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## Statistical Commission

### Thirty-ninth session

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Item 3 (j) of the provisional agenda\*

**Items for discussion and decision: statistics of human development**

## Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Programme

### Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Statistical Commission the report of the Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Programme. The report is transmitted in accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-eighth session.

## Report of the Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Programme

### I. Introduction

1. The *Human Development Report* in particular and human development indicators more generally were discussed previously at the thirty-first (2000), second (2001) and third (2002) sessions of the Statistical Commission. The present report is a follow-up to those earlier discussions, pursuant to a request of the Commission at its thirty-eighth session.<sup>1</sup>

### II. Background

2. The *Human Development Report* is an independent report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and is the product of a selected team of leading scholars, development practitioners and members of the

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\* E/CN.3/2008/1.

<sup>1</sup> See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2007, Supplement No. 4* (E/2007/24), chap I.A.



Human Development Report Office of UNDP. The global *Human Development Report* which has been published annually since 1990, explores in depth a different topic each year relevant to the field of human development. The reports also contain an extensive statistical annex of the latest human development indicators, some of which are summarized in four composite indices of which the Human Development Index is the most widely known and quoted.

3. The Human Development Report Office, which produces the reports is a user of statistics and indicators rather than a data collector. The Office relies very heavily on other United Nations agencies and international organizations to collect data from national authorities based on international definitions and standards, to verify and quality assure the raw data and to compile the statistics and indicators that are used ultimately in its reports.

4. In addition to the annual global *Human Development Report*, a total of over 600 national or regional human development reports have been produced in over 140 countries since 1992. Those reports are produced by regional and national teams of experts often with the support of local UNDP country offices but, like the global reports, independent from UNDP.

### **III. Use of international data**

5. The *Human Development Reports* aim to present and analyse indicators that are comparable across countries. It is therefore important to use, as far as possible, data that have been reported according to a standardized set of definitions and coverage and have been assessed independently as meeting those standards. For this reason, the Human Development Report Office largely uses data from other United Nations agencies or international organizations with the mandates and expertise to gather and report data that is comparable cross nationally. As a consequence, such indicators may not always be equal to nationally defined indicators. However, in order for the indicators to be useful and meaningful the transformations between national and international definitions should be as transparent and well-understood as possible. To that end, the Human Development Report Office works with countries that alert it to problems or substantial differences to resolve queries with the relevant United Nations or international agencies and, if appropriate, to ensure that errors are corrected. This can be a simple matter of putting the country and the relevant agency in direct contact with each other or may involve mediation between the two or the creation of opportunities to present and discuss problems together with all interested parties in order to reach a resolution that is satisfactory for all concerned.

6. It takes approximately 15 to 18 months to produce each global *Human Development Report*. Within that period, approximately six months is spent compiling and analysing the statistics and indicators used. When added to the data collection and processing time of the national authorities and regional or international agencies that supply the data, the time lag between the reference dates of the data and the publication date of the report can be as much as two years. This can be problematic, in particular for countries experiencing rapid rates of change in their development, as the published figures may no longer be a good representation of the current status and more recent statistics may exist at the national level.

## IV. Data quality assurance

7. Following the advice set out in the Friends of the Chair report presented to the Statistical Commission at its thirty-second session, the Human Development Report Office introduced a number of procedures in order to better assure the quality of the data and analyses contained in the global reports. These procedures continue to date. They include:

(a) The appointment of an independent and impartial Senior Statistical Advisor to provide advice and guidance on a wide range of statistical issues;

(b) The creation of a Statistical Advisory Panel of a dozen or so senior statisticians and economists from around the world. The Panel meets usually once a year and is also consulted in writing if the need arises;

(c) The institution of Statistical Peer Review processes both of individual chapters of the report and, in recent years, of specific analyses conducted by the Office;

(d) The introduction of a process of regular informal consultations with member States (via the UNDP Executive Board) on the development and contents of each year's report. Consultations are held five times a year and include one session devoted exclusively to statistics.

8. The Human Development Report Office has also greatly improved its interaction with the agencies that provide data for the report, not only by seeking their advice as the recognized experts in their given fields but also by scrutinizing the data received more thoroughly and systematically and raising queries if in doubt. And, as noted above, the Office takes active steps to resolve queries from countries about the data that have been used in the reports.

## V. Country coverage and data gaps

9. A total of 177 countries or territories (representing 98 per cent of the world's population) are currently included in the Human Development Index, the report's composite measure of basic human development. The number of countries for which sufficient data are available to calculate the Human Development Index has barely changed in recent years. There are still 17 States Members of the United Nations for which one or more of the four component indicators (life expectancy, adult literacy, gross enrolment and GDP per capita) are not available. The "missing" countries fall mainly into two categories: very small countries with total populations of less than 100,000 or countries in, or recently in, crisis situations. In nearly all cases, the most difficult indicator to estimate is GDP per capita, mostly because of insufficient data on purchasing power parities. There are also many countries in the missing group for which there are no estimates of adult literacy rates. Even among the 177 countries and territories included in the Human Development Index there are gaps in the component indicators: different sources or reference years have had to be used for at least one of the component indicators for nearly half the countries.

10. Human development covers a very wide range of topics going well beyond the field of social statistics: poverty, human rights, personal security and good governance to name a few and, more recently, the effects of climate change and environmental sustainability. While data exist in these areas there is always room

for improvement and demand for more and better statistics, in particular on outcomes rather than inputs, and on the effects of various phenomena and policies on the lives and well-being of individuals (men and women, adults and children), of families and of households.

11. One area of particular concern has been the measurement of gender disparities and inequalities. With generous funding from Sweden, the Human Development Report Office conducted a major review of its two gender-related composite indices during 2006 and has commissioned further research to develop better measures for the future.

12. The Millennium Development Goals are also human development goals. Many of the indicators of the Goals are contained in the *Human Development Report*. As the United Nations Statistics Division has noted in its various reports to the Statistical Commission, there remain large gaps in the Millennium Development Goals data series despite recent improvements in some areas.

## **VI. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission**

13. The Commission is invited:

- (a) To note the content of this report;
- (b) To comment on the activities undertaken and to advise on future activities and proposals.

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