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**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

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**COMMENTS ON THE PAPER “NOTES ON RENEWING
THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS”**

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1. The paper presented by Ivan Fellegi and Yves Franchet deals with an issue that has been debated, at least informally, over the last three-four years and that poses a real problem: how to ensure that the Conference continues to play the important role that it has played over the last fifty years. This is one of those cases in which everybody agrees that there is a problem, but nobody is able, independently, to solve it. In fact, the main issue raised by Fellegi and Franchet is the loss of the sense of ownership of the Conference by participants, reflected in a declining attendance by a certain number of heads of national statistical offices (NSOs). Therefore, a new formula for the Conference is needed to allow country participants to feel more involved again in the Conference, otherwise the recent decline risks to accelerate in coming years.

2. I fully agree with the targets of this initiative listed by the two authors, as well as with the need for a *forum* where people coming from EU countries, non-EU OECD countries and other European countries can meet and discuss issues of common interest. Such a *forum* does not exist elsewhere. The UN Statistical Commission plays a fundamental role, but it is clear that the agenda has to cover a very wide range of issues and heads of NSOs normally arrive at the Commission with well designed positions, according to suggestions received by their experts. This approach prevents the possibility of interactive and deep discussions on issues of strategic interest to NSOs, in particular on emerging issues. On the other side, EU countries have several meetings during the year at the top level (the Statistical Program Committee), plus an annual Conference of Presidents and Director Generals (DGINS), now attended also by heads of NSOs of the so-called Candidate Countries. These meetings cover several topics (for opinion, for decision, etc.) and some of them discuss strategic issues (for example, the future of the European Statistical System), but they do not offer the opportunity to involve, in the latter, people coming from non-EU OECD countries and from other non-EU European countries.

3. As correctly stated in the paper, two needs emerged strongly during the last decade. First, the “revolution” which occurred in developed countries due to the introduction of new technologies in all parts of society, the globalisation, the launch of e-government initiatives, the political pressures towards the devolution of some public functions; all this is pushing NSOs to carefully rethink their strategies and roles. The innovation in methods, organisation and statistical methodologies is much faster today than in the past, even in statistics. In addition, the development of the European Statistical System is changing the relationships between EU NSOs and Eurostat. At the same time, due to the globalisation of the world economy, an increasing pressure from users to improve the comparability of statistics between Europe, North America and Japan is clearly emerging, as well as the need for internationally comparable statistics for selected “global” players (Russia, China, etc.).

4. Secondly, due to the technical and strategic co-operation between Eurostat, other international organisations and selected EU countries, on one side, and non-EU European countries on the other, new statistical systems have been developed in the latter. Modern statistical information systems have been established in some of these countries and advanced statistical methods are widely applied. The Candidate Countries made a remarkable effort to update (in some cases, rebuild) their statistical systems, sometimes “jumping” a generation of methods and infrastructures, adopting very innovative tools and methods. Even if budget restrictions or an insufficient attention to statistics by policy makers have limited in some cases the development of new systems, it is clear that the dialogue between European countries in statistics is much more developed today than in the past. At the same time, statistical techniques and infrastructures used in European countries are much more similar today than ever.

5. These two tendencies push in different directions: the first one, towards a closer co-operation among EU and non-EU OECD countries, the second towards a more continuous dialogue between EU and non-EU European countries. The proposal presented by Fellegi and Franchet starts from the recognition of these two tendencies, without establishing a priority between them, but suggesting an organisation of the Conference able to address both of them. The key issue for the success of the Conference is the definition of a high-profile agenda, or, in their proposal, of two (or three) sub-agendas: the first focused on topics more relevant for statistical systems “in transition”, the second focused on “fast-track leading-edge emerging issues”. The reference to the possibility to organise a special session to deal with “relations/interaction with/between international organisations” is also a very important one.

6. Even though this is a necessary condition, my impression is that an improved definition of the agenda is not a sufficient condition to ensure the success of the Conference. In my view, it is necessary to improve at least two other dimensions:

- The organisation of the sessions, with different schemes for different sub-agendas;
 - The way in which the Conference interacts with the “rest of the world”.
- About the first point, it seems to me that the Conference is the only opportunity to discuss, at the top level, issues concerning strategic issues for statistical systems “in transition”. In this case, I would prefer to talk about “statistical systems in transition” instead of “countries in transition”, because some of the problems that the latter can currently encounter are also common to some western European statistical systems. For example, the “devolution” to local authorities of some

functions previously ensured by central authorities is posing new challenges in several EU countries, as well as in non-EU countries.

7. The focus on issues related to statistical systems should not only permit to share national practices, but also try to identify some “best practices”. Even though the institutional factors can make the comparison of different situations difficult, this session should be based, as much as possible, on papers prepared jointly by different NSOs. My suggestion, in particular, is to organise this session with a few papers focussing on not more than two subjects, prepared by statistical offices with different experiences, perhaps with the involvement of one international organisation. The papers should try to identify possible solutions to the selected problems and two discussants for each paper (coming from different countries) would be asked to comment on the papers. In this way, for each subject at least four countries would be involved in the same issue and the discussion during the Conference could be really useful, because the debate would be focused not only on the presentation of a list of problems, but on a set of proposed solutions.

8. The session on “fast-track leading-edge emerging issues” should follow a completely different approach. It should be mainly a “brainstorming” session, with papers prepared by NSOs who have paid special attention to the issue under discussion. In addition, the papers should contain a clear list of questions, which other countries would be asked to answer during the session. The Chairperson of the session could also act as “discussant”, as well as one representative of the invited international organisations (UNECE, Eurostat, OECD, IMF, etc.), who should bring a wider view based on the experiences of other groups of countries. Clearly, to have a successful session, the topics should be chosen to permit a “real time” interaction among the attendants, which means that the agenda should be focused on interesting “political” themes or, if addressing statistical issues, should avoid a too highly technical level.

9. As already said, for “transition issues” the CES would be the unique *forum* of this level, while for the other set of issues debate opportunities already exist (i.e. the Eurostat SPC meetings, as well as the recently re-launched meeting of heads of OECD NSOs), but the risk of overlapping between these meetings and the CES seems to me quite limited. In fact, “fast-track leading-edge emerging issues” topics are so numerous that a “division of labour” among these *fora* would be not a problem. On the other hand, each of these meetings has a different constituency, attendance and possible follow-ups, and only at the CES would all countries and international Organisations participating in the UNECE area be represented.

10. An important point raised by Fellegi and Franchet is the possibility to organise, from time to time, a session directly related with the activities carried out by international organisations. In my view, there are several issues that can be discussed in such a session: for example, the way in which their political agendas are reflected in statistical activities and instruments to involve the international statistical community in supporting policy makers’ discussions; data and metadata collection and dissemination policies adopted by international organisations; the adoption of statistical quality frameworks within international organisations, etc. The session should be organised on papers co-produced by two or more international organisations, with two discussants from NSOs.

11. This initiative could be very helpful for all the organisations, but especially for those who do not have regular meetings with heads of NSOs about their statistical policy. In addition, this approach would help them in reinforcing their mutual links and the spirit of co-operation,

avoiding the risk of competition among them. Finally, the conclusions reached in these debates could help chief statisticians of international organisations in their continuous effort to stress the importance of statistical priorities within their environments.

12. The second point mentioned in the previous paragraph 6 is related to the perception of the importance of the CES by the “rest of the world”. On this issue, I would like to mention two proposals in order to improve the visibility and the profile of the CES vis-à-vis the policy-makers, the media and the civil society. First, I think that sometimes it would be important to invite to the CES opinion leaders or policy makers at international level, with a very high profile. These persons could be invited to play a role in one session, or to give a “special lecture”. Even though the Conference should continue to be based on discussions among chief statisticians, this kind of interaction could be helpful for the identification of emerging needs and to demonstrate the role that statisticians can play in managing an “information society”.

13. Secondly, I suggest that a brief press release be disseminated at the end of the Conference, describing the main conclusions reached during the discussion. This text could be prepared by the press office of the hosting organisation (UNECE for meetings held in Geneva, OECD for those held in Paris) and disseminated not only by the Secretariat of the Conference, but also by all interested participants through their normal media (web sites, newsletters, etc.). The text should present, in a widely accessible language, the main conclusions presented by the chairman of the Bureau during the final session of the Conference and the follow-up expected in the short- and in the long run.

14. In conclusion, I fully believe that the CES can have a brilliant future both in supporting the “globalisation” and the “internationalisation” of national statistical systems, and in stressing multilateral and bilateral co-operation in statistics. A common effort in identifying interesting agendas, improving the organisation of the various sessions, and increasing the visibility of the conclusions can significantly reinforce in all of us the sense of ownership of this important instrument and re-launch the participation in the CES of all chief statisticians of the UNECE region.