

FREE EXCHANGE OF STATISTICS AND RELATED MATERIALS
AMONG INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Paper by Eurostat

Back in the mid-1980s this subject was discussed at the now (sadly) defunct ACC Technical Working Group on Statistical Databases. Here discussion often turned to access policy (and not technology) and thus to mutual access arrangements. As this was considered to be outside the remit of the group no formal agreement was ever agreed, despite the efforts of the Eurostat representative, although it was felt that the agencies were agreed on the principle of free mutual access.

In practice Eurostat has working exchange arrangements with OECD for data (tapes are exchanged for free but Eurostat pays for diskettes at 50% discount as we have no diskette products ourselves) and on an ad-hoc basis with IMF and World Bank. The UN COMTRADE access follows the principle that the data is free, we simply pay for the (expensive) computer time to get at it.

The issues surrounding the exchange of data and methodology are very different. For data perhaps the solution is not obvious. On the one hand the principle has always been that agencies would waste a lot of time and effort raising invoices and settling bills with each other for data and it would be more rational to avoid this. Furthermore some international agencies act a mail-boxes for country data which is then forwarded to other agencies responsible for larger groups of countries so as to avoid duplicative requests from countries (eg the Eurostat to OECD to UNSD chain). No-one would seriously advocate anything but free exchange in this instance.

However in the current more market oriented profile of some agencies an invoicing/payments system might actually be more efficient. One of the problems with free data (as evidenced by the US free access to public data policy) is that everyone just asks for everything without seriously considering the use. Once there is a price tag, no matter how small, people tend to think a bit more seriously!

Probably the best solution is to agree the principle of free, or nearly free, exchange and allow agencies to settle the details of the actual data transfer, which may incur some cost, bilaterally.

For the methodology side Eurostat proposes that there should be unlimited (within reason) free access because otherwise current co-operative efforts between agencies make no sense.

A handful of key methodological publications, such as the IMF BoP manual or Eurostat's ESA, are needed as reference material by scores of people and the same book remains valid for typically 10, 15 or even 20 years. Unlike the situation for the exchange of data the method and frequency of use do not yet appear to justify recourse to the experimental high-tech solutions. Exchange between international organisations - for the use of their own staff and clearly not for redistribution - would not jeopardise the potential private market. This would be a pragmatic solution that would provide for the needs of the professional statistician in the international agency (who may indeed have been closely involved in the preparation of the publication) with the minimum of paperwork. Of course international organisations would have to exert a certain amount of self-discipline to keep their requests to a reasonable level and not request an inordinate number of copies of any publication.