

Background Note for Geneva Meeting

L Chen, May 13, 2002

This note discusses a few issues that could be considered in shaping the WIEGO Geneva meeting. The purpose of that meeting, as I understand it, is to plan an initiative for following-up the publication of “Statistics for Policy-Making.” The paper compiles the world’s available data on the scale, nature, and distribution of workers in the informal economy. It also explores related issues, such as informal workers’ contribution to the national GDP, women as informal workers, and linkages between the informal economy and the working poor.

The paper describes as desirable follow-up activities – improved concepts and methods, collaboration among statisticians, measurement of informal employment, and the international comparability of data. More specifically, there is a proposal for an initiative to pull together existing data, organize key indicators, generate national, regional, and global estimates, and provide information in user-oriented formats.

The goal of the Geneva meeting, therefore, is to advance these objectives through developing consensus, planning, and ultimately launching an international initiative to meet the objectives noted above. The specific objectives for the Geneva meeting, therefore, may be organized as follows:

- to develop consensus on the precise objectives of the new initiative
- to identify contributions of existing and new groups
- to consider various organizational arrangements
- to mobilize requisite resources – financial, human, organizational

Consensus about the precise objectives of the new initiative is important because the clarity of “partnership” and support among the participants will be predicated on shared understanding of and agreement on the ultimate objectives of the enterprise. Assuming that is in place, one would then want to tap all relevant resources of existing groups in support of the initiative. To minimize threat, a new organizational arrangement should be proposed only if existing groups, for one reason or another, are either unable, unwilling, or cannot efficiently discharge the mandate. In developing partnerships, it can be assumed (and openly discussed) that participating groups have “institutional self-interests” in major aspects of the new enterprise – operations, governance, staffing, financing, etc. Therefore, not only is agreement on objectives important but the most viable institutional options for reaching the objective should be openly considered, measured against their efficiency and effectiveness in meeting the objectives.

Ultimately, negotiations will focus on resources – financial, human and organizational. Human leadership and resources are central to any intellectual task, and a conducive organizational arrangement must be found. Most importantly, the launch and operations of the new enterprise will only be possible if financial resources are mobilized.

In considering modalities of moving forward, one might wish to examine arrangements that have been adopted in other fields, for example.

Global Burden of Disease that collated and analyzed global health/mortality data was started at Harvard, an academic center, and eventually shifted to become a core statistical function of WHO in Geneva. The start-up and ultimately UN base was mostly determined by the preferences of the GBD leader, Chris Murray, who had an academic appointment at Harvard and eventually shifted to become an Executive Director for Evidence and Policy at WHO. At Harvard, Chris took the responsibility for mobilizing the requisite resources from foundations and the World Bank, while the GDB work at WHO receives both bilateral donor and core WHO funding.

World Population and Health Surveys are among the most advanced of all sectors. The UN has a central statistical and demography units and nearly all countries have national census bureaus or department of statistics. Even with these governmental resources, USAID saw the necessity of specialized surveys. Thus, initially in collaboration with the International Statistical Association, USAID established and financed the Demographic Health Surveys to conduct specialized surveys around the world. The DHS now operates in more than 50 countries, and the DHS secretariat continues to receive more than \$30 million annually from USAID.

National Living Standard Surveys have been conducted in more than two dozen countries, usually funded by the World Bank and often executed with the technical assistance of UNDP. The Surveys was necessitated by the Bank's interest in obtaining national data on poverty, employment, livelihoods, income distribution, consumption, and other economic parameters at the country level. A common module also facilitated cross-national compilations and comparisons, for example global estimates of poverty. These surveys are usually financed by the World Bank and bilateral donors from bilateral and multilateral donors, trust funds, and project planning budgets.

For the Geneva meeting, the principal challenges, it seems to me, are:

- Can consensus be developed over precise objectives of the new initiatives?
- After examining alternative organizational arrangements, can consensus be developed on the most appropriate arrangement for proceeding?
- Is there leadership for the enterprise that commands the support of most of the stakeholders?
- Are there sufficient prospects of funding? Can sufficient fund be raised at least for a first phase?

The likelihood of success is enhanced if the future leadership and financial decision-makers (challenges 4 and 5) participate in Geneva, develop enthusiasm, and are willing to make commitments to proceed.