



UNITED NATIONS
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
STATISTICS DIVISION

Expert Group on International Merchandise Trade Statistics
First meeting
New York, 3-6 December 2007

Opening Statement

Expert group on International Merchandise Trade Statistics

Paul Cheung
Director
United Nations Statistics Division

Dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the first meeting of the United Nations Expert Group on International Merchandise Trade Statistics. With over eleven trillion of US dollars worth of goods in annual international trading, we can appreciate the importance of international merchandise trade statistics for giving us a feel for the pulse of the world economy, monitoring trade policy and market research etc.

It is not surprising therefore that international merchandise trade statistics are always in a high demand and all countries compile them to the best of their capability. Internationally, these statistics become more and more easily available to users all over the globe. I am glad that the United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade), with the help of other partners has been able to play an instrumental role in making the data readily available.

However, it should be noted that in some countries these statistics are not sufficiently developed and do not satisfy fully the needs of the policy makers, business community and general public. In a number of countries, even with well established trade statistics, there are concerns regarding the quality and international comparability of data necessitating bilateral and multilateral reconciliation exercises.

These concerns, combined with new developments such as changes in commercial practices and legal environment (e.g., abolishing of customs controls in trade between some countries) as well as the adoption of revised methodological guidelines for balance of payments statistics and national accounts, warrant revisiting and updating current recommendation for international merchandise trade statistics.

It is also important to achieve the best possible harmonisation of trade statistics with those statistical domains in the context of an integrated approach to economic statistics as a whole. The benefits of such an integrated approach will include improving a country's capability to produce data in the most cost effective way and, at the same time, ensure their coherence with other economic statistics and enhance policy relevance.

Following its policy of strengthening basic economic statistics, UNSD has decided to make a special effort to modernize the methodological and operational foundations of international merchandise trade statistics. This is one of our priority activities in coming years.

This Expert Group is organized in order to assist UNSD in the revision of the existing recommendations for international merchandise trade statistics which were adopted by the UN Statistical Commission a decade ago. The Expert Group is envisaged as a forum to review the underlining concepts and definitions, data items, data sources, data compilation strategies, data dissemination policies and other relevant areas.

The Expert Group is expected to conduct two meetings – the first on 3-6 December 2007 and the second in early 2009. The purpose of the first meeting is to provide an assessment of the existing recommendations in view of the new developments, to advise on the areas where updating of the existing and/or developing of the new recommendations is needed, propose a list of issues for a worldwide consultation and to formulate initial proposals for scope and contents of the future revised recommendations.

Based on the meeting's results and the subsequent worldwide consultation, UNSD will prepare a draft of the revised recommendations and submit it to the second meeting of the Expert Group for review and endorsement.

To achieve the meetings goals and to ensure that the agenda items are taken up effectively, we invited to the Expert Group countries from different regions and with different experiences, circumstances and needs. I am pleased that you accepted our invitation and came here to the UN headquarters for four days of discussions. I am also glad to welcome the representatives of the international and supranational organizations who are active in the production and use of trade statistics and whose input in the revision process will be very much appreciated.

In conclusion, I would like to wish you fruitful deliberations and to express my appreciation of your professional contribution to this important meeting.

Thank you.