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**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

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**NOTES ON RENEWING THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

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**I. Introduction**

1. The 50th anniversary of the Conference is an excellent occasion to review, and indeed to celebrate, the numerous substantive achievements of the Conference. This paper has a different purpose: to take stock of what works well and what might be areas for improvement, even significant improvement. While people, unfortunately, can not be “rejuvenated” when they reach their 50th birthday, this is very much a possibility for institutions.

2. Historically,<sup>1</sup> the Conference used to provide a venue where statistical agencies got together to exchange information about significant initiatives in their respective offices and consider emerging challenges for official statistics. These discussions were important for several reasons:

- First they served to improve quality and international comparability
- Second, they served as a source of peer group stimulation for the participants.
- Third, they often resulted in specific and productive follow-up, such as the creation of continuing or ad hoc working groups, conceptual work, and classification systems.
- Fourth, much of the work of the Conference dealt with leading edge issues that sooner or later became problems for all -- and as such the Conference played a leadership role within the United Nations family.
- And fifth, the Conference provided a venue for all countries in the region according to the United Nations spirit of openness and equality.

3. It is clear that members of the Conference found its meetings stimulating and that a number of significant initiatives (e.g. work bridging the MPS and SNA systems) arose out of the work of the

Conference. Furthermore, during much of the period the participating heads of agencies were presiding over well established statistical systems, each with a critical mass to carry out priority national statistical work.

## II. An analysis of the current situation

### (a) Major forces at work with an impact on the Conference

4. Several important developments occurred in the world at large and in the world of statistics that had a profound impact on the role of the Conference.

- *The break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*

5. The break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia had two significant impacts on the Conference. The first was a transformation of one of the major functions of the Conference: from serving as a bridge between statistical offices from market and non-market economies, to one of providing a forum for knowledge and technology transfer among countries at different levels of statistical development. The second impact was a large increase in the membership of the Conference, with 17 additional countries joining as a result of these break-ups.

6. While all members (new and old) were striving towards shared objectives, many of the new members represented statistical systems which were struggling to make the transition to a market economy based statistical system. Indeed, some new countries were trying to set up statistical systems almost from scratch.

7. The variance of countries' priorities, during this period has increased significantly. As a result the valiant attempts of the Conference to draw up a program that addressed the priority needs of all countries was not always effective.

- *The European Union*

8. With the creation of the European Union, Eurostat meetings became the venue that mattered for much of Western Europe. But with the ever-increasing number of accession and pre-accession countries, Eurostat meetings have also become, gradually, the crucial venue for much of Central and Eastern Europe as well. Given the intrinsic importance of these meetings (where compulsory standards and work programs are discussed) and their frequency, the relative importance of other meetings of heads of statistical agencies necessarily diminished. This is a challenge for the Conference which it cannot ignore.

- *A strengthened OECD*

9. The OECD traditionally had a completely decentralized statistical system with little internal coordination. This resulted in significant problems, including several affecting statistical agencies. In response, and with the active lobbying of many heads of national statistical agencies from OECD member countries, the OECD established a Statistics Directorate headed by the Chief Statistician. As this function gains momentum, there is a movement to establish a forum consisting of heads of the statistical offices of OECD countries. In order to be effective in its goal of helping the statistical coordination function, both inside OECD and between OECD and national statistical offices, it is quite likely that there will be a need for regular meetings of heads of national statistical offices. These would necessarily compete with those of the CES, particularly in respect of those countries which are members (or candidates) of both the EU and the OECD and whose international statistical agenda is already heavily burdened.

(b) Some longer term risks

10. Parallel with these developments, the salience of another risk increased: that the emerging issues in the statistical systems of countries in the EU and in other non-EU countries might grow apart. Conceptual work often starts informally, expands slowly, then reaches the testing stage – all without much early exposure. By the time such work is discussed at international scientific meetings, it is often too late for those who did not participate from the beginning to make a creative impact. While the various city groups and the joint Eurostat/OECD/CES working groups achieved a great deal in addressing this problem in specific subject matter areas, these venues are not substitutes to a forum where heads of statistical agencies get together. Such a forum is needed to discuss emerging problems (before an idea is necessarily ready for presentation as a scientific paper), to elicit early thoughts about approaches to address these issues and, most important, to assess priorities. Such discussions among heads of agencies can then form the basis of subsequent formal or informal cooperation (in working groups, city groups, etc.).

11. If this function is to be helped by the Conference in a significant way, its modalities will need to be reformed – going beyond the reforms adopted in the early nineties, which are described below.

(c) The reforms of the last ten years

12. Over a period of years, starting in the late 1980s, a series of reforms of the work of the Conference was initiated.

- We had the fundamental principles paving the way for quality improvement for all countries across the region.
- We placed the focus on a new role for the Conference: to coordinate the often overlapping work programs of international agencies active within the ECE Region, particularly of the OECD, Eurostat, and the CES. The visible manifestation and coordination tool for the new role was the Integrated Presentation of the Work Programmes. At the time of its initiation, it was a major innovation: it provided a single summary of the activities of the relevant international and supranational agencies categorized by subject and with an orientation that was prospective as opposed to retrospective.
- In order to facilitate this new role, the heads of Eurostat, the OECD Statistics Directorate, IMF Statistics Directorate, the UNSO and, more recently the CIS Statistics Directorate, were invited to participate in the meetings of the Bureau as ex officio “observers” (in fact, full members). Bureau meetings were focused on an intensive review of drafts of the Integrated Presentation.
- We took measures to streamline the proceedings of the plenary sessions of the Conference.
- We also tried to find topics for the so-called “substantive discussions” that might be of interest to all members of the Conference.

13. Did we succeed in these endeavours? In some sense one may conclude that we succeeded too well in the main reorientation: coordinating the activities of the international and supranational agencies. Under the guidance of the consecutive bureaus the three principal international/supranational organizations developed a close working relationship and the very preparation of the Integrated Presentation became the vehicle for them to coordinate their programs (without much input from the plenary sessions of the Conference). While this is wonderful, it certainly eliminates one possible useful focus for discussions during the annual meetings of the Conference.

14. As far as the “substantive discussions” are concerned, it seems that the differences in statistical priorities could not always be bridged: the topics were often chosen with an attempt to interest all countries regardless of their priorities but the resulting discussions were seldom truly effective.

15. Finally, the Bureau did become a well functioning entity and the meetings of the Conference were effectively shortened to two and a half days from a full week.

(d) Strengths of the current institutional arrangement

16. Irrespective of its shortcomings, the current institutional arrangement has important strengths that must not be compromised:

- The preparation of the Integrated Presentation and the coordination effected by the Bureau is as important now as it was ten years ago. The fact that there is typically little need for discussing the presentation during the plenary sessions of the Conference does not distract from this fact. On the one hand, the Presentation serves as a ready reference for statistical offices. On the other hand the need to prepare it and the knowledge that the Bureau discusses it in depth results in a heightened awareness and sensitivity by the participating agencies to the activities of the others.
- The various working groups established by the Conference, often as joint activities with other international/supranational agencies, generally work productively and well.
- The plenary sessions take place in a friendly environment and provide opportunities for informal interaction among heads of agencies in the region.
- The plenary sessions provide an opportunity for a collegial exchange of views between delegates from the region regardless of their priorities. As such they contribute to a transfer of technology and methodology. Therefore it keeps strong collegiality whatever the priorities.

(e) A summary of the issues

17. To summarize:

- altered circumstances have resulted in a changed role for the Conference which its current modalities are only partially able to achieve;
- in terms of the role of knowledge and technology transfer, issues related to transition are not given as effective attention as possible because our agendas do not focus on this task – at least not with regularity;
- the coordination of activities of the three international/supranational agencies active in the ECE Region occurs largely within the Bureau, diminishing the need for agenda time during the plenary sessions of the Conference;
- the Conference must play an important role in ensuring that the statistical practices of EU members do not drift apart from those of other member countries of the ECE and OECD;
- the Conference must take account of the already crowded agendas of agency heads, particularly those in EU member countries, accession countries, and pre-accession countries who regularly participate in meetings organized by Eurostat;

- finally, the Conference continues to have very important strengths which it is worthwhile, indeed essential, to preserve.

### III. Suggested renewal

#### (a) A proposal

18. If one is ready to agree, at least in broad terms, with the analysis outlined above, then one would like to have an alternative modality that preserves the strengths of the current arrangement while it effectively addresses its weaknesses. In particular, we were looking for an arrangement that would have the following properties:

- it preserves the collegiality of the Conference and in particular the spirit of trust and mutual respect that characterises the United Nations spirit;
- it preserves the unity of the Conference and the collegiality of the discussion while catering to the diversity of needs and interests among its members, and promoting their dynamic participation;
- it preserves the role of the Conference, and particularly of the Bureau, as a “coordinator of coordinators”, i.e. it preserves the preparation of the Integrated Presentation and the work that lies behind it;
- it provides room within the agenda of the Conference for addressing, in an informal environment, the issues of current interest to heads of statistical agencies in all countries;
- it provides an annual opportunity to focus on leading edge or emerging developments in official statistics in order to help avoid a drifting apart of statistical systems due to lack of adequate exchange of information;
- it provides an annual opportunity to focus on specific transition issues;
- it provides an opportunity to focus on other specific issues of interest to all members such as relations/interaction with/between international organisations;
- it does not increase the number of meetings imposed on heads of statistical agencies – in fact, if possible, it reduces them.

An option having these characteristics can be derived from the analysis above and is outlined in the following paragraphs.

19. The CES currently lasts for two and a half days and it would clearly be very difficult to shorten it further and still carry out the formal business. The typical agenda of the Conference is currently structured in four fundamental parts:

- (i) Formal business, i.e., Bureau elections, information points, plans for future plenary sessions.
- (ii) Interaction of different bodies: reviewing the decisions of the parent bodies, the Statistical Commission and the ECE itself, and determining the implications on statistics in the region.

(iii) Discussion around the Integrated Presentation of the Work Programmes of the international and supranational statistical organisations active in the region (notably the ECE Statistical Division, the OECD, Eurostat, CIS-STAT, the IMF, the ECB, the ILO, the WB, the World Trade Organisation, the World Tourism Organisation, FAO, the EEA, the WHO, UNICRI, HEUNI) and approval of the ECE component. Recently this discussion has been structured in two main parts:

- (a) short overview of the issues to be brought to the attention of the Conference via a summary paper prepared by the ECE Secretariat and the Bureau on the basis of reports by international statistical organizations;
- (b) targeted discussion for certain programme elements identified by member countries and recommended by the Bureau.

(iv) Seminar/Substantive discussion on a chosen topic, lasting for one day or more (i.e., around 50% of the time of the Conference).

20. The first three parts of this agenda ((i), (ii), and (iii a)) are perfectly in line with our objectives, and it has been acknowledged that the Conference has improved its efficiency greatly over the past decade or so, helped by proactive chairmanship, an effective bureau, and enthusiastic secretariat support provided by the ECE Statistical Division. The coordination among the three major agencies (Eurostat, OECD, ECE) and other international agencies active in Europe occurs largely outside the plenary sessions of the Conference (through the preparation of the Integrated Presentation). Moreover, the efficiency of the Integrated Presentation for co-ordination, raising awareness, and as a managerial tool is being addressed for further improvement.

21. The parts of the agenda that pose problems are (iii b) (the targeted discussion on specific Programme Elements) and (iv) (the seminar). These parts are closely connected with our objective of promoting the exchange of knowledge and experience for the benefit of all members at World level. For these parts, the Conference in its current form is making a declining contribution. The principle of "one size fits all" that is being applied creates considerable frustration. On the one hand, transition issues are not given as effective attention as possible because the Conference does not adequately focus on this task. On the other hand, and for similar reasons, the Conference is no longer an effective forum for in-depth interaction and exploration of issues dealing with fast-track leading-edge emerging topics. It is these parts of the agenda that would be revamped under the following proposal. Moreover, issues such as relations/interaction with/between international organisations, might be addressed by the Conference. This proposal is not meant to make dramatic changes; it should be interpreted as the minimum change necessary in order to ensure attractiveness and the survival of the Conference.

22. The proposal would see the agenda constructed around two main modules (or three, according to needs). The first module would consist of parts (i), (ii) and (iii a) of the current agenda and would be covered in half a day. The second module would have two targeted sub-agendas, with a duration of approximately two days. One would cover topics of definitive specific interest related to transition issues; the other would cover fast-track leading-edge emerging issues. If necessary a third module may be introduced to deal with relations/interaction with/between international organisations. To encourage active and full participation, the secretariat of the Conference would obtain, with the help of the Bureau, a clear and representative indication from member countries and observers of the list of issues to be addressed under each sub-agenda. For each sub-agenda an organizing group would be set up under the co-ordination of the Bureau involving a small but representative number of interested parties.

23. The organisation of the discussions should be very much like the approach currently used for the seminar part of the agenda, with a main paper and appointed discussants. From the start of the planning, and for each subject, the focus and issues should be clearly stated (i.e., what the Conference is invited to

do, and what the discussion hopes to achieve). Before the Conference, an “exchange of views” should take place between the authors and discussants to help the preparation and conduct of the meeting.

24. Evaluation forms should be systematically completed by participants at the end of each plenary sessions to gauge satisfaction with each item of the Agenda and with room for suggestions for improvement.

25. The arrangement outlined above seems to address all the issues identified earlier. Indeed, it:

- preserves the spirit of the United Nations of openness, equality, thrust and mutual respect for all;
- maintains an inclusive and strong regional organization with a distinguished tradition of participation by all its members on an equal footing;
- reinvigorates the CES by providing a strengthened focus for the substantive discussions of the Conference, thereby ensuring that its sessions have a strong appeal for all member countries;
- strengthens the usefulness of the Conference on major priority issues by providing one substantive session specifically aimed at transition issues, a second one aimed at fast-track leading-edge emerging issues and if necessary a third one dealing with relations/interaction with/between international organisations;
- provides an informal but meaningful venue designed to ensure that the statistical practices of EU members do not drift apart from those of other member countries of the ECE and OECD;
- preserves the Conference as the “integrator of integrators”, and preserves the role of the Integrated Presentation;
- does not increase the number of conferences for heads of statistical agencies.

26. We believe that this proposal will serve to rejuvenate our 50 year old conference and set it on a productive path for the next 50.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is not the vehicle to enumerate the historically important contributions of the Conference. That task is undertaken by the part of the session organized by Mr. C. Malaguerra.