

Subregional Seminar on the Trade Statistics Database  
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**REPORT OF THE SUBREGIONAL SEMINAR ON  
THE TRADE STATISTICS DATABASE**

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## **REPORT OF THE SUBREGIONAL SEMINAR ON THE TRADE STATISTICS DATABASE**

In keeping with programmed project activities, a subregional seminar to report on the achievements of Project NET/00/081 was held on 14 and 15 October 2002 at the offices of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, secretariat of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC). Attending the meeting were chief statisticians and trade statistics personnel from the southernmost countries of the CDCC subregion. The seminar, in addition to reporting progress on the project and demonstrating the mechanism of the query routine, showcased two trade analysis packages whose elements of analysis could be implemented with the data from the database created under the project.

Attending the seminar were participants from Aruba, Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Netherlands Antilles, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

A list of participants is annexed to this report.

### **Agenda item 1: Welcome remarks**

Mr. Lancelot Busby, Economic Affairs Officer, ECLAC/CDCC secretariat, opened the seminar and welcomed the participants, thanking them for having made the time, despite their busy schedules, to be present. Mr. Busby reminded the seminar of the origins of the project, pointing out the frequent complaint of the paucity of statistics on the Caribbean. He hoped that the trade statistics database that was in the process of being installed would be the first in a number of databases on the Caribbean that would move the Caribbean from being a “data poor” subregion to a “data-rich” one. He expressed the hope that the seminar would be a fruitful one.

### **Agenda item 2: Consideration and adoption of the agenda**

The meeting adopted the agenda as proposed. Mr. Lancelot Busby of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat assumed the Chair. The agenda was as follows:

1. Welcome remarks
2. Consideration and adoption of the agenda

3. Presentation of objectives of project and database design - An overview of work accomplished
4. Consultant's report - Assessing the job
5. Consultant's report – Terms of Reference, approach to work and achievements
6. Other project activities
7. Description and demonstration of the database engine
8. Analysis of Trade Data – Part 1
9. Analysis of Trade Data – Part 2
10. A road map for future work
11. Discussion on modalities for the future transfer of data to ECLAC
12. Closing remarks from participants and from ECLAC

**Agenda item 3:**  
**- Presentation of objectives of project and database design**  
**- An overview of work accomplished**

The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat presented an overview of the project and its accomplishments, tracing its evolution. Attention was drawn to the fact that there existed a database that was substantial. Information for all years for all countries was not available, but the database was functional. The challenges encountered in collecting the data were highlighted: those included the issue of confidentiality as perceived by the smaller countries involved in the database coverage. In like manner the successes were noted and the countries thanked for the part that they played in ensuring the success of the project. At the time of presentation, countries were continuing to provide data for the database. The secretariat observed that in addition to providing data on trade and transportation, the database allowed the use of analytical tools based on other software packages to provide insights into the evolving nature of markets. Those insights would assist countries to strategize their approaches to the market. Based on the progress made in the project, sustainability of the initiative would be realised only if a successor phase that sought to improve data quality while training the key stakeholders to deliver quality data the first time were put in place. The successor phase would also train a number of persons in the Caribbean to be proficient in the use of the database engine and contribute to the continuing development of the software. The assistance of ECLAC Headquarters in making available the services of Mr. Serge Poulard to work with the project team in Port of Spain was acknowledged. The secretariat also reported on the interest of all countries to produce index

numbers of volume and value of trade. Many had tried but had abandoned their efforts because of measurement problems experienced.

In the discussion that ensued, participants drew attention to existing initiatives in monitoring and measuring trade in services. The representative of Trinidad and Tobago informed the meeting that the study on trade in services captured data on insurance and freight. A number of countries reported that they also captured those data, but agreed that the situation was not the same in all countries. After observing that the project captured merchandise trade, the meeting agreed with the suggestion that ECLAC's work in trade in services should be coordinated with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat's initiatives in that area to maximize the utility of any outputs resulting from activity on that topic. The meeting agreed with the clarification of the Chair that data fields could be added to the database as areas of interest emerged, with the understanding that there would be no attempt to revise the series already captured in the database.

On the subject of the index numbers of volume and value of trade, participants commented on the problems of widely fluctuating average unit values. They observed that part of the fluctuation could be explained by the nature of the unit of measurement which was not necessarily a good correlate of average unit value (price, so to speak, which would also reflect quality). In part, average unit value related to the country of origin and perhaps the economics of transport over varying distances. The meeting agreed that the index could not be an accurate measurement but had utility in that it would be a broad indicator of movement in average unit value or volume. The meeting noted the suggestion of one participant that ECLAC research the feasibility of preparing index numbers on the basis of country of origin or destination.

The Chair, in response to the question of the periodicity of the database reporting, clarified that the contemporary resources permitted annual collections. If more resources came forth subsequently, thought would be given to increasing the periodicity to semi-annual. The meeting agreed that a reasonable time for submission to ECLAC of annual data for the database would be after the month of June in the year following the year of reference. The month of August would be reasonable.

#### **Agenda item 4: Consultant's report - Assessing the job**

Mr. Joe Babooram, Consultant, presented his report in two parts, the first of which recalled the preparatory work and feasibility considerations that would determine the likely success of the project. Data had been collected by means of a questionnaire that sought to establish the ability of the countries to provide trade data. The questionnaire collected data on the adequacy of the hardware used by countries to process the trade statistics. Mr. Babooram reported on the first meeting of an ad hoc expert group that had advised the project team to opt for the transaction file rather than the annual consolidated file as the former would be able to yield the data on transportation. The database that had been produced for demonstration at the seminar was the result of those consultations. Mr. Babooram highlighted the characteristics of

the data submitted, drawing attention to the different coding schemes used across countries and justifying the need to normalize the data.

On the subject of a more efficient regime of data supply to the statistical offices and from them to ECLAC, the meeting discussed the quality of the data that reached the statistical office for further processing. The stage at which data were brought into account were aired. A number of participants felt comfortable with the special trade system in which transactions were brought into account as they became available for domestic use. The meeting also discussed the best way to transfer the data to ECLAC. In response to the suggestion that data could be e-mailed, the observed problem was the size of those files. Most mail boxes were too small to accommodate the size of the files. The file transfer protocol (FTP) solution was not generally used. Participants would have to be coached into trying this data transfer modality.

The meeting was cautioned that care should be taken at the customs and statistical office sites to observe the difference between country of consignment and country of origin and ensure that the correct coding was used.

#### **Agenda item 5:**

#### **Consultant's report – Terms of Reference, approach to work and achievements**

Mr. Babooram presented a detailed account of his terms of reference and proceeded to report on implementation. He discussed the mechanics and complexities of data collection, highlighting the challenges posed by widely varying specifics of data capture. Among the challenges were the following:

- Many formats used for supplying the data to ECLAC. Formats included ACCESS, EXCEL, DBASE 7, ASCII and DBASE IV.
- Poor documentation of record layout that accompanied the files.
- The above diversity increased the effort necessary to secure the normalization of the data.
- The derivation of a common file design and the identification of an acceptable software package for use in creating the database;
- The methodology for creating the databases and delivering them to the webpage designer at ECLAC
- The identification of data requirements
- The identification of beneficiaries of the project intervention
- Future work necessary to sustain the significant achievements of the project.

The emphasis of the Customs Department on the collection of duties resulted in an underestimate of the need for accurate non-duty data. The result was increased work for the Statistical Office to rectify faulty input data. In a previous project the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) had embarked on a number of seminars aimed at training brokers, customs and statistical staff to get the data recording right the first time and by so doing improve the quality of data. The data collected was a reflection of the improvement in data capture. There remained, however, the need to sustain such training. Such activity should form part of a second phase of the project. The Consultant informed the meeting that some 15 million records had been included in the database up to the date of the seminar and more countries' data were to be added. He promised to compile a list of the errors encountered during the phase of cleaning the country data as submitted for the benefit of the Statistical Offices.

In response to the disclosure that CARICOM had recently prepared a revised CET document, Mr. Babooram suggested that it would be advantageous if ECLAC could obtain a copy for use in examining the new mapping of item numbers.

#### **Agenda item 6: Other project activities**

Dr. Helen Mc Bain of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat reported on the *study "The Netherlands Antilles: Trade and Integration with CARICOM"* which formed part of the activities of the Dutch-funded Trade Database Project.

The Dutch Government had been interested in deepening the relations between the Dutch territories in the Caribbean, in particular the Netherlands Antilles, and the member countries of CARICOM. To this end, resources had been provided to undertake a study of existing trade relations between the two sets of countries. The objective was to recommend an optimal form of association between the Netherlands Antilles and CARICOM.

Because the trade database was in the process of being developed the study necessitated visits to the five islands that comprised the Netherlands Antilles, namely, Bonaire, Curacao, Saba, St. Eustatius and Dutch St. Maarten in order to gather trade data as well as other information relevant to the study.

The findings of the study revealed that the level of trade between the Netherlands Antilles and CARICOM was not significant. For example, during the 1990s the Netherlands Antilles exported 14% of its total exports to CARICOM and imported 5% of its total imports from CARICOM. Most of the Netherlands Antilles' trade was with the European Union, North America and Latin America. Oil was the main export as well as the main import. Crude oil went into the Netherlands Antilles for refining and the refined products went back out, recorded as imports and exports, respectively. The main CARICOM exporters to the Netherlands Antilles were Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Jamaica and Barbados. The main imports from CARICOM comprised fish, oil products, cereals, pharmaceuticals and motor vehicle parts.

Major factors militating against increased exports from the Netherlands Antilles to CARICOM were tariff barriers (the CARICOM CET rates ranged from 10-40%), non-tariff barriers (e.g. import licensing), high transportation costs (freight rates) and the homogeneous production structures of the two sets of countries.

The study was based on data that were available only for the last two years of the 1990s. It could have benefited from a longer time series which would have allowed for more detailed analysis of the Netherlands Antilles' trade and competitiveness. The trade database under construction should facilitate future work of that kind. A major weakness of the study was the absence of analysis of trade in services between the Netherlands Antilles and CARICOM. The lack of detailed data on trade in services might have contributed to that situation.

Despite those shortcomings, the study recommended "associate member" status for the Netherlands Antilles in CARICOM, leading to the establishment of a free trade arrangement between the two groups, especially in light of the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in 2005.

#### **Agenda item 7: Description and demonstration of the database engine**

Mr. Serge Poulard of ECLAC Headquarters, Santiago, presented to the meeting a description of the database engine and the website look and feel. He traced the short history of the engine from its early days as the REDATAM engine for census and survey type applications to its contemporary versatility in handling hierarchical databases. He demonstrated the ease with which programming could be done and showed that fact by programming an output to a data request made by one participant at the session. That output was presented after less than two hours' programming effort. He demonstrated the speed of the engine, which was an advantage for web queries. Mr. Poulard reiterated the design of access to the database, pointing out the varying levels of access that would be permitted. He reiterated the previous statement of the secretariat that the ECLAC trade database would not be used to deflect requests for information away from the national statistical offices. The meeting benefited from a demonstration of the ease of preparing a query to yield an analysis of trade by trading blocs or regional groupings.

In answer to the question as to which data source would have the greater validity, the clarification was made that if the database were properly updated and maintained, it would track revisions that the countries made to their data, but could not reflect in hard copy as it was too expensive to re-print an annual trade statistics report. The database should therefore be the preferred source of data.

In answer to the question as to whether or not the country officials would be able to update the contents of the database, the secretariat clarified that that would not be desirable since that level of access would bring with it an increased probability of compromising the integrity of the database. The speed, versatility and functionality of the database engine were highlighted by the secretariat and it was stated that work on the preparation of the documentation of the query routine would commence within a short time.

**Agenda item 8:  
Analysis of Trade Data - Part 1 - MAGIC**

The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat presented a demonstration of MAGIC (Module for the Analysis of the Growth of International Commerce). The analysis package had three modules and was completely symmetric. The modules were:

- Country information;
- Product information; and
- Product by Country information

MAGIC had been developed after CAN (Competitive Analysis of Nations) and attempted to extend the analysis of trade flows beyond the capabilities of CAN. MAGIC had been developed in 1995 and was designed to be user-friendly. It offered queries on both imports and exports and contained information on country of origin. It was designed to trace the evolution of market shares and perform share analysis. MAGIC uses a dataset that encompasses the years 1990 – 2001 and is based on the Harmonized System. Data at the item level are stored and the level of detail is 10 digits. Data can be aggregated up to the 8, 6, 4 and 2 digit levels in real time. It analyses the trade data of all countries and can address country groupings when examining products. The modules were characterized by symmetry. They provided indicators to visualize the data and indicators to analyze the data. Among the analysis indicators were:

- Value and volume
- Market share
- Specialization
- Relative unit values
- Duties

The aspect of the demonstration that impressed the minds of the participants the most was the applicability of the indicators to the database that was being built. The demonstration brought to the group a new view of trade statistics and the possibility of analysis that would help a country to strategize its next moves in its trade relations with other countries.

**Agenda item 9:  
Analysis of Trade Data - Part 2 - CAN**

CAN (Competitive Analysis of Nations), a global trade database with value added in the form of a toolbox analysis was introduced by the secretariat. The package was developed by ECLAC and used COMTRADE, the official trade database maintained by the United Nations Statistical Office. The raw data extracted from that database were the dollar value of imports by year, by commodity and country of origin as presented in Standard International Trade Classification (SITC) Rev. 2 format.

CAN2002 was presented as having 82 reporting countries. They reported on all countries of origin of their imports and provided information on imports from 193 countries. The database

covered over 90% of world trade. Differences between the exports of one country and the recording of what should be the same goods imported into the receiving country would differ by the cost, insurance and freight value recorded in the imports whereas the exports would have been recorded on the free on board valuation. In order to smooth out fluctuations in quantities and average unit values from year to year, each data point was arranged to be the three year moving average, centred on the year captioned. For example, the 1990 data point would have been the average of the period 1989 – 1991.

The program afforded the following types of analysis:

- Market share analysis and trends of key products
- Analysis of export and import composition
- Trade specialization analysis
- Comparisons between “trade rivals”
- Competitiveness matrices.

The indicators as used in CAN might be utilized in the Trade Database under construction and were useful in assessing the country’s position in the market. Such an assessment would guide strategy.

The meeting registered its enthusiasm with the capabilities of CAN and MAGIC.

#### **Agenda item 10: A road map for future work**

The secretariat addressed the construction of index numbers and summarized the reactions to this issue during the collection of the trade databases by the secretariat. All countries had been interested in constructing index numbers of volume and value of trade but had abandoned their efforts when faced with widely fluctuating average unit values. Among the suggestions exchanged were the following:

- Reduction in the number of items selected as indicator items;
- Careful attention to the unit of measurement;
- Reduction of average unit value fluctuations by establishing acceptance regions for average unit value variability;
- Measuring average unit value change (calculating index numbers) by region.

Future work would include the elaboration of the indicators demonstrated, as well as further analytical work, along the lines demonstrated in CAN and MAGIC, on the basis of Caribbean data collected in the facility that had recently come into being and which was being demonstrated at the seminar.

Participants agreed that in the smaller Caribbean economies, some 60% of economic activity was in the services sector. They agreed that a database of trade in services should be developed and would be enriched by a joint ECLAC/CARICOM approach to the exercise.

Data quality was an issue of concern, notwithstanding the significant improvements in that area that had been made over the previous decade. The meeting agreed that coordinated project activity was needed in a second phase to improve the quality of data input into the trade statistics by targeting the human resources that had been committed to the production of trade statistics as a by-product of trade transactions. Training seminars were identified as being urgently required to outfit all stakeholders to “get the figures right the first time” and to regard every item on the single administrative document as being of equal importance.

Participants recommended that a way be found to bring to the attention of the CARICOM Heads of Government the capabilities of CAN and MAGIC and elicit their stated support for the delivery of increased trade analysis capabilities to relevant officials at country level. The suggested route to the Heads was the Committee on Trade and Economic Development (COTED) forum of CARICOM. The meeting agreed that the ECLAC/CDCC and CARICOM Secretariats should collaborate to a greater extent on the development of trade analysis.

The participants voiced general satisfaction and pleasant surprise at the demonstrations of the analyses of trade and resolved to inform their ministries of trade of the existence of the facility. The outcome of such information would be a number of requests to train trade economists and personnel in the private sector to use the database more fully. That suggestion was proposed as a possible “downstream” phase two project activity. Participants commended ECLAC/CDCC and the Dutch Government for their foresight in mounting the project and requested an extension of the database to provide the features of CAN and MAGIC as well as to train Caribbean people in the expert use of the database engine.

Participants drew attention to the usefulness of some reporting in the Harmonized System. The Chair clarified that that output format was possible. Only a very small programming effort was required to produce the requested output.

Analysis by Broad Economic Category would assist countries in their analysis of trade statistics. Participants agreed that it would be advantageous if each item of import could be mapped to an industry importing the item. As a necessary input to the mapping exercise, updated copies of the Broad Economic Category and other nomenclatures as recently provided by the United Nations would be sent to ECLAC/CDCC for redistribution to all statistical offices in the subregion.

**Agenda item 11:  
Discussion on modalities for the future transfer of data to ECLAC**

Participants raised the question of security of the database if it were held in one location, namely, ECLAC in the case of the trade and transportation database. The meeting agreed that offsite storage of the database should be decided on and implemented at the earliest possible time.

The meeting considered the transfer of trade data to ECLAC and agreed that the best medium was the CD ROM. The project could serve to bring together in a productive liaison the following personnel:

- Trade statisticians
- Government trade negotiators
- Trade experts and
- Academics

On the issue of timing of updated files for entry into the database, the meeting agreed that August of the year after the period to be added to the database was a good time to add the data to the database. However, because of the possible high impact of late reporting of extremely important exports, the data for the previous two or three years should be revised for re-entry into the database as a matter of course.

**Agenda item 12:  
Closing remarks from participants and from ECLAC**

Participants expressed their delight at having participated in the construction of the database. They pledged their support of the database by their reports to their governments and their campaigns for the use of the indicators as per the MAGIC and CAN packages.

Mr. Lancelot Busby of the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat thanked the participants for their strong support for the project. Their efforts had helped to make the project deliverables the success that they had been. Their efforts had helped to make the challenge of constructing a normalized trade and transportation database the success that it had been, notwithstanding the possibility of further improvement in the quality of the incoming data. He promised that the recommendations of the meeting would be included in the report of the seminar and would go forward at the time of the closeout of the project. He also proposed that the report of the seminar would be included in the outreach documentation of ECLAC for the greater awareness of as many high-level government officials as possible. He wished participants a safe return journey and promised future collaboration on the index number issue.

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