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The General Data Dissemination System (GDSS)

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I. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. The GDDS is a system conceived by the IMF (the Fund) to improve the quality of economic, financial, and socio-demographic data in member countries. It is one of the most important strategic projects of the fund in the area of statistics, where a longstanding objective has been the improvement of data and statistical practices among the membership.

2. In terms of defining moments, the history of the GDDS can be traced back to the 1994-95 international financial crises. The crisis underscored a number of important challenges faced by data producers, in particular, that economic globalization is impacting statistical systems, and that each country has an interest in the availability of others' data. The crisis also brought about a recognition among policy makers that ready availability of comprehensive and timely economic and financial data may facilitate formulation and implementation of sound macroeconomic policies, and reduce the frequency and severity of turbulence in financial markets.

3. Thus, in June 1995, the heads of state and government of the G-7 countries asked the Fund to establish standards to guide countries in the provision of economic and financial data to the public. Subsequent work in the fund, in collaboration with member countries and other international agencies, led to the approval by the Fund's Executive Board of two proposed statistical standards: the Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS), in March 1996, and the GDDS, in December 1997. The GDDS was conceived to apply to all Fund members, whereas the SDDS was designed for members having or seeking access to international capital markets. A basic assumption in making the distinction was that potential subscribers to the SDDS already had advanced statistical system in place, whereas the statistical systems of potential subscribers to the GDDS needed substantial strengthening across a broad front.

4. The reform of the international financial architecture set in motion by the Asian crisis, which started in 1997, assigns a sizable role to enhanced transparency, and, within this, closer adherence to international statistical standards as well as newly developed international codes of conduct in the fiscal and monetary areas. These moves are being taken with a view to inducing quicker and smoother adjustments of markets to changing conditions.

II. PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVES AND FEATURES OF THE GDDS

5. The GDDS' objectives are threefold, namely, (1) to encourage member countries to improve data quality; (2) to provide a framework for evaluating needs for data improvement and setting priorities in this respect; and (3) to guide member countries in the dissemination to the public of comprehensive, timely, accessible, and reliable economic, financial, and socio-demographic statistics. The framework takes into account, across the broad range of countries, the diversity of their economies and the developmental requirements of many of their statistical systems.

6. The framework is build around four dimensions – data (coverage, periodicity, and timeliness), quality, access, and integrity – and are intended to provide guidance for the overall development of economic, financial, and socio-demographic data. Within this context, the GDDS is oriented to benefit three groups. In particular, (1) participating countries are expected to benefit from the process of evaluating their statistical systems and of formulating plans for improvement; (2) multilateral and bilateral providers of technical assistance may benefit from having a framework for assessing the quality of data, for helping set priorities for improvements, and for organizing technical assistance activities; and

(3) the data user community stands to gain from detailed information about the statistical systems and practices of participating countries.

7. The four dimensions of the GDDS are fashioned so as to focus mainly on aspects of data quality. The quality dimension requires that users must be provided with information to assess quality and quality improvements. The data dimension of the GDDS addresses the development, production, and dissemination of two interrelated classes of data: (1) comprehensive frameworks for each of the four economic and financial sectors (real, fiscal, financial, and external); and (2) indicators for each of the four sectors, as well as a range of socio-demographic indicators. The focus for the access and integrity dimensions is on the development of policies and practices in line with the objectives of dissemination of readily accessible and reliable data.

III. OPERATIONAL ASPECTS

8. Participation in the GDDS by member countries is voluntary. Participation, however, involves a commitment to (1) use the GDDS as a framework for statistical development; (2) designate a country coordinator, who is to be the main interlocutor with the Fund on all issues relating to the GDDS; and (3) prepare metadata that consists of descriptions of (a) current statistical practices, and (b) plans for short- and long-term improvements in these practices.

9. The phased implementation of the GDDS has commenced in 1998. It focuses first on education and training, and subsequently on direct work with countries. During the training phase, nine regional seminars have been scheduled, four of which were already held in Asia, French-speaking Africa, English-speaking Western hemisphere (including the Caribbean), and the Middle East and North Africa. The remaining five seminars – for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Southern Europe, Latin America, and the Asian and Pacific Islands – are planned to be held before the end of 1999.

10. Fund staff have started pilot projects with a few countries on the development of metadata for the GDDS (Bangladesh, Barbados, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Fiji, Jordan, Kuwait, Saint Lucia, and Sri Lanka). Following the conclusion of the training phase, a period of intensive country work is expected to commence. The metadata of participants are then expected to be disseminated by the fund through the Dissemination Standard Bulletin Board (DSBB) on the Internet (<http://www.dsbb.imf.org>), which currently provides general information on the GDDS, as well as detailed country information on the SDDS.

IV. COLLABORATION WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

11. Fund staff is working with other international agencies on various aspects of the GDDS. Fund staff have collaborated closely with the World Bank, the UN, and others on the socio-demographic data categories. The Fund has used the fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which were conceived by the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) and adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 1994 as a point of reference in defining the elements of the GDDS and the SDDS. Fund staff continues working with UN bodies, including the UN Statistics Division, the CES, and other international agencies on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles in the context of the GDDS, and otherwise.

V. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GDDS AND THE SDDS

12. Whereas the SDDS and the GDDS have, as was mentioned above, features in common (e.g., their origins, voluntary nature, and dimensions), there are important differences worth noting. The SDDS specified points of time by which (voluntary) subscribers need to become in observance of the standard, but no future date is set by which improvement in statistical practices of potential GDDS subscribers must be completed. Whereas the SDDS is a precise standard, with specific requirements for coverage, frequency, and timeliness of data, the GDDS is less prescriptive, in recognition of the diversity of potential subscribers. The GDDS is broader in scope than the SDDS: in addition to the real, fiscal, financial and external sectors, (and population, as an addendum), the GDDS also covers socio-demographic data.