

STATISTICAL COMMISSION
and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Report
of the forty-eighth plenary session

(Paris, France, 13-15 June 2000)



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REPORT THE MEETING

I. INTRODUCTION

Attendance

1. The Conference of European Statisticians held its forty-eighth plenary session in Paris at the invitation of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It was attended by representatives of Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States.
2. The session was attended by representatives of the European Commission (Eurostat).
3. Japan, Mexico, Mongolia and the Republic of Korea participated under Article 11 of the terms of reference of the ECE.
4. Representatives of the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis (UN Statistics Division); and the following specialised agencies and intergovernmental organisations attended: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO); International Labour Office (ILO); International Monetary Fund (IMF); World Trade Organisation (WTO); Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS-STAT); the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and European Environmental Agency (EEA).
5. The following non-governmental organisation in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was represented: International Statistical Institute. CESD-Communaute attended the session at the invitation of the Secretariat.
6. Mr. Svein Longva (Norway) chaired the session. Ms. Martín-Guzmán (Spain), and Messrs. Donal Murphy (Ireland), Tadeusz Toczynski (Poland) and Hallgrimur Snorrason (Iceland) served as Vice-Chairpersons.

Agenda and procedure

7. The provisional agenda (ECE/CES/57) was adopted. The Conference recalled the procedure for improving the efficiency of plenary sessions (CES/821) that the Conference adopted at its 1994 plenary session.

Opening statements

8. Opening statements were delivered by Ms. Huebner, the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe, Mr. Kondo, the Deputy Secretary General of the OECD and Mr. Longva, Chairman of the Conference.

II. IMPLICATION OF MEETINGS OF THE CONFERENCE'S PARENT BODIES

A. May 2000 session of the Economic Commission for Europe

Documentation: CES/2000/2

9. The Conference thanked Eurostat for facilitating the participation of representatives of central and east European countries and of CIS countries in the annual plenary sessions of the Conference of European Statisticians and in selected other high priority meetings in the Conference's work programme, by permitting representatives of the statistical offices of these countries to use the European Commission's PHARE and TACIS funds to finance their participation in these meetings;

10. The Conference agreed that the ECE Statistical Division is already collaborating closely and in a partnership relationship with Eurostat, OECD, the UN Statistics Division and other international organizations in carrying out the Conference's programme of work and also, to a considerable extent, in the secretariats' collection of statistics from ECE member countries.

B. March 2000 session of the UN Statistical Commission

11. The Conference asked the ECE Secretariat to conduct, in co-operation with other international organizations, a survey of methods used for producing early (advance) statistical estimates, to be discussed at the joint meeting on national accounts in the spring of 2002. The Conference also noted that the ECE secretariat is participating in joint work on defining a minimum set of national accounts, which is intended to enable countries with less developed statistical systems to estimate the main macro-economic aggregates.

12. The Conference noted the moratorium on the start of the global International Comparison Programme. It also noted that the European Comparison Programme is expected to proceed as planned, under the leadership of Eurostat and the OECD, and with the active involvement of the ECE and CIS-STAT. The Conference also agreed that in the ECE region the management and financial implications of continuing the ECP will be dealt with in the course of the next ECP Consultation meeting that the ECE will host in Geneva in October 2000.

13. The Conference noted with appreciation that the ECE Statistical Division plans to collaborate with UNSD, UNDP and other international organizations to help strengthen the statistical basis of the UNDP's Human Development Report

14. The Conference noted that the next meeting of the UN Statistical Commission is planned to be held from 6-9 March 2001.

C. Other important UN meetings

15. The Conference noted the information on the planned seminar sponsored by the ECE in cooperation with United Kingdom, Switzerland and Italy. The seminar will be organised on the margins of the Geneva 2000 special session of the General Assembly, and it will focus on the benchmarking for monitoring social progress. The seminar will take the form of a series of round tables. The Conference asked the Bureau to consider at its autumn 2000 meeting possible impacts that the outcome of the seminar could have on the Conference and on national and international statistical offices in the future.

III. INTEGRATED PRESENTATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL WORK IN THE ECE REGION

Documentation: CES/2000/4 and addenda 1-7; CES/2000/5, CES/2000/6 and Add.1; CES/2000/7 and Add.1; CES/2000/8 and addenda 1 and 2

a) Introduction

16. The Conference agreed to review the Integrated Presentation in the manner suggested by the Bureau, namely to review three topics in greater depth, and to review the remaining 40 or so programme elements more quickly on the basis of the detailed recommendations made by the Bureau. The three topics that it reviewed in greater depth were (i) quality assessments of statistics (part of Programme Element 3.2); (ii) harmonised consumer price indices (part of P.E. 3.9); and (iii) agriculture statistics (part of P.E. 3.10).

b) Quality review of statistical data

Documentation: CES/2000/5; CES/2000/6 and addenda 1

17. This topic refers in part to Programme Element 2.3, and it was discussed on the basis of a paper prepared by Bulgaria (CES/2000/5, jointly prepared by the Bulgarian National Bank and the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria), a joint paper prepared by Switzerland and Canada (CES/2000/6), and a paper by the IMF (CES/2000/6/Add.1).

18. The Bulgarian paper reviewed issues related to the harmonisation of the national statistics with the European Union requirements, its development over the period of transition to a market economy, and the role of the General Data Dissemination System (GDDS), developed by IMF, in this respect. It was noted that these topics were discussed within the context of the invitation for negotiations that Bulgaria received in December 1999 for accession to the European Union. It was also stressed that the national legislation in the statistical area had to be harmonised with the European legislation.

19. The role of GDDS for the development of statistics in the case of Bulgaria was emphasised. It was pointed out that an accession to the GDDS could be a significant factor for the enhancement of the national statistical system. Following a strict timetable as established by the GDDS also helps to improve the quality of data. Accession to the GDDS leads to improving the co-operation among the different institutions which are involved in producing the statistical information, i.e. the Statistical Agency, the Ministry of Finance and the National Bank. In Bulgaria, strengthening the inter-institutional co-operation lead not only to the improvement of the quality of statistical data, but also to the establishment of uniform principles and methods for data dissemination.

20. The paper submitted by Switzerland was concerned with the role of a "peer review" in evaluating the work of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office as an essential part of the restructuring of the national statistical services. The project was launched in order to meet the new challenges for producing statistical data such as: changes in technology and society; globalisation of markets and information; growing competition on the information market; new requests for information; office's critical operating conditions, etc. The review was carried out with the assistance, as peers, of two experts from Statistics Canada with a view to identifying and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the existing Swiss statistical system, and of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office in particular, and by comparing it with other acknowledged models and standards.

21. It was noted that the conduct of a peer review pre-supposes the design of a suitable methodology. It also requires that the scope of the review be defined so as to include a large range of questions

concerning legal foundations, institutional frameworks, core values of government statistics, priority needs and activities, and the Office's structure and services. Furthermore, for a review to be effective, it is important that the political level above the Statistical Office also be engaged. It is important that the recommendations of the review encompass recommendations not only about the staff of the statistical office but also the government and even the parliament.

22. The Conference noted that the review of the Swiss Statistical Office had been prompted, not by any crises in the office or the statistical system, but by the desire of its management to introduce changes and improvements based on the objective assessment and evaluation of the national statistical system. The Conference also noted the prerequisites for a successful review, which include inter alia, openness of the review because certain risks have to be accepted if the results are to be published, access to interviewing the users, and openness of the staff of the Office.

23. The IMF paper was concerned with the various reviews of statistical activities that have been done in the past, including the motives that gave rise to them. It also explored the motive for increased transparency in an international setting that seems to be playing an increasingly important role. Mrs. Carson, who presented the IMF paper, emphasised that the reviews of statistical activities - whether of national statistical systems or individual agencies within the system or of specific sets of products - are not a new phenomenon. It was noted that a variety of motives underline the various reviews which have been undertaken - these range from setting out the facts and alternative remedies, to confirming the overall strength of a programme or being a part of a quality assurance process.

24. Another aspect of the review is its international dimension. It was stressed that the calls for reviews with an international focus seem to be increasing in volume. The underlying reasons, or motives, recognise more explicitly that the interests in the outcome of the review process extend beyond the solely national interests in the results of the statistical review. It was noted that by the end of 1999, the IMF had conducted some assessments through the preparation of "reports on the observance of standards and codes". In this context the treatment of data quality in the SDDS and GDDS was recalled.

25. The Conference was informed that IMF had undertaken two projects which were designed to further a dialogue about how the SDDS and GDDS could be used to increase the understanding of data quality issues and to encourage improvement in data quality. At present the IMF is working on elaborating a framework for assessing the quality of data used for macroeconomic analysis. The aim is to design an integrated and flexible framework in which data quality can be assessed by a broad range of interested users. A meeting on data quality, jointly organised by IMF and the Republic of Korea, will be held in December 2000 in Washington. The aim is to have an intensive discussion for elaborating a framework for the assessment of the data quality when carrying out the country reports. It was noted that this is seen as being an effective way to have an expanding approach for assessing data quality, so that the users know more about what the National Statistical Institutes, the Ministries of Finance and National Banks are producing.

26. During the discussion several participants emphasised the importance and usefulness of carrying out peer reviews. Slovenia described its experience in this area. It was pointed out that countries in transition are in a process of evaluation. In 1996 a feasibility study of the statistical system of Slovenia was carried out jointly with statistics Sweden, which led to the development of a programme for the modernisation of the Slovenian statistical system. It was also noted that carrying out assessment reviews by transition countries is a demanding operation. The assessments require a lot of work, resources and time. A global assessment of the statistical system in the Czech Republic was carried out by Eurostat. The results of the assessment were very useful in preparing the amendment to the Czech Statistical law.

27. The representative of Eurostat stressed the importance of continuing the work on international comparability and quality of data and statistical systems. However, it was noted that it is very resource consuming for the countries to carry out the assessments that are required by the various international organisations. In this respect, it was suggested that better co-ordination among the various international and national agencies involved needs to be achieved in developing a framework for assessing data quality. It was also suggested that the topic of quality reviews should be taken up by the Bureau of the Conference during the coming year.

28. Several participants supported the suggestion of continuing the discussion on quality reviews. The experience of the Swiss Statistical Office of conducting a peer review was mentioned as a good and very useful example. However, participants were advised to be careful when choosing an external management consulting firm to evaluate a national statistical system. It was recognised that there is a risk when a private firm that does not know much about statistics is asked to evaluate a complex statistical system.

29. The Conference was informed that Statistics Sweden and Eurostat are jointly organising a Conference on Quality in Official Statistics in Stockholm from 14-15 May 2001.

c) Harmonised consumer price indices

Documentation: CES/2000/7 and 7/Add.1

30. This topic refers in part to Programme Element 3.9, and it was discussed on the basis of invited papers prepared by the Central Statistical Office of Poland and Statistics Denmark. The Polish paper reviewed experiences and progress made in implementing the harmonized index of consumer prices (HICP), which was implemented on an experimental basis as early as 1998. By January 2001, fully compatible HICP is expected to be produced.

31. Although Poland has already implemented, to a remarkable extent, the methodological rules laid down by the HICP regulations, a number of problems were encountered in this process. Among these can be mentioned the difficulties in the process of COICOP/HICP implementation, which was completed in 1999, resulting from continuous modifications in the classification. Moreover, it was mentioned that COICOP/HICP fails to fully meet national demands.

32. Particular problems were also encountered with respect to certain goods and services, such as health care and education, which were previously heavily subsidized by the Government and hence constituted minor weights in the household budget.

33. Another problem highlighted was how to treat prices when they are changing from zero to positive values and how to deal with income-dependent prices when fluctuations arise not from actual price changes but rather from changes in income. Among the problems still to be resolved in HICP are the treatment of quality changes. The Conference noted that in this area concrete guidance from Eurostat would be welcome.

34. Areas that will be improved in the near future include: the weighting system, which should not be updated more frequently than necessary; estimates on lower levels than the COICOP system; and expenditure surveys that include expenditures by non-residents and by institutional households. Modifications will also be made in the formula for elementary aggregates. In order to better measure housing price services, real estate price surveys will be carried out.

35. In order to facilitate the implementation of the HICP, it was proposed in the presentation of the Polish paper that Eurostat organise workshops and provide training of staff from candidate countries in

statistical offices of member states. It was also suggested that it would be helpful if the EU regulations could be consolidated into one legal act.

36. Implementation of HICP will not, at least in the near future, replace national CPI, which has a much wider use than HICP. However, some parts of the HICP and the national CPI might overlap but other parts will differ.

37. The invited paper from Denmark focused on two issues: the comparability of indices and the quality of CPI statistics. The first issue dealt with inflation indices, which are used in most European countries, versus cost-of-living indices, used in the United States, and the coverage of goods and services, in particular with reference to owner-occupied housing, which is included in the latter type of indices but not in the former.

38. As for quality of indices of CPI, the methodological work carried out by the Ottawa Group, the Voorburg Group and by the ECE/ILO joint meetings were referred to as well as to the use of new technologies, in particular scanner data and the use of handheld computers for price collection and data editing.

39. During discussion it was stressed that Eurostat should be praised for its pioneer work in this field. However, it was requested that the documents, legal acts and guidelines be made more accessible to users. Eurostat informed the meeting that both a handbook and a consolidation of the legislation would be brought together in 2001/2002. References were also made to Peter Hill's important work in illustrating the differences between the inflation index and cost of living index.

40. Some countries also stressed that greater attention should be paid not only to price changes but also to price levels, which calls for more focus on work on PPPs. Another challenge lying ahead is the work on quality aspects of CPI. Whatever measure is used, HICP or national CPI, the users must be convinced that inflation is correctly measured.

41. During discussion it was also pointed out that when inflation is running as low as 0.3 percentage points per month, HICP tends to measure a lot of "noise". In view of this, some countries suggested that 3-month moving averages may provide a better measure.

42. The Polish paper pointed to the importance of staff from statistical offices in candidate countries participating in training programmes that are carried out in EU member states. This might call for a re-examination of existing co-operation programmes towards this direction.

43. It was also suggested that with the rapid introduction of new products and services, maintaining fixed baskets is becoming irrelevant. This speaks for calculating not only pure price indices but also cost of living indices which better track changes in consumer behaviour.

d) Agriculture statistics

Documentation: CES/2000/8, 8/Add.1, 8/Add.2, 8/Add.3

44. This topic refers in part to Programme Element 3.10, and it was discussed on the basis of invited papers that were prepared by the Statistical Office of Estonia, Statistics Canada and the Intersecretariat Working Group on Agriculture Statistics (IWG.AGRI).

45. In the Estonian paper, the agricultural sector in that country and its agricultural statistical system were reviewed, including methods used for collecting product statistics, agri-monetary statistics and price statistics.

46. An assessment was also made of the extent to which the Estonian agricultural statistics comply with EU requirements. The major constraints in achieving this were that survey coverage and data quality are strongly influenced by the incompleteness and errors in the Farm Register as well as the lack of reliable administrative data.

47. Among the steps planned to address these constraints an agricultural census is scheduled to be undertaken in 2001. It was concluded that Estonian agriculture statistics would be fully harmonised with the Acquis Communautaire by the time of the Estonian accession.

48. The paper by IWG.AGRI described the modalities, strategies and the output resulting from co-operation between international organizations. The success and usefulness of this co-operation was also highlighted in the Estonian paper. Of particular interest as a source of information for the transition countries are the IWG.AGRI seminars, which have evolved from a generalized approach as concerns coverage to more specialized ones, focusing on a narrower range of topics. The July 2000 Seminar on Agriculture Economic Statistics was cited as an example of this.

49. It was also mentioned that the scope of IWG.AGRI is expanding, covering not only agricultural statistics but also agri-environmental statistics and indicators of rural development. This broader scope of coverage is included in the 2nd World Conference on Agriculture Statistics, which will take place in Rome in June 2001.

50. In the discussion this broader approach was favourably commented upon. It was suggested that what farmers are doing for improving environmental protection should be monitored.

51. The importance of continued co-ordination by the international organizations with respect to harmonization of concepts, definitions and databases in this field was stressed.

52. For many transition countries the agricultural census is a priority area for assistance from international organizations as well as from individual countries. Without such assistance some of the recent censuses would not have been able to have taken place. It was noted that in some countries the agricultural census was conducted for the first time.

53. In concluding the discussion, it was mentioned that more support and co-ordination are needed in the area of agricultural censuses; further efforts in joint data collection; and in the integration of agricultural, environment and rural statistics.

e) Other Programme Elements in the Integrated Presentation

54. Following the recommendation made by the Bureau, the discussion by the Conference of the 40 or so remaining programme elements was introduced for each Programme Activity (P.A.) by a designated member of the Bureau, namely: P.A.1, Organisation and operation of statistical services, by Tadeusz Toczyński; P.A.2, Technical infrastructure and other cross-cutting issues, by Donal Murphy; P.A.3, Economic statistics, by Hallgrímur Snorrason; P.A.4, Social and demographic statistics, by Svein Longva; and P.A.5, Environment statistics, by Pilar Martín-Guzmán.

(i) Programme Activity 1: Organisation and operation of statistical services

Documentation: CES/2000/4 and CES/2000/4/Add.1

55. The Conference approved the comments of the Bureau on work done in 1999/2000 and on ongoing activities in this programme activity.

56. Subject to the qualifications specified below, the Conference accepted the Bureau's recommendations on the planned activities in the programme elements in this programme activity (see CES/2000/26/Add.1)

P.E. (Programme Element) 1.1: Promotion and coordination of multilateral statistical work

57. The Conference emphasised the necessity of coordination of statistical work in light of the globalisation process and particularly the promotion of bilateral and multilateral contacts between national as well as international statistical agencies.

P.E. 1.2: Management and policy issues of direct concern to presidents of national statistical offices

58. The Conference selected the topic "Small area statistics, and statistics for small countries" as the topic for substantive discussion at the 2001 plenary session. At the request of the Bureau the National Institute for Statistics of Spain agreed to organise and chair the session.

59. Pilar Martín-Guzmán outlined the planned structure of next year's seminar session. She explained that it is planned to cover three major topics: (i) collection of statistics in small countries; (ii) estimation for small areas; and (iii) special issues concerning the collection and dissemination of statistics in countries that are geographically large, but whose population is small.

60. The Chairman called attention of the members of the Conference to the circular letter the ECE Secretariat has sent to NSOs, asking them to propose possible themes of substantive discussion at future plenary sessions of the Conference.

P.E. 1.3: Countries in transition in the ECE region

61. Representatives of countries in transition expressed appreciation for the technical assistance in statistics that has been provided by international organisations and NSOs in the past in the framework of regional statistical programmes, and by the ECE's Regional Adviser in statistics. The Conference agreed that it would be useful to continue similar kinds of activities in future.

62. The Conference noted that the ECE's Regional Adviser for Statistics will assume his duty in the near future. As in the past, the Regional Adviser's activities will focus on the field of economic statistics.

(ii) Programme Activity 2: Technical infrastructure and other cross-cutting issues

Documentation: CES/2000/4 and CES/2000/4/Adda 2 and 7

63. The Conference approved the comments of the Bureau on work done in 1999/2000 and on ongoing activities in this programme activity.

64. Subject to the qualifications specified below, the Conference accepted the Bureau's recommendations on the planned activities in the programme elements in this programme activity (see CES/2000/26/Add.2)

P.E. 2.1: Management of information technology

65. The Conference included the Seminar on Integrated Statistical Information Systems and related matters (ISIS'2002) in its work programme for 2001/2002.

66. The Conference noted that rapid changes in technology made the issue of technology transfer challenging for many NSOs. The Conference agreed therefore that work in this sphere should receive more attention in this programme element in the future.

P.E. 2.2: Statistical data collection and processing

67. Attention of the Conference was drawn to the fact that the efficiency and timeliness involved in collecting data from business enterprises are becoming increasingly important for many statistical agencies. The impact of electronic data collection methods and techniques in this exercise is growing. The Conference agreed, therefore, that in future greater attention should be paid in this P.E. to issues involved in collecting data from businesses.

68. The Conference was informed that Canada is organising a Workshop on Electronic Data Collection from Enterprises in Ottawa from 25-27 September 2000.

P.E. 2.3: Dissemination and interchange of statistical information

69. The Conference welcomed the increased co-operation among international organisations in the development and implementation of statistical metadata for the collection and dissemination of statistical information. While Eurostat adopted the IMF's Statistical Data Dissemination Standards (SDDS) for its metadata on the Euro-indicators site and the release calendar, OECD has progressed in getting better synergy in its metadata for data collection. The OECD's release calendar, given its goals, is more geared to responding to the conditions of OECD member countries. Metadata for the economic OECD forecast, however, is orchestrated with internationally used metadata models.

P.E. 2.4 Statistical classifications

70. The use of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) sector is a very high priority for many NSOs. Indicators for the measurement of ICT are seen as a key component of measurement in the information society. The Conference noted the progress in the development of internationally comparable statistics in this field that is being achieved by OECD and Eurostat.

71. The development of new classifications, definitions and measurement of the ICT sector, the measurement of ICT commodities, electronic commerce, and the definitions and measurement of the use of ICT within the economy are the most important streams of work in this field. OECD is developing classifications on ICT commodities, goods and services.

72. Eurostat is also intensively working in this area. In its Fifth Research and Development programme, and especially projects on Statistical Indicators for the New Economy (SINE), projects on electronic commerce on the internet and issues concerning enterprises in the New Economy sector are target tasks in this field. In the framework of the European Commission those projects also have high priority, and receiving outcomes from them is a driving force in solving them.

73. The Conference stressed the importance of international cooperation in this field. In addition to OECD and Eurostat, close cooperation with the Voorburg Group on Service Statistics and with the Nordic countries would be highly desirable. The Conference noted that this area is of growing interest for NSOs and welcomed plans to focus more attention on those activities in the future.

74. The Conference also noted that the ISIC rev 3 on industry classes was finalised and encouraged countries to begin using them.

P.E. 2.5: Statistical research and development

75. The Conference recognised the importance of the projects that are included in Eurostat's 5th Research and Development Programme, and encouraged countries and international organisations to cooperate closely on implementing them in practice.

P.E. 2.6: Geographical and regional data

76. The Conference included the Work Session on Methodological Issues Involving the Integration of Statistics and Geography in the Conference's work programme for 2001/2002.

77. The Conference endorsed the secretariat's plan to organise a half-day training session on GIS implementation for interested countries back to back with the 2001/2002 Work Session.

78. The Conference asked the ECE Secretariat to install the Guidelines on Cartography for Statistical Purposes on its Website, and it encouraged NSOs of ECE and other interested countries to use the Guidelines and to inform the ECE secretariat, Finland and the United Kingdom on their experiences in using them. The Conference agreed to consider at a future plenary session whether the Guidelines should be revised in two year's time, based on experiences that countries report on in applying them.

(iii) Programme Activity 3: Economic Statistics

Documentation: CES/2000/4 and CES/2000/4/Adda. 3 and 7

79. The Conference approved the comments of the Bureau on work done in 1999/2000 and on ongoing activities in this programme activity.

80. Subject to the qualifications specified below, the conference accepted the Bureau's recommendations on the planned activities in the programme elements in this programme activity (see CES/2000/26/Add.3)

P.E.3.1: Implementation of the System of National Accounts

81. The world level of implementation of SNA93 is progressing more slowly than had been hoped. Although there is progress in the ECE region, many countries are falling behind. Substantial difficulties are recorded in several transition countries. The question is whether a full set of NA should be required or a minimum core set of tables.

82. The Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts is working on this issue and will come up with suggestions to the next meeting of the Statistical Commission concerning (a) minimum requirements for implementation of SNA 93; (b) indicators showing whether a country is using SNA 93 or another SNA version; and (c) the quality of national accounts data. As for item (b) it was noted that ECE has volunteered to test a questionnaire in selected countries whether they could complete it.

83. The Conference included the Joint ECE-CIS/STAT-OECD Workshop on National Accounts in its programme of work for 2001/2002. It also included the Joint ECE-OECD-Eurostat Meeting on National Accounts in its programme of work for 2001/2002. It also included in the Conference's work programme the various ECE surveys that the April 2000 ECE-OECD-Eurostat joint meeting had recommended.

P.E. 3.2: Money and banking, government finance, and balance of payments

84. The considerable progress in this area was noted.

P.E. 3.7: Tourism

85. The conference welcomed the common conceptual framework of tourism satellite accounts that the OECD and the World Tourism Organization produced.

P.E. 3.9: Price statistics, including purchasing power parities

86. The ongoing work by the Intersecretariat Working Group on Price Statistics of updating the ILO manual on CPI as well as undertaking the production of a manual on PPI was stressed as priority work in this area. The work is going well but should be speeded up further. The important inputs from the Ottawa Group and the Voorburg Group to these manuals were mentioned.

87. In view of the difficulties encountered in the work of ICP, the Conference welcomed that the work with ECP will progress as planned.

P.E. 3.11: Industrial statistics

88. The work undertaken by the OECD in the area of Information, Computers and Telecommunications was noted.

(iv) Programme Activity 4: Social and demographic statistics

Documentation: CES/2000/4 and CES/2000/4/Add. 4 and 7

89. The Conference noted the proposed new format of the Integrated Presentation which was used, on an experimental basis, in this year's version of the Integrated Presentation for Programme Activity 4. The conclusions that the Conference reached on this experiment are summarized in section (f) below (**see paras. 112-114**).

90. The Conference approved the comments of the Bureau on work done in 1999/2000 and on ongoing activities in this programme activity.

91. Attention of the Conference was called to the ongoing process of integration of demographic and social statistics.

92. Subject to the qualifications specified below, the Conference accepted the Bureau's recommendations on the planned activities in the programme elements in this programme activity (see CES/2000/26/Add.4)

P.E. 4.1: Demographic statistics (including projections, migration, fertility and families and households)

93. The Conference included the ECE-Eurostat-ESCWA work session on migration statistics in the Conference's work programme for 2000/2001.

94. The Conference approved the Population Activities Unit's planned work programme in this field.

P.E. 4.2a: Population and housing censuses

95. The Conference approved the Population Activities Unit's planned work programme in this field.

P.E. 4.2b: Statistics on population groups of special interest

96. The Conference approved the Population Activities Unit's planned work programme in this field. The Conference also asked the ECE Population Activities Unit to serve as Rapporteur of this Programme Element.

P.E. 4.4: Labour statistics

97. The Conference included the ECE-Eurostat-ILO Seminar on the Measurement of the Quality of Employment in the Conference's work programme for 2001/2002.

P.E. 4.5: Education and training statistics

98. Attention of the Conference was called to the necessity of collecting data not only on formal educational attainment but also on skills acquired through other forms of training, including on-line training through computer networks.

P.E. 4.7b: Social security statistics

99. The Conference agreed to include this as a new programme element in future editions of the Integrated Presentation.

P.E. 4.9: Health statistics

100. The Conference postponed to 2000/2001 the preparatory meeting for the Joint ECE-WHO meeting on health statistics that had previously been planned to be held in 1999-2000.

101. Attention of the Conference was called to the importance of improved coordination of data collection in the field of health statistics.

P.E. 4.10: Gender statistics

102. The Conference approved the Population Activities Unit's planned work programme in this field.

(v) **Programme Activity 5: Environment statistics**

Documentation: CES/2000/4 and CES/2000/4/Add.5

103. The Conference approved the comments of the Bureau on work done in 1999/2000 and on ongoing activities in this programme activity.

104. Subject to the qualifications specified below, the conference accepted the Bureau's recommendations on the planned activities in the programme elements in this programme activity (see CES/2000/26/Add.5).

P.E. 5.1/5.3: Sectorial concepts, definitions, classifications and environmental databases

105. Attention of the Conference was drawn to the fact that 5 June had been nominated World Environment Day. Four areas were put forward as deserving priority attention in the coming years: the System of Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounts (SEEA); the development of environment statistics and indicators in the areas of water, waste, forestry and atmospheric emissions; regional and small area environment statistics; and measures of tourism on the environment. Due to the regional dimension of tourism the environmental impact was extremely varied and hard to account for.

106. It was also noted that international data collection in environment statistics is placing a heavy work burden on NSOs. The Conference concluded, therefore, that the organizations concerned need to coordinate better their data collection activities and to simplify their questionnaires and make them less complex. (See also P.E. 6.1.)

P.E. 5.2: Environmental accounting

107. OECD informed the meeting that it is hoped that the manual on Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting, which is being jointly prepared by UN, OECD, Eurostat and the World Bank, will be ready for publication by mid-2001.

P.E.5.4: Meteorology statistics

108. The Conference agreed to include this programme element in the structure of the Integrated Presentation and will invite contributions from organisations working in this area.

(vi) **Programme Activity 6: Dissemination and support for secretariat activities**

Documentation: CES/2000/4 and CES/2000/4/Add.6

109. The Conference approved the comments of the Bureau on work done in 1999/2000 and on ongoing activities in this programme activity.

110. Subject to the qualifications specified below, the conference accepted the Bureau's recommendations on the planned activities in the programme elements in this programme activity (see CES/2000/26/Add.6).

P.E. 6.1: Coordination of international data collection

111. The Conference noted that international data collection in environment statistics is placing a heavy work burden on NSOs. It concluded, therefore, that the organizations concerned need to coordinate better

their data collection activities and to simplify their questionnaires and make them less complex. (See also para. 106, and P.E. 5.1/5.3).

f) Concluding comments on the Integrated Presentation

112. The Conference reviewed the proposed new format of the Integrated Presentation which had been used, on an experimental basis, to prepare Programme Activity 4 of this year's version of the Integrated Presentation. The Conference agreed that the proposed new format of the Integrated Presentation that was used in Programme Activity 4 was generally acceptable, subject to the following conditions: (i) that the information that would be presented in future years would be more comprehensive than that which was presented in very concise "bullets" this year in Programme Activity 4; and (ii) that in future editions of the Integrated Presentation, in all applicable Programme Elements, issues that warrant being called to the attention of the Conference are highlighted for the Conference, to facilitate discussion by the Conference. Subject to these conditions, the Conference agreed that for the 2001 and later plenary sessions the proposed new format could be used for Programme Activities 1-6.

113. The Conference also considered that in the future, the programme elements that are selected for in-depth review should be discussed on the basis of two papers, one that would be prepared by a national statistical office and the other by the Rapporteur. It agreed that both papers should be issue-oriented for the Conference at large, and should contain concrete proposals for discussion and/or action.

114. The Conference considered that the material presented in the Integrated Presentation was a rich source of information for countries. However, the Conference noted that the text presented in it is very voluminous and hence difficult to digest. It considered the proposal to attempt to convert the Integrated Presentation into a database to be an interesting one. The Conference noted that the secretariat does not have sufficient resources to look into this possibility on its own, and therefore it welcomed the offer of interested national statistical offices to assist the secretariat in this endeavour.

g) Prioritisation of the Conference's work programme

Documentation: CES/2000/9

115. The Conference approved the Bureau's recommendations on the prioritisation of the Conference's work programme shown in CES/2000/9.

IV. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

Documentation: CES/2000/10

116. The Conference noted the information presented by OECD on ongoing activities in the field of sustainable development indicators. Developing a set of indicators that are useful to monitor sustainable development calls for the definition of a framework that links the information that relates economic, environmental and social policy issues. Only by linking these issues can we examine whether different goals reinforce each other or are in conflict.

117. Because of the growing interest in sustainability, it was considered essential that the OECD's proposed framework encompass a time dimension so as to permit statisticians and others to evaluate the evolution of sets of indicators over time, and to enable them to assess whether the development path of the economy is indeed sustainable. The OECD approach is based on the System of National Accounts

adjusted to the areas where variations in medium and long-term trends could impact on economic policy and thus on the development trends. It also will incorporate both physical and monetary measures.

118. Fifteen areas were defined within this framework. Within individual areas many problems should be explored and elaborated. Each of the areas represents a considerable data set. However, it is envisaged that two or three indicators from each area could be included in the total set of 30-50 indicators.

119. The European Environment Agency (EEA) informed the Conference about its experiences in the field of environmental sustainability indicators and highlighted the crucial importance of official statistics. The EU integration process proved the necessity of close cooperation between the EEA and its monitoring network EIONET (the European Information and Observation Network) and statistical services, for example in developing the Transport and Environment Reporting Mechanism. This cooperation has now been enhanced at the pan-European level. The experience indicates the following fields where action is needed: improvement of statistics that describe developments in the structure of sectors; improvement of work on and the international availability of core social statistics; and coordination of the work of international organisations in statistical data collection.

120. Eurostat noted that to integrate sustainable development indicators with environmental concepts would ensure more stability. It informed the Conference that the set of sustainable development indicators has developed. It is maintained in the database, which is already providing users with the information they need. The integration of the content of this database with environmental concepts is becoming increasingly stable. Sustainability remains a priority issue in Eurostat's activities.

121. During discussion, some participants pointed out that there are still many open problems in some areas. Some examples cited were how to measure sustainable development without setting the goals, how changes in the environmental sphere can be measured in a macroeconomic framework like national accounting, and how a very short list of sustainable development indicators can cover the needs of potentially broad problems in this area. The Conference concluded that these and many other questions should be further examined. It encouraged all institutions involved to continue their active work in this field. The Conference asked the OECD to report to a future plenary session about the progress it achieves in this field.

V. INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL WORK IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

Documentation: CES/2000/11

122. This topic was discussed on the basis of an invited paper contributed by Eurostat.

123. The paper provided information about ongoing activities in South-East Europe in the field of statistical co-operation. It also described the problems that the National Statistical Institutes in the region are currently facing, what the priorities and the objectives for the countries themselves are, and what those of the international community in the field of statistics are. It was emphasised that the Stability Pact, adopted in June 1999, represents a major step in the process of co-ordinating the efforts of all the countries interested and involved in policy matters in the region. However, it was noted, that it is also up to the countries in South-East Europe to recognise their responsibility and to develop a shared strategy for the stability and growth of the region.

124. The Conference was informed about the initiative of the European Union to promote stability in the region through the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) which include a chapter on statistics. Despite the progress achieved by these countries during the past few years in establishing and developing

their statistical systems, there are still a large number of problems that the NSIs have to resolve. A major common problem is that most of the data produced by the countries in the region are not harmonised with the international standards and rules. Another problem of concern is the quality of the data.

125. An overview of the activities undertaken by the international organisations to assist the countries from the region in developing their national statistical systems was presented. However, it was stressed that because of the numerous donors active in the region, as well as the various fields in which assistance is provided, it is essential that proper coordination among the donors be ensured. In this respect, it was suggested that beneficiary countries should ensure the co-ordination among the donors. It was also suggested that Eurostat could ensure the co-ordination for statistical co-operation at the regional level. In addition it could promote bilateral co-operation between donors and the countries in the region.

126. It was pointed out that there are already several tools available to make the co-ordination work more effective: master plans of the countries' NSIs; priority list of statistical domains; the EU-World Bank Internet site that will have a link to the CIRCA (Communication and Information Resource Centre Administrator); and donor meetings. Eurostat will maintain an Internet site that is linked with CIRCA for co-ordination purposes. It would be used to circulate any information that donors consider valuable and necessary for the other interested parties in the region.

127. During the discussion several participants emphasised the importance of co-ordinating the activities of the various donors in the region. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia described its experience in transforming its national statistical system to meet the European standards. The work is carried out with the financial support of several donors within the framework of the Phare programme. The role of developing a strategic master plan was stressed. However, the country still needs further financial support as well as technical assistance. It was also recognised that priority should be given to developing both the regional and bilateral co-operation. Albania also informed the Conference about its experience in conducting the regional co-operation.

128. The Conference noted the activities organised by ISI to facilitate the participation of several participants from Yugoslavia (namely Belgrade) who attended, in their personal capacity, several meetings organised by the ISI during the last several months. ILO has also been active in South-East Europe. Some good contacts have been established with Pristina and Kosovo in the area of labour statistics. It was suggested that it would be useful if The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which is considered as a leading country in the region in the area of labour statistics, shared its experience with other countries in the region.

129. Attention of the Conference was drawn to Eurostat's proposal that South-East European countries should find new ways of funding their statistical activities so as to decrease their dependency on external aid, and to build up a sustainable system of funding in the country. In this respect, it was suggested that countries should ensure that NSIs keep the revenues from the sale of products and services for their own needs. In this context, the representative of the CIS Statistical Committee stressed that the issue of keeping the revenues is important for other countries as well. Therefore, it was suggested that the idea should be disseminated broadly in order to strengthen this activity and even give it some legal basis, if possible.

130. The Conference recalled that the topic of establishing a framework to co-ordinate donor activities in South-East Europe was discussed a year ago and since then considerable progress has been achieved in regional co-operation and in improving the dialogue between the international organisations. However, further improvement in co-ordination is needed in order to avoid isolated activities in the region.

131. In concluding the discussion, Eurostat noted that the experience of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a good example for effective programming of the work for developing a national statistical system. It was also emphasised that the quality of managing the national statistical systems is an important factor for success, as well as the availability of a strong national policy in statistics. In this context, it was stressed that national priorities are set up by the governments. The Conference agreed that the topic of co-ordination of the international statistical work in South-East Europe will need to be discussed further in future plenary sessions.

VI. RELATIONS BETWEEN OFFICIAL STATISTICIANS, ACADEMIA AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOs)

Documentation: Conference Room Handout

132. The Conference welcomed the outcome of the first survey of the links and cooperation between statisticians working in the field of official statistics and academia, and agreed to further pursue this issue at future CES Bureau meetings and plenary sessions so as to promote the strengthening of the links. In the presentation of her paper Pilar Martín-Guzmán pointed out that the paper would be updated with new information and would focus on three issues: good practices; practices demanding further discussion; and hampering factors. During discussion, it was pointed out that the collaboration of statistical offices with the academic world goes well beyond that of statisticians and examples were given of very productive relationships with economists and social scientists. In these relationships, however, it was important to have clear ideas of what was expected from the collaboration and which objectives were to be pursued. The survey may show that expectations and objectives may vary somewhat from country to country.

133. The Conference thanked the National Statistical Institute of Spain and in particular Pilar Martín-Guzmán for the work she did on the survey. She indicated that she hoped to have a revised version of the paper available at next year's plenary session.

VII. HOW INTERNATIONAL COMPARABILITY IS AFFECTED BY DEVELOPMENTS WITH USERS AND WITH ADMINISTRATIVE SOURCES

Documentation: CE/2000/12-19 and addenda

134. A seminar on the above topic was organised by Statistics Netherlands. The seminar topic was divided into the following three themes: (i) The need for more timely information versus reliability and international comparability; (ii) The use of administrative sources for statistics and international comparability; and (iii) The changing use of statistics in transition economies. A session was dedicated to each theme and the discussion was based on seven invited papers and eleven supporting papers. The seminar was chaired by Statistics Netherlands: Mr. Ruud van Noort, Director General (sessions 2 and 3) and Mr. Henk van Tuinen, Member of the Executive Board (session 1).

135. As organiser of the seminar, Statistics Netherlands introduced the topic and reminded the audience that the need for international comparable statistics is likely to increase in the future. This will affect many areas in statistics. At the same time, more timely information is needed and much more data will come from other sources such as administrative registers. Furthermore, as the transition countries become more integrated into the world markets it is important to ensure that there is a clear understanding of which measures statistical organisations can take themselves, in their relations with their users to improve the use and utility of statistics. The collaboration between statistical offices and their users can improve the quality of the national statistical systems.

Theme 1: The need for more timely information versus reliability and international comparability

136. The discussion of the first theme was based on three invited papers by the European Central Bank, the US Office of Management and Budget, the German Federal Statistical Office and supporting papers contributed by Eurostat, the Russian Federation and Korea.

137. The paper by the European Central Bank (ECB) was presented by the author, Mr. W. Schill. He spoke from the perspective of a major user of European economic statistics and highlighted a number of key issues regarding timeliness, reliability and international comparability of European statistics. The data requirements of the ECB are derived from their primary objective to maintain price stability in the Euro area. For that they need a set of highly comparable monetary, financial and economic data. Most of the Euro area series result from aggregating national data, they are therefore influenced by the degree of harmonisation as well as the timeliness and reliability of the national data. Without timely and reliable data for the 11 countries making up the Euro area the ECB cannot ensure that the correct monetary decisions are taken.

138. The author pointed out that in Europe there are gaps both in availability and timeliness. These gaps should be addressed with priority. A comparison of the timeliness of data for EU countries with that of the United States had shown that the Euro area data are released at least one month after that of the United States, although some individual countries produce their data with less delay. Although aware of the trade-off between timeliness and reliability of data he believed that in the Euro area there is scope for improving both by adopting best practices among countries.

139. Katherine Wallman introduced the Invited Paper from the USA and described the mechanisms which are used in United States to ensure a timely production of key economic indicators. She reminded the meeting that it was necessary to weigh the trade-offs among timeliness, cost and reliability in determining acceptable periodicity and time-lags for each of the series. In the decentralised statistical system of the United States, one office (the Statistical Policy Office in the Office of Management and Budget) has the responsibility to coordinating activities and enforce standards and guidelines concerning the timely release of statistics. This co-ordination is based on two pillars: on the one hand there is a very specific and detailed institutional framework which structures both the production processes of statistical indicators as well as defines the timely release of information; on the other hand, they have a very clear policy regarding adjustments and revisions. The guidelines issued by this office, as part of the institutional framework, determine the maximum number of working days, after the reference period, by which compilation of data should be completed and set the deadline for the actual release of the data. Furthermore, it demands that a schedule of release dates should be publicly available one-calendar quarter in advance. The agencies involved are also asked to submit to the office a performance evaluation of each indicator every three years, which evaluates the reliability of the series as well as the agency's ability to adhere to the schedule.

140. The third invited paper, prepared and introduced by Roland Gness of the Federal statistical Office of Germany, argues that timeliness has a different relevance for structural than for short-term economic data. Furthermore, the intended use of the data is another important factor to consider when assessing the trade-off between timeliness and reliability of the data. For example, for statistics compiled at long intervals such as structural data, the demand for timeliness is probably not the top priority and one should favour accuracy. However, when the data is needed to assess trends rather than the exact magnitude, as for instance often is the case with certain short-term data used by the media and the government, then timeliness is clearly more important than reliability.

141. The author also observed that official statistics has perhaps put too much importance on accuracy and reliability and therefore has left the production of rapid data to the private-sector market. In his

opinion this is regrettable as the official statistical community with their experience could have done a better job. He also concluded that modifying the production process itself to speed up timeliness is not easy and, therefore, gain in timeliness will hardly be possible without losses in reliability. Furthermore, he queried whether the ECB actually needed all the requested indicators with the same timeliness.

142. Yves Franchet (Eurostat), acted as the Discussant for this theme and introduced some of the main issues raised in the three supporting papers. He underlined the special situation of Eurostat which makes it both an influential and powerful user of statistics (as seen from national producers' perspective) and a producer of official community statistics. He outlined briefly Eurostat's past objectives in trading-off rapidity, accuracy and comparability of official community statistics. He considered that comparability would continue to increase automatically within the European statistical system because of convergence and ever closer relations among statistical offices. It would, however, be necessary in the future to devote more attention to rapidity, as proper functioning of the European Monetary Union largely depends on fast statistical information. The options he saw for increasing rapidity in the production of Euro statistics were either: to establish an authority to enforce standards community wide; to have Eurostat compile EU aggregates that are not necessarily the sum of data provided by the member states; to have specific statistics compiled by one national office on behalf of other offices; or by having EU wide surveys with EMU aggregates estimated by Eurostat, or the ECB. He left open in which way the data collection of EU wide surveys could be organised.

143. From the Russian and Korean papers the discussant gave an account of some practical experiences where statisticians had had to make the choice between rapidity and reliability of some basic economic series. The Russian experience with monthly GDP estimates had demonstrated the need to explain to users the interim nature of the estimates and the significance of the frequent and relative high revisions previously unknown to the users in the Former Soviet Union. In the Korean case timeliness had been significantly improved by an increased use of survey IT with the aim in the future of moving towards "paperless surveys". Thanks to the use of sophisticated software programs accuracy had been maintained.

Discussion:

144. It was clear that most statistical offices experience pressure from users to produce more timely data on a wide range of topics. The European Central Bank and other new initiatives in the region have all contributed to the growing demand for timely statistics. In reply to whether the ECB needed all the requested data, their representative argued, that many economic indicators are used to study the interrelation between the real economy and the monetary economy. The ECB is doing the same kind of research as most central banks in Europe are doing. As a result of these new initiatives, the offices in the Euro region were being asked to increase the available time series, to speed up their production of basic indicators and to produce more detailed data. Several statistical offices found that these demands could not be satisfied without additional resources being made available and that government should be made aware that new data requests had budgetary implications.

145. As a result of the European integration and the development of the global economy, demands for international comparability are further being added to the demands for more accurate and timely data. In addition, rapid changes in the economy, have added to the challenge of statistical agencies to produce timely and relevant indicators. For example, in the United States deregulation and growth in the service industries have increased considerably the scope of data collection efforts.

146. Can statistical offices improve the timeliness of existing statistics, without lowering the quality or curtailing the current production? There is a trade-off in data production between speed and the level of detail and accuracy. It is important that this is made clear to users so that the image of statistical offices

as producers of quality data does not suffer. However, there are many uses of data where a high degree of reliability is less important as it is more the trend that counts. Official statistics should also cater for these uses by producing rapid provisional data, which later can be revised as necessary. Only by trying to push the timeliness further will we know where the acceptance level is in respect to accuracy. In conclusion, most agreed that a change in the institutional arrangements, at the national and at the supra-national level, in combination with the introduction of different statistical methods and new methods for data collection would lead to improvements in timeliness. Of course explicit adjustment policies should be developed and explained to the users. Good statistical offices are able to deal with this challenge and to strike a balance between quality and timeliness and explain this to users. If statistical offices refuse to take up the challenge, the danger may exist that the private sector is asked to do the work instead.

147. Should statistical offices give in to the demand for producing rapid results when the reliability of the data suffers? Despite the risk of damaging the image of the official statistical system by augmenting the margins of error and producing slightly less reliable data, serving policy needs is crucial for statistical offices. It was mentioned that the "Economist", in the past, had mentioned that relative large adjustments to the data are to be considered as a sign of strength rather than of weakness. It was generally agreed that it is critical that key clients receive the data they need or they will go elsewhere to get them. Through a genuine dialogue with users, however, it should be possible to define priorities together and to recruit the support of users for raising the needed funds from government. The dialogue needs to encompass the private sector, as an important source of data, since it is through this process that statistical offices can improve the speed of collecting data from their sources. Concerning the need to service users, it was also said that statisticians have to become better at servicing needs for unforeseen time series. The traditional development of new statistics is very time consuming and long and statistical offices have to look for methods to produce these quicker.

148. A comment from a key user that: 'statistics is not everything in policy-making' put the discussion in perspective. Other factors and information are also of importance. This, however, should not detract from the fact that policy making without statistics or with inadequate statistics is in the long run unacceptable. In the EMU area the present process of change of statistics is considered to be too slow and the danger of wrong policy decisions might become real. This could lead to a slower economic growth or high inflation. Investments in statistics are therefore essential and worthwhile.

149. As a result of the ICT revolution the methods of data collection and processing have undergone dramatic changes and new technologies are reducing the production time everywhere. It is also thanks to the ICT progress that the information available as input to the statistical process has increased, in particular in form of digitised administrative registers. Several examples of improvement in electronic data collection, processing of large sample frames, transfer methods and editing techniques were mentioned as resulting from advances in computer hard and software.

150. In general the production times for standard short-term statistical indicators in the United States and Japan are shorter than in European countries. Can the present production process used in European offices be speeded up significantly? The production process is largely determined by the productive factors, technology, legal framework and tradition, all parameters not easily changed. However, the American experience had shown that timeliness could be improved through a change in the institutional framework and related culture as well as the introduction of guidelines for a release schedule and procedure. Moreover, deciding when to release an indicator requires that agencies strike a balance between accuracy and timeliness. In America, agencies are advised not to withhold information needed to evaluate current economic conditions by imposing unnecessarily stringent accuracy requirements. Therefore to speed up the production time, it may be needed for offices to change not only methods, but also culture and attitude towards using preliminary information.

Conclusions and recommendations:

151. The messages, which came out in the discussion, made the Discussant draw the following conclusions:

- 1. There is a trade-off between timeliness and reliability as well as between timeliness and level of detail.*
- 2. Key users must receive the timely data they need to make policy decisions, and a genuine dialogue must be engaged with them about priorities and resources.*
- 3. There is substantial scope to improve timeliness in the statistical production process with the intensive use of ICT.*
- 4. In the Euro area, US timeliness is the benchmark. Progress has to be achieved to come closer first to the EU benchmark then to the US benchmark if needed..*

152. He further recommended that to make progress on releasing data more rapidly, statistical offices should:

- Promote the dissemination of best practices in improving timely data collection with ICT techniques;
- Integrate internationally comparable concepts and definitions within the national statistical collection systems, wherever this is meaningful; and
- In the Euro area, give first priority to the production of timely statistics for monetary policy.

Theme 2: Use of administrative sources for statistics and international comparability

153. The invited paper by Statistics Denmark was prepared and presented by Lars Thygesen. Mr. Thygesen highlighted the problems associated with the use of administrative sources. Although Denmark's statistical information system is register-based and aims to a large extent at improving conditions for information and communication technologies (ICT), the production of statistics is still a secondary function of the administrative data, and the diversity of those sources results in various difficulties. Obstacles are often encountered in dealing with the validity and relevance of the administrative data for statistical concepts. Mr. Thygesen pointed out that at the international level, the use of national administrative sources may bring about methodological inconsistencies. However, a shift towards concepts that are agreed internationally could help solve those problems. He also argued that research should play a more active role in this process. Mr. Thygesen concluded that in Denmark the conceptual translation from administration to statistics and the harmonisation of the rules for processing in different statistical domains will remain the most important task in the future.

154. The invited paper by INSEE, France was prepared and presented by Paul Champsaur. French statistics are survey-based but administrative sources are also very widely used, especially in business and social statistics. In national statistical surveys, the response rate from administrative sources is very reliable. Mr. Champsaur pointed out that attaining the much-needed synergy between administrative and statistical concepts in France is still a very demanding task and, in some cases, it is very costly to obtain good quality statistics from administrative data. He underlined that to use administrative and statistical sources requires taking methodological precautions both at national and international levels. In European integrated statistics, the use of divers national administrative sources can create problems in international comparability. He stressed that the creation of a harmonised European framework for non-statistical concepts would, therefore, be desirable.

155. Supporting papers by Canada, Greece, Russia and Slovenia were submitted on this theme. They were introduced by the Discussant, Mr. Henk van Tuinen of Statistics Netherlands. Mr. Van Tuinen highlighted some of the common issues raised in both the invited papers and the supporting papers. In his overview he distinguished between more general aspects like the subject matter fields, legal conditions, ICT conditions, the linking of registers, response burden for enterprises and the costs for the NSI's. On the other hand he also covered numerous more technical/methodological aspects like the quality of the data in the registers, the consistency in time and the translation (ex ante or ex post) of the concepts used in administrations to the statistical concepts. As for the impact of administrative sources on statistics at the national level, he drew a special attention to the harmonisation of statistical and administrative concepts. Concerning international comparability of statistics, he stressed the need of harmonising outputs. This means that the concepts and definitions to be used in publications should be harmonised in order to have international comparable figures.

a) General Considerations

156. The presentations and discussion identified common trends in NSIs toward taking increasing advantage of the use of administrative sources for the production of national statistics. Developments in ICT in recent years have resulted in larger volumes of administrative data becoming available for statistical purposes, and this could result in significant cost savings for NSIs.

157. At the national level it can be observed that administrative sources are used in similar statistical subject matter areas. Business registers, VAT and income tax registers, and social security and customs administrations are areas where administrative data are most frequently used for statistical purposes. However, the legal conditions in individual countries differ. While the Danish and Slovenian papers report on a reliable register-based statistical system, the Russian and Greek papers point out obstacles in the availability of some confidential administrative information.

158. In all presentations, it was noted that the improving ICT conditions and needs for reducing the response burden are stimulating the greater use of administrative data and revealing the lower cost of producing statistics from those sources as compared to surveys.

159. However, countries also reported some obstacles in the use of administrative sources for statistics at the national level ranging from data quality and data comparability through to legal aspects, confidentiality, data feasibility and resource considerations. A call for harmonised international statistical concepts related to the administrative issues was highlighted in the Danish, French and many other papers as a driving force to improve international comparability.

b) Statistical and administrative concepts

160. It was stressed that changes in administrative regulations can cause inconsistencies in time series and the concepts of variables in administrative sources can vary according to statistical concepts. The importance of having direct exchanges and co-operation between statisticians and public programme administrators on the harmonisation of administrative and statistical concepts was highlighted. The Danish, French and Slovenian papers demonstrated a tradition of such co-operation. The Canadian paper described a government project where the statistical system provides the basis for tax allocation to the provinces.

161. To facilitate the harmonisation of administrative sources, the Danish paper proposed the following grouping of administrative sources: enterprise internal registers (bookkeeping); service bureau registers (for accountant practices); public registers developed by local and regional government and the "quasi" public registers created by administrations/institutions that carry out special administrative functions

(such as social security registration). In contrast, the French paper proposed that the harmonisation process could be supplemented by more sharply focused statistical surveys.

162. In some papers it was pointed out that national public programme administrations should be considered important users of statistics. As stressed in the Canadian paper, the exploitation of official statistics in government administrations may offer significant savings while at the same time reducing the overall compliance load of businesses.

163. Due to market development, businesses are also facing increasing demands for better quality of their information systems, more transparency of their operations and their public responsibility. Consequently, they are increasingly willing to co-operate with statistical offices.

164. It was also pointed out that both administrative registers and statistical surveys should be considered potential sources for statistics. Several mixed data collection systems were reported to the Conference in this respect. During the discussion, in one example that was mentioned, three separate data collection streams in banking, financial inspection and statistics existed in the past. Now these diverse data collection systems have been united into a single data collection process and each institution uses data relevant for its needs.

165. The reprocessing of administrative sources also implies the need to cooperate closely in the harmonisation of administrative and statistical concepts. As mentioned in the French paper, the reprocessing operations may have to employ relatively sophisticated methods and techniques which could call for complicated matching data tests and the manual processing of anomalies.

c) International comparability of statistics

166. There was general agreement that, technically, the use of administrative data for statistics does not cause specific problems for international comparability. However, different concepts of administration reflecting institutional differences between the countries, and the different coverage of national statistical surveys using the administrative sources and the differing quality of administrative data can all constitute significant obstacles.

167. Many delegations pointed out that an important prerequisite to achieve a better international comparability of statistics at the European level would be the international harmonisation of non-statistical concepts. The French paper proposed that in social statistics, the concepts on households, occupational categories, and labour qualifications can be harmonised. For business statistics, the French paper mentioned the possibility of harmonising statistical and local legal units. In the European framework, the degree of harmonisation could vary depending on the power and objectives of European Union policies, the similarity of national realities, cost effectiveness and other factors.

168. The process of globalisation creates a number of international business groups and through that increased needs in comparability of business accounting information. However, the introduction of different accounting standards in those groups could lead to the problems in international comparability of statistics. While using administrative registers and statistical surveys the difference between accounting standards should be taken into the consideration both at the national and international level.

169. Many participants stressed that the harmonisation of national statistical outputs should be the basis for future improvement of statistical comparability at the international level when using national administrative sources. The history of national accounts shows that the harmonisation of outputs can be very successful. Output/concept harmonisation should concentrate on the standardisation of final results

from national statistical systems while the choice of sources and estimation methods should be left to the responsibility of NSIs.

d) Concluding considerations

170. The concluding discussion revealed that different countries have different cultures and different ways of using administrative sources for statistical purposes. Therefore in some countries the use of administrations will be developing faster than in other countries. However, it can be expected that the trend will continue in the extensive use of administrative sources for statistical purposes in NSIs.

171. It was recommended to concentrate future efforts on the development of harmonised international concepts including the development of effective systems for quality assurance and peer reviews. Priority can be given to structural statistics that have already developed policies in the use of administrative sources.

172. It was recommended to organise, under the auspices of the programme of work of the Conference, an exchange of experiences in the combined use of administrative and other data sources for statistical purposes.

Theme 3: Changing use of statistics in transition economies

173. This topic was discussed on the basis of invited papers prepared by the National Bank of Hungary (CES/2000/18) and Russian State Committee on Statistics (CES/2000/19) and supporting papers submitted by Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Georgia, Poland, United Kingdom and Republic of Korea.

174. Mr. Ruud Van Noort, who chaired this theme, introduced the topic. He referred to the invited and supporting papers, which raised a number of important issues related to the use of statistics in transition economies. It was noted that most ECE countries have experience in working with users of statistics and the CES is the forum for exchange of experience between the ECE member countries. National statistical systems exist to serve the users. Therefore, the users' view is very important in evaluating a national statistical system. National users should be stimulated to become active discussants in the dialogue with the national statistical systems.

175. The paper by the Central Bank of Hungary considered the relation between producers and users of statistics during the transition period. It was noted that being the main user and second biggest producer of economic statistics, the Central Bank of Hungary is in a position to express views on the user-producer relations. As a user of statistical data, the bank has initiated a number of methodological changes or presentation of the data compiled by the Hungarian Central Statistical office (CSO). At the same time the bank initiated changes in its own statistics in order to respond to the new requirements posed either by the users of statistics or the needs of the CSO.

176. The important role of the international organisations in setting up new statistical standards in transition economies was stressed. However, their influence on decision-makers is limited. It is also the responsibility of the country to develop further the relations between the producers of statistics and the domestic users. The Hungarian experience shows that setting up some kind of 'users groups' did not contribute much to the process of changing the statistical system because of the lack of interest from the users. In Hungary, the financial market analysts including the representatives of the financial press are the most promising group of users. However, they have to be trained in the new statistical methodology. In this context, it was noted that in order to educate the users it is important that the new statistical standards are written down and made available to the users. It was also noted that the academic world shows less

interest in contributing to the development of a new statistical system. This could be explained by the fact that the academia is also in a process of transition.

177. Setting up in-house analysis units within the central bank could be useful for improving the statistics in the bank but also as a feedback to the development of certain methodological issues. There are various models in developed economies of how to establish such analytical units. However, the limited financial and human resources has to be considered when choosing the model to be applied in a transition country.

178. The paper by the Russian State Committee on Statistics (Goskomstat) reviewed the most important aspects of the reform in the Russian statistical system. Before the reform, the main objective of the statistical system was to provide as much data as possible to the state authorities in order to monitor the fulfilment of the 'plan'. Statistical methodology was related to the methodology of the plan and its fulfilment. Today, Goskomstat provides data to all different users – state authorities, enterprises and private businesses, scientific community, media and general public. It was also stressed that the new demand for statistics lead to the improvement of data quality.

179. Openness and transparency of the national statistical systems are important guiding principles during the transition period. Equal access to general statistical information has become a fundamental principle of data dissemination of Russian Goskomstat. Dissemination of statistical data via Internet is a priority in the work with users. The information needs of users, both domestic and foreign have been a major criterion in the fundamental reform of the statistical system. A number of essential tasks had to be accomplished within a short timeframe, such as implementation of the system of national accounts, work on the international comparisons of GDP based on purchasing power parities, statistics, monitoring labour market and standards of living, foreign trade statistics.

180. From the side of Eurostat it was stressed that some transition countries face very particular problems. On the one hand they are still requested by the traditional users to act in the same way as during the period of the planned economy. They have to maintain databases for administrative purpose and to deliver the traditional information to the national planning authorities, while at the same time working on the development of a new and market oriented statistical system. And introducing the principles of openness and transparency. Here are clearly conflicting interests. The situation is aggravated by shortages of budgets or even reduction of budgets.

181. Training of users as the primary concern of statisticians was emphasised. Considerable efforts are needed to make sure that state administrative staff understands the nature of statistics in a market economy, new indicators and their use. It was noted that virtually in all transition economies the statisticians had been ahead of other institutions in introducing new methods and standards. Therefore, they had to undertake an enormous amount of additional work to explain the use of new methods and indicators.

182. Mr. Willem De Vries, discussant for the session, noted that the label 'transition countries' has a decreasing value because the group of countries it stands for is very heterogeneous. It can be argued that many other statistical offices of developed economies are also in a transition. He briefly introduced the supporting papers contributed for the session. The paper by the Czech Republic gives a very good description of the historical development of its national statistical system. The Bulgarian paper focuses on latest developments in the statistical system, such as the adoption of a new statistical law, harmonisation of national regulations with the European Union legislation and development of meta-data for the IMF's General Data Dissemination Standards (GDDS). The paper from Georgia reviews the changes in the statistical system as a result of the development towards a market economy. It also touches on issues of the correct interpretation of statistical information and the role of mass media as an inter-mediator between the producers and users of statistical data.

183. The supporting paper by the National Office for Statistics (United Kingdom) argues that users are not a homogeneous group and therefore they should be approached differently by the statistical service and according to their background and needs. It also argues that improvement of user relations is perhaps the most important issue for the majority of the transition economies.

184. The Polish paper gives a full and comprehensive description of all the issues and problems that the Central Statistical Office has faced during the last ten years. One issue of concern to the statistical office is that it becomes more and more difficult to receive data from the respondents. While in the past administrative regulations obliged the respondents to provide data, with the transition the old methods became inefficient. Therefore, the statistical office had to change substantially the way of communication with the respondents and replace the method of obligation with the dialogue.

185. In the discussion that followed, the Conference was informed about the main priorities of Russian Goskomstat during the transition period, such as: improving the efficiency of the national statistical system, improvement of the methodology, training the staff, and improving user relations (dissemination and marketing). Improvement of the macro-economic statistics is considered as the greatest achievement. However, problems of regional statistics remain unsettled, which is also due to the fact that there is not a body to manage it. Developing regional statistics will be a priority of the Russian Goskomstat in near future. Another priority will be to reorganise technically and technologically the statistical office in the next five years.

186. Working with users of statistics is a priority but also a challenge for the Central Statistical Office of Georgia. The Conference was informed about the recent changes in the legal basis for providing statistics in Georgia. In this context, the issue of confidentiality of statistical information was mentioned. It was also noted that statistical systems should respond to the demands of the users with regard to timeliness and accuracy of data.

187. Several participants noted that changing the statistical systems had been a big challenge. It had to be carried out within short period of time and with limited financial resources. Training of staff in new international standards and the implementation of these standards had to take place at the same time. The language barrier was mentioned as a factor, which delayed the implementation of new standards. In this context, the important role of the international organisations in providing financial and methodological assistance was stressed. In the Czech Republic, it is expected that the transformation will be finalised by 2002.

188. The representative of Armenia recalled that in 1998 the Conference discussed the institutional arrangements of statistical offices and the need for their independence. In this respect, it was mentioned that Eurostat provided a lot of assistance to transition economies. A draft for a statistical law prepared by Eurostat in 1999 was recommended to the countries. Armenia used the draft to develop its own, which was adopted in the beginning of 2000.

189. The Conference was informed about the transition of the statistical system in Poland. Training of statisticians was noted as the main problem. Developing the relations with users of statistical information is a big challenge: about 200 persons are engaged in dissemination of data to the public. In this respect, it was mentioned that there is a need for guidelines how best to work with users. It was also stressed that it is important not to let users to dictate what should be done. It was suggested that a project on best experiences in working with users be developed in future. In this context, the experience of United Kingdom, which published a booklet explaining how user groups influence the work of the NSO, was mentioned. Participants were invited to contact the NSO for copies of the booklet.

190. In conclusion, the Conference agreed that the session was important and useful for the transition countries: a lot of exchange of information took place and a number of recommendations were made. The Conference also agreed that the so called “transition countries” represent a very heterogeneous group of countries. Following the proposals of Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, it was suggested that a set of indicators might be developed in order to describe the various stages of transition. In addition, it was recognised that transition countries are different in organisation, traditions, culture, etc. It was also noted that there are no recipes for developing similar statistical systems. It is important that national requirements and needs are taken into account. Countries should develop statistical systems which fit to the national interests.

191. The Conference noted that sustained assistance from the European Union and other international organisations is necessary to complete the transition process. Several transition countries mentioned that assistance provided by Eurostat and the EU member states is essential. Exchange of information is also an important element in supporting the countries. In this context, the Conference was informed that the United Nation Statistical Division is working on a couple of web sites – methodological standards and good practices in statistics (including statistical laws) - which could be also useful for the transition countries.

192. The importance of regional co-operation within a certain region was stressed. There are countries whose statistical systems are better developed than others and it would be useful if they exchange information with the rest of the countries in the region. The Conference agreed that the improvement of the relations with various users is among the priorities for the future as well as marketing and dissemination of data. Training and retraining of staff is still needed. It was also stressed that transition countries should try to get rid of some elements from the old system, such as the production of monthly and cumulative data, and should respect the principle of confidentiality.

VIII. ELECTION OF THE BUREAU

Documentation: CES/2000/1

193. In accordance with the rules of procedure adopted by the Conference at its 1993 plenary session, the election was organised by Mr. Carlo Malaguerra of Switzerland, who was the most senior previous Chairman of the Conference present at the plenary session.

194. The Conference noted that in the Autumn of 1999 two of the elected Bureau members, Mr. Adrian Abrahamse (Netherlands) and Mr. Edvard Outrata (Czech Republic), left their statistical offices. Consequently two new Bureau member had to be elected at the 2000 plenary session to replace them for the remaining portion of their two-years term.

195. The Conference noted that the Bureau had co-opted, at its autumn 1999 meeting, Mr. Donal Murphy (Ireland) and Mr. Tadeusz Toczyński (Poland) to serve on the Bureau until elections could take place at the 2000 plenary Session. The Conference thanked Mr. Murphy and Mr. Toczyński for having accepted this assignment.

196. For the 2000/01 term of office, based on proposal put forward by Mr. Malaguerra, the Conference elected the following as Vice-Chairs of the Bureau:

Mr. Tadeusz Toczyński (Poland)

Mr. Len Cook (United Kingdom)

197. The Conference thanked Carlo Malaguerra for the work he performed in electing two new Bureau members.

IX CONCLUDING COMMENTS

a) Informal evaluation of the outcome of the 2000 plenary session

198. Prior to formally closing the plenary session, the Chairman provided the Conference with his informal evaluation of the outcome of the 2000 plenary session. He re-iterated the general conclusions that were reached concerning the experimental way in which Programme Activity 4 of the Integrated Presentation had been prepared this year (see Chapter III, Section (f) above). He considered that there were too many items on the agenda, and too little time for discussion; that the agenda item relating to the Integrated Presentation needed some streamlining; and that in the future the Seminar Session should have fewer papers and that it should provide less overlap with other fora where similar types of meetings are scheduled for heads of NSIs at around the same time. He also welcomed the much more active participation of delegates from countries whose economy is in transition at this year's plenary session. He proposed that the Bureau review the experience of the 2000 plenary session at one of its meetings in the coming year, with the view of improving the content and structure of next year's plenary session.

b) Tribute to Louis Kincannon

199. The Conference paid tribute to Louis Kincannon, Director of the Statistics Directorate of the OECD, who will be retiring at the end of June 2000. The Conference thanked him for the support he had provided to the Conference and to the Conference's Bureau during his term in office at the OECD.

c) Tribute to Statistics Netherlands and to the OECD

200. The Conference thanked Statistics Netherlands for having organised the seminar session at this year's plenary session. It also thanked the OECD for having hosted this year's plenary session in Paris.

X ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

201. This report was adopted by the Conference at its closing session on 15 June 2000.

ANNEX I

INTEGRATED PRESENTATION OF PROGRAMMES OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL WORK IN THE ECE REGION, 1998/99 AND 1999/2000

Note

The Integrated Presentation of the statistical work programmes of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the European Communities (EC), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other international organizations working in the ECE region is presented in documents CES/2000/26 and Addenda 1-6, as indicated below. The Integrated Presentation shown in these documents, which collectively constitute Annex I of the report of the plenary session, is too large to issue as part of this report or as a single document.

CES/2000/26: Programmes of international statistical work in the UN/ECE region, 1998/99 and 1999/2000: An Integrated Presentation – Introduction and overview

CES/2000/26/Add.1: Programme Activity 1: Organization and operation of statistical services

CES/2000/26/Add.2: Programme Activity 2: Technical infrastructure and other cross-cutting issues

CES/2000/26/Add.3: Programme Activity 3: Economic statistics

CES/2000/26/Add.4: Programme Activity 4: Social and demographic statistics

CES/2000/26/Add.5: Programme Activity 5: Environment statistics

CES/2000/26/Add.6: Programme Activity 6: Dissemination and support for Secretariat activities.

ANNEX II

PLANNED DATES OF MEETINGS IN THE CONFERENCE'S WORK PROGRAMME, 2000/2001 and 2001/2002

2000/2001

3.10	Joint ECE-EUROSTAT-FAO-OECD Seminar on Agricultural Economic Statistics (E/F/R) (Luxembourg)	5-7 July 2000
2.3	Work Session on Statistical Output for Dissemination to the Information Media (E-only) (Voorburg, Netherlands)	25-27 September 2000
3.1	ECE Special Session on National Accounts for Transition Economies (Paris)	29 September 2000 (p.m.)
1.2	CES Bureau Meeting (Oslo, Norway)	2-3 October 2000
4.10	Joint ECE-INSTRAW Work Session on Gender Statistics (E-only) (Orvieto, Italy)	11-13 October 2000
2.2	Work Session on Statistical Data Editing (E-only) (Cardiff, UK)	18-20 October 2000
4.9	Work Session (preparatory meeting) on Health Statistics (E-only) (Ottawa)	23-25 October 2000
3.9	ECE-Eurostat-OECD and Austrian CSO Joint Consultation on the ECP 2000 (E-only)	23-25 October 2000
2.3	Work Session on Statistical Metadata (Washington DC) (Early)	28-30 November 2000
2.1	Meeting on Management of Statistical Information Technology (E/F/R)	14-16 February 2001
2.1	Joint Work Session on Statistical Data Confidentiality (E-only) (Skopje, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)	14-16 March 2001
4.1	Joint ECE-EUROSTAT-ESCWA Work Session on Migration Statistics (E/F/R/A)	21-23 May 2001
3.1	Joint ECE-CIS/STAT-OECD Workshop on National Accounts (E/R-only) (Moscow)	Second half of May 2001
3.10	Joint.ECE-OECD-FAO-EUROSTAT World Conference on Agricultural Statistics (E-only) (Rome)	5-7 June 2001

2001/2002

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|------------|---|----------------------------|
| 1.2 | 49th Plenary Session of the Conference of European Statisticians (E-F-R) | 11-13 June 2001 |
| 3.14 | Joint ECE-EUROSTAT Seminar on the Use of Business Registers in National Statistical Offices (E-F-R) | 27-29 June 2001 |
| 4.6 | Joint ECE-EUROSTAT-UNESCO Work Session on Cultural Statistics (E-only) | 24-26 September 2001 |
| 2.3 | Work Session on Statistical Output for Dissemination to the Information Media (E-only) | ... September 2001 |
| 2.6 | Work Session on Methodological Issues Involving the Integration of Statistics and Geography (E-only) (Tallin, Estonia) | ... September 2001 |
| 4.2a | Preparatory Meeting on Population and Housing Censuses (E-only) | ... October 2001 |
| 3.10 | Joint ECE-Eurostat-FAO-OECD Meeting on Food and Agricultural Statistics in Europe (E/F/R) | 17-19 October 2001 |
| 2.3 | Work Session on Statistical Metadata (E-only) | ... October 2001 |
| 3.9 | Joint ECE-ILO Meeting on Consumer Price Indices (E/F/R) | 31 Oct. (p.m.)-2 Nov. 2001 |
| 4.9 | Joint ECE-WHO Meeting on Health Statistics (E/F/R) | 15-17 April 2002 |
| 4.11c | Joint ECE-Eurostat Work Session on Registers and Administrative Records for Social and Demographic Statistics (E-only) | ... April 2002 |
| 2.1 | ISIS'2002 (E/F/R) | ... May 2002 |
| 4.4 | Joint ECE-Eurostat-ILO Seminar on the Measurement of the Quality of Employment (E/F/R) | First half of 2002 |
| 3.1 | Joint ECE-EUROSTAT-OECD Meeting on National Accounts (E/F/R) | First half of 2002 |
| 1.2 | 50th Plenary Session of the Conference of European Statisticians (E-F-R) | 10-12 June 2002 |
