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THE COMMON DATA SET: STATUS REPORT BY WTO

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This document has been prepared by by Andreas Maurer - WTO for information and discussion under Item 5 d) of the Draft Agenda: Inter-Agency co-operation and coordination

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1. International agencies compile and publish merchandise trade statistics with different timeframes, revision schedules, estimation methods and adjustments. They may also apply different exchange rates to convert national currencies to dollar values. These elements often result in users being confronted with multiple figures for the same time-series of individual countries and ensuing aggregates.
2. To address this problem and also contribute to the ongoing process of harmonization of data between international agencies, the inter-agency Task Force on International Merchandise Trade Statistics endorsed the idea of producing and maintaining through a division of labour a Common Data Set (CDS) on total merchandise exports and imports at its 2001 meeting.
3. The objectives of this inter-agency project are to bring about significant improvement in coverage, consistency, comparability and transparency of aggregate merchandise trade data by country for users.
4. The WTO volunteered to coordinate this project with the IMF, UNSD, OECD, UNCTAD, and Eurostat as participating organizations. To facilitate a smooth operation of the project and subsequent reconciliation exercises, contact persons were assigned by each participating organization. To ensure, in as much as possible, that the underlying data are the "best" available, participating agencies review each others' data for coverage, errors and omissions and conformity to international concepts and definitions as elaborated in the *United Nations, International Merchandise Trade Statistics -- Concepts and Definitions. Series F, No. 52, Rev. 2*. It was agreed to develop the data set on an incremental basis, starting with annual data as of 1995. Based on the agencies' production schedules of annual data, the CDS will be updated twice a year, in April and October.
5. In April 2003, a first prototype Common Data Set covering 1995 to 2001 was made available to the participating organizations only. It incorporated comments and revisions resulting from the reconciliation exercise. Since then, the Task Force has continued the reconciliation exercise and updated the CDS with 2002 data. Additional metadata were added to facilitate interpretation and manipulation (sorting and linkages to other statistical series).
6. At its last meeting in March 2004, the Task Force discussed also future work on the CDS. It was suggested to develop a medium-term strategy for its dissemination. On a short-term perspective, the CDS reconciliation exercise should continue with the addition of 2003 data, however, results thereof would only be available to the participating organizations.
7. With regard to the medium-term strategy for a wider dissemination, the participating agencies discussed an Internet trade portal. Such a portal could include all relevant information on merchandise trade statistics, that is, in addition to data also information on concepts and definitions, compilation guidance, analytical articles, etc.. However, such a website requires further clarification of a number of organizational and technical questions, for example, could the CDS be disseminated through an Internet trade portal that is jointly maintained by the organizations or how can the organizations ensure that their latest revisions are rapidly reflected in the CDS.

8. The Task Force will discuss these aspects at its next meeting while continuing the reconciliation exercise to enhance the quality of the CDS.