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TASK FORCE ON INTERNATIONAL MERCHANDISE TRADE STATISTICS
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Common Data Set

Report by UNSD

Background

1. The inter-agency project of a Common Data Set (CDS) of Aggregate Export and Import Statistics was established in 2003 by UNSD, OECD, Eurostat, UNCTAD, and WTO. It is an effort to reconcile the annual values of total trade available in the databases of the participating organizations.

2. In the 2006 Task Force (TF) meeting, it was decided to improve the Common Data Set's user-friendliness by developing an interactive database, taking into account the SDMX standard. Under the leadership of WTO, this initiative has been divided in two phases: (1) Design and development of the database, and (2) development of the SDMX-based data exchange.

3. A proposal on the "development of a work and dissemination database" was prepared by WTO and circulated among the organizations that participate in the CDS project. The proposal included an assessment of problematic areas in the CDS process, along with suggested solutions (summarized in Table 1 at the end of this report). It made specific suggestions regarding (1) the structure of a CDS database, including data dimensions and metadata, (2) the design of a CDS web interface, (3) streamlining of the CDS production cycle, (4) data reconciliation principles, and (5) potential improvements of data documentation by data providers.

4. UNSD reviewed that proposal and commented on its contents, making some suggestions for changes and additions. One special area of concern related to the design of the database structure, and particularly the use of a single 'flag' to code several dimensions of the data. UNSD felt that extra flags were needed both for

easiness of maintenance and in anticipation of the future adoption of a SDMX structure for trade data. Other concerns raised by UNSD included: (1) The use of the term "officially reported" to designate data submitted by the providing agencies which originate (in some cases through IFS) from national authorities; (2) the distinction between "imputed" and "estimated" data; (3) the need to separate the logical structure of the database from its visualization interface.

5. WTO took note of UNSD's concerns but did not make the proposed changes. UNSD still maintains its position that an SDMX standard cannot be realized without appropriate structure of the underlying database. Based on the most recent reconciliation exercise, WTO is now in the process of feeding the prototype database, thus providing a basis for its implementation. The current state of the database can be accessed at http://imts.wto.org/common_dataset_e.htm.

Table 1: Summary of WTO's proposal on the CDS

Problem	Proposed Solution
1 Lack of an interactive and user-friendly interface for CDS dissemination	Develop an interactive web interface, allowing users to create customized queries of data and metadata
2 Cumbersome processing of data and metadata during the CDS production cycle	Integrate database functionalities in the CDS production cycle
3 Lack of general guidelines to deal with problematic data and metadata	Develop commonly-agreed principles to guide the reconciliation process
4 Lack of clarity during the reconciliation process	Develop a system to document the exchange of recommendations and the decisions made by participating agencies about individual time series.
5 Lack of a standard format for data and metadata submission	Develop and implement an SDMX standard for data exchange between participating agencies