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from:	the General Secretariat of the Council
to:	Delegations
Subject:	Draft (ECOFIN) Council Conclusions concerning the Communication of the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on "Towards a European governance strategy for fiscal statistics"

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Delegations will find attached Draft (ECOFIN) Council Conclusions concerning the Communication of the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on "Towards a European governance strategy for fiscal statistics" .

The text has been agreed at the level of the Economic and Financial Committee.

**Draft Council Conclusions concerning the Commission Communication on “Towards a European Governance Strategy for Fiscal Statistics“**

The ECOFIN Council in its meeting of 17 February 2005 adopted the following conclusions:

On several occasions in the past months, Ecofin ministers have emphasised that reliable and timely statistics are the basis of economic policy-making and multilateral surveillance and a crucial precondition for effective Council decision-making. In line with its intentions expressed at earlier meetings, the Council therefore decided on 7 December 2004 to return to the issue of how to improve the governance of the European statistical system in early 2005.

The Council therefore welcomes the Commission Communication on “Towards a European Governance Strategy for Fiscal Statistics“, adopted on 22 December 2004, which proposes three lines of action: building up the legislative framework; improving the operational capacities of the relevant Commission services, i.e. Eurostat and the Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN); and establishing European standards on the independence of national statistical institutes. The Commission is planning to present proposals in the above areas.

The Ecofin Council emphasises that the following principles should guide future work on these issues:

- The core issue remains to ensure adequate practices, resources and capabilities to produce high quality statistics at the national level. It is the responsibility of Member States to ensure that their national statistical offices have sufficient resources to function effectively. Capacity can be further enhanced by an increased focus on sharing best practices through peer reviews. The Council welcomes the on-going work on a code of conduct for European standards for the statistical authorities. These standards should provide clear and practical guidance as regards the safeguarding of the independence, integrity and accountability of the National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat when it comes to producing and disseminating statistics.

- National statistical offices' capacity to meet high statistical standards depends crucially on the ability to prioritise the burden from EU statistical requirements on authorities. Priority setting in this respect would also need to be conducive to a reduced regulatory burden on respondents. Therefore, and in line with the Ecofin Council conclusions of 2 June 2004, ministers are looking forward to discussing in June 2005 proposals by the Economic and Financial Committee (EFC) on the rebalancing of statistical priorities.
- The Council recognises the need to enhance the capacity of the relevant Commission services to reinforce its role in multilateral fiscal surveillance. This is essentially a question of more efficient and effective allocation of resources in the Commission budget.
- While recognising that government finance data are in general of a high quality standard, the Council acknowledges that the Eurostat should be in a better position to analyse the quality of the reported public finance data. The surveillance should be able to benefit from the use of a complete set of government accounts as soon as they become available.
- Finally, the scope of the enhanced Eurostat powers, as well as the scope of the surveillance on statistical standards under the new code of conduct, should strike the right balance between the benefits in terms of improved statistical quality and the costs in terms of added administrative burden at the EU and national level.
- Independence of Eurostat should be enhanced and formally established to clarify the internal statistical governance of the relevant Commission services.
- It is vital that Eurostat/Commission services promptly inform the EFC and the Council should major statistical problems arise.

These improvements in statistics would be consistent with the on-going discussions on enhancing governance within the Stability and Growth Pact.