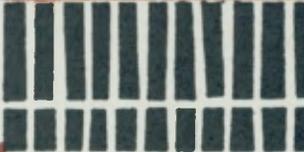




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137



THREE DECADES  
OF THE CONFERENCE  
OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS:

PAST ACHIEVEMENTS AND  
PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

BY  
PETTER JAKOB BJERVE

DEN EUROPEISKE  
SJEFSTATISTIKARKONFERANSEN  
GJENNOM TRE TI-ÅR:  
MÅL SOM VART NÅDD OG PERSPEKTIV  
FOR FRAMTIDA

STATISTISK SENTRALBYRÅ

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*PREFACE*

This article is a lecture held at the 30 Session of the Conference of European Statisticians in June 1982. It was presented in a more detailed form in the first volume of Statistical Journal of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, published in connection with the anniversary of the Conference.

Central Bureau of Statistics, Oslo, 20 September 1982

Arne Øien

## FORORD

Byrået gjev med dette ut eit foredrag som forfattaren heldt ved 30-årsjubiléet for Den europeiske sjefsstatistikarkonferansen i juni 1982. Framstillinga er ei forkorta utgåve av ein artikkel offentleggjort i *Statistical Journal of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe*. Dette tidsskriftet kom ut for første gong i samband med jubiléet.

Statistisk Sentralbyrå, Oslo 20. september 1982

Arne Øien

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## 1. SCOPE AND FOCUS

At the time when the Conference of European Statisticians was founded a number of new international organizations both within and outside the United Nations framework had recently been established. All of them felt a great and growing need for statistics on their member countries. The national statistical offices were receiving an unprecedented flow of questionnaires which they considered urgent. In Europe, the United Nations Economic Commission with its technical committees, and other regional organizations were particularly demanding. Frequently, data collections were initiated without consultations between international organizations and national statistical offices. Consequently, duplication; differences in concepts, classifications and definitions; and badly designed forms made the burden of supplying the data unnecessarily heavy.

At certain intervals international organizations arranged meetings to discuss statistical problems, but there was little or no co-ordination of these meetings and the national statistical offices played a minor role in determining the subjects to be discussed. Sometimes, they did not even participate in the meetings. National delegations came from the subject-matter Ministry concerned, whose representatives frequently argued in favour of additional data collections, disregarding the resulting impact on the reporting burden.

Thus, statistical co-operation in Europe was on the whole arranged in a rather accidental and unsatisfactory manner. At the same time statistical offices were subject to heavy pressure from national users whose rapidly expanding demand for statistics could only partly be satisfied. The resources available, particularly qualified statisticians, were very scarce, and the requests from international users could not be satisfied without limiting the supply of services to users at home. I remember that as a new director in 1949, when I asked for some new data, I got the answer: "Not until we have answered the questions asked by IMF, UN Statistical Office and other international organizations". Under such circumstances it is understandable that many directors of national statistical offices felt rather uneasy about their relationships to international organizations.

In November 1952, eight directors of national statistical offices were convened in Geneva by the Research and Planning Division of the ECE. These were B. Barberi (Italy), P. J. Bjerve (Norway), H. Campion (United Kingdom), F. L. Closon (France), A. Dufrasne (Belgium), G. Fürst (Federal Republic of Germany), R. C. Geary (Ireland) and Ph. J. Idenburg (Netherlands). It was at this informal meeting that the Conference of European Statisticians was conceived.

After long and sometimes quite heated discussions with the ECE staff members present, the eight directors unanimously adopted a resolution agreeing in principle with the proposal to organize a Conference of European Statisticians: "It was agreed that: (i) this Conference should be instituted within the organization of the United Nations; (ii) the United Nations should be asked whether they could provide for a permanent secretariat of the Conference; (iii) this proposal, under the title of "Programme of Future Work" should be an item on the agenda for the meeting, early in 1953, of European Statisticians; (iv) before the meeting, there should circulate a memorandum indicating in general terms a programme of future work for the Conference ...". The memorandum mentioned was elaborated through correspondence between the eight directors and transmitted by the Central Statistics Office of Ireland to the so-called regional meeting of European Statisticians in 1953.

The agenda item Programme of Future Work was discussed informally at a number of gatherings on the fringe of this meeting. Following these discussions, the heads of delegations decided to establish two working groups, one on organizational aspects and the other on substantive topics to be dealt with. In accordance with the report of the first of these groups the participants agreed to meet henceforth as a permanent body: The Conference of European Statisticians was born.

The report on organizational aspects can be considered as a "Charter" of the Conference (or terms of reference in the formal sense). It describes objectives, membership, participation by international agencies, activities, officers, secretariat and meetings. This "Charter" is still valid, except that, in 1955, the Bureau was extended by a third vice-chairman: a director of one of the statistical offices in Eastern Europe was elected member of the Bureau. The apparent adequacy of the original Charter during the three decades of the Conference's history seems to justify the conclusion that its fathers were quite foresighted.

In view of the main purpose of my lecture, i.e. the presentation of perspectives for future work of the Conference, the particular situation of the Conference in international statistical co-operation must be borne in mind. Its most important peculiarity in this respect relates to the membership, comprising groups of both eastern and western industrialized countries.

- I shall present perspectives with regard to three themes:
- the general direction of future work;
  - work on specific topics; and
  - method of work, or in other words, the ways and means in which statistical co-operation might be best performed.

As a background for this presentation, I shall first briefly describe major past achievements of the Conference.

## 2. PAST ACHIEVEMENTS

As a means of reducing the burdens of international statistical reporting, Mr. Geary proposed at the 1952 meeting that the Conference should "screen the statistical questionnaires drafted by Technical Committees of all international organizations ...". Although the "Charter" was more diplomatically formulated, the secretariat of the Conference was gradually authorized to carry out such a screening activity within the ECE. Today, all subsidiary bodies of the ECE are obliged to submit statistical questionnaires to the Statistical Division before they are issued to member countries.

Furthermore, the Memorandum of 1953 assumed "active control, by the directors of European statistical offices themselves, of the work of international organizations which pertains to the improvement of European statistics". Today, this has also been largely achieved as regards the ECE Principal Subsidiary Bodies, all of which, except the Inland Transport Committee, carry out such work jointly with the Conference.

In addition, statistical activities in Europe carried out by other international organizations are nowadays co-ordinated to a considerable degree. Meetings on improvement of statistics within their field are often held jointly with the Conference, although a few exceptions to this rule have occurred even in recent years.

As a result of this co-ordination several international organizations have agreed to use identical questionnaires for data collection, and the forms used have improved in design. Some organizations have in several instances refrained from collecting data and used statistics collected and published by other organizations instead.

International organizations today also apply to a larger extent than before the same standard concepts, classifications and definitions. Nevertheless, there are still examples of impractical forms, of more detail asked for than is probably needed, and of duplications often due to the timeliness required by some international organizations. It is certainly true that the total amount of data collected by international organizations has increased over time, but statistical offices do not any longer feel that the corresponding response burdens are to a large degree unwarranted. Thus, it can be said that directors of statistical offices have got "active control" in the management of international statistical co-operation.

The long-term programme for future work of the Conference, which was initiated in 1961, also contributed to co-ordination of international statistical activities and to improved priority setting in the development of European statistics. At a later stage the Statistical Commission began requesting similar programmes for the entire United Nations family and preparing a Directory of International Statistics which both were instrumental for co-ordinating statistical activities at the world level. In addition, two new bodies were established for the same purpose, viz. a Working Group of the Statistical Commission and the ACC Sub-committee on Statistical Activities.

The statistical development work of the Conference was in the beginning concentrated on the preparation of programmes and recommendations for individual fields of statistics. During the first decade interest was focussed mainly on economic statistics such as foreign trade, manufacturing, distribution and transport statistics. During the last two decades the Conference gave high priority to social statistics, including statistics on employment, health, education and culture.

In the course of the three decades a large number of programmes and recommendations were prepared, including methods to be applied in each individual subject-matter field. Many of them were published in a series which was created by the Conference in 1963: Statistical Standards and Studies (SSS). Others are included in a number of handbooks and manuals published by the United Nations Statistical Office.

Most of the results of the Conference were achieved not only in co-operation with the Statistical Commission and other international organizations, but also with national statistical offices which, as a rule, reported on current practices in the fields concerned. Many of them also contributed notes or papers on particular substantive aspects, or by making comments on draft recommendations or papers. Thus, the work undertaken may be characterized as a common venture.

The Conference also studied to some extent the implementation of its programmes and recommendations in national statistical offices. Though the degree of implementation cannot be assessed with precision, there is no doubt that the programmes and recommendations contributed substantially to the development of national statistics in Europe and also to the improvement of their comparability.

As eastern European statistical offices joined the Conference in the mid-50s, the consideration of their statistical instruments and standards became an important part of the Conference's work programme. Considerable progress was made in obtaining a mutually beneficial adjustment of the respective standards. Nevertheless, two separate statistical systems remained in existence - with the ensuing need to build bridges

between them. Increased comparability was achieved partly through linkages between statistical standards, such as for economic activities and national accounts, and partly through direct co-operation between statisticians of eastern and western countries in comparisons of various kinds of statistics. The corresponding achievements have to be seen as a major success of the Conference in its concern with international comparability of statistics.

During the last two decades the need for integrating and co-ordinating national statistics was more and more recognized by members of the Conference. In particular two such tools were dealt with: frameworks for systematizing aggregated data, such as the national accounts and balances and standard concepts, classifications and definitions. A third important tool, viz. multipurpose registers of basic statistical units, was discussed at plenary sessions, but not included in the programme of work.

At the plenary sessions in the second half of the 1950s and early 1960s some members of the Conference pressed for a general revision and an extension of the existing System of National Accounts (SNA), inter alia, to obtain a better means of integrating and co-ordinating economic statistics. Finally, in 1964, the Conference decided to establish a Working Party on National Accounts and Balances (SNA and MPS).

In subsequent years the revision and extension of the SNA constituted a major part of the work programme. Preparatory work was to a large extent carried out at the UN Statistical Office, but the Conference played an important role as a forum for testing new ideas. The resulting new System of National Accounts was published in 1968 and it represented a conceptual framework suitable for the integration of any aspect of national accounts. Undoubtedly, the revision of the SNA was a major achievement.

Since 1968 experience with the implementation of the revised SNA has demonstrated weaknesses of the system and additional needs for data have arisen. In response, the Conference, in co-ordination with the Statistical Commission, has recently again included work on national accounts in its programme of work.

At the plenary session in 1970 the development of a Framework for Social and Demographic Statistics (FSDS) was discussed on the basis of a first report from the newly-established Working Party for this purpose. It was decided to continue work and to include social indicators in the future programme.

Since 1970 many meetings have been held on FSDS. At the plenary session in 1976 the Conference expressed great satisfaction with the progress made as regards the development of concepts, classifications and

definitions, but criticized the Working Party on FSDS for its treatment of social indicators and for the relatively slow progress of the work on sub-areas of FSDS and on linkages between them. After another period of six years that now has passed, it is still difficult to evaluate the achievements made. However, at any rate, national statistical offices have been brought into closer contact with users of social and demographic statistics, and progress has been made on an integrated presentation of such statistics. Perhaps the major achievement with regard to both FSDS and social indicators is the preparation and presentation of social surveys aiming at providing a condensed and comprehensive picture of the well-being of the population.

SNA and FSDS give rise to a large number of standardized concepts, classifications and definitions as regards aggregated data. However, the producers of statistics can only align these aggregates as much as possible on their intended content, if much more disaggregated standard concepts and definitions and far more detailed classifications become available. Some of such detailed standards were provided in the past. Most efforts were spent on the activity standard (ISIC) and the commodity standard (SITC), but the Conference also made considerable contributions to the development of an International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), in co-operation with ILO, and an International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), in co-operation with UNESCO. The achievements made in this field should not be underrated. The attempts at developing standards for a classification of all goods and services and a classification of the population by socio-economic status were not equally successful.

In the field of operation of statistical services an important event took place in January 1957 when the first meeting on electronic data processing was held. Statistical offices in Europe at that time had no or little experience in this field, and many had not even started to plan the use of computers. The Working Party on EDP was convened for its first meeting in 1961, and the ISIS Seminars were included in the Conference's work programme at an even later stage. Thus, though the start was slow, activities continued during the next two decades on a relatively large scale.<sup>1/</sup> Valuable work was carried out by the Working Party, by groups of rapporteurs, and by way of seminars. A system of regular reporting was also established. This enabled each statistical office to take advantage of advances made elsewhere and to evaluate how far it had progressed as compared with others. To some extent computer programs prepared by one office were also transferred to and used by other offices, but only on a limited scale.

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<sup>1/</sup> The Working Party has so far held as much as seventeen sessions.

Since the second half of the 1970s statistical offices and others have made great progress in preparing portable generalized computer programs, which at present are in ample supply. For many offices the question now is not whether they can use such programs at all, but which of them is most adequate.

The Conference of European Statisticians originally did not place high priority on advancing statistical methodology. Recently the Conference changed its attitude in this respect and included this subject in its programme of work.

### 3. GENERAL DIRECTION OF FUTURE WORK

A major conclusion concerning the general direction of future work relates to the reporting burden experienced in the national offices in response to international requests for statistics. The necessary co-ordination can in the future be mainly left to the co-ordinating machinery established by the UN Statistical Commission, and the Conference may contribute to it as one of the Commission's subsidiary bodies. The Conference will certainly continue to react to unnecessary duplication of work between international organizations, but the required effort seems to be fairly small.

The Conference will have to observe plans for data collections and meetings on statistical issues carefully in order to avoid unnecessary duplication. In addition, the Conference should aim at an improvement in the design of questionnaires used in international data collections.

Resource savings as compared to the past can also be made in the long run in the development and maintenance of programmes and recommendations for individual fields of statistics. The work accomplished by the Conference, together with the progress made in other regions of the world implies that the need for testing programmes and recommendations mainly in Europe will diminish in more and more individual fields of statistics. Consequently, a more explicit integration of the future work by the Conference in individual fields of statistics into world-wide statistical co-operation imposes itself. These various resource savings at the level of the Conference can be used to assist in the improvement of national statistics.

However, in the near future, the Conference may also have to make considerable efforts in new statistical fields. For instance, statistics of environment (including resource statistics) and of other fields where in particular the heavily industrialized countries need new data, may still require development of European programmes and recommendations in advance of possible world standards in such fields.

With regard to programmes and recommendations already available, there is a great need for increased knowledge on their implementation and their practical usefulness for promoting international comparability. Detailed comparisons between two or more countries would shed light on this important question, and the Conference could be the most appropriate international organ of statistical co-operation to monitor such comparisons, as already done in the past.<sup>1/</sup>

Much work remains to be done on tools for integration and co-ordination of statistics, i.e. on national accounts and balances and similar comprehensive frameworks, on detailed standards for the processing of basic statistics, and on multi-purpose registers of basic statistical units. Resources devoted to these tools will have to be increased for quite some time in the future. I shall later deal with the future work on statistical frameworks and registers. At this point I only want to emphasize the need for continued engagements of the Conference in east-west co-operation on frameworks and classifications. Thus, the Conference should give high priority to the development of suitable conversion keys between eastern European and western European statistical standards. A start was already made on the SITC/SFTC conversion and with regard to activity classification and national accounts and balances. The exercise should be extended to other standards and would also have to be maintained in the future through necessary updating procedures.

In the field of electronic data processing, the Conference deployed considerable efforts already in the past, and these efforts will have to be maintained. Statistical offices will continue to profit from the advance of computerization - in terms of both effectiveness and efficiency - and European co-operation could greatly contribute to this development.

The Conference should follow up its plans for increased engagements in statistical methodology. Statistical offices in Europe are often too small to afford a methodological unit of an optimum size. Even large offices may face problems in recruiting suitably qualified staff. These obstacles may be partly overcome through co-operation between countries. The need for an increased utilization of theoretical statistics appears, thus, to justify European co-operation on an increasing scale. In view of the scarcity of sufficiently qualified methodological experts in statistical offices, co-operation will also have to be sought with universities and research institutes.

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<sup>1/</sup> Such comparisons were made on wages, productivity, prices, family budgets, consumption and income distribution.

Producers of statistics should in the future make greater efforts than in the past to extend and improve the use of their products. Despite an enormous increase in the volume of raw data collected and despite clear improvements in the quality of statistics, their use is still unsatisfactory. Actual and potential users of statistics have to be informed more effectively of the availability of data, of the modes of access and of their reliability and relevance. In addition, the presentation of statistics has to be better adapted to different user groups. In my view, national statistical offices are here faced with a major task for the future. The Conference may thus have to be concerned more with product design and dissemination of statistics. The problem would have to be discussed between top-level executive managers of national offices, but useful work could also be done by consultants, groups of rapporteurs, expert meetings, etc.<sup>1/</sup>

A necessary precondition for the adaptation of statistics to user needs is information on how users think or even better, how they should think. Such information can be obtained with relative ease if users apply numerical models. Joint meetings with user groups applying numerical models such as the Senior Economic Advisers to ECE Governments, may help the Conference in its efforts to adapt statistics to user needs.

National statistical offices may in the long term devote more resources than at present to analysis of their data. Most members of the Conference, according to a recent substantive discussion, would wish such a development. This subject may be further discussed at a future plenary session or a seminar, and expert meetings could possibly be held for certain analytical tasks.

#### 4. SPECIFIC TOPICS OF FUTURE WORK

With regard to future work on specific topics, the Conference may have to cover a wider range in the future than in the past. I shall only deal with those topics which seem at present to be particularly important.

The already started major revision of the SNA will require extensive preparations. The necessary classifications have to be reviewed, extensions will have to be made and a number of modifications of the present system will be necessary. Some of the extensions will call for the collection of new data, e.g. on non-market transactions and for the development of supplementary accounts of natural resources. The solutions to be brought to the identified problems may in some instances have to be <sup>1/</sup> Systems and techniques of publications were frequently discussed in the 1960s, but not later.

region-specific. In particular, the accounting of non-market transactions will, at least initially, require a separate solution for ECE member countries.

Similar challenges are encountered with regard to the framework for social and demographic statistics. The Conference could make contributions in co-operation with specialized agencies. As a result, standard concepts, definitions and classifications could be obtained that are equally applicable to all sub-areas of social and demographic statistics.

The use of the systems of national accounts and balances for the co-ordination and integration of economic statistics and the use of the FSDS for the co-ordination and integration of social and demographic statistics have to be increased in the future. This is a task for both national statisticians and the Conference.

Environment statistics stand out as a particularly important topic of future work. This is due to the high priority attached to environment statistics in national statistical offices of the ECE region and to the progress achieved in ECE member countries in environmental studies and policies. The integration and co-ordination of environment statistics will certainly require the elaboration of new standard concepts, definitions and classifications. In some countries, even a comprehensive natural resource accounting framework is envisaged.

With regard to regional statistics, the perspective is not clear. At the 1980 plenary session, conflicting views were expressed as to the level of priority which should be attributed to this topic. Obviously national needs for regional statistics differ widely between ECE member countries. A solution to this problem could be found by meetings limited in participation to countries which are genuinely interested in international co-operation on the development of regional statistics.

Progress will also have to be made in several other specific fields of statistics: Employment and unemployment statistics will have to be improved; price statistics are of particular interest under prevailing inflationary tendencies; new fertility surveys will be needed; statistics of crime may become once again an item of the programme of work, etc. All such topics are likely to be considered at future plenary sessions of the Conference as candidates for resumed, increased or new activities in international statistical co-operation.

As regards work on tools for integration and co-ordination of statistics, we have already dealt with topics related to the revision of SNA and the further development of FSDS. However, it remains to specify topics of work on two other important tools, viz. detailed classification standards and multi-purpose registers of basic statistical units.

The conclusion of the work on the Harmonized System of the Customs Co-operation Council will permit improvements in ISIC and SITC and their linkage. Such improvement and linkage, together with existing data processing facilities, will enable consistent analyses of the relationships between detailed data on production, foreign trade, stocks and eventually perhaps consumption. Since the national accounts and balances depend heavily on such commodity data, their quality will certainly also be enhanced through such analyses. Work on a standard classification of all goods and services as well as on a classification of the population by socio-economic status has to be continued in the hope that it will come to successful ends. A revision of ISCO is planned and a revision of ISCED may be needed. In addition, the Conference should also be associated with the work on detailed standards in the field of health statistics. So far such work was done only by WHO, in co-operation with national health authorities. Further co-operation with specialized agencies on more detailed standards will certainly become necessary once more progress has been made on FSDS.

A multi-purpose register of establishments and enterprises is now available or planned in most European countries. Such a register is a potentially powerful tool for enhancing the consistency of economic statistics, although at present its use for integrating economic statistics at the level of the individual unit is still rather limited. Establishment of such a register is almost obligatory if computerized administrative data systems are to be successfully utilized for statistical purposes - an objective in which the Conference has already expressed interest. A multi-purpose register of establishments and enterprises is also of high value for the integration of the various operations necessary in the production process of economic statistics and its use as a basis for sampling is growing in importance. In conclusion, the usefulness of such a register is beyond doubt. Many of the problems involved in its development and application are common to European statistical offices. Consequently, the Conference may play a role in providing international co-operation in this matter.

Many statistical offices may for integrity reasons miss the opportunity to take advantage of a population register. Other registers of basic statistical units, such as land-registers, registers of addresses and buildings, etc., which are mainly established for administrative reasons, will probably not become available in many countries in the near future. However, owing to their potential importance primarily for the production of regional and small-area statistics, the Conference may provide for "informal" meetings on this subject.

In electronic data processing, recent hardware and software developments require important changes in the organizational structure of statistical offices, in the distribution of EDP work and in the relations between producers of statistics, suppliers of basic data and users of statistics. Such changes will occur in all statistical offices, and the Conference should deal with some of the problems encountered. For example, organizational topics should be dealt with directly by executive heads of statistical offices, at plenary sessions of the Conference or at other suitable meetings. The Working Party on EDP could deal with the choice of the most suitable generalized computer programs, while ISIS Seminars could deal with problems of more limited implications.

The Statistical Computing Project which was recently initiated appears to open interesting perspectives. This project may lead to what optimists already hoped in the early days of the Conference: a division of labour between European countries in preparing portable, generalized computer programs for both individual statistical operations and integrated sequences of operations. While there are certainly serious obstacles to be overcome - inter alia caused by differences in institutional arrangements of individual countries - some profitable division of labour might be achieved.

In the future, users will increasingly request direct access to data bases, although there will be a continuing demand for publications of various kinds. The Working Party on EDP, together with experts for the marketing of statistics may explore how to satisfy these demands.

As regards specific topics on which co-operation on statistical methodology could be beneficial, I shall first mention one which is related to electronic data processing.

The available software for statistical analyses includes programs for regression analysis, for seasonal adjustment of time series, and for other statistical methods. Such programs may enable statistical offices to compute at low costs regression coefficients in addition to ordinary tables, seasonally adjusted series in addition to the unadjusted series, measures of dispersion in addition to averages, etc. Thereby, better "digested" statistical products can be offered to users. The adaptation of such software to the statistical production process can therefore be seen as a convenient topic for co-operation through the Conference.

Data collection problems during sampling appear to require considerably more methodological work in the future. The Conference has dealt with sampling errors in the past. The reduction of measurement errors, particularly in the case of data collection by interview, remains an important topic for discussion. Informal meetings could also deal with

the experience gained in the establishment of field organizations for data collection by interview.

The statistical utilization of computerized administrative data systems constitutes another important topic in the field of data collection. Such utilization could provide for particularly detailed statistics without an increase in the reporting burden of the corresponding data suppliers. The establishment of multi-purpose registers of basic statistical units is an essential requirement, if full advantage is to be made of computerized administrative data systems. Informal meetings may have to be convened in order to discuss the problems encountered in using these administrative data systems for statistical purposes, and to assure co-operation within the Conference on this important question.

##### 5. FUTURE METHODS OF WORKS

The perspectives just presented for the general direction of future work and for work on specific topics imply a need for adapting also the methods of work applied by the Conference.

It appears first of all that in many instances informal meetings are preferable to the traditional meeting type. They provide for more flexibility, since countries could to a greater extent decide on their participation in relation to their particular interest. Informal meetings are also less service-demanding and, thus, more meetings could be held. At the same time, the many suggestions made for future work by the Conference are only feasible if national statistical offices can assist in the preparation of future meetings to a sufficient extent. Such contributions were forthcoming in the past particularly if they could be linked to ongoing national projects. A shift from "traditional" to "informal" meetings may enhance the possibility to obtain substantive country contributions, since informal meetings could be better adapted to existing national programmes for the development of statistics.

Since 1957, a series of regional statistical seminars were held, most of them intended for subject-matter specialists, but two convened for executive heads of national statistical offices. Seminars of the last kind are to be seen as adequate means of extending the "Professional milieu" of directors of statistical offices. The need for convening seminars for subject-matter experts seems to be less obvious. The purpose of such seminars was defined by the Conference at the fifth plenary session: "to discuss the practical methods, tools and techniques for implementing international recommendations in different statistical fields". In fact, many seminars convened so far were not confined to this purpose, and there may

be a need to re-define the objectives which should be attained through seminars of subject-matter experts.

Since the early 1960s plenary sessions were used for substantive discussions of topics with which the directors of statistics were particularly concerned. Initially, such discussions took place during the time when the secretariat drafted the reports of plenary sessions. These discussions were later expanded at the expense of the discussion of reports from subsidiary bodies and of the terms of reference for their future work. It may be worth considering whether this trend should be reversed, particularly if the seminars for executive heads become a regular occurrence.

The existence of gaps between different groups of professional statisticians was repeatedly discussed at international fora during recent years. The basic problem seems to reside in communication. A particularly undesirable communication gap prevails between "official statisticians" on one hand and "academic statisticians" on the other. The International Statistical Institute has recently published a report on these problems. The Conference should follow-up recommendations made in this report. Perhaps the report could be considered at a future seminar for heads of statistical offices. At the expert level, the establishment of a permanent working party on methodology may be an instrument for building bridges between official statisticians and statistical theorists. Academic statisticians may be invited to take part in deliberations of such a working party.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Experience during the last three decades shows that statistical offices can make better progress in co-operation than in isolation. The success of the Conference of European Statisticians during these decades stimulated statisticians in other regions to establish similar bodies. In this way, the Conference set the pace for world-wide statistical co-operation in general. The particular role of the Conference is situated in the broad context of east-west co-operation.

In spite of functional differences between statistical offices in centrally planned economies and in market economies, both groups of offices benefit from the Conference in many respects. If the co-operative spirit prevailing in the Conference can be further strengthened in the future, the Conference could continue to be the most important east-west forum of international statistical co-operation.

Let us hope that in the decades to come the Conference can maintain its position as a leader in international statistical co-operation, both in its general and in its specific role.

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