

Subregional Seminar on the Trade Statistics Database  
St. John's, Antigua & Barbuda  
28-29 October 2002

GENERAL  
LC/CAR/G.712  
2 December 2002  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**REPORT OF THE SUBREGIONAL SEMINAR ON  
THE TRADE STATISTICS DATABASE**  
*(Antigua and Barbuda)*

## Table of contents

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

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

Following on the first seminar to report the progress of the trade statistics project (Project NET/00/081) the second of three such seminars was held on 28 and 29 November 2002 in St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda. Attending the meeting were chief statisticians or their representatives and trade statistics personnel from the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) countries, excluding those that had attended the seminar in Port of Spain. 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. The participants were informed of work done on the study entitled "*The Netherlands Antilles: Trade and Integration with CARICOM*", which had been undertaken by a consultant.

Attending the seminar were participants from Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis and Saint Lucia.

A list of participants is annexed to this report.

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

Mr. Lancelot Busby, Economic Affairs Officer, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (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 utility of the newly constructed database of trade and transportation statistics to researchers in the Caribbean subregion. Expressing the expectation of a successful seminar, 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.

### **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. The work involved in creating the database was explained to the meeting. The challenges lay in the diversity of codes and nomenclatures used across countries. The inaccuracy of some units of measurement was addressed. The collection of data for all of the years proved to be difficult at times. The format used to provide data to the secretariat presented challenges to their easy incorporation into the database. The secretariat was pleased to announce that the database was functional. The secretariat noted the successes in the data collection exercise and thanked the countries for the part that they played in ensuring the success of the project. At the time of presentation, data had been collected for all but one of the countries and the databases for the last of the countries were being created. The secretariat highlighted the feature of the database that allowed the use of analytical tools inspired by other software packages to provide insights into the evolving nature of markets in addition to providing data on trade and transportation. 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 enhanced 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, Santiago, in making available the services of Mr. Serge

Poulard of the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE) 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 confirmed the possibility of providing data on transportation, such as the nationality of the carriers and their tonnage. On the subject of duty paid or payable, the meeting noted that further investigation should be made into the collection of data on duty actually paid. The secretariat observed that data were entered after duty was paid. Duty actually paid should be collected. Some participants expressed the view that seminars involving staff of the Customs Department would result in a more accurate data capture.

Participants commented on the problems of widely fluctuating average unit values. They observed that part of the fluctuation could be explained by product and quality variability within a given item number. Average unit value could also be related to the country of origin and the economics of transport over varying distances. The meeting agreed that the index could not be an accurate measurement but had utility as a broad indicator of movement in average unit value or volume. The meeting agreed that research be conducted into finding a way to produce index numbers that were more satisfactory than those prepared to date.

#### **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 inform the likely success of the project. Investigative data had been collected by means of a questionnaire that established the ability of the countries to provide trade data and the hardware endowment of the countries to process 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 conversion to machine-readable form. Discussions on 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 optimum modality of transfer of the data to ECLAC. In response to the suggestion that data could be e-mailed, Mr. Babooram described the problem of transmission and receipt of files as large as the trade statistics 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 the FTP 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 diversity of formats and poor documentation 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 was noted. This was directly related to relatively poor data that did not contribute to the calculation of duty payable. The result was increased work for the Statistical Office to rectify faulty input data. In a previous project a number of seminars were held, aimed at training brokers, customs and statistical staff to get the data recording right the first time and by so doing to improve the quality of data. The data collected in the present project 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 that 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 future capture and coding of data.

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

The 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 the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). To that 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. Those transactions were 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. One level of access would be for the general community of researchers. That group would be given unrestricted access to the database up to the three-digit level of disaggregation. The other identified group would comprise the Directors of Statistics of the countries that contributed data to the database. Their access would be down to the item level of disaggregation and would be controlled by a password. 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. Associated with this question was the further question as to whether the user could define a group of countries as a bloc for a particular bit of analysis. The secretariat suggested that that request might be accommodated by creating a check box to allow the user to consider selected countries as a group or a trading bloc.

The participants contributed to the fine-tuning of the output tables by suggesting refinements in the output tables pertaining to country groupings as opposed to countries that could be analysed as members of a group. In answer to the request for notes regarding missing data, the secretariat demonstrated the ease with which that information could be added to the total. Participants wanted to see notes explaining significant aspects of the tables, if necessary. They were assured that these elements of meta-data could be put in place.

In response to the request for a display of market share, the meeting was assured that the table could be produced with a sort in accordance with market share size in ascending or descending order, for any designated reference year.

In response to the question as to whether the database offered symmetry between exports of country A to country B and the imports of country B from country A, the secretariat clarified that such symmetry could not be guaranteed as there could arise differences in the time of the transactions being brought to account and the certain difference between the valuation of exports and imports.

In answer to the question of the amount of programming involved in the maintenance of the database, the secretariat clarified that very little programming was required. It was a matter of writing scripts.



**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. A defining feature of the modules was their 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 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, 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. In the design of the database, it was important not to include too many indicators so as to keep maintenance of the system at an optimum level.

The meeting registered its enthusiasm with the capabilities of CAN and MAGIC and at least three countries requested further technical assistance in the use of the software from ECLAC.

Participants asked whether the level of detail in CAN could render the Statistical Office obsolete. They also wanted to know if they could import the Caribbean trade database into CAN and perform the analysis through that software. The secretariat responded in the negative to both questions and explained that CAN analysed only up to the three-digit level while MAGIC looked only at the United States Market. The Caribbean database was aiming at providing more functionality than CAN and MAGIC.

Participants observed that the training of clerical staff to input data more accurately was of great importance if the quality of trade data were to be improved.

The secretariat observed that the worth and functionality of the statistical offices would increase if they could use the database to provide quick responses to requests for data.

### **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 its collection of the trade data. 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.

The secretariat encouraged the participants to access the database on the website and provide it with feedback, suggesting improvements where they thought necessary.

Future work would include the elaboration of the indicators demonstrated as well as further analytical work along the lines as 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.

Data quality was addressed and participants agreed that there was need for greater dialogue between statisticians, customs and trade officials and brokers to improve the quality of the data being recorded on the invoices that were passed for the extraction of statistics. Those officials should be encouraged to pay as much attention to the recording of quantities as to revenues. The benefit of the proposed quality drive would accrue to the government and the country at large by the production and use of trade index numbers of volume and value of trade to assess the effects of trade with third countries.

Participants observed the need to sensitize all elements of Caribbean society on the usefulness of the trade statistics. Such an approach would result in a vastly improved database and improved service to the subregion.

The secretariat encouraged the statisticians to be proactive in their environmental scans, identifying opportunities for the fuller use of trade statistics by the planners and trade specialists. The participants voiced general satisfaction at the deliverables from the database and pleasant surprise at the demonstrations of the analyses of trade. They resolved to inform their ministries of trade of the existence of the facility. Participants commended ECLAC/CDCC and thanked the Dutch Government for their foresight in funding the project.

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

The Consultant recounted his experiences with the incoming data and recommended that data for the next round of data collection be provided by the countries in dBase IV or ASCII sdf format. In addition, data provided in electronic format should be accompanied by documentation on the file layout and documentation on the coding used in the file. The countries should all supply country codes in accordance with the ISO classification. In instances where countries were dependencies or departments of a metropolitan country, the country name should be coded and appropriate arrangements made to link those countries with the metropolis, while retaining the (island) country data.

In like manner, transport codes should be submitted in accordance with the ISO classification. The Statistical offices should provide accurate quantities and correct information on country of origin. In this regard, the meeting suggested that dialogue with the Customs Department could lead to more vigilance and therefore better quality information being captured. The completed form should treat as country of origin, the country where the goods were manufactured. The size of the files made electronic transfer difficult as the file size exceeded the

size limit of most e-mail boxes. The recommended method of transfer of data was therefore via CD ROM.

The secretariat recalled the observation in the results of the survey that preceded work on the database that there was no need for additional personnel to be introduced into the Statistical Offices to produce trade data. What was needed in some cases was the enhancement of hardware to support the provision of the data files to ECLAC.

Participants, while agreeing that the transport statistics should be provided to amplify the database, believed that in cases where those data were not recorded, it would take some time before the data could be incorporated into the database.

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. 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**

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. He stated that the provision of the data on the worldwide web would benefit the countries by making the data available without the intervention of office staff to satisfy user queries at that level of aggregation presented in the publicly accessible database.

Participants thanked ECLAC for having conducted the seminar and expressed their delight at having participated in the construction of the database. They pledged their support of the database by promising to send copies of their reports to their governments and by campaigning for the use of the indicators as per the MAGIC and CAN packages. The participants underscored the need for dialogue with all stakeholders involved in the trade statistics activity and pledged to work towards the provision of data of improved quality.

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