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SOME REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN AND SOCIAL
INDICATORS FOR DEVELOPMENT

by

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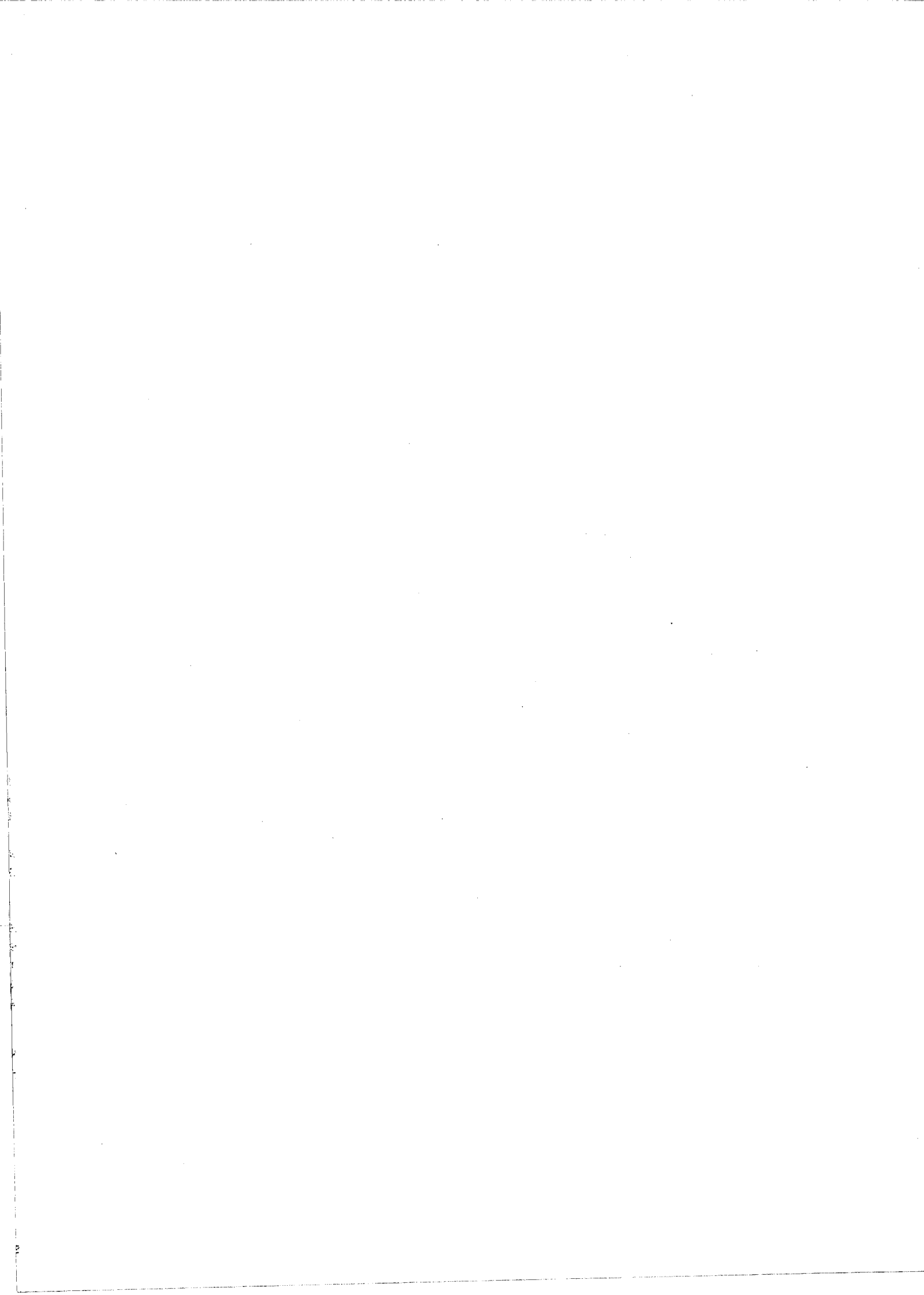
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PREFACE

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in developing appropriate and usable social indicators. This has been due in part to the need to measure the social impact of policies of adjustment and structural reform being attempted in a large number of countries. However, there is also an enduring interest in the relationship between the pace of social progress and the pattern and rate of economic growth. This paper discusses indicators on some aspects of living conditions and social concerns.

It begins with a discussion on the scope and use of social indicators. This is followed by a brief survey of some major strands of work in this area since the early 1950s. The paper then considers some widely used indicators on living conditions, assesses their shortcomings and suggests the need for low-cost and feasible methods of collection of social statistics. In the concluding section, there is a discussion of some social concerns on which it might be useful to develop indicators, collect information and prepare reports.

Considerable work has been done in the field of social indicators since the early 1950s. There have been advances in the discussion on components and indicators of living standards, although the 1954 report by the group of experts still constitutes the main conceptual basis for much of the current work on social indicators. There has been considerable work but few practical results from the attempts made to integrate social and economic statistics into more comprehensive accounting frameworks.

At the level of measurement, while there has been an important increase in the number of countries undertaking censuses, household surveys and similar enquiries, our review shows that there are still important gaps in data and serious questions about the reliability of available data on some of the more commonly used social indicators in a large number of countries. The launching of better and more frequent censuses and household surveys would no doubt lead over time to more

useful and reliable data on social indicators. However, such methods of data collection are expensive, demanding in technical skills and may not always generate reliable statistics.

There is therefore need to supplement these efforts by simpler, lower cost, non-conventional methods of information collection and analysis. As examples of such methods, mention may be made of sample registration areas where responsibility for reporting vital events is placed upon a local responsible person; establishment of "sentinels", "observation areas" or "observation posts" on social progress; rapid rural appraisals; use of innovative scaling methods; facilities registers and the use of trained local informants and of travelling "social development assessors" in a network of observation.

It is proposed that a comprehensive study be made of such innovative methods of data collection on selected social indicators, based on the several approaches that have already been tried out by different organizations in several countries. This study could be followed by pilot surveys to test the effectiveness of such methods in countries with particularly weak data on social indicators.

Finally, the paper has drawn attention to the lack of systematic information and serious analysis of some important areas of social concern in many developing countries. They relate to such themes as human rights, rule of law, status of women, participation, personal security, child labour, drugs, environmental deterioration, etc. It would be highly desirable to encourage data and information collection in these areas and preparation of social reports for dissemination and discussion.

Dharam Ghai
Director

Introduction 1/

The Charter of the United Nations enjoins it to "promote higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development" (United Nations, 1968). As part of its mandate to promote social progress, the United Nations system has attempted since the early 1950s to develop theoretical and empirical work on social indicators. Over the past 30 to 40 years a great deal of effort has been devoted by international organizations, national statistical offices and individual researchers to identify components and indicators of social progress, gather relevant data and information, and undertake analysis of the relationship between economic growth and social progress.

This effort has extended our knowledge base and deepened our understanding of various aspects of social development. Yet in some respects, especially those relating to measurement of social progress in developing countries, improvements have fallen short of expectations and needs. In the majority of developing countries, it remains difficult to measure with a satisfactory degree of accuracy changes over time in living standards and social conditions. Given that the fundamental objective of economic growth is human well-being, it is necessary to continue efforts to improve the analysis and measurement of social progress.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss indicators on some aspects of living standards and social concerns. The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section contains a general discussion on the scope and use of social indicators. This is followed by a brief survey of some major strands of work in this area since the early 1950s. We then consider some widely used indicators on living conditions, assess their shortcomings and suggest some low-cost methods of data collection. Finally, there is a discussion of some social concerns on which it might be useful to develop indicators, collect information and prepare reports.

A. Scope and use of social indicators

Social conditions and concerns cover a wide spectrum of human experience. By the same token, social indicators elaborated to throw light on them display corresponding diversity. It may be useful to classify these indicators into four categories. 2/ The first refers to living conditions (health, nutrition, shelter, access to water, sanitary facilities). The second category comprises information and cultural aspects (literacy, education, libraries, newspapers, music, theatre, fine arts). The third relates to some social concerns (human rights, status of women, participation, equality, personal security, child labour, drug taking, corruption, state of the environment). The fourth category refers to indicators on the state of the mind and the spirit (happiness, satisfaction, tranquillity, etc.).

The literature on social indicators provides examples of work on all four categories of social domains. These indicators may be quantitative or qualitative, objective or subjective. Likewise they may be collected through a wide variety of methods, the principal ones being censuses, household questionnaires, individual surveys, administrative records, registration systems, public opinion polls and referendums. While the state is usually the main agency of data collection in all countries, useful social information may also be gathered by such organizations as political parties, religious groups, co-operatives, business enterprises, unions, communications media, research institutes, universities, non-governmental development bodies and international organizations as well as by individuals.

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