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STATISTICAL COMMISSION and ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Forty-fourth plenary session
(Paris, 11 - 13 June 1996)

REPORT OF THE WORK SESSION ON STATISTICAL OUTPUT FOR
DISSEMINATION TO INFORMATION MEDIA

Note by the secretariat

1. The Work Session on Statistical Output for Dissemination to Information Media was held in Geneva from 18 to 20 March 1996. It was attended by: Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, United Kingdom and the United States. The Commission of the European Communities was represented by Eurostat. The OECD, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States were also represented.
2. The provisional agenda (Working Paper No. 1) was adopted.
3. Mr. Wayne Smith (Canada) was elected to chair the meeting.
4. The following substantive topics were discussed at the Work Session:
 - a. Objectives, principles and management issues in data dissemination to information media;
 - b. Techniques and technologies for improved information flow;

^{1/} Due to limited capacity in the UNOG translation services, this document could not be translated.

- c. Relations with media outside dissemination;
- d. Coordination of policies towards supranational news organizations.

5. The topics were discussed on the basis of 13 papers prepared by Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Norway, the Slovak Republic, United Kingdom, and the United States. Additional written material submitted by Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Israel, Poland, IMF and Eurostat served as a supplementary basis for discussion.

6. The participants welcomed the organizing of this second meeting on dissemination to the information media and appreciated the opportunity to exchange experiences. The significant progress which has taken place in the field of data dissemination in the two years since the last meeting made it extremely useful to discuss how statistical offices could integrate all these new developments and use them for disseminating statistical information to the public. The very frank discussion which took place at the meeting largely confirmed the growing importance statistical offices attach to communicating efficiently with the media and improving the media skills of their staff.

Future work

7. The participants were unanimous in recommending that the Conference continue to provide a forum for discussing Statistical Output for Dissemination to Information Media. Moreover, in view of the extremely rapid technological progress which is taking place and the speed with which statistical offices are availing themselves of the Internet services, the meeting felt that it would be necessary to use the current momentum and organize another meeting in the next year and a half. Indeed, four countries expressed their willingness to organize and host a meeting within this time-span.

8. The Work Session therefore recommended that another meeting be planned in the framework of the Conference of European Statisticians within the next 12 to 18 months. The participants identified a number of discussion topics for future meetings and recommended that the following text be included in the Conference's programme of work:

Activities and means:

Activities of ECE: (CES Priority B)

Work session in 1997/98 to consider topics chosen from the list below:

- (i) Further development of Internet:
 - Guidelines on selecting content for Internet
 - Pricing of Internet based services
 - Measurement and evaluation of Internet use / Use of the Internet by the media
 - Use of Internet for internal communication;
- (ii) Techniques and approaches in training of statisticians in media relations;

- (iii) Legalities, principles, implications and application of copyright by statistical agencies in dissemination of statistical output to the media;
 - (iv) Pricing principles in dissemination of statistical outputs to the media: When, what, who and how to charge for disseminated output?
 - (v) Methods, techniques and tools used within statistical offices to support preparation of data for dissemination;
 - (vi) Policies of analysis of statistical data for dissemination to the media: What can be written and what can be said;
 - (vii) How to establish fixed release dates for major indicators and how to meet them;
 - (viii) Experiences in evaluating the quality of communication with the media.
9. The main conclusions reached by the meeting are presented in summary form in the Annex to this note.
10. The participants adopted the report of the meeting at its closing session.

ANNEX

Summary of the main conclusions reached at the Work Session on Statistical Output for Dissemination to Information Media (Geneva, 18-20 March 1996)

I. DATA DISSEMINATION TO INFORMATION MEDIA: OBJECTIVES, PRINCIPLES AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

1. The work session appreciated the summary overview provided in the Working Papers presented during the first session. It was noted that most statistical offices had in the last few years made substantial changes to their policies of data dissemination. Since the last meeting in 1994, many more offices were using electronic means for disseminating data and information about new releases. A development in on-line databases which could be accessed by outside users was also noticeable.

2. It was clear that statistical offices had become increasingly aware of the importance of good media contacts and some had established press offices or hired staff to improve the communication with the media. Most offices used press releases and press conferences to inform about new statistical releases. A few statistical offices were able to fix their schedule of press releases 12 months in advance, while it was not possible for others to give a precise date due to variations in the time of submission of data from different parts of the country. One solution to this problem was to use a two-stage release with provisional and final data.

3. The participants noted with interest the differences among the countries as to the time of day considered to be the most appropriate for the release of market-sensitive economic data. Some offices considered the early morning as the best time for the release of such data, while others preferred the afternoon, after the closing of banks and stock-markets.

4. A common concern mentioned by many countries was the need to ensure the simultaneous release of information to news agencies and other media. It was generally agreed that the advance publication of dates for press releases was essential but different distribution channels and techniques could be used according to the local communication environment. Direct broadcasting and E-mail are beginning to be used by a number of offices and are increasingly seen as being the most viable solutions in the future.

5. The Work Session was generally of the opinion that the basic objectives of data dissemination were i) to inform the public and to assist policy makers in their decision making; ii) to enhance the public awareness of the products and services of the national statistical offices and, iii) when possible, to recover some of the cost of data production and create revenue for the organization.

6. The Canadian participant informed the meeting about the substantial efforts his office had undertaken to improve its news releases and to make them more newsworthy and interesting for the media to report on. Following consultation with journalists to determine how the news releases could better serve them, more analysis, trends and context to other data were provided and the texts were improved by getting rid of technical terms and by including user-friendly charts. A senior editorial board was set up for the purpose of

reviewing the daily news release, and guidelines were established for managers and analysts who produce them.

7. This process required a major change in corporate culture and the full backing of the top management to be successful. A service for guiding subject matter specialists in writing the releases was also established and a training course provided for all concerned staff. Several positive spin-off effects resulted from the exercise, notably an expansion of media coverage and an improvement of the news releases with information conveyed in a way that underscore its relevance and importance. The exercise also resulted in an improvement in the data quality and a better understanding and relationship with journalists and the media in general.

8. The Bulgarian and Finish participants reported on some new data dissemination projects which currently were being considered in their offices. These included some innovative activities such as weekly radio programmes where a statistical picture on different aspects of the nation is given; a release of selected statistics in a monthly annex to the most popular local newspaper; TV flashes or fill-ins between commercials giving statistics for the day; and cooperation with a newspaper in reporting structural changes in society.

9. The discussion also touched upon the extent to which analysis should be provided by statistical offices. Most participants were of the opinion that official statistics should be independent of the political process and feared that too much data interpretation would damage their image of neutral data provider. It was agreed, however, that a statistical office can provide the interpretation of data to describe a phenomenon but should not endeavour to go into discussion of policy remedies. Forecasting was mentioned as the most difficult, and apart from population projections (accompanied by their different assumptions and scenarios) are not usually undertaken by statistical offices.

10. Another issue which was raised in the discussion was the marketing and pricing policy of statistical products. Some national statistical offices have as part of their dissemination objective the creation of revenue, and are thus under pressure to charge for access to their data. At the same time, most offices find it difficult to establish a borderline between what type of statistical products and services should be charged for and which users should be made to pay. Journalists, for example, are generally accustomed to receiving information free of charge and it would be difficult to change that. Moreover, the media is a means to reach the public and it can hence be argued that they should be given the information without having to pay for it.

11. The representative from the IMF informed the meeting about a new statistical project they were undertaking on the preparation of standards for dissemination of economic and financial data to guide IMF's member countries. One of the main aims of this project is to establish more transparency of the information used for public policy. In recognition of the fact that all its member countries are not at the same level of financial development, a two-tier standard for country data will be used. The more demanding standard, which is supposed to be operational by April 1996, outlines four dimensions for the data which subscribing countries must fulfil: coverage, periodicity and timeliness; access by the public; integrity of the data; and quality of the data disseminated.

12. The cornerstone for the implementation of the IMF project is to be an Electronic Bulletin Board (EBB) which would contain all the necessary meta-data on the financial and economic data disseminated by the countries. The EBB, which would be maintained on the Internet, would also be a tool for monitoring the observance of a country's data standards. Eventually, hyperlinks to another Internet site housing the data themselves could be established. Some concern, however, was raised by one participant about the use of two standards for members, which was contrary to the integration process practised in the UN and the European Union. Responding to another question, the IMF representative told the meeting that the project would not duplicate harmonization work done elsewhere by other international organizations, since transparency rather than harmonization is the goal of their project. The IMF will also be preparing a manual on good dissemination practices, for use by its member countries.

II. TECHNIQUES AND TECHNOLOGIES FOR IMPROVED INFORMATION FLOW

13. In many countries the release of data to news agencies is treated preferentially and special advance briefings are held for them. The meeting was informed about the particular "lock-up" system used in United Kingdom's Central Statistical Office (CSO). During these briefings all communications with the outside world are cut off until 9:30 a.m. exactly, when everyone can begin to transmit the data to their offices. Every reporter attending these briefings has to agree to comply with the very strict lock-up rules or risks being banned from future briefings. This procedure which has been developed for releasing and publicizing macro-economic data has worked for many years to the satisfaction of both news agencies and the CSO. More recently the system has had to be modified somewhat to accommodate live television and will probably have to undergo further modifications when the CSO will be merged with the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys. The lock-up procedure is not always used for social data. In the United Kingdom social data were not attracting as much media coverage. To encourage more interest, a press conference and a 36 hour embargo was used with much success for the Social Trends publication.

14. Not all countries believe it is necessary to issue a large number of press releases each year. In Norway, the statistical office has halved its number of annual press releases and are using several other means to inform the media about their products. A weekly magazine, written in a very journalistic style, is produced by the information department and distributed free of charge to the media. Statistics Norway is also putting more and more statistics and publications on the Internet which for the moment is free-of-charge. This may eventually cause some loss of revenues due to reduced sales of standard statistical publications, but they believe that the trend in the future is towards the sale of specialized services rather than data.

15. On the topic of press releases, the representative from Eurostat reported that they too had found that too many could be counter-productive. Particularly, because of Eurostat's special situation where they compete with a lot of national statistical offices, it is essential that they give "the right product to the right people at the right time". By applying journalistic judgement, their press service, therefore, carefully selects material likely to constitute a good story and offers this to the media

written up in a user-friendly way. In their experience, the less the press has to change to use the story, the less the risk of their making a mistake.

16. The meeting went on to discuss the importance of having someone in charge of the press/information office with sufficient journalistic and media relation skills and experience. Several participants reported on the experiences their offices had had with training courses for their staff in journalistic writing and interview techniques. It was generally agreed that these courses had been extremely valuable and had helped subject-matter staff improve their media skills. Eurostat had already held two such training courses which were open to non-member countries. As part of the techniques for improving media relations, the names of the subject-matter statistician responsible for the data series are now included in the press releases of many offices. Similarly, statistical officers are now used to presenting the data findings to the media and are no longer faceless bureaucrats.

17. A couple of offices had organized training courses for journalists to help them understand and interpret statistics. For example, Statistics Finland is preparing a sales publication on how to correctly read and interpret statistics. Some countries have observed an evolution away from formal press conferences towards more informal gatherings with the journalists. It was noted that with the extreme time-pressure journalists operate under, they have less and less time to prepare a story. It was therefore in the interest of the statistical offices to provide the information in a way that would suit the needs of the news media.

18. A clearly visible trend among the national statistical offices is to move towards putting their statistics on the Internet. There are, however, a number of issues involved in this development. What and how much information should be placed on the internet? Should the information be made available free of charge or should the users have to pay for the data? What information should be free and what should be chargeable? If the users should pay, then at what price and how to keep track of the use of the data? What precautions need to be taken to ensure the confidentiality and security of the data? These questions all deserve some in-depth consideration at a future meeting.

19. The attitude to the use of Internet varies from country to country. Some national statistical offices plan to make their data available on the internet entirely free of charge, others plan to charge but are considering a combination i.e. some data sets will be free of charge while other data sets will have a price attached to them. In countries where revenue generation is also a mandate of the national statistical office, the internet raises the very important issue of how to strike a balance between revenue generation and the public's right to information as a public good as well as the need to promote data dissemination. In this regard, it was felt that national statistical offices clearly need guidance from the Governments. On the other hand, with the very rapid development and expansion of the internet, some countries were of the view that it was not advisable to take decisions now on the pricing policy of data on the internet, particularly when most of the information currently available on it is entirely free-of-charge.

20. The Work Session further noted that there are benefits to be gained from providing data on the Internet other than in money terms. Data dissemination may be expanded at a very marginal cost; the public could have access to the data quickly and freely; more use of the data meant more feedback on the data

quality; and statistical staff could spend less time responding to requests for data.

21. The representative for the United States' National Centre for Health Statistics (NCHS) informed the work session about the elaborate dissemination strategy and media relations program of her organization. NCHS has established a Public Affairs Office and designated two staff members to develop and handle their media programme, which includes response to media needs, media outreach and training of staff for working with the media. Various dissemination techniques including news releases, fact sheets, videos and TV and radio interviews as well as direct satellite links and Internet presence are among the communication channels used.

22. In releasing information about their data, NCHS has to maintain strict objectivity and their reports about major health findings can only contain data-driven conclusions without policy recommendations. Occasionally, major news releases include a policy statement from the responsible authority. The Public Affairs office determines the findings which are appropriate for dissemination through the press, specialized journals or the broadcast media and the released information is jointly prepared with the researchers.

23. The work session further noted that, in interacting with the media and the public, it was necessary to explain the statistical technique which was needed for the correct understanding and interpretation of the information in the news release. If this was not possible then a simpler method of data presentation should be used.

III. RELATIONS WITH MEDIA OUTSIDE DISSEMINATION

24. The potential of the media to support data collection programs of statistical offices is generally appreciated and viewed as very significant. National offices are using a variety of methods to involve the media and get additional support and coverage before the major statistical surveys and censuses are carried out. Among the promotional activities mentioned were major newspaper, radio and television announcements and public exhibitions.

25. The meeting also discussed what processes are available in statistical offices when a problem with the media arises. The approaches used in responding to media controversies and erroneous and unfair criticisms differed from country to country. It was generally agreed that whatever the response, whether in written form or through personal contact, it must be focused on facts and always given with professional integrity and authority. An ongoing debate between the statistical office and the press over an alleged controversy should be avoided since it is likely to fuel the debate rather than end it.

IV. COORDINATION OF POLICIES TOWARDS SUPRANATIONAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

26. Representatives from different statistical offices informed the meeting about their relationship with the supra-national news agencies and how they usually dealt with them. In smaller countries no preferential treatment was accorded to these agencies and the focus was on the national news coverage. In countries with important financial centres the world-wide coverage offered

by the international news agencies was appreciated and special briefings and services were organized for them.

27. The fact that most of the international news agencies also offer commercial services to financial enterprises is a difficult problem to sort out for statistical offices who make their data freely available. No office had established rules yet (but some are considering to do so) about what these agencies can do with the data they are provided with and it would not be easy to separate the media and financial functions of the news agencies. Concerning ownership and copyright, most offices currently only demand recognition of source.

V. DEMONSTRATION OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

30. Participants from Finland, Germany and Canada demonstrated their national statistical offices' Internet presence. An increasing number of countries are either already using or planning to use this medium to disseminate information about their services. Currently, the scope of information and amount of data on statistical offices available through this service varies but is growing rapidly. The experience of countries who are well advanced indicates not only a growing use but also possibilities to achieve considerable savings in resources previously used on printing and mailing. It was also noted that apart from an initial investment for the Internet set-up, maintenance and update could be done through a reallocation of resources within the office.
