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**SUBSTANTIVE TOPICS CONSIDERED AT THE CONFERENCE OF
EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

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SUBSTANTIVE TOPICS CONSIDERED AT THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

This note was prepared by the Secretariat at the request of the Executive Committee of the Statistical Conference of the Americas, to inform the members of the Conference about the substantive topics taken into account by the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) and its Bureau. By providing this information, the objective is to guide the debates of the V meeting of the Executive Committee on the selection of the substantive topics to be selected for the forthcoming IV Statistical Conference of the Americas, to be organised in 2007.

A. SUBSTANTIVE SEMINARS

The organization of substantive seminars during the CES plenary sessions started formally in 2003. Each year, a seminar is devoted to two aspects:

- (i) foundational issues of statistical systems
- (ii) new and emerging issues

The topics of the following seminars held under this arrangement are:

1. Foundational issues

2003 Statistical confidentiality and microdata

- 1) Overview and use of microdata
- 2) Data confidentiality
- 3) Legal aspects on microdata
- 4) Access to microdata – issues, organization and approaches

2004 National Statistical Systems

- 1) Coordination within national statistical systems
- 2) Independence, integrity and credibility of official statistics (including all producers)
- 3) Issues generating demand for statistics
- 4) Official statistics as a brand

2005 Improved data reporting

- 5) Using the Internet for business surveys
- 6) Using the Internet for population censuses and surveys
- 7) Cognitive and usability testing and marketing in support of Internet reporting
- 8) Reducing respondent burden through improved data reporting

2. Emerging issues

2003 Globalization

- 1) Gauging the globalization phenomenon itself
- 2) Impact of globalization on traditional statistical systems
- 3) Globalization questions to which users of statistics want answers
- 4) International statistical cooperation

2004 Measuring prices and volume of the services sector

- 1) Current international practice for measuring prices and volume in the services sector: overview
- 2) Current international practice for measuring prices and volume in the services sector: non-market services
- 3) Output measures of services volume
- 4) The use of service sector statistics by external users

2005 Sustainable development

- 1) The role of official statistics
- 2) Frameworks and analytical tools
- 3) Case studies
- 4) Future needs and recommendations

All papers that documented and supported the substantive discussion are available at the UNECE Statistical Division's website:

<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2003.06.ces.htm> - CES 2003 plenary session

<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2004.06.ces.htm> - CES 2004 plenary session

<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2005.06.seminars.htm> CES 2005 seminars

In March-April 2005, the UNECE secretariat conducted electronically a survey to consult with the member countries of the Conference and international organizations, on the possible topics for discussion at the 2006 CES plenary session. The list of proposed issues for 2006 and results from the survey are presented in Annex 1.

II. OTHER SUBSTANTIVE REVIEWS

Before 2003, there were also substantive items to be discussed; nevertheless the discussion was organized in a different format. There were about 1-day seminars on different topics selected by the CES Bureau, which were as follows:

2002: 50th anniversary of the Conference of European Statisticians

2001: Small area statistics and statistics for small countries

2000: How international comparability is affected by developments with users and with administrative sources

1999: Performance indicators for statistical offices

1998: Relations between statistical offices and the governments

1997: Impact of information technology developments on statistical operations: managerial considerations

1996: Labour market dynamics: new statistical and analytical approaches

1995: Possibilities to describe statistically the effects of ongoing integration processes in the ECE region

Some additional topics were often presented and/or discussed, based on papers submitted by countries or selected by the Bureau to tackle a specific issue.

In addition, substantive issues were also considered in the context of the periodic revision of the **Integrated Presentation of International Statistical Work Programmes (IP)**. In June 2004 the Conference decided that, starting from 2005, the Rapporteur reports on the IP should focus on sections "*Issues and problems*" and "*Attention of the Conference is drawn to*".

It should be noted that the main purpose of the CES Rapporteur reports on the IP is to make a critical assessment of the international coordination and cooperation in a particular programme element. The analysis should draw attention to pertinent issues or problems and provide concrete proposals for improvement. These issues should be brought to the attention of the Bureau and the Conference, i.e. to the attention of the management of national and international statistical agencies. The CES should then review the measures put in place to address any problem identified by the Rapporteurs.

To get an overview of these issues, please refer to the agendas of the CES plenary sessions on the UN.ECE website: <http://www.unece.org/stats/archive/01.02.e.htm>

ANNEX 1

NOTE ON THE POSSIBLE TOPICS PRESENTED FOR THE NEXT SEMINAR SESSIONS AT THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

This annex is based on a note prepared by the UNECE secretariat, ANNEX CES/2005/WP.4, 20 May 2005.

I. POSSIBLE TOPICS

In March-April, the UNECE secretariat conducted electronically a survey to consult with the member countries of the Conference and international organizations on the possible topics for discussion at the 2006 CES plenary session. The objective of the exercise is also to identify the *Session Organizers* (the members who will organize the session, which includes the presentation of the document(s), the invited comments and the discussions) and the *Contributors* (the members that will prepare the technical documents).

The following list of possible topics was sent to countries and international organizations for consultation:

a) The relationship between statisticians and policy makers, including implementation of fundamental principles of official statistics

– related, among other things, to issues of relevance of statistics for policy and issues of independence

b) Issues related to the statistical environment:

- (i) *public trust in statistics, protecting the privacy of respondents while respecting the right to information – principles of good practice;*
- (ii) *supporting analysis and research by providing access to anonymous microdata;*
- (iii) *changes in institutional framework;*
- (iv) *maintaining response rates and other current concerns, etc.*

c) Population and Housing Censuses in the future

Traditional method, based on registers, mixed - traditional with use of registers or other? Future form and place of population censuses.

d) Current thinking about measures of population and components of change

– including the measurement of migration, identifying ethnic and other communities; techniques for improving the accuracy of population estimates, especially for small areas.

e) Social statistics

- (i) *Linking outcomes to the determinants of those outcomes;*
- (ii) *reviving the system of social and demographic statistics;*
- (iii) *identifying areas where there are needs for improved standards that could be used internationally.*

f) Official and non-official statistics

– suggestion to include one "slot" devoted to the experience of international organizations.

g) Performance measures

Political and statistical issues in their selection and publication. – also suggested to include the measurement of public sector output (including that of hospitals, schools and public administration)

- the measurement of public sector output should be considered in a broad framework - where the output of hospitals is health improvement, and that of schools is learning gain.

h) The Impact of the EU Enlargement on the Statistical Work of the UNECE

i) Technical cooperation

- international coordination of technical assistance programmes; country-level and recipient coordination; taking into account the requirements of countries; NSO's role in coordinating statistical technical assistance activities in countries; coordination tools.

j) Human resources and training

- human resources development; organization of training in statistical offices; international training courses; e-learning – including country practices and case studies.

II. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Thirty-eight countries and eleven organizations replied to the survey. In several replies, a distinction was made between favourite topics and other topics to be considered as possible alternatives. In other cases, the proposed topics were ranked (first choice, second choice, etc.).

Concerning the first seminar, the February 2005 meeting of the CES Bureau decided that this should be devoted to the topic of Population Censuses, in view of the work that has been undertaken to develop New Census Recommendations for the ECE region.

Concerning the second seminar, the topics that received most votes are presented in the following paragraphs, by decreasing number of preferences.

1. Topic b) Issues related to the statistical environment:

- (i) public trust in statistics, protecting the privacy of respondents while respecting the right for information – principles of good practice*
- (ii) supporting analysis and research by providing access to anonymous microdata,*
- (iii) changes in institutional framework,*
- (iv) maintaining response rates, and other current concerns.*

This topic received the most preferences: 16 votes (14 from countries and 2 from IOs).

Comments made on this topic:

- privacy is becoming a bigger issue in several parts of the world as a result of increased use of databases for surveillance purposes. Therefore, maintaining public trust with respondents is an increasingly important issue. Increasing public trust in outputs can also be a challenge. The relatively recent events in Greece will have a contagious effect on trust in official statistics in many statistical offices (Australia);

- it would be very useful to attract policy makers to participate in the session (Lithuania);

- the topic has too many threads in the sub-topics listed. Subtopic (i) would be a topic in itself. Subtopic (ii) has been treated in a seminar, and is being followed up in current CES work on principles. Subtopic (iv) could be embraced in the Statistics Canada proposal (see below under New topics) (United States);

- under subtopic (i), it would be very useful to discuss how to improve public trust in the independence, integrity and accountability of official statistics in an age of increasing interdependency. Points of discussion are for instance: communication about subsequent revisions and about incorrect information, in particular to politicians; how to minimize the risk of a 'statistical disaster'; how to operate in the area of tension between the individual's right to

privacy and his right to access information; what are the best international statistical principles, methods and practices and how can we improve international coordination regarding methods, definitions and practices? Regarding subtopic (iii), what are the critical success factors of a sound institutional framework? (Netherlands);

– preference for subtopic (ii) supporting analysis and research by providing access to anonymous microdata (Bulgaria).

Session organizer – no volunteer; contributor – Estonia.

2. Topic f) Official and non-official statistics

– *including one "slot" devoted to the experience of international organizations*

This topic was the second most frequently selected with 13 votes (9 from countries and 4 from IOs).

Other comments on this topic:

– suggestion to devote a substantial part to practices of international organizations (Iceland);

– the trade-off between the growth of statistical information demand and the decrease of financial resources for official statistics raises the problem of taking advantage of all information existing at national and international levels. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the importance of developing and implementing the existing information sources as long as the process of exploiting non-official sources is regulated and the relative procedures are clearly stated between producers and users (Italy);

– the topic is very relevant because official statistics has to meet the expectations of the users and policy makers, while at the same time competing with “private” statistics. This topic could be considered together with topic a) the relationship between statisticians and policy makers (Switzerland).

Session organizer – no volunteer, contributor - Finland.

3. Topic a) The relationship between statisticians and policy makers, including implementation of fundamental principles of official statistics

– *related, among other things, to issues of relevance of statistics for policy and issues of independence*

This topic received 9 votes (7 from countries and 2 from IOs).

Other comments on this topic:

– since this topic would also deal with issues of independence, it fits perfectly with the effort to develop a so-called "code of practice" for statistical institutes at EU level (Germany);

– the theme has a wide angle and is therefore appropriate for a seminar session. From the point of view of the institutional environment: what are the characteristics of the relationship between statisticians and policymakers? What arrangements lay down rules? (e.g. the implementation and monitoring of the UN Fundamental Principles and the European Statistics Code of Practice.) Is there an area of tension with regard to the fundamental principles like professional independence in terms of dissemination and content of publications? (Netherlands).

Session organizer – no volunteer; contributors – no volunteers.

4. Topic g) Performance measures

– *political and statistical issues in their selection and publication; also suggested to include the measurement of public sector output (including that of hospitals, schools and public administration) - the measurement of public sector output should be considered in a broad framework - where the output of hospitals is health improvement, and that of schools is learning gain.*

This topic also received 9 votes (7 from countries and 2 from IOs) – the same number of votes as the previous topic.

Mongolia suggested considering the estimation of output of public service sectors, such as public administration and defense, education, and health sectors at constant prices, and offered to organize the discussion on this topic.

Session organizer – no volunteer; contributors – Finland, Mongolia.

5. Topic j) Human resources and training

– *human resources development; organization of training in statistical offices; international training courses; e-learning;*

– *including country practices and case studies.*

This topic received 8 votes (6 from countries and 2 from IOs).

Other comments on this topic:

– to stress the link between the two dimensions: human resources development/management and training (France);

– to also cover training of statisticians outside the NSO (Australia);

– to consider the topic in view of the organization of international training with the application of new tools and methods (web based courses), development of a system of performance indicators to measure the efficiency of training, best practices in organizing the internal training in statistical offices (Slovenia, Albania);

– to discuss recruitment into the government's statistical system (United States).

Session organizer – Czech Republic; contributors – Canada, Finland, Eurostat, IMF.

6. Other topics of interest

The following topics could be noted:

a) Technical cooperation – 6 votes (1 from countries (Armenia) and 5 from IOs).

Note: in February 2005, the Bureau made an in-depth review of technical cooperation activities and requested the UNECE, Eurostat and the Interstate Statistical Committee of the CIS to prepare a concrete proposal on how to improve the coordination of technical assistance in the UNECE region. The proposal will be considered at the CES Bureau meeting in October 2005.

b) Population and Housing Censuses in the future - 4 votes.

Comments:

- to be incorporated into the population census seminar already planned for 2006; could perhaps be the last session. There have been recent UN/CES meetings that could serve as a basis for this discussion (United States);

- can be combined with the planned seminar on population census in 2006 (Switzerland).

c) Current thinking about measures of population and components of change - 4 votes.

Comments:

- this is highly related to the next round of population censuses; moreover, it is an area where relevant CES work is underway that should form the basis for a broader, higher level discussion (United States);

- can be combined with the planned seminar on population census in 2006 (Switzerland);

- this proposal overlaps to a large extent with the topic of Population Censuses. Nevertheless, the subject is very interesting and the topic could be listed again for the possible topics for CES 2007 (Netherlands).

d) Social statistics - 4 votes.

Note: a joint UNECE/Eurostat seminar on social statistics is being planned for September 2005.

It is proposed to wait for the outcome of this seminar before considering social statistics as a topic for a CES seminar.

e) The Impact of the EU Enlargement on the Statistical Work of the UNECE - 3 votes (Israel, Switzerland and UNESCO).

Comments:

- the topic requires particular attention in the light of the external evaluation of the UNECE (Switzerland).

III. NEW TOPICS

Members of the Conference were invited to propose new topics. These are listed below:

Topics proposed by Canada:

- A common core content for social statistics

A session devoted to discussing key social issues common to a number of countries and that could potentially be better illuminated by a common or standardized measurement instrument (and underlying concepts and definitions) that would permit better descriptive and analytical comparisons. The goal would be to see if a critical mass of NSOs could be made to volunteer for a meaningful experimental or pilot survey.

- Ways to conduct statistical programs more efficiently

All statistical agencies face the challenge of improving the cost-effectiveness of their operations, although some have been more proactive in addressing it than others. The emergence of new technologies and improved statistical and management methods over the past decade or so has offered significant possibilities for lower cost production. The seminar could focus on the different approaches that statistical agencies have taken to realize cost savings (e.g. consolidation of data collection or computer operations, substitution of tax for survey data, substitution of new, more efficient computer technologies for outdated ones, data warehousing, electronic data reporting, etc.) and the various lessons learned could be compiled as an output of the seminar, to the potential future advantage of all its participants.

Note: Some of the issues raised in the description are similar to topics that will be addressed in this year's seminar on "improved data reporting."

Topics proposed by FAO:

- Statistics on rural development and agricultural household income
- Agricultural censuses and population censuses

Topic proposed by Slovenia:

- Building awareness of the importance of independent and high quality statistical information (promotion of statistical production)

New topic proposed by Finland:

- Increasing the productivity of the NSOs

The efficiency and productivity issues are currently relevant and topical to many statistic offices for various reasons: (i) financial constraints to cut down expenses; (ii) improvement of their output and performance in general; and (iii) streamlining of the processes. It would be interesting to share gained experiences and to find out which kind of measures and tools in increasing productivity have been successful. There is one more reason why the topic would be

highly important. Statistical offices are also asked to provide sound methodology to measure productivity of public organizations. Measurement of productivity of the statistical agency could probably be dealt with in one of the sessions.

Finland would be willing to contribute to the organization of the seminar, if the topic is selected.

Topic proposed by Austria:

– Migration statistics

Topics proposed by Kyrgyzstan:

– Reducing respondent burden

– Best practices in surveying fixed assets and their service lives, especially in the informal sector

Topics proposed by ILO:

– The role of national statistical offices in measuring the economic and social dimensions of globalization

– The role of national statistical offices within the framework of national statistical systems to facilitate and coordinate the production and dissemination of statistics from all government agencies and departments

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The 50th Conference delegated to the Bureau of the Conference the implementation of the new structure of organizing the seminar sessions, including the selection of topics. Based on the decision of the CES Bureau at its February 2005 meeting and the results of the survey, it is proposed that the following topics be considered by the Conference for discussion in 2006:

• **For the first seminar session:**

Population Censuses

Session organizer: to be decided

• **For the second seminar session:**

After carefully considering all five topics with the highest number of votes and taking into account the offers to act as the session organizer and to contribute, the Bureau decided to propose the topic of Human resources and training, *human resources development; organization of training in statistical offices; international training courses; e-learning. The seminar should include country practices and case studies.*

Session organizer: Czech Republic;

Contributors: Canada, Finland, Eurostat, IMF