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**ON THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL STATISTICAL COMMITTEES**

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**I. Introduction**

1. First let me extend my congratulations to the member states of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) and to the secretariat of the CES, the Statistics Division of the ECE on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the CES. The CES has a long and admirable record of leadership and innovation and this occasion is truly a reason to celebrate. An anniversary, however, is more than an occasion for a celebration; it is also an opportunity to reflect on the past and to try to peer into the future -- as perilous as that might be. My colleague, Willem DeVries has written a paper for this occasion on the past of the CES and as others have written on the future of the CES I would like to take this opportunity to offer some comments on not only the CES but broader thoughts on regional statistics committees and regional statistics divisions. The structure of this brief paper is as follows: first a section on the concept of a global statistical community, next a discussion of the functions and benefits of regional statistical committees and regional statistics divisions and finally some thoughts on the future of regional statistical committees and regional statistics divisions.

**II. A global community**

2. Since its inception over fifty years ago the United Nations has had many Commissions that have been devoted to a specialized area. The Statistical Commission is the last remaining functional commission whose members are technical and not political. Perhaps the most important reason for this is that the Statistical Commission has been effective in carrying out its mandate and has not attempted to stray into political arenas. However, I think there is more too

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed are solely those of the author and not necessarily those of the United Nations.

it than this. In the world of official statistics there is a powerful phenomena -- the existence of a global statistical community. This community does indeed exist and is often able to transcend political, economic, language and cultural differences. The reason this community exists are the strong forces that define and keep this community together: a strong ethos and a common body of knowledge.

3. Our common ethos is demonstrated by a shared belief that official statistics exists to provide, with impartiality, statistics and information that are needed by decisions makers in government, for an informed society and that information is a public good. These principles are enshrined in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which were developed by the CES and later adopted by the UN Statistical Commission and the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Official statistics also comprises a common body of knowledge. This body includes, inter alia, probability, sampling and estimation theory. The level of expertise and amount of study devoted to these areas varies widely among Heads of National Statistical Offices but there exists a common appreciation that there is a body of knowledge upon which our work is based. This serves to give us a common language – the language of mathematics and statistics --and a common understanding of each other's problems.

### **III. Regional Statistics Committees and Statistics Divisions**

4. We are a community then with a shared purpose, a common approach to accomplishing that purpose and a common language that can be used to understand what others have done. This shared purpose and common language also makes it possible to develop and implement international statistical standards. The global community is large with approximately 190 nations belonging to the United Nations. In addition to this global community there are regional communities such as the League of Arab States and the Association of South East Asian Nations. Of course, there are the five regional communities or commissions within the United Nations, of which the ECE is one. These Regional Commissions are far from homogenous. In only one, ESCWA, is there a common language, and many of the political, economic and cultural differences discussed previously still exist. Nevertheless, the Regional Commissions should offer opportunities for collaboration among members denied to the larger grouping of the UN.

5. At one time all of these Regional Commissions had a centralized approach to providing statistics support to the regional Commission and to the member states of the region. All the Regional Commissions, then, had Statistics Divisions and Statistics Committees. It appears that soon, however, only two of these Commissions may have Statistics Divisions -- ECE and ECLAC. ECA has already adopted a decentralized approach that has resulted in the elimination of its Statistics Division and ESCWA is proposing to follow in that direction. ESCAP is considering making the Statistics Division part of another Division. However, it does not automatically follow that the absence of a Statistics Division will result in the absence of a Statistics Committee. In fact, despite the decentralization trend I referred to there still may be Statistics Committees in all of the Regional Commissions. Before we consider why this happened and what the future may hold let us consider for a moment the possible functions and benefits of a regional statistics committee:

- Guidance of the work program of the Statistics Division in the region;
- Developing a sense of community in the region;

- Knowledge transfer among the members of the region.
6. Because of the unique situation of the presence of both the OECD and Eurostat in the ECE region there is one additional function of the CES. It is to encourage coordination and eliminate duplication between the OECD, Eurostat and the ECE Statistical Division using the “integrated presentation” as the principle instrument.

#### Guidance of the work program

7. The statistics division in a regional commission must try and satisfy national statistics offices of the member states of the region as well as the Executive Secretary of the Regional Commission. Increasingly this has seemed to be difficult to do. The Executive Secretary is responsible for the entire program of the Regional Commission and of late it seems that we have not always been able to convince him/her of how statistics (or at least a centralized program of statistics) can support not only the member states but also the regional commission program. Certainly the statistics committee can be helpful in this process as the CES has been. Of course, the statistics division must also understand and be responsive to the needs of the member states. The resource situation being as severe as it is in the regional statistics divisions prioritization and consensus building on the program of the division take on increased importance. Thus, there is a symbiotic relationship between regional statistical committees and regional statistics divisions that goes beyond the fact that the statistics division is the secretariat of the committee .

#### Developing a sense of community

8. We discussed before the existence of a global statistics network that is defined by our shared beliefs about official statistics. While this common ethos is necessary for a sense of community, by itself it is not sufficient. In a vibrant and healthy community there is a continuous reaffirmation of these values, the sharing of problems and solutions and a belief that the members of the community can look to each other for support. Creating an environment where a sense of community can thrive is one if not the most important achievement of a statistics committee. This sense of community becomes more difficult to establish as the regional grouping becomes less homogenous. The challenge for all members is to commit to the larger long-term goal of community in the region and not allow more homogenous sub-groupings to dominate.

9. The changes that have taken place in the CES in the past ten years exacerbate this problem. For example, when I began to represent the United States of America at the CES it was both a smaller and more homogenous organization. The meeting took place in one of the smaller rooms in the Palais and there was a feeling of intimacy among the members. The Western European and Other representatives tended to dominate the agenda and the discussion. Now, the meeting is quite large -- with more than fifty members -- and it is no longer as homogenous. Significant differences have always existed in the political and economic structures and development of the member states, the traditions of the statistical offices and the development and resources (staff and capital) of the office. However, while previously there were roughly two sub-groupings of members, today the number of sub-groups is larger and the differences among the members of the subgroups often more pronounced. Because of these

increased differences it is more important than ever for the CES to consider how it can reinforce the community of official statisticians in the region.

### Knowledge transfer

10. One of the reasons to foster a statistical community is so that national statistical offices can learn from each other. The most obvious way that this takes place is through the formal agenda. Often, however, this transfer takes place in a more informal way. This informal method is through “side conversations” which take place during breaks and during the evening. These informal transfers are at least as valuable as the formal ones, and the outcomes, although they do not appear in the formal report of the meeting are no less important than those that appear in the formal report.

11. The CES recognizes the importance of the formal transfer of knowledge with its special seminar program. Sometimes there is a spirited discussion among all the members of the statistical committee and at other times debate is limited to members of one more or less homogenous group of countries with little participation by others. It would I think be misleading to conclude from the second case that there is limited transfer occurring. In fact a great deal of learning is taking place. Even if it is agreed that an issue is predominantly of concern to, for example, more developed countries, it is important that other countries participate. Because of their state of development, it may be that some, or even many participants, are not able to address the “advanced” issue directly. Nevertheless, even if participants are silent it does not mean that the examination of the issue is not of great value to them. Discussion of these kinds of issues gives those countries not yet faced with the issue time to learn from the experience of others and to prepare for the future.

12. Moreover, I think we would all agree that those in more developed statistical systems have a responsibility to assist those in the community who have had less experience. Communities get stronger when the members are willing to trade short-term costs for the longer-term benefits of a strong and healthy community.

### **IV. On the future of Statistical Committees**

13. When we, as individuals, think about the future of statistical committees there are several questions that we should try to answer. Among these are: What is my commitment to supporting a community? Who should be in that community? What price am I prepared to pay for supporting such a community? What are the benefits that will satisfy me?

14. The future of regional statistics committees is also linked with that of regional statistics divisions. In one sense this does not bode well for the future. As I mentioned before, by the beginning of 2003 there may be only two regional statistics divisions in existence. The reasons are complex and differ somewhat in each region. To the extent, however, that the statistics divisions provided leadership and support to the member states in that region we can expect that these vanishings will have a deleterious effect on the region’s statistics committees.

15. The absence of a regional statistics division does not mean that there cannot be a regional statistics committee. It does mean that new modalities will have to be found to mitigate the absence. These modalities may include different administrative arrangements and support and

follow-up responsibilities. It certainly will mean increased responsibility for the Bureau of the Statistics Committee. In this respect one model may be the Permanent Committee for Geographic Information Systems in Asia. There is no secretariat function in ESCAP and the countries have taken more responsibility for follow-up activities. The Statistics Division in New York provides limited administrative and substantive support. We in New York will do what we can to mitigate these actions but we cannot replace the leadership and support that regional statistics divisions can provide

16. One of the great strengths of official statistics is that we fostered a sense of community at both the global and regional level. I can think of no region where this sense of community is stronger than here in the ECE. We cannot take this for granted however. Unless there is a shared commitment that the benefits discussed above are worth the members' time, energy and financial and human resources the community will begin to wither. One of the great strengths in the past has been the ability of the members of the CES to reaffirm their commitment to this idea of community.

17. The past, however, is no guarantor of the future. Our past success may not transfer into the future. It is likely that only a few of the people in this room will be alive in fifty years. I hope that those of you who are, will be able to say – at the hundredth anniversary of the CES – that our community not only survives but is stronger than ever.