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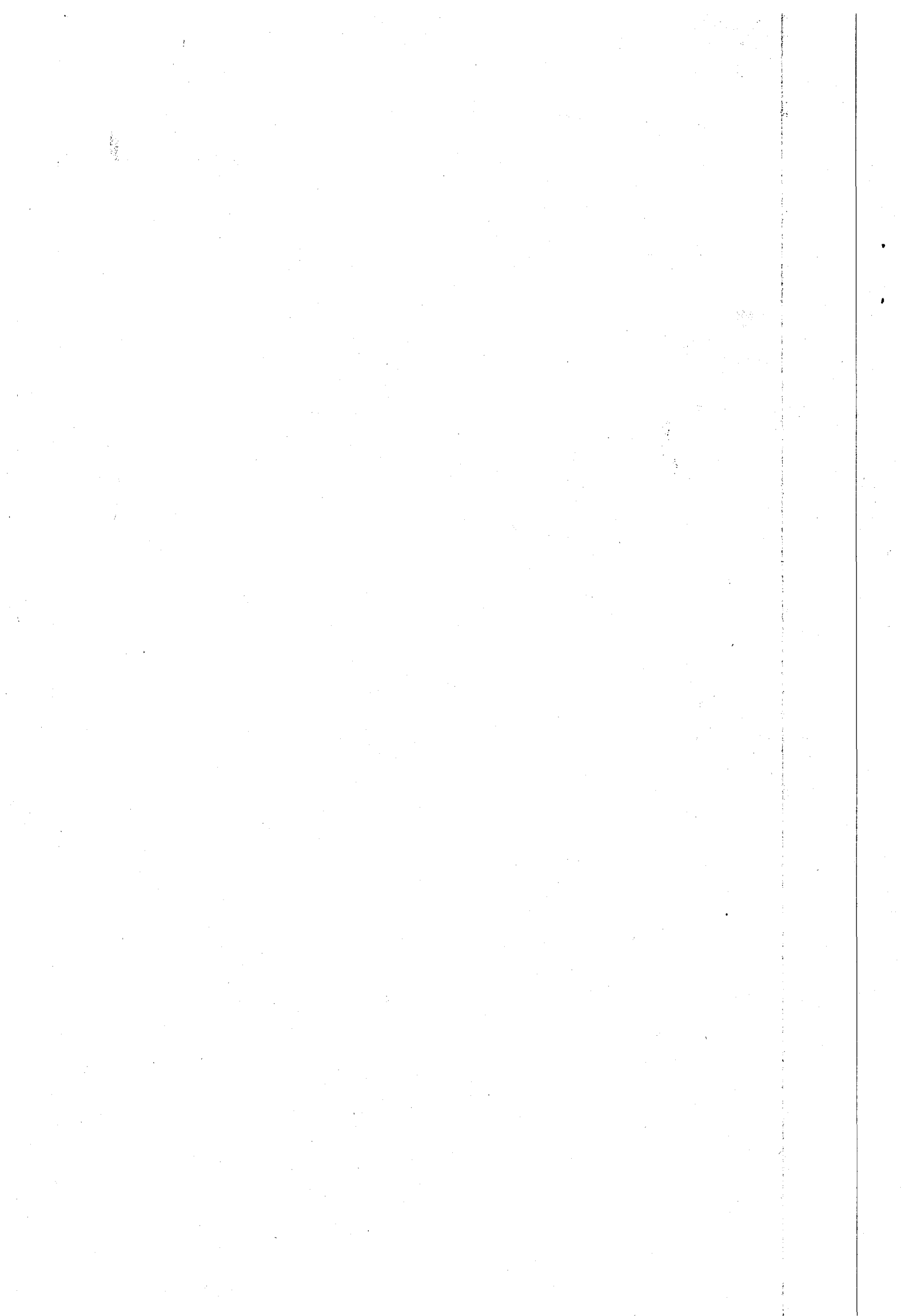
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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING PAPER

EVALUATION REPORT

ON THE COLLECTION OF STATISTICAL DATA IN CIREA

Implementation of Phase 1 of the Commission's Action Plan of 15 April 1998



EVALUATION REPORT ON STATISTICAL DATA COLLECTION IN CIREA

INTRODUCTION

This paper evaluates the progress made by Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Community, in the first phase of the establishment of a data collection system on monthly asylum data. The programme of work involved in this exercise is based on the Commission's Action Plan of 15 April 1998 (SEC (1998) 661; Doc. 7837/98 CIREA 40), which had been drawn up at the explicit request of the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 19 March 1998.

In the Action Plan, which foresees a two-phase approach, it was proposed that an evaluation would take place at the end of phase 1. This evaluation should examine the way the system has worked during this first period, point out its strengths and weaknesses and make proposals for improvements. These proposals would then be taken into account in the second phase together with any other proposals for enlarging the data collection in geographical terms and/or in contents.

OVERVIEW

The first step after the adoption of the Action Plan was the collection of all necessary information that would indicate what were the limitations and possibilities of actually achieving the aims of the Member States concerning the collection of asylum statistics, as expressed by CIREA. Thus, in summer 1998, a questionnaire was devised by Eurostat and disseminated to the relevant Ministries of the Member States. In order to ensure efficient and reliable data collection, Eurostat sought to clarify the situation of data availability and the issue of confidentiality for each Member State. It was also necessary to identify the relevant contact persons in each country for the three domains of policy issues, statistics and computing/technical matters.

The questionnaire was first sent to five Member States that had volunteered to participate in a pilot phase: Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Amendments were made in the light of their comments before the questionnaire was sent to the remaining ten Member States. The responses to that questionnaire were analysed and formed the basis of a progress report (Commission Staff Working Paper of 13 September 1999, SEC (1999) 1476; Council Doc. 11053/99 CIREA 65) which was submitted to the Council in September 1999. Following an analysis of the replies, a draft set of templates for use in collecting the data was prepared.

Guidance notes including a full list of citizenship codes and help index, were prepared and circulated, first for consultation, then to accompany the data collection tables during the launch of the data collection.

The launch of the full data collection took place, as planned, at the end of November 1998 with data for October 1998.

The following monthly and quarterly reports have been produced by the end of April 2000:

Monthly: April 1999,

Quarterly: 2nd quarter 1999, 3rd quarter 1999, 4th quarter 1999.

In parallel, an informal CIREA subgroup of statistical experts (proposed by the Austrian Presidency in October 1998) started working, in early 1999, on proposals for common definitions and clearer table structures for the data collection on asylum.

FIRST PHASE: CURRENT WAY OF WORK AND EVALUATION

1. Data collection

A. The information collected is the following:

- Monthly Table A1 New asylum applications by citizenship and type of application
- Monthly Table A2 Asylum decisions and applications by citizenship and type
- Quarterly Table A3 Rejected asylum applicants returned by citizenship
- Quarterly Table A4 Asylum applications of unaccompanied minors by citizenship and age

B. Current deficiencies

The main weakness of the current set of tables is the lack of common or harmonised definitions. Eurostat has been working to resolve this problem (see Room Document No.1, CIREA Meeting of 27-28 January 1999) and participated actively in the work of the above mentioned CIREA sub-group. The work of this sub-group has been very useful. Although it was not possible to produce a completely harmonised data collection because of the different sources, methods of data collection and processing within the Member States, it has, nonetheless, been possible to produce a set of proposals which, if adopted, would represent a great improvement on the current situation. It is expected that, before summer 2000, the new set of definitions and formats including a new table will have been agreed upon (see Room Document No.2, CIREA Meeting of 3 May 2000).

C. How the data are collected

Eurostat has a list of contact points based on the answers to the questionnaire on data availability and timeliness. The list has been updated where necessary as and when the contact officials have changed.

Eurostat sends the request for statistical data on asylum to the CIREA contact persons for statistics every month in electronic form via email (13 Member States) and fax (2 Member States). The request consists of a standard letter asking for the new data with a reminder to supply missing data from previous requests. The reminder is distributed six weeks after the end of the reference month for which data are collected. The data are supplied by email, fax or diskette, in most cases, using Eurostat's predefined formats. Two Member States (Denmark and Sweden) supply data in electronic formats, which are different to Eurostat's. This creates additional work in transferring, inputting and checking the data. Considerable time was spent on reformatting the "backlog" files for these countries. The routine workload would be a matter of hours each month, however, updates arrive only every quarter or six months, necessitating two or more days each time to ensure that the data are transferred accurately each time and that revisions are taken into account.

Three Member States (Greece, Italy, and Spain) send data sporadically by fax. This has also led to considerable difficulties in processing data, particularly where the quality of the fax is poor. The figures have to be entered by hand into the correct Eurostat file formats. In the cases of two of these Member States (Greece and Spain), the paper version is a printout of the correct electronic format, so an unnecessary duplication of effort is taking place. All of these inconsistencies create delays in the speedy processing and reporting of the data. A great deal of progress has been made in loading and processing the data backlog, but significant gaps still remain. In order to be able to provide a rapid service to the users, Member States must comply with the required format.

According to the answers to the questionnaire on when the data would be available, 14 of the 15 EU Member States declared that data (in some cases provisional data) on *asylum applications*

would be available one month after the end of the reference period. According to this statement, e.g. on 1st January 2000 data for the month of November 1999 should have been available. The reality, however, looked different because some Member States, for various reasons, have not been able to process and supply the data according to their original intentions. Others did not supply any data at all until the end of 1999/beginning of 2000. Two Member States that had originally communicated to have data, have provided only a few months in 1999, if any.

On 1st January 2000, October data on applications were still missing for three Member States and November data were missing for seven Member States. There were many gaps in the database (some of them reaching back to the period October – December 1998) which, in theory, should have been long filled. In particular the situation concerning data on *decisions, rejected asylum applicants returned* and *unaccompanied minors* appears increasingly worse. Only eight Member States had provided October data on *decisions* and only seven had done so for the month of November. On *rejected asylum seekers returned* in the 3rd Quarter 1999, seven Member States had not transmitted any data. In fact, only one country actually had provided data for the full quarter and another one had done so for two months of that quarter. The picture was only slightly better as regards data on *unaccompanied minors* where only three Member States had provided data for the 3rd Quarter 1999.

The delays in providing Eurostat with data clearly have repercussions on the frequency, timeliness of the production of the CIREA reports. This applies all the more if one takes into account that, at the same time, some Member States have provided more complete data, or data described to Eurostat as confidential, openly to other international organisations such as IGC in Geneva.

The practice in the current questionnaire is that information is collected for Third country nationals only. In order to avoid confusion to the users of the public data on asylum, it is suggested that information should be collected for all citizenships, including EU citizens. Thus the totals on asylum applications and decisions in the public database would be the same as those published by other international organisations. For reporting purposes within CIREA, the analysis could be done either on non- EU citizens and/or totals including EU citizens.

Eurostat had launched the idea of using STADIUM for data transmission. STADIUM is the preferred system used successfully by Eurostat and the National Statistical Institutes for the regular annual data collections. Unfortunately, this idea has not been successfully implemented within the CIREA network of contacts. The reasons for this are both technical and organisational within Eurostat and within the Member States. Most Member States have chosen to use e-mail which has worked efficiently. Given that the sensitivity of the data only applies in a few cases and that in these cases they become non-sensitive with rounding, it appears that STADIUM was a cumbersome tool for the purpose. Eurostat should reflect once more whether STADIUM should be used.

Evaluation: The system was set up in a promising way but the, sometimes inexplicable, delays in transmitting data to Eurostat have impeded the performance. An important improvement compared with the previous situation is that now the data collection has moved from a quarterly to a monthly one.

*Recommendations: Adopt definitions proposed by the statistical expert group as well as the new tables. Collect information for all citizenship breakdown.
Include the inventory of data already received in the standard letter.
Accept only information sent by electronic means using the Eurostat predefined format.
Regularly update list of contact points.
Data received late may not be included in the relevant reports.
Critical reflection of the use of STADIUM.*

2. Data processing

The data that arrive at Eurostat are stored in a database that is used for the production of the reports and answering data requests. The database is flexible enough to produce many different types of tabulations using fairly simple procedures. For the time being, however, no metadata information such as footnotes and methodological notes are stored with the primary data.

Improvements can also be made to the templates provided to the data suppliers. A new version of the templates incorporating some automatic checking facilities will reduce the time needed to check the data before entering it in the database.

Member States will also be required to complete all cells in the tables. A default value of "0" will be inserted in the templates. This must be changed, where necessary, to a value or a special value code, as the database will otherwise process it as a real value.

The database encompasses all data collected by Eurostat. Information collected by the Secretariat general of the Council (before October 1998) has been transmitted to Eurostat but in a format that requires substantial efforts to be integrated in the current data collection. This has the clear disadvantage that, for the time being, no historical analysis is possible for a period longer than one year. The incorporation of the historical data would mean that Eurostat would engage together with the Member States in an exercise involving checking the data, documenting changes in the definitions and filling gaps.

The data should be revised each year because in certain cases, Member States provide provisional figures. A mechanism for the revision of the data each year should be put into motion.

Evaluation: The current database has been performing in a satisfactory way. Evidently, there are always improvements possible but the overall evaluation is positive.

*Recommendations: Improve data capturing facilities.
Include historical data.
Include metadata information.
Establish a mechanism for revising data*

3. Database and dissemination

Given the sensitive nature of the CIREA data, it is circulated exclusively among the CIREA Members. Only the data providers, that is to say the Member States, can lift such a restriction. It is being noted, however, that similar information (mainly on asylum applications and decisions)

is considered "public" and, therefore, published in the open domain by other international fora. Within CIREA, most of the data on asylum applications (93%) and decisions (67%) is already considered "public" by Member States. Consequently, this data should be available to the public and preparations are underway to include it in New Cronos, Eurostat's database.

Initially, the plan was to disseminate data by the production of monthly, quarterly and annual reports. This plan has not been fully materialised yet due to, on the part of Member States, the delays in transmitting data to Eurostat and, on the part of Eurostat, an underestimation of the work involved in processing data that arrive in different formats.

In the long-run one should consider the possibility of electronic dissemination. This has already been requested by some Member States because it would, on the one hand, satisfy the provider's needs for keeping some of the information in a secure environment but it would, on the other hand, also allow direct access by the user to the database or some of the tables electronically.

Evaluation: The dissemination system is a powerful one and much improved compared to the previous situation, however it has not yet been used to its full potential. There is, particularly, a need for rapid monthly information in a less bulky format.

<p><i>Recommendations: Include metadata information in the database. Include past data in the database. Make public all data that is considered as public elsewhere Examine possibilities for electronic and secure dissemination. Include all non-confidential data to New Cronos.</i></p>

4. Reports

The current reporting system has not yet been fully operational because of the delays in transmission of data described above, technical problems and mobilisation of Eurostat for the work of the High Level Working Group on migration and asylum. Only two quarterly and one monthly report had been produced by March 2000. Given the delays, it was decided to concentrate on the quarterly reports rather than on the monthly ones. It needs to be reflected whether the monthly report should continue to be produced, and whether this should be in a redesigned formatting in order to facilitate its production and dissemination. One possibility could be to disseminate some of the monthly tables electronically only. The possibility of a detailed annual report with analysis of trends is also to be envisaged.

Member States' views about the current reports are vital to the whole evaluation process. Until now, there has been no possibility to get proper feedback from them on whether these reports are useful, which elements are important to keep and what could be improved. Eurostat has some ideas on how to improve the layout of the current quarterly reports by including more analytical overview tables. The monthly tables may require a complete rethink, with the aim of producing less bulky and more timely reports to be disseminated electronically. Each Member State receives three copies of the report on the basis of a distribution list that is predefined. A system should be set up to regularly update this list.

Evaluation: The current reporting system is a big improvement compared to the situation before the Commission was in charge of the data collection, but there are still many improvements to be made.

Recommendations: *Disseminate monthly report electronically.
Produce streamlined monthly reports in the form of updates
Discuss the reports with the Member States.
Produce an annual report with analysis of trends.
Establish a system to regularly update distribution lists.
Improve layout of current quarterly reports.*

5. Data Confidentiality/Sensitivity

The confidentiality/sensitivity of the data provided by Member States has been respected by Eurostat whenever handling, processing or disseminating it. Where required, individual numbers have been rounded or withheld according to the requirements of the data providers. There are, however, a number of anomalies between these requirements and what is known now to be current practice of Member States in providing unrounded data to other international institutions and bodies which are entitled to publish them. For example, monthly asylum data for Spain are supplied to and disseminated by the IGC and UNHCR, whilst Eurostat is bound by confidentiality rules until April of the year following the reference year.

Evaluation: *Eurostat has created, with the help of Member States, strict rules for confidentiality but, partly, data providers themselves have overruled these rules by providing data publicly elsewhere.*

Recommendation: *Adapt current rules on data confidentiality to Member States' practices.*

6. Future steps

The current data collection covers only the 15 EU Member States. A possible geographical extension could be to include in this data collection all applicant countries, Iceland and Norway. In order to do so, EU Member States must agree to the dissemination of their data to these countries. Thus, the report would include all countries and all data providers would get a copy of it.

Some of the issues mentioned above necessitate a regular dialogue between Eurostat and the statistical experts/contacts from the Member States. It is not always possible to discuss technical issues related to data collection in the framework of a CIREA meeting since, in that body, Member States are frequently not represented by their statistical experts. In order to strengthen the common statistical network and to allow enough time for technical discussions, it is therefore proposed to hold once every year a special meeting where statistical experts from Eurostat and the Member States will be afforded the opportunity to discuss, in detail, all issues of concern.

Recommendations: *Get agreement from the CIREA Members to include in the data collection and dissemination, applicant countries, Norway and Iceland.
Organise once a year meetings with statistical experts.*

7. Overall assessment

As foreseen in phase 1 of the 1998 Action Plan, Eurostat has set up an elaborate system for the monthly collection and dissemination of asylum data from and to Member States. This system has a lot of potential but has not yet been fully used, mainly because of problems related to data availability. The crucial question is whether Member States would be prepared to respect, in future, the deadlines, transmission rules and formats in order to have the system better meet their needs if Eurostat would be prepared to work in a more efficient way. This problem needs to be resolved first before enlarging the system to cover more tables and countries. There is a clear need for a more regular and intensive dialogue between Member States and Eurostat on the various technical and practical aspects of the system.

