



United Nations

**Statistical Commission
Economic Commission For Europe**

Report of the Conference of European Statisticians

**Fifty-eighth plenary session
Paris, 8-10 June 2010**

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ECE/CES/79

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I. Introduction

A. Attendance

1. The Conference of European Statisticians (CES) held its fifty-eighth plenary session in Paris at the Headquarters of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It was attended by representatives from Albania, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States and Uzbekistan.

2. The Conference was attended by representatives of the European Commission (Eurostat), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), United Nations Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (UNSIAP), United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the following specialised agencies and intergovernmental organizations: the European Free Trade Association (EFTA); Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS-STAT); the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); World Trade Organisation (WTO); European Central Bank (ECB); International Labour Office (ILO); International Monetary Fund (IMF); and The World Bank (WB).

3. Ms. Heli Jeskanen-Sundström (Finland) chaired the Conference.

B. Agenda and procedure

4. The provisional agenda (ECE/CES/78 and Add.1) was adopted.

II. Meetings of the Conference's parent bodies

A. Forty-first session of the United Nations Statistical Commission

5. UNSD presented to the Conference the follow up activities to the 41st session of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) held on 23-26 February 2010 as follows:

(a) An ad hoc expert group meeting held in March 2010 made detailed recommendations on the Human Development Index. This issue will be discussed further at the next session of the UNSC;

(b) The first United Nations Forum on Global Geographic Information Management is planned to be held in the autumn of 2011 in the Republic of Korea;

(c) Work has been launched on the Global Standards Inventory by a task team consisting of Mexico, the World Bank, ILO, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and UNSD;

(d) Consultations have started to form an expert group to develop a quality assurance framework template for national statistical systems;

(e) Work started with the Friends of the Chair Group on the Barriers to the Implementation of National Accounts and the Expert Group on the Framework for Environmental Statistics;

(f) The 2010 MDG report officially launched by the Secretary-General in June 2010 will constitute an important input for the Summit on the Millennium Development Goals to be held in September 2010 in New York.

6. UNSD presented the first copy of the new publication of the System of National Accounts 2008 (SNA 2008) to the Chair of the meeting.

Action taken by the Conference:

7. Countries and international agencies are encouraged to use the first World Statistics Day on 20 October 2010 as an opportunity to promote official statistics.

III. Coordination of international statistical work in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

A. Outcomes of the in-depth reviews of selected statistical areas carried out by the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians in October 2009

1. Statistical dissemination, communication and publications

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/1, ECE/CES/2010/1/Add.1

8. The outcomes of the in-depth review of statistical dissemination, communication and publications carried out by the Bureau in October 2009 were presented to the Conference.

9. Slovenia invited all countries to support the International Statistical Literacy Project under the International Association for Official Statistics. Eurostat drew attention to the related activities of the Eurostat group "Sponsorship on Communication". The first results of the work of this group will be available in approximately one year.

Action taken by the Conference

10. The Conference approved the proposed follow-up actions, including the development of guidelines on improving statistical literacy by the Steering Group on Statistical Dissemination and Communication.

2. Government finance, fiscal and public sector statistics

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/2, ECE/CES/2010/2/Add.1

11. The IMF presented to the Conference the outcomes of the in-depth review of government finance, fiscal and public sector statistics carried out by the Bureau in October 2009 and informed the Conference about the follow-up actions to the review:

(a) IMF plans to establish an external group of experts on government finance statistics (GFS). Preliminary plans are to hold a meeting in February 2011 and conduct a wider consultation process through electronic discussion groups. The first task of the group would be to update the Government Finance Statistics Manual (GFSM2001) to bring it in line with 2008 SNA;

(b) The IMF Executive Board endorsed the strategy for implementation of the GFSM2001 and for continued technical assistance for countries to implement the standard;

(c) Capacity building efforts have been undertaken to improve the implementation of GFS, such as providing technical assistance to selected countries to conform with the GFSM2001. IMF is contributing to the UNECE/EFTA seminar for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries on “Using GFS for National Accounts compilation” to be held in mid-2011.

12. ILO informed about the ILO/OECD project on measuring employment in the public sector.

B. Discussion on in-depth review topics to obtain input for the reviews to be carried out by the Bureau

1. In-depth review of time-use surveys

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/25

13. The Conference discussed challenges in the area of time-use surveys, based on a paper prepared by Germany with input from Finland and the United States. The outcomes of the discussion will serve as input to the in-depth review by the CES Bureau in November 2010. The following issues were raised during the discussion:

(a) Data from time-use surveys provide an invaluable source for measuring quality of life - an important issue highlighted in the Stiglitz report;

(b) In many countries, there is a strong demand for time-use data from policymakers and the academic community; however, in some countries the demand is not so pronounced;

(c) The cost of the time-use surveys can be reduced by implementing a lighter version of the time-use diary and using innovative data collection techniques that exploit the advantages of new technologies;

(d) There is a need for improvement in the comparability of time-use surveys across countries;

(e) The usefulness of developing practical guidelines on implementing time-use surveys was underlined;

(f) Japan and New Zealand offered to provide contributions to the Bureau discussion;

(g) It was suggested to contact some research institutions to look at their experiences with running time-use surveys.

Action taken by the Conference

14. The Conference invited countries and international organizations to provide input to the in-depth discussion to be held at the November 2010 meeting of the Bureau. Inputs on experiences with the light version of the time-use diary and the use of innovative data collection methods would be particularly welcome.

2. In-depth review of measuring information society and statistics on science, technology and innovation

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/4

15. The Conference discussed challenges in the area of measuring the information society and statistics on science, technology and innovation based on a paper prepared by

Australia. The outcomes of the discussion will serve as input to the in-depth review by the CES Bureau in November 2010. The following issues were raised during the discussion:

(a) The lack of a common definition of the information society makes it difficult to measure it effectively;

(b) There are useful manuals on topics such as innovation statistics and research and development, but the information society is changing very rapidly and is only partially captured in the System of National Accounts;

(c) Measurement challenges include tensions between consistency and relevance, as well as difficulties in determining price indices for information and communication technology services;

(d) There is scope for better measurement of the information society by re-using and linking existing statistical and administrative data sources. The resulting micro-data can provide a rich basis for research;

(e) There are many international groups working in this area, and stronger coordination is needed. A graphical representation mapping these groups to different information society concepts was proposed. The inventory of international groups maintained by Eurostat may be useful in this respect.

Action taken by the Conference:

16. The paper should be revised on the basis of the comments made and should clearly identify specific challenges and lessons learned. The revised paper will be reviewed by the Bureau in November 2010. The UNECE secretariat may contact CES member countries, inviting them to provide additional input to the paper.

IV. Progress reports and work of the Conference of European Statisticians Teams of Specialists

A. United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Statistical Programme: report on 2009 and plans for 2010

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/5, ECE/CES/2010/5/Add.1, ECE/CES/2010/5/Add.2

17. The Conference was informed of the process of preparation and adoption of the annual UNECE Statistical Programme. The report on the implementation of the 2009 Programme and plans for the rest of 2010 were presented. The Conference was informed about the expert meetings and workshops that have taken place since June 2009. Information was also provided on future meetings to take place between June 2010 and June 2011.

B. The Database of International Statistical Activities

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/29

18. The Conference was informed about the latest update of the Database of International Statistical Activities (DISA), which presents the statistical activities of more than 30 international agencies undertaken in the UNECE region. The Conference of European Statisticians is the owner of the classification according to which DISA is organised. In recent years the DISA classification has been adopted for various other purposes, for example, Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) and reporting on

technical assistance activities by the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS 21). The Bureau of the Conference will approve any future revisions of DISA classifications.

C. Reports of the meetings of the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians, progress reports on the Teams of Specialists working under the Conference

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/45, ECE/CES/2010/47

19. The Reports of the CES Bureau Meetings were presented for information.

V. Manuals, guidelines and recommendations of the Conference

A. Manual on gender statistics

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/7/Rev.1, ECE/CES/2010/7/Add.1

Action taken by the Conference

20. The Conference endorsed the Manual on gender statistics as presented in document ECE/CES/2010/7 Rev.1.

21. The Conference noted the great practical value of the Manual. The UNECE secretariat will publish the Manual and will translate it into Russian with financial support from the World Bank. The World Bank is planning to translate it into other languages and use it as a training material in other regions of the world. The Conference recognized the need to continue work on gender statistics involving the high level of expertise available in member countries.

B. Measuring new forms of family and household arrangements

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/8, ECE/CES/2010/8/Add.1

Action taken by the Conference

22. The Conference endorsed the Report on measuring new forms of family and household arrangements subject to the inclusion of the amendments presented in the Annex of document ECE/CES/2010/8/Add.1. The Conference also noted that the Task Force on Families and Households has completed its work and is therefore dissolved.

C. Measuring the quality of employment

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/9, ECE/CES/2010/9/Add.1

23. The Report on *Potential indicators for measurement of quality of employment* was presented. Attention of the Conference was drawn to the amendments presented in Annexes 1 and 2 of document ECE/CES/2010/9/Add.1.

Action taken by the Conference

24. The Conference endorsed the Report on *Potential indicators for measurement of quality of employment* and agreed to consider further work in this area based on the suggestions presented in the Annex to document ECE/CES/2010/9/Add.1, in particular

concerning operational definitions, guidelines and data sources. The Conference emphasized the need for further practical experiences.

25. The Conference also emphasized the need for statisticians to be cautious in interpreting indicators due to the heterogeneity of jobs in society and individual expectations. National Statistical Offices should acknowledge the subjective component of determining quality of employment and their focus should be on measurement issues and tools, leaving the subjective issues to policy makers and governments.

VI. Seminar on spatial statistics

26. This seminar was organised by the Census and Geography Agency (INEGI) of Mexico and Eurostat. The seminar discussed countries' experiences in using statistical grids in official statistics and the potential of spatial analysis as a tool for exploiting the combination of geographic and statistical information.

27. The keynote speech was given by Mr. L.H. Backer (Statistics Sweden and European Forum for Geostatistics). He outlined the user needs for spatial statistics and emphasized the importance of grids providing a fixed, neutral system suitable for spatial analysis across statistical domains and administrative areas.

A. Session 1: Use of statistical grids in official statistics

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/11; ECE/CES/2010/12; ECE/CES/2010/13

28. The session was organised by Austria and was based on invited papers by Finland, United States and Slovenia. The session covered various aspects of creation, use and provision of statistical grids and grid based data. The session also addressed the ways that grid-based statistical data can complement traditional statistics based on administrative or statistical units. The advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches were highlighted with respect to costs and benefits and an improved support to decision making.

29. The following issues were raised during the discussion:

(a) Grids are a good tool for harmonizing geo-referenced data from different sources and for aggregating point-based data. An important advantage of a grid system is its flexibility in aggregating data according to administrative or other functional areas and the possibility to choose a grid size that allows protecting confidentiality;

(b) Metadata for geographically compiled data do not necessarily align with statistical metadata which can raise problems in dissemination of spatial statistics. This requires further development of metadata standards;

(c) It is not always possible to harmonise grid sizes across the country; this can be an issue when presenting the information for the whole country;

(d) Maintaining different systems of geographical areas is resource demanding and standardization allows for cost savings;

(e) Release of census data by grids can be a promising way of promoting the use of grid data;

(f) When disseminating spatial statistics based on grids, confidentiality should be carefully considered; there is a need for more methodological work to develop appropriate solutions.

B. Session 2: Spatial analysis: a tool for exploiting the combination of geographic and statistical information and improving dissemination

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/14; ECE/CES/2010/15; ECE/CES/2010/16; ECE/CES/2010/17

30. The session was organised by Brazil and was based on invited papers by Israel, Sweden, the Netherlands and Mexico. The session considered the potential for spatial statistics in different thematic areas. It addressed the challenges associated with specific types of data, such as the definition of units depending on the area under study and the choice of the most promising types of analysis. The costs and benefits of spatial analysis with respect to data collection were discussed. The session also presented best practice examples of dissemination of spatially referenced statistics and examples where spatial analysis could provide new insights into the data.

31. The following issues were raised during the discussion:

(a) Statistical offices face an increasing demand for spatial information for policymaking. The combination of geographic information systems and administrative sources offers a new range of options for meeting the demand; developing guidelines on how to best use the modern techniques for this purpose would be useful;

(b) Statistical offices have to remain open to the use of a variety of different tools to take advantage of the rapid development of software applications; partnerships with commercial software vendors (e.g. Google) can be beneficial but the associated costs have to be carefully considered; the advantages and disadvantages of using open-source versus proprietary solutions for spatial analysis and dissemination deserve further analysis;

(c) Adhering to existing international standards and developing new ones is necessary to ensure interoperability of data and web applications; statistical offices have a challenge to cope with the different emerging spatial data infrastructure initiatives worldwide, the guidelines and procedures to be followed by a NSO in this regard require further investigation;

(d) Statistical offices must maintain the priority of ensuring the quality of the disseminated data while taking on board the new technological developments in spatial statistics.

C. Session 3: General discussion and conclusions

32. The session was organized by Mexico in the form of a round table discussion. In summarising the seminar, the Seminar Organiser noted the following:

(a) Spatial analysis offers a promising set of tools and methods for getting added value from the combination of geographic and statistical information, as well as enhancing the dissemination of statistical data;

(b) Spatial analysis and geographical information systems should serve a variety of users and can be effectively used for policymaking. This requires further discussion between statistical agencies, policymakers, academia, mapping agencies and other institutions;

(c) There is a need for strengthening the international harmonisation and standardisation of spatial data and metadata;

(d) The use of statistical grids needs to be addressed in the broader context of increasing demand for small area statistics, the need for linking spatial statistics with land

use and other spatial data, and the need to produce statistical data series that are independent of administrative units;

(e) Grids provide a suitable and flexible measurement unit for aggregating and disseminating geo-referenced data, but they do not substitute for other units such as census blocks or administrative units;

(f) Further work is needed on how to protect the confidentiality of spatial data; developing common approaches would be useful;

(g) The varying needs of customers using spatial data require developing both standardised and custom-made solutions for data dissemination.

Action taken by the Conference

33. The Conference asked the UNECE secretariat to publish the proceedings of the seminar.

34. The challenges identified by the seminar should be brought to the attention of existing CES expert groups on management of statistical information systems, statistical metadata, statistical data confidentiality and sharing of statistical software. These groups should discuss the issues raised at the seminar and elaborate proposals for further work.

VII. Seminar on the impact of global crises on statistical systems

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/24

35. The seminar was organised by IMF and OECD. The seminar focused on new challenges arising from global crises and their implications on the longer term development of official statistics.

36. The keynote speech was given by Mr. P. Moutot, European Central Bank. Mr. Moutot provided a comprehensive view of the need for good quality and timely economic and financial statistics from the point of view of a central bank user who has to put together “all the pieces of the puzzle” of an economic outlook. The current financial crisis has further underlined the importance of greater transparency in financial markets and an improved framework for financial stability analysis.

A. Session 1: Financial statistics, balance sheets and cross-border linkages

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/3, ECE/CES/2010/18, ECE/CES/2010/19

37. The session was organised by IMF and was based on invited papers by the United States, Norway and the World Trade Organisation. The session addressed the data gaps on key financial sector vulnerabilities that have to be better monitored, such as cross-border financial linkages, vulnerability of domestic economies to shocks, and financial sector risks.

38. The session highlighted the need to understand interconnectedness, both across national borders, and between the real, financial and government sectors.

39. The session also focused on the relations between various agencies providing data within a country and at the international level, and the mutual benefits from cooperation. The dependence of NSOs on other agencies as sources of data creates potential vulnerabilities to their credibility. Government finance statistics are a good example in this sense where the NSO relies on information from the Ministry of Finance. In this context, the need for transparency was stressed as the NSO needs the full information. Here

international agencies have a role in providing guidance through international standards, and, where appropriate, validating that the information provided by the NSO is consistent with these standards. Consistency with accounting standards was also stressed.

40. The session also highlighted the need for NSOs to enhance the presentation of statistics. Better presentation may help with identifying early warning signs in data but NSOs have to be careful not to overstep the borders of official statistics. The more disaggregated the data, the higher is the possibility of crossing the line, particularly in the financial sector. However, the world is complex and it is a role of statisticians to help provide meaningful and understandable signals from multi-dimensional and constantly changing environments.

B. Session 2: Communication and timeliness

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/20, ECE/CES/2010/21, ECE/CES/2010/27, ECE/CES/2010/28

41. The session was organised by Statistics Netherlands and was based on invited papers by New Zealand and Romania, and supporting papers by France and the United Nations Statistical Division. The Conference discussed how to improve the communication and timeliness of official statistics in the light of lessons learned from the crisis.

42. There is increasing pressure on NSOs to speed up data availability and provide more disaggregated data. With regard to improving frequency and timeliness, concerns were expressed about the potential loss of quality and risk to the credibility of the NSOs. Examples were provided of some frequent datasets that had stopped being disseminated because of quality concerns. On the other hand, there are international efforts to promote the availability of business cycle statistics. The users' need for high frequency data (on financial transactions, retail trade, etc.) may be partly satisfied by obtaining data from private companies (credit/debit card transactions, retail chains and others). When improving timeliness statisticians have to bear in mind that there is a fine line between the tasks of NSOs and the tasks of forecasters.

43. The Conference underlined the importance of maintaining the quality of established data series and filling gaps in existing data sets, particularly in sectoral and balance sheet data, while considering the development of new data series. The need to communicate with producers and users was also stressed.

C. Session 3: Social and household statistics

Documentation: ECE/CES/2010/22, ECE/CES/2010/23, ECE/CES/2010/26

44. The session was organised by OECD and was based on invited papers by Sweden, the Netherlands and Eurostat. The session considered the social and household implications of the crisis. It discussed how to provide relevant and timely social information to monitor the situation of the most vulnerable parts of society. Different solutions were considered on how to collect data quickly and to react to new data demands that can arise in situations of crisis.

45. The speakers emphasized that the current financial crisis has reinforced the importance of timely and reliable social statistics, going beyond the labour market field. Such statistics portray the most vulnerable population groups, provide the basis for policy measures and help to evaluate the impact of the crisis in a timely manner. Combination of objective and subjective wellbeing measures can bring new knowledge and ideas to policy makers.

46. Four main messages emerged from the session:

- (a) the importance of flexibility, such as the use of Labour Force Survey data for uses not previously considered;
- (b) the need to look at microdata to understand the dynamics of labour markets;
- (c) the need to consider social implications of policies from a broader perspective than the labour market, such as looking at crime and health statistics;
- (d) the need to distinguish between data for longer-term analysis and data for short-term monitoring when introducing new data sources.

D. Session 4: Conclusions and recommendations for follow-up work

47. This session focused on the recommendations to the Conference for follow-up work. The following conclusions were presented by the Seminar Organizer:

(a) The points raised in the discussion broadly support the analysis of data gaps set out in the joint IMF and the Financial Stability Board (FSB) Secretariat report to G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors in October 2009 on the “Financial Crisis and Information Gaps” (<http://www.imf.org/external/np/g20/pdf/102909.pdf>). The need for improvements in understanding cross border linkages, identifying risks in the financial sector and strengthening sectoral, particularly balance sheet data was underlined. The importance of disaggregated data was highlighted across the sessions;

(b) In terms of demands on NSOs in times of crisis, there is pressure for more frequent and timely data. However, concerns were raised on the implications of these pressures for quality. The seminar emphasized the importance of quality;

(c) With regard to the institutional implications of the crisis, two observations were made:

(i) First, the importance of a good relationship between agencies was underlined. The discussion highlighted the dependence of NSOs on other agencies for the supply of information, and the need to ensure that these data are reliable. There is a pressure on NSOs to expand activities but NSOs need to be careful with spreading out into the fields where they do not have a comparative advantage. The international agencies also have an important role in providing guidance and validating data;

(ii) Examples of creative solutions to address the crisis were provided by several statistical agencies – with you-tube videos, expanding visual presentation of data, use of data mining, and flexible use of available data sources. These ideas are worth further investigation;

(d) The Inter-Agency Group on Economic and Financial Statistics (IAG) was established to promote available data and investigate data gaps in the wake of the crisis. The IAG consists of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), the European Central Bank (ECB), Eurostat, IMF (chair), OECD, World Bank and the UN. The seminar provided good basis for these agencies for further reflection.

VIII. Selection of topics for seminars on foundational issues of statistical systems and on emerging issues to take place during the 2011 plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians

48. Taking into account the results of the survey carried out among the CES members in May 2010 and the recommendation by the CES Bureau, the following topics were selected for the CES seminars in 2011:

A. For the seminar on foundational issues of statistical systems

1. Organization of data collection and data sharing / implementation of the standard for Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX): management challenges from the national perspective

Seminar organizer: UNECE

Session organizer: Netherlands (session 1)

Papers offered by: Canada, Germany, Israel, Mexico, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, ECB, World Bank and other members of the SDMX sponsors group.

49. The seminar will focus on strategic issues and managerial challenges related to data collection in national statistical organisations and data sharing between organisations, including the implementation of SDMX standards.

B. For the seminar on emerging issues

1. Measuring human capital

Seminar organizer: New Zealand, in cooperation with Canada and UNECE.

Session organizer: Canada, Poland and Mexico to contribute

Papers offered by: Belarus, Canada, Israel, United States (Bureau of Economic Analysis), OECD, World Bank.

50. Measurement of human capital is of interest from a number of perspectives. Today the economic importance of knowledge and skills is widely recognised within labour economics, growth theory, business economics, sustainable development, and particularly in the context of demographic change. At the same time, the personal and social wellbeing effects of learning are considered as important as the economic ones. Statisticians are in the early stages of work in this area and are trying to reach common views on why and how to measure human capital. The seminar will address why human capital measurement is an important issue and how different approaches to its measurement are relevant for different needs.

Action taken by the Conference:

51. The secretariat will distribute an electronic copy of the proposal for the 2011 seminar topics (document ECE/CES/2010/10/Add.1) to allow countries to consult their offices for possible contributions.

52. The Seminar Organisers will invite selected countries and organizations to prepare papers for the seminars to provide basis for discussion.

53. The Conference requested the CES Bureau and the secretariat to follow up on the organization of the two seminars in 2011.

IX. Other business

54. The Conference was informed about the forthcoming IAOS Conference 'Official Statistics and the Environment: Approaches, Issues, Challenges and Linkages' taking place in Chile on 20-22 October 2010. Participants' attention was drawn to a special session on the revision of the International Statistical Institute Declaration of Professional Ethics.

55. The 2011 plenary session of the Conference will take place during the week of 13-17 June 2011 in Geneva.
