CRITICAL PROBLEMS IN ECONOMIC STATISTICS

Issues for the “city groups”

Note by OECD

1. At the meeting of the Conference of European Statisticians in June 1997, we reported in general terms on the status of environmental accounting and expressed the hope that the meeting of the London group the following week would present an opportunity to clarify where consensus was emerging. In the event, the meeting of the London group was important but perhaps not in the way expected. Rather a series of issues for the “city groups” emerged which should be brought to the attention of the ACC as well as the CES bureau. These can be expressed in terms of questions with the arguments on each side given.

*Is the role of a city group to develop standards or simply to act as a forum in which people working in the field can present their latest work in progress and benefit from comments from their colleagues?*

2. The second function is obviously valuable and in any case must be an intrinsic part of a city group’s work, but is this all a city group is mandated to do? Views were strongly divided on this. Some felt that there was no institutional framework for the groups and thus they were not in a position to take decisions. On the contrary, representatives at the London group had clear responsibilities to take decisions in other fora and where perhaps narrower concerns took precedence. Others believed equally strongly that there would not be support from their own institutions for the groups unless tangible progress towards new standards could be demonstrated. Further, these representatives suggested that one of the strengths of the city groups was that they could cut across individual institutional perspectives and reach a truly global view,
a position felt to be essential for the development of international standards.

*How far is it the role of the London group to act as the body responsible for the preparation of the revised version of the S certified?*

3. One view is that if this is accepted as a role for the London group, the other function of continuing to develop new aspects of the subject will be squeezed out for lack of time. The alternative was to respond extremely positively to the suggestion from UNSD to participate in the preparation of the handbook.

*How can a group that meets only once a year for three to five days contribute effectively to development of standards or writing of handbooks?*

4. The example of the resources needed to complete the SNA were cited as a reason to believe that even if the group wished to participate in such activities, logistically this was extremely difficult.

*How do others not formally participating in the group follow the proceedings of the group?*

5. To date, the papers presented at the group have been collected in a compendium and distributed to the participants. For each meeting there has been a different office responsible for producing and distributing the compendia. Since these do not always coincide with the institution hosting the meeting, it is difficult for outsiders to know whom to approach. Further there was discussion about whether all the papers should be regarded as being in the public domain or, since many were work in progress, subsequently changed substantially (not least in response to the discussions in the group), should the authors be left to disseminate final products according to their normal channels?
Can the groups function effectively without a recognised secretariat?

6. The desire to avoid attribution of individual groups and thus topics to individual offices (especially perhaps those of international organisations) was intrinsic to the establishment of these groups initially. Some participants insist on this freedom; others see it as a practical impediment and a lack of accountability.

Responses

7. Much of the time outside the formal sessions was spent trying to develop mechanisms that would overcome some of these problems and yet permit a flexibility of response from the participants. During the next year, before the next formal meeting of the group scheduled for May 1998, the following steps will be taken.

8. Statistics Canada offered to provide a secretarial function. They will be the first contact point for outsiders wanting information on the group. They will maintain lists of names and addresses and ensure all the group were aware of these. They will participate actively in the arrangements for future meetings.

9. It was also agreed that a record of the meeting would be useful (the record of the Canberra group on capital stock was cited as a good model) for general distribution. As the host of the meeting, Statistics Canada would also take on this role for the 1997 meeting.

10. A list of areas to be covered in the revised SEEA was prepared and it was agreed that electronic discussion groups would be the mechanism to take work forward to developing consensus on technical issues and to preparing and commenting on drafts. Convenors of these groups were nominated and agreed to in Ottawa. Initially all members of the London group will be included in all discussion groups but it is supposed that these will shrink to a smaller number on a natural, self-selecting basis. Those who have the time and interest will pursue the issues; those who lack either or both motivation will drop out.
11. It remains to be seen how well these discussion groups will work and this will be reviewed next year. The question of how to manage interactions between "decisions" taken by the group and by other institutions remains to be worked out.

12. These questions arose in the context of the London group on environmental accounting but anecdotally similar questions have arisen in connection with other groups. As the number of such groups proliferates, it seems appropriate to bring these to the ACC discussion.