**UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

UNECE Work Session on the Communication and Dissemination of Statistics
(13-15 May 2009, Warsaw, Poland)

FINAL REPORT OF THE MEETING

1.   The UNECE Work Session on Statistical Dissemination and Communication was held from 13 to 15 May 2009 in Warsaw, Poland. It was attended by participants from: Australia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States of America. The Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) were also represented. An expert from the University of Florence participated at the invitation of the Secretariat.

2.   Mr Josef Olenski, President of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, opened the meeting by welcoming participants and highlighting key issues relating to the communication of statistics. He stressed the importance of quality in ensuring data are both usable and used.

3.   The delegates adopted the following agenda of the work session:
   (i)   Managing communication and credibility
   (ii)   To charge or not to charge: fundraising, access licenses and costing models
   (iii)   Improving internal communication: working better together
   (iv)   Working with the media
   (v)   Education and outreach strategies for communicating with hard-to-reach respondents

4.   Mr. Leon Östergaard (Denmark) chaired the meeting. The following participants acted as session organizers: Mr. Leon Östergaard (Denmark) for topic (i), Mr. Petteri Baer (UNECE) for topic (ii), Ms. Frances Comerford (Ireland) and Mr. Michael Levi (United States) for topic (iii), Mr. David Marder (United Kingdom) and Mr. Kenneth C. Meyer (United States) for topic (iv), and Ms. Colleen Flannery (United States) for topic (v).

Topic (i) - Managing communication and credibility

5.   This topic focused on the management of communication functions within a statistical organization. Discussion included establishing strategic plans, common communication challenges and solutions, policies for dealing with errors in data and pre-release/embargo access. It attracted the greatest number of papers, indicating that the way dissemination and communication is managed in a statistical organization is important. There is a clear connection between how things are organized and what can be achieved.

6.   The role of statistical organizations is to both inform and discover the information needs of society. Communication is a strategic tool to help achieve these goals. Discussion suggested that it is important to focus strategic plans on few priorities (e.g. less than four) in order for them to be realistic. It is important to ensure the entire organization is involved in developing strategic plans in order to achieve more than just an operational plan for communicating. Strategies include: bringing

in new personalities and professions to drive the change process, speaking with all management groups and incorporating feedback as the consultation process goes on.

7.   Issues associated with effectively managing organizational websites were discussed. Website governance is a challenge for many organizations. Website content and appearance should be consistent, which may be achieved through the implementation of standards. Organizational structure should not drive the organization of the website. The use of Web personas was also discussed. Personas are a tool used to illustrate the main website user groups, their information needs and behaviours, as determined by analysis of website usage and focus groups. They are used by development teams during the early planning stages of developing a statistical product to clarify the target audience and ensure their needs are considered.

8.   Participants discussed pre-release/embargo policies and explored the differences between participating organizations. Many organizations have an equal access policy, meaning that everyone gets access to the data at the same time. Others allow journalists or politicians access to data before they are officially released. This may take place in a controlled "lock-up" environment, within the statistical office, or through other means, such as a password protected website. The European Code of Practice and the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics provide guidance on independence, equitable access to data and other strategic issues.

9.   Approaches to managing erroneous information and maintaining credibility were discussed. Many organizations have clear policies in place to classify and react to errors in data (i.e. an unplanned occurrence rather than a revision). Although it is impossible to anticipate every issue and potential media reaction, it was agreed that such policies are vital to the effective functioning of the organization. Timeliness in notifying stakeholders of errors and publishing corrections can be crucial. Some organizations provide notice of a change before publishing it, whereas others make it a priority to release corrections immediately and consider that a key factor in retaining the confidence of stakeholders.

10.   The University of Florence presented a model they have developed to assess the quality of the communication of statistics. It provides a matrix of dimensions that, used together, give an overall measure of the effectiveness of a presentation. Ensuing discussion highlighted that quality content is the fundamental component of any statistical message, but the way in which it is presented and communicated plays a crucial role in whether information reaches a target audience. Statisticians have a tendency to make many clarifications and caveats when they communicate statistics. Education and guidance is needed to ensure they balance this against the need to communicate in a way that will reach the user. Employing communication professionals and journalists within statistical organizations can assist.

11.   Other points made during discussion include:

- There are some methods to measure the effectiveness of communication, such as tracking web usage and press citations. As statistical organizations are in the business of making statistics, communications areas should quantify their activities and success measures as far as possible.
- Statistical organizations have to manage a perception of respondent burden even though in reality, there are other government agencies that place more burden on the public with their reporting requirements.
- Crises have an impact on statistics by increasing the need for information to be provided in a timely manner. They also provide opportunities to reconsider the statistical program and reprioritize current collections. It was argued that a crisis can be the worst time to introduce

changes in method and presentation as it may call into question the reliability of the data at a time when consistency is paramount.

- Many of the presentations in this session were related to implementing new organizational structures, policies and business processes. This often necessitates cultural change and there are a range of challenges associated with that, such as managing resistance to change and the importance of stakeholder management throughout change processes.

Topic (ii) - To charge or not to charge: fundraising, access licenses and costing models

12.   The approach to providing statistical information free of charge or at a cost was discussed during the work session. Reports from participating organizations revealed that many offer a combination of chargeable and free-of-charge information. Usually, the statistical material which is directly retrievable on the Web is non-chargeable, whereas print publications, customised tabulations and services, microdata and sensitive variables are usually chargeable services. Charges for customized services allow organizations to control the number of requests and manage the subsequent impact on resources. Some organizations avoid offering tailored services due to a lack of resources, but may use or be exploring existing technologies for establishing self-help systems so users can extract their own customized tabulations or microdata files.

13.   A survey of the European Statistical System (ESS) has revealed a high degree of convergence in dissemination practices across national statistical organizations. Eurostat are currently working on drafting a 'Dissemination Policy Charter', which includes a proposal for seven principles relating to access to statistics and microdata, privacy, release, use and transmission:

    (i)   Equal and free access to statistics
    (ii)   Equal and free access to explanations of statistics
    (iii) Respect for privacy
    (iv)   Announced and simultaneous release
    (v)   Free use of statistics
    (vi)   Free transmission or commercialization of statistics
    (vii) Free access to microdata for research

These draft principles were presented as a starting point for discussion and participants were invited to provide feedback to Eurostat. These principles will provide a useful guide, but for legislative and other reasons, it may not be possible for each country to comprehensively apply them.

14.   The experience of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in implementing the Creative Commons open licensing standard was discussed at the meeting. By applying the Creative Commons standard to online content, the use of freely available statistical information can be consistently attributed and, where necessary, the possibility for further derivations and sharing can be clearly specified. In recent years, there have been pleas from the user community for consistency in practices for applying terms and conditions to statistical information. Adoption of Creative Commons by statistical organizations could provide clarity into often complicated copyright issues and provide advantages for both the statistical organizations and the users of statistical information.

15.   Aspects of the importance of contact networks, customer databases and management of user relations were also highlighted in the discussion. Good and direct relations with different user groups are especially important for product and service development.

Topic (iii) - Improving internal communication: working better together

16.   Internal communication is a key element in the success or failure of an organization. Contrary to the norms in the 1980s and 1990s, internal communication no longer stems only from a human resources perspective. Good internal communication is essential when an organization wants to implement change, motivate, ensure transparency, inform, promote engagement, set standards, provide access to central information and much more. The way that internal communication encompasses all work-related communications within an organization can also have an important impact on the way that the organization communicates with the external world.

17.   Problems with internal communication include the challenges in overcoming organizational, geographical, social and physical boundaries; ineffectiveness of email as a persistent and transparent record of communication; and poor recordkeeping practices. Other drivers for change include the desire of staff to participate in decision-making; a need to do more with less; and the recognition of the positive impact that good internal communication can have on staff motivation and the efficiency of work processes.

18.   Some organizations are considering the adoption of blogs, wikis and social networks to address some of these issues and to facilitate knowledge sharing and more interaction between employees. The potential for such tools to have a negative impact on productivity was mentioned. Widespread sharing of information, through the use of blogs for example, may contribute to external leaks. However, when organizations experience a high degree of turnover, the importance of a good intranet and other internal communication systems/processes are even more important.

19.   Tools are only one aspect to be considered when developing strategies to improve internal communication. A significant issue is whether or not the organizational culture encourages information sharing and open communication. Once an organization recognises the value in internal communication, they will find the appropriate tools and processes to make it happen.

20.   Other issues raised during the discussion were:
- Two-way communication mechanisms, such as performance management or personal development interviews, reflection workshops, seminars and informal discussions, can play an important role in improving internal communication**.**
- It was noted that several statistical organizations have acquired business intelligence systems to gather and communicate information about what is happening in the global statistical community. It was proposed that organizations pool these resources and create a global information system that can be shared.
- The information age has created challenges for managing information overload, archiving and version control of documents.
- Eurostat's use of MediaWiki (the software platform upon which Wikipedia is built) for developing online publications was considered a good idea, as it is familiar to users and they are likely to be able to quickly determine how to navigate and use the site.

21.   This topic was clearly of interest to the group with much discussion and issues to be covered. It was suggested this topic be continued at the next work session.

Topic (iv) - Working with the Media

22.   There was a discussion on the impact that the recent financial crisis has had on communication professionals in statistical organizations. Participants noted impacts such as:

- Significant increase in demand for economic statistics
- Increase in demand from the media for more interviews with staff
- Cuts in budgets that have resulted in reducing survey frequency or sample size
- Pressure on researchers to provide more frequent analysis and commentary on the economic situation
- Greater scrutiny of statistical methodology and data, as well as pressure groups questioning the accuracy of the statistics

23.   Solutions and strategies to react during this time include:

- Bringing subject matter experts together to discuss the organization's approach to the crisis and to review the quality and usefulness of products
- Considering additional surveys to address emerging information needs
- Providing more analysis of data (e.g. monthly labour force survey results)
- Putting an emphasis on quality, in order to respond to concerns about accuracy
- Putting an emphasis on neutrality in communications
- Canada is hosting an international conference in June 2009 on how statistical organizations can react to the financial crisis
- Considering the creating of a 'financial crisis portal' on the website – this idea was rejected due to the potential short timeframe of the issue
- Improving the visibility of economic indicators on the website

24.   The work of Statistics Denmark in monitoring press citations as a measure of the effectiveness of statistical press releases prompted a discussion about how other agencies approach this task. The in-house system that has been developed in Denmark is an innovative approach to managing and communicating this valuable information. It is used to prioritize the publication of press releases, convince subject areas to invest in developing effective communication measures and provide feedback to recognize the efforts being made in communicating with the media.

25.   The meeting considered proactive strategies for building strong relationships with mainstream media. The United Kingdom shared their experience with reaching out to media that they consider will have the largest reach and biggest impact. These media tend to be of higher quality than other sources, as they have the potential to communicate statistical information to a large number of people. The benefits of interacting with other media, such as radio, television and local newspapers, were also recognised.

26.   It is important to put out news releases that are accurate and have a clear message. Dealing with the media effectively requires a patient, understanding approach, offering education and training in statistical methodology and presentation of information and, finally, building trust between both parties.

Topic (v) - Education and outreach strategies for communicating with hard-to-reach respondents

27.   Statistical organizations are faced with the challenge of reaching many target audiences for a variety of purposes, such as conducting population or business censuses and surveys of all kinds. Each country acknowledges that there are segments of their diverse population with whom it is difficult to communicate, much less secure participation. All acknowledge the trend to declining participation in surveys and censuses.

28.   This session explored ways of communicating with populations that are hard to reach, by virtue of language, literacy, marginalization, location, access to technology and/or distrust of government agencies. The presentations focused on outreach in relation to agriculture, business and population and housing censuses. They included examples of methods for analyzing perceptions and respondent needs (e.g. focus groups and interviews) and campaigns that highlight both legal requirements and the value for respondents. In many cases, research revealed that having respected voices within the community tell of the need for and benefits of the census underway was more effective than having the government do so.

29.   Reports from organizations highlighted some common challenges and concerns, such as lack of resources; multiple, persistent language barriers; and establishing trust and credibility. Another challenge for organizations conducting a decennial census - or the first census after a long break - is that the infrequency of the census creates problems with retaining the necessary institutional knowledge and expertise. Starting the planning and implementation of outreach campaigns early is important. Organizations have found it beneficial to analyze the lessons learned from conduct of a census or survey and use this as an input to planning the next round.

30.   Strategies to deal with lack of resources may include making a business case to government for increased funding and clearly demonstrating the implications of funding cuts on the quality of statistical information. One outreach strategy to overcome multiple language barriers, used during census campaigns, is to contact children through school education programs. This is an effective method for both awareness raising and encouraging children to assist with translation and completion of census forums that are in a different language to that spoken at home.

31.   The issue of how to communicate legislative requirements, such as the mandatory completion of census and survey forms, false responses or compulsory/non-compulsory questions was discussed. Respondent and target group analysis revealed that the fact that responses are required by law should be clearly communicated. The inclusion of questions on ethno-cultural characteristics varies from country to country.

Future topics and products

32.   Suggestions for future topics were given during the small-group and plenary discussions:
   (i)   Creative Commons: risks and opportunities, alternatives to Creative Commons
   (ii)   Session on social media, new media, Web 2.0: business cases, best practices and lessons learned
   (iii)   Personas or other ways to segment the users
   (iv)   Content management systems
   (v)   Feedback system for websites
   (vi)   Managing communication in a crisis: how to correct errors and communicate on errors and misuse
   (vii)   Developing services and relationships with businesses and corporations
   (viii) Organizational culture, tools for and strategic approach to internal communication
   (ix)   Strategic communications plans
   (x)   Internal reviews
   (xi)   Best practices exchange by identifying and inviting papers, e.g. website structure, short-term economic indicators, statistical services pricing methods
   (xii)   Revisit presentations from past years to show what happened
   (xiii) Case studies to seek out lessons learned, e.g. website approach of Sweden

33.   There were also suggestions for future products of the group:
   (i)   Prepare a guide (recommendations) on standard structures for a statistical website to ease communication between statistical organizations
   (ii)   Update the *Communicating with the media* guide (2004) to reflect the current media landscape and bring it into the *Making Data Meaningful* series/format
   (iii)   Share crisis plans
   (iv)   Guidelines and check lists for:
         a.   crisis communication
         b.   internal communication
   (v)   Create a website of best practices
   (vi)   Create a forum/social network where discussions can be continued between work sessions

34.   Other comments made on the activities of the group:
   (i)   Participants appreciated the opportunity to have an open and frank exchange of views
   (ii)   More information on media corners on websites would be useful
   (iii)   It is useful if presentations provide practical applications
   (iv)   Materials, such as the *Making Data Meaningful* series, should be translated into Russian
   (v)   There are a number of existing resources about access to microdata, experiences in the dissemination and communication of census results, etc.
   (vi)   Organizational reports are very useful and should be continued: they can be used to identify future topics