proper use of data.

18. Given the very rich data sources available in the United States as well as the long research experience in family and fertility matters, the meeting strongly encouraged the United States to fully participate in the FFS project.

III. FERTILITY AND FAMILY DATA FROM POPULATION REGISTERS VERSUS SURVEYS

19. In the absence of any representative from Kyrgyzstan, the Chairperson introduced the paper which, based on census, vital registration and household survey data, gives an overview of the fertility situation in that country.

20. The meeting was told that Denmark has not participated in this FFS round but that, with existing register data, a good selection of the tables recommended for the FFS project's country reports can be produced. A special fertility database has recently been created from various registers to allow analysis of fertility trends in Denmark. The database which goes back to 1980 covers all women and men in the fertile ages and all children born since 1960. Although the Danish statistical law does not permit the transfer of individual files to PAU, the meeting welcomed the Danish offer to produce a country report with as many standard tables as possible. It was pointed out that the completeness and quality of the Danish data should be taken into consideration when comparing these with data from other countries.

21. Working Paper no.12 raised the question of whether there is a need for family and fertility surveys in countries with good population statistics. In presenting his paper the representative of Norway gave a review of the pros and cons of the FFS and the different types of data that could be obtained from various registers as well as their quality. The conclusion was that every country should conduct an FFS, with varying frequency and content depending upon the availability of alternative sources. Even in countries with good registration data, it is useful to carry out a fertility and family survey from time to time. For many data variables, the FFS is actually the only source as most registers lacked or had incomplete information on a number of topics such as cohabitation, abortion, contraceptive use, parental home and attitudes and values. Furthermore, the FFS has more flexibility to include questions to measure new phenomena, and it can provide more "complete" biographies. The combined use of surveys and registers will be of mutual advantage to both approaches and it can also address better the great need for longitudinal data in demographic analysis.

22. The meeting was also informed that, although a few countries were still reluctant to use registers, there was a general tendency in Europe to move towards greater use of new and existing administrative registers for statistical use.

IV. OTHER BUSINESS

23. The third phase of the UNFPA sponsored project, aimed at promoting fertility and family surveys in ECE countries, is planned to begin in April 1996 and may run until the end of 1999. The Project's cross-national research will be guided by an Informal Working Group which will meet annually. For the next few years this Group will be the appropriate forum in which issues relating to fertility and family could be discussed. No recommendation is therefore made for the terms of reference and timing of a future meeting within the framework of the CES work programme - these will be determined later by the secretariats of the ECE Statistical Division, the ECE Population Activities Unit and possibly Eurostat and proposed to the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians for consideration.
