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A NEW STRATEGY FOR OECD STATISTICS

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A NEW STRATEGY FOR OECD STATISTICS

1. Introduction

1. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has a very long tradition in statistics and plays an important role in the international statistical community. In particular, the OECD Secretariat requires a wide range of comparable statistics for its ongoing work of monitoring developments in Member countries and in key non-Member countries. Because the Organisation is called upon to develop recommendations in emerging areas of policy interest to governments, it is often requested to develop new types of statistics, new statistical standards and statistical systems. These activities are normally developed in co-operation with national statistical offices (NSOs), central banks, other government agencies and other international organisations. The OECD also disseminates a very large amount of statistics to external users. To ensure comparability and reliability of these statistics the Secretariat promotes, in co-operation with other international organisations, the adoption of international statistical standards and best methodological practice.

2. The OECD currently has a high reputation for both the quality of its analytical work and for the statistics that underpin that work. In some areas, OECD's statistics are internationally recognised as the "best" in terms of coverage, timeliness, and comparability. The network of national and international experts created, through the Committees and Working Parties, gives the Organisation the possibility to launch research activities (and data collections) on new topics, playing a leading role in producing new statistics and developing new definitions, classifications and standards.

3. However, with the expansion in the Organisation's cross cutting activities and products there is a need for significant improvement in internal co-ordination across the whole range of its statistical activities – data collection, transformation, dissemination, and development. Also, despite improvements in internal co-ordination that have taken place over recent years, there is emerging internal and external criticism about some of the Organisation's statistical activities and some of its statistical products.

4. In order to improve the current situation of statistics at OECD, a project for the reform of the Organisation's statistical system has been launched. In particular, during the final part of 2000 a wide consultation within the Organisation was conducted to define a new strategy for the OECD statistics. The new strategy has been developed and discussed within the Organisation at the beginning of 2001 and some special resources have been allocated to this project.

5. This paper presents the main aspects of this strategy, illustrating the initiatives undertaken to improve both the efficiency of the internal statistical organisation, and the quality of statistics disseminated to internal and external users. Finally, a brief overview of the work programme for 2002 is presented.

2. The statistical organisation of the OECD

6. The organisation of statistical activities at the OECD is based on a “decentralised approach”, which means that various statistics are developed by the Directorates responsible for analytical studies and policy analyses. The Statistics Directorate was created in 1992 with the following mandate: (a) to improve the supply of relevant and timely statistical information to analysts and policy makers inside and outside the Organisation; (b) to develop international statistical standards, systems and classifications in collaboration with other international statistical agencies; (c) to improve co-ordination between the statistical activities of the OECD and those of other agencies; and (d) to provide a mechanism for co-ordinating statistical activities within the Organisation. A more general aim was established to concentrate all statistical activities in the Statistics Directorate, but this project was only partially completed: several “on-going” activities were moved to STD, many innovative projects and those closest to new policy challenges remained in the so-called “substantive” Directorates. The Statistics Directorate took responsibility for macroeconomic statistics and for some social (i.e. labour force) and business statistics, playing a fundamental role in promoting internal co-ordination and external co-operation with other international organisations.

7. Today, the OECD statistical activities are mainly concentrated in five Directorates:
- the Statistics Directorate;
 - the Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (ELS)
 - the Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry (STI);
 - the Directorate for Financial, Fiscal and Enterprise Affairs (DAF);
 - the Environment Directorate (ENV).

Other important statistics, but more limited in quantitative terms, are produced by the International Energy Agency (IEA), the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (AEN), the European Conference of Ministers of Transport (CEM), the Development Co-Operation Directorate (DCD), the Public Management Service (PUMA), the Directorate for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries (AGR) and the Territorial Development Service (TDS). In this framework, the Service for Information Technology and Network Services (ITN) and the Public Affairs and Communications Directorate (PAC) play an important role. The former co-operates with STD and other Directorates to develop the statistical databases and other IT infrastructures for conducting statistical activities, while the latter, PAC, is responsible for the dissemination of all OECD products, including statistical data and publications. Finally, ITN and PAC developed jointly *SourceOECD* (the electronic gateway for accessing all OECD publications) and the new OECD web site, which are very important tools for the implementation of the new OECD dissemination policy for statistics.

8. To ensure the internal co-ordination of statistical activities, the Statistical Policy Group (SPG), representing all Directorates, was established in 1990. The SPG holds monthly meetings and is chaired by the Director of STD (who has also the role of Chief Statistician). In addition, the Director of STD is member of the CCTB, where issues related to the development of OECD IT policies are analysed. The Analytical/Statistical task force (ASTF) was created in 1992, to discuss technical problems related, amongst other things, to the implementation of new IT technologies for statistics.

9. The management of a decentralised system is always problematic and the OECD is not an exception. The main concerns refer to the following aspects: weak and inefficient co-ordination in data collection; insufficient coherency and (sometimes) quality of the statistical information published; inappropriate inferences from cross-country data; unnecessary overlap between OECD and other international and supranational organisations in some areas. Over the last five years, various actions were implemented to improve the situation. These include:

- an inventory of on-going data collection was compiled in 1996 and 1999;
- agreements were signed with Eurostat, UNSD, UNIDO, UNESCO, UNCTAD and WTO to improve co-operation and to develop common questionnaires to reduce the burden on Member States;
- following the success of the Inter-Secretariat Working Group (ISWG) on National Accounts in finalising the 1993 System of National Accounts, a number of other ISWGs have been set up with other international organisations;
- meetings were organised with the heads of a small number of national statistical offices to improve co-operation, to understand their needs and to explain OECD plans.

3. The decision to launch a new strategy for OECD statistics

10. Despite these initiatives, it is fair to say that there is still considerable room for improvement in some critical areas. This consideration pushed the OECD to launch a programme to reform its statistical organisation in order to improve the efficiency of statistical activities and to enhance the quality of its statistics. This program was defined in early 2001 and covers the years 2001-2003.

11. The process to launch a reform of statistics at the OECD, and to transform the initial proposal into a “corporate” strategy, has involved several parts of the Organisation. The initial step involved mainly the Statistics Directorate and the newly appointed Chief Statistician¹. During the period September-December 2000 several meetings were held to review the existing organisation of statistics and to develop some initial ideas for the preparation of the reform proposal. This analysis showed clearly that several problems were due to insufficient OECD investment in the past in the statistical infrastructure and tools. In fact during the second part of the 90s, the OECD budget was cut substantially and these cuts constrained Directorates to limit their statistical work or focus such activity on maximising the immediate outcomes of their analytical work². Therefore to support the reform it was absolutely necessary to convince the Organisation to increase resources for statistics, both in the Statistics Directorate and in other Directorates.

12. In January 2001, a draft document containing the guidelines for reform was prepared and disseminated to all Directors of the OECD. The document (the so-called “strategy paper”) was discussed in a meeting of the Management Directors Group in early February and the final version of the plan was disseminated within the Organisation in March. To ensure a comprehensive awareness of the new strategy, both inside and outside the Organisation, and to involve the staff in the programme, a general meeting of the OECD statisticians was organised. In addition, the “strategy paper” was presented to two key OECD Committees (the Budget Committee and the Committee for Public Affairs and Communication (CPAC)) and it was disseminated to the heads of national statistical offices of all OECD countries. In the meantime,

¹ My appointment was decided in September 2000, but I joined officially the Organisation only at the beginning of December 2001.

² The statistical work in the OECD is mainly oriented to fulfil the needs coming from their Committees and from Member countries supporting (and financing) special projects. In addition, the needs defined by the Secretariat research projects must be taken into account. In this sense, the main stakeholders for the OECD statistical work are “internal”.

the Chief Statistician visited the statistical authorities of several OECD countries and the heads of the statistical divisions of other international organisations (UN, Eurostat, IMF, WTO, etc.), to explain the project and to establish new co-operation agreements.

13. Following these discussions, the Secretary General of the OECD decided to finance the start-up of the project, while a more complete plan has been recently presented in the framework of the budget for 2002. In particular, the Secretary General has indicated statistics as one of the priorities for the Organisation in 2002. In fact, in his proposal for the 2002 work programme, he underlined that:

“the arrival of the Director of the Statistics Directorate (STD) points to a robust cross-house effort to improve comparability and reliability of our statistics, to further the adoption of international statistics standards and best methodological practices and to develop recommendations in emerging areas of policy interest to governments. Many areas require the development of new types of statistics, new statistical standards and statistical systems, very often in co-operation with national statistical offices, central banks, other government agencies and other international organisations. A priority must be to ensure that the STD objectives are met“.

14. To transform the initial proposal into a “corporate strategy”, a great effort has been made to increase the participation of all Directorates in the project. The Statistical Policy Group has been re-launched as the centre of the consultation process across the Organisation, new instruments to improve internal communication have been developed, some technical horizontal task-forces have been created to solve the most urgent problems, and focused training initiatives have been organised for OECD statisticians. Because the “human factor” is absolutely crucial to implement a large organisational and technical reform, several meetings were organised in STD (with administrators and assistants) to discuss the overall project and to receive feedback.

15. As a result of this process, today the Organisation is fully aware that:

- the accountability of the OECD is largely based on the quality of its statistics and that, as in other activities, the quality of a product depends on the investments made to improve the processes used to satisfy the user’s needs;
- the expression “good statistics” implies not only the usual characters of “good quality” statistics (coverage, timeliness, comparability, accuracy, etc.), but also the adoption of a set of new techniques and standards for the data and metadata collection, storage and dissemination;
- the OECD has to develop a statistical “corporate strategy” for statistics;
- statistics is clearly a multidimensional and cross-cutting activity, which must be managed and organised following an approach based on a modern “statistical information system”;
- and that the new strategy must be supported by a medium-term investment of resources.

4. A two-step approach: medium-term goals and short-term actions

16. The main objectives of the new OECD statistical strategy would be, over the medium term, to:

- improve the quality of OECD statistics;
- increase the efficiency of OECD statistical activities;
- develop the competencies of OECD statistical staff;
- enhance the role of the OECD in the international statistical network.

17. The first target uses the term “data quality” in a broad sense. A lot of work has been done in recent years to apply the concept of quality to statistics. For example, IMF, Eurostat and Statistics Canada have identified a number of data quality elements and the application of these elements requires continuous set of tradeoffs (see table 1).

Table 1 – Quality elements developed for statistical activities

Statistics Canada¹	Eurostat²	IMF³
Relevance	Relevance	
Accuracy	Accuracy	Accuracy and reliability
Timeliness	Timeliness	
Accessibility	Accessibility and clarity	Accessibility
Interpretability		
Coherence	Coherence	
	Comparability	
	Completeness	
		Integrity
		Methodological soundness
		Serviceability

1. *Statistics Canada Quality Guidelines*, 3rd edition, October 1998, available at www.statcan.ca

2. *Assessment of Quality in Statistics*, Eurostat, April 2000.

3. IMF Data Quality Assessment Framework available at <http://dsbb.imf.org/glossary.pdf>

18. The second one is crucial for an organisation like the OECD where there is a systematic discrepancy between the demand for new activities and the existing budget constraints. Every year, Member countries identify new tasks for the Organisation, whilst the overall budget is almost stable in nominal terms. A way to improve the quality and the efficiency of the OECD statistical work is to improve the quality of human capital, which is the fourth objective. Therefore, the new strategy has to enhance the professional skills of OECD statisticians, and to increase their satisfaction and the quality of their daily work.

19. Finally, through the achievement of the first three goals, the OECD can play a more relevant role in the international statistical context, contributing to the development of statistics both at international level and at national level, and improving the relationships among Member countries and with Non-member countries.

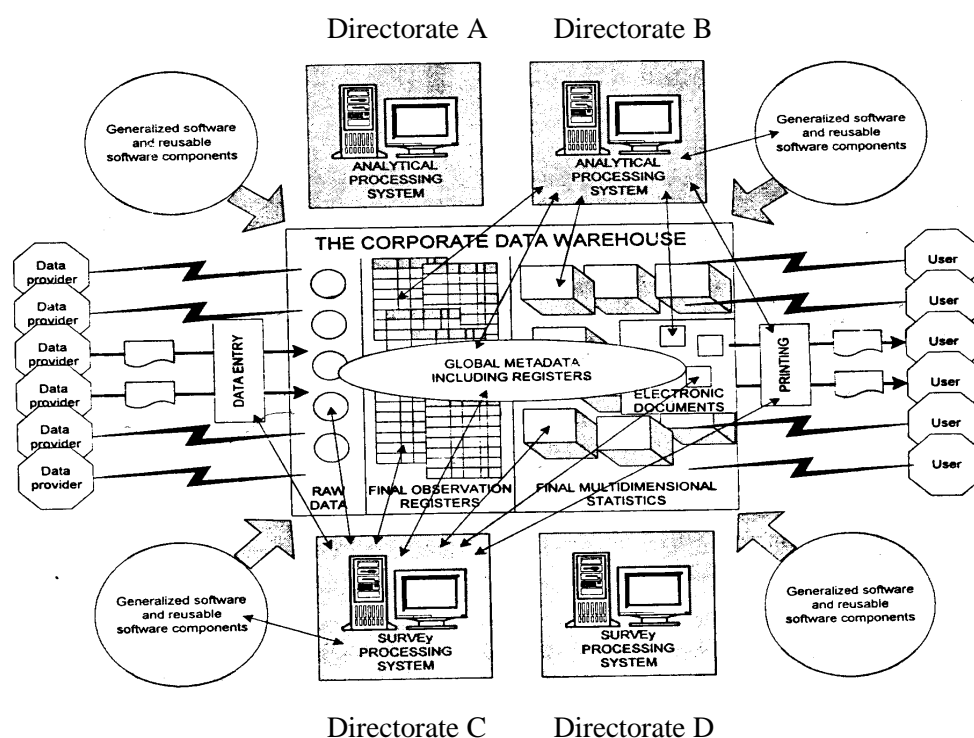
4.1 *Towards an OECD statistical information system*

20. The implementation of the new strategy is clearly a long-term project, but with several short-term actions and expected results. The basic assumption is the maintenance of the current decentralised organisation of statistical activities, which (theoretically and practically) has as many advantages and disadvantages as a centralised one. But to achieve the first two targets mentioned above it is absolutely necessary to adopt a different perspective, implementing a comprehensive OECD statistical information system able to manage decentralised statistical activities in a general co-ordinated framework.

21. A statistical information system can be defined as a structure composed of sub-systems which collect, process, store, retrieve, analyse and disseminate statistical data. The information system architecture (ISA) of a statistical organisation is a common framework within which different sub-systems have their respective roles, and interact mutually. The ISA should reflect the purposes and tasks of the institution, but in many cases this coherence does not exist today. One of the reasons for this discrepancy could be the conflict between the traditional “single process-oriented” (or “input-oriented”) organisation of the institution and the cross-cutting information needs of statistics users. This makes it difficult to achieve desirable co-ordination across subject-matter areas.

22. To develop a statistical information system it is necessary to define: a) a reference model for the development of technical tools able to manage the system; b) a reference model of “governance” of the system, which implies a set of agreed procedures to conduct statistical activities, guidelines, quality controls, etc. A possible organisation of a modern statistical information system is described below in Chart 1, extracted from the publication, *Information Systems Architecture for National and International Statistical Offices* (1999, UN-ECE). Adopting this system, each OECD Directorate would contribute to a corporate “data warehouse”, where all relevant (raw and final) data are stored with their metadata, in order to give full (and easy) access to all authorised internal users. Data collection is fully co-ordinated as is the preparation and the distribution of multidimensional data-bases (called “hypercubes”) for dissemination. Each Directorate would be (largely) independent in determining their own statistical and analytical processing, but the inputs and the outputs of these processes would be a part of the corporate data warehouse³.

Chart 1 – The model based on data warehouse



³ The tendency to follow the model described in Chart 1 is common also to some international organisations. For example, Eurostat recently started to revise completely its IT organisation, in order to improve the internal co-ordination, to increase the efficiency of data collection and to reduce inconsistencies in the dissemination of statistics.

23. The model described in Chart 1 is only a theoretical scheme, which has to be developed taking into account the existing situation and the organisation of the OECD. For example, the model was proposed in the second half of nineties and in the following years several NSOs (and some other national agencies) have started to implement this model following two main directions: the development of only one data warehouse;

or the development of a “constellation” of data warehouses, connected each other. Some new IT systems make it easier to follow the second way, avoiding the re-design of existing databases, but connecting them with a common infrastructure of metadata and providing tools to navigate across databases. This approach can dramatically reduce the costs of the implementing such a system, even in cases where (as in the OECD) a large number of databases already exist.

24. Without entering into technical details, it is important to say that this model has been adopted by the OECD as a framework to develop some short-term objectives. In the meantime, a detailed analysis has been carried out to derive an overall project of the new system from an IT point of view.

25. As already mentioned, the second condition for the development of a statistical information system is the definition of a model of “governance”. This model has to define the role of all players (substantive Directorates, STD, etc.) and the rules for the “political” management of the system. From this point of view, there is a general consensus that STD has to:

- define (in co-operation with other Directorates) general guidelines for the development of statistical activities (data and metadata collection, storage and dissemination) to improve the quality of all OECD statistics;
- ensure the exchange of relevant information across the Organisation;
- develop (in co-operation with other Directorates) common infrastructures for conducting statistical activities;
- co-ordinate the external relationships with other international organisations and with national statistical authorities;
- promote and organise (in co-operation with the relevant OECD bodies) the development of training activities for statisticians.

Some proposals to implement concrete rules to ensure the full co-ordination of the system have been recently discussed and a more general proposal will be presented by the end of this year. The implementation of the new statistical information system entails:

in 2001

- firming up the project definition, boundaries, time schedule and resource requirements. This has been through an extensive process of consultation across all Directorates and levels of staff;
- mounting a few small scale pilot projects in selected areas (refer to specific short-term objectives described in the next section), analyse the results of the pilot projects, and define the operative project before the end of 2001;
- agreeing on a general “governance” framework for the management of the system;

in 2002

- full implementation of the system from a technical point of view;
- definition of the main guidelines for the development of statistical activities;
- agreement on specific rules for the management of the system.

4.2 Specific short-term objectives

26. The design and implementation of the new statistical information system will require time. However, in the short run some actions to improve the current situation, to rationalise the existing organisation and to resolve some urgent problems have been undertaken. By and large these short-term objectives are going to be achieved working on all three main areas of the “corporate data warehouse” model described in Chart 1, namely:

- data and metadata collection (raw data);
- data and metadata storage and integration (final observation registers);
- data dissemination (final multidimensional statistics).

27. As mentioned above, OECD statistical work now follows a decentralised model. This approach can be effective because there is continuous (sometimes informal) contact between statisticians and experts on different topics. It can also stimulate the collection of statistical data in new fields of interest. On the other hand, this model can also be inefficient, both from the perspective of the OECD and national data providers. To improve the existing situation in the **area of data and metadata collection** the following actions have been undertaken:

- a) The compilation of an integrated annual OECD statistics programme, starting from 2002 reference year. The main elements of such a programme comprise a description of the activities, the characteristics of data and metadata collection and storage processes, the expected outputs, the list of statistics meetings, etc. The first programme will be ready at the end of this year and will be published. In addition, the database with all the available information will be made accessible to national statistical authorities, in order to help them to co-ordinate activities according to their national legislation. In 2002 a full review of the methods used for data and metadata collection will be conducted, to expand the adoption of best practices currently implemented in some areas.
- b) The definition of precise OECD internal guidelines for the collection of data and metadata to:
 - avoid duplication of collection activity;
 - adopt the most efficient technical instruments and languages, according to emerging international standards for data and metadata transmission;
 - improve the co-ordination with other international organisations, minimising overlapping, adopting joint electronic questionnaires and exploring the possibility of sharing information across their databases;
 - inform Member countries about new data collections and calculate some broad indicators of the “statistical burden” imposed by the OECD.
- c) A qualitative survey on the quality of data capture process has been conducted for short-term economic indicators, national accounts and international trade figures. Through this survey we have evaluated the timeliness of data transmission, the efficiency of methods used for data capture, problems (if any) with contact persons in Member countries, etc. Initial analysis has yielded some interesting results comparing the situation in different countries (for example, in terms of best systems for data transmission) and identifying the most critical cases. The expected result of this more systematic approach (which will be applied also to other fields) will be an efficiency gain in data capture and verification, which will improve the overall quality of OECD publications and user satisfaction. These improvements will take the form of both relatively small “cost-free” immediate changes by either the OECD and/or the provider agency, and longer-term strategic changes.
- d) A fourth initiative has been finalised to improve co-ordination in data collection with the European Commission Joint OECD-Eurostat questionnaires are already used in many areas. The objective of this initiative is to maximise the use for OECD purposes of data transmitted to Eurostat by EU Member

countries in the framework of the Regulations for Short-term statistics (STS) and Structural Business Statistics (SBS). A specific initiative has also been developed with DG-ECFIN to avoid duplication in the collection of business tendency surveys data. Several meetings to discuss technical and legal aspects have already been held. Joint OECD-Eurostat documents outlining proposed solutions will be prepared soon in order to start the necessary discussion with Member countries. The benefits of a strategic breakthrough in this area to both OECD/Eurostat and Member countries could be significant; however, one should not underestimate the technical and organisational complexity of the issues that need to be resolved, or the resources required for implementation.

28. In the **area of data and metadata storage**, some initiatives have been undertaken to develop the new statistical information system (SIS), in particular:

- a) the OECD has conducted market research to evaluate the best solution to develop the system from an IT point of view; in this framework, the experiences of some national statistical offices (NSOs) in the development of SIS have been evaluated;
- b) a complete map of existing databases will be created using information currently being collected for the OECD statistical programme;
- c) a project for the development of a “common browser” to navigate the various internal OECD databases has been launched. The browser will use a “corporate data catalogue” (showing the location of data, methodological information, etc.), which would help to avoid inconsistencies across different databases, enable users to conduct quick searches and extractions for developing analytical studies and to create and disseminate new integrated dissemination databases;
- d) the first version of a “corporate data dictionary” has been developed using existing glossaries created by the OECD Directorates and other international organisations. The dictionary (which will be fully integrated in the SIS) contains definitions of statistical items, concepts and terminology. These have been derived from existing international standards developed by the UN, ILO, IMF, OECD, Eurostat. The current version of the dictionary contains about 3.500 items and will be published (initially on the Internet) before the end of the year⁴.

29. In the **area of dissemination** several initiatives have been undertaken to improve the situation in the short run, in particular:

- a) the improvement of *SourceOECD* from a statistical point of view. In particular, a specific task force has defined a set of recommendations to improve the presentation of statistics in *SourceOECD* and to inform users of the sources used to create the different databases, etc. An editorial group for the management of all electronic “statistical products” has also been created.
- b) A second initiative is the creation of a “statistical portal” in the framework of the new OECD web site (www.oecd.org). In particular, it is now possible to navigate across all statistical pages following a unique classification derived from the UN classification of statistical themes (the same classification will also be used in the presentation of the OECD statistical programme). The full implementation of the “portal” is scheduled for the end of the year. The portal will contain a selection of available statistics for each theme, which will be accessible for free. A more general analysis of the current dissemination and pricing policy for statistics has been initiated as part of a wide review of the OECD general dissemination policy.

⁴ The OECD proposed to Eurostat (also currently reorganising its data dictionary) to develop a common dictionary, which could be jointly managed and updated. Other international organisations could also be associated with the project, once it has been better defined. An interesting aspect of the dictionary are the links between the definitions it contains and the complete source statistical guidelines, recommendations and manuals now being located more and more on the web sites of international organisations.

- c) The “OECD Statistical Newsletter” has been completely redesigned and now also includes articles written by statisticians working in national statistical offices (contributions are very welcome). Feedback received from users is very positive and more than 3.000 people now receive the electronic version of the Newsletter. A new occasional publication “Statistics Brief” has been designed and its launch is now scheduled for autumn. A publication “OECD Working Papers in Statistics” has been created for hosting scientific papers prepared by OECD experts and external experts who participate in various OECD statistical meetings.
- d) In September, STD introduced regular publication of press releases containing estimates for key monthly and quarterly economic indicators. The first group of indicators (GDP, composite leading indicators, standardised unemployment rates, consumer prices and international trade) will be gradually enlarged during 2002, when a calendar of releases will be announced in advance. Press releases will contain data for the following areas and countries: OECD, G7, EU, EMU, United States, Japan, Canada, Germany, Italy, France and United Kingdom. Summary analyses text is also included.

5. Improving the partnership with international and national statistical organisations

30. STD and other Directorates are currently involved in a number of projects with UNSD, ILO, IMF, World Bank, WTO and other international organisations. Projects with these agencies include co-ordinated data collection, the development of international statistical standards (particularly in emerging areas of statistics) and the promulgation of best methodological practice within those standards.

31. At international level some institutional changes are taking place and these modifications may affect the OECD’s position in the statistical network. In particular, in Europe, Eurostat is developing the European Statistical System, a network of the EU-NSOs; the pre-accession countries will join the System in a few years' time, while countries of the former Soviet Union are receiving technical assistance from Eurostat to develop their own statistical systems. In the Balkan countries co-operation in statistics is a tool to help those countries to develop their own governance. In Asia, the development of emerging economies and greater openness in China is increasing the demand for good statistics for those areas. The same tendency is emerging in Latin America, while many African countries are now developing their statistical systems, asking for help from international organisations. The globalisation of the world economy is creating several new challenges for statisticians. New standards are necessary to monitor emerging phenomena: e-commerce, development of multinationals, international trade in services, etc.

32. In order to maintain the OECD’s existing central position in the world statistical network it is necessary to expand our contacts with all the other international and supranational organisations:

- by playing a leadership role in the development of statistical standards in key areas of interest to the Organisation. The OECD has performed this role in the past (e.g. in national accounts, R&D, ICT) and should continue to do so in future;
- through more co-ordinated participation by OECD Directorates in the working parties, etc, of other international agencies, in particular, the UN and bodies;
- by carrying out projects to support the development of statistics in certain areas of the world⁵;
- by sustaining the creation and the improvement of modern national statistical systems where they do not exist (for example, enlarging the role played by PARIS21, the Consortium hosted by the OECD for the partnership in statistics), utilising for this purpose the high level political OECD network.

⁵ In STD a Division is active in statistical co-operation with OECD Non-member countries.

33. Even if, for very evident reasons, special attention is paid to improve relationships with Eurostat, a primary target is to enhance the role of the OECD in facilitating relationships among European and non-European countries. From this point of view, it is important to note:

- a) the participation of the OECD in the “EU-US benchmarking task force” on short-term macroeconomic statistics. The task force, created by Eurostat and Statistics Sweden, analysed the different approaches used in the European Union and the United States to produce short-term economic indicators, with emphasis on the issue of timeliness. The final report of the task-force has been discussed in September by the heads of EU statistical offices and important follow-up actions have been decided. From our perspective, the Statistics Directorate intends to create an OECD working group on short-term economic statistics, in order to facilitate the development of more continuous co-operation between EU and other OECD countries in this important field.
- b) the launch of an OECD task force on the treatment of software in national accounts, within the framework of the OECD National Accounts Experts Group. This is an area that needs special attention to improve the comparability of national data. The task force will be chaired by a US expert and will present its conclusions and recommendations by summer 2002.

34. A fundamental pillar of the OECD statistical strategy is the improvement of the partnership with national statistical authorities. The most relevant initiative in this field is the establishment of a Statistical Advisory Group (SAG). The Group, created on a voluntary basis, will be a forum to debate arguments like:

- data and metadata collection policies, to minimise the reporting burden and to enhance the efficiency of collection systems;
- data and metadata dissemination policies to maximise users’ satisfaction and to improve the quality and transparency of the OECD statistical outputs. In particular, to enable metadata to be used effectively and efficiently to compare statistical methodologies between countries for specific indicators;
- definition of new research projects, to improve the capability of national and international statistics to meet emerging users’ needs and to increase the international comparability of statistics;
- evaluation of initiatives to improve the co-operation with other international and supranational organisations;
- preparation of the high-level OECD statistical meeting (defining the agenda, giving preliminary advice on the draft documents, etc.).

35. New agreements have been signed with some national statistical offices to expand the possibility of exchanging staff with OECD and to have secondments of national experts for particular research projects. These agreements will improve co-operation and increase knowledge of the OECD among national statisticians, who will benefit from experiencing the multicultural work environment of the Organisation.

6. The next step for 2002: towards an explicit strategy on “quality”?

35. As already mentioned, the improvement of quality of OECD statistics is the main target of the strategy described above. Issues like relevance, timeliness, accessibility, coherence, comparability can be directly affected by initiatives undertaken to create the new statistical system and to improve the OECD statistical network. Several projects have been launched and some considerable improvements are expected in 2002. The work programme for 2001 is mainly focused on the resolution of some urgent problems and the development of technical and organisational infrastructures.

36. Now the next step is the full implementation of the new statistical information system and the adoption of a different method of work. In this respect, the main question is the opportunity to launch an explicit programme for quality, as has already been done in some national and international statistical organisations. Several approaches to quality for statistics have been developed. For example, Statistics Canada recognises three broad aspects of a data quality programme, which are: knowing and understanding user needs; involving employees in the decision making associated with meeting these needs; and continuously reviewing business processes for reengineering potential. Together, these aspects form the basis of a total quality management (TQM) program.

37. The OECD already applies several management techniques that are also used in TQM frameworks, without having adopted a formalised approach to quality. A question for consideration at this stage is whether or not the cultural, organisational and managerial climate within the OECD is currently conducive for the Organisation (at least for statistics) to embark on a formal TQM program. Experience of other organisations that gave presentations on their TQM programs at the recent ISI Conference in Korea and the Data Quality Conference in Stockholm indicated that the successful launch and implementation of a TQM programme requires the active and visible support of the Organisation's senior management and the commitment of dedicated resources for the initiation of specific TQM activities/processes and training, etc.. In other words, there is a clear risk in launching a formal TQM programme only to see it petering out through lack of commitment at all levels in the Organisation and through insufficient resources.

38. In the OECD context, the premature launch of such a programme could stimulate long debates, resulting in dilution of effort on other initiatives being implemented in the framework of the first version of the OECD statistics strategy. On the other hand, an explicit programme for quality could permit more advanced solutions to be identified, involving all the OECD statisticians in a common effort that would accelerate the transition to a different approach to statistical activities and products. A deep analysis of pros and cons of this approach will be conducted in coming months, taking into account the more general reform processes that have been launched in the Organisation.