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**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

**Forty-eighth plenary session**

(Paris, 13-15 June 2000)

**United Nations Statistical Commission: Thirty-first Session,  
New York, 29 February - 3 March 2000**

Note Prepared by the Secretariat

1. The United Nations Statistical Commission is one of the parent bodies of the Conference of European Statisticians. It has twenty-four elected members. On this occasion about thirty other countries also attended as observers. All five of the Regional Commissions, including the Economic Commission for Europe, were represented. Chairmen of Regional Commission statistical bodies are encouraged to attend. Mr. Longva attended on behalf of the Conference of European Statisticians. The Director of the ECE Statistical Division also attended.
2. The final report is expected to be available before the current meeting of the Conference of European Statisticians. A summary, prepared by the UN Statistics Division, is given at the end of this document, highlighting some relevant issues for the CES to consider.
3. The sessions of the Statistical Commission, which now take place on a yearly basis, are becoming increasingly dense and business-like. In 2000, important deliberations took place concerning the revision of the System of Integrated Economic and Environmental Accounting, and Tourism Satellite Accounting. Lively and significant discussions were held on activities of strategic importance, like the SNA, the ICP, international classifications and gender statistics.
4. Participation at the SC meeting is growing in quantity and quality with regard to the participation

of different international agencies within and outside the UN system. Opportunities and issues of co-operation and co-ordination are being dealt with. The SC has a fundamental role within the global statistical system to ensure overall coherence and commitment. Activities of the various City Groups are becoming increasingly integrated in the international statistical agenda; these Groups provide a particular, but significant, contribution. Discussion at the SC shows how important overall co-ordination and inter-agency co-operation is. The CES in the ECE region has placed a strong emphasis on this task and has made considerable progress, thanks to the active participation and co-operation of major players like Eurostat, the OECD and the IMF.

5. UNSD reported at the meeting the significant progress made on their activities supporting the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, and on the integration and co-ordination of international statistical programs. Since it was the CES that initiated activities on these tasks, progress has to be welcomed by the CES with particular interest and satisfaction. It shows in fact how regional commissions can contribute to the development of global activities, and how effective a bottom-up approach to setting statistical standards can be. The continuing engagement of the CES on both the Fundamental Principles and the Integrated Presentation of the International Statistical Work Programs in the ECE region signals the strong links existing between the CES and the SC, one of its parent bodies.

6. On the whole, the meeting illustrated how statistics are moving closer and closer to the core of the international policy agenda, most notably to the policy priority of the UN system (consider e.g. the IMF data quality reviews, the co-ordination of indicators programs, the statistical implications of poverty reduction). The emphasis placed on monitoring and benchmarking in a wide-ranging and expanding set of policy fields attributes to statistics, and its applications in terms of indicators accounts and data modeling, an evident and immediate policy relevance. This is drawing the attention of policymakers and the public at large more and more on the proceedings and deliberations of the SC, and the CES. It also opens up new areas of interest and new opportunities of visibility and recognition for statistical activity (e.g. in the field of human rights or social capital). At the same time it puts considerable pressure on statistical institutions to respond and deliver, and guarantee quality, without necessarily making available additional resources.

7. The SC is increasingly becoming a forum for fruitful, even if not necessarily easy, discussions between producers and users of statistics (see e.g. the discussion on the Human Development Report). While at the national level, in the experience of most statistically advanced countries there are traditions and dedicated institutional mechanisms for this dialogue, at the international level it is up to bodies like the SC or the CES to take up this essential role.

### **More Specific Issues of Interest to the CES.**

8. Implementation of National Accounts. The analysis of milestones in the implementation of SNA 1993 shows lack of progress in a large number of countries at the world level. It is encouraging to remark that the ECE region, and in particular transition countries, is the only area where some progress

was registered. However, much remains to be done. In addition, the discussion questioned even the suitability of requiring full implementation, when it is clear that in relation to the stage of development of the underlying statistical system this is not achievable. It was suggested to look into the possibility of defining a minimum or core set of accounts or flash estimates, enabling countries with relatively weak statistical infrastructure to estimate the main aggregates, while at the same time contributing to building statistical capacity. The CES and its Bureau have addressed this issue on several occasions. The CES has a comparative advantage in taking an initiative in this field since among its member countries we find both the countries which have developed the most relevant experience, and some of the countries most in need, such as in the Balkans and the CIS. In co-operation with other international organizations, and after a co-ordination discussion at the ISWGNA, the ECE Statistical Division will elaborate a proposal for consideration at the next Bureau meeting.

9. The International Comparison Program. Even though expressing support for the program, the SC recommended a kind of moratorium on the start of the global ICP, asking to clarify the organizational management implementation and financial implications of the program. In the ECE region these aspects will be dealt with in the course of the next ECP Consultation meeting, hosted by ECE, which will take place in Geneva in October 2000. Therefore, under the impulse and leadership of Eurostat and the OECD, and with the active involvement of the ECE and CIS-STAT, the European Comparison Program is expected to proceed as planned. The ECE countries with economies in transition, which were present in New York, expressed support for the ECP program and urged the organization concerned to move on. The ECP can make a useful contribution to addressing the issues of quality, timeliness and transparency of PPP estimates pointed out in the Castles and Ryten Reports. In January 2000, the ECE publication on "International Comparison of GDP in Europe and North America" was issued, containing the results of the latest round (1996) of the ECP.

10. Special Data Dissemination Standard and General Data Dissemination System of the IMF. The Commission welcomed the developments in these important programs of the IMF, including the data quality debates and reviews that the IMF has stimulated. It invited the IMF to build on existing experiences and expertise in the regions and in countries. The CES has played a considerable role in developing a framework for data quality analysis and reviews. At the 1999 CES plenary session in Neuchatel, the in-depth Seminar organized by Mr. Tim Holt of ONS on "Performance Indicators for Statistical Offices" presented various aspects of such a framework. In this year's plenary session, a few experiences from ECE member countries will be discussed. Once again, the CES is providing useful contributions to a set of developments of global concern.

11. Geneva 2000 Special Session on Social Development. The SC expressed support for the ECE initiative to strengthen capacity building in social statistics in connection with the Special Session of the General Assembly on Social Development (Copenhagen + 5), in Geneva in June 2000. This was discussed in the context of the broader discussion on the co-ordination of development indicators, in the context of follow-up to UN Conferences and Summits. The authority and leadership role of UNSD on the latter was recognized and welcomed. It was stressed that the various initiatives in this area, which inevitably are driven by policy demands and agenda, should contribute to statistical capacity building. They should therefore involve the national statistical authorities and have them play a co-ordinating and

stimulating role at the national level.

12. The Paris 21 initiative. The SC welcomed this new development, launched by the OECD and the World Bank, with the active involvement of Eurostat, the ECE, and other UN agencies. It focuses on statistical capacity building in developing or transition economies, and is related to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers required by the World Bank and other international financial institutions for debt remission of the highly indebted poorest countries (HIPCs). National and international development agencies and Official Development Aid organizations recognize the importance of statistical infrastructures in a national development strategy. An ad-hoc meeting on Paris 21 was held back to back to the meeting of the SC.

13. The Human Development Report (HDR) statistics. The SC discussed a set of very critical papers on the quality and use of statistics in the UNDP's Human Development Report, written by I. Castle of Australia. Serious concerns were raised by many countries on the issues that were raised in the Castle paper. More generally the SC wanted to ensure that the HDR is based on valid statistical evidence. UNDP was present at the discussion, which was frank and detailed. Thanks to this discussion, a more open and constructive dialogue has started within the statistical community concerning the HDR. The SC will set up an expert group to look into the question. UNDP invited a group of statistical experts to contribute to their statistical work; the ECE was also invited. More in general it was felt that better co-ordination within the UN system, and among the major international organizations either producing or using statistical data is an absolute necessity. The CES in the ECE region has invested considerable efforts and resources in promoting dialogue and co-ordination between the major players, such as Eurostat, the OECD or the IMF. The ECE Statistical Division, in close consultation and co-operation with the UNSD, will contribute as much as possible to strengthen the statistical basis of the HDR, and promote the quality, and use, of statistics in the major publications of the UN system.

14. The next meeting of the Statistical Commission will be 13 - 16 March 2001.

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