

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

For discussion

Third meeting of the 2006/2007 Bureau
Geneva, 12-13 February 2007

Item 1c of the Provisional
Agenda

BEA COMMENTS ON “IN DEPTH REVIEW OF BUSINESS STATISTICS”

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1. Overall, the focus in these papers on such issues as emerging user needs, setting statistical priorities, and the updating of manuals (and statistics) and collection methods to remain relevant and efficient is to be applauded. However, the range of issues that might be brought into this “In-Depth Review” is very broad and virtually any one of the issues could form the basis for a working group and a work program. Indeed, most member countries – including the United States -- could probably provide a detailed breakdown on what they are doing in each of these topic areas raised in these short papers. Perhaps the discussion at the UNECE meeting could try and focus on some priorities for this in-depth review.

2. At BEA we would vote to focus on two of the topics that Rob Edwards raised in the document ECE/CES/BUR/2007/FEB/4:

- a) addressing emerging user needs; and
- b) the associated updating of manuals to remain relevant and to address these user needs.

In our view updating the manuals and consistently implementing them (using whatever business statistics and methods each country has at its disposal) are the most effective steps that can be taken towards improving the consistency and relevance of economic statistics/ To that end we also agree with one of his other main concerns—that it is important to assist countries in adopting the international standards agreed to—such as the classification system and the SNA and BOP manuals.

3. All the other issues - sampling, Censuses, respondent burden, integrated surveys, business registers, etc. - are important issues, and sharing best practices on these topics are useful activities. However, improvements in many of the areas will depend upon individual country or regional tax and statistical laws and regulations, accounting standards, resources, and business practices mean that most solutions will be country specific.

SELECTED COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

4. For example, Eurostat (ECE/CES/BUR/2007/FEB/4/Add.4) lays out a very broad program of work that they are undertaking to improve business statistics in the EU. Much of it makes good sense.

- Paragraph 5 talks about the importance of streamlining surveys and integration of different areas of business statistics—all from a European perspective. Such integration in data collection makes sense, but would be difficult to extend to other regions or countries. In the United States, for example, legal restrictions on the

sharing of data across statistical agencies pose large impediments to such sharing. On the other hand, efforts to improve consistency through the adoption of integrated concepts and methods by BEA, BLS, and the Federal Reserve Board -- such as those laid out in the SNA's full production account and in a recent NBER volume on Integrated Accounts, are reaping significant benefits for data users.

- Paragraph 6 promotes the use of tax and administrative data. This may be fine in the European context, but in the United States, we have found that the economic usefulness of such data can be limited because the collection criteria are not driven by economics but rather tax and administrative purposes.

5. The document ECE/CES/BUR/2007/FEB/4/Add.2/Rev.1 is written by Ivo Havinga. He refers to integration efforts in the context of Friends of the Char group—and we have already sent comments about their planned work. (They are along the same lines as our comments above) Paragraph 8 talks about the importance of Economic Censuses and he talks about a technical report that will help countries undertake such a Census—this is a good idea. Indeed, whatever UNSD can do to promote best practices is excellent.

6. Along those lines, if there is support for a broader initiative than that which we are proposing above, the UNSD and the IMF (with support from member countries) might wish to develop a coordinated and expanded work program for disseminating information on best practices, ranging from business registers and Censuses to use of administrative data and integrated data collection and sampling techniques.

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