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**E C L A C**

**Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Meeting of Directors of Statistics of the Americas**

**Santiago, Chile, 24 - 26 March 1999**

**MEETINGS OF FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS \*/**

\*/ This document was prepared by Jacob Ryten, former Deputy Director of Statistics Canada. It has not been formally edited, the views it contains are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Organization.

Ten fundamental principles of statistics were established some eight years ago to assist the States of Eastern Europe and of the former Soviet Union to make the transition to a new institutional order. Those countries had statistical offices which, instead of acting as reliable sources of quantitative data obtained through objective methods and disseminated by an independent and impartial body, were offshoots of the political organs of the Government. As a part of its support to those States, the Western community decided that, in addition to providing financial contributions, it would be in a position to assist them to restructure their administrative apparatus.

From the outset, emphasis was placed on the production of quantitative information and the reorganization of the national statistical institutes of countries with economies in transition. However, the new directors also expressed the desire for a guide or manual based on the ten basic principles. Such a guide should contain sufficient details to enable a director to use it in specific circumstances.

Two meetings were held in this connection - the first in Prague in March 1998 and the second in Singapore in January 1999. Whereas the first meeting had been improvised and spontaneous, the second meeting was thoroughly prepared and well orchestrated. Furthermore, the second was attended by representatives of central banks and ministers of finance, whereas the first was not. Nonetheless, however, the first may be considered to have been successful while the second proved to be less conclusive.

In response to the directors' request for a guide or manual and thanks to an invitation from the Director of the National Statistical Institute of the Czech Republic, the meeting in Prague was held in March 1998 to discuss the best way of drafting and disseminating the manual or guide. The following conclusions emerged:

- The guide would respond to a demand shared not only by a handful of countries in transition but by the majority of countries, including some highly industrialized nations;
- It would at the same time be a means of informing and a means of providing protection for the director of any national statistical institute where there was the risk of undue ministerial interference in the management of the statistical office;
- The guide should recognize the variety of economic, technical and institutional circumstances affecting national statistical institutes in different regions; moreover, it would be useful for the manual to give examples of policies that have been successful and of others that have not worked, that is to say, it would be useful to have an analytical guide setting out a wide range of options for use by statistical directors;
- The focus of the manual should be on the relationship between the national statistical institute, on the one hand, and, on the other, information sources, users, and, ultimately, the political representatives and how they deal with the information system.

Insofar as there is a group of enthusiasts willing to initiate work on a first draft of the guide, such enthusiasm should be harnessed and channelled in a constructive way.

The following reservations were also expressed:

- Rather than give advice, the guide should recognize the significant differences that may exist among countries and among their administrative systems;
- An analytical guide on these 10 fundamental principles would take a very long time to prepare and would probably be out of date by the time it was published;
- There are no resources for organizing a drafting committee, given the nature of such a document, it would have to be drafted by a representative group of experts.

At the second meeting, held in Singapore in January 1999, the above reservations were underscored and less weight was given to the decisions taken at the meeting in Prague. The conclusions reached were as follows:

- Efforts to continue and improve the dissemination of the 10 fundamental principles should be pursued;
- A short, concise guide of no more than 20 pages in length would be sufficient to set forth the 10 principles and explain the significance of each;
- The Statistical Division of the United Nations undertakes to create a Website containing documents provided by national statistical institutes that directly relate to the application of the fundamental principles. The Division will act as an agent rather than as the author or interpreter of the texts placed on the Website;
- The Statistical Division undertakes to recruit the services of a consultant to update the United Nations manual on how to organize a statistical office.

The following reservations were expressed:

- Creating a Website or, to be more precise, maintaining a repository for such information is difficult and the benefits are only marginal;
- A 20-page guide on the fundamental principles might simply add to the confusion rather than clarifying anything.

At the Singapore meeting, no progress was noted in relation to the conclusions reached in Prague.

**Attendance:**

The meeting in Prague was attended mainly by representatives of the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (including Mexico). The Director of the National Statistical Institute of Hong Kong attended in his capacity as Chairman of the Meeting of Directors of Statistics of Asia and Australia.

The meeting in Singapore was attended by many of the persons who had participated in the meeting in Prague and by representatives from the Philippines (Ministry of Finance), Sri Lanka (Central Bank), the Palestine Authority and Ethiopia.