

Instruments of Trade Analysis and Negotiation -
Introducing the CARIBTRADE Database
16 April 2004
Port-of-Spain, Trinidad

LIMITED
LC/CAR/L.16
21 June 2004
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**REPORT OF THE MEETING:
INSTRUMENTS OF TRADE ANALYSIS AND NEGOTIATION -
INTRODUCING THE CARIBTRADE DATABASE**

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**REPORT OF THE MEETING
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Introduction

The Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, secretariat of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC), launched its CARIBTRADE Trade and Transportation Database through the meeting Instruments of Trade Analysis and Negotiation: Introducing the CARIBTRADE Database, held on 16 April 2004 in Port of Spain, Trinidad. The list of participants of the meeting is annexed to this report.

Agenda item 1: Opening remarks

Mr. Esteban Perez, Officer-in-charge of the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, welcomed participants to the launch and acknowledged the significant role played by the Kingdom of the Netherlands through its funding of the project. He described the CARIBTRADE Database and its submodules and stated that the Database provided answers to queries on the direction of trade, performance of trade and competitiveness through the submodules and their specialization indicators and competitiveness matrices. These trade and competitiveness indicators included country and product shares, imports and exports by country of origin and destination, and by product category. The Database drew on data provided by the national statistical offices throughout the Caribbean, with access at two distinct levels: the public level of access, which provided results up to the third digit of the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC) Rev. 3, and up to the second digit of the Harmonised System (HS) classification; and the private level of access, which was accorded to a limited number of personnel at the national statistical offices. Mr. Perez expressed the hope that the Database would increase the capacity of Caribbean countries to better participate in and benefit from trade negotiations and policy decisions, and thanked the Directors of Statistics and Trade Statisticians of participating countries for their provision of data that formed the input to the creation of the Databases.

Agenda item 2: Tracing the history and main features of the project

Mr. Lancelot Busby, Economic Affairs Officer at the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat and Project Leader of the CARIBTRADE Database development and implementation, stated that Caribbean economies depended, to a great extent, on external trade; however, because of the scarce supporting data on transportation and the various national systems for recording trade transactions in the Caribbean, it was extremely difficult to analyze their trade performance and effectively partake in trade negotiations. It was felt, therefore, that the CARIBTRADE Database would provide Caribbean analysts with timely and quality statistics and detailed information on intra and extraregional trade, thereby increasing the knowledge basis on which trade in and among CDCC countries could be developed.

The more immediate objectives were: (a) to understand and analyze trade and transportation flows and their implications on the economies of the subregion; (b) to provide current and more comparable trade data across the Caribbean countries; (c) to create a fully-searchable Caribbean trade database; (d) to improve analysis of trade and transportation statistics on the Caribbean; and (e) to establish a tool for formulating effective policies.

He presented a comprehensive report on the project achievements and prospects for the future through a revision of the background, objectives and impact of the project; the ECLAC approach to achieving the objectives; the design of the Database; technical support in the programming aspects; the status of its implementation; the consultative process with participating countries; the challenges in collecting, handling and analyzing the trade data; the benefits of the subregional seminars; and feedback and guidelines for future work on the development of the Database.

Agenda item 3: The role of the trade statistics consultant

Mr. Joseph Babooram, Information Technology (IT) Consultant to the Project, provided a detailed account of the technical tasks involved in establishing a normalized set of databases for all countries in the subregion participating in the CARIBTRADE Database project. These databases comprised a common set of codes, classifications and item description sets. More specifically, the tasks involved data gathering; design and creation of reference files; the development of a menu-driven system for maintenance of the reference files; and the design and creation of the national databases. These databases were then used to prepare trade tables and indices that were made available through the Internet.

Mr. Babooram stated that there were several inherent shortcomings in the quality and completeness of trade data received by the national statistical offices, and explained the measures taken to ensure that the data normalization process resulted in reliable and valid datasets. The issues with data quality centered around differences in file structures; the use of obsolete and/or non-ISO codes; limited or missing data and metadata; and logically-flawed data.

The overall Database creation system comprised two subsystems: creating and maintaining the reference tables, and creating the Database. The reference tables were the files necessary to support the country databases and consisted of a common set of codes and their descriptions, to which the various codes in the incoming data were normalized. The database creation system made use of the raw data provided by the countries, the reference tables and the computer programmes to create the standardized databases.

Agenda item 4: Unveiling the database

A live demonstration of the CARIBTRADE Database was conducted for participants. This was also shared with the ECLAC offices in Santiago, Washington and Mexico via video conference.

Agenda item 5: Discussion

A roundtable discussion followed the live demonstration of the Database. The participants thanked the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean for providing the subregion with such a powerful tool. It was unanimously agreed that, with such authentic trade data so easily accessible, a great opportunity for advancement had been created for decision makers in their negotiation processes. One of the key issues raised in the discussion was the need for countries to accept ownership of the Database by providing the ECLAC Port of Spain office with their annual trade data in a timely manner, paying special attention to the quality of such data. This was viewed as a critical element to the survival of the Database. In so doing, value would be added to the authenticity of the data, which in turn would be accepted by a wide cross-section of decision makers, policy formulators, governments and government agencies. This homogeneity of data between CARIBTRADE and the various countries would instill a sense of confidence in and acceptance of the reports and output data generated from the Database. The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat indicated its willingness to support all users of the Database, especially since it saved time and effort in processing internal requests for data.

While acknowledging that CARIBTRADE is a highly powerful and analytical tool, some participants were concerned about the proportion of representation, given the absence from the Database of CDCC member countries, such as, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Suriname. There was a call for greater efforts to have these countries represented in the Database. The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat responded that meetings had been held with the relevant departments in an effort to incorporate Puerto Rico and Suriname, but that each country had inherent obstacles to its making available the trade statistics needed for inclusion into the Database. Puerto Rico's data would have to be obtained out of the authoritative source, namely Washington; while Suriname's time series data needed to be more fully accumulated.

On the issue of assisting statistical offices to produce quality statistics, the meeting was informed that through the project a number of countries had received computer supplies and hardware to help meet the goal of effectively processing their data. Nevertheless, there was an urgent call for greater collaboration between the national statistical office and the local customs office as a longer-term solution to the provision of accurate data. With vigilance over those items, which were crucial to the functions of the statistics office but not primarily of interest to the customs office, the latter could be a key player in the production of higher quality national trade data.

Agenda item 6: Closing remarks

In closing, the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat expressed gratitude to the participants for attending the launch of the CARIBTRADE Database and urged its use to inform policy analyses and trade negotiations. Thanks were also extended to the countries for providing the input data and the Government of the Kingdom of The Netherlands for their significant financial contribution to the project.

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