

R E P O R T

ACC SUB-COMMITTEE ON STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES
 Twenty-fourth session
 Vienna, 18-22 June 1990
 Item of the provisional agenda

SA/1990/2
 June 1990

PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION POLICY, INCLUDING
 CO-ORDINATION OF STATISTICAL DATA BASES

Report of the Technical Working Group on Statistical Data Bases
Seventh Meeting, Geneva, 21-22 May 1990

Report prepared by the Technical Working Group on Statistical Data Bases

INTRODUCTION

1. The seventh meeting of the Technical Working Group on Statistical Data Bases was attended by representatives of the United Nations Statistical Office (UNSO), Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Bank (WB), International Labour Office (ILO), Universal Postal Union (UPU), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Customs Co-operation Council (CCC), International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Advisory Committee for the Co-ordination of Information Systems (ACCIS), Statistical Office of the European Communities (SOEC), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS - HABITAT).

2. The main agenda items discussed were:

1. Current status of statistical data bases:
 - a) New developments for member organizations;
 - b) Issues of on-line access;
 - c) Data base management systems.
2. Standardization for data transfer:
 - a) Common coding systems for data transfer;
 - b) Inter-organizational statistical data base.
3. Applications of new technology:
 - a) Data base management systems on minicomputers, microcomputers and local networks;
 - b) Use of CD-ROM for data dissemination;
 - c) Use of advanced laser printer systems or other electronic typesetting technology for statistical publishing;
 - d) Use of scanners and optical character readers;
 - e) Assistance to developing countries in the area of data base development and technology application.

3. The meeting was informed of the new developments within the participants' organizations. The majority of these developments were extensions of previously reported activities. However, one salient development was reported by the representative of ECE. It was a project recently initiated between the ECE and the World Bank in which the World Bank will supply the maximum set of

SA/1990/
page 2

World Bank's published data to ECE and, using ECE's AXIS system with open access policy, will provide access to a large group of member countries and UN agencies.

4. The Representative of the United Nations Statistical Office brought the Working Group's attention to paragraph 22 of the Report of the Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities at its twenty-third session (Geneva, 19-23 June, 1989), which stated that "the Sub-Committee requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to set up an informal ad hoc group to prepare the relevant material for use by the Sub-Committee at its twenty-fourth session on the basis of reports from organizations on their recent experiences, in particular their experiences with new forms of dissemination, for example, CD-ROM and on-line. The group should also consider the new issues involved relating to the existing guidelines for secondary dissemination and develop proposals for the consideration of the Sub-Committee".

5. In response to paragraph 4, the Group expressed the opinion that the guidelines should be broadened in order to include the supply of the source data to the member governments in addition to international organizations; this being dictated by the growing number of requests for such services.

6. The Representative of the United Nations Statistical Office also brought the Working Group's attention to paragraph 23 stating "The Sub-Committee recalled that its Technical Working Group had considered the subject of EDIFACT. While some organizations would be actively involved in this activity, the Sub-Committee considered that all organizations should be kept informed and be given the opportunity to comment at critical stages". It was proposed that the participants in the Technical Working Group would serve as focal points for EDIFACT.

I. CURRENT STATUS OF STATISTICAL DATA BASES

A. New developments for member organizations

B. Issues on on-line access

7. The meeting was informed of the work done by agencies to provide internal users and external international organizations as well with on-line access to their data bases. It seems that a good degree of success has been achieved since last year in the establishment of on-line dialogue facilities. However, the reports indicate that the results cannot be conclusive before conducting reviews of costs and benefits, security and other technical matters.

8. The Group noted during discussion that users and potential users of on-line systems sometimes indicate difficulties in the following three areas:

- i) in identifying what data are available;
- ii) in establishing access to such systems due to complicated or unfamiliar administrative procedures;
- iii) in using the wide range of available data bases due to the lack of standard user interfaces.

SA/1990/
page 3

C. Data base management systems (DBMS)

9. The meeting noted that all the organizations endeavoured to implement the use of commercially available data base management systems to develop and maintain their on-line data bases on mainframe and micro computers. Some organizations confirmed the use of the data base management systems they had previously announced while some expressed reservations and planned to continue to study and explore new and potentially better alternatives.

10. Many participants recommended that the Data Base Management Systems should be based on the international standard Structured Query Language (SQL) to ensure access to distributed data bases now and in the future. UNESCO, UPU and WHO intend to investigate ORACLE or another SQL based DBMS which allows data bases to spread over different environments.

11. ECE reported that the English version of AXIS (Auxiliary System for Interactive Statistics) announced the previous session of the Technical Working Group was completed by their secretariat and contains download facilities for the two types of outputs (tables and files) that can be obtained in an AXIS session. The PC version of AXIS is now under preparation.

II. STANDARDIZATION FOR DATA TRANSFER

A. Common coding systems for data transfer

12. The meeting was informed that the United Nations Statistical Office had completed the draft of the revision of the "Standard Country or Area Code for Statistical Use (ST/ESA/STAT/SKR.M49/Rev.2) 1982" used in whole or in part for the dissemination of statistics in machine-readable form. Since this publication also contains ISO alpha-codes it should solve at least some of the difficulties arising from the mechanical problems of coding. The Representative of WHO said that if this publication was, from now on, going to be updated on a more regular basis, his Organization would be glad to communicate to UNSO their own regional groupings. The group also discussed briefly the question of standardization of other common coding systems for data transfer, such as that concerning units in which the data are expressed, the coding of missing data, the coding of other data irregularities, etc. It was agreed that this question should be discussed at the next session of the TWG. The group also expressed its agreement that the periodic updating of this document was an important effort which is extremely useful to members. The representative of UNCTAD proposed to communicate their groupings to UNSO.

B. Inter-organizational statistical data bases

13. The Representative of UNSO then said that his office was finishing the computerization of its World Statistics in Brief (Statistical Pocketbook) which contained about 40 basic statistical series starting in 1980 for all the Member States of the United Nations. This core statistics series as proposed to the Technical Working Group at its previous session will be stored in an on-line data base at the New York Computing Service which can be accessed through the ADV line linking United Nations offices throughout the world. However, the UNSO was still studying what software should be utilized for the DBMS. The Representative of UNSO also said that the Inventory of Computerized Statistical Data Bases had just been updated by the Statistical Office. He thanked all the members of the Working Group for their efforts to send their

SA/1990/
page 4

contributions on time, and recalled that this Inventory of Computerized Statistical Data Bases was to be included in the above-cited Data Base, as decided in the previous Session of the Technical Group.

III. APPLICATIONS OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

A. Data base management systems on minicomputers, microcomputers and Local Area Network

14. The Working Group was told about the tests conducted by the organizations on microcomputer-based (as well as minicomputer) data base management systems. The developed Systems stretch on a wide range of applications and types of equipment and one participant pointed out that, as the applications became more sophisticated, the need for expert programming was felt. There is, however, a consensus among the participants that distributed processing is a reality.

15. During discussions, several organizations reported favourable experiences in the use of Macintosh Computers. Word processing, spreadsheets, data bases and document preparation were among the applications reported. Areas where the Macintosh has proved to offer some advantages include reduced training and support requirements for users, ease of transferring data among applications, and a standard user interface across all applications.

16. With respect to the United Nations Statistical Office feasibility study on the use of microcomputer diskettes for collecting national accounts statistics (UNTAB) from Member States, the responses from the participating countries in the pilot study were very encouraging. Unfortunately, outside support to the development of the UNTAB system has been discontinued and the Statistical Office is at present exploring ways of developing a new software to replace UNTAB in the near future. In developing the new system, the Statistical Office will take into account all comments and reactions which participating statistical offices have communicated to the Office while using the UNTAB system.

B. Use of CD-ROM for data dissemination

17. There was a general consensus that the use of CD-ROMs is a cost-effective way to disseminate a large volume of data. One Representative even reported that some study indicated that it could be less expensive to send a CD-ROM with its drive to developing countries rather than a large amount of data in the form of microfiche or publication. However, the user interface is still unsatisfactory.

C. Use of advanced laser printer system or other electronic typesetting technology for statistical publishing

18. The Technical Working Group noted great interest in the use of desk-top publishing technology in statistical work. While presently available laser printers offer near-typeset quality which is useful for certain statistical documents, improvements in print quality of laser printers to be available in the near future will bring about the use of desk-top publishing for a greater number of statistical reports, with the consistent benefits of cost reduction, increased speed and flexibility, etc. The optional use of post-script compatible systems which permit direct photocomposition from microcomputer-



Papers submitted by the UN Organizations for
the T.W.G. 21-22 May 1990 Meeting in Geneva

1. UN/ECE Progress Report
2. UN/ECE Recent Developments with the Statistical Computing Project (Phase 2)
3. Contribution of the World Health Organization
4. UNESCO view and comments
5. Proposed data bank at the U.P.U. - General Aspects
6. ACCISS paper
7. C.C.E. Progress report on Standardization activities for (SOEC) statistical data interchange
8. UN/ECA comments on issues in the provisional agenda (Statistical Division)
9. Statement by the C.C.C. observer
10. Progress report of UNCTAD's activities
11. Current Status of Development of Data Bases in the Statistics Division of ESCAP - Report prepared by ESCAP
12. World Bank Report on Technical Working Group on Statistical Databases
13. Report of International Statistical Institute (ISI), Ms. Denise Lievesley, Director
14. Summary of current state of preparation for the UN Conference on Environment and Development to be held in Brazil 1992
15. Inter-American Development Bank - current statistics
16. International Telecommunication Union - current statistics
17. Views and comments of UNFPA

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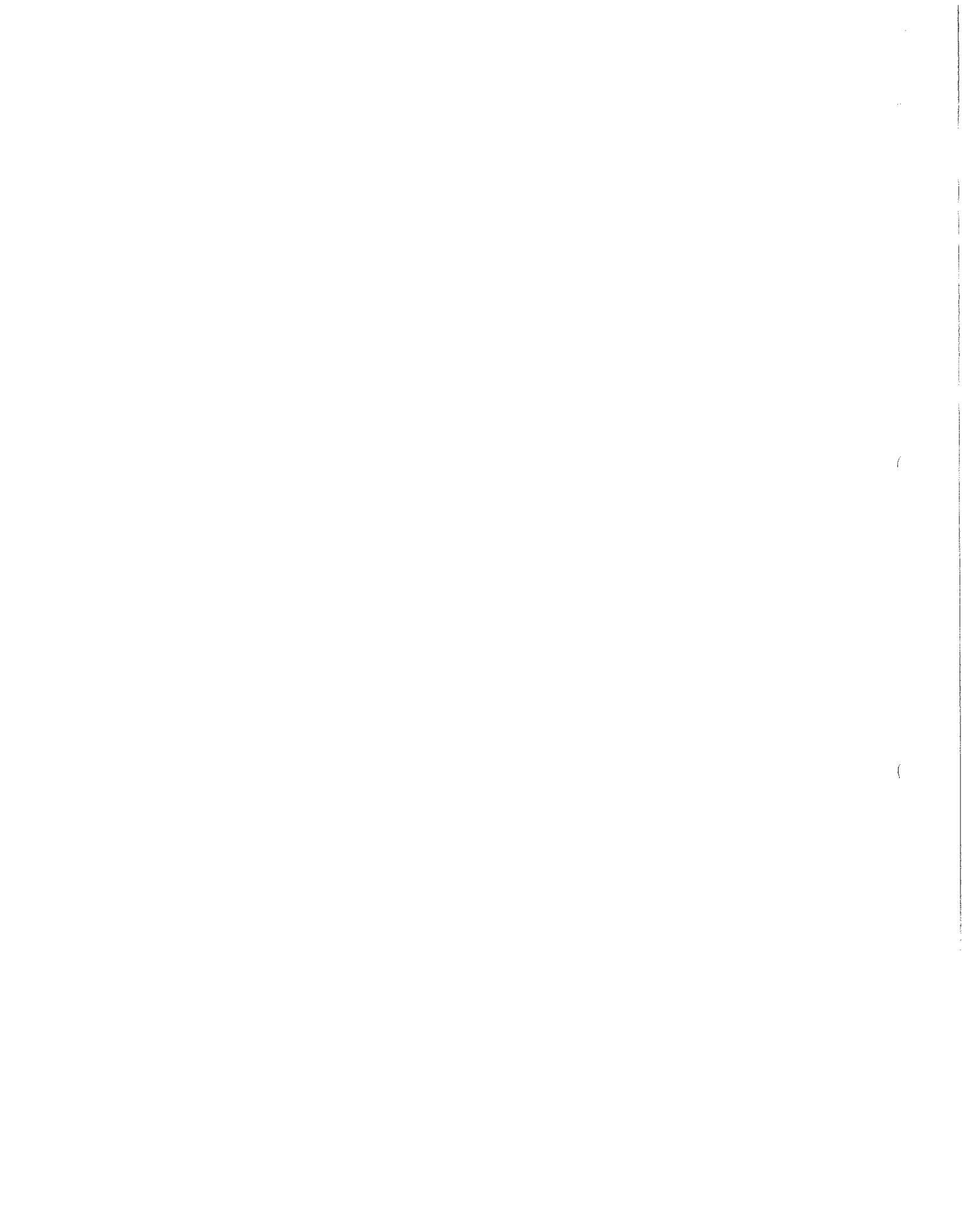
Provisional Agenda *
(Eighth meeting 1991)

1. Current status of statistical data bases
 - A. Data base management systems
 - B. Standards for user interfaces
 - C. On-line access
 - D. Inter-organizational statistical data base
 - E. Geographical information system
2. Standardization for data transfer
 - A. Codes
 - B. Data models
 - C. Documentation
 - D. Transfer
 - E. UN/EDIFACT
3. Dissemination of statistical data
 - A. Technical issues (CD-ROM, publishing techniques, etc.)
 - B. Policies and practices
4. Experiences in statistical data bases in developing countries

* Considering the wide scope of this provisional agenda, the ACC-Sub-Committee may wish to recommend that the next session of the Working Group meet for 3 days.

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8/10
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TECHNICAL WORKING GROUP ON STATISTICAL DATA BASES

ACC SUB-COMMITTEE ON STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES

21-22 May 1990, Geneva

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33581

9/10
WFX945



- 2 -

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