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Experience and response in developing countries:
the twinning project with the Tunisian National Statistical Institute

**Parallel Session N° 7
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1. Objectives and activities in the twinning project

The EU-funded twinning project, led by the Italian NSI (Istat), was set up involving three partners, the Tunisian National Statistical Institute, the Italian Institute for Studies and Economic Analyses (ISAE), the Italian consortium CSI Piemonte, and the Formez Training and Study Centre. It started in April 2008 and it will last two years.

The main aim is the delineation of an Informative System of Statistics on Enterprises (namely SISE - Système d'Information pour la Statistique des Entreprises) in order to spread coherent information on the physical, occupational and financial structure of the enterprises in Tunisia.

Before starting the project the statistics on enterprises had the following characteristics:

- Data on Structural Statistics (SBS) were only used for national accounts and they are not disseminated on their own.
- Structural and Short-term data are completely lacking in the most relevant Tunisian economic activity sectors, like transport and internal trade.
- As regards the business register, that is based on the integration of identification data coming from both Fiscal Authority and Social Security, most of the human resources are engaged on manual activities like linking records or assessing and coding the economic activities.
- There are no assessments on the quality of the statistics produced.

Within this framework the twinning project is divided into four actions:

- A. SISE architecture and development strategy
- B. Development of the basic tools of the system
- C. Sources and statistical products
- D. Informatics Platforms and activities

During the planning phase of the project, that analysed the situation and the actual needs of the Tunisian NSI with regard to statistics on enterprises, both the partners – Italian and Tunisian ones – identified the priorities in the project:

1. Operating on the national register of enterprises (RNE - Répertoire National des Entreprises) and on the creation of a new technologic Informatics Platform

2. Defining the new Tunisian classification of economic activity (NAT) harmonized to the NACE Rev.2
3. To proceed to a complete revision of the annual Structural Survey on Enterprises (ENAE) in terms of contents, sampling plan, methods of editing and imputation, estimates of economic aggregates
4. Drawing a new survey on internal trade and, potentially, the implementation of a pilot survey.

These priorities should be placed within a general framework of a broader plan, whose central elements must be:

- A. Increased use of administrative sources
- B. The definition and design of an “open” informative system, capable of absorbing – with few developments costs – the external (new administrative sources, changes in the contents of the utilised sources) and internal changes (new surveys, changes in the contents of the surveys)

2. The activities in the first months of the project

In the first months of the project some activities have been carried out:

- Support to the definition of the new economic activity and products classifications.
- Study and analysis of the available administrative sources to be used for statistical purposes (for the Statistics on Enterprises). 15 different sources managed by several agencies (Ministries, Tax Authorities, some companies that provide utilities) were analysed. Data from three new sources have been acquired - Chambers of Commerce, STEG (the society that provides electricity) and the Agency for Industrial Development - which are currently under study to verify the possible use to improve the coverage and the quality of information of the Register. The relations with the General Directorate of Taxation have been deepened with the aim to obtain information on the structure of the business accounts. A first analysis of the quality of Social Security data was performed to verify the usability of these information to estimate the values of partial and total non-response in the annual Survey on Employment and Salaries. A cross-functional multi-skilled team inside the Tunisian NSI was founded for the study and the use of administrative sources for Statistics on Enterprises. For its training Istat organised a course on the use of administrative data for statistical purposes together with a study visit in Italy.
- The diagnostic of the actual situation and the detection of the problems of the RNE is now concluded and the output of this phase was the identification, for each register variable, of the possible solutions in terms of new administrative sources, new methodologies and new processes.
- Starting from the register, the logical and physical structure of the System is under definition. It is based on a modular design with the identification of cross-section processes (not linked to a specific element of the System) and the definition and characterization of the information (data) and the typology of information (metadata) to be used as a means to realise the interaction among processes.
- An “informative” seminar was carried out in November 2008 with a wide and focusing participation of numerous experts coming from the other administrative bodies and from academia.

3. The problems in the implementation of the project

The realisation of the project encountered some problems relating to the peculiar social and cultural context in which it operates.

The problem of the heavy bureaucracy is relevant – the Tunisian experts have to ask for permissions for each activity, even in the experimental ones – and it often causes important delays in many activities.

The culture of “working in team” is lacking and this is an important issue if the goal is the creation of an informative system; it is lacking also the culture of the joint analyses of the methodologies and the processes carried out in various surveys, as well as of the results from comparing different sources, administrative data or statistical surveys.

There is obviously a problem of lack of resources. Statistical and IT experts in the Tunisian NSI can hardly follow the current activities together with the twinning project activities.

Moreover, there is a problem in the relationship between the Tunisian NSI and the other authorities holding the administrative data that are potentially useful for statistical purposes. Even if the statistical legislation is quite fully in line with the European standard, concerning the statistical data confidentiality and the exchange of data with administrative bodies, unfortunately some authorities, primarily the Tax Authority, are still considering its own legislation as “superior” to the statistical one.

However these negative elements are well balanced by the high professional skill of statisticians and IT experts of the Tunisian NSI, by the strong will of the top management of the Statistical Institute to have quick results from the twinning project and finally by the good professional relations that were established among Tunisian and Italian experts.