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SESSION 1: RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

**LOST AND FORGOTTEN? OFFICIAL COLONIAL STATISTICS
EXPERIENCE IN CONSTRUCTING HISTORICAL STATISTICS FOR SURINAME**

Report submitted by the United Nations Population Fund *

Summary

INTRODUCTION

1. Unlike developed countries which have a long tradition of preparing and publishing statistics, most developing countries started the collection and publication of official statistics, with varying degrees of coverage, quality and timeliness, after national independence. As a result, statistical series for most developing countries are non-existent.

2. Nevertheless, Colonial authorities have produced a wealth of quantitative information on the conditions of their colonies with varying regularity. This information was needed to enable them to carry out their policies more effectively and efficiently. These data have in general been ignored by statisticians, and only a few historical series of colonial

*/ Prepared by Mr. Alphonse L. MacDonald. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations and its agencies.

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statistics have been constructed and published. Yet the reports prepared by the Colonial administrations contain quantitative information which could be used to construct series of colonial statistics on various subjects.

3. A case generally unknown to historical statisticians is the case of the colonies of the Netherlands. Due to a provision in the Constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands of 1848, the King (=Government) was required to inform the States General annually about the administration of the colonies and their situation and conditions. In 1948, for all practical purposes, the colonial empire of the Netherlands ceased to exist. Hence, theoretically, there are Colonial Reports over a period of about one hundred years. It should therefore be possible to construct series of colonial statistics for the ex-Dutch possessions: Indonesia, Suriname, and the Netherlands Antilles. Yet, no official colonial statistical series have been published by the Netherlands authorities or by the Governments of the now, independent countries.

4. In the paper, the experience in constructing the historical statistical series for Suriname is reported. Most of the experience relate to population and related data. Issues which will be discussed are:

1. Availability of and access to data;
2. Origin, coverage, completeness and quality of the data;
3. Concepts, continuity and change caused by changing conditions in the country; and
4. Use of international standards and classifications.

5. Reconstruction of statistical series of information collected during the colonial period is a rewarding, but complex activity, which forces the statistician to acquire a thorough knowledge of the society and its political, administrative, cultural and social conditions.
