

The Conference of European Statisticians in Its Fourth Decade of Work

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Abstract: Recent events in central and eastern Europe created a new environment for international cooperation among statistical organizations. The Conference of European Statisticians promptly responded to these new challenges in reorienting and adapting its programme to these new cir-

cumstances. This article gives a short overview of the framework of the Conference, its main achievements, and future plans.

Key words: Economic Commission for Europe, United Nations.

1. Introduction

The Conference of European Statisticians (CES) brings together the heads of national statistical offices of the member countries of the UN Economic Commission for Europe. Although many of them belong to other regional organizations, for example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the European Communities, etc., the Conference holds a special status among these bodies owing to its contribution to international cooperation. Since the Conference is a principal subsidiary of the United Nations Statistical Commission, the CES's work can be characterised as regionally-oriented statistical cooperation in Europe, with a strong element of integration into worldwide statistical activities.

The Conference deals with the field of official statistics and its objectives

are:

- to improve national statistics and their international comparability, in accordance with the recommendations of the Statistical Commission of the United Nations, the Specialised Agencies, and other appropriate bodies as necessary;
- to promote close coordination of the statistical activities in Europe of international organizations so as to achieve greater uniformity in concepts and definitions and to reduce the burden on national statistical offices;
- to respond to any emerging need for international statistical cooperation arising out of transition, integration, and other processes of cooperation, both within the ECE region and between the ECE region and other regions.

In Geneva, June 1992, the Conference of European Statisticians convened the fortieth plenary session since its foundation in 1952. This article provides some overview of

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how the Conference adapted to emerging circumstances.

2. The Role of the Conference in a Changing Environment

Ongoing integration processes in the European Economic Community, the European Economic Space, the North America Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico and, in particular, the political and socio-economic changes in central and eastern Europe created a new environment for the work of the Conference of European Statisticians and brought about favourable conditions for statistical cooperation between international and supranational organizations active in the ECE region.

In response to the new challenges, the Conference convened, in Geneva, a consultation of heads of national statistical offices on February 23, 1990, in order to review and redefine its role under these circumstances. As a result of its deliberations, the consultation decided to forward to the thirty-eighth plenary session of the CES proposals for the general reorientation of the Conference's activities and for the revision of the programme and the methods of work. The main recommendations of the consultation were the following:

- i. The basic objectives and methods of the Conference should be maintained. However, in the light of the recent developments, they should be adapted to the ongoing integration and transition processes and to the resulting needs and potentialities of statistical offices of the region.
- ii. The Conference should continue to be composed of the presidents (or equivalent) of national statistical services, because the maintenance of the highest executive level for membership in

the Conference in this period of change was felt to be extremely important.

- iii. The programme of work of the Conference should be reviewed and amended so as to include
 - all aspects of relevance to the transition of statistical services in central and eastern Europe from a centrally planned to market economies ("transition projects"); and
 - special subjects in which statistical work has not yet been started to the extent required under the new economic and social circumstances ("developmental projects").
- iv. The Bureau of the Conference should be increased to six members and should carry out a steering function to improve the efficiency of the work of the Conference.

At its thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth plenary sessions, the Conference of European Statisticians adopted these recommendations. The Bureau was increased to six members and, in addition, the Director General of Eurostat and the Director of the Statistics Directorate of OECD were granted a permanent observer status in the Bureau of the Conference. A revised and more transparent programme of work of the Conference, with a clear priority setting mechanism, was adopted. An Intersecretariat Working Group on Coordination of Statistical Activities by International Institutions in central and eastern Europe was created upon the initiative of Eurostat. In June 1991, the Conference adopted and endorsed the revised terms of reference of its work. Furthermore, a Joint Programme Review of the UN/ECE, Eurostat and the OECD was held in Luxembourg in September 1991, a second one was held in Geneva in December 1992, and the third will be held in Paris in

autumn of 1993, fostering further harmonization of statistical methodology, and improving comparability of statistical data through more effective cooperation among the concerned institutions.

The annual sessions of the UN Economic Commission for Europe in 1990 and 1991 expressed satisfaction with the results of the Conference's initiatives, and selected statistics as one of the priority fields of work of the Commission and requested the Executive Secretary of the Commission to reallocate resources of the secretariat to that important field.

As a follow-up to the streamlining of the work of the Conference of European Statisticians in general, special attention was paid to improved coordination and cooperation in the main areas of its work programme, i.e.:

- organization and operation of statistical services;
- statistical information technology;
- economic statistics;
- social and demographic statistics;
- environment and natural resource statistics; and
- support for ECE publications, studies and projects.

3. Organization and Operation of Statistical Services

Historically, the work undertaken by the Conference under this sub-programme is aimed at exchanging experience and views on matters of statistical policy among the heads of national statistical offices. The methods applied were basically the "substantive discussions" at plenary sessions and, since 1977, seminars for heads of offices at approximately five-year intervals. The topic which will be discussed at the next Seminar will probably be "Statistics for and in a Historical Perspective."

While issues of statistical policy remain a popular subject on the agenda of the plenary sessions, two additional programme elements of a pronounced operational character were introduced into this sub-programme:

- adaptation of statistical services to transition and integration processes in Europe; and
- promotion of the coordination of international statistical work.

As the unique forum for heads of statistical offices of the ECE region, the Conference of European Statisticians is especially well suited to study the needs and plans for statistical services emanating from changes in socio-economic systems, and to investigate the repercussions of evolving integration and other kinds of cooperation in the ECE region. In implementing this element of the programme, the Statistical Division of the ECE secretariat organized, with the support of statistical offices of member countries and in close cooperation with other international and supranational organizations, seven workshops for transition countries; acted in a match-making function for transition projects; prepared and issued Newsletters on Transition Projects, Readings in agriculture, transport statistics, and data editing methods as well as the Steering Document of the CES on strategies, priorities and results in the work of statistical offices of transition countries in Europe.

In line with Commission decision O(45) "The activities of the Economic Commission for Europe," adopted in 1990, the Conference paid special attention to the review of statistical work of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations in the ECE region, within the global statistical system, with a view to promoting coordination of international statistical activities. Inventories of international statistical coopera-

tion in the ECE region were carried out and proposals for the improvement of international mechanisms for the development, transmission and implementation of statistical standards and methods were adopted by the plenary session of the CES.

4. Statistical Information Technology

Cooperation in the field of electronic data processing (EDP), under the auspices of the Conference of European Statisticians, has a long tradition. The Working Party on EDP was launched in 1961 and the Seminar on Integrated Statistical Information Systems (ISIS) in 1971. Since that time, meetings have been held at regular intervals and are highly appreciated by statistical offices of the ECE region and other regional commissions of the UN System. New developments in information technology, particularly in computer networks, communication, and software triggered many changes in statistical data processing and the Conference included, in 1990, a new sub-programme – Statistical Information Technology – in its programme of a coherent set of projects closely connected to the production and dissemination process of statistics. High priority is assigned to this area. The Working Party on EDP obtained, in addition to its substantive work, a steering function for all projects of the secretariat in that field, whereas the ISIS Seminars are maintained as a forum for EDP-experts to exchange their experiences. Special methodological and research work is foreseen in the fields of statistical data editing, statistical metadata (METIS), and standards for electronic data interchange in statistics (EDISTAT).

In connection with the organization of assistance to transition countries, a regional Transition Project on Applied Statistical Computing (TPS) was jointly designed by member countries and the ECE secretariat

and forwarded to UNDP for inclusion in the Fifth UNDP Regional Programming Cycle from 1992 to 1994. The main objectives of TPS are to bring statistical computing in transition countries up to the standards required by market economies. Concrete projects in that programme will deal with computing methods for SNA, the establishment of business registers, and effective processing systems for economic surveys. It is based on the long experience and successful work of the ECE/UNDP Statistical Computing Project (SCP). These programmes ran from 1981–1985 (SCP-1) and from 1988–1991 (SCP-2) and produced software and methodological documents in the field of statistical computing. The Conference recommended to sustain the network of computer experts established during the lifetime of SCP not only as a way of helping transition countries but also to greatly increase international cooperation in statistics generally.

5. Economic Statistics

Work in this field is influenced by the following issues:

- The socio-economic changes which have taken place in central and eastern Europe have implied that new international statistical standards are being applied in the statistical systems of former centrally planned economies. Interest in implementing United Nations statistical standards has already been expressed by several central and east European countries in the fields of national accounts, foreign trade, food and agricultural statistics, statistics of household income, etc., and in the participation in the European Comparison Programme.
- Work has started at Eurostat on the revision of the European System of

Integrated Economic Accounts (ESA). The revised ESA is expected to be entirely consistent with the revised SNA, but will contain more detail reflecting the needs and circumstances of the European Community countries. It is expected that the revised ESA will also be of interest to non-European Community countries in central and eastern Europe.

- The cooperation of regional commissions in economic statistics is more and more requested by the UN Statistical Commission; however, this can only be developed within limited resources. Therefore, and in the light of activities of other international and supra-national organizations and specialized agencies, the work of the CES has to be selective and closely coordinated with other actors.

Another field of work of the Conference with a long tradition is linked to the System of National Accounts. The Working Group on National Accounts and Balances was established by the Conference in 1964. It contributed to the new System of National Accounts published by the UN Statistical Office in 1968. In the following decades, special attention was paid to the different concepts and definitions used in the SNA and the Material Product System of National Balances of the Economy (MPS) with the aim of linking both systems. In the recent past, the Working Party on National Accounts dealt with interim results and problems to be solved for the revised version of the SNA, which is expected to be adopted by the 1993 session of the UN Statistical Commission. Recently, the revision of the European System of Integrated Economic Accounts (ESA) was launched in keeping with the SNA revision. Because of the interest of non-Community countries in the

revised ESA, the OECD and the ECE have to ensure that the views and requirements of those countries can be taken into consideration during the revision process. Moreover, in June 1993 the Conference will organize, jointly with the OECD, a meeting on the implementation of the revised SNA, and this meeting will also take into account the special needs of transition countries.

In 1968 the UN launched the International Comparison Project in cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania. Its objective was to set up a worldwide system allowing comparisons of the purchasing power of currencies and of gross domestic products. As a consequence of this project, in 1979 the Conference incorporated into its programme the "Comparison within the ICP framework for the European region." The European Comparison Programme soon became a well known and successfully operated project in the Conference's work programme for economic statistics. In line with the changes in central and eastern Europe, participation in the Programme is increasing. Preliminary results of the 1990 comparison in Group II, with Austria as a bridge country, are expected to become available in 1992. The year 1993 was proposed for the next round, which would remain a bilateral comparison. Romania, Bulgaria, the Russian Federation and perhaps others will join the 1993 comparison. Multilateral comparisons may start in 1996, when the necessary conditions in central and eastern European countries have been attained.

In 1991, the Conference decided to assign more attention to work on statistics of the hidden and informal activities inside the production boundary of national accounts. A revision of existing terminology in this field, and the preparation of an inventory of national practices in the collection and compilation of hidden economy statistics for GNP purposes is currently under way.

Guidelines for the inventory of practices in the European Community, prepared by Eurostat, were made available for that purpose. The compilation of a "guidebook" to statistics on the hidden economy for market economies, containing contributions on methodological problems and ways for their solution is envisaged for 1993, in close cooperation with Eurostat, ILO and OECD.

Work on agricultural statistics was reactivated by the twentieth session of the Study Group on Food and Agricultural Statistics, held in 1991, with the aim of organizing and implementing cooperative projects on the introduction of new agriculture statistics in transition countries. The group will develop, jointly with the FAO, recommendations for agricultural censuses, increase conceptual work on the environmental aspects of agriculture, and improve coordination of international activities through an Intersecretariat Working Group on Agricultural Statistics (UN/ECE, Eurostat, FAO, OECD).

A Seminar on Household Income Statistics was held in 1991 to examine the state-of-the-art in income statistics and it identified the development of regional guidelines on income statistics, consumption and as an important item for future work.

A joint ECE/ILO meeting in 1991 discussed various methodological issues concerning the calculation of consumer price indices and made recommendations for future work to consider, inter alia, the uses of consumer price indices and the effect of the uses on the design and composition of the indices. In addition, harmonization of work within Eurostat and the improvement of CPI methodology in transition countries will be discussed in future meetings.

6. Social and Demographic Statistics

Since its inception, the Conference of Euro-

pean Statisticians has always taken an active interest in the field of social and demographic statistics. Although considered important, the priority assigned to this field changed over the years as did the secretariat's resources. In the late sixties and early seventies, high priority was given to collaboration in the work undertaken by the UN Statistical Office on the possible development of a System of Social and Demographic Statistics and to the preparation of a regional set of recommendations for the decennial population and housing censuses in the ECE region. Although in the seventies and eighties higher priority was given to economic and environment statistics, the Conference maintained an active interest in all major fields of social and demographic fields.

In terms of work methods, the convening of meetings in the various subject-matter fields has traditionally been a major activity and has led to outputs such as regional recommendations for housing and population censuses, collaboration in the development of improved international classifications in specific fields, for example, the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH) in health statistics and the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), or provided a forum for experts of national statistical offices to exchange experience on particular problems in various fields of social and demographic statistics.

During the past two years, the work programme has been substantially reoriented to accommodate planned additional new publications on the situation of women in ECE countries, on international migration statistics and on key results from the 1990 round of censuses in the ECE region. In addition, the meeting programme has been reviewed in order to rely more heavily on work sessions and to foster joint meetings or back-

to-back meetings with other international organizations and specialized agencies. At present, the following projects are considered to be highest priority in this sub-programme: migration statistics, population and housing censuses, statistics on women, and housing statistics. Improved coordination in the collection and publication of migration statistics is expected to be achieved in the future through a recently created Intersecretariat Working Group between Eurostat and the ECE Statistical Division. One of the first issues examined by the Working Group was how to minimize the statistical reporting burden on EC and EFTA countries, and the ECE and Eurostat secretariats attained their objectively developing a joint questionnaire on international migration statistics which Eurostat will send to EC and EFTA countries to collect the statistics on international migration that are required by both ECE and the European Community.

7. Environment and Natural Resource Statistics

The sub-programme currently covers environment and energy statistics.

In environment statistics, the Conference's work is centered on three issues. There is, first of all, the development of standard statistical classifications in environmental sub-areas. Classifications on land use, water use, ambient air quality, waste, flora, fauna and habitats, economic protection expenditures and facilities, and environmental indicators are currently under development.

Secondly, the Conference is creating an International Environmental Data Service (IEDS), which is meant to be developed into an important service for all users of environmental statistics, and which will also include the publication of environmental compendia and of statistical monographs.

Thirdly, the Conference provides for an organizational framework in which national experts can regularly discuss their methodological concerns.

These three directions are mutually dependent so that each one profits from the others: the conceptual work has highlighted numerous methodological problems that were then transferred to a methodological meeting; the conclusions from methodological discussions have both determined approaches followed in the development of classifications and influenced the way in which the ECE compendia of environment statistics are structured and presented. The standard classifications are used in data collection for the IEDS; and the draft standard classifications are regularly tested in data collection for ECE compendia before they are finalized.

The success of the Conference in pursuing this network of activities is also due to two general conditions for national work in this field. On the one hand, over the years an increasing number of members of the Conference in various ways have acknowledged the need to become active in this new statistical field. On the other hand, this recognition happened to coincide with a period of considerable budgetary constraint for most, if not all, public statistical services, effectively preventing the allocation of resources that would have been required for fast progress. Joining forces internationally thus became a strategy, and the Conference benefitted from this genuine readiness for operational cooperation. As a result, much of the work done by the Conference was and continues to be pioneering work also for national statistical offices. It can be expected that the future evolution of international environment statistics will attach greater importance to the International Environmental Data Service because of the rapid growth of requests for internationally comparable environment statistics.

Finally, the discussion of methodological issues continues to be of great value, not only for the programme of work of the Conference in this field, but as an effective forum for national experts to maintain abreast of current developments.

An important step towards joint work among international and supranational organizations was made in 1991. In June 1991, a meeting of environmental ministers was held at Dobris Castle (Czech and Slovak Federal Republic). One of the results of the meeting was the decision to prepare a pan European state-of-the-environment report before the end of 1993. The request was entrusted to the European Community in cooperation with the ECE, and other relevant international organizations in the region, such as OECD, Council of Europe, WHO, IUCN and others. The work suggests several activities in the field of environment statistics, one of which could well be the joint preparation by ECE, Eurostat and OECD of an environmental compendium as a companion volume to the state-of-the-environment report.

In the field of energy statistics, the Conference concentrated over most of the past years on two areas of equal importance: the publication of the Annual Bulletin of General Energy Statistics, and the further development of international standard concepts and classifications. As this work evolved, it was felt necessary to harmonize all international data collections in order to arrive at a satisfactory solution to the problem of national respondent burden. Towards this end, an Intersecretariat Working Group on Energy Statistics was created in 1985. The OECD/IEA, Eurostat and the ECE secretariat met in order to harmonize their concepts and methodologies before tackling data collection procedures. A first product of the work of the Group was the publication of a joint (Eurostat/IEA/ECE)

guide to international energy statistics. A first joint questionnaire on coal statistics was used early in 1990, and 1991 saw the appearance of joint questionnaires on gas and electricity statistics. The joint questionnaires are accompanied by arrangements for data exchange and joint editing, so that the partners of the Intersecretariat Working Group effectively operate a joint database for published data. Today, the only option for alleviating respondent burden consists of compiling overall energy balances in the secretariat, rather than collecting data through questionnaires. This development will become possible once sufficient oil data are available – a development which is envisaged through the extension of the IEA/OECD oil questionnaire to non-OECD member countries of the ECE.

8. Statistical Support for ECE Publications, Studies and Projects

In addition to services provided for the Conference, the ECE Statistical Division publishes regular statistical bulletins of the Economic Commission for Europe (see Appendix 1), supports the statistical work of other ECE Principal Subsidiary Bodies of the Commission, and ECE studies and projects, among which, the Economic Survey of Europe and the Economic Bulletin for Europe figure most prominently.

In an effort to streamline the statistical support given to other ECE Divisions and, in particular, to the Division for Economic Analysis and Projections (DEAP), an Interdivisional Economic Statistics Team was created in August 1991. As its first task, the Interdivisional Team worked on the establishment of an economic statistics databank for transition countries, covering yearly, quarterly, and monthly data for the most important macro-economic variables.

In line with a decision taken by the Economic Commission for Europe, the Conference is requested to evaluate periodically the utility and impact of the ECE's various statistical publications for European policy makers and enterprises. A report on this matter, prepared by a working group of the Conference, will be considered at the plenary session in June 1992, and the Conference will report its findings to the Commission at the April 1993 session of the Commission.

In addition to its regular statistical publications, the Statistical Division is editing the **Statistical Journal of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**. Its objective is not only to reflect the Conference's work and to make it known to a wider audience, but also to give academic statisticians a forum and encourage the dialogue between official and academic statisticians.

9. Conclusions

From the overview provided on past work and future activities of the Conference, the conclusion can be drawn that the Conference has achieved a considerable record in coordinating international cooperation for official statistics in its four decades of existence. New tasks will come up in the future, for example, users of statistics will increasingly request direct access to databases. Therefore, one of the most important fields for the future will be the further development of statistical computing.

At present, statistical information systems are increasingly incorporated in computing networks. In that respect the use of administrative sources for data collection is or will become easier. On one hand, this provides for more efficiency in the production of statistics, on the other, it involves many data security and confidentiality problems. Since statistical offices have to

rely on individuals to obtain information, these offices are obliged to put resources into research to secure individual data and to avoid any misuse of them. This might become a significant challenge for the Conference in years to come.

This example shows that apart from the pure statistical description of economic, social, demographic, and environmental conditions, there are important tasks ahead for national statistical offices, for which international cooperation will certainly prove to be an important means of finding solutions. The recent past has shown that the Conference is a vital and flexible body, which is always ready to adapt to new circumstances. It will therefore in its fifth decade undoubtedly remain a body for coordinating international cooperation in Europe and North America, and for integrating these developments into the worldwide statistical system.

10. Further Reading

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Appendix 1.

List of Statistical Publications Regularly Issued by the Economic Commission for Europe

Section A. Statistical Publications issued by the Statistical Division

- I. Annual Bulletin of Coal Statistics for Europe
- II. Annual Bulletin of Electric Energy Statistics for Europe
- III. Annual Bulletin of Gas Statistics for Europe
- IV. Annual Bulletin of General Energy Statistics for Europe
- V. Statistical Indicators of Short-term Economic Changes in ECE countries (monthly). (Discontinued after the June 1991 issue).
- VI. Annual Bulletin of Transport Statistics for Europe
- VII. Statistics of Road Traffic Accidents in Europe (annual)
- VIII. Annual Bulletin of Housing and Building Statistics for Europe
- IX. Compendium of ECE Environmental Statistics (3-4 year periodicity)

Section B. Statistical Publications Issued Outside the Statistical Division

1. Agricultural Review for Europe, Volumes II-V (annual)

(Besides statistical tables the volumes show short market reviews)

Volume II: Agricultural Trade

Volume III: The Grain Market

Volume IV: The Livestock and Meat Market

Volume V: The Milk and Dairy Products Market

2. Prices of Agricultural Product and Selected Inputs in Europe and North America (annual)
3. Timber Bulletin, five issues (annual)
 - Nos. 3 and 7: Monthly Prices for Forest Products
 - Nos. 4 and 9: Forest Products Statistics
 - No. 6: Forest Products Trade Flow
4. Annual Bulletin of the Chemical Industry
5. Annual Bulletin of Trade in Chemical Products
6. Annual Bulletin of Steel Statistics for Europe
7. Statistics of World Trade in Steel (annual)
8. Bulletin of Statistics of World Trade in Engineering Products (annual) (Discontinued in June 1992)

Section C. Statistical Journal of United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Published by IOS Press, Amsterdam, Netherlands