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Item 9 of the provisional agenda

**SELECTION OF TOPICS FOR SEMINARS TO TAKE PLACE DURING THE
2009 PLENARY SESSION**

Note by the secretariat

I. BACKGROUND

1. In May 2008, the UNECE secretariat conducted electronically a survey to consult with the member countries of the Conference and international organizations on the possible topics for discussion at the 2009 CES plenary session. The list of topics sent to countries and international organizations for consultation in May 2008 is attached in Annex 1. The list of CES seminars held so far is provided in Annex 2.
2. In 2002, the 50th Conference decided that two seminar sessions would be organized at the annual plenary sessions - one to deal with foundational issues of the statistical systems and the second one to deal with new emerging issues. Since then, the list of possible topics to be discussed at future plenary sessions has been regularly updated, based on the proposals from countries and recommendations by the Bureau.
3. Member countries and the international organizations were invited to select topics to be discussed, to recommend new topics and to indicate whether their office would be willing to organise a seminar/session or prepare a paper for a specific topic if selected for discussion in 2009.
4. The countries/organizations were also asked to comment on the need to establish a small group to update the Canberra Group Handbook and whether they

would be interested to participate in the work if such a group were to be set up. The result of this consultation is provided in paper ECE/CES/2008/33.

II. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY: PREFERENCES

5. The following thirty-six countries and six international organizations replied to the survey: Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United States, Uzbekistan, CIS, IMF, World Bank, OECD, ECB and Eurostat.

6. The topics that received most votes are presented in the next paragraphs, by decreasing number of preferences. The countries/organizations who offered to organize a seminar/session or to present a paper are listed under each topic.

Topic (1) Strategic issues in business statistics

7. This topic received the most preferences: 16 votes (15 from countries and 1 from IOs).

8. Contributions offered on this topic:

Seminar organizers: Canada and Eurostat.

Session organizer: Portugal (on the use of administrative data in business statistics).

Papers: Canada, Czech Republic, Portugal (on the use of administrative data in business statistics), and Switzerland.

9. Comments made:

- Canada could contribute to one of the following topics: (i) progress in integrating and unifying business statistics in Canada; (ii) approaches to developing statistics for multinational enterprises; (iii) prospects for expanded collection of longitudinal business statistics (Canada);

- This can be regarded as "a new emerging issue" topic (Finland).

Topic (8) Official statistics and other tasks of national statistical offices: conflicts of interest or synergies?

10. This topic was the second most frequently selected with 11 votes from countries.

11. Contributions offered on this topic:

Seminar organizer: Poland (possibly).

Session organizer: Austria.

Papers: Austria, Australia.

12. Comments made:

- Statistics Austria supports the topic as a fundamental issue. Would prefer a focus primarily on administrative registers rather than opinion polls. The emphasis is on registers additionally serving administrative purposes rather than on registers for administrative purposes (Austria);
- Topics 7 and 8 could be dealt with in complementary sessions in a single day long seminar. The second bullet in session 7 “indicators for policy advocacy” is related to the second and third bullets in session 8. Could discuss this as a possibility (USA).

Topic (9) Organization of data collection and data sharing

13. This topic received 10 votes (9 from countries and 1 from IOs).

14. Contributions offered on this topic:

Seminar organizer: Poland.

Papers: Canada (on multi-modal data collection), Ireland, Netherlands (on data sharing), and Slovakia.

15. Comments made:

- The topic *multi-modal data collection* is interesting, since Statistics Netherlands is increasingly mixing modes in its surveys. The need to use complementary data collection modes like web and telephone interviewing in order to cut costs of face-to-face interviewing may improve response rates. It is a challenge to reduce mode effects as much as possible. Would like to share thoughts on policies and best practices. Research could possibly be coordinated on subjects like mode effects, selection effects and multi-mode research designs. The other topics within this chapter are also interesting (Netherlands).

Topic (7) Professional autonomy and accountability of statistical offices

16. This topic received 9 votes (7 from countries and 2 from IOs)

17. Contributions offered on this topic:

Seminar/session organizer: Finland

Papers: Finland, Latvia.

18. Comments made:

- This topic is more fundamental. Statistics Finland is willing to contribute in one way or another if the topic is chosen (Finland).

Topic (3) Environment statistics

19. This topic received 8 votes (7 from countries and 1 from IOs). Australia, Ireland, Netherlands and Norway offered to contribute a paper.

20. Comments made:

- Statistics Netherlands could submit two invited papers: one on the recently developed monitor on sustainability and one on strategic prioritisation and the role of SEEA (System of economic environmental accounting) (Netherlands);
- An interesting issue to discuss is "Environmental statistics made available in integrated tools" to look at tools for environmental accounts, the analysis of existing environmental statistics and the producers of such statistics (Sweden).

Topic (11) The role of metadata in the management of official statistics.

21. This topic received votes from 7 countries. Canada, Lithuania and Spain offered to contribute a paper.

Topic (10) Spatial statistics / Role of a spatial dimension in official statistics

22. This topic received votes from 7 countries. Bulgaria offered to organise the seminar or a session. Papers were offered by Bulgaria, Norway, Portugal (on costs and benefits of geographical information systems for statistical offices), and Netherlands (one or two invited papers).

23. Comments made:

- There are challenging initiatives with an innovative character in the area of spatial statistics. Since the appearance of digital and interactive maps on the Internet, Statistics Netherlands has been working on cartographic dissemination and visualisation of regional statistics. Examples of applications are: Buurt in Beeld ('Neighbourhood in the picture') in 2001 and the Cartographic Entry into StatLine (2004). Statistics Netherlands launched in 2008 an application of providing statistical information in combination with Google Earth (Netherlands);
- Sweden is interested in issues relating to mapping and analysing of global population distributions on systems of discrete grids. The population explosion is a challenge to the global environment and welfare for future generations. Reliable data and methods to describe and analyze population distributions are an essential dimension for all policies programs, plans and projects for sustainable development. Statistics aggregated to administrative areas is not an ideal foundation for spatial analysis. Such a seminar could, in view of the environmental challenge, map the state of the art of creating reliable statistics on hierarchies of regular grids on all levels from global to local (Sweden);
- There is an interesting relationship between providing national and regional level statistics. Geospatial tools and techniques need to be thought about in relation to streamlining the operations of a NSO (e.g. enumeration, census map making) as well as for presentation of output. There are challenges in thinking about the relationships with technology vendors/tool providers and how far along the value chain should an NSO aim (New Zealand).

Topic (12) Statistical quality assurance

24. This topic received 6 votes (5 from countries and 1 from IOs). Canada, Lithuania, and ECB (from the perspective of the ECB Statistics Quality Framework, published April 2008) offered to contribute a paper.

25. Comments made:

- A very live issue for us right now (Canada).

Topic (4) Labour and social security statistics, labour migration

26. This topic received votes from 4 countries. Bulgaria offered to organise the seminar or a session. Austria and Bulgaria offered to contribute papers.

Topic (5) Health statistics

27. This topic received votes from 4 countries. Canada and Switzerland offered to contribute a paper.

Topic (6) Crime statistics and perceived security of citizens

28. This topic received votes from 4 countries. Canada (on victimisation surveys), New Zealand and Switzerland offered to contribute a paper.

29. Comments made:

- This encompasses dimensions of the official statistical system (other agencies than NSOs are often prime players) and use of administrative data, amongst measurement challenges (New Zealand).

Topic (2) Short-term economic indicators

30. This topic received votes from 4 countries. Slovakia and Spain offered to contribute a paper.

31. Comments made:

- Statistics Sweden is interested in short-term indicators, with a specific focus on services statistics, service production index, which has been published in Sweden for the first time, and service prices, on which Sweden has made particular progress (Sweden).

III. NEW TOPICS PROPOSED

32. Members of the Conference were also invited to propose new topics. These are listed below:

- Indicators and their assessment for preparation of health accounts (proposed by The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia);
 - The use of the new technologies for processing and disseminating population census materials, communication with users of the census data (proposed by Ukraine);
 - Confidentiality of the population census data, regulation of data confidentiality (proposed by Ukraine);
 - Guidelines for integrated economic statistics (proposed by ECB as a follow-up to the discussion of this issue at the UN Statistical Commission in February 2008);
 - Pensions in the context of the revised SNA (proposed by ECB).
33. If either of the suggestions made by ECB is received positively at the CES plenary session, the ECB could develop the ideas further.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

34. The 50th Conference delegated to the Bureau of the Conference the organization of the seminars, including the selection of topics. The Bureau will discuss the results of the survey at its meeting on 11 June. The proposals will be presented to the Conference on 12 June under agenda item 9.

ANNEX I

The following list of possible topics for the seminar at the 2008 CES plenary session was circulated to countries and international organizations for consultation in May 2008:

1. Strategic issues in business statistics

Strategic issues in business statistics was proposed as a topic for the CES seminar by the CES Task Force on business statistics that was set up in February 2008. The seminar would focus on two main topics:

- new domains and user needs in business statistics;
- reduction of respondent burden through the use of new production techniques, such as the integration of economic statistics: censuses, surveys and administrative data.

The co-chairs of the Task Force, Canada and Eurostat, have developed a more detailed proposal for a possible seminar which is attached in Annex. 1.

2. Short term economic indicators

There is a strong demand for a set of indicators showing recent developments, maybe even day to day indexes (Early Warning Systems). The seminar could deal with the following issues:

- *Short-term economic statistics (STS) and structural business statistics (SBS).* There are significant differences between the STS and SBS (e.g. due to the different treatment of the changes and reclassifications in the business register). Countries need to ensure that the divergence between the two sets of statistics can be sufficiently explained and that users are informed of these differences. Should the differences between STS and SBS exist and if so is there a need to attempt to reconcile the two sets of statistics?
- *Services statistics.* Many countries do not publish short-term economic statistics which provide users with sufficient and timely information about developments in the services sector. There is a need for countries to move towards producing a monthly Index of Services Production (ISP), other measures of services output and Services Production Price Index (SPPI) not just for selected services sectors but for the services industry as a whole. What are the barriers to production of monthly ISP and SPPI statistics and how to overcome them?
- *Harmonization of wages and salaries statistics.* There is no international manual dealing specifically with wages and salaries (W&S) and different countries use different measures. The poor state of wages and salaries statistics should be to some degree addressed by the upcoming International Recommendations for Industrial Statistics, which provides clear guidelines on how to collect, compile and disseminate the annual W&S statistics. Nevertheless there remains a need for an internationally accepted manual for W&S statistics;

- *Building capacity of National Statistical Offices to produce seasonally adjusted short-term economic statistics.* A number of UNECE Member Countries do not publish/produce any seasonally adjusted STS. Discussion should take place on how to better assist countries with moving towards producing seasonally adjusted statistics.

3. Environment statistics

This area has an increasing importance in the coming years (e.g., related to climate change). There are many international initiatives going on in environment statistics but no overview of these and no clear priorities (or rather too many priorities). Therefore, the seminar could provide an opportunity for countries to discuss the role of statistical offices in environment statistics and their response to the user expectations and priorities. The seminar could focus on the following themes:

- the organisation of environment statistics in countries and the role of official statisticians in this area. Lessons learnt from attempts at national level to integrate environment statistics into the system of official statistics. Given that many sources for environment statistics are non-statistical in their origin, what is the role and value added of bringing them under the umbrella of official statistics?
- How can the global system of official statistics, which is mainly based on national statistical systems, address cross-boundary and global issues of environment such as climate change in an effective way?
- Do we need standards of official statistics for certain areas of environment statistics in addition to standards for environmental accounts?
- The use of environmental accounting data in policy monitoring;
- User expectations and priorities.

4. Labour and social security statistics, labour migration

Measuring of employment and unemployment is a complex issue, politically also very relevant when related to the ageing of the population in Europe, how to pay the aging, etc. The following issues can be considered:

- importance of measuring quality of employment at the national and international level;
- cost and benefit analysis regarding development of internationally agreed set of indicators for measurement of quality of employment;
- adjusting sources for data collection - necessity to adapt existing household surveys (LFS & others) and/or develop new ones.

5. Health statistics

This topic has not yet been discussed but it is quite important for countries. The seminar could deal with the following issues:

- organization of health statistics in countries, relations with Ministries of health, ways to promote cooperation, interaction and overlaps between what the health professionals call the health information system and the national systems of official statistics;
- measuring health from a health status perspective (instead of focusing on diseases and mortality);
- issues related to data on life expectancy, fertility etc. in the context of aging societies: use of the data in relation to social security and pensions, their policy relevance, etc.

6. Crime statistics and perceived security of citizens

This topic has received relatively little attention but is an important concern of citizens in all countries. The seminar could discuss the following issues:

- Crime statistics has long been based exclusively on reported crime and related state activities to contrast illegal/criminal activities, such as convictions and other police or judicial measures. These data, though important, have two major weaknesses: (1) they capture only 'official' criminal activities while many other criminal behaviours/acts remain largely undetected (as for example domestic violence or corruption), and (2) they depend on national legislation, which can vary across time and is by definition different in each country. This has an impact on comparability of data;
- In the last decades, many National Statistical Offices have started to carry out the so-called 'Victimisation Surveys', which aim to collect data from the victims who experienced various types of crimes. If these surveys are proving to be successful to provide data on the prevalence of the most important criminal acts, they appear to be less used to monitor crime trends in the countries. What improvements would be necessary to make 'Victimisation surveys' more apt to provide data to monitor crime, for example at local level or for specific groups of victims?
- Crime trends are not always directly related to the security perceived by citizens, which is often influenced by certain types of crimes and/or by the type of information provided on such crimes. What challenges exist to collect data on security in the framework of official statistics?

7. Professional autonomy and accountability of statistical offices

- The relationship between statisticians and policy makers, relevance of statistics for policy, and issues of professional autonomy;
- Balancing principles of professional independence and impartiality with indicators developed for policy advocacy; maintaining independence in light of policy makers' interest in specifying areas to be covered by official statistics;
- The counterpart of professional autonomy is accountability to the taxpayer, the Parliament and the general public for making good use of public funds for official

statistics. What ways of being accountable are used by various countries, and what feedback is received? Do the methods for accountability differ between the NSOs and other producers of official statistics? The mechanisms for accountability are rarely discussed while they are increasingly demanded by governments and the wider community.

8. Official statistics and other tasks of national statistical offices: conflicts of interest or synergies?

- NSOs are sometimes asked to perform other functions than producing and disseminating official statistics. Examples are: including questions about opinion or even carry out opinion polls; engaging in forecasting or scenario-building; participating in research activities, managing administrative registers or assisting those agencies responsible for such registers in classifying and coding; hosting computing centers for the whole administration, updating electoral registers, etc. To what extent are such tasks creating conflicts of interest with the core task of official statistics, and to what extent do they contribute to synergies by creating and improving skills that are important for the core task?
- The role of perception indicators in official statistics;
- Addressing increasing demands for opinion surveys (such as, public policy evaluation surveys, consumer expectations, environmental opinions, measuring subjective well-being and happiness, exit polls of elections, etc.) – pros and cons, risks and benefits, effects on perceptions of the NSO's impartiality and integrity.

9. Organization of data collection and data sharing

- *Organizational models for statistical collection* - there is a big diversity of organizational models used (e.g., telephone interviewers operating from homes vs. from call centers, from regional offices vs. centralized call centers; separate collection operations for business and household surveys, etc.). It would be useful to understand the principles, experiences and issues that are driving the decisions to use a specific organizational model for data collection;
- *Multi-modal data collection* - statistical agencies face more and more difficulties in obtaining responses to surveys using traditional modes of data collection. This session would discuss the experience gained so far in offering multi-modal data collection. The objective of this session would be to review the approaches taken by a number of different organizations, including review and minimisation of the costs, gains in quality, strategy for increasing take-up rates, mode effects, etc. This session should **not** be technical in nature but rather an opportunity for sharing policies, thoughts, approaches, strategies, best practices, etc.;
- *Organisational models for data sharing across institutions* - data sharing (e.g. use of administrative data for statistical purposes, alignment of different standards such as supervisory, accounting and statistical ones, multi-purpose surveys and harmonised response forms) can be seen as important means to reduce administrative burden. The session could compare the situation in different countries, identify best

practices, analyse the preconditions for efficient data sharing and the necessary measures to foster it;

- *Data sharing among international organizations.* To increase efficiency and reduce the burden on NSOs there is a need to improve the coordination of data work between international organizations. In principle, the national statistical offices should only report the same statistics once, and it would then be up to the international organizations to establish appropriate means for data sharing.

10. Spatial statistics / Role of a spatial dimension in official statistics

There is growing use of geographical data in combination with data from surveys (e.g., remote sensing, GIS techniques, on the European level the GMES initiative, LUCAS survey, Corine landcover etc.). However, maintenance of spatial data requires considerable resources and expertise. This is a challenge for statistical offices while the resources are always limited. The seminar would offer an opportunity for the top management of statistical offices to discuss the related managerial problems. The following issues can be discussed:

- Costs and benefits of geographical information systems (GIS) for statistical offices. The geo-referenced data is increasingly linked with data from surveys, but also from administrative registers – do geographical references add value to official statistics? (examples: GMES initiative, LUCAS survey, Corine landcover, etc.);
- Geo-referencing is one method of data integration: its potential for official statistics about the economy, society and environment;
- Remote sensing as a source of information for various statistical areas – a focus on land use, land cover and environment statistics. Are these typical areas remote sensing's application, or can it be used also to complements social, demographic and economic statistics (e.g. agriculture statistics, energy statistics, etc.)?
- Cross-cutting aspects of geo-referenced data. Are the presently used spatial references relevant for internationally comparable statistics, or do we need a harmonized methodology for geo-referenced data?
- Given that many geo-referenced sources are not statistical in their origin, what is the role and value added of official statistics in this area?
- What are the ways for international collaboration in the field of GIS (sharing of systems and components, methodology, etc.)? In what respect can activities at international level assist national statistical systems?

11. The role of metadata in the management of official statistics.

The seminar could deal with the following issues:

- Role of metainformation systems in the overall management of the statistical offices;
- Core principles of metadata-driven management –quality considerations, requirements on availability, life-cycle and interoperability of metadata between different phases of the statistical cycle, training;
- Metadata management strategies – a global vision of the statistical office/statistical system is a pre-condition of success. This vision combines goals, actors, concepts and rules of the metadata organization;
- Good practices of governance of metainformation systems –responsibilities are shared across all parts of the statistical office/statistical system, including subject matter statisticians as well as processing methodologists. These responsibilities involve creation, harmonisation, maintenance of metadata, setting internal standards and coordination of all metadata related activities.

12. Statistical quality assurance

- As our statistical systems get larger and more complex, and as staff turnover continues, the challenge grows ever larger of anticipating where human errors might occur and acting in a pre-emptive manner to avoid them. Such human errors may be made by data suppliers within agencies that supply us with administrative data and we must be constantly on the lookout for them. They can be made by our own statistical methodologists or computer programmers and if the resulting effects are initially rather subtle, they can be easily missed. Human errors can be made in the course of data collection, transcription and processing and if the statistical units they apply to have a large enough weight within the sample, they may distort the resulting statistics in a significant way. Errors can also arise when seemingly tried-and-true methodologies become increasingly invalid with the passage of time, but that fact goes unrecognized. There are so many ways that human beings can make mistakes, despite the best of efforts and intentions. And perhaps ironically, the more dynamic a statistical agency may be, the more vulnerable it may become to the possibility of such errors simply as a result of the ongoing high rate of change. A statistical agency's good reputation is its most important asset and that asset may be seriously depreciated if human errors are permitted to corrupt significantly the information the agency releases. Accordingly, it is proposed that the CES organize a seminar to review statistical quality assurance best practices around the world so that each agency can learn from the others;
- Another issue is assuring data quality in administrative data sets or assuring quality in analytic interpretations of international surveys like the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey which is characterised by vastly differing and generally very low response rates across participating countries.

ANNEX II

CES SEMINARS HELD SINCE 2003

- 2003 Statistical confidentiality and microdata
Globalisation
- 2004 National statistical systems
Measuring process and volume of the service sector
- 2005 Improved data reporting
Sustainable development
- 2006 Population and housing censuses
Human resources and training
- 2007 Increasing the efficiency and productivity of statistical offices
Measuring capital – beyond the traditional measures
- 2008 Strategic issues linked to the measurement of international transactions
Measuring population movement and integration in a globalized world

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