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PROGRESS REPORT ON THE ELECTRONIC DATA INTERCHANGE

Note prepared by the secretariat

1. The recent progress in the area of information and communication technology created a wide range of possibilities for using the Electronic Data Interchange (EDI). The EDI can increase the efficiency and timeliness of the secretariat's work. Therefore, the ECE secretariat is actively involved in the development, implementation and use of EDI to transmit various kinds of information. Over the preceding year the ECE Statistical Division concentrated on:

- (i) Participation in the work of the European Board for EDI Standardization, EDI Expert Group 6 (EEG6) (former Western European EDIFACT Board, Message Development Group MD6);
- (ii) Assistance to National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in transition countries and training of experts in the implementation of EDIFACT standards for statistics;
- (iii) Implementation of EDI in the regular collection of data required for the ECE economic analysis;
- (iv) Development and maintenance of the Internet bulletin board (World Wide Web) aiming at the more operative transfer of documents and information to NSOs and other interested users; and

^{1/} Due to limited capacity in the translation services of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), this document cannot be translated.

- (v) Transmission of documentation through electronic mail.

Cooperation with EEG6

2. The ECE Statistical Division continued its active cooperation with EEG6. In particular, the ECE hosted the January 1996 meeting of EEG6.
3. The ECE concentrated its work within EEG6 mainly on the development of the Generic Statistical Message (GESMES). This message represents a suitable interchange format allowing the exchanging parties to minimize the size of files transmitted through communication networks. This international standard can be used as a format independent on concrete applications for the remote exchange of data between different statistical production systems. Since the development of GESMES is now completed, the ECE secretariat considers it important to develop tools and applications enabling the use of GESMES by international and national statistical agencies.

Assistance to NSOs in countries in transition

4. The ECE secretariat has already implemented a variety of software tools to support its trial EDI launched in 1993 with NSOs of Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia and Slovenia. There were different tools for data providers and the ECE secretariat. This arrangement allowed a one-way data communication.
5. The experiences gained through this trial created a basis for the preparation of the generic software tool "EDISTAT 2.1" in the second half of 1995. EDISTAT 2.1 is supposed to be a start-up tool for the implementation of EDIFACT standards in statistical EDI, and to cover the transition period until commercial software is available.
6. EDISTAT 2.1 is a common tool for NSOs and the ECE secretariat. Therefore, it can also be used by NSOs for receiving data from the ECE, or to design their own data collections. Installation diskettes and the Users' Guide for the software were disseminated to NSOs in countries in transition. The up-to-date information on EDISTAT is available through the World Wide Web at URL <http://www.unicc.org/unece/stats/edi.htm>.
7. Based on the first experiences with EDISTAT 2.1, its upgraded versions EDISTAT 2.11 and EDISTAT 2.12 were prepared. The feedback received also shows that such a generic tool should be accompanied by a set of specific tools depending on concrete applications (e.g. EXCEL tables) to simplify the work of users and mainly of data providers.

Data collection using EDI

8. In December 1995 the ECE secretariat, in cooperation with the statistical offices involved, launched a regular collection of macroeconomic data using EDI. Data are being collected by means of the ECE Questionnaire on Selected Macroeconomic Indicators from Hungary, Russian Federation and the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States. This represents a considerable amount of data on 14 countries (including CIS members) becoming available from the 14 tables (50 pages) in the

questionnaire. The use of EDI allows the ECE secretariat to overcome the lack of resources for data collection.

9. Some other statistical offices expressed a willingness to use EDI for the submission of statistical data to the ECE secretariat. To promote this data collection method, the ECE secretariat plans to provide technical assistance and training to experts from NSOs in countries concerned.

World Wide Web

10. The ECE secretariat has had access to the Internet services since Spring 1995. In order to enhance the communication with NSOs, the secretariat decided to create its own World Wide Web (WWW) site initially intended for the dissemination of CES official documents. Its Uniform Resource Locators (URL) is <http://www.unicc.org/unece/stats/Welcome.html>. In addition, the ECE statistical WWW provides information on the meetings convened under the CES programme of work, the organizational structure of the ECE Statistical Division, ECE statistical publications and selected links to other international and national statistical agencies. The ECE secretariat will maintain and further develop the structure and content of its WWW according to the feedback received from users (mainly NSOs).

11. WWW provides a wide range of possibilities for the electronic dissemination of information. However, it has some limits concerning authentication and protection of statistical data. Therefore, despite numerous requests originating mainly in the academic sector, the ECE secretariat is not in the position to disseminate statistical data collected from NSOs through WWW in the near future. For similar reasons, CES documents with a limited distribution (e.g. the Bureau documents) will not be published on WWW. These problems concern both the policy and technical means for data protection.

12. The further development of the ECE statistical WWW should be undertaken in cooperation with NSOs. In particular, the ECE secretariat would like to provide, if possible, a full set of links to existing WWW sites of NSOs in member countries. Moreover, after one year of work with the WWW, the ECE secretariat may share its experience with NSOs (namely in countries in transition) willing to create their own WWW site, if such assistance is required.

Electronic mail

13. Since mid-1995 the ECE secretariat has been intensively using the Internet electronic mail. One of the major benefits is the quick transmission and minimized delays in the processing of documents. However, the success of such transmission depends on the equipment used on both sides. Therefore, beginning in 1996, the ECE Information Systems Unit has made an effort to implement a new gateway to Internet, which may be further improved where necessary. This permits the secretariat to receive documents according to various standards. For incoming e-mail for individual staff members of the secretariat, the new gateway is accessible through the address of the ECE staff member concerned (i.e. `firstname.secondname@unece.org`). Outgoing documents are usually coded using Mime (base 64) code.