STATISTICAL COMMISSION and   ECE/CES/BUR/2007/FEB/14
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE   23 January 2007

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

For information

Third meeting of the 2006/2007 Bureau
Geneva, 12-13 February 2007   Item 7e of the Provisional
                                            Agenda

PROGRESS REPORT OF THE STEERING GROUP ON MANAGEMENT OF STATISTICAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS (MSIS)

Note prepared by the UNECE secretariat

BACKGROUND

1.   The Steering Group on Management of Statistical Information Systems (MSIS) was created by the Bureau at its October 2002 meeting (CES/BUR.2003/9/Add.2). The Steering Group's objectives are to provide a forum for exchange of experiences among information systems managers from national statistical offices and making available leading practices in the area of statistical information processing.

2.   The foundation of the Steering Group was part of efforts aimed at streamlining the pattern of activities in the area of statistical data processing. A rising challenge is the necessity of unifying, methodologically, the work in specialised areas like data reporting, data editing, metadata, disclosure control, etc.

3.   The activities of the Steering Group are undertaken under the joint auspices of the UNECE, Eurostat and OECD. The IMF participates actively in the work of the Steering Group.

PROGRESS ACHIEVED TO DATE

4.   Already at the time of its formation, the Steering Group proposed to reduce the number of distinct activities. The chain of Seminars on Integrated Statistical Information Systems and Related Matters was discontinued and merged together with periodic meetings on management of statistical information systems.

5.   Similarly, at the Steering Group's recommendation, the issues related to processing of geo-referenced statistical information were taken up at more general fora and the series of work sessions on geographical information systems (GIS) was discontinued. Obviously, it is understood that, in the case of emerging developments, a specialised ad-hoc event on GIS may be organized.

6.   According to informatics managers in national statistical offices, the MSIS meetings provide a unique forum for exchange of their experiences. In order to better organize the knowledge obtained through these events, the Steering Group decided in 2002 to create a **Website on Leading IT Practices in National Statistical Offices**. OECD originally offered a very good infrastructure for hosting the website with a number of added functionalities. The website was later transferred to its current location on the UNECE server

(http://www.unece.org/stats/sis/). While the UNECE could not offer all the advanced features originally provided by the OECD, its relative advantage was that the papers describing the IT practices in national statistical offices were already located on its website. The current work on the website, therefore, consists mainly of indexing the papers of interest according to the agreed structure.

7.   The Steering Group organized the **International Survey on the Role of the National Statistical Offices in e-Services**. The survey focused on capturing the information on the impact of the Internet in developing on-line data collection and dissemination services. The results were published as CES/AC.71/25 in April 2005 and are available on the UNECE website (http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/ces/ac.71/2005/25.e.pdf). One of the results of the survey was that the MSIS Steering Group put, in its substantive work, emphasis on studying the client relationship from both the respondent and the data user perspectives.

8.   The MSIS meetings usually take place in the first half of the year and attract, on average, about 70 participants from UNECE member countries as well as Australia, Brazil, Japan, New Zealand and Mexico. This interest brought with it an opportunity to spread more awareness among the national statistical offices on issues related to the implementation and possible benefits of standards emanating from the SDMX initiative. Therefore, they are organized back-to-back with the **OECD sponsored meetings of the Expert Group on Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange**.

9.   The Steering Group has undertaken, using the meetings on MSIS, annual reviews of the related activities of the Conference. In particular, it has made recommendations for the work plans of the Task Forces on Common Metadata Framework and the Electronic Raw Data Reporting.

ONGOING AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES

10.   From a substantive viewpoint, the MSIS activities are focused around the following topics:
   a) governance, management and development strategies of statistical information systems;
   b) architecture of statistical information systems, including impact of changes in statistical processes, metadata driven systems, data collection channels, processing, warehousing and data interchange;
   c) user perspective on statistical information systems, comprising issues like dissemination, accessibility, usability testing, service oriented architecture and the impact of the Internet.

11.   Within the topic of **governance**, the questions related to outsourcing and service partnership created particular interest. As was discussed over the past few years, the UNECE is currently analysing the knowledge that has been collected. It will present, at the May 2007 MSIS meeting, a paper that will identify prevailing approaches to outsourcing and service partnerships. It will also look for answers to the question of what is the core control that the statistical office needs to retain over its information systems, and what may be feasible for outsourcing. Depending on the findings of this analysis, the MSIS Steering Group may consider organizing a survey on the status and approaches to outsourcing and service partnership.

12.   The topic on **architecture** relates to one of the past achievements of the Conference – the guidelines on the "Statistical Information Systems Architecture for National Statistical Offices". The guidelines, published in 1999, provided results of an extensive research undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s. The current activities reflect the view from the perspective of networking and growing demand for on-line services. The related papers are available on the UNECE website.

13.   The **user perspective** concerns studies, within the MSIS context, from the technical viewpoint, while issues of communication and media relations are considered under a distinct activity of the Conference. The goal of the MSIS is to increase the knowledge of methodologies for making the information services more user-friendly and better aligned with the expected behaviour of the target user groups. Looking into the issue of ergonomic interfaces is one of the future challenges for the MSIS Steering Group.

CHALLENGES FOR THE COMING PERIOD

14.   The Steering Group was proposed as a unifying element for various activities on (electronic) data processing. While it fulfilled part of this goal through annual review of activities of the Conference in the related areas, part of the focus was looking into the interest of informatics managers. However, as the specific activities bring sometimes controversial results and recommendations, the MSIS Steering Group can intensify its focus on such cross-cutting issues. The following are non-exhaustive examples of such issues.

   a) The quality experts promote a trend of respondent side editing (or editing nearer the source). This may provide benefits to statistical offices with respect to costs as well as quality. On the other hand, the present trends in electronic data reporting aim at increasing the automation, with a view of decreasing the response burden. Therefore, they are not so enthusiastic about the respondent-side editing.

   b) Interaction between data editing and disclosure control. The statistical disclosure control techniques often involve cell suppressions and perturbations, in particular in relation to microdata, thus decreasing the data quality. The data editing methods, on the other hand, aim at improving the quality through imputing missing values and correcting outliers, but may compromise the confidentiality if applied after perturbations and cell suppressions.

   c) All expert groups come across linking of various data sources, and particularly combining statistical surveys and administrative registers and records. There are issues linked to metadata, data reporting, disclosure control as well as editing. Therefore, this topic should be discussed from a more general perspective, and the MSIS should provide a platform for such discussion.

   d) Experience shows that metadata related issues cut across any other electronic data processing activity. This does not apply only to technical issues, but also to management and governance. Therefore, the metadata related issues might represent a driving force for the future MSIS activities.

15.   The Steering Group on MSIS and the events on this topic mainly attract the attention of developed statistical offices. While the recent events succeeded in soliciting some participation from the CIS and South-East Europe, the participation is less than in some other events sponsored by the Conference. Therefore, the Steering Group, and the UNECE secretariat face a challenge of bringing in countries from the CIS and South-East Europe.

Recent participation of the countries in question was motivated to a large extent by holding the meeting in Bratislava and Sofia. Therefore, this challenge does not relate only to the substantive content, but also to fund-raising and organization.

EXPECTED OUTPUTS

16.   The MSIS Steering Group will, subject to the approval by the Bureau, continue to facilitate the exchange of experience and identify leading practices. These will be summarised in products (electronic and/or printed publications). At present, the following outputs are planned in the forthcoming two years:

- Website on Leading IT Practices in National Statistical Offices (continued);
- Summary of national practices in outsourcing and service partnerships (based on existing material and a possible survey);
- An update/addendum to the publication "Information Systems Architecture for National Statistical Offices".

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