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**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

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**AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN  
STATISTICIANS**

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**I. Introduction**

1. It is an honour to be able to contribute to the discussion of the future of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES). Not many conferences have such a long life. To survive and be well attended, the meetings must have been of significant interest and stimulation. However, the format will have evolved to meet the needs of today - organisations will not survive if they don't.

Tradition is not enough

2. The paper by Fellegi and Franchet makes it clear that the CES has evolved. Nevertheless, the 50th Anniversary is a good occasion to reflect and analyse how to make best use of the Conference from now on. The available time to attend Conferences is limited and there are many alternatives from which to choose. Attendance by Chief Statisticians will decline unless the Conference has something to offer.

3. I will be writing from the perspective of an observer country. I have only attended one CES but have talked to other ABS staff who have attended previous Conferences. There are two basic components to the paper. The next Section addresses the proposed re-format of the meeting. The following Section discusses developments with a similar Conference for the ESCAP region.

## **II. The Revised Format of the Conference of European Statisticians**

4. Australia's participation in the meetings has been intermittent. It is expensive, both in time and money, to travel to Europe. We will generally only attend if we feel there is value in attending these meetings. Our motivation is not self-interest only. Our interest is driven by:

- The increased interest in international comparisons within Australia; international standards and manuals play a vital role in improving the comparability of data;
- Our desire to represent the concerns of our statistical colleagues in the Asia/Pacific region that international standards, manuals and associated activities are relevant to them; and
- The desire to avoid "reinventing the wheel" and learn from the experience of our statistical colleagues.

5. We think we have an important role to play in international statistics, particularly the development of international standards. Our role may be somewhat unique in that we have a reasonably well developed statistical system, with lots of experienced statisticians, but with less constraints in the nature and choice of our interventions in international statistical activities than many other countries. We also take a strong interest in the work of our colleagues in the Asia/Pacific region.

6. Accordingly, a major reason for attending CES meetings will be if they are influential and inspirational in terms of international good practice. We will not attend if they are dominated by process issues or discussions of the responsibilities of the various international agencies. The proposals put forward by Fellegi and Franchet would make the meetings more attractive from my perspective. More of the time would be spent on international good practice. It would significantly increase the likelihood that the ABS would attend CES meetings.

7. Discussions that lead to developments in international standards would be another reason for attending. It is clear that it is very difficult to have an international standard that is not consistent with a European standard, once the latter has been enshrined in law. Therefore, the best time to have an influence is before a European standard has been set. This suggests any Australian influence should come at the contemplative stage. One useful role for the ECE meeting (plus selected observer countries) will be to discuss the processes for establishing/reviewing international standards and manuals and the juxtaposition of European work on similar topics. (Of course, this will need to be done in collaboration with the UN Statistical Commission which has responsibility for overseeing work on international standards.) We can then decide on the extent of our participation (with the agreement of the convenors). We do participate in the City Groups, working groups established by the international agencies, etc. However, we have generally not participated in the EU based groups. There may be merit in considering representation from non-EU countries in those groups where

the prime role is to review/develop statistical standards that may have an impact on international standards. Certainly, in Australia's case we would only participate if we think we could add value.

8. These comments are made in recognition of the fact that Eurostat are probably the best resourced of the international and supranational statistical agencies and therefore in a good position to do "much of the leg work" involved in work on developing standards.

What are the main risks with the Fellegi and Franchet approach?

9. The proposals seem very sensible to me. My only real concern is that representatives of OECD member countries may not attend the session proposed to be of primary interest to developing countries. Non-attendance is less likely to occur if this session was held in the middle of the Conference as proposed. Nevertheless, there needs to be a commitment from the representatives of the OECD countries that they will attend and participate (but not dominate) in this session. If this doesn't happen the CES could revert to previous arrangements. It is worth a try.

### **III. ESCAP Committee on Statistics**

10. Australia has been an active participant in the Committee and I am the current Chair. With help from our colleagues there have been important reforms in recent years in the way the Committee on Statistics (CoS) operates.

11. There are also further changes taking place to the CoS (not all desirable) because of an overall re-structuring of the ESCAP Conference, Programme and Secretariat structure. I will also discuss this because, without strong interventions from Australia, Japan and Korea, there would have been a significant reduction in the statistical activity of ESCAP as a result of this restructuring. There may be some lessons that are useful if similar moves are made in other Regional Commissions.

12. Looking back five years or so ago, there had been considerable frustration with the work of the CoS. The main concerns were:

- It was too process driven - the agenda was dominated by UN process issues rather than those issues of most interest to member countries;
- Insufficient follow through on agreements made at the meetings;
- Too many countries were represented by diplomatic staff; and

- Too much time was spent reading out prepared statements (particularly when countries were represented by diplomatic staff).

13. The CoS meetings are held every two years but Working Group meetings are held in intervening years. The latter are less formal with English being the only language. Both meetings are (well) attended by the Statisticians of the region. As there is virtually no travel funding for meetings the good attendance is a positive signal of their usefulness.

14. The main changes that have been made over the last five years or so are:

- To ensure a large part of the agenda covers those statistical topics of greatest interest to ESCAP and the member countries;
- Many of the discussion papers were prepared by member countries or experts. Discussion openers were identified;
- Many of the "process" issues were considered by the Chair or the Bureau rather than the full CoS; and
- Reading of prepared statements was discouraged.

15. Also, the Statistics Division now regularly reports progress on implementing the Committee's proposals.

16. In 2001, work began on a much needed structural reform of the ESCAP Conference, Programme and Secretariat structure. Among other things, the work of ESCAP was to concentrate on three main themes - Poverty Reduction, Managing Globalisation and Emerging Social Issues - with the conference, programme and secretariat structures being organised along these lines.

17. Unfortunately "statistics" would have been a casualty of the early proposals. This was in spite of the fact that in discussion documents, the CoS was recognised as one of the few successful ESCAP Committees. It was successful because most of the attendees were the senior statistical experts for their country and were discussing issues of interest to them.

18. The early proposals were for the Statistics Division to be downgraded in status and resourcing, as was the CoS, with the work of both bodies concentrating on poverty reduction. Although this is an important topic, there are many other topics of importance to the statistical offices of the region including capacity building. After a lot of debate and discussion, the current proposal does provide that the Statistics Division and the CoS (downgraded to a Sub-Committee) have responsibility for the broad range of statistical activities although they are still

subservient to those responsible for Poverty Reduction. Surprisingly, many of the representatives of developing countries (not the statisticians) supported the less significant role for statistics. This is indicative of the low priority that statistics has at the political level in many countries and why it is difficult for our statistical colleagues in those countries to obtain the resources they need. The importance of statistics to good governance has to be reinforced at every opportunity.

19. In ECA and ESCWA, there have been far more significant reductions in their statistical activities. This led to a debate at the last UN Statistical Commission meeting on the importance of statistical work in the Regional Commissions. The report of that discussion is attached as an annex to this paper. It was useful in securing a softer line on statistics in the latest ESCAP restructuring proposals, albeit a step down from the reasonably successful arrangements that are in place.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

20. Conferences such as the CES can play a very important role in improving both national and international statistics. They are expensive in time and money. They need to be refreshed from time to time to ensure they meet current needs. The Fellegi and Franchet proposals seem to be sensible changes to implement for the next phase in the life of the CES.

**Annex**

**THE SITUATION OF STATISTICS IN THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS**

Action taken by the Commission

57. The Commission:

- (a) Noted the ECOSOC affirmation in resolution 2000/27 of the importance of national efforts to build statistical capacity in all countries, including through statistical training, and of effective international statistical support in that context for developing countries, and considered that regional programmes of statistics should have a strong element of capacity building;
- (b) Considered that regional programmes of statistics should focus on particular priority areas tailored to the circumstances and needs of the countries in the region, but at the same time considered that a broad range of functions is necessary;
- (c) Emphasised that there should be recognition at the regional level of the links with global statistical programmes, so that regional and global programmes complement each other in pursuing the priority concerns of member countries; and
- (d) Considered that governance arrangements at the regional level should be prominent within the respective regional conference structures, should cover a comprehensive range of statistics, and should allow for the formulation of regional views on global statistical issues.

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