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## United Nations comparative fertility survey programs: balancing national challenges and international objectives

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# United Nations comparative fertility survey programs: balancing national challenges and international objectives\*

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**Abstract:** This historical analysis examines the practice of international comparison through the study of three projects coordinated by the United Nations in Geneva around the study of fertility in Europe. In all three projects, the difficulty of adopting a theoretical framework is testified to in various ways, due to divergent interests in terms of research, implementation, national priorities and finances. These practical pitfalls produce mixed results in terms of reflection on the methodology of international comparison and its real possibility of being achieved.

**Keywords:** international comparison, methodology, historical analysis, fertility survey, family, fertility, world fertility surveys, comparative fertility survey, family and fertility survey, United Nations, Population Activities Unit, UNECE

**Résumé :** Cette analyse historique étudie la manière dont est pratiquée la comparaison internationale à travers l'étude de trois projets coordonnés par les Nations Unies à Genève autour de l'étude de la fécondité en Europe. Dans les trois projets, la difficulté à adopter un cadre théorique est attestée de diverses manières en raison d'intérêts divergents en termes de recherche, de mise en œuvre, de priorités nationales et de finances. Ces écueils pratiques livrent des résultats mitigés du point de vue de la réflexion sur la méthodologie de la comparaison internationale et sa possibilité réelle d'être réalisée.

**Mots clés :** comparaison internationale, analyse historique, méthodologie, enquête de fécondité, famille, fécondité, enquêtes mondiales de fécondité, enquête comparative de fécondité, enquête famille et fécondité, Nations Unies, Population Activities Unit, CEE-ONU

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\* This study was first undertaken within the framework of a European project aiming at analysing the use of comparative fertility surveys in Europe during the last 30 years or the 20<sup>th</sup> century and financed by DG Research called Survey Comparability Issues-Family Instances (HPSE-CT-2001-60028)

The Generations and Gender Programme (GGP) was launched in early 2000 at the instigation of the Population Activities Unit (PAU) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in Geneva (UNECE). This vast project included the development of a series of national surveys focusing on the dynamics of family formation, and the creation of a contextual database. It was based on a model conceived over thirty years ago, when few researchers and United Nations leaders were seeking to compare the results of researches linked to new concerns about the decline of fertility in Europe. In search of universal and the particular to explain the differences between countries and discover the factors influencing fertility, they launched a complex project which they gradually came to understand: the international comparison of survey data.

Because at the time the field of demographic research was highly organised and limited at international level, and because this knowledge of fertility trends seemed useful to policy-makers, a union of potential was achieved.

Over the previous thirty years, from 1967 to 1997, the frequent repetition of national surveys had enabled the UNECE to carry out its comparative projects on three occasions, as three series of rather close nature emerged concerning fertility and the family. These three major international surveys took place in distinct societal contexts that determined the conditions in which they emerged.

In accordance to the search for explanations for fertility decline at the end of the 1960s, the first wave initiated a new way of studying fertility in Europe. The Comparative Fertility Study (CFS) project was based on surveys gathered *a posteriori*, and was the first attempt to compare data on fertility in industrialised countries. The World Fertility Survey (WFS), on a very similar subject, arrived shortly afterwards, in the 1970s, in a global context of studying fertility by means of surveys. Its aim was to explain the stabilisation of the phenomenon. After the failure of the project in its European dimension, a new attempt was made with the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) at the end of the 1980s. This latest wave focuses more on family formation, emphasising the relationship between fertility and the family by looking at the situation in Europe and the process of integration in Eastern European countries.

These three waves are not identical, either technically (methods of implementation, comparison tools) or scientifically (study of fertility, then of the family). Developments in scientific knowledge and technical progress have determined the characteristics of the projects. There are, however, common features: the process of work construction, the major role of the UNECE and the working groups developed within or around the UNECE.

The aim of this historical study is to examine how international comparison was envisaged as a method of analysis through the organisational structure of coordination, the different forms it took and the consequences for the execution and completion of works. In addition to examining the links between the projects and their relationships, an analysis of how their construction methods have evolved over the years through the conditions of opportunity produced by the structure developed to achieve the research objectives has made it possible to account for certain effects on the final results, which are often dependent on the structure and attributable to other factors.

### **Note on sources**

Reconstructing the history of the coordination of these comparative projects required the use of archives of all kinds coming mostly from the United Nations. Working on the United Nations has its advantages and disadvantages. The organisation has a strong bureaucratic tradition of comitology, which means that there are records of all the debates held under its aegis. In earlier times, these records were translated and published in English and French. During the 1980s, the widespread use of data processing resulted in a mass of documents that were impossible to publish, let alone translate, but these documents were nevertheless preserved by the departments concerned.<sup>1</sup>

What status should be given to this virtually unique source of information used for the study of working groups which is the focus of this research? This type of official document reporting on debates both reveals and conceals a certain number of facts. The transition to written form after the fact has altered the content of the remarks, and the consensus required for publication has attenuated the dissensions. On the other hand, the written version of the discussions does not

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<sup>1</sup> When the archives were consulted in the early 2000s, they were widely scattered across the United Nations premises in Geneva and New York. They could be found in various departments, UNECE Population Activities Unit, UNECE Statistical Division, NY Population Division and at the United Nations library in Geneva

mention who is speaking and who is at the origin of the content and only reflects what is produced and validated by the group, as a single entity.

The information obtained in this way was therefore cross-referenced as often as possible with other archive documents such as preparatory writings, letters between the protagonists or more abstract exchanges by fax or, more recently, by e-mail, documents kept at the PAU or in researchers personal archives. The files of few of the researchers involved in the surveys and or coordinations, in particular Paul Clerc, Henri Leridon, Laurent Toulemon (INED) and especially Lars Østby (Statistics Norway)<sup>2</sup>, as well as interviews recorded or on paper, Philippe Collomb (INED), Martine Corijn (PAU), Henri Leridon (INED), Alphonse McDonald (PAU), Miroslav Macura (PAU), Lars Østby (Statistics Norway) provided a wide source of additional material. Conference papers and drafts, less formal than publications, were also available (mainly at the PAU) and offered information on the progress of the coordination work.<sup>3</sup>

## **I. On few organisational effects on work progress**

The coordination work of the fertility surveys comparative projects was carried out by the United Nations on the basis of the reflections of working groups. What tools did the group intend to use to undertake its work and achieve its objectives? At what point did the general consensus reveal what the researchers wanted to know? In the meeting reports, there is little or no discussion of theoretical objectives. Admittedly, there were means of communication outside the meetings, particularly during the FFS period with the advent of e-mail, which facilitated exchanges, but it is reasonable to assume that the group as a whole could not be consulted or its agreement obtained during informal exchanges. However, it is during the FFS period, when these exchanges were more feasible, that the working group is the least homogeneous in terms of representativeness and attendance.

### **A. Absence or weakness of theoretical orientation**

#### *On the choice of basic agreements*

The effects of the organisational structure on a few basic areas seem elementary in a comparative project. In all three projects, certain choices or non-choices were characteristic and had a direct influence on the guideline.

#### *CFS and WFS: the late appearance of a framework*

It is difficult to reconstruct clearly the progression that led to the presentation of the objectives as announced in the only reference work concerning the CFS (United Nations, 1976). Documents of the Working Group on Social Demography (WGSD), at the heart of the study's development and commentary, rarely give a glimpse of the theoretical concepts that the project was supposed to put forward.

In 1970, the Strasbourg meeting defines more precisely what the scientific objective might be. The results of a comparative study would highlight "*more clearly the interaction of fertility and the socio-economic factors and the relative effectiveness, in the various countries, of the methods of family planning at the same time as it will contribute to provide a base for the establishment of projections of fertility closer to reality*" (WGSD, 1970, p. 9)<sup>4</sup>. Here we have the right combination of a concern to provide a framework for fertility analysis and a comparative perspective, but the terms remain vague and common.

For the London meeting in 1972, a theoretical framework was commissioned from a consultant, Arthur Campbell, a recognised expert in the field of fertility surveys, in order to propose objectives for the study, even though the group had been meeting since 1967 without any apparent theoretical guidelines and it can be assumed that the national surveys had their own conceptual framework. In any case, it seems that Arthur Campbell's project did not really

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<sup>2</sup> Special thanks to Lars Østby from Statistics Norway who took part in the three projects for opening up his archives on comparative surveys to me in his Oslo office.

<sup>3</sup> The main archives kept at the UNECE PAU can be divided in two groups: "Berent-van den Boomen" (mainly contextual) and FFS Archives (almost all the coordination's administrative documents are available thanks to Erik Klijzing and Martin Corijn). For a critique and a detailed list of sources, please refer to the broader study from which this reflection is drawn (Digoix & Festy, 2003, p. 3-4).

<sup>4</sup> All the decisions of this working group meetings are recorded in official reports published by the United Nations Organisation Editions. They are referred WGSD in the citation and as Groupe de travail sur la démographie sociale in the reference part (as consulted in French).

correspond to the aspirations of the working group since, during the session reported, it was found to be too ambitious, too complex or ill-suited to surveys, requiring other types of sources (WGSD, 1972, p. 5, 7-8). The need for a framework therefore arose at a later stage, that of the comparative study, as would be the case 20 years later with the FFS.

The theoretical bases are even more obscure when it comes to coordinating the WFS. After the CFS experience, the UNECE knew from the outset the methods governing the coordination of surveys and its limited capacity to impose a common scheme. It also felt that theoretical bases designed to achieve maximum consistency would have to be limited. The approach was pragmatic. Rather than seeking to develop a theoretical framework on the determinants of fertility, the UNECE therefore chose to build a minimal comparative questionnaire around the variables which would actually be used by the surveys and which would therefore need to be comparable. This was considered crucial and innovative at the time.

In Zakopane, while the group has grown in size and perhaps actually lost its dynamics linked to its small size, it is clearly announced that the choice of variables on which the comparative study should focus is linked to the political body to which the coordinator reports (the United Nations): identify fertility differentials and their regulation, identify the socio-cultural factors and economic differentials affecting fertility – “*the causes of the decline in fertility*” and its “*probable trend*” (WGSD, 1976, p. 6), of great use in helping countries to develop their demographic policies (whatever their own will).

The initial working hypothesis is closely linked to national trends specific to Western countries: fertility decline and rising divorce rates. Fertility is falling, but no one knows whether this trend will continue. Developed countries should also focus on fertility intentions, the desired dimension of the family (reproductive project: number of children (born, desired)) (Berent, 1977, p. 69) the means of birth control and the motivations of the people surveyed.

However, as far as the cross-national perspective is concerned, the comparative interest is never explained as such, except when comparing fertility trends in Western and Eastern European countries, where the decline began earlier (WGSD, 1976, p.7). But even in this case, the countries of Eastern Europe appear more like observation territories.

Overall, there was no discussion of a theoretical framework for this project, as work on the model questionnaire monopolised attention during the few WGSD meetings held during the WFS period.

#### *FFS: the failure to adopt a framework*

When the FFS project began, there was a strong desire for a theoretical framework, perhaps born of the frustrations of the two previous experiences. Aware of its inability to develop such a framework, the UNECE entrusted its construction to the CBGS, a Belgian research organisation. However, it seems that the work carried out by its researcher Robert Cliquet, left most of the members of the working group sceptical. Complex, dense and heavily rooted in the Belgian context of fertility, the CBGS document is a typical example of what Pierre Bourdieu called the misunderstandings of the internationalisation of intellectual life, the problem of contextualising ideas between the field of transmission and the field of reception (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 3). It would appear that the text cannot be exported without numerous modifications, as required by the FFS-IWG.<sup>5</sup>

During the first three meetings, the text was discussed after amendments and improvements had been made by the Belgian team. At the same time, the Belgian team was working on a questionnaire adapted to the text. It seems that the main criticism was that the theoretical development was poorly adapted to the minimal questions that the majority of the members of the working group wanted to raise, and therefore far removed from the questionnaire to which it was supposed to be linked. Here the group as a whole reveals its inability to agree on a theoretical framework and constantly reverts to the practical achievements expected. What was supposed to be the framework for a comparative study became a marginal element in a project that claimed to be comparative. The document itself was not prepared for a comparative study, but that is not why it was rejected (Digoix & Festy, 2003, p. 30).

When, in 1991, Erik Klijzing, the PAU's FFS co-ordinator, reached the practical phase by producing the final version of the model questionnaire, there was no longer any mention of this theoretical framework and, *a posteriori*, the PAU drafted an explanatory text from which no

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<sup>5</sup> For a closer look at the background to this document, see Digoix, M. & Festy, P. (2003, p. 30).

research hypothesis could be deduced. And indeed, when the PAU presented the project to the Conference of European Statisticians as part of their working group on fertility and the family surveys on 29 and 30 April 1991 (Population Activity Unit, 1991) chaired by Lars Østby, who was present in the other groups, it developed in 29 paragraphs a research proposal taken from a text written by Jan Hoem, a professor at Stockholm University, in September 1990 and used as a background document in the Swedish survey.<sup>6</sup> The text is very oriented towards the practical application of the main ideas and directly links the theoretical conceptions and the field survey. There was no comparative overview.

The rejection of the work on the theoretical framework proposed by the CBGS had a series of important consequences for the comparative objective of the project. By losing its substance, the project also missed the object that leads from theory to practice by focusing on a questionnaire that went in several directions due to the multiplicity of contributions made.

As with the CFS and WFS, there is no attempt to impose recommendations on the participating countries. Moreover, at the beginning of 1991, the programme chose to ratify surveys already carried out using tools different from those with which the group was working. However, the characteristics of the national samples and the drafting of the questionnaires generally followed, as a starting point, the models suggested more often in the FFS than in previous programmes. UNFPA funding may have had an influence, as well as the operational services and assistance offered by the PAU to certain inexperienced countries.

## **B. Lack of reflection on the comparative method**

### *Promising beginnings with international reflections: the IUSSP Comparative Working Group and the UN Working Group*

In the 1960s, in parallel with national initiatives to gain a better understanding of fertility trends, the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) began to reflect internationally on the need to compare demographic situations. The aim was not only to estimate fertility levels, but also to discover, using comparative methods, the universal and particular determinants revealing cross-national differences, with international comparison then to be used to understand specific situations.<sup>7</sup>

However, the book published after the discussions reveals that the work was still based exclusively on themes, without any in-depth justification of the comparative effort and its merits. On the other hand, the document also lays down procedural rules concerning the sample or the order of questions in the questionnaire. It proposes a model divided into modules, with three sets of variables: a basic list, a restricted list and an expanded list, depending on the availability (mainly financial) of the survey being carried out. This program is a clear indication of the direction in which UN survey coordinators was heading.

In 1966, the United Nations set up a Committee of Experts on Fertility Programmes, which noted that, while fertility measurement was perfectly mastered in developed countries, it was necessary to highlight the gaps in knowledge of its factors. Speaking at a meeting of the group in New York, Léon Tabah, of the Institut national d'études démographiques (Ined), advocates a European effort to conduct comparative surveys, and suggests a possible coordinating role for the United Nations. After outlining the need for surveys, he comments: "*wouldn't it be desirable, under these conditions, that the European countries combine their efforts and undertake a series of surveys on fertility? Wouldn't it be appropriate, moreover, that these surveys take a comparative form? If the members of this meeting agreed on this point, it would be necessary to wonder which could be the role of the United Nations in this field. Couldn't those launch the idea of a concerted research, then to be used as co-ordinating body between the various countries which would agree to take part in the study and, finally, to guide them on the technical level?*" (Tabah, 1966b, p. 2). All subsequent actions are already reflected in this declaration. At the European Population Conference organized by the Council of Europe in September-October 1966, he proposed the guidelines for a comparative project, in line with the conclusions of the

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<sup>6</sup> Hoem, Jan. *The need for information about today's family developments in Sweden*. This text by Jan Hoem was sent with annotations to refocus from Sweden to Europe to Erik Klijzing in March 1991 (UNECE FSS archives) after the meeting of the FFS Ad Hoc expert meeting (Geneva January 28-30, 1991) where the PAU gave up the highly criticized Cliquet framework. Both Jan Hoem and Lars Østby are active contributors to these FFS informal or ad-hoc meetings.

<sup>7</sup> Theoretical conception as expressed in the book of the Committee of International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, (1971, p. 5).

IUSSP's work, which at the time suggested a growing interest in the subject.<sup>8</sup> During the discussions at this conference, Halvor Gille expressed interest in Léon Tabah's project on behalf of the United Nations Division of Social Affairs, and raised the possibility of setting up a working group to undertake comparative studies. So, it's no coincidence that a year later, coordination of the CFS began at the heart of a UN body.

*A questionable choice: variables and questionnaires as the only comparative tools*

Despite this international desire to orient research towards comparative perspectives and tools, all three coordinations suffered from a lack of options in terms of the choices they made to carry out their work. While the lack of a framework resulted from the heterogeneity of the groups, the antagonism between national and supranational concerns, and a general misunderstanding, these conditions also played a role in the research orientations.

The easiest way, and perhaps the most obvious from a practical point of view, to reflect on these comparative problems was to look at the drafting of the questionnaires. This was the first step. Efforts were made in all three waves to agree on a basic model questionnaire that was strongly recommended, if not mandatory, to adopt. Details of the discussions are reported in the working group meetings, and an analysis of the outcome can be found in Digoix and Festy's report (2003, p. 57-71).

From the outset, the informal FFS working group has been torn between national constraints and international ideals when it comes to data comparability. It was suggested that the new coordination should keep in mind the possibility of comparison with previous waves, without insisting on total comparability, so as not to cause countries not wishing to adopt the standard questionnaire under development to give up (FSS-IWG, 1990, p.3).

The comparative project was subject to these constraints from the start. This simple consideration of comparability once again raises the problem of the complexity of this type of project. To imagine that the new wave could be used as the basis for a comparative study with the CFS and the WFS, when the WFS synthesis has not yet been published, denotes an optimism devoid of any realism or practical sense about the survey to come. This is also demonstrated by the simple fact that two countries, Norway and Finland, are considered full participants in the comparative project, even though they had already completed their fieldwork when the group met in January 1990.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from general considerations, the comparative project itself was never really discussed, since the group was deadlocked on the conceptual framework proposed by CBGS. The antagonism between the positions of the PAU and those of the experts appeared to be detrimental to comparative research, which in the end was never clarified. Even when, in March 1996, the PAU presented an outline (FSS-IWG, 1996) that could have set out the conception of the comparative analysis, it was in fact no more than an organizational document: how to carry out the comparative study, but never why. Perhaps this explains the absence of a final project: no one raised the issue. It's as if the obsession with comparability suppressed the concern for comparison.

A general analysis of the comparative tool chosen by the three programmes shows remarkable similarities in their development processes. In all three waves, it was necessary to eliminate or bypass the phase of defining a conceptual framework which should lead to the development of the survey tools and the draft questionnaire. Practical issues were tackled before considering the theoretical problems needed to resolve.

The ambiguous role of co-ordination undoubtedly had something to do with this process: having planned to undertake an original initiative then adopted by the participating countries, each programme ended up basing itself on national surveys already carried out, which could be assumed to have been built on concepts shared by a few pioneering countries. Everything was therefore based on an unspoken commentary, which was then extended by the unspoken commentary of the comparative project itself.

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<sup>8</sup> The project in itself was fully detailed and had strong incentives to undertake fertility surveys. (Tabah 1966a).

<sup>9</sup> Elise Jones, who collaborated on the analysis of the first version of the WFS chapters, was invited to the 1991 ad hoc meeting of the group to talk about her experience with the WFS; she will take part in the 5th FFS IWG meeting in 1996.

### **C. Difficulties in harmonizing technical survey components**

*Divergences between survey components and the impossibility of syncretism*

Scientific production around the three waves of surveys was of different matters, reflecting the aims and risks of their coordinations. It is pointless to bring next to the other in their conclusions, projects such as CFS or even WFS, which in reality were no more than studies (one of which was never completed) undertaken by a small group, with those of a program such as FFS, which was endowed with substantial financial resources and where it was decided from the outset that dissemination of the work will be the main objective. It is also certain that advances in communications techniques, the widespread use of e-mail and the Internet, and the use of data-processing software have contributed considerably to the dynamism of the FFS.

Whatever the case, the practical consequences at the data processing stage are of the same nature - delocalization of survey design, variety in the choice of methods and sample types - as those on questionnaire structure and question wording, and more generally, as those encountered in harmonizing collection procedures requiring the use of a *posteriori* harmonization methods.

What the coordinations considered to be the comparative product, i.e. the harmonization of data to conduct a study as in the CFS or to make them available to international research as in the FFS, after the intermediate attempt of the WFS, revealed numerous obstacles to their use which are the consequences of an insufficiently thought-out (or forced) design.

And yet, when he created the CFS and WFS databases, Jerzy Berent constantly drew attention to the difficulty of producing standardized data. Between the conceptual difficulties linked to data recoding and the lack of personnel to complete the work centralized at the PAU, it seems, for example, that the failure of the WFS comparative study was due to the data processing problems generated at this stage of the project.

This aspect had been put forward as the objective of the FFS. It was therefore successfully completed. By decentralizing data recoding, FFS relieved the PAU of a major task. The PAU also undoubtedly benefited from the experience of the DHS (Demographic Health Surveys), using the same software and the advice of its creators. One question remains: even with warnings about their limitations, is the availability of data sufficient to be satisfied with the project<sup>10</sup>?

The organizational structure of the programs has undoubtedly played a role in this mechanism. As a permanent body of the United Nations, the PAU's vocation was less to innovate than to build consensus around projects acceptable to a large number of countries. Wouldn't the best compromise be to stick to the innovative experiences of some and ensure that they were disseminated to others?

## **II. Organisational structure and conditions for international scientific production**

### **A. The organisation of research: the UNECE and the working groups**

*The importance of the role of national experts in the production process and the simple organisational role of the United Nations*

Because of its political nature, its modus operandi and the constraints to which its staff are subject, the UNO had to base its large-scale work on complex structures involving permanent groups of networks of experts in order to be able to think, prepare and monitor its comparative studies. The three comparative projects on fertility surveys co-ordinated by the UNECE were organised in the same way: a small group carrying out the technical tasks linked to the comparison and working groups directing and supporting its reflections, bringing the national expertise of its members to the analysis of the situations and advising on its actions.

The first coordination (CFS) began before the birth of a permanent demographic structure within the United Nations. It was within the Working Group on Social Demography (WGSD), an

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the technical components characteristic of these surveys, see Digoix & Festy, (2003, p. 41-72) and for FFS, Festy & Prioux (2002).

offshoot of the European Social Development Programme, that the decision to undertake a comparative study of fertility in Europe created the conditions favourable to the prolonged establishment of a structure responsible for this project and which remained so for the other two (Digoix & Festy, 2003, p. 15).

#### *From the demographic team to the PAU*

Although the UNECE played a very important role in the population-related issues discussed at WSGD meetings, it is the United Nations Division of Social Affairs that theoretically took the lead. At its very first meeting, the Division included in its report the recommendation to create an official demographic organisation in Europe to guide the United Nations in its work on population (WGSD, 1968, p. 22). The scope of the comparative project only accentuated this need over the years, but it was only at the London meeting in 1972 that Jerzy Berent announced the actual birth (in January 1972) of the Service of the Population, which at that time was almost entirely devoted to the comparative study (WGSD, 1972, p.2).<sup>11</sup> The team was made up of staff from the UNECE, the Division of Social Affairs and temporary recruits. From the outset, the demographic team was subject to risks in terms of funding, which enabled the structure to take on intermittent staff who, technically speaking, carried out the work on the projects which were in fact entrusted to a small team.

The main task of this new department was to analyse fertility trends in Europe and the factors influencing current levels and their future development. As a result, the project to coordinate fertility surveys was entrusted entirely to Jerzy Berent and the Economic Commission for Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Within the UNECE, the Service of the Population and then the Demographic Team took the name of Population Activities Unit (PAU). The Unit was headed successively by Jerzy Berent (1972-1977), Joseph van den Boomen (1978-1988) and Miroslav Macura (from 1989), with John Kelly (of the UNECE Statistics Division) acting as interim director between Joe van den Boomen and Miroslav Macura.

From its inception, the PAU had a small permanent staff and depended on external funding for its proper functioning. The coordination work was carried out mainly thanks to funding from the UNFPA; the size of the group varied constantly and depended on its possibilities and the generosity shown towards it. The studies were therefore carried out by temporary staff, which didn't facilitate the coordination of long-term projects, the monitoring of which then became uncertain.

The chaotic experience of the WFS programme is a striking example. The project suffered from the retirement of Jerzy Berent, the death of Joe van den Boomen and the transfer of a large number of researchers during its development. While the coordination process was already somewhat cumbersome, the data processing process seemed to cause insurmountable delays, which led to the final report being abandoned, thereby reducing the content of the project to marginal productions, largely internal to the United Nations.

The PAU was able to draw lessons from this experience for the FFS, which nevertheless began during the interim period of 1988, by multiplying the number of expert groups, entrusting the theoretical framework to an external institute (the CBGS) and managing to recruit Erik Klijzing, long-term project manager from 1991 to 1999 (albeit on a number of temporary contracts) and responsible for carrying out the coordination. When he left, Martine Corijn took over (with the same contractual uncertainty) to ensure that the programme continued, in particular archiving and making available to the public the documentation relating to the surveys, so as to guarantee that the work carried out by the PAU was as accessible as possible and organising a Flagship Conference, which in a way summed up all the scientific objectives of the project.

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<sup>11</sup> Jerzy Berent had already announced this creation in 1970 at the Strasbourg meeting.. (WGSD, 1970, p. 5)

<sup>12</sup> Invited to take part in the first meeting in 1967, the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), which at the time had only an observer's role, became a co-organizer and clearly played a leading role from the second session onwards. Jerzy Berent, of the Economic Studies Division, who in 1972 formed the demographic team responsible for coordinating the CFS and then the WFS, would continue to take part in the coordination work after retiring from his position as advisor to the UNECE.

*From consultancy to organisation: from the Working Group on Social Demography to the Informal Working Group on Fertility and Family Surveys*

The first two survey co-ordinations were set up with the collaboration of the Working Group on Social Demography (WGSD). The group met nine times between 1967 and 1978.<sup>13</sup> The WGSD aims to “*make suggestions for the standardisation and harmonisation of demographic data and studies and to encourage the demographic research necessary for the implementation of social programmes in Europe*” (WGSD, 1967, p.1). This dual function of harmonising data and encouraging work, whether on a national or comparative level, is reiterated on several subsequent occasions. In fact, since 1970, the group had been working mainly on the coordination of fertility surveys, while statistics on marital status and the harmonisation of censuses, which were also on the agenda of the first meetings, are gradually disappearing.

Halvor Gille<sup>14</sup> defined the group's mission as follows: “[...] *The working group will become a significant means to stimulate demographic research in the various countries of Europe, to direct the sample surveys and other studies, to provide the demographic data necessary to the programs of social development, and [...] to allow the analyses essential to the compilation of official demographic statistics, to be comparable on the international level*” (WGSD, 1967, p. 2). Various bodies within the United Nations in Geneva are involved in the group's work: The Division of Social Affairs, the Economic Commission for Europe and the Conference of European Statisticians (CES).

The group brought together mainly national experts and representatives of several international institutions concerned with population issues. How these people were selected remains to be elucidated. Was it the choice of nations, the choice of recognised institutes that nominated people, interpersonal choices, co-optation? The official United Nations process tends to favour the first solution. In practice, the national experts had various affiliations (director of demographic institutes, university professor, member of statistical offices, etc.) and undoubtedly did not all have the same status or the same potential for influence in their own country.

During the group's last meetings, a limited number of experts (around ten) were joined by a larger number of national representatives (more than twenty) and more representatives of the various UN bodies. As a result, the number of people attending the meetings rose from around twenty to over forty. This change took place when taking over WFS coordination. The experts who joined the group were field researchers and representatives of other UN organisations involved in the WFS. During the coordination of the WFS, the group seemed to have a more practical side, as the new members were more often researchers than decision-makers.

However, the group operated smoothly because attendance at meetings was regular enough for experts such as Jean Morsa, Paul Christian Matthiessen, Jean Bourgeois-Pichat and Egon Szabady to ensure continuity of work during the CFS period. In addition, the movement of experts within the group had little influence on the way it operated: George Vukovich initially sat for Hungary before representing the Division of Social Affairs, where he replaced Halvor Gille, who became head of the WFS in 1982 after a short spell at the UNFPA. V. Chidambaram, a member of the UNECE Population Team in 1972, represented the WFS in 1974, etc.

Similarly, participants from various international organisations were recognised actors in the field of fertility: Gwendolyn Johnson for the United Nations Population Division (New York), Timothy Sprehe from USAID, György Acsádi or Parker Mauldin who regularly attended meetings.

These various lasting elements contradict, and no doubt partly compensate for, the instability of the UNECE's demographic group and the rapid turnover of its members. Weakened in his own department, Jerzy Berent could count on the stability of his external “think tank”.

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<sup>13</sup> See group composition in Appendix 1

<sup>14</sup> Halvor Gille, representative of the Social Affairs Division, announced at the first meeting that the group “*was convened because of the keen interest which appeared for the demographic questions during the recent meetings in Europe, in particular with the second international conference which were taken place in Budapest in September 1965, and the Conference about the European population convened by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in September 1966. During these meetings, the need had been underlined to stimulate demographic research on a regional level and to develop the international activities in order to improve the comparability of the statistical data and for encouraging the studies, investigations and comparative statistics at the national level relating to various demographic fields.*” (WGSD, 1967, p. 2).

The group's activity was not limited to meetings where coordination is discussed. Each expert contributed by national studies and reports to the general reflection and prepared the joint work.<sup>15</sup> However, these documents were never of a comparative or theoretical nature.

Little time elapsed between the coordination of the WFS and the FFS, as one began while the previous one was not yet completed. In any case, the ageing WGSD dissolved in favour of a new structure. Joseph van den Boomen, who seemed to have difficulty to impose himself after Jerzy Berent, who had become a consultant for the WFS after retiring from the UNECE, dismantled the existing structure by relying on the CBGS Working Group on Fertility<sup>16</sup>, but when the coordination of the FFS really began, the Population Activities Unit was reduced to its simplest form. Joseph van den Boomen died in September 1988, leaving to their own fate the WFS report and the launch of the FFS initiated at the Regional Population Conference in Budapest (24-27 February 1987) by the UNECE and UNFPA. John Kelly, from the UNECE Statistics Division, temporarily took on the role of head of the PAU while continuing his activities in the Statistical Division, which did not make the transition any easier, even though it was Alexandre Riazantsev, who had worked on the WFS report with Joseph van den Boomen, who was monitoring the project (MacDonald & Macura, 2002).

Three different groups (or even four, with the group on archives) took part in the structure coordinating the FFS.

The Informal Working Group on Promotion of Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS IWG) in the ECE Region proved to be the real think-tank for the project as a whole; two other groups were responsible for clarifying its decisions, while the PAU was given the concrete task of coordination, in particular finding the funds needed to implement the project. A restricted "ad hoc group", almost an emanation of the WGSD in terms of its composition, was involved at two key moments: during the drafting of the questionnaire (1991) and then during the development of the comparative analysis program (1994-1995). An even smaller "advisory group", which grew out of the Informal Working Group, has been responsible for organising the monitoring of the analysis programme since 1996, but it is within the Informal Working Group that co-ordination really took place.<sup>17</sup>

The activities of the FFS IWG were not organised in the same way as those of the WGSD, and from the outset have been entirely devoted to coordinating the project. This was in fact inspired by the existence of the CBGS Fertility Working Group, which met in Brussels in December 1987 with the aim of comparing international experiences in the field of fertility in order to carry out future surveys (Centrum voor Bevolkings- en Gezinsstudien, 1987). At the time, the Belgians were preparing NEGO V and the Norwegians, represented by Lars Østby, had just completed a pilot survey which preceded the survey planned for 1988. These two countries were particularly concerned because they had already made progress in working on the subject of fertility. The other participants, referred to as "experts in fertility research", were more or less the same as in the United Nations groups, the most recent being the WGSD.<sup>18</sup>

The group of experts that met in Geneva in 1988 had a more assertive aim than the WGSD, and from the outset had a precise vision of coordination. The organisation and running of events should not be exposed to the risks inherent in collegiate decision-making. In fact, the various groups depended on a work programme drawn up by the PAU along the lines of the Budapest conference, from which it did not deviate.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Additional preparatory documents for WGSD meetings have been partially preserved. The most recent (dating back to the seventh working group) are available at the United Nations library in Geneva.

<sup>16</sup> Convened in 1987 on the initiative of Robert Cliquet, who was preparing the new Flemish survey:

<sup>17</sup> For more details on the different groups, see Digoix & Festy (2003, p. 21-27)

<sup>18</sup> It is questionable why the Belgians needed to bring together an international group to shed light on their own questions. Was this step being taken in a global context of exchange? Had the news, already circulating, of the United Nations' plan to coordinate a new wave of surveys generated momentum, or even a desire, for positioning? It is significant, however, that things were moving at that time in the research field, and that most of the known experts had responded positively to the CBGS invitation to discuss.

<sup>19</sup> At the annual meeting of the Conference of European Statisticians, the project was presented as follows: "*The project will concentrate on the following three activities, each of which is to be worked on by different groups of interested countries to be established for this purpose;*

*(i) development of a framework for comparable fertility and family surveys in the region of the type described above;*

*(ii) formulation of recommendations concerning the scope and content of a standard core questionnaire for use in such surveys; and*

*(iii) establishment of an ECE depository for the survey data tapes, for use by researchers performing comparative analyses"* (United Nations Commission for Europe, 1988, p. 2)

Seven experts who had participated in the WFS WGSD period were present at the first IWG meeting (Cliquet, De Sandre, Holzer, Klinger, Østby, Palomba, Pinnelli), which represented almost half of the group. Initially, this group was smaller than the one that had followed the CFS and WFS, but from 1991 onwards, it expanded by opening up widely to countries in transition that were launching surveys, in particular the Baltic countries, and by inviting several experts per nation. There were no representatives from international organisations, with the exception of staff from the PAU and UNFPA, whose funding had become crucial since 1993.

The work of the FFS IWG was in fact more research-oriented and less policy-oriented than that of the WGSD. The researchers in the group represented nothing other than scientific concerns, which is not to say that they were not focused on the political characteristics of their country of origin and were not representatives of national concerns. On the other hand, they were no longer counterbalanced by representatives of organisations whose sole objective is the advancement of the programme.

The experts initially came mainly from the statistical or demographic organisations of the nations involved in the comparative project. At the time of the declaration of intent on future surveys, it was realised that national statistical offices would no longer be systematically responsible for fieldwork, which perhaps marked a turning point in the nature of the surveys. It was felt that the active participation of non-statistician researchers could help the content evolve towards a less statistical conception of fertility-related issues. This, in turn, has led the Conference of European Statisticians, another body linked to the UNECE, to periodically convene “working sessions on family and fertility surveys” The difficulty here was to reconcile the statistical requirements perpetuated by expertise in survey design and a rapidly evolving need for knowledge due to a more sociological orientation in the analysis of results.

The creation of this “think tank” at the Conference of European Statisticians somewhat counterbalanced the position of the Informal Working Group and, when Erik Klijzing took it in hand over a longer period, gave the PAU additional potential leverage during discussions on the conduct of the work, in particular on the construction of the database.

However, the difference in the composition of the FFS IWG indicated an orientation towards practical research (it is in fact researchers specialising in fertility who managed the national surveys) which was lacking in the WGSD.

Despite their varied backgrounds, the front-line staff of the comparative projects, the UNECE and the working groups all shared the same general concern: the practice of comparative research. What other actors were involved in the decision-making process, and what other issues were at stake?

## **B. The researcher, the State and research funding: objectives and interests, autonomy and diversity**

*Diverging national and transnational interests, leading to a preference for the national over the international*

### *The role of funders and invisible actors*

While the organisational aspect of coordination and research seems to depend on the UNECE and the working groups, the role of the State is predominant in two crucial areas.

On several occasions, there were significant discrepancies between the projects and their implementation, mainly due to a gap between the aspirations of the researchers and the final decision taken by the funders.

Thus, the groups, and the individuals within them, mainly discussed research, which they would be able to carry out only because the subject of the research, the survey, is funded by their state. However, any agreement between the latter and the former is always to the detriment of the former. The pre-eminence of the State at this level of intervention is therefore in question.

Demography is a discipline with direct policy applications, and fertility is linked to major political issues that cannot be left to the supranational level. By monitoring national surveys, governments are therefore making the best use not only of the money they have spent, but also of the possible significance of the research and its consequences. The aim of this paper is not to discuss the political aspirations of States, but only to mention their power of control.

In a number of countries, the survey was not carried out by the institute to which the researcher participating in the working group belonged to, even during the WGSD period, when the

participants seemed to have greater influence. This led to some of the problems, as an additional obstacle between the researcher and the fieldwork.

This tendency is particularly evident in the FFS, and it is perhaps for this reason that discussion of the comparative study came late and did not seem to be a priority: it was primarily a question of agreeing on the tools rather than the objectives. The dichotomy between the discussion on comparative work and the way in which the surveys were carried out is obvious, even though in practice the project's objective was to carry out comparative work, whereas the surveys were merely the tools for doing so.

The recent experiences of the CFS and the WFS may also have been in memory. Moreover, the FFS IWG was made up of potential users, not necessarily initially from a comparative point of view but at national level, and not of designers of a theoretical framework centred on comparative projects.

The national representatives commissioned by the WGSD were far removed from practical research and had a more effective overall vision but no real effect on the practical side, whereas the experts on the FFS IWG were limited by their personal involvement in research.

This raises the question of the weight a researcher carries in relation to the institution responsible for carrying out the fieldwork, even if it is his or her own institution and when it's a different structure, relations with other researchers, even if they work well together. Another question concerns relations at national level between researchers who represent the comparative project and those who do not. In any case, this means that a number of actors who do not appear in the discussions on the comparative project have occupied a leading position in the decision-making process at national level.

In addition to the policies of the various institutions involved in organising surveys at national level, practical aspects are also important. An infrastructure which sets up a survey at national level can hardly leave it to the vagaries of the discussions of a group which has a different aim or objective. A government will not fund a survey that does not meet its initial needs. If there are international benefits, it is simply a bonus.

The beginning of the CFS was a clear example of this dichotomy. The desire to organise a comparative study was such that some WGSD researchers, whose country had just carried out its first fertility survey, did not hesitate to declare that they were ready to undertake another in order to integrate it into the comparative project (Digoix & Festy, 2003, p. 18). Others went even further. INED, for example, proposed to test a questionnaire as part of a pilot survey. However, the proposal was not adopted for reasons that are unclear and need to be clarified.<sup>20</sup> Then, from the fifth session onwards, in 1971, the group definitively abandoned the earlier innovations. Here too, time disrupted the development of the project. The group met perhaps too infrequently to enable sufficiently precise decisions to be taken, to enable the UNECE to summarise them, to receive and consider responses, which was a guarantee of interactivity, and to enable the experts to relay them in their countries so that they would have a real impact. The timetable for the construction of a national survey could not follow the UN coordination agenda.

In the end, there was a significant inability on the part of the experts to put into practice the ideas developed specifically for the project and discussed at the group meetings.

The typical WFS example of developed countries and their interest in joining the comparative programme, showed from the outset that undertaking a new survey was essential neither to their population policy nor even to their national analyses. Without financial support from the WFS, the prospect, only a few years after the CFS, of acquiring new knowledge thanks to the comparability of surveys could certainly be justified for a researcher, but remained of minor interest. While this type of project is stimulating from a scientific point of view, it is much less attractive to national funding agencies, which pragmatically expect concrete answers to their specific problems, at the lowest possible cost.

### *International funding*

Little funding has been allocated to developed countries, which has given way to the pre-eminence of national concerns.

Internationally, most of the funding came from UNFPA, which from the outset paid for the additional staff of the UNECE demographic unit. During the FFS, it also financed the entire

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<sup>20</sup> It seems that the researcher in charge of the comparative model questionnaire, Paul Clerc, left the institute shortly after the test was carried out. (Digoix & Festy, 2003, p.58)

project through “technical assistance to the countries with fund-raising, questionnaire design, file creation, tabulation, report writing, training seminars” (Population Activities Unit, 1996, p. 3) aimed at countries in transition. The Baltic States and Poland, for example, had the costs of their surveys fully covered by UNFPA.

At each additional meeting of the group over the years and especially since 1994 (ad hoc FFS meeting, CES working sessions on FFS), the PAU was constantly looking for additional funding opportunities, in particular to organise meetings.

It would be interesting to do some research to try and find the UNFPA's recommendations on the conduct of the work and to see exactly what its expectations were and what influence it might (or might not) have had on the scientific aspect of the project.

#### *The group at individual level*

Because the experts in the groups were only representatives of a country and not decision-making authorities, they did not have the means to impose comparative ambitions, which they may not even have had. Was the disparity in the positions of WGSD members an indication of the effectiveness of the dissemination of the group's work?

From the very first discussions of the FFS Informal Working Group, the same scientific positions emerged as at previous scientific coordination meetings. Alongside Robert Cliquet's rather theoretical reflections, it was practical questions relating to national issues that seemed to preoccupy the group, leading to questions about the real investment of researchers in comparative research.

When trying to go further to find out why they were present in the groups set up by the UNECE, the question of individuality emerges: Designation? Special scientific interest? Were they only comparative researchers or not? And all things considered, what about their reasons for belonging to these groups? Who participated and why? It could have been a scientific or strategic career choice, or both. How important are national and international concerns when it comes to making a choice?

All these questions, the answers to which are bound to influence the choices underlying the coordination process, remain unanswered. Individuals and their personal career choices cannot hide completely behind the group.

The personality of the researcher can be of vital importance. Particularly recognised expertise or simple perseverance can, without too much effort, steer the group in a specific direction. The dynamics of a group depend often on its leader, whether declared or not (see, for example, how Jerzy Berent took the lead on the UN side).

During the FFS, two personalities successively stood out. Robert Cliquet tried to give direction to the emerging project, but as a result of the group's immobility, this leadership disappeared and was replaced by another. Lars Østby then seemed to take over the management of operations after the decline of Cliquet's line, even if his reasons and methods were completely different. In any case, by early 1991, the position he defended was quietly but surely taking control of the group's decision-making. He was a statistician, he had experience of the WGSD and of the previous wave of surveys, he came regularly to meetings, he took part in other United Nations groups reflecting on the subject (those of the CES), the Norwegian survey had been completed and served as a model for the collective work. So, he was clearly a man of resources. His collaboration with Erik Klijzing was excellent. This was enough to set the project in a specific direction (Digoix & Festy, 2003, p. 23). In any case, Lars Østby was a researcher who was very committed to methods and comparative thinking, but who could not deny that the limits imposed by Norway, in particular the fact that the survey has already been carried out there, were scientific limits that he could not overstep. With his experience, he brought a “Nordic trend” to the comparative project.

#### *The national field: diversity of actors and positioning strategies*

The experts were national and came from national organisations that may be in competition with each other. What kind of links did they have with the surveys? Were they involved in designing or carrying out the surveys, or were they simply users? How representative were they and what was their status? What about the circulation of information in different countries, and what impact did the different groups working on fertility issues have?

The French case of the CFS in the Institut national d'études démographiques (Ined), is significant. Although Léon Tabah has been speaking out strongly in favour of the international comparability of fertility surveys since 1966, he had only been involved in the WGSD since 1971, taking over from Jean Bourgeois-Pichat. Jean Sutter represented INED in the IUSSP think-tank and it was Elisabeth Zucker and Philippe Collomb who were carrying out the French survey based on the first model questionnaire tested by Paul Clerc! Was this dispersal of potential a guarantee of effectiveness? Was it simply the result of a desire to disperse responsibilities? Was it the result of internal struggles, and if so, what was the effect of these struggles at the international level? What were the links between these different people? What were the positioning issues in the field of fertility research? What influence did this have on their actions? All these questions are very complex to answer. In any case, it is clear that this very well-structured institute could not have failed to notice this dispersal.

It is believed that the two leading French representatives were present for two reasons. They were both heads of INED when they were part of the group, and they both had a high international profile, which has to do with the United Nations. Indeed, among other international activities, Bourgeois-Pichat held responsibilities in the Social Affairs Division of the United Nations Population Division (UNPD) from 1954 to 1962 and Tabah (who was already a UN expert when he taught at CELADE) headed this body from 1972 to 1984.

However, it took some time for the WGSD to devote itself solely to fertility surveys and it is not surprising that the French representative after Tabah's departure was Philippe Collomb, who had been in charge of the French survey in 1971, and that he was succeeded by Louis Rousset and Jean-Paul Sardon, who were in charge of the WFS French survey, at a time when the group was gradually made up of more researchers and fewer decision-makers.

#### *International variations*

Initially, the representativeness of the group's members was not homogeneous. The WGSD included directors of demographic institutes, statisticians and researchers; they represented countries with fairly wide social and societal variations (East-West, North, South), different levels of population and fertility research, etc. The ambition to cover as vast a territory as possible was ideologically justifiable and all the more fruitful and unavoidable in that it made it easier for the FFS to finance the project for the countries of Eastern Europe. But it unquestionably took precedence over scientific homogeneity and theoretical reflection.

When the FFS introduced representatives from the countries in transition into its Informal Working Group, the latter's interventions showed a total absence of comparative objectives. In 1996, when the comparative phase of the project had not really begun, they were already pushing for a new wave without really asking themselves why they had just carried out the previous one. As they were funded by the programme, they were obviously not dependent on decisions made by their states, and were instead forced to adopt the comparative approach. However, it is clear to them that the "fertility survey" aspect was more significant than the "cross-national research on fertility and the family" aspect. Would all the countries concerned have to be at the same level of national knowledge to be truly able to focus their attention on the contributions of cross-national research to the analysis of trends?

#### *United Nations Population Division: an example?*

Considering the research field, it's worth saying a word about the UNPD and its relationship with the PAU: officially none.

When going back to the founding of the Unit, this angle can give a better understanding of the circulation and transfer of ideas.

According to Paul-André Rosental, in the 1950s the UNPD occupied a decisive position in the demographic field (Rosental, 2003, p. 127). As previously seen the links between French demographers and the Population Division are established. Several other researchers present in the WGSD also spent time there (the Swede Hyrenius, for example). The UNPD was too oriented towards developing countries to have any direct influence on the group, but it gained in importance during the coordination of the WFS because of the global aspect of the survey,

when its representatives participated more and more in the meetings and had an interactive role in the progress of the unfinished study.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship with UN bodies is interesting both for its contributions and its failures. The WGSD was not only convened by a UN body, but also by the Social Affairs Division, which was so marginal in Europe at the outset that it has now disappeared (Macura, 2002), therefore the UNECE had a role to play in the European region. The multinational dimension proved to be an obstacle to deployment, as was the case in the American field, where the UNPD occupied a strategic position (Notestein, 1982, p. 679). In the UN system, when drawing a parallel between New York and Geneva, there was an empty space. Does this mean that there was scope for building up a European field by creating leadership, or a position where leadership could be created, and where Jerzy Berent proved to be the most imaginative actor? The situation of the researcher and his position in relation to research and its tools is brilliantly illustrated by his evolution in the context of the United Nations. He was not at the origin of the CFS, but gradually took over its management, got the WGSD involved and called for the creation of a specific department at the United Nations, which he then headed and whose existence he never ceased to defend. Thus, his interest in comparative work reflected the specificity of his position, as it constituted his *raison d'être*, a *raison d'être* that was unravelling in his difficult succession.

In conclusion, the national experts involved in developing the projects were therefore constantly torn between national constraints and an interest in new research, the benefits of which were less obvious and which was controlled by a group of people with different interests and concerns. In this context, the UNECE, without significant financial resources, had no means of imposing the *ex-ante* coordination it once dreamed of, but was satisfied to manage a situation that is evolving largely independently. A man like Jerzy Berent was undoubtedly well aware of the importance of these type of studies and the technical difficulties involved in carrying them out, but this essential condition was not enough. The United Nations could not carry out this type of project alone. Much depended on the groups of experts who worked with the UNECE, but precisely for these practical and concrete reasons, they could not have the same vision as a supranational organisation.

These different conditions revealed the difficulty of the position of the UNECE, which had to carry out, with the collaboration of researchers, institutes and countries, comparative projects that were ideally supposed to transcend national interests. However, because of all the characteristics described above, the main task of co-ordination did not serve the comparative project but consisted of trying to achieve a balance between national interests.

## Final considerations

Studying the history of fertility survey coordination programmes in order to understand how international comparisons are made is a major undertaking. The analysis made here does not pretend to fully explore all the documents necessary for the in-depth study that would be desirable, but from the documents that have been analysed, it did allow to draw some general conclusions and outline the study that remains to be undertaken.

In the midst of ever-changing demographic trends, groups of researchers have attempted to analyse information through the still poorly mastered process of surveys, using an overlooked technique, cross-national comparison. The constant obsession with the conflict between national and cross-national interests ran through the years, with the United Nations playing a particularly difficult mediating role.

The way in which the comparative programmes coordinated by the UNECE were constructed shows that despite the variety of modes in which they were carried out, they were developed according to an identical model: a light structure, a small group of people managing the reflections of the groups of experts, and fairly similar technical means of implementation. Despite the different societal contexts, the genesis of the projects was more or less the same, but the analysis showed that the results varied.

The Comparative Fertility Study (CFS) was made up of surveys assembled *a posteriori* in an attempt to compare data. Although the idea of conducting comparative surveys was on everyone's minds for a while, it was quickly abandoned in favour of practical realism. The

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<sup>21</sup> See the draft letters between Gwendolyn Johnson and Joseph van den Boomen in "Archives Berent-van den Boomen", Geneva, PAU.

experiment was innovative. The external societal conditions were conducive to questioning in each country, questions that it then seemed interesting to compare. They didn't really know what they were looking for, but were bound to find something. Driven by the tireless determination of one man, Jerzy Berent, who had given real thought to the necessary conditions for comparability, the project had modest ambitions, which culminated in a study carried out by the UNECE, the results of which were published in a single document.

Building on the previous experience and using the contacts of its staff, who were very well integrated into international population research, the United Nations co-ordination of the European WFS included it in the worldwide programme of the World Fertility Survey (WFS), with the main aim of setting up a truly comparative project. Drawing on the experience of the CFS, the team in charge of the industrialised countries of the WFS began very early on to draw up a model questionnaire which was then to be distributed to everyone. But without the financial means to impose it, it was only able to compensate for the variations from the initial objective that gradually appeared as the project developed.

It appears then that the competence or goodwill of a staff (whether sufficiently numerous or not, whether stable or not) was not enough to compensate for the damage caused by national interests generated by the size of the funds required at the outset of the surveys.

In practice, the WFS has come up against several obstacles: the distance from the model questionnaire was significant, centralised data processing in Geneva was too restrictive, and the objective of carrying out comparative work on the same model as the previous one had failed, undeniably for technical reasons, but also because of staffing problems. As if to erase these obstacles, at the final level, the small Geneva team chose to carry out the comparative work. This was perhaps a little too ambitious given the many difficulties generated structurally by the divergent interests of each party. While it is true that the work carried out by the UNECE to develop a model questionnaire *ex ante* has favoured the adoption of many recommended questions and, by the same token, greater comparability in the WFS than in the CFS, the comparative aspect was never really addressed in a major publication, which suggests that it was never realised, even that it was not feasible. As Paul Demeny pointed out at the WFS conference in London in 1980 (Demeny, 1981, p. 137-144), the WFS project did not really provide developed countries with any new knowledge. The main conclusion was that the data used for studies on fertility was based more on traditional sources (censuses and vital statistics) than on recently conducted surveys. This conference also saw Jerzy Berent asserted that international comparability can only be achieved following a huge amount of preliminary work in drawing up questionnaires and harmonising data, work that has not been done in the European WFS (Berent, 1981, p. 453-455).

The WFS pitfalls led to a number of conclusions which were used by the FFS. It was realised that if this type of survey focused solely on fertility issues, it would not be possible to answer the questions asked about current trends, and that the focus of the surveys needed to be broadened to include the evolution of the family, as was the case with the FFS. The problems encountered during the construction of the WFS database also enabled to gain essential experience of the technical requirements of such a project: the creation of a solid framework (which was unfortunately not adopted) placing the emphasis from the outset of the FFS project on the comparability of data using the Standard Recode File. From this point of view, the lessons learned from the failure of the WFS project constituted an important step between the CFS and the FFS which greatly benefited the latter.

In practice, the Fertility and Family Surveys were inspired by the previous waves, but the programme was designed more specifically for the industrialised countries and the countries of the former Eastern bloc. The co-ordination efforts involved developing and monitoring an organisational structure consisting of several working groups that met regularly before and during the development of the survey, a precise and achievable objective, and the creation of a comparative database with the aim of making this data available to the scientific community. By not making publication the aim of their work, the FFS were able to concentrate fully on producing outputs that, in the end and put together, proved to be convincing in practical terms. The FFS have been innovative when it comes to disseminating their work, both during its development and by taking advantage of new means of communication to publicise the results on comparability beyond the restricted circle of UN fertility experts.

On the other hand, as in previous projects, there was a lack of theoretical reflection on the problems associated with comparative programmes. Questions about the tools of comparability

were lacking, and the implementation of comparative programmes consequently remained routine and not very innovative. Based on the simple and rarely questioned principle of a model questionnaire applied uniformly in each country to serve as a basis for the development of comparative programmes, the UNECE has mainly had to deal with questions concerning the construction of questionnaires. In practice, the work focused more on the distance from these aspirations. The justification for this bias has not led to any theoretical reflection, which is extremely surprising given the complexity of getting the countries concerned to adopt this methodological choice.

The CFS was an opportunity to create a population unit at the United Nations in Geneva. This constituted the scientific, and to some extent financial, contribution of the United Nations: the funding of staff working on fertility-related projects but also on other tasks and comparative or harmonisation studies. To ensure the long-term future of this service, it was necessary to look to the future. The creation of the department also had structural consequences for the organisation of work, with a workforce that was constantly changing (both for the worse and for the better), and therefore lacked the stability needed to manage large-scale projects.

The role of the UNECE demographers was of the utmost importance in the development of the three projects; they were the only ones with a broad view of the comparative issues, and their sole aim was to contribute to them. But the team was small, with no real financial resources and under constant threat of dissolution. In order to impose UNECE ideas, the team had to show tremendous energy in stimulating research in developed countries: finding European experts so that they could act not only on the comparative level by working on the first version of the model questionnaire, but also on the national level by trying to influence the adoption or adaptation of this questionnaire.

In practice, the divergence of interests in the design of the surveys between national needs focusing on specific local issues and cross-national objectives aiming at comparability is perceptible without any improvement during each of the three waves. Because there was no real solution, in the first two projects aimed at a final study, the UNECE opted for the compromise of a choice of coordinated variables, hoping to lead the local teams to similar formulations. The technical work of comparability was carried out *a posteriori* with a recodification of variables considered *a priori* comparable. To achieve this goal, the UNECE had to be constantly mobilised on a project whose interest UNECE alone perceived and whose potential impact on national decisions was low, as if the machine were running on idle.

The economic and financial situation often imposed its orientations on science without the latter having the means to oppose it. In an extended multinational context, the politics of compromise regulates decisions and behaviour and levelling out is rarely done from above. Innovative thinking is unlikely to emerge and gain majority support when the cost of surveys is known. There, national representatives favoured safety and preferred to use a common method, even if it was not completely satisfactory.

The very organisation of the work gave rise to certain operational difficulties. Unable at any stage in each of the three projects to reach a common understanding of a theoretical framework, the participants did not question the tools they are supposed to use: the cross-national comparative method. Whether fatalistically or realistically, they conformed to the previous model by improving it.

What remains to be analysed in detail is a considerable part of the process of producing comparative projects: the field of researchers.

The balance between reflection, implementation and innovation was a difficult one to strike, as we have seen that the UNECE alone did not have the necessary room for manoeuvre to impose a guideline. The world of research also has rational and practical tendencies. Alliances need to be forged. How can they be set up? On what principles?

This initial examination of the network of researchers who worked on these comparative projects shows that it was small but not always homogeneous. In order to analyse the differences in the representation of countries at international level in the groups of experts that met under the aegis of the United Nations, several elements are necessary. The first may be the selection criteria for the researchers who were supposed to lead European research, their links with their governments and the place occupied by their discipline, the study of fertility, in the demographic policies of the various countries concerned.

Furthermore, it is essential to distinguish whether the researchers working in the comparative field were the same as those working in a national context. If they differed, an evaluation of each group is crucial to identify if those representing their country or institute at UNECE meetings belong to either category.

On a more detailed level, it should be interesting to know what the comparative method truly means for a researcher. This involves examining the relationship between national and international contexts and between national and regional analyses and additionally, consider the symbolic benefits that researchers derive from international recognition and how this affects their work in both national and international domains. The answers to these questions could serve as a basis for reflection on the composition of the field of demographic research, which could undoubtedly shed light on the origin of the decisions that governed the choices made at the time of the comparative programmes.

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## List Of Acronyms

CBGS	Centrum Voor Bevolkings- En Gezinsstudie
CFS	Comparative Fertility Study
CES	Conference of European Statisticians
DHS	Demographic Health Survey
FFS	Fertility and Family Surveys
FFS IWG	Fertility and Family Surveys Informal Working Group
INED	Institut national d'études démographiques
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
ISI	International Statistical Institute
IUSSP	International Union for The Scientific Study of Population
PAU	Population Activities Unit
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNPD	United Nations Population Division
WFS	World Fertility Survey
WGSD	Working Group on Social Demography
WHO	World Health Organisation

## Annex I- Participation of the working groups

### *Working Group on Social Demography*

1	1967	5-8 December	Geneva	<b>13 experts:</b> Bourgeois-Pichat (France), Colombo (Italy), Frejka (Poland), Glass (UK), Mackensen (Germany), Matthiessen (Denmark), Morsa (Belgium), Safilios, Szabady (Hungary), Tabah (France), Valaoras (Greece), Valkovics (Hungary), Vukovich (Hungary) / <b>2 IPPF</b> (Braestrup, Rettie) / <b>1 IUSSP</b> (Bickel) / <b>UN</b> :1 <b>ILO</b> (Doctor) / <b>2 FAO</b> (Lamartine Yates, Schulte) / <b>1 WHO</b> (Weber) / <b>3 UNECE</b> (Davies, Grot, Velebit) / <b>1 UN Social Affairs</b> (Gille) / <b>1 Observer</b> Rothschild (USA)
2	1968	11-13 December	Geneva	<b>11 experts:</b> Bourgeois-Pichat (France), Colombo (Italy+IUSSP)), Glass (UK), Hyrenius (Sweden), Jacquard (France), Mackensen (Germany), Matthiessen (Denmark), Morsa (Belgium), Valaoras (Greece), Vukovich (Hungary), Wynnyczuk (Czechoslovakia) / <b>1 Council of Europe</b> (Hornecker) / <b>2 WHO</b> (Weber, Hansluka) / <b>1 ISI</b> (Nixon) / <b>3 UNECE</b> (Berent, Davies, Stanovnik) / <b>1 UN Social Affairs</b> (Gille) / <b>1 Consultant</b> (Frejka)
3	1969	23-25 June	Bressanone	<b>9 experts:</b> Bourgeois-Pichat (France), Colombo (Italy+IUSSP)), Hofsten (Sweden), Holzer (Poland), Mackensen (Germany), Matthiessen (Denmark), Morsa (Belgium), Szabady (Hungary), Wynnyczuk (Czechoslovakia) / <b>1 Council of Europe</b> (Whibley) / <b>1 IPPF</b> (Rettie) / <b>1 FAO</b> (Schulte) / <b>1 WHO</b> (Weber) / <b>2 UN Social Affairs</b> (Gille, Vukovich) / <b>9 Observers</b> (Corsini, Federici, Golini, Guarini, Livi Bacci, Natale, de Sandre, Santini, Valkovics)
4	1970	3-5 June	Strasbourg	<b>10 experts:</b> Bourgeois-Pichat (France), Del Campo (Spain), Glass (UK), Hofsten (Sweden), Holzer (Poland), Mackensen (Germany), Matthiessen (Denmark), Morsa (Belgium), Szabady (Hungary), Valaoras (Greece) / <b>2 Council of Europe</b> (Hornecker, Whibley) / <b>1 IPPF</b> (Rettie) / <b>1 IUSSP</b> (Remiche) / <b>1 UNECE</b> (Berent) / <b>1 WHO</b> (Hansluka) / <b>1 UN Social Affairs</b> (Vukovich, Cutullic) / <b>7 Observers</b> (Calot, Cazin, Jacquard, Lengyel, Leridon, Paillat, Pressat)
5	1971	5-8 April	Geneva	<b>15 experts:</b> Breznik (Yugoslavia), Campbell (USA), Heeren (The Netherlands), Holzer (Poland), Klinger (Hungary), Langford (UK), Leppo (Finland), Matthiessen (Denmark), Morsa (Belgium+IUSSP), Noordhoek (Denmark), Smolinski (Poland), Szabady (Hungary), Tabah (France), Thompson (UK), Wynnyczuk (Czechoslovakia) / <b>1 UNPD</b> (Johnson) / <b>1 UNESCO</b> (Franchette) / <b>1 Council of Europe</b> (Hornecker) / <b>1 IPPF</b> (Kestelman) / <b>4 UNECE</b> (Albright, Berent, Messy, Saunders) / <b>1 WHO</b> (Hansluka) / <b>3 UN Social Affairs</b> (Iliovici, Vukovic, Cutullic) / <b>1 Population Council</b> (Acsadi) / <b>2 Observers</b> (Kamp, Lengyel)
6	1972	4-7 April	London	<b>24 experts:</b> Adegboyega (UK), Brablcova (Czechoslovakia), Bretz (Germany), Breznik (Yugoslavia), Campbell (USA), Collomb (France), Fairhurst (UK), Fisek (Turkey), Heeren (The Netherlands), Ibarrola (Spain), Kamp (Germany), Klinger (Hungary), Langford (UK), Leppo (Finland), Moors (The Netherlands), Morsa (Belgium), Pinnelli (Italy), Smolinski (Poland), Szabady (Hungary), Tabah (France), Thompson (UK), Uner (UK), Ussing (Denmark), Westoff (USA) / <b>1 UNESCO</b> (Solomon) / <b>1 Council of Europe</b> (Whibley) / <b>1 IPPF</b> (Rettie) / <b>1 IUSSP</b> (Grebek) / <b>1 ISI</b> (van de Kaa) / <b>1 USAID</b> (Sprehe) / <b>4 UNECE</b> (Berent, Chidambaram, Overton, Okolski) / <b>2 WHO</b> (Logan, Padley) / <b>2 UN Social Affairs</b> (Vukovich, Cutullic) / <b>2 National observers</b> (Feery, Sinclair)
7	1974	30/9-3 October	Geneva	<b>11 experts:</b> Breznik (Yugoslavia), Collomb (France), Heeren (The Netherlands), Kisnisci (Turkey), Kostal (Czechoslovakia), Morsa (Belgium), Pearce (UK), Pulkkinen (Finland), Smolinski (Poland), Ussing (Denmark), Woolf (UK) / <b>3 PAU</b> (Berent, Falk, Yaukey) / <b>3 UN Social Affairs</b> (Hyttén, Holzer, Cutullic) / <b>1 UNPD</b> (Johnson) / <b>1 UNESCO</b> (Bouchoudi) / <b>1 Council of Europe</b> (Murray) / <b>1 Council of Europe</b> (Murray) / <b>1 IUSSP</b> (Livi Bacci) / <b>1 USAID</b> (Lawson) / <b>1 WFS</b> (Chidambaram) / <b>5 observers</b> (Eisenbach, Langford, Linke, Pinelli, Ruckert)

8	1976	25-28 May	Zakopane	<b>23 experts:</b> Borowski (Poland), Breznik (Yugoslavia), Cliquet (Belgium), Eisenbach (Israel), Fechtinger (Austria), Ibarrola (Spain), Jekova (Bulgaria), Jensen (Norway), Manolov (Bulgaria), Mikus (Czechoslovakia), Moors (The Netherlands), Muresan (Romania), Pavlov (URSS), Pongracz (Hungary), Pulkkinen (Finland), Romaniuk (Poland), Roussel (France), Rückert (Germany), Ruzkova (Czechoslovakia), Smolinski (Poland), Thompson (UK), Ussing (Denmark), Woolf (UK) / <b>2 PAU</b> (Berent, Chicco-Falk) / <b>2 UN Social Affairs</b> (Holzer, Cutullic) / <b>1 UNESCO</b> (Timur) / <b>1 UNFPA</b> (Gille) / <b>1 IPPF</b> (Kozakiewicz) / <b>1 IUSSP</b> (Rasevic) / <b>1 Population Council</b> (Demeny) / <b>1 USAID</b> (Ravenholt) / <b>1 WFS</b> (Chidambaram) / <b>2 Organisers</b> (Rusinek, Wasilewka) / <b>6 Observers</b> (Dzieno, Klinczyk, Latuch, Nanyslowska, Okolski, Welpa)
9	1978	9-12 October	Varna	<b>24 experts:</b> Aranda Aznar (Spain), Arvidsson (Sweden), Barany (Hungary), Bertelsen (Denmark), Bezouska (Czechoslovakia), Bogdanov (Bulgaria), Breznik (Yugoslavia), Britton (UK), Cliquet (Belgium), De Sandre (Italy), Dunnel (UK), Eisenbach (Israel), Holzer (Poland), Jekova (Bulgaria), Leguina Herran (Spain), Mikus (Czechoslovakia), Moors (The Netherlands), Muresan (Romania), Naoumov (Bulgaria), Østby (Norway), Pinnelli (Italy), Pratt (USA), Sardon (France), Smolinski (Poland) / <b>2 PAU</b> (McHenry, Chicco-Falk) / <b>1 UNECE adviser</b> (Berent) / <b>2 UN Social Affairs</b> (Hyttén, Cutullic) / <b>1 UNPD</b> (Johnson-Acsadi) / <b>1 UNESCO</b> (Timur) / <b>1 UNFPA</b> (Kusukawa) / <b>1 IPPF</b> (Vassilev) / <b>2 WFS-ISI</b> (Chidambaram, Little) / <b>3 Organisers</b> (Chernev, Stoimenov, Vassilev) / <b>6 Observers</b> (Dyakova, Lambov, Nikolaeva, Nikoulin, Petrov, Zahariev)

### CBGS Fertility Working Group

	1987	7-8 December	Brussels	Avramov (Yugoslavia), Cliquet (Belgium), De Jong (The Netherlands), Deven (Belgium), Impens (Belgium), Kamaras (Hungary), Lesthaeghe (Belgium), Lodewijckx (Belgium), Moors (The Netherlands), Østby (Norway), Palomba (Italy), Schmid (Germany), Willems (Belgium)
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### Participation of *Fertility and Family Surveys Informal Working Group (IWG)*

1	1988	19-20 December	Geneva	Avramov (Yugoslavia), Cliquet (Belgium), De Jong (The Netherlands), Holzer (Poland), Impens (Belgium), Klinger (Hungary), Lensgfeld (Germany), Lutz (Austria), Moors (The Netherlands), Nieminen (Finland), Palomba (Italy), Pinnelli (Italy), Østby (Norway), Simons (UK), Toulemon (France), Willems (Belgium). <b>UNECE</b> : Kelly, Riazantzev, Steffenson, Vukovich
2	1990	11-12 January	Geneva	Avramov (Yugoslavia), Beets (The Netherlands), Cliquet (Belgium), Ctrnact (Czech Republic), De Sandre (Italy), Deven (Belgium), Hoem (Sweden), Holzer (Poland), Kamaras (Hungary), Lutz (Austria), Moors (The Netherlands), Nieminen (Finland), Østby (Norway), Palomba (Italy), Pinnelli (Italy) Shaw (UK), Simons (UK), Toulemon (France), Tsvetarsky (Bulgaria), Zingg (Switzerland). <b>UNECE</b> : Kelly, Macura, Mochizuki, Riazantsev, Steffenson Vacic. <b>Observers</b> : Fux (Switzerland), Kowalska (Poland)
3	1991	3-5 June	Geneva	Atienza (Spain), Avramov (Belgrade), Beets (The Netherlands), Cliquet (Belgium), Ctrnact (Czech Republic), De Sandre (Italy), Deven (Belgium), Fux (Switzerland), Ghetzau (Romania), Hoem (Sweden), Holzer (Poland), Kamaras (Hungary), Klinger (Hungary), Kowalska (Poland), Lapinch (Estonia), Minkov (Bulgaria), Nieminen (Finland), Østby (Norway), Palomba (Italy), Pinnelli (Italy), Pohl (Germany), Toulemon (France), Vermunt (The Netherlands). <b>UNECE</b> : Macura, Kelly, Klijzing, Lonsdale, Mochizuki, Steffenson, Vacic, Von Cube. <b>Observers</b> : Frejka, Vaessen, <b>UNFPA</b> : Wagener
4	1993	26-28 May	Geneva	Atienza (Spain), Beets (The Netherlands), Callens (Belgium), Csonka (Switzerland), De Sandre (Italy), Ghetzau (Romania), Hoem (Sweden), Holzer (Poland), Kamaras (Hungary), Kowalska (Poland), Latten (The Netherlands), Nieminen (Finland), Noack (Norway), Norris (Canada), Noth (Switzerland), Østby (Norway), Pratt (USA), Sauvain-Dugerdil (Switzerland), Schoenmaeckers (Belgium), Sircelj (Slovenia) Sakkeus (Estonia), Springfeldt (Sweden), Stankuniene (Lithuania), Toulemon (France), Tunçbilek (Turc Republic), Zvidrins (Latvia). <b>UNECE</b> : Klijzing, Macura, <b>UNFPA</b> : Vlassoff

5	1996	18-20 March Geneva	Atienza (Spain), Beets (The Netherlands), Bracher (Sweden), Bumpass (USA), Callens (Belgium), Csonka (Switzerland), Darroch Forrest (USA), Fux (Switzerland), Gheorghiu (Romania), Holzer (Poland), Jones (consultant), Kamaras (Hungary), Katus (Estonia), Klinger (Hungary), Kowalska (Poland), Landgren Möller (Sweden), Morris (USA), Nikander (Finland), Noth (Switzerland), Obersnel Kveder (Ljubljana), Østby (Norway), Pfeiffer (Austria), Philipov (Bulgaria), Pinnelli (Italy), Pohl (Germany), Prinz (Austria), Rindfuss (USA), Sauvain-Dugerdil (Switzerland), Schoenmaeckers (Belgium), Stankuniene (Lithuania), Symeonidou (Greece), Toulemon (France), Turcotte (Canada), Volkov (Russia) Zvidrins (Latvia). <b>UNECE</b> : Klijzing, Macura, <b>UNFPA</b> : MacDonald
6	1997	6-7 November Geneva	Beets (The Netherlands), Cernic Istenic (Slovenia) Chenet (UK), Corijn (Belgium), Darroch (USA), De Guibert (France), Gabadinho (Switzerland), Goldberg (USA), Holzer (Poland), Hullen (Germany), Kamaras (Hungary), Kartovaara (Finland), Kiernan (UK), Klinger (Hungary), Kowalska (Poland), Kraus (Czech Republic), Lakiza Sachuk (Ukraine), Lelievre (France), Martin (Spain), Nowak (Austria), Østby (Norway), Pfeiffer (Austria), Philipov (Bulgaria), Pinnelli (Italy), Sauvain-Dugerdil (Switzerland), Schoenmaeckers (Belgium), Stankuniene (Lithuania), Toulemon (France), Turcotte (Canada), Zvidrins (Latvia). <b>UNECE</b> : Bloch, Klijzing, Macura, <b>UNFPA</b> : den Besten, MacDonald