

GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICS AND OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE¹

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I APPROACH this general appraisal of the comparability of international statistics with a sense that everything I will say has already been said in more compelling ways by those who have already spoken. I will not attempt to summarize the opinions that have been expressed or to present general conclusions that could be drawn from them. Nevertheless, I should like to examine some of the institutional aspects which affect the development of comparable statistics and to review some of the circumstances associated with its achievement.

The attainment of country-to-country comparability of statistics is almost invariably a secondary objective to any particular country, although it is the primary job of the international statistical agencies. There have been very few examples in social and economic fields in which the goal of international comparability was a primary objective of national statistical officers. There have been instances, nevertheless, where such comparability was a primary objective, or at least where national purposes and international purposes were accorded more nearly equal weight by a group of countries. The conferences of British Empire statisticians have given primary consideration to country-to-country comparability; so, also, have the periodic statistical conferences of the Scandinavian statisticians. The Benelux countries are now working in this direction and have initiated programs designed to make some of their statistical series mutually comparable by utilizing identical concepts, definitions, and procedures. Mention should be made also of the efforts being made by European countries in connection with the Marshall Plan.

For the most part, however, statistics are generally collected for strictly national purposes. For the most part, also, the

¹ In preparing this paper I had the benefit of assistance from my colleague P. J. Loftus.

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statistics are collected either for a specific administrative purpose or they are simple by-products of normal governmental process. The by-product character of many statistical series may be illustrated by banking statistics which are the inevitable results of the book-keeping process. Foreign-trade statistics had their origin in tax collection and for protectionist purposes, and railway statistics in regulatory processes applied to rates charged for service.

In recent decades, of course, many national statistical series have been initiated independently of administrative needs, narrowly defined, and are not by-products of some governmental process. They have been developed, however, to meet specific national needs. The many subjects covered by a census of population or agriculture in a well-developed country illustrate the variety of matters about which it is thought desirable to have information to facilitate the smooth operation of the economic and social systems. The point is, however, that the statistics are designed to take account of and to reflect the existing structure of economic and social life in a particular country, at a particular time, in consideration of specific or general uses to which the statistics could be put.

Despite many points of similarity between economic and social conditions in one country and those of another, there usually remain significant points of difference which tend to make statistical comparability somewhat more difficult. A great many modern countries, for example, have well-developed systems of social insurance and, in a loose way, it could be said that they are more or less comparable. As far as the by-product statistics of the insurance programs are concerned, however, they may not be comparable in the first instance. Industrial and occupational coverages vary, age limits vary, benefits vary, there are inclusions or exclusions to take account of purely national problems and policies, and in fact an almost infinite variety of small or large differences arises from legal or administrative causes which are almost always fully reflected in the statistics. The result is that, except in the very broadest

sense, statistical comparability is not immediately or automatically attainable. It is important to note, however, that administrative rigidities are not present in many types of statistical collections. The progress achieved in planning the 1950 censuses, especially in Latin America, is a case in point. In such cases a very great opportunity exists for the development of basic comparability.

Even if one disregards the administrative and procedural aspects which are, to a large extent, independent variables, the differences between countries regarding national concepts of needs for statistics are sources of lack of comparability for which there is frequently no easy remedy. At one end of the scale there are countries for which it would now be premature to develop elaborated estimates of national income, important as these estimates are to almost all countries. At the other end of the scale, there are countries which will not collect literacy statistics in the 1950 censuses because illiteracy is so small that it would not be worth while to burden the census schedules with questions upon it.

A country needs statistics first for its own internal purposes; it is only when its internal purposes extend beyond its frontiers that country-to-country comparability of statistics becomes an objective to be sought by the country itself. This is illustrated by the fact that one of the first collections of internationally comparable statistics measured the movement of external trade. In this case it was desirable for individual countries to know as much as possible about sources of goods and markets and know as much as possible about their client and competitor countries. It is interesting to note that even now external trade statistics are available for more countries than any other kind of statistics. This is not to infer that these statistics have reached a desirable degree of comparability; the total value figures possess rough comparability, but the more detailed figures are plagued by a variety of differences which are accounted for by purely national requirements and interests.

It follows that as countries become more and more interdependent politically and economically, incentives will exist for additional areas of comparability to be established. For many years it was enough for most countries to record the flow of merchandise trade in order to adjust their policies in an intelligent way; for the past several years, however, it has been vitally necessary to know also about the flow across national frontiers of capital, tourist expenditures, and other invisible items. This accounts for the very great interest now in comparable statistics of balances of payments.

While there are many indications that institutional forms in different countries are coming closer together, there are also contrary indications which create new difficulties in the preparation of comparable statistics. Governments establish different political and economic objectives and because their statistics must be related to policy matters the statistics are likely not to be comparable. Thus, the role played by the price system in a collectivist society is not the same role as is played by the price system in a capitalistic society; this introduces basic differences in the concepts and magnitudes of economic statistics. Moreover, the industrial structure of a collectivist society is likely to be sufficiently different from that of a capitalistic society that difficulties in comparing statistics are introduced. This point was strikingly shown in the discussions of the standard classification of industries which was recently adopted by the Statistical Commission and by the Economic and Social Council.

Even among countries with roughly the same degree and kind of economic organization, developments during the past few years have made it more difficult to make comparisons among figures of external trade. Trade agreements, currency and exchange controls, and similar governmental policies have resulted in the frequent use of more or less nominal valuations of exports and imports instead of market valuations. Bi-lateral trading arrangements tend to result in unique price relationships for the particular goods under agreement and these re-

relationships may not have any close similarity to the real relationships. In any case, it is now quite hazardous to use formal exchange rate quotations to get from one country's prices to those of another.

Under the conditions outlined, how is comparability to be achieved? One obvious answer is that comparable or identical questionnaires or procedures should be used and to the extent that comparable or identical economic and social organizations prevail this answer is acceptable. But we have seen that economic and social organizations vary considerably. Under these conditions something less than full comparability may be obtained through the use of identical questionnaires and procedures. It is possible, however, in many cases, to seek supplemental statistics which can be used to make comparable figures which are otherwise not comparable or to agree to classification systems that will help to bridge the gap. If for example, one wished to establish comparable figures of the number of persons covered by a defined kind of social insurance program, it would be possible to devise a definition, to analyze the figures of each country determining how they conformed to the definition, and in cases of non-correspondence, to seek supplementary figures which could be used to bring the country's figures into line with the standard definition. Thus it might be necessary to subtract the numbers of domestic servants, or to add the industrial workers engaged in Government enterprises.

It should be noted also that it is not usually necessary for international purposes that all results of statistical series be comparable; it may be enough that the totals or major subdivisions be comparable. In these cases, comparability may not be hard to achieve.

Despite the presence of both old and new impediments to comparability, several developments since the end of World War II have been favourable to the progress of international comparability. The United Nations and the Specialized Agencies have clear and defined responsibilities for promoting the compilation of comparable statistics. These responsibilities are

being exercised with diligence and effect. Increasingly large amounts of reasonably comparable statistics are being collected and published, and an increasing number of methodological and technical publications and standard classifications are being prepared and circulated. The United Nations and the Specialized Agencies are in continuous correspondence with the appropriate offices in almost all countries and a very large number of improvements in comparability have been made in the last two years. Statisticians in every country are becoming more and more conscious of the need for adequate and comparable statistics. Most of the international statistical agencies have many more demands upon them for assistance in statistical matters than they can possibly meet, but it is very encouraging to know of the very real interest being evidenced.

There is a real desire on the part of national governments to provide basic statistics where they do not now exist and to improve national statistics where they are now less than adequate. The real hope for comparable international statistics lies in the establishment and improvement of national systems; if these are established and improved, comparability can be achieved.

In conclusion, therefore, the prospects are encouraging, and the international agencies are generally in a position within realistic limits to expand and improve the work done before the war by such agencies as the League of Nations, the International Institute of Agriculture, the International Labour Office, and the pioneer work done by the International Statistical Institute, the Inter-American Statistical Institute, and other bodies. It will be important to guard against over-optimism about the speed of results because statistics and especially international statistics are evolutionary and depend upon associated conditions. It is the purpose of the international agencies through the ways open to them to minimize the effect of the associated conditions and to produce increasingly large bodies of essentially comparable statistics. I am confident that this can be done.