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VIEWS OF THE POPULATION COMMISSION ON  
"PRINCIPLES FOR A VITAL STATISTICS  
SYSTEM" (E/CN.3/143)

(Memorandum by the Secretary-General)

1. At its seventh session (just completed) the Population Commission, in response to a request made at its sixth session, had for consideration under Agenda item 12 "Principles for a Vital Statistics System" (E/CN.3/143), the revised draft recommendations for improvement and standardization of vital statistics which the Statistical Commission at its sixth session requested be prepared.

2. The Population Commission, anticipating that the Statistical Commission at its seventh session would take formal action on the Principles, requested the Secretary-General to bring its views to the attention of the Statistical Commission. In view of the fact that the final report of the Population Commission (E/2359) is not yet available, the section dealing with the subject of the "Principles" (item 12 of the agenda) is reproduced below for the information of the Commission.

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( 8 p.)

ABSTRACT FROM REPORT OF THE POPULATION COMMISSION (E/2359)

REVISION OF DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND  
STANDARDIZATION OF VITAL STATISTICS

"The Commission had for consideration a memorandum prepared by the Secretary-General (E/CN.9/107) which brought to its attention aspects of 'Principles for a Vital Statistics System' (E/CN.3/143) with which it is primarily concerned.

"The 'Principles for a Vital Statistics System' (E/CN.3/143) is a revision of draft recommendations for the improvement of vital statistics which was considered by the Population Commission at its sixth session (1951).

"It is noted that this revision is based on the comments submitted by Governments, the views expressed by the Population Commission, the Statistical Commission, the Expert Committee on Health Statistics of the World Health Organization and those of individual technicians and experts.

"Although the Commission considered the general aspects of the 'Principles', the primary interest of the Population Commission relates to the type of statistical information which is essential for demographic analysis and interpretation rather than to statistical or methodological questions on procedures of collection and compilation. For this reason, the major part of the Commission's attention was directed to the following paragraphs of E/CN.3/143:

- 4.8 - Content of statistical report on a vital event
- 4.9 - Definition of each item on the statistical report
- 5.10 - Annual tabulation programme for national and international purposes.

"Since it is anticipated that the Statistical Commission at its seventh session will take formal action on E/CN.3/143, the Secretary-General is requested to bring to the attention of that Commission the views of the Population Commission which are given below and in Annex 2 of this report.

"The Commission pointed out that the importance of national and international activities to improve vital statistics is well illustrated by an examination of data given in the Demographic Yearbook. Among the types of data most essential for the understanding of demographic phenomena or problems are the statistics of births, deaths and other vital events in sufficient detail and tabulated in

relation to the most closely related economic and social variables. Examination of the data published in the Demographic Yearbook shows that such fundamental information is lacking for a large proportion of the world's population.

"The necessity of improving data in this field is not limited to the so-called 'underdeveloped countries'. Even in 'developed' countries, the international study of demographic problems is made difficult by lack of statistical comparability. Some of the causes of non-comparability arise from unique national needs or legal provisions which countries may find difficult to modify. On the other hand, other types of non-comparability persist only for the reason that, heretofore, there have been no generally agreed upon principles which could serve as 'guides' to countries wishing to improve the comparability of their vital statistics. The final formulation of the international 'Principles for a Vital Statistics System' will provide a document of value both to countries now developing or appraising their systems and to countries wishing to improve the international comparability of their existing vital statistics.

"As stated above, the primary interest of the Population Commission in examination of the 'Principles' is in considering the types of data which are essential for its work of analysis and interpretation. From this point of view, the number and types of items of information proposed in the 'Principles' for inclusion in the statistical reports forms on vital events appear to be modest. The majority of countries already collect more extensive data than those suggested. The function of the Population Commission is not to restate the obvious, nor to confine itself to elemental concepts and information. Rather, staying within the limits of practicality, the Commission should assume a responsibility for leadership in the demographic field, pointing out the paths along which progress from the most elementary stage of demographic research can be made. The Commission was of the opinion, therefore, that, after a period, it might be well to re-examine the list of proposed items to see if these are adequate for the developing needs in the field of vital statistics.

"While in no way mandatory upon countries, the existence of this definitive set of international recommendations in its present form will serve an immediate and constructive purpose. For this reason, the Population Commission believes that, after final action by the Statistical Commission, the 'Principles for a Vital Statistics System' should be given immediate publication and distribution.

"It is the view of the Population Commission that the general acceptance and value of the 'Principles' would be increased if their applicability was clarified. Some areas of the world are at a stage of development which makes a general registration system impracticable at this time. Other areas are undertaking the establishment and organization of a registration system, but for a considerable period the major problems will be those of increasing the effectiveness of this registration system, with limited attention to the statistical information derived therefrom. The third stage of development is that in which the registration system functions adequately and attention can be directed to the elaboration of the statistical information resulting therefrom. In the opinion of the Commission, the 'Principles' have their greatest applicability to this last category of countries. Also, it may be well to stress that, even as 'guides', the 'Principles' are prepared only as suggestions for the use of countries and have no mandatory character, and to emphasize that for some countries the 'Principles' may represent not a programme for immediate implementation, but a 'goal' toward which they may work.

## ANNEX 2

### COMMENTS OF THE POPULATION COMMISSION ON SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF 'PRINCIPLES FOR A VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEM' (E/CN.3/143)

"The views of the Population Commission on specific Principles are given below. The number of the Principle in E/CN.3/143 to which reference is made is indicated.

#### "2.1 Definition of a vital statistics system

This definition would be clarified by the addition of a footnote referring to other types of events of demographic importance (for example, migratory movements), which, since information on them is not usually collected through the regular legal registration system, are not now included in the definition. Particular attention is drawn to the desirability of obtaining data on marriages variously known as 'customary', 'consensual' or 'common-law' which are frequent in many areas of the world. Inasmuch as their characteristic is the fact that they are not registered legal unions, it is impracticable to provide for them in a definition of marriage for a registration system. However, since marriage statistics will remain incomparable and of limited value for demographic purposes as long as they refer only to 'registered unions', it is advisable to recognize the problem of such informal or de facto unions and to suggest that countries explore methods by which data on such unions could be compiled.

#### "2.7 Place of sampling in the vital statistics system

It may be desirable to strengthen somewhat this Principle, since it may be necessary to supplement the routine registration method in situations where registration is substantially defective, or when data required for certain special purposes are not included in the regular registration system.

#### "4.8 Contents of a statistical report on a vital event

Consideration was given to the views of the representatives of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Ukrainian SSR that the individual statistical records of births, deaths and marriages (paragraph (d) of Principle 4.8) should include information on ethnic origin. However,

because of the variation among countries in the utility and method of defining 'ethnic groups', the Commission concluded that this item should be mentioned in paragraph (b) rather than (d).

"In general, it was thought that paragraph (b) should be restated in a positive rather than a negative manner so as to draw attention to the scientific value of including items which would permit the analysis of demographic factors in relation to significant social and economic groups within the country. These would include items which some countries would find desirable for their own purposes but which, because of their local rather than universal applicability, are not specified in the basic list given in paragraph (d). In line with this proposal, the Commission suggests that 'race' be deleted from paragraph (b) and 'ethnic group' be added. Other items of this character which the Commission thought might be included are 'country of birth', 'nationality', 'citizenship', 'religion', 'language', as well as more information on economic characteristics, such as items which would permit classification of operators of agricultural holdings by tenure and by size or character of holdings.

"Consideration was given to the list of items suggested in paragraph (d) for inclusion in the statistical report forms. The Commission considers the list in paragraph (d) neither as a minimum nor as a maximum. As noted above, many countries will wish to add additional items of scientific value for the study of their own problems. For other countries, some items included in the list may be of relatively minor value and for others it may be difficult or impossible to obtain sufficiently accurate information to be of value. The list can be considered as a basic desirable list, but it may be more helpful to countries at early stages in the development of their vital statistics system if a 3-category priority scale were used instead of the present 2-category system.

#### "4.9 Definition of each item on the statistical report

Examination of Principle 4.9, giving definitions of each item suggested for the statistical report, confirms the fact that the proposed definitions are in accord with the most generally accepted national practices, but the Commission believes that, in paragraph (b) of 4.9, greater stress should be given to achieving conformity with international recommendations so that comparability will be improved.

"It is noted that the definitions of items are given in alphabetical order. While retaining this order, cross references between the Industry, Occupation and Status items might serve to emphasize the interrelated character of these items.

"Under the definition for (19) Number of children born to this mother, it is suggested that in line 8 the words 'and in some instances' be inserted after the word 'current'. Also some countries may not wish to collect all of the subdivisions indicated in the definition. If a country wishes to obtain only a single figure under this item, then the Population Commission suggests that it should be stated in the Principles that that single number should be 'total live births to this mother' or the nearest approximation to this which is acceptable to the government concerned.

"Under (26) Status, the subgroups given correspond with those recommended by the United Nations for population censuses. The representatives of the USSR and the Ukrainian SSR suggested that the subgroups of 'status' be expanded to distinguish entrepreneurs, directors (managers), employees, hired workers, craftsmen, landless peasants, peasants with medium-sized holdings, large-scale farmers and other population groups. This suggestion was not endorsed by the Commission.

The Commission suggested that in definition (28), Type of birth, the distinction by sex might be added as a matter of lower priority.

#### "5.7 Tabulation by calendar periods

It is noted that Principle 5.7 refers to tabulation by calendar periods. This Principle should state that the time periods indicated are solar calendar periods and not lunar periods. Reference here might be made to the desirability of providing, in the case of areas using a lunar calendar, tabulations in solar time periods so that international comparisons might be possible.

#### "5.10 Annual tabulation programme for national and international purposes

The review of the proposed annual tabulation programme indicates that these tabulations are those of major general importance for the purposes of demographic analysis and that they can be recommended for the consideration of countries. It should be noted, however, that in individual countries,

particular tabulations may be inapplicable or not essential on an annual basis, and the list should not, therefore, be described as a minimum programme.

"On the other hand, the vital statistics of a country are more useful to that country and for general scientific purposes if they are tabulated in relation to the significant social and economic groups which are identified within the country. It is expected, therefore, that many countries will add to the basic list of tabulations given and compile their vital statistics in relation to such groupings of the population. Additional tabulations might cover such items as ethnic group, language, economic characteristics, including occupation and status, tenure status for agricultural population, and other items in paragraphs (b) and (d) of Principle 4.8."

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