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ON THE FUTURE PROGRESS OF THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

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Introduction

When considering the future of the Conference of European Statisticians [CES], we must take into account the fundamental principles of the United Nations (which the CES adopted at its creation), the accumulated operational experience of the CES functioning (in order to make use of everything positive and to avoid previous mistakes), the actual condition of statistical activity in the region, the serious problems of statistics that have been accumulated and the new demands which the development of society and technology have placed on statistics, and the concerns of those who manage national statistical services in the region and of the other participants (intergovernmental bodies and international organizations).

On the principles of the Conference of European Statisticians

1. The Conference of European Statisticians was originally created as a United Nations regional structure for official meetings by representatives of the region's national statistical services. At the time, this was the only acceptable solution, permitting all of the principal statisticians from the different countries in the region, belonging to different blocs, to get together at the same table in order to evaluate and deal with the most pressing common problems in statistics. One of the most important objectives was to bring together statisticians from various countries in order to ensure the international comparability of statistical information and to develop common standards and a common statistical language.

2. A fact of crucial importance is that, from its very inception, the CES has been guided by the well-publicized fundamental guiding principles of the United Nations, based on a spirit of equal rights for all countries, regardless of their political system or economic situation, and on democracy, mutual respect, cooperation, and openness.

3. Everything positive that has been achieved during the lifetime of the CES has resulted from the unflinching application of these basic principles. In the immediate postwar years, there were fundamental conceptual differences in the statistical methodology of different groups of countries. They have been eliminated to a great extent, especially in recent years, as a result of cooperation within the framework of the CES.

4. Adherence to the adopted principles also ensures the future successful and amicable cooperation of statisticians from all countries in the region. Any deviation from the spirit of equality and partnership or any attempt to divide countries by any criteria (political, superior statistical capability, etc.) could do irreparable damage to cooperation that is intended to bring together statisticians from countries in the region. It would be a great mistake to permit a step backwards in regard to promoting subregional activities, and it would weaken overall regional cooperation. This could lead to a divergence in definitions, in methods of calculation, and so on (a situation that had existed earlier), and could produce increasing economic misunderstanding.

5. Extensive and beneficial statistical activity carried on within the present framework of organizing statistical cooperation by groupings of countries (such as the European Union, the OECD, and the CIS) requires some mechanism for avoiding a potential spread of isolationism and the resulting threat of a divergence among countries in matters of statistical methodology. The principles of the CES provide for such a mechanism, and everything should be done to increase its effectiveness. The effectiveness of the work of the Conference itself should be improved, since it is the main region-wide statistical body on the continent; the role of the CES Bureau in coordinating relations with subregional and international organizations should be enhanced; thought should be given to a system of measures to ensure that each one of them makes a contribution to the region's common statistical endeavors; and the executive body of the Conference, the UNECE Statistical Division, should be strengthened.

The basic goals and functions of the CES

6. The basic goals and functions for which the CES was originally created remain valid.

7. One of the most important of these is increasing the comparability of statistics among the different countries by bringing them closer together in methodology, by establishing common requirements, standards, and approaches, by developing international statistical standards, and by creating classifications. Doing this would make it possible to eliminate a maximum number of dissimilarities in the statistics of different countries, bringing the weaker into line with the stronger.

8. It is very important to discuss the region's common statistical problems and to exchange opinions and knowledge regarding them, to formulate common solutions and recommendations, to organize the necessary joint actions, and to involve international organizations.

9. Thanks to the CES, the conference witnessed a joint discussion of activities of general interest, a sharing of experience and knowledge, the dissemination of acquired experience, and the organization of support between countries.

10. The Conference of European Statisticians discusses the most important issues concerning the future progress of statistics, considers specific solutions, organizes activities to implement them, and coordinates statistical activity in the region. The Integrated Presentation of international statistical work programs in the region is an important document in this regard.

11. All this has made palpable gains possible in systematically improving the quality of statistics in all the countries in the region and in their continued development.

Discussing problems at the Conference

12. The fundamental goals and functions of the CES have, in a very basic way, charted the course for examining issues at the conferences. In order to increase the effectiveness of its work, it would be desirable to establish a range of problems open for discussion, first of all, under the general constraints set by the spirit of the CES that all issues discussed within the framework of the Conference must, if possible, touch upon the concerns of a maximum number of its participants. And vice versa, it is not desirable to include among the issues those that reflect the concerns of a limited number of countries, especially concerns of a subregional, narrowly specialized, or secondary nature.

13. Serious fundamental statistical problems that have attracted public interest of late, must of necessity be included in the range of topics to be discussed at the CES.

14. The past several years have witnessed dramatic changes in the world. There have been radical changes in the political and economic environment, in financial and organizational capabilities, in technological possibilities, growth rates, and relationships, and in the relationships among people and organizations. There are new goals and tasks for statistics, and end-users have new requirements regarding the information they need. All of this has very serious consequences for statistics. Statistics must adapt to the new reality and must evolve sufficiently to accommodate all of these changes and the appearance of alternative informational possibilities.

15. A failure to keep pace with the needs of numerous end users of statistical information has produced sharp criticism of official statistics in some countries (including some with highly developed statistical capabilities). Specifically, official statistics stand accused:

- of paying attention only to "traditional fields"
Remaining "holes" include financial flows, the securities market, politics, man's moral values and spiritual world, the shadow economy and the so-called new economy. Some statistics are simply inadequate, such as those relating to the social sphere, to international migration movements, and to macroeconomic correlations.
- of applying outdated methods of summarizing and generalizing data
The rich statistical and mathematical machine is virtually unutilized, particularly in sample surveys. The simplest calculation formulas (averages, indices, etc.) are used, rather than algorithms that take into account the various nuances of the process being studied and that take advantage of the rich logical possibilities and the speed and memory of modern computers. Registers are inadequately utilized. Static models of a long-term nature are employed at the macro level.
- of being inadequately equipped
The equipment available for statistics, particularly in the provinces and in the developing countries, is grossly inadequate in terms of what is needed and what is available in competing informational domains in regard to computers, software support, modern communications equipment, and printing capability. The Internet remains underutilized.
- of employing primary data from observations of poor quality
The methods of collecting initial primary information do not ensure sufficient accuracy. Some sources of information are unreliable. The range of observations and collection is narrowing, and the readiness of observed subjects to participate voluntarily in surveys and the multipurpose research of official statistics is decreasing. Monitoring of the reliability of records, questionnaires, and sample surveys is poor. Consequently, all of the summary and macro index structures based on the initial record is based on quicksand.

- of delay in collecting, processing, and distributing data
Widespread and lengthy time lags in delivering statistics, particularly the results of broad surveys and annual publications, reduces their value considerably. Today, end-users value up-to-the-minute information, not thick tomes from the archives.
- of poorly presenting their information to the public
Published materials are poor in appearance, nondescriptive, not readily accessible, and poorly explained. Graphic methods of presenting statistical information are rarely employed. Geographic informational systems are little used. Much data remains inaccessible to the public.
- of creating doubt in the reliability and comparability of information
There is widespread mistrust of statistical data and complaints that it lacks objectivity, that it is biased, and that it has been "juggled." Many people *see* statisticians as administratively and financially dependent on government agencies and at times interested mainly in presenting the results of their work in a positive light and in hiding their shortcomings. There is concern about the possible use of a statistical methodology that makes it possible to falsify or to arbitrarily "correct" results, about government censorship before publication of the results, about a lack of guaranteed public control, and about the monopoly held by official statistics and the lack of alternative statistical bodies that are equally entitled to make use of source materials and primary databases.

16. All of these numerous accusations should be examined and either shown to be groundless, or else measures should be taken to correct obvious deficiencies and to open up paths for progress in official statistics. The CES must face up to the true state of statistics: what should be done to deal with the growing demands made upon statistics coupled with decreasing resources? Has the time come for serious reforms in the field of statistics or can the subject be ignored completely? The current state of affairs in statistics, an evaluation of the problems it faces, and a search for potential paths to improvement are serious topics for comprehensive discussion at the Conference.

17. On the other hand, the stormy advance in ways and means of collecting, transmitting, processing, storing, and presenting information has unavoidably led to radical changes in statistical equipment, management, and methodology. The task of statisticians is to timely accept the new possibilities and add them to their arsenal, whenever appropriate.

18. It is believed, for example, that almost all statistics will soon be placed on the Internet. Owing to the technology of the Internet and the creation of high-capacity interconnected databases, many people are acquiring access to large amounts of primary information and the ability to treat it statistically for themselves and to provide alternative presentations of the results in their own interpretation. Clearly, it would be worthwhile to discuss this topic in a professional way in order to be prepared for events as they unfold. At the very least, there has to be an objective evaluation of the possibilities that the Internet offers to statistics, a discussion of measures to initiate activities on the Internet and to make maximum use of the Internet for the progress of statistics, the dissemination of information, and the education of end-users.

19. On the other hand, it is important to provide an effective defence against improper access to information and to ensure the safety of the statistical information system from viruses and people with bad intentions.

20. According to another prediction, the new technology will eventually make it possible to obtain for statistical purposes not only individual aggregate results from calculations, but the entire body of primary administrative information, which will, in principle, eliminate a number of statistical surveys now being conducted, and will require better management and coordination of methodology. The increasingly significant volumes of statistical information will be created outside the jurisdiction of the

statistical services, so that statistical information will force consideration of a new approach to the problems of data collection and processing, a guarantee of methodological uniformity within the framework of national and international systems of information, and the coordination of all these activities.

21. These are merely examples of a very possible future trend in statistics, showing that there is much of interest over and above current issues for statisticians from all countries of the region.

22. The conferences must draw up a list of important topics for immediate discussion and agree on the order and the format in which they would like this to be done.

23. The work preparatory to selecting a range of problems for discussion can be organized by the Bureau of the CES or by an elected Program Committee, with due consideration of the opinions of Conference participants.

Managing the Aspects of Discussion

24. It would hardly be appropriate to devote a lot of attention at the jubilee session to planning the detailed format of future sessions, fixing times and specific topics many years in advance. It is always better to have a more flexible format, since new circumstances and requirements may appear, many of which cannot be foreseen at this time. It is now clear that it is better to set the structure of the sessions only in a very general way, singling out in particular the discussion of the general program (designating the priority of coordinating activities and minimizing duplication, particularly in the gathering of information by non-national bodies) and an exchange of views on selected topics.

25. The CES sessions can be in the form of special plenary sessions or of sections, subsections, and so on, and in different formats, such as seminars. It is best to remain flexible about the choice of form, depending on concrete circumstances. **All that is important right now is the principle that all such meetings and sessions, when they are conducted within the framework of the CES, be open to all member countries of the CES. On the other hand, all sessions with limited access must be outside the format of the Conference and may be conducted before or after it, but not at the expense of Conference time, which is limited to begin with.**

26. From our point of view, the format for discussing problems should not be fixed rigidly in advance, either as a plenary session or in the form of a seminar and its components. The choice can be suggested by the Bureau during the preparations for a regular session, with due consideration for actual circumstances.

27. The Conference meets only for a short time, and its agenda is usually overloaded. Consequently, it would be desirable, first of all, to reduce the time given to questions of a formal, informative, fiscal, or organizational nature; secondly, to simplify the discussion procedure for the Integrated Presentation (taking into account its preliminary examination, fundamental discussion at the CES Bureau, and the inclusion of selected topics in the program of more detailed discussion); and thirdly, to devote as much of the remaining time as possible to a comprehensive discussion of the most important problems, chosen in conformity with the basic goals and functions of the CES.

28. The number of topics per session can vary, and it is unlikely that this could be determined very far in advance. The Bureau could suggest a new sequence for each new session, depending on specific conditions, current issues, and so on.

29. Under normal conditions and considering time restrictions, it is clearly desirable to have a comprehensive discussion of a single topic. But, the area of discussion can be broadened if circumstances permit.

30. When selecting several topics for discussion at a single session, some of them could be given to crucial current problems or fundamentally new problems, others to a sharing of experience.

31. When selecting topics, we should be mindful of the lack of time for any unnecessarily broad and detailed discussion and of the diversity to be found in the audience. Under these circumstances, it is scarcely possible to enter into a profound and detailed discussion of topics of a scientific nature. The CES is not really a scientific forum, but rather a forum for those in charge of statistical services, intended primarily for organizing cooperation in basic statistical issues common to all.

32. Interesting topics in statistical development that require a comprehensive and thorough treatment, would be more productively dealt with at special high-level seminars, such as those held in Washington in 1977, Moscow in 1981, and Lisbon in 1996, at a conference of the kind held at Montreux in 2000, or at a session of the International Statistical Institute or the International Association of Official Statisticians.

33. The growth in the number of diverse international statistical encounters in recent years has clearly reduced the importance, relatively speaking, that the CES used to enjoy. But, at the same time, the CES has freed itself from secondary and issues of narrow interest only to a limited number of members, and usually of a subregional character, and has facilitated greater concentration on topics of importance to all the countries of the region.

34. Despite all the diversity in the different meetings of statisticians, the Conference of European Statisticians has remained (and will remain) unique, in the sense of gathering together all the chief statisticians from the countries of the region, and henceforth the utmost advantage should be taken of this opportunity, leaving on the agenda only those issues that are of interest to all, and ridding it of those issues more effectively and better treated at specialized meetings.

35. It is extremely important to leave the CES time for **open discussion by all participants** on all the current burning issues: on issues of general concern; on issues that must be given priority by international organizations (starting with the UN Statistics Division) and the Bureau of the CES; on issues about who requires what kind of assistance where, with what problems. The Conference is the sole place where the heads of the region's national statistical services can carry on direct conversations with all of the cooperating organizations. Considering the great importance and organizational significance of the CES Bureau, such direct contact between those in charge of the statistical services of the countries in the region is an opportunity not to be missed.