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CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Fiftieth plenary session

(Paris, 10-12 June 2002)

**Matters arising from the May 2002
Session of the Economic Commission for Europe**

Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

The 2002 annual session of the Economic Commission for Europe was held in Geneva from 7-10 May 2002. This note provides an overview of the main outcomes of the session, highlighting the implications and the follow-up, which are relevant to the Conference of European Statisticians, and its program of work.

Several issues of interest to the Conference were discussed at the session. The following were the main substantive agenda items:

- a) The policy implications of the 2002 Spring Seminar for the ECE;
- b) The economic aspects of security in Europe;
- c) The ECE Steering Group: Conclusions and recommendations on the functioning of the Principal Subsidiary Bodies and the Programme of Work;
- d) Strengthening the ECE;
- e) Progress report on ECE technical assistance;
- f) Preparation for and follow-up to World Conferences.

The strategic orientation and the priorities of work of the Conference are largely consistent with the decisions and recommendations of the annual session of the ECE. However, the outcome of the session does require some significant follow-up by the Conference. A draft decision of the Conference concerning the outcome of the Commission session with reference to the Conference is given in para.26.

I. Introduction

1. The annual session is the most important meeting for the ECE. Annually, the representatives of the ECE member countries meet to define priorities, strategic orientation and the utilisation of ECE resources, and to orient the activities of the Principle Subsidiary Bodies of the ECE, of which the Conference of European Statisticians is one. The 2002 meeting was particularly significant, as it was expected to carry forward the in-depth discussion of the new strategic directions of the ECE initiated in 2000.

II. Issues discussed at the Commission session of relevance to the Conference of European Statisticians

The policy implications of the 2002 Spring Seminar for the ECE

2. The Commission traditionally organizes a one-day seminar immediately prior to its annual session. This year the seminar was held on 6 May and its theme was “Labour Market Challenges in the ECE Region”. On the first day of the Commission session (May 7), the Commission considered the policy implications of the seminar for the ECE. This was organized around two Round Tables, one entitled “Foreign Direct Investment, industrial restructuring and labour markets”, and the other entitled “Population ageing, socio-demographic changes and labour market responses”.

3. In his concluding remarks, the Chairman of the Commission highlighted a number of conclusion points, including the following ones:

- To achieve a sustainable economic and social development in the region, of which the labour market is a very important element, the issue has to be approached from a holistic and comprehensive perspective;
- Discussion of policies requires the availability of in-depth analyses in a global and regional framework; ECE, with its statistical and analytical capabilities, provides the forum for this substantive and cross-sectoral approach, in cooperation with the European Commission and international organizations such as OECD and ILO;
- Further, there was recognition of the need to address the problems of ageing in the ECE region and to monitor the progress made in this respect, as a follow-up to the World Summit on Ageing and the Regional Ministerial Conference on Ageing.

4. The Executive Secretary of ECE, Mrs. Brigita Schmögnerová, stated her belief that the High-level segment discussion had been very productive and encouraging for the future strategic directions of ECE. She identified the following as some of the implications of the discussion on the future work of the ECE:

- Bearing in mind the work of other organizations, ECE can find a niche by concentrating on promoting labour force participation among vulnerable social groups, i.e. youth, older workers and women;
- Geographical mobility having been identified as a supporting factor to employment, the Human Settlements subprogramme of ECE can further develop its work on social housing and housing policy that facilitates such workers' mobility;
- ECE as a Regional Commission has a role to play in tackling the problems of ageing. It should include in its work agenda the economic and social implications of ageing;
- Migration is also an important issue and within its limited resources ECE could focus on a very narrow niche in this area.

The economic aspects of security in Europe

5. Discussion on this topic focused on both the ECE role in developing the economic conditions for long-term security and the sectoral dimension. The discussion was organized around two Round Tables, one of which considered an integrated policy approach to security and development and the other the sectoral dimensions of security. Discussion on the sectoral dimensions of security benefited from contributions made by the Chairpersons/Vice-Chairpersons of ECE's Principal Subsidiary Bodies who attended the session. The discussion revealed that all PSBs have, in varying degrees, ongoing work relevant to the issue of security, but that the ECE fields of work that were most directly affected are transport, energy, environment, trade facilitation and human settlements.

6. The Commission considered that while ECE is not a security agency, it can contribute to security through its ongoing work in the various sectors. However, it stressed that ECE should avoid duplicating the work of other regional and international organizations and institutions and build on its recognized areas of expertise. It encouraged the ECE to continue its work relating to economic aspects of security and its cooperation with OSCE whilst ensuring coordination and complementarity of the work between the two organizations. It further expressed its support for the private sector's involvement as an important component of future work.

7. The Chairpersons of the PSBs were invited to look closely at the work programmes of their PSBs in the context of security and safety. This would provide a basis for a cross-sectoral examination of the challenges and potential threats to security that pertain to ECE work. The Executive Secretary was encouraged to continue to monitor this aspect of the activities of the Commission.

The ECE Steering Group: Conclusions and recommendations on the functioning of the Principal Subsidiary Bodies and the Programme of Work

8. During the course of the Commission session the ECE Steering Group met on 9 May in an informal consultation. The Steering Group consists of the Bureau of the Commission, the Chairpersons of the ECE Principal Subsidiary Bodies and senior managers of the ECE. The Chairman of the Commission briefed the Commission on 10 May on the outcome of the Steering Group's meeting. The Group confirmed its role in strengthening the overall policy coherence of and communication in ECE. To this end, it recommended inter alia that:

- The monthly briefing by the Executive Secretary to the Permanent Missions be continued;
- The PSBs and the concerned Divisions present their work to Member States once a year possibly during the annual session;
- Cooperation between the Commission's Group of Experts on the Programme of Work (the GEPW consists of representatives of the Permanent Missions who are responsible for regularly following ECE's work) and the ECE Bureau be strengthened, through the continued attendance of the Chair of the GEPW in the Bureau meetings and, possibly, joint meetings between the Bureau and the GEPW as appropriate;
- The theme of the annual session of the Commission be selected following consultations between the ECE Bureau, the GEPW, the PSBs and the secretariat;
- The theme chosen should take into account the interest of all member States, the need for ECE to contribute to global events, and the cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary character of ECE;
- The preparations for the annual session of the Commission should be accelerated so that the theme can be decided at the ad hoc informal session in June.

9. The Steering Group, in the context of its discussion on technical assistance, also stressed the need to develop mechanisms to facilitate the participation of representatives from countries with economies in transition in meetings and activities of the Commission. It also discussed the use of regional advisers and operational activities. It was observed that operational activities should be better targeted, coordinated, demand driven and transparent.

10. The Commission reaffirmed the role of the Steering Group in contributing to the overall policy coherence and strengthening communication in ECE.

11. The Report of the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work was also reviewed at the Commission session. Member States also made the following proposals:

- That the Steering Group could play a more important role and meet as an integral part of the annual session;
- That for future annual sessions of the Commission, a brief formal document be prepared by each PSB outlining its accomplishments, problems and challenges. The document should also provide information on the structure of the PSB and its subsidiary bodies, as well as the rate of participation by Member States. In addition, where relevant, it should describe the status of the

- main ECE conventions and agreements together with the number of ratifications and accessions;
- That the report of the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work be endorsed by the Commission;
- That coordination and assessment of technical assistance within the secretariat should be enhanced.

12. The Commission endorsed the report of the GEPW and the recommendations contained therein, with the possibility of further reviewing them in future open-ended consultations among member States, the Bureau and the secretariat.

Strengthening the ECE as an Organization

13. Under this item the Commission had before it a Conference Room Paper entitled “Strengthening the Organization – UNECE Secretariat’s Self-Assessment”. In introducing the paper, the Executive Secretary recalled that the Secretary-General had launched an initiative to continue the process of strengthening the Organization in the light of the Millennium Declaration principles and priorities. Part of this initiative involved a review of the Secretariat’s programme of work and each UN department had been asked, as a first step, to prepare self-assessments.

14. To involve ECE member States as early as possible in the process, the Executive Secretary presented the self-assessment document for information and comment. In presenting her proposals, she stressed the importance of avoiding duplication with other organizations and building new strengths on existing ones. In particular, she proposed for ECE’s activities to include the social dimension of growth and to increase policy-dialogue and support to policy-making in the Commission. She also underlined that the Commission was not expected to take a formal decision on the proposed “reform package” at the current meeting, but to have the first in a series of many discussions on strengthening the organization.

15. The Commission welcomed the opportunity to discuss the proposals set out in the discussion paper. Delegations’ initial comments on them were very diverse. The Commission believed that further discussion was needed on several important matters, such as the proposals to introduce more policy dialogue, the social dimension and security issues into the Commission’s work programme, to reform ECE’s intergovernmental structure, to strengthen the role of the annual session and the Bureau, as well as the proposed orientation of technical assistance and operational activities.

16. The following were some of the major points that delegations made under this item:

- It was suggested to agree at the session on clear recommendations for further advancement of inter-governmental negotiations on the “reform package” including the format and time-frame for this process. As an option, the existing Group of Experts on the Programme of Work (GEPW) could be authorized to undertake a preliminary expert-level examination of proposals and its conclusions and recommendations could be subsequently considered at an Ad Hoc Informal Meeting of the Commission;
- The Plan of Action that the Commission adopted in its 1997 Reform remained the basic reference for the Organization and, in accordance with this Plan, ECE’s activities should focus on those areas where it has recognized expertise and comparative advantages. (In the 1997 Reform, statistics was designated as a strategic area of work for the ECE which needs to be further consolidated);
- In UNECE activities a combination should be retained of various functions, namely exchange of views on topical issues related to development in the region, norms and standards-setting, collection of statistical data and economic analysis, provision of technical assistance;
- The UNECE role in European Affairs and seeking solutions to global problems should be increased, and its image in political and business circles should be improved. This will require refreshing the priorities and introducing tangible result-oriented working methods;
- The need to agree on the strategic vision of the Commission’s role and tasks and to prepare its medium-term plan of action (with the possibility of updating the plan at the annual sessions) was also noted;
- Measures aimed at any changes in the subsidiary machinery and reallocation of means and resources among the secretariat entities should be based on the results of a comprehensive review of the ECE activities both sector-wise and function-wise;
- The Commission should build on its existing strengths in areas of norms and standard setting and strengthen the implementation and monitoring of these areas;
- The work programme should be focused;
- Activities should respond to the needs and interests of all member countries and sub-regions;
- Any changes should take into account the mandates of other bodies in the UN system, European regional institutions and organizations in order to avoid overlapping, inefficiencies and to ensure appropriate coordination;
- Any measures taken should be demand-driven and taken with the full participation of and consultation with member countries, the Bureau, the Steering Group, the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work and the Principal Subsidiary Bodies;
- Any new activities must be taken on only when other activities are dropped;
- The modalities and timing of the process would have to be agreed at future Ad Hoc meetings of the Commission, following consideration by the GEPW, the Bureau and the PSBs.

17. The Executive Secretary expressed her appreciation of the Commission's support for strengthening the ECE in the wider context of UN reform. She concluded that:

- The ECE self-assessment contributes to the UN-wide reform launched by the Secretary-General which will provide for intergovernmental dialogue at all levels. Therefore, she welcomed the active involvement of the Commission in this process;
- The Commission should not only build on old achievements, but must be able to respond to new challenges while exploiting its proven advantages and increasing its cooperation with others;
- The impact on the intergovernmental structure will take time to develop;
- The secretariat should improve its dialogue with member States and increase transparency;
- Member States should be involved in priority setting and establishing the programme of work for the budget so that ECE's work programme corresponds to the interests of its member States;
- The upcoming reform of the ECOSOC will likely have implications for all regional commissions.

18. The Executive Secretary invited member States to submit their written comments on the proposals to her by the middle of June, and a further discussion is expected to be held on the subject at an Ad Hoc Informal Meeting of the Commission in June 2002.

19. In concluding, the Chairman of the Commission emphasized the need to actively involve member States through the Steering Group, the Principal Subsidiary Bodies, the Bureau of the Commission, and the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work in all future discussions of the proposed reform package.

20. It was the understanding of the Commission that member States would start open-ended consultations on the issue with the GEPW as soon as possible.

Progress report on ECE technical assistance

21. The Commission underlined the importance it accorded to ECE's work on technical assistance and operational activities. It was considered that further improvements were necessary to make them more effective. These activities needed to be better targeted and more coordinated with a view to producing tangible results, at the national and sub-regional levels and thus having a real impact on the development of recipient countries. It was also felt that they needed to be more transparent and that more information should be provided to clarify the understanding of the procedures involved in these activities from conception through funding, implementation and onto follow-up and evaluation.

22. Delegations made the following points:

- ECE technical assistance should respond to Member States' real needs and necessities, be demand-driven and action-oriented and not be carried out at the expense of ECE's core activities, and be based on ECE's proven competencies;

- Technical assistance activities should benefit, in particular those transition economies that have not yet achieved strong economic and social performance, are resource constrained and have limited support from various donor sources;
- Given ECE's limited budget for such activities, efforts should be made to mobilize extra-budgetary contributions from the donor community and develop diversified sources and funding schemes for technical assistance with civil society groups, foundations and the business community;
- The Commission should continue its cooperation with the EU, OECD and WTO with a view to supporting and developing joint technical cooperation programmes including seeking funding;
- A stronger overall horizontal coordination would be necessary to provide for priority setting in line with member countries' demands and increasing flexibility in the use of resources;
- Within the framework of ECE's technical assistance activities, it is important to address the problem of covering by supporting the participation of experts from low- and middle-income transition economies in various activities, especially in PSBs and related work;
- It was considered that greater transparency and accountability was required regarding these activities. Member States needed to be provided with regularly updated information of the requests coming from individual countries or groups of countries, project proposals and a list of completed, ongoing and planned projects and priorities and analysis of project efficiency for end-users.

23. The following decisions were taken:

- It was agreed that the document that had been prepared by the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work on this subject (E/ECE/1393) would be the basis for the continuation of the dialogue between the Group of Experts and the secretariat on technical support issues;
- An Ad Hoc Informal Meeting will be convened during the course of 2002 to further discuss ECE's technical assistance and operational activities in more detail.

Preparation for and follow-up to World Conferences

Second World Assembly on Ageing

24. The delegation of Spain briefed the Commission on the outcome of the Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid from 8-12 April 2002. Two main outcome documents had been adopted at the meeting: the Madrid International Plan of Action and a Political Declaration.

25. The Commission was also informed of the state of preparations for the ECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing which will take place in Berlin from 11-13 September 2002. The Conference will adopt a Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) for the International Plan of Action 2002 which will be fully based on the global Action Plan and highlight the regional perspectives of the challenges and opportunities leading to demographic change.

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

26. The Ambassador of Romania briefed the Commission on preparations for the European Regional Conference that will be held from 7 to 9 November 2002 in Bucharest. Focusing on regional specificities whilst linking them to the global dimension, the Bucharest meeting is expected to provide a platform for dialogue among all stakeholders (governments, the academia, the business community and civil society), allowing them to share success stories and new developments in the information society of different countries. Further, the meeting would address issues of common interest, make a regional assessment of achievements and challenges, and develop a vision for the information society, agreeing on regional initiatives and possibilities for further cooperation and partnership.

27. The Conference is expected to result in a common vision and road map for the information society in Europe and possibly a plan of action in this field. The themes of the meeting would include: knowledge-based society; e-government; infrastructure and institutional framework; trade and e-commerce; sustainable development; quality of life in the information society.

III. Draft decision by the Conference

28. The Conference may consider that its method of work and its operating procedures are already largely aligned with the ones which were called for in the discussion that took place at the Commission session. The Conference therefore may wish to:

- Thank Eurostat for facilitating the participation of representatives of central and east European countries and of CIS countries in the annual plenary sessions of the Conference of European Statisticians and in selected other high priority meetings in the Conference's work programme, by permitting representatives of the statistical offices of these countries to use the European Commission's funds to finance their participation in these meetings;
- Agree that the ECE Statistical Division is closely involved in operational activities addressing the issue of economies in transition through the Regional Adviser Programme and the involvement in the UNDP financed project aiming at statistical capacity building for social reporting, and agrees that the Statistical Division should seek ways of increasing its technical assistance in statistics to economies in transition in the ECE region through its Regional Advisor in Statistics, the Conference's regular meeting programme and its current regular budget and extra-budgetary resources;
- Agree that the Bureau of the Conference, the Conference itself and the secretariat of the Statistical Division should continue to work actively towards contributing positively to strengthening the ECE as an Organization;
- Ask the Bureau of the Conference, on the basis of proposals by the Secretariat and the Bureau, to examine in which new areas the Conference could further contribute to statistically-related cross-sectoral activities in the ECE, and in identifying what the most

- efficient, flexible and cost effective modalities would be for addressing those intersectoral issues;
- Ask the Bureau to continue to review annually statistically-related intersectoral cooperation that is underway in the ECE, and to report on the outcome of the review to the annual plenary sessions of the Conference;
 - Ask the Bureau to continue to consider what contributions the CES can make to the implementation process of the Millennium Declaration and to statistically-related policy-related work that the ECE may undertake in the future, and how aspects of it could be integrated into the CES programme of work.
