INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND TRANSPORT STATISTICS

Progress report prepared by the United Nations Statistical Office

1. Data Collection

The Statistical Office has continued to explore different ways of improving the availability and timeliness of external trade data collection from developing countries. Problems connected with obtaining data on magnetic tapes rather than on computer print outs for certain large developing countries, in particular, are gradually being overcome. The Statistical Office has been successful, through repeated appeals, to convince a few of these countries to provide their data on magnetic tapes. In the case of some other countries, the Statistical Office is receiving assistance from various international agencies such as UNCTAD and GATT, and regional commissions to encourage these countries to supply their external trade data on magnetic tapes. Provision of data on magnetic tapes significantly reduces the processing costs and elapsed time for processing the country's data in the Statistical Office. Unfortunately, a number of countries still provide data in a form that requires that the data be transformed into a machine readable format. The costs of these manual keying operations have now reached the point that they can no longer be absorbed within the reduced United Nations regular budget. Accordingly, to ensure the timely inclusion of such data in the Comtrade data base, it will be necessary to approach major users to share in the cost of this activity.

Similarly, the Statistical Office has been exploring the possibility of obtaining external assistance to improve the timeliness and availability of international trade data for a number of developing countries, for example, Burma, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, India, Libya, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Tanzania, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, Zaire, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Efforts to improve reporting for such countries have so far been without success. In some cases, national policy issues of Member States are involved; in other cases, the obstacles are more technical in nature and in still other cases, the source of the non-reporting is not known. In the latter two circumstances, missions by the Statistical Office are often required to resolve the problem. Major users of the Comtrade data base are invited to use their good offices in encouraging more complete reporting by developing countries and to consider how they can provide direct financial support for required country missions.

The Statistical Office is collaborating with UNCTAD in the implementation of its Asycuda (Sidonia) software programme at the Customs departments of developing countries. It is hoped that implementation of this programme by customs offices of developing countries will have spill-over advantages in improving the timeliness and availability of external trade data from national statistical offices. To this end, the UN Department of Technical Co-operation for Development and the Statistical Office plan to conduct, in collaboration with UNCTAD, an interregional workshop in 1989 which will explain the benefits, advantages and usefulness of the
Asycuda software programme and also demonstrate the method of constructing unit value and quantum indexes of external trade and show its usefulness for economic development.

2. **Compressed External Trade Data**

At the end of April 1988, the Comtrade data bank had 4959 country periods of external trade data. This occupies 38514 tracks or disks space which amount to 1.65 billion bytes. The size of the data bank continues to grow from year to year. This growth rate is expected to increase much more significantly as national external trade data for 1988 are received since all such data should be kept in the Comtrade data bank according to the SITC Rev. 3 classification in addition to Rev. 2 and Rev. 1. There has also been an increase in the number of on line users over the past three years. The table below shows usage by Organization for the past 3 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1986</th>
<th>1987</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European Economic Community (EEC)</td>
<td>2,485,493</td>
<td>6,750,336</td>
<td>11,360,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Free Trade Areas (EFTA)</td>
<td>66,913</td>
<td>228,793</td>
<td>92,397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>214,493</td>
<td>500,763</td>
<td>305,311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITC</td>
<td>11,473,107</td>
<td>12,528,088</td>
<td>8,670,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNCTAD</td>
<td>26,284,999</td>
<td>17,570,440</td>
<td>11,330,553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GATT</td>
<td>1,041,584</td>
<td>3,578,624</td>
<td>5,774,078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Bank</td>
<td>69,957</td>
<td>177,731</td>
<td>2,480,125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFCE (French Coy.)</td>
<td>66,913</td>
<td>212,513</td>
<td>193,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USTR (US State Dept.)</td>
<td>7,819</td>
<td>126,277</td>
<td>417,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRADAX (Swiss Coy.)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14,899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>41,711,278</strong></td>
<td><strong>41,673,565</strong></td>
<td><strong>40,639,806</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excludes Economic Commission for Europe (ECE).*
3. **Methodology**

Work has continued on methodology and publications consequent to revision of the Standard International Trade Classification as follows:

a) **Classification by Broad Economic Categories - defined in terms of SITC Rev. 3**

This work has been completed and is being printed as Series M. No.53, Rev. 3.

b) **Commodity Indexes to the SITC Rev. 3**

These indexes are being issued in 2 volumes. Volume I is planned for completion by end of 1988 (before the Statistical Commission meeting in February 1989). This volume incorporates lists of commodities in alphabetical order under the most detailed headings of the SITC Rev. 3. Volume II which lists all commodities in alphabetic order is expected to be completed by the end of 1989.

c) **Methods used in compiling the United Nations price indexes for external trade**

Work has now started in preparing the methodology of the tables of indexes that are prepared by the United Nations Statistical Office and which should form Volume II of this publication. The first draft description of the methodology for the table "indexes for manufactured goods exports" has been compiled and is being discussed. Work on describing the methodologies of the other indexes and improving the indexes for machinery and transport equipment is underway, but is severely hampered by lack of staff resources.

d) **Customs Areas of the World**

This publication was first issued in 1970. A revised version which incorporates aspects of the revised publication "International Trade Statistics - Concepts and Definitions", and information obtained from national governments has been prepared. It is hoped that this will be published before the end of the year.

e) **National Practices in compiling external trade statistics**

The United Nations Statistical Office has in its work programme the preparation of this publication. A questionnaire is now being prepared and will be sent to countries. It is hoped that work in compiling this document will be started at the end of this year.
4. **External Trade Publications**

The following publications have been issued:

1. 1986 International Trade Statistics Yearbook
2. 1984/85 International Seaborne Trade Statistics Yearbook
3. 1984 World Trade Annual
4. 1983 Supplement to the World Trade Annual

The publications "World Trade Annual" and "Supplement to the World Trade Annual" are printed and published by an independent publisher using its own resources. The Statistical Office's responsibilities are to provide the data and check the final copy before printing to ensure its contents are acceptable.

5. **Shipping statistics programme**

The United Nations Statistical Office has not been able to continue work on revising the publication "International Standard Definitions for Transport Statistics" as was reported in the progress report SA/87/9 of 1987. This is due to the resignation of the only professional staff on this project and our inability to recruit a replacement because insufficient funds remained in the project. In accordance with the request made at the 24th session of the Statistical Commission, several potential donors have been approached requesting financial assistance for the continuation of this work programme. To date, no progress can be reported in these efforts. In the meantime, data compilation activities continue.