

Processing and Dissemination of Trade Statistics  
Progress Report on the Arrangements for  
Processing and Dissemination of International Trade Statistics

Report prepared by the Statistical Office of the United Nations

INTRODUCTION

1. The Sub-Committee will recall that this item was discussed at its Twenty-Second session in June 1988 and at earlier sessions. The conclusion of the Sub-Committee at its twenty-second session was reflected in its report as follows:

"The Sub-Committee requested the Statistical Office to keep users fully informed of developments and to prepare a detailed paper on the transfer outlining what was contemplated and how it would be implemented. The Statistical Office was requested to meet with major users of COMTRADE to discuss the paper. Users were invited to provide written comments and suggestions as to what type of service they required in Geneva in order to maintain their use of the COMTRADE data bank. That information would be important for the Statistical Office to prepare the requested document and for subsequent discussions with users. The Sub-Committee also requested that the subject be discussed at its next session".

2 pages  
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discussing  
letter  
this  
detailed  
report.

2. The Statistical Office of the United Nations by its letter of 28 November 1988 updated members on the progress and plans for the processing of international trade statistics since the discussion of the matter at its June 1988 session. The Statistical Office reported that although the bulk of its posts outposted to Geneva will be returned to New York, a full time professional (now identified at the P5 level) and one supporting staff will be retained in Geneva to carry out essential functions relating to servicing organizations that use the ICC to access COMTRADE.

Keep  
① Staff

3. That letter also outlined the detailed plan that had been developed to implement the transfer in an orderly, phased manner during the period July 1988 and December 1990; and indicated that certain steps had been initiated and in some cases accomplished. The letter repeated the invitation for users to provide written comments and suggestions as to what type of service they required in Geneva in order to maintain their use of the COMTRADE data bank. Members were reminded that such comments were very important inputs into the preparation of further reports that the Statistical Office would prepare for on-going consultation with users.

②  
③ - Software  
- Office  
- Technical  
- support  
at West  
④ Requested  
comments

ISSUES/COMMENTS BY USERS

4. The Statistical Office received replies from a number of users to its letter of 28 November 1988. A summary of the issues and concerns of users is provided below.

- (i) That the report of "the ACC Sub Committee requested the Statistical Office to keep users fully informed of developments and to prepare a detailed paper on the transfer outlining what was contemplated and how it would be implemented. That the Statistical Office was requested to meet with major users of COMTRADE to discuss the paper". That this has not been done and that the Statistical Office appears to be proceeding with plans without taking due account of the undertakings reached at the Sub-Committee meeting.
- (ii) That the transfer of the processing would mean the relocation of the software system used to access COMTRADE through the ICC to New York. That because of the different computer environment in New York that this would negate the use of the present software and thereby lead to new resources being used to develop another software system for accessing from the New York COMTRADE.
- (iii) That any changes in the operation of COMTRADE might degrade access to the Geneva data base, reduce the quality of the data contained in COMTRADE or slow the process of updating the data bases.
- (iv) That the staff now processing COMTRADE has more than 15 years accumulated experience, and replacing this team with a new one with no experience will mean a long transitional period of on the job training in the processing of national trade data into international format.
- (v) That several thousand tapes are stored by ICC and that since NYCS does not have the storage capacity required for these tapes, considerable expenditure would be required for establishing the required capacity.
- (vi) That the ability to introduce the Asycuda Software Programme in developing countries would be reduced by the transfer of the processing of national trade data into international format from Geneva to New York.
- (vii) That the transfer of the Unit from Geneva to New York would create a serious personnel problem since it would abolish the 11 General Service posts and the incumbents may not be able to relocate to other positions in the United Nations System in Geneva.

*Comments  
relevance*

*procedure*

*need  
software  
changes for  
access*

*affects  
data*

*lossing  
staff  
of personnel*

*tape  
storage*

*Asycuda*

*Personnel  
questions*

- (viii) That the full time professional to be left in Geneva should be sufficiently senior to have had a large experience not only in processing international trade data but also in concepts and definitions of international trade statistics. P-5
- (ix) That certain Organizations made use of trade data at a more detailed level than the 5 digit SITC and would like to receive copies of original national tapes of annual data which would be at more than 5 digit level for non-OECD countries and that these be stored at the ICC. GATT has indicated that it would be willing to pay the storage fees at ICC. access to national tapes
- (x) EEC promised to prepare a short document which will give an idea of the services for COMTRADE that EEC would require, and the inconvenience that would result from the transfer of the Commodity Trade Unit, to the extent that the expertise will not be easily available in Geneva to users in Europe. EEC promised comments

UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL OFFICE RESPONSE TO ISSUES/COMMENTS

5. The Statistical Office welcomed the detailed and varied issues and concerns of the users. In some cases, individual replies were sent. In others, discussions were held with officials of the organizations. At such discussions and in letters the Statistical Office replied in detail to the various issues and concerns that were raised. The Statistical Office sent an interim report dated 22 March 1989 to users reporting on further developments in the transfer of the process to New York. Below is a summary of the responses of the Statistical Office to these issues and concerns.

*checked  
7  
299*

That in addition to the quotations in the report made by some users, that the report also "noted that users were invited to provide written comments and suggestions as to the type of service they required in Geneva in order to maintain their use of the COMTRADE data bank" and also noted "that the Sub-Committee recognized such information would be important for the Statistical Office to prepare the requested document and for subsequent discussion with Users." The Statistical Office has now issued two progress reports supplemented by the current detailed report.

*clarified intention*

(ii) That it is the intention to transfer from ICC in Geneva to New York Electronic Services Division only those activities which involve the initial transformation of nationally supplied data into internationally standard format, units and classifications and loading the transformed data into COMTRADE. That the Statistical Office will continue to maintain and keep up to data via satellite the full COMTRADE resident on the ICC for continuing access by all interested users, and any software previously developed by users for use of COMTRADE in Geneva should continue to be usable.

*OK  
data +  
staffing*

(iii) That one full time professional at the P-5 level and one supporting General Service staff will be retained in Geneva to carry out essential functions relating to servicing all organizations that use the ICC to access COMTRADE. These staff will take care of the needs of users in Europe and provide the essential "human contact" with users to complement the continuing provision of the trade data base on-line at the ICC. Access in Geneva will remain unchanged. Quality of data and rate of updating will be assured as we are assigning in New York experienced staff, both P and G, and still have existing Geneva staff working.

(v) In regard to the concerns regarding anticipated added costs of storing several thousand tapes of Comtrade in New York, the Statistical Office stated that these tapes are of 3 types. Tapes containing national data which have been converted and transformed into international format for each country period. The country periods are either quarterly or annual data. These run into several thousands. All the annual country period data are in the Comtrade data base both in Geneva and in New York. That in regard to the quarterly country period, it is the policy of the Statistical Office to keep only in the Comtrade data base, quarterly trade data for the past three years. The second type of tapes are software library tapes and these are about 20. These software library tapes are already in the Comtrade data base both in Geneva and in New York and the tapes are for back up. The third type of tapes contain national data that have been processed. These tapes are not wanted by the countries supplying the data. Rather than throw them away, they are kept, scratched and used to send data on tape. These tapes amount to about two hundred. All tapes will continue to be held in Geneva. The policy of the Statistical Office to monitor these tapes periodically and remove those which are not absolutely necessary will continue.

*tapes  
not a  
problem*

(vi) As regards the effect of transferring the processing of national trade data from Geneva on UNCTAD'S implementation of its Asycuda project, the Statistical Office explained that the two were only very remotely connected. It was explained that the Asycuda software project is primarily concerned with Customs management; that one of the expected outputs of the Asycuda project will be national external trade data classified according to the Harmonized Classification System; and that the conversion of the Harmonized System to the SITC (which is the statistical classification) has been built into the Asycuda project. That a successful implementation of the Asycuda project in a developing country should therefore eventually lead to national external trade data of that country being easily available to the Statistical Office for further processing and eventual inclusion in the Comtrade data base. Thus it was hoped that the availability and timeliness of data from developing countries to the Comtrade data base will be significantly enhanced.

Further the Statistical Office would like to underline the fact that the Asycuda project is technically linked to the technical cooperation programme of the Statistical Office which is based in New York. That, if anything, the transfer of the processing of national trade data to New York should enhance the link between the Asycuda software programme and the technical cooperation aspect of the processing of national trade data into international format.

- (vii) As regards the transfer of General Service posts to New York, the Statistical Office explained that the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM), Department of International Economic and Social Affairs (DIESA) and the personnel office of United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG) have an arrangement to minimize the negative impact of the transfer on the staff in the Geneva Statistical unit. Basically during the transition period, staff will be allowed to stay in their posts until deployment is arranged. That if, in the unlikely event, at the end of the transfer period (December 1990) any staff member is not otherwise redeployed, that staff member will be offered an assignment in the Statistical Office in New York. *Staff*
- (viii) See para.2 above.
- (ix) - The Statistical Office is willing to make available to interested users copies of national trade data for their own use after receiving approval of countries to do so. It was also noted that GATT was willing to pay storage fees at the ICC for such tapes. *national tapes*
- (x) The Statistical office is looking forward to receiving the views of EEC.

ACTIONS TAKEN IN THE TRANSITION

6. The Statistical Office has established, through the parallel processing of the same country/period data in both Geneva and New York, that the software libraries installed in the New York Comtrade version could function adequately and could be relied on to support the proposed activities both in terms of the specific computer processes and in terms of scale. The Statistical Office was able to establish these by processing both small and large country periods. *tested ✓*

7. The Statistical Office has acquired additional 600 megabyte disk space and 5 terminals. Data processing support capability has been provided from within the Statistical Office. This assistance is critical to the pre-processing phase of work, i.e., the reading of the diverse and changing national data formats and media. Support for the main software and for the Comtrade system is also adequately provided from New York, and changes; improvements, adjustments to these systems can be competently carried out by the Computer Systems Section of the Statistical Office. Promised additional necessary help has been assured from the New York Electronic Services Division. *Space support*

8. Staffing of the New York processing unit has commenced, even before posts are relinquished in Geneva, through redeployment of staff from within the Statistical Office to form the nucleus of the new unit. Apart from the Chief of Section (P5), this unit now comprises one P3 and 4 General Service staff. This core group is composed of staff who have previously been involved in the processing and production of trade statistics and seaborne trade statistics publications. In addition, four General Service posts have been transferred from Geneva and the usual administrative clearances are being gone through to enable recruitment to be effected. The P2 post is being transferred from Geneva with the staff member who is also experienced in processing work. It is expected that by the end of June, this Unit will consist of one P3, one P2 and 8 General Service Staff. *Staffing unit P+G experienced in training*

→ not lifted yet

+95

9. Training of the core group commenced in New York in March 1989 by having each staff process an actual annual country/period of national trade data. This on the job-learning process, though slow at first, involves intensive study and is very effective. All of these staff already have computer knowledge of processing international trade data and although each country/period presents new and different challenges, the training period is reduced because of the staff familiarity with certain of the required computer processes.

10. With the positive commencement of processing work in New York in March 1989 on the formation of the Unit with the internally redeployed staff 4 country/periods have been satisfactorily completed through the learning process. A number of country/periods are both with the Punching Unit, New York or have been prepared and ready to be sent to the Punching Unit in New York. Again, this is done by the same core staff redeployed from within the Statistical Office.

11. The Commodity Trade Statistics Unit in Geneva continues to process national data into international format and during the first quarter completed processing and storing onto the Comtrade data Base in Geneva and New York 38 quarterly and 24 annual country/periods. In addition, the Geneva Unit has processed an additional 13 quarterly and 7 annual country/periods that have, since the end of the first quarter, been installed in the Geneva and New York Comtrade data base.

PROPOSED FUTURE WORK PLAN

12. It should be realized that the starting process of any activity is always slow since this is the learning period. However it is expected that the process will gradually increase its pace and output by the New York group will increase and later outpace the output of the Commodity Trade Statistics Unit, Geneva. This is because a core staff of 2 professionals and 8 General Service staff are now in the Unit and they are actually processing country data. The general service posts from Geneva are being filled primarily through deployment of staff from within the Statistical Office and the new recruits will be made available to other areas of statistical work. Therefore most, if not all, staff who will eventually work on processing national data would come to the Unit with some amount of knowledge of computer processing of trade data. Consequently their learning periods would be much shorter than others.

13. It will be recalled that at earlier sessions of the Sub-Committee meetings, the Statistical Office stated that during the transfer period, evaluations of progress will be done from time to time and adjustments made in the timing of the transfer. The Statistical Office will evaluate the progress of the transfer at the end of June 1989, at which time the core group of staff would have completed the initial training period and should be more conversant with the intimate substantive problems involved in the processing of national country data. Also, at this time, the additional staff would have been recruited and trained and there would be in place a more unified and cohesive group. Any major amendments to the plans resulting from this review will be reported to users.

14. The Statistical Office, for the time being intends to proceed with the transfer of the work from Geneva to New York along the following lines.

*Training*  
*of the core group*  
*in New York*  
*in March 1989*  
*on the formation*  
*of the Unit*  
*with the internally*  
*redeployed staff*  
*4 country/periods*  
*have been*  
*satisfactorily*  
*completed*  
*through the*  
*learning*  
*process.*

*EVALUATIONS*  
*OF*  
*PROGRESS*

15.

July - December 1989

1. Transfer P2 post with staff member to New York from Geneva at the beginning of July.
2. Staff travel to Geneva to arrange the following:
  - (a) transfer all remaining software to New York (microfiche, country notes, WTA and WTAS, CTS print)
  - (b) discuss all remaining technical and related issues with staff of CTS (Geneva).
  - (c) work out with CTS (Geneva) agreed step by step detailed plan of transferring the national country data to New York for processing
  - (d) discuss the timetables of transferring the workload and its technical implications as was agreed at the last ACC Sub-Committee on Statistics Meeting with UNCTAD, EEC, GATT and other interested Specialized Agencies.
3. The Group in New York should have processed a total of 50 country/periods by end of December 1989 and installed these into the Comtrade in New York and Geneva.
4. The size of the Processing Group in Geneva at the beginning of July will be 1 Professional Staff and 5 General Service Staff, and will continue to process national data into international format. In addition, there is also one post which is encumbered temporarily by a staff member on transfer to UNOG.

16.

January/June 1990

1. Further reduction of General Service Staff in Geneva by 3 and transfer of 2 posts to New York. Recruit and train 2 staff. It is planned to have accomplished this by the end of March 1990. The Geneva office will still have a staff of 1 professional (P5) and 2 General Service staff in Geneva.
2. Acquire 5 additional terminals for the New York Unit.
3. By the end of June 1990, the Unit in New York should have been able to process at least 80% of all national country/periods sent to the Statistical Office. The Unit would then consist of 1 P3, 1 P2, and 9 General Service Staff.
4. Review and evaluate status of transfer of work from Geneva to New York and take if necessary any remedial action

17.

July/October 1990

1. Transfer remaining 2 posts in Geneva to New York. Recruit and train staff. This to be done by end October 1990.
2. 90% of all processing work should now be undertaken by the New York office. At end of October, review and evaluate status of transfer and performance of work by the New York Processing Unit.

18.

November /December 1990

1. Consolidation of processing work in New York.
  2. Prepare detailed work programme for remaining staff in the Geneva Unit in consultation with Geneva staff.
  3. Discuss all remaining issues with the Geneva staff, ICC and all interested International Users in Geneva.
  4. Re-evaluate the Transfer and write a final progress report.
19. At all "review and evaluate" points, the Statistical Office will report to users.