

ECONOMIC
AND
SOCIAL COUNCILCONSEIL
ECONOMIQUE
ET SOCIAL

UNRESTRICTED

E/CN.3/SR.39
26 April 1949

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

STATISTICAL COMMISSION

FOURTH SESSION

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE THIRTY-NINTH MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 26 April 1949 at 2.30 p.m.

Contents:

1. REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMISSION ON STATISTICAL SAMPLING
(Item 4 of the Agenda) (Continuation)
2. CO-ORDINATION OF STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES - REPORT OF
THE REGIONAL MEETING OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS
(Item 5 (b) of the Agenda).

N.B. Will delegates who wish to have corrections made to the Summary Records please submit such corrections in writing on the official notepaper of their delegation to the Secretariat, Room C.436, as soon as possible after distribution of the Summary Record.

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Present:

Chairman:

Mr. IDENBURG Netherlands

Rapporteur:

Mr. CAMPION United Kingdom

Members:

Mr. MARSHALL Canada

Mr. DARMOIS France

Mr. MAHALANOBIS India

Mr. JAHN Norway

Mr. RYABICHKO (Vice-Chairman)
Ukrainian Soviet
Socialist Republic

Mr. RYABUSHKIN
Union of Soviet
Socialist Republics

Mr. RICE United States of America

Representatives of
Specialized Agencies:

Mr. TOLLEY Food and Agriculture
Organization

Mr. CHOMBART
de LAUWE Food and Agriculture
Organization

Mr. HOFMAN United Nations
Educational, Scientific
and Cultural
Organization

Mr. GRAB World Health
Organization

Representative of Non-

Governmental Organization:

Mr. GOUDSWAARD International
Statistical Institute

Secretariat:

Mr. LEONARD Representing the
Assistant Secretary-
General for Economic
Affairs.

Mr. BRUCE Secretary to the
Commission

Mr. LOFTUS Statistical Office

1. CONTINUATION OF CONSIDERATION OF THE REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMISSION ON STATISTICAL SAMPLING (item 4 of the Agenda) (Documents E/CN.3/52 and E/CN.3/52/Add.1.)

Chapter XI: Programme of Future Work of the Sub-Commission.

Replying to the point raised at the previous meeting by

Mr. CAMPION (United Kingdom) as to whether anything useful could be achieved in connection with sub-paragraph d) of paragraph 72, "statistical quality control", Mr. MAHALANOBIS (India) recalled that the Sub-Commission had been requested by the Commission at the last session of the latter to examine that problem; as far as he was aware, that decision remained unchanged. The Sub-Commission felt that it was particularly opportune to include that item in its future programme of work in view of the fact that the question was to be considered by the International Statistical Institute before the next meeting of the Sub-Commission.

The Sub-Commission was also aware of the difficulties inherent in sub-paragraph c) of paragraph 72, to which attention had been drawn by several members of the Commission, but it had included that item in its work programme in order to ascertain what material existed in that field. With regard to the further enquiry of the United Kingdom representative concerning the future work of the Sub-Commission, he would draw his attention to paragraph 70, which indicated that the Sub-Commission would give continued attention to certain items which had already been considered at its first and second sessions.

Mr. MARSHALL (Canada) stated that sub-paragraphs b) and c) of paragraph 72 covered far too broad a field. Their full consideration would be a very onerous task. He considered therefore that they should be more precisely defined.

Mr. RICE (United States of America) observed that the object of the Sub-Commission in suggesting those fields for the application of sampling methods had been to allow itself a certain amount of latitude in breaking new ground. The Sub-Commission should be allowed to exercise its own judgment where no specific instructions had been given to it by the Commission.

Mr. MAHALANOBIS (India) stated that the Sub-Commission was anxious to avoid a theoretical and academic approach to its work. It was made up of experts who were apprehensive of straying too far from their specialized subjects. There should therefore be no danger of its field of study becoming unduly extended. The Sub-Commission had no intention of attempting to cover sub-paragraph b) of paragraph 72 in its entirety.

At the suggestion of the CHAIRMAN, the Commission agreed to entrust to the Rapporteur the task of summarizing for inclusion in its report to the Economic and Social Council the opinions expressed in the Commission on the Sub-Commission's Report.

The Commission agreed to defer discussion on the United Kingdom resolution on the Sub-Commission's report (see Document E/CN.3/SR.38, last page) pending circulation of the Russian translation.

2. CO-ORDINATION OF STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES. - REPORT OF THE REGIONAL MEETING OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS (Item 5 (b) of the Agenda) (Documents E/CN.3/70 and E/CN.3/W/8).

At the CHAIRMAN's invitation, Mr. LOFTUS (Statistical Office) gave the Commission an account of the Regional Meeting of European Statisticians, explaining that it had been convened as the result of a recommendation of the Commission, endorsed by the Economic and Social Council at its seventh session, for the purpose of securing the active co-operation of national statistical offices in the implementation of the recommendations of the Statistical Commission, and of providing an intermediary between governments and the Statistical Commission in matters of international comparability. The chief subjects discussed by the 17 countries which had attended the meeting had been index numbers of industrial production, and productivity. Certain questions connected with external trade statistics had also been examined. Some recommendations requiring action by the Commission had been adopted and communicated to the Secretary-General. They were to be found in paragraph 11, sub-paragraphs (a) and (b) of document E/CN.3/70. In his reply, the Secretary-General had assured the Chairman of the Meeting that the attention of the Statistical Commission would be drawn to the recommendations, which would subsequently be transmitted by the Statistical Commission to the Economic and Social Council.

The CHAIRMAN drew the attention of the Commission to the Memorandum (Document E/CN.3/W/8), presented by the representative of the Netherlands, in which the purpose of meetings of European statisticians was summarized.

Mr. RICE (United States of America) stated that the Commission had been gratified to hear the encouraging report of the Secretariat on the co-ordination of statistical activities between organs of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies (Item 5 (a) of the Agenda, Document E/CN.3/69). He was therefore the more disturbed to learn from paragraphs 8 and 11 (a) of the report of the Regional Meeting of European Statisticians that the Secretary-General was being asked to consider the best means of co-ordinating the work of the different organs of the United Nations in order to avoid duplication, which would appear to indicate that co-ordination was not at present very satisfactory. He would recall that the Statistical Commission itself had been set up as a co-ordinating agency, not only with outside bodies, but also between organs of the United Nations itself. The two paragraphs he had mentioned appeared to imply that the Commission had failed in those responsibilities. He would strongly deprecate any suggestion that the activities of a recognized co-ordinating agency be further co-ordinated.

Mr. JAHN (Norway) said that when the question of calling a meeting of European statisticians had first been mooted, he had been extremely doubtful as to its utility. He had been far from convinced that there were any specifically European problems which could be usefully studied by such a body. His doubts had been fully justified by the results of that meeting, from which it appeared that the topics dealt with had either been or were about to be discussed by the Commission itself. From a statistical point of view, there was no sound reason for dividing the world into regional geographical groups, since variations within those groups were far too wide to permit of any overall treatment. The whole problem should be approached from the angle of the level of economic development in different countries; those which had reached a similar stage of development could usefully discuss problems of mutual interest in the field of statistics. Europe did not constitute an economic unit and it was unrealistic to expect to find

uniform statistical practices in all European countries. There was no need in his opinion, for continuing to convene regional meetings of European statisticians, particularly as no attempt had been made by the first Meeting to deal with questions of standardization. That was in any event a task for the Commission itself.

Mr. RYABICHKO (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) took the Chair

Mr. MAHALANOBIS (India) agreed with the argument developed by the representative of the United States of America concerning the danger of an endless spiral of co-ordination. However, he had been impressed by the principles underlying the Netherlands memorandum, namely, that specific regional needs for which some provision should be made did in fact exist. It had to be recognised that certain statistical problems were common to specific geographical areas. A simple example was the analysis of rice production and consumption, a matter which concerned a definite group of contiguous countries. He felt it would be useful to discuss such questions on a geographical basis, and that such a procedure would in no way conflict with the functions of the Statistical Commission. That body was certainly alone responsible for global co-ordination, but there was still room to develop standard practices on a regional basis.

Mr. MARSHALL (Canada), recalling that he had been present at the Meeting of European Statisticians, doubted whether international standards could be discussed or formulated by such a group. Its membership was too large, and it had too little time at its disposal. Moreover, the representatives present were not experts in the appropriate fields. He did not think the kind of work referred to by the Indian representative could be satisfactorily carried out by such bodies. It had been stated at the regional meeting by certain representatives that the views of European statisticians did not receive sufficient attention either in the Commission or at the meetings of expert consultants set up by the Commission, and it had therefore been suggested that a small committee of European statistical experts should be set up which could send representatives to meetings of expert consultants when such were convened by the Commission. His personal

feeling was that the results achieved would not justify the continuation of general regional meetings.

Mr. IDENBURG (Netherlands), speaking from the floor, summarised his Memorandum on the position and task of the meetings of European statisticians within the framework of the activities of the Statistical Commission (Document E/CN.3/W/8) for the benefit of those members who could not understand the English text, which was alone as yet available.

In his view the functions of such meetings were five-fold:

- 1) to satisfy the urgent desire of the responsible leaders of the statistical services of the European countries for facilities for the joint discussion of their problems and the pooling of their experience;
- 2) to establish contact between those officials and the Statistical Commission, which, through the medium of its European members, could thus, and only thus, come to know the needs of the statistical services of all the European countries;
- 3) to enable the Statistical Commission, by such contact, to benefit from the practical experience and field work of the statistical services of the European countries and, at the same time, to bring the Commission's directives more effectively to the notice of those services;
- 4) to give recognition to the very real diversity in kind, as well as in degree, of development that existed between the different regions; and
- 5) to provide for the special European post-war needs for comparable data of a much more detailed character than could ever be assembled for the world as a whole.

He could not share the apprehensions that had been voiced concerning the possibility of a conflict between the Statistical Commission and meetings of European statisticians, who, at the Meeting already held,

had fully recognised the role of the Statistical Commission. In his opinion, it was much more probable that differences would arise between the Statistical Office at Lake Success and the statistical services of the Economic Commission for Europe.

Mr. IDENBURG (Netherlands) resumed the Chair.

Mr. RYABICHKO (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) felt that it would be out of order for the Commission to return to the question of whether or not there should be European regional meetings, since that question had already been decided at the Third Session. A meeting had in fact taken place, and the responsibility for convening further meetings now lay with the Economic Commission for Europe. The Commission should rather consider the question of its relations with the other regional organs of the United Nations, a question which it was now in a better position to consider, in the light of its experience with the European meeting, than it had been at the Third Session, at which discussion had been limited to the problems of duplication and overlapping. He suggested therefore that the Commission request the Secretary-General to submit to the next Session a report on the relationship between the Statistical Commission and all the regional organs of the United Nations.

With reference to the results of the Meeting of European Statisticians, he confessed that he was surprised that representatives at the Meeting appeared to have dealt not so much with local problems as with the problems of Europe as a whole, and had then thought it necessary to refer their findings to the Statistical Commission. That appeared to be a very good instance of the practice referred to by the United States representative, whereby a body was asked to co-ordinate the work of what was supposed itself to be a co-ordinating agency.

It was also surprising that the Meeting of European Statisticians had assumed the functions of an administrative rather than those of an advisory body, as the tenor of Sections 7 and 10 of the Secretariat's Memorandum on that Meeting (Document E/CN.3/70) clearly showed.

Mr. MAHALANOBIS (India) agreed with the representative of the Ukrainian SSR that the discussion as to the desirability of holding further meetings of European statisticians should be brought to a close. He therefore proposed that a drafting committee be set up to prepare for inclusion in the Commission's report to the Council a passage stating that the Commission considered that further regional meetings of European statisticians might prove of value, first, for the working out of the administrative and executive details of statistical work such as the central elaboration of trade statistics or plans for the exchange of information on local statistical requirements; secondly, for the preparatory drafting of the regional standards to which he had already referred, or, as he would term them, "provisional sub-standards"; and, finally, for the further elaboration, subject to overall co-ordination by the Statistical Commission, of certain items of special regional interest which the Commission had only touched on in a general way.

Mr. JAHN (Norway) agreed that it would be useful for the heads of the statistical services of the different countries to meet together, but felt it was not the task of the United Nations to convene such meetings unless they were charged with some specific task. The only concrete results achieved by the Meeting of European Statisticians had been the elaboration of certain recommended standards possessing no specifically European interest.

In his experience it was Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America which could impart the most valuable lessons in the statistical field, and he felt that the benefits of mutual contact between statisticians of European countries could be over-estimated.

He was as well aware as any other representative of the statistical problems confronting Europe, but, as he had said, he was not in favour of further regional meetings of statisticians unless they were convened to examine specific problems of common interest to that region.

Mr. CAMPION (United Kingdom) recalled that at the third session of the Commission he had fallen in with the wish expressed by other representatives to arrange for convening a regional meeting of European statisticians, although he had been aware that the Commission had thereby been establishing a precedent for other functional Commissions of the Council to arrange for regional meetings of experts on the matters within their competence.

He drew the Commission's attention to Section 11 of the Secretariat's Memorandum on the Regional Meeting of European Statisticians (Document E/CN.3/70). The second of the two requests made to the Commission would be covered in the course of its discussion on trade statistics. With reference to the first request, it was for the Commission to decide what comments, if any, it should make upon the Report of the Regional Meeting of European Statisticians when forwarding it to the Economic and Social Council.

He would point out that with the exception of the central elaboration of trade statistics, all the items which had been examined by the Meeting of European Statisticians were on the agenda of the Statistical Commission, and should, in his view, be examined on a world-wide rather than on a regional basis. He would also point out that the Economic Commission for Europe was performing very valuable work of a day-to-day nature and, under its terms of reference, had the necessary power to convene meetings of statisticians to deal with any questions within its competence; at the present moment, indeed, a Working Party of Experts on Statistical Information set up by the Inland Transport Committee of the Economic Commission for Europe was sitting in Geneva. It would be undesirable to embarrass the Economic Commission for Europe in any way.

With the above considerations in mind, he could not but ask himself what would be the functions of further regional meetings of European statisticians convened to discuss general statistical questions; if such meetings were to be convened at regular intervals, real danger of conflict with the Statistical Commission would develop; if, on the other hand, their field of study was restricted to such specific questions as food statistics, health statistics or migration statistics, they would immediately come into conflict with the Specialized Agencies or with the Population Commission. In the latter connection, he agreed that it would be of value for technical specialists in such specific fields to meet together at intervals under the aegis of the responsible agency or commission, but pointed out that it would still be necessary for the work done at such meetings to be co-ordinated with the work of the Statistical Commission.

In conclusion, he considered that the Statistical Commission must make clear to the Secretary-General its view that, if he intended to convene a Meeting of European Statisticians during 1950, he should inform the countries invited to the meeting of the exact subjects of their discussions, and of what it was considered should be left for consideration by the Statistical Commission or another United Nations organ.

Mr. RICE (United States of America) agreed with the suggestion of the representative of India that a drafting committee should be set up, and suggested that it should consist of the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman, the Rapporteur and the representatives of India and Canada. He felt however that its terms of reference should be to draft for inclusion in the Commission's Report to the Council a recommendation as to the correct relationship which should exist between the Commission and regional meetings of statisticians held in Europe or elsewhere.

Mr. RYABUSHKIN (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) wished to add that he did not consider it within the Commission's competence to decide whether arrangements should be made for regional meetings of statisticians.

He drew the United Kingdom representative's attention to the statement in Section 5 of the Secretariat's Memorandum to the effect that it had been agreed "that the report of the regional meeting should be sent to the Secretary-General and that there should be a single channel of communication to the Economic and Social Council".

The CHAIRMAN stated that he understood from the Secretariat that the report of the Regional Meeting of European Statisticians had not been submitted to the Economic and Social Council, but that the Statistical Commission had been requested to do so by the Secretary-General.

The Commission unanimously adopted the proposal of the Indian representative, as amended by the United States representative.

The meeting rose at 5.50 p.m.