

# OECD Expert Group on Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange

## *Conclusions from the 6-7 April 2006 meeting*

The third meeting of the OECD Expert Group on Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange was held on 6-7 April 2006. The meeting was hosted by the UN/ECE at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. The purpose of the Expert Group is to identify ways of improving OECD's data collection and data sharing activities with member countries, and to promote the development and use of SDMX standards for this purpose. The Expert Group meetings also provide an important opportunity for member countries to discuss the SDMX standards and their evolution.

Over 60 people attended the meeting. In addition to 31 participants from statistical agencies of OECD member countries, the following international organisations were represented: UN/ECE, Eurostat, IMF, ECB, BIS, World Bank, FAO, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO and the WTO. A number of observers also attended: Bulgaria, Brazil, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovenia and South Africa. Two consultants from the SDMX standards team also participated.

### ***SDMX information model and technical standards***

1. From the presentations and ensuing discussion it was clear that **version 2 of the SDMX technical standard - currently under review by ISO - represents a major advance over version 1**, notably in terms of:

- greatly expanded support for exchange of metadata, in particular: reference metadata; publishing/reporting information (e.g. release calendars) and categorisation schemes;
- support for richer and more complex data/metadata structures, notably hierarchical code lists and extensible data structures;
- communication with registry services in support of a data sharing model: data/metadata registration, discovering and locating information, and subscription/notification

V2 is backwards compatible with V1. The standards team said that the scope of the standard should not broaden considerably in future versions. However a number of participants mentioned the importance of introducing standards for compression and authentication/encryption and the need for an additional generic cross-sectional SDMX-ML format.

2. A number of participants emphasised the **strategic potential of SDMX** over and above its tactical use for information exchange: SDMX provides a framework and mechanisms for implementing much of what is carried out within and between statistical agencies and with external clients in the national context, in terms of finding, exchanging and managing statistical information. A number of countries presented work in progress along these lines, noting that this may entail enriching the data standards, e.g. to deal with longitudinal or geo-spatial information.

3. V2 of the SDMX standards introduced the specifications for an **SDMX registry service** - the objective is to allow organisations to publish statistical data and metadata in such a way that others can discover, locate and share it. Participants raised the issues of governance, ownership, security and operation of such services, and emphasised that relying on such a service to provide the authoritative location of information implied a very high degree of trust. They also posed specific questions concerning subscription/notification mechanisms (e.g. to be notified when a particular dataset has been updated) and the possibility of using RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Participants felt that to have a clearer picture it would be useful for the SDMX team to prepare a paper investigating the issues raised and options available.

### ***Getting started with SDMX***

4. Much of the discussion was centred on the **practical issues** facing those who want to begin implementing the standards and there was a lot of material presented at the meeting to address these aspects. A leitmotif of these presentations was that the issues are primarily

statistical, rather than technical in nature. A very important part of the meeting was therefore devoted to presenting and discussing the **draft SDMX Content-oriented Guidelines** as a means of conceptualising and working through these issues, in particular the key task of developing SDMX content standards within each statistical domain. This work will need to be coordinated by the key working groups in each domain; the role of the Interagency Task Force on Finance Statistics in developing the SDMX “Joint External Debt Hub” pilot project was cited as an example. The Group was invited to provide feedback on the Guidelines.

5. Terminology is important in coming to grips with SDMX and participants clearly felt more at home with the new SDMX terms, in particular the expression “**Data Structure Definition**”. The use of some other terms, such as “survey”, needed more discussion and clarification.

6. The draft paper “**Towards an SDMX User Guide: Exchange of statistical data and metadata between different systems, national and International**” was welcomed as an important step in developing a domain-*independent* approach to modelling domain-*specific* data/metadata and for mapping between existing national and international metadata schemes and the SDMX model. Participants were invited to provide further comments before end-April.

7. The draft “**SDMX User Guide – Getting Started**” distributed at the meeting was also well received. Designed as a “how-to” guide rather than a strategic document, the objective is also to guide statisticians and other potential users through the first steps in using SDMX to structure data and metadata. Participants were asked to provide feedback over the coming weeks.

8. The SDMX team presented the **SDMX Tool-Kit**, with the help of many examples. A first set of tools is designed to simplify many of the routine tasks associated with defining and maintaining data structure definitions or entering data, transforming between the various SDMX formats and generating outputs. A second family of tools is available for interacting with a registry. The toolkit is currently SDMX V1 compliant. Participants were told that a V2 toolkit would be available in a few weeks. Most of the tools are designed to run under Windows – all are available free-of-charge. Participants welcomed the tool-kit but some commented that in its present form, the tools required specialist technical knowledge. The Chair confirmed that the SDMX User Guide would incorporate material on the Tool-Kit. Eurostat added that they were developing complementary tools, which would be able to run on platforms other than Windows.

### **“Real-life” implementations of SDMX**

9. A number of presentations were devoted to **real-life or pilot SDMX implementations**, notably the Joint External Debt hub (production), the OECD/UNSD Joint Trade Project (entering production), NAWWE National Accounts World-Wide Exchange (in progress), the Eurosystem joint dissemination of statistics (ECB - production), IMF/OECD data exchange (pilot) and SODI project (pilot). These projects demonstrated the viability of key elements of the SDMX standards and associated technologies, in particular: SDMX-ML formats, “pull” technologies, web services and use of a registry. A key message that emerged was that working with the appropriate statistical community to develop a Data Structure Definition was crucial; technological considerations were secondary, especially as SDMX is based on technologies (XML, web services, etc.) which are becoming commonplace. Some participants pointed out that the lack of IT infrastructure and technical expertise within the institutional environments of some developing countries could hamper adoption of SDMX on a world scale. A training effort could help to overcome some of these difficulties.

10. **The Chair concluded that the meeting had confirmed OECD’s intention to continue developing practical applications of SDMX with interested national agencies and international organisations.**

11. Agenda, papers, presentations and list of participants are available at:  
<http://www.oecd.org/std/research/exchangeexpertgroup/2006>