

**STATISTICS DIRECTORATE**

**National Accounts and Economic Statistics – International Trade Statistics**

**STATUS OF OECD'S INTERNATIONAL TRADE STATISTICS DATABASES**

*OECD INTERNATIONAL TRADE STATISTICS MEETING (ITS) AND OECD-EUROSTAT MEETING OF EXPERTS IN TRADE IN SERVICES STATISTICS (TIS)*

*Château de la Muette, Paris*

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*Room 6*

**Room document 13 attached for item 3 a) of the draft agenda: Recent developments at OECD**

## STATUS OF OECD'S INTERNATIONAL TRADE STATISTICS DATABASES

- Note by the Secretariat -

### Introduction

As for previous International Trade Statistics meetings, this paper presents recent developments for both trade databases International Trade by Commodity Statistics (ITCS) and Monthly Statistics of International Trade (MSIT).

Over the past years, improvements have been carried out by the OECD concerning the dissemination of data and metadata. To keep on improving trade databases, more information on data processing is needed as well as updated metadata. The joint OECD/UNSD letter sent at the end of February 2004 to all OECD member states outlined in detail the data and metadata requirements for the dataset.

A strengthened cooperation is also necessary to ensure that data provided to the secretariat, particularly on the Internet, is comprehensive enough and compatible with automatic transfer procedures.

### 1. Annual data availability

#### *a) Data collection*

Thanks to the efforts made by member countries, the OECD used to receive annual trade data quicker each year. 2003 data reception for the reporting year 2002 have been delayed for some countries because of the new HS 2002.

As marked at the last meeting, timely delivery to OECD becomes all the more important since delays in delivery also affect UNSD and WTO. The Secretariat would like to thank data providers for steps taken in maintaining or investigating systems for the automatic transfer or update information.

In 2003, 50% of annual trade data were available in June 2003 and 100% of data were available in February 2004. Those ratios are quite similar to those of 2002 but, on average, there is a slight deterioration of the data reception, about 2 weeks per country.

Figure 1: Comparison of data reception for the reported years 2002 and 2001

	Data reception 2001/2000 (months)	Data reception 2002/2001 (months)	2003												2004				
			Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb			
AUS	-6	0		2002														AUS	
AUT	+5	-3						2002			2001							AUT	
BEL	0	+11			2001												2002	BEL	
CAN	+2	0					2002											CAN	
CHE	+4	-3		2002				2001										CHE	
CZE	+7	-1											2002	2001				CZE	
DEU	+6	+2											2001			2002		DEU	
DNK	-2	-8		2002									2001					DNK	
ESP	+3	+1										2001	2002					ESP	
FIN	-5	0			2002													FIN	
FRA	0	0		2002														FRA	
GBR	-5	-1			2002	2001												GBR	
GRC	-5	+5										2001					2002	GRC	
HUN	+2	+3					2001					2002						HUN	
IRL	+1	+2										2002						IRL	
ISL	-1	0										2002						ISL	
ITA	-1	+1				2001	2002											ITA	
JPN	0	+2					2001			2002								JPN	
KOR	-8	+10			2001													2002	KOR
LUX	0	0											2002					LUX	
MEX	-2	+2								2001			2002					MEX	
NLD	-1	+1									2001		2002					NLD	
NOR	-8	+5		2001						2002								NOR	
NZL	+7	-4									2002						2001	NZL	
POL	-2	-3				2002				2001								POL	
PRT	+2	-3												2002			2001	PRT	
SVK	-3	0												2002				SVK	
SWE	-3	-4				2002						2001						SWE	
TUR	-1	-3					2002					2001						TUR	
USA	-4	0			2002													USA	
CHN	+3	-2							2002		2001							CHN	
HKG	0	+0			2002													HKG	
TWN		+6								2001								2002	TWN
average -gain/+loss	-0.47	0.48																	

*b) Content and publication of annual trade statistics*

The size of the ITCS database is about 55 MB. It contains trade statistics:

- For values and quantities;
- Since 1961 when available, up to 2002;
- For 30 OECD member countries plus China, Hong-Kong and Chinese Taipei;
- Provided according to 5 commodity based classifications (SITC Rev 2, SITC Rev 3, HS 88, HS 96 and HS 2002) and 2 activity based classifications (ISIC Rev 2 and ISIC Rev 3).

A paper version of ITCS is released every two or three months. Electronic versions are now available as updates progress since data files are included immediately on Sourceoecd/OLIS when ready. All OECD member countries are also published on 4 CD ROMs containing each one 7 or 8 countries. CD ROMs are released every two months. The 2003 edition has been delayed because of the HS 2002 implementation.

## 2. Monthly data availability

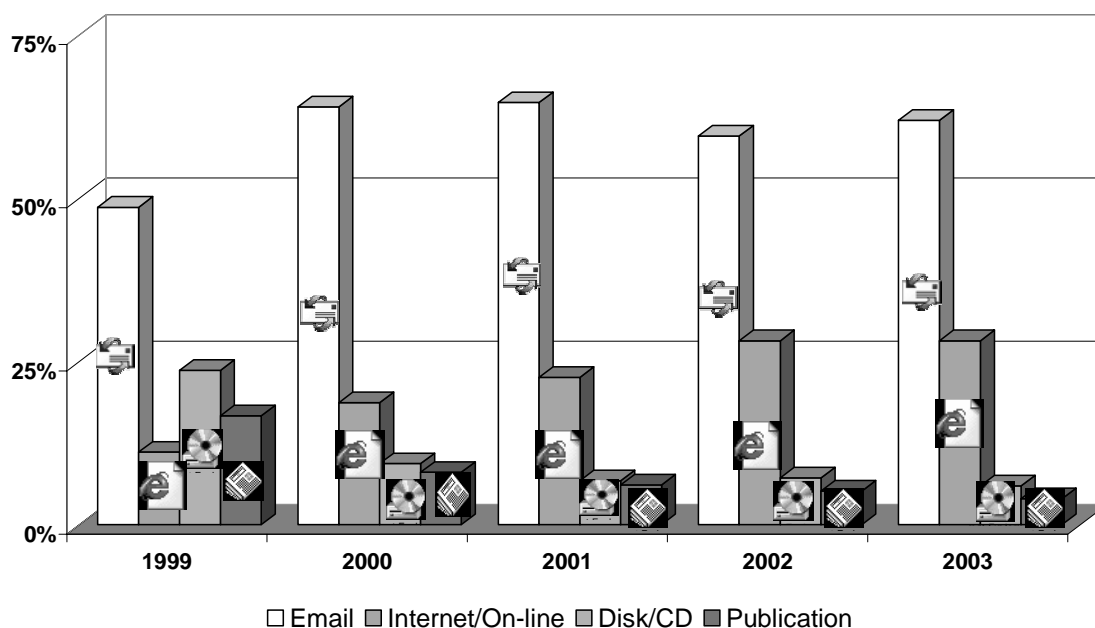
### a) Data collection: the case of MSIT

The main trend in data transmission observed in the past years is confirmed in 2003. Figure 2 shows the various options aggregated in four groups (publications, diskettes/CD-ROMs, e-mails and Internet), measured in number of files transmitted.

The number of data files sent through electronic mean - email and Internet - increases smoothly in comparison to 2002 but the general trend is stabilization. This is a gain for the timeliness and accurateness of data.

As a counterpart of the increase of the electronic mean, usage of diskettes and CD-ROMs is marked by a sharp drop over the last four years (from 24% to 6%) and the number of paper publications continues to decrease over the whole period in benefit of the Internet dissemination (especially .pdf documents).

**Figure 2 : Data transmission**



The growing use of Internet sites to publish statistical data, accessible by downloading tables or by running on-line extraction, follows a universal trend with several crucial advantages such as flexibility, rapidity and cost efficiency. Nevertheless, it may not be the perfect solution in all cases. By definition, Internet sites are designed mainly for a large public and therefore may not meet all the specific requirements associated to the management of a database such as the MSIT and its derived publications.

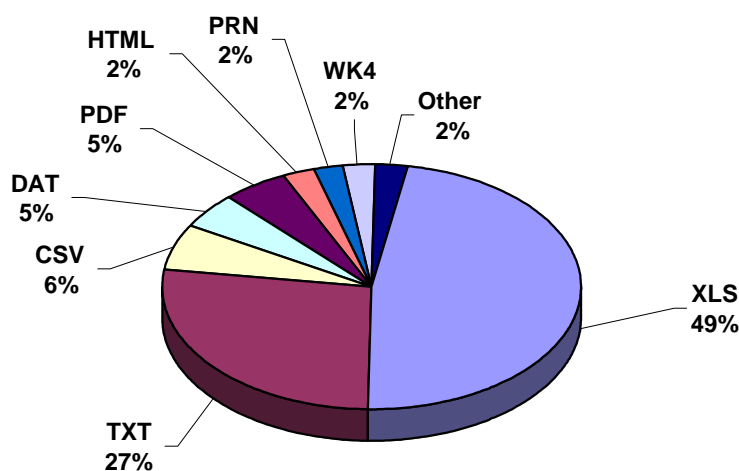
Data provided in these public institutional sites are not always comprehensive enough:

- Trade flows by partner country are in some instances limited to a given number of partners such as the first fifty ones;
- Figures are usually rounded;
- Series are often too short to allow historical revisions necessary to ensure the consistency of a whole database used for long-term economic analysis. Such a limitation of available information is also found in the case of indices where, for instance, only a selection of series may be available or a given type of index (e.g. unit value index) may be completely omitted.
- The structure of some web sites is usually subject to sudden changes without prior notice which create difficulties to maintain automatic extraction procedures.

Another aspect where harmonization could be improved is file format. Presently, about a dozen of different formats are used (see figure 3), some of them being combined by the same data provider. Fortunately, the most commonly used ones are easy to manage, but some as the PostScript creates difficulties and are not justified since statistics displayed in corresponding tables come certainly from other applications more compatible with data manipulation.

All these difficulties are an obstacle to the development of standardised procedures.

**Figure 3: File formats transmitted**



Because of the great variety of access and format options described above, a manual intervention is still required.

As proposed in the last Expert Meeting, the best solution consists in embedding in public institutional sites detailed and comprehensive files, possibly password protected or stored in dedicated addresses, with stable structures and agreed data formats, preferably XML (Extensible Markup Language), corresponding to the specific needs of international organisations collecting statistical data. Thanks to the replies to the OECD questionnaires recently sent to data providers, we now have the publications schedules for most of member countries. It facilitates a timely management of monthly statistics.

In cases where the above recommendations cannot be applied, email transmission of custom-made files should be kept in use as the most efficient solution to provide trade data to the organisation.

### ***b) Content and publication of monthly trade statistics***

The MSIT database currently covers trade flows of OECD member countries analyzed from four different perspectives. The first one is a set of synthetic tables giving the most meaningful trade indicators and allowing direct cross-country analysis. The second perspective is made of a selection of volume and unit value indices by member country. The third one is a summary by commodity where data are provided in accordance to the sections of the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC). Then trade by partner country and country groups gives the most detailed perspective available in the database.

The MSIT database was initially developed for the needs of OECD economists and remains crucial for internal use at the organisation, for instance as an input to economic forecast models.

Data are also used to prepare the Quarterly Press Release which contains seasonally adjusted value data for OECD member countries and seasonally adjusted volume indices for the G7 countries. This press release sent directly to a large number of journalists specialized in economics highlights the latest trends in international trade of member countries. It is also published on the OECD web site, four months after the reference period.

In the objective to better fit the needs of the Press Release users, the OECD sent in February 2004 a questionnaire. It was well received and the OECD investigates ways to improve this Press Release based upon their proposals.

Being the most up-to-date source of data on international trade, the MSIT is increasingly used also by external users. Besides the traditional monthly paper publication giving the latest updates which is still quite popular, a monthly CD-ROM is issued in parallel to provide external users with as much data as the mother database does, including for instance every single partner country.

### **3. On-line access to trade data**

Three different types of Internet access have been developed to meet the various needs of three groups of users. The first one is available on the statistics portal in the OECD site where the general public can get for free a limited selection of tables showing total trade flows for each member country and figures by SITC sections.

Also free, the second access through OLIS is dedicated to officials from Governments, delegations, International Organisations and offers them two options. The first one, Statistics Online, is a service providing interactive access to the latest statistics including International Trade data. Selected data can be extracted, displayed and downloaded in three formats (Beyond 20/20, Excel, Comma delimited ASCII). The second option gives access to all files issued in the latest copy of the MSIT CD-ROM, most of them in Beyond 20/20 format, which can be downloaded on the spot.

SourceOECD, the third access, is the OECD's online library of books, periodicals and statistics designed for institutions such as universities, consultancies, non-governmental and governmental organisations.

This service, available on annual subscription, gives access to OECD databases the same way OLIS does with the same capability of doing specific data selections. From SourceOECD, it is also possible to download Postscript versions (PDF) of printed publications including all foreign trade ones.

#### **4. General issues for discussion**

Improvement in the quality of OECD statistics is one of the main objectives of the Statistics Strategy. The quality of OECD statistics depends on its internal processes but also on quality of statistics and methodological information received.

As mentioned in the OECD Statistical Programme of Work 2003, good statistics imply not only characteristics of good quality statistics but also the adoption of a set of modern methods and standards for metadata collection, storage and dissemination. Many improvements have already been done concerning international trade metadata dissemination on Internet and on electronic products. To continue these improvements a commitment from data providers is necessary in order to disseminate more relevant methodological information useful for a proper use of statistics.

On the other hand, as mentioned each year additional efficiency gains could be made if more information about trade statistics were sent automatically to the OECD which still has to get back to too many countries with questions concerning unknown commodity codes, unknown country codes, unknown labels series, etc.

For both reasons, in the joint OECD/UNSD letter sent in February to member countries, we encourage data providers to send all information available concerning methodology and data processing or to indicate web sites where this information may be found.

The increasing availability of electronic data reduces the scope for error and delay.

Concerning the MSIT database, 90% of raw files used as an input in 2003 were transmitted electronically which compares to just 60% four years earlier.

This impressive change is by itself a real success and shows the way for future improvements which depend largely on strengthening cooperation between statistical institutions and the OECD Statistics Directorate on the followings issues:

- Availability and comprehensiveness of relevant data (detailed series, historical data, methodological information ...);
- Coordination for the implementation of agreed and stable Internet technical solutions to allow an increased development of automatic transfer procedures;
- Especially for indices an effort should be done to disseminate data on a monthly regular basis. Indices series still contain temporal gaps, figures inconsistencies between years and metadata scarcity;
- Separate submission of total import and export data as soon as they become available. At present, these figures are most often calculated from detailed data. Aggregate input would allow a better tracking of data discrepancies and earlier data availability for the Quarterly Press Release;
- The reception of revised data on a regular basis.

The Secretariat would be interested to have views expressed by delegates on these issues.

## **5. Current and future developments**

### ***a) Developments announced in 2003.***

Announced developments presented at the last Trade Statistics Meeting in 2003 have been achieved or are ongoing:

- For publishing considerations EU-15 EXTRA is not be published anymore in the paper version of ITCS. However, these data, as well as all trade data relating to zones published in the volume 5 of the paper version will be disseminated on electronic products. This project is ongoing;
- The Harmonised System 2002 has been implemented in ITCS.

The formatting automation performed within the MSIT database has been enhanced:

- 74% of raw data files are currently formatted with automatic routines instead of 65% in 2002.
- 9% of processes are on the way of improvement;
- 17% of raw data files are completely manually formatted (versus 34% in 2002).

### ***b) Co-operation with other international organisations.***

The OECD contributes to the Common Data Set (C.D.S.) project which provides the total merchandise exports and imports data. This project coordinated by W.T.O. will be presented in the point 5.d. of the agenda.

The Memorandum Of Understanding between UNSD and OECD has been extended to all OECD member countries. More generally, the co-operation between both organisations is strengthened through the project of a single world trade database (see point 5.c. of the agenda about this issue).

### ***c) New developments for 2004.***

The OECD is currently studying how to improve the Quarterly Press Release. A questionnaire has been sent for this purpose in February 2004 (see point 8.a. of the agenda about this issue).