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ECLAC/CDCC Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting
on the Development of Social Statistical Databases
and a Methodological Approach for a Social
Vulnerability Index for Small Islands Developing States
Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago
12-13 February 2001

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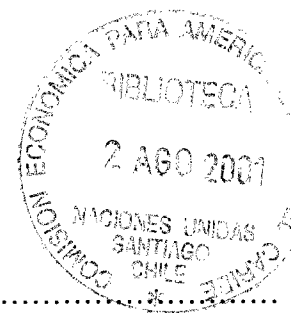
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REPORT OF THE AD HOC EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL STATISTICAL DATABASES AND A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR A SOCIAL VULNERABILITY INDEX FOR SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES

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REPORT OF THE AD HOC EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL STATISTICAL DATABASES AND A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR A SOCIAL VULNERABILITY INDEX FOR SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES

The Meeting of the Ad Hoc Expert Group on the Development of Social Statistical Databases and a Methodological Approach for a Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) for Small Island Developing States was held on 12 and 13 February 2001 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, at the offices of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, secretariat for the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC).

Nineteen experts attended the meeting functioning at the subregional and national levels. The list of participants is annexed to this report.

<u>Agenda item 1</u>
<u>Opening</u>

Dr. Len Ishmael, Director, ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, in her opening remarks, reminded participants that the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat was mandated to provide assistance to governments in the subregion to meet the commitments made at the various world conferences. In this regard, she noted that at the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), held in 1995, governments in the subregion had adopted the goals of poverty eradication, employment creation and social integration of marginalised and vulnerable groups. These goals were to be met as part of their national agendas. That intention was reiterated and elaborated at the Millennium Assembly of the United Nations, 6 September 2000. The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat had therefore been working with governments to identify how best to meet their needs, so as to facilitate and accelerate their efforts and initiatives of the Copenhagen Summit.

Dr. Ishmael explained that through a series of high level meetings, coupled with programmes of technical assistance, the Social Development Unit of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat had accepted the conclusions of member States that it was necessary to strengthen the capacity of member countries in the area of social policy formulation and analysis. Fundamental to such a task was the availability of reliable social data for use by policy makers, social planners and researchers in the subregion. She said that, far too often, social policy had been formulated in the absence of concrete data.

The Director highlighted the fact that such a conclusion was also shared by key stakeholders working in the area of social development and that many

of them were, in fact, supporting that task through their assistance in the generation of reliable data. In this regard she spoke of the work of the Caribbean Community/United Nations Statistics Division (CARICOM/UNSD), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the areas of social statistics and social indicator development. The ECLAC/CDCC project was therefore structured in such a manner as to be complementary to efforts underway in the subregion. In this way, the limited resources available to the subregion would provide optimum opportunities to the governments.

Dr Ishmael spoke of the objectives of the project, which were to provide to governments and researchers in the subregion access to a comprehensive database of social statistics for 24 countries that would serve their needs, as well as to construct a methodological approach for the formulation of a social vulnerability index for Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

She thanked participants for joining the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat in this endeavor and wished them well in their deliberations, the outcome of which, she hoped, would provide useful information on how the project was conducted.

The agenda of the meeting was discussed and adopted as follows:

1. Welcome

2. Introduction to the ECLAC/CDCC project

3. Review of recommendations from the Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting

4. Agency response to Project – in terms of similar exercises

5. Areas of collaboration

6. Modalities for collaboration

7. Closing

The representative of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat presented an overview of the programme of work for the two-day meeting. She also presented a brief overview of the ECLAC/CDCC project and explained that the duration would be two years, in the first instance. The general objective of the project, according to the ECLAC/CDCC representative was to improve the social conditions of persons living in the ECLAC/CDCC member States by

strengthening the capacity of policy makers to formulate, implement and evaluate social policies. She also identified the immediate objectives of the project, which were:

(a)   To create, maintain and use fully searchable social statistical databases housed/linked through the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat;

(b)   To build capacity at the national and subregional levels for the monitoring and evaluation of social vulnerability among small open economies of the Caribbean through, inter alia, the establishment of national databases on social statistics and training of social planners in the use of social statistics for policy formulation;

(c)   To make available to policy makers in the subregion a comparative analytical framework based on the available social data for informed social policy development relevant to poverty eradication, social equity and gender equality and the eradication of violence against women; and

(d)   To complete the quantitative and analytic work on the most appropriate methodological approach for a social vulnerability index within the parameters of the SIDS framework, preferably by the end of the year 2001.

On completion of the project, the expected outputs would be:

(a)   Fully searchable databases of socio-demographic statistics for all ECLAC/CDCC member countries, housed/linked through the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat;

(b)   Socio-demographic data sets at the national level stored electronically;

(c)   Trained personnel at country level with the capability to monitor and evaluate social indices as a tool for policy formulation;

(d)   An integrated data collection protocol on violence against women;

(e)   Publication of a compendium of social statistics;

(f)   Development and maintenance of a website for dissemination on-line of selected socio-demographic data sets;

(g)   Methodology for construction of the SVI; and

(h)   Manual for use in the construction and review of the SVI.

She drew the attention of participants to a number of papers that were tabled for the meeting.

Agenda item 2
Collecting and managing regional data sets

The representative of the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), reported that her organization serviced 22 countries in the Caribbean and had, since the mid-1990s, developed a database of nearly 100 indicators on health. She disclosed that 33 of these indicators had been selected for publication and that the data was available online to the public in tabular form, and accessible in a windows-based environment. She also informed the meeting that specific information on gender was available.

The meeting was informed that data from that database fed back into two publications - 'Health Conditions in the Americas' year 2002, which was in preparation, and the WHO World Health Report. PAHO also had a mortality database that contained data for approximately 20 years. The Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC) was the repository of this data.

Challenges associated with the collection of data for the database included:

(a)   Data not being obtained from countries in a timely manner; and

(b)   Obvious inconsistencies with the quality of the data, so that some have had to be dropped.

The representative of CAREC indicated that her organization serviced some 21 countries. The data collected was entered into three databases on the following subjects:

(a)   Mortality;

(b)   Communicable diseases; and

(c)   HIV/AIDS.

She noted that late receipt of data had been one of the problems encountered in the collection of data and that mortality data was only available up to 1994.

Another problem encountered by the organisation was the reluctance of countries to use the software disseminated to them. Some countries, for example, were using the older version of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), while others were only partially using the updated version (10th edition).

Plans were disclosed for a 'hospital discharge' database in order to calculate the burden of diseases, as well as a database on 'the incidence and prevalence behaviour' relevant to the exposure of the individual to certain types of health risks. CAREC also planned to start a new series of publications based on the data emerging from the use of the new software, ICD10.

The meeting was informed that data from CAREC was available online and that all information was now accessible in a windows-based package.

The representative of the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Jamaica, informed the meeting that her organization monitored education statistics and that two years ago the UNESCO Institute of Statistics was designated as an autonomous body with the responsibility of monitoring progress on education for all.

She explained that in 1998, 22 countries in the Caribbean took part in an international assessment of education. These assessments were done at a national level using available data. In an interagency exercise to produce a document that spoke to the regional situation, the 22 country reports were used and a number of problems became evident. These included:

(a)   "Spottiness" of the data, resulting in an inability to make comparisons at the regional level;

(b)   Common categories and classifications often did not exist; and

(c)   Questionnaires did not tidily capture needed information due to differences in the definition of concepts.

In February 2000, stakeholders of this process met to reflect on the findings of that exercise and as a result agreed to initiate the following projects designed to address the problems encountered:

(a)   The setting up of the Caribbean Education Management Information System (CREMIS) by UNESCO to collect 23 quantitative indicators

for 22 Caribbean countries, within the framework of the Summit of the Americas, using standard and agreed upon indicators already in existence;

(b)   The collection of qualitative data developing on work done by CARICOM and the OECS;

(c)   A project on Literacy, which would be given separate treatment because of some of the complexities involved; and

(d)   An appropriate electronic platform to be used during the project.

An electronic platform for the project came out of the expressed need of policy makers to communicate with each other on policy matters and for teachers to share innovations with each other. A consultancy to conduct a needs assessment for the development of an appropriate electronic platform was in progress.

The representative of UNESCO reported that the projects would be monitored by a committee, conceptualized as having representatives from 22 Caribbean countries, with representatives of CARICOM and the OECS also present.

Mr. Desmond Hunte, Regional Census Coordinator, was the final presenter and spoke of the efforts of CARICOM to coordinate census activities and to collect and bring together data at the regional level. In the context of these efforts he made the following points:

(a)   Common questionnaires were used to collect comparable data from national censuses for the regional census report.   He reported that approximately 75 to 80 per cent of the data were comparable;

(b)   Planners had not recognized the use to which census data could be put;

(c)   There was general lack of recognition of the importance of census data; and

(d)   There was no repository for the census data from the region. This has led to poor storage and corruption of data from the 1970 census.

He spoke of the addition of new data to this year's census.   These included information at the level of the household (data on internet use, rents, mortgages, interest use, waste disposal and levels of crime); and at the level of the individual (disabilities, access to health facilities, union status of males 15+ and time spent on home duties).

Following these presentations, participants were invited to comment on, and to discuss, the issues raised.

The meeting welcomed the UNESCO focus on variables that spoke to quality, and agreed that they were very important for the analysis of education.

Questions arose as to when the 2000/2001 census data for the region was likely to be ready, since a number of regional projects depended on the availability of these data to conduct further studies. It was revealed that expected dates of completion were variable. Data for some of the censuses that were conducted in the year 2000 would be ready at the end of the year 2001. This was usually the case for smaller countries in the subregion, even though this data might not be published due to cost. Data for larger countries, were usually more problematic since obtaining clean data from the census could take up to four years to produce. It was therefore surmised that obtaining clean data by the year 2002 from most of the countries of the subregion, especially the larger countries, did not seem very likely.

This information led to a discussion by participants of the most efficient and effective use and conduct of the census, given resource constraints. The suggestion was made that perhaps the basic purpose of the census should continue to be the provision of vital and basic statistics that would provide researchers with useful diagnostics needed to conduct sample surveys. It was also suggested that the addition of new questions to the census might be better left for smaller sample surveys that were invariably more useful, valid and less costly.

The meeting was however cautioned that smaller countries with limited resources saw the census as providing them with 'more value for their money'. This was so, since they were often unable to conduct smaller and more frequent sample surveys.

Participants also spoke of the need to standardize information. It was noted that although a software package, ICD10, had been disseminated to countries in the subregion, which would allow for such standardization in the collection of health statistics, many countries continued to use various versions of this software to enter their data. Apart from lack of standardization, this reluctance to use ICD10, had also led to problems in the analysis of data.

The issue of legislation, which mandated health practitioners to provide data in sensitive areas of health, was also discussed, and the point was made that countries had variable legal and surveillance systems. Loopholes were sometimes created from this variability in the legislation, thus relieving reluctant practitioners from the necessity of providing required data.

The meeting was also asked to consider the question of how detailed should national data be if it were to remain relevant to local units and still be able to be aggregated at the regional and subregional levels.

The representative of ECLAC, Santiago, informed the meeting of the outcome of a recently concluded meeting held in Chile concerned with the development of a regional database. One of the important conclusions was that, for the purpose of developing a regional database and in order to provide latitude to users, data should not be entered nor provided at a highly aggregated level. In this regard, a database of micro-data, provided at a wide enough geographical level to preserve confidentiality of the population, was best. He admitted that the small size of Caribbean countries might prove to be a challenge. The question to be asked, he posited, was what would be the comparable geographic unit to be used in the Caribbean that would maintain the confidentiality of the population?

He spoke of the importance of the census data as a 'gold mine' of specific social indicators, as well as a verification of sample data. He also suggested that only micro-data would allow for the generation of custom-based indicators. With regard to the housing of data, the representative of ECLAC explained that data ought to be centralized, but that the site ought to be one that would reassure governments that the data could not be owned by any one country. As such, he advised that a neutral institution or organization ought to be the repository of such data.

These comments gave rise to a discussion on the issue of legislation associated with the release of information. The meeting was informed of the difficulty of obtaining sensitive data from some governments due to legal and political implications. It was reiterated however, that the subregional databases were necessary because of the danger posed to individual countries, through the loss of their data in the event of a natural disaster. It was pointed out that the loss of data would hinder the ability of policy makers to assess loss and damage, as well as to plan for the period of reconstruction. The recommendation was therefore made that in the event of the release of micro-data for the development of the regional database, a retrieving system should be developed that would restrict a user from identifying a minimum unit, thus protecting the identity of the individual.

The meeting was informed that the primary constraint to releasing the census data to be housed in a subregional database was political will, since names were not used in the census surveys. It was also suggested that with regard to providing micro-data at a wide enough geographical level to preserve confidentiality, the smallest geographical unit that might be feasible for this purpose might be 'the community'. However, the need to overcome problems related to the definition of a community that would impact on data analysis and survey design, was still outstanding.

The representative of UNICEF presented the case of collecting data on sustainable development in Jamaica, as an example of how some of the practical considerations already discussed in the meeting were dealt with in this project. In that project, data was approached as a corporate resource, and as such, issues of copyright and legislation affecting information were addressed. In the UNICEF example, government support for the project was garnered directly through a presentation to Cabinet. During this presentation, an example of the database and some of its uses were presented.

It was agreed that data at the level of the individual were required for the databases and that the databases would be set up in a manner that would allow for retrieval, access and update[1]. Some of the tasks associated with the setting up of the database included:

(a)   The creation of a meta-data dictionary, tied to ISO standards;

(b)   Grouping of key agencies, e.g., biophysical, economic, social, etc.;

(c)   Completing of a data inventory;

(d)   Development of a clearing house; and

(e)   Setting up of online help and a data archive.

The issue of how to ensure connectivity among databases to maximize access and analysis was discussed by the participants. It was recognized that there was a need to have a common thread or unique identifier in all of the data sets. Dr. Dennis Brown, Department of Behavioural Sciences, University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine campus and Ms. Heather Ricketts, Department of Sociology and Social Work, UWI, Mona Campus, explained how this was achieved in Jamaica. Using the survey of living conditions, as the example, they suggested that there might be best practices associated with the conduct of this survey which the project might want to study and duplicate.

Apart from the issue of choosing a unique identifier for the purposes of connectivity, participants were concerned about the comparability of samples. Dr. Godfrey St. Bernard, Fellow, Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies (SALISES) directed the attention of participants to a project that was currently being undertaken by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs of Trinidad and Tobago, in which issues relevant to the project on comparability, usefulness of indicators, data source and the basis for evaluating the quality of data, were discussed.

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[1] It was suggested that data would be stored at a pixel level of 10x10 metres.

In conceptualizing the kind of data needed for the social database, the meeting was cautioned to be mindful of the fact that outside of the need to collect basic data for local/national needs, it was also necessary to collect other kinds of data that were often externally driven. The circular process of data collection and social policy was also highlighted and the experience of the Jamaica survey of living conditions was used to explain the circularity process and the need for assessing data for currency and relevance. It was explained that a technical committee drawn from a wide cross-section of the public and private sectors, came together to look at the modules and to discard those variables that were no longer found to be relevant or useful. At the same time, areas in which social policy planners needed to make decisions or formulate policy, for which no data existed, were usually included in the questionnaires for the collection of data. In this regard, the Social Policy Unit of the Planning Institute of Jamaica (PIOJ) was identified as an integral component in social planning, since it was involved in utilizing data generated from the survey for social policy analysis by policy planners.

Agenda item 3
Definition and use of social indicators

The use of indicators in monitoring and evaluation was highlighted through the UNICEF experience. It was explained that these indicators specified the performance standard to be reached in order to achieve the intermediate objectives of the programme being implemented, as well as the ultimate output. The meeting was informed of various UNICEF projects for which the development of monitoring and evaluation indicators was important, among them being the child vulnerability index in Costa Rica and Brazil, and the situational analysis of children and their families 2000 being done in Jamaica. The indicators of importance for monitoring and evaluation, 'input indicators', 'process indicators', 'output indicators', 'outcome and impact indicators', were also outlined.

The meeting was also informed of: (a) the role of UNICEF in supporting the Government of Jamaica in the Social Indicator Monitoring System (SIMS) project; and (b) the methodological review of the system, coordinated and overseen by the PIOJ. It was explained that the expectation of SIMS was to develop a system that was multi-dimensional but focused, giving to policy makers a tool that would help them to better understand social trends and their impacts. The methodological review was done in order to determine under what conditions and in what form the system would have been possible. It made recommendations and discussed approaches which had worked for other projects in similar situations.

Principal stakeholders in the SIMS project included the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the Ministry of Justice in Jamaica. Other stakeholders included the Statistical

Institute of Jamaica (STATIN), the Jamaican Social Investment Fund, the Caribbean Child Development Center, the National Council on Disabilities, UNICEF and other international donors. Each of the SIMS stakeholders felt that the system was valuable to them and their constituencies when it included data generated by their organization. Additionally, SIMS importance was recognized when it conducted analysis with regard to data from other ministries and/or with regard to economic and other social data.

The representative of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat presented to the meeting some of the salient features of the ECLAC Gender Indicators Manual. She explained that by 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action wanted to obtain more speedy action with regard to the implementation of the programmes and the setting of benchmarks and time-frames for such implementation. Governments had made commitments to achieve gender equality, regional bodies had agreed to assist governments in this process, and there was recognition that countries in the subregion needed to strengthen governance and accountability. In this context, the collection of statistics and the analysis and publication of data was one of the guidelines for the attainment of these objectives and the document ECLAC/CDCC document contained proposals for indicators developed for this purpose.

The gender indicators manual was described as user-friendly and intended for use by a wide cross-section of policy planners. Among some of the issues the manual dealt with were:

(a)   The situation of women compared to men;

(b)   The importance of continuous surveys as opposed to census data for periodic assessments of policy on a continuous basis; and

(c)   Making the most use of available data and how to use them more efficiently.

It was suggested that some of the main conceptual challenges associated with the manual included:

(a)   How to make the document and its contents relevant to national priorities;

(b)   How to take account of qualitative differences in gender roles and gender relationships, given the quantitative focus of the manual; and

(c)   How to take account of new inequalities arising in recent times.

The ECLAC/CDCC representative concluded her presentation by pointing to the data issues that were of significance in the development and collection of

gender data. These included the disaggregation of data, quality of data, availability of data and accessibility to relevant data.

Discussion surrounding the presentations focused largely on the issue of using indicators in a manner that was more community-oriented, inclusive and 'bottom-up' rather 'top-down'. Participants agreed that this was indeed the challenge to policy planners, and the UNICEF representative spoke of the efforts of her organization to reverse this trend by training communities to use social indicators and to become more involved in the identification of these indicators. Another perspective on the matter was that local government reform was one way of obtaining a more consultative process.

Concerns surrounding issues of gender, including the need for sensitivity on matters of gender equality, gender difference and gender equity, were also raised. The meeting also pointed to the need for analysis of the role of the State in facilitating social participation and recommended the institutionalization of a mechanism charged with the responsibility for social analysis as a means of creating a more enabling environment.

Professor Elsie Le Franc, SALISES, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, spoke on the work that was being undertaken by SALISES on behalf of the OECS Secretariat and its similarity to the ECLAC/CDCC project. This presentation was prefaced by expressions of dissatisfaction at the quality of data that was available to professionals in the field and at some of the indices that were calculated. Noted too, were the many instances of duplication that resulted in stagnation and lack of progress of work in this area.

Professor Le Franc reported that SALISES was currently involved in elaborating a human development report using existing indices, which would be adjusted to reflect vulnerability in the subregion. That work also attempted to identify gaps that retarded effective participation of the subregion in the current globalized international environment.

In this context, using the UNDP Human Development Index, the project would seek to combine a rights-based approach with a capacity approach, using both economic and social indicators. The need to sell this approach to finance-oriented officials who wished to first get the economics right and then deal with the social issues was seen as very important.

She spoke of some of the indicators currently being used to measure human development and shared some of her concerns in that area. According to Dr. Le Franc human development in the context of the Caribbean would have to take into account the concept of vulnerability. The Human Development Index, would, in such a case, have to be adjusted to include indicators that would measure disability and weakness using poverty levels, income inequality and per capita income.

In expressing the concern on the use of existing variables, and how they should in fact be treated when addressing vulnerability, Dr. Le Franc said that the "access" variable, was noted to be of little meaning. Access to water and health services, using physical distance, as a criterion does not speak to real access since the actual availability of facilities were not taken into consideration. In Jamaica, it was explained that 30 of the 32 sanitation plants did not work, showing the meaninglessness of measuring access to public sanitation. This clearly warranted the need, therefore, to indicate the quality of service or the outcome of the provision of such service to fully assess such situations. That, she thought, would entail a lot of research and was an area in which SALISES could assist. In addition, the resultant analysis of social issues, such as employment status and security, utilizing a gender lens, only gave a gender breakdown and did not speak to equality.

Dr Le Franc also spoke of the need to look at indicators that spoke of 'resilience'; 'flexibility' and 'sustainability', when looking at the concept of vulnerability and human development in the context of Caribbean countries.

Indicators of resilience might speak to issues, such as:

(a)   The degree and extent of economic diversity;

(b)   Non-economic factors – flexibility of knowledge acquisition and the psycho-social values related to this. The experience of the average person in developed countries was that during an average lifetime one person held at least six different jobs. This was notably different in the Caribbean but was thought to be related to capacity;

(c)   Labour markets;

(d)   Management of human resources; and

(e)   Technical innovation.

Indicators of sustainability might be drawn the following areas:

(a)   Physical and human capital investment;

(b)   Social investment; and

(c)   The existence and components of social capital.

Following Professor Le Franc's presentation, the floor was opened for discussion.

The ECLAC/CDCC representative noted work in the area of disaster assessment in the subregion, which entailed the development of a related index. The notion of collaboration, therefore, between the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat and SALISES to advance work in this area was thus welcomed.

The point relating to the inadequacies of gender indicators resonated and one participant noted that while women were represented in parliament, the indicators did not speak to their location in the power hierarchy. There was no real data to represent this concern and, therefore, the need to devise more qualitative indicators was posited. It was also stated that issues of domestic violence were not represented in indicators such as Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) and Gender-related Development Index (GDI).

While acknowledging the importance of the project, concern was expressed about the quality of country level data. It was thought that a system of rewards should be considered for statisticians employed at the Central Statistical Offices (CSOs), to reduce the high turnover of personnel. All agreed that the high turnover of personnel impacted negatively on the quality of personnel and data collection, dissemination and analysis.

It was advocated that statistics was at an evolutionary stage in the Caribbean and the thrust to enhance statistical literacy was underway. The need was seen to enhance this development in line ministries, statistical offices and among policy makers in the subregion. The need for statistical literacy was underscored by the comment that decision makers were often in no position to judge the quality of the statistics received from the CSO. The point was also made that CSOs needed to be overhauled and that statisticians were in need of further training. Training would include social policy analysis since statisticians and social policy decision makers spoke different languages. Such a situation was overcome in Jamaica where training involving the PIOJ, the Consortium and the Office of the Prime Minister took place.

It was noted that information was not always viewed as a political priority, and that political will was needed to realize the stated objectives of the SVI project. There was, therefore, the need to:

(a)   Find a way to articulate the conceptual framework in a manner that decision makers could accept; and

(b)   Assist decision makers to understand the uses of data and convince them of the need for a long-term vision.

In light of this discussion, another participant noted the need to coordinate an approach to the use and storage of information at the highest level. The importance of this was seen in the aftermath of the Mexico disaster where information was needed, which had been stored on computers that were

destroyed. The success of the operation in the aftermath of the disaster was predicated on the understanding of the importance of data. That understanding resulted in the reorganization of how information was processed and stored.

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Agenda item 4
Exploring information technology issues relevant
to social policy formulation

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The representative of ECLAC, Santiago, Chile, indicated that ECLAC was aware of the different expressions of vulnerability in the Caribbean and that the SVI provided the platform to showcase the Caribbean dimension.

He envisioned that the SVI database should comprise three databases, the first being an Information Retrieval System (IRS) that was available to the public, housed on the world wide web, which would consist of the following:

(a) A meta-data dictionary which would state where information could be found;

(b) Micro-data so that computation of indicators could be facilitated if necessary; and

(c) A few statistics which would facilitate basic computations such as, time series analysis and trends. Comparison would be possible because of the reduced number of indices.

The second type of database would be an information analysis database, larger than the IRS. That database would be able to show additional variables to enable useful analyses and comparisons. There would be need to identify the user here, since this level of data would not be available to the public.

The third type of database would be an information planning system. This would include even more variables than the other two databases because of the need to measure the efficiency of various programmes and projects. He thus identified the need for data at the lowest levels possible to allow for the development and modification of various scenarios. He further stated that there was the need to take account of the output requirements and geographic dimension.

He pointed out that all three databases must have supporting data sets that were reliable and should also have a unique identifier for connectivity. He also suggested that the unique identifier could be at the level of the household.

The Information Technology Systems Coordinator of the Ministry of Human Development, Youth and Culture, Trinidad and Tobago, in her contribution listed the following needs and concerns:

(a)   Formation of the meta-dictionary – the definition of data and fields were foreseen to be problematic because of the variability of the data and its sources;

(b)   Research into laws governing information in countries – this would impact on the ability to obtain data;

(c)   Definition of a starting point for data collection and planning for the collection of data;

(d)   The need for standardization of definitions and terminologies within the Caribbean; and

(e)   Involvement of the information technology (IT) personnel at the start-up phase of the project re: questionnaire formation, which impacts on the resulting data.

The floor was opened for discussion following the two presentations. In view of the discussion on the databases being separate yet linked and the timing of the collection of data, the question was asked of the challenges for the IT professional given the various collection methods in use in the Caribbean. It was suggested that no particular crises were foreseen, but it was noted that it was crucial to adopt a general external structure for the database and then move to a more complex level.

In addressing the questions of attaching technical notes to the databases, indicating non-response rates, etc., and outlining the method for collecting sample data, the representative of ECLAC, Santiago, responded that the meta data dictionary would address those issues. It was suggested that part of the design of the system was that each database ought to have a different functionality.

With respect to multiple databases, it was noted that the education database needed to be linked with the health database and that a methodology to facilitate this should be developed. Questions relating to the changes in definitions, comparability and time series analysis were also raised. In addressing these concerns it was intimated that the database could be structured 'backwards' using thee data that already existed and systems could be put into place to incorporate the new data as it came on stream.

On the issue of missing micro-data, concern was expressed that if countries were left out because of bad data, significant portions of the region's

population would be left out of the analysis. Other issues which also needed to be taken into account were: (a) the quality of questionnaires; (b) the loss of information at the start; (c) open-ended questions; and (d) standardization regarding collection of information in the future.

The possibility of complications related to the use of different sample designs, for example, self-weighting versus disproportionate weighting, was noted. Also with reference to the suggestion to link data, such as health and education, the meeting was reminded that different users would be interfacing with the databases and therefore, the different types of research designs, time-frames and methods of data analysis should be considered in the building of the databases.

The heavy emphasis on quantitative data was noted and the meeting was asked to be cognizant of the immeasurable, descriptive and explanatory information which could be gathered through qualitative data. The output format of the databases was also queried, since all countries did not use the same software for analysis, hence, the need for a compatible platform for various format translations. It was also stated that while there were gaps in the capacity to do so, there was software that had the capability to analyze qualitative data quantitatively.

The representative of ECLAC/CDCC thanked participants for sharing their views and concerns and noted that the secretariat envisaged a process which would engage social planners, researchers and policy makers to enhance, strengthen and increase the use of social data in the subregion.

<u>Agenda item 5</u>
<u>Issues related to the construction of a SVI</u>

In his presentation on the construction of a social vulnerability index, Dr. Godfrey St. Bernard, Fellow, SALISES of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, indicated that vulnerability index was indeed difficult to construct and that the literature focused primarily on environmental vulnerability.

Consideration of social vulnerability however, caused him to employ the strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) analysis, in looking at vulnerability. He asked participants to think of a nation as a system having subsystems that promoted survival of the nation, for example, the family, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), health, education, etc. In the context of each of the subsystems, therefore, his analysis was that if an entity was low on the threat and weakness scale, i.e., that susceptibility to both was minimal, it would be considered high on the strength and opportunity scale thus vulnerability would be low. Therefore, if the entity were high on both threat and weakness then it would be low on the strength and opportunity scale and

therefore have high vulnerability. Determination of weaknesses and threats was said to be entity specific, however.

Dr. St Bernard then turned his attention to the development of the composite index and concluded that weighting presented a technical challenge because of the diversity of the data. He expressed concerns about the availability, access and quality of the data; about information policies that might govern data; as well as the skills-level required to process and analyze data.

Dr. St Bernard concluded his presentation by speaking to his efforts in constructing a Youth Development Index (YDI) for the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP). He also suggested that at the institutional level, the index should be more descriptive and tell of what is done and by whom.

In the discussion that followed, Dr. Le Franc expressed great interest in Dr. St. Bernard's presentation with respect to vulnerability. She asked, whether the concept of development should be linked to the notion of systemic or societal survival and noted that there were instances where societies survive even though vulnerable. It was her contention that much depended on the definition of development and survival.

In noting the parallels and differences between the approaches of Dr. St. Bernard's and Dr. Le Franc's presentations, it was asked, whether being vulnerable related to systems or to people within the systems. This drew the answer that implicit in the notions of individual attainment were systems and vice-versa. One participant felt that shocks to the system, such as inflation, diseases, etc., were experienced by units within the system such as the household and, therefore, the unit of analysis should be the household.

The index was seen as a tool for comparison across and within countries to provide a rough gauge for understanding of the social structure. While there was relevance in the ability to draw comparisons across countries it was thought, that it must also be relevant internally. Given that discussion, it was agreed that the decision on the unit of analysis was critical, and ought to be fairly universal.

Another participant noted the manner in which inter-country comparisons were used, i.e., not to identify similarities but to differentiate, list and rank. This comment brought into question the validity of indices with respect to the ranking of countries. A discussion on the usefulness, strengths and weaknesses of indices ensued, and it was generally concluded that indices were important, even if only for their ranking ability.

The discussion attempted to draw out the gaps in the process, and the following concerns were aired with regard to baseline data, capacity building,

and political vulnerability. These were: (a) changes in administration that routinely affect projects; (b) the difficulty which would be encountered in the construction of the SVI; and (c) national government approval of the databases.

Other concerns were directed toward the capacity of national statistical offices and the cost of training as it was felt that one project could not fulfil the level of training needed. At this point it was explained that the IDB, the Department for International Development (DFID), CARICOM and OECS projects were addressing training needs complementary to that required of the ECLAC/CDCC SVI project and, therefore, synergies were being built rather than duplication, which would impact on the available resources.

It was suggested that in two years a symposium should be held, after the database was completed, in which policy makers could share their experiences in their use of the databases. The marketing of the ECLAC/CDCC project was thought to be important and that one route could be the CARICOM ministers meeting.

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Agenda item 6
Closing

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In closing, it was noted that the meeting provided an excellent space and opportunity to share and explore the way forward for the ECLAC/CDCC project. It was also noted that the issues aired provided additional information to be incorporated into the ECLAC/CDCC project. Mr. Lancelot Busby, in his capacity as Officer-in-Charge, indicated that he looked forward to meeting again to continue fine-tuning the project and recommended that participants take the initiative to continue the discussion using available technology. The usual courtesies were exchanged and the meeting was brought to a close.

Annex

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