
2. Data Collection

2.1 Basic Data

Customs documents and the foreign exchange control record (exchange record) are the two principal sources of external trade statistics. Most countries use only customs documents, required from importers and exporters when clearing merchandise, as the principal source of external trade statistics. A country's customs administration, sometimes partly in collaboration with the central statistical office, compiles these data.

For some countries, the exchange record is another principal source of trade data. Exchange record statistics comprise all merchandise transactions relating to payments made through the banking system. This source depends for its coverage and accuracy on exchange controls that regulate the classification of transactions in foreign exchange by resident banks. Therefore, the exchange record differs in coverage and timing of recording from customs documents (trade returns), which are based on the physical movements of merchandise. Trade data derived from the exchange record are not as comprehensive, detailed, and conceptually comparable with partner countries as those from the trade returns; consequently, they are not used for the direction of trade statistics data base.

2.2 Procedures for Data Collection

According to the Fund's Articles of Agreement, member countries are required to provide the Fund with export and import data by country of destination and country of origin. To assist countries to comply with this requirement, the Fund provides technical assistance to national statistical authorities. The Fund also collaborates with other international institutions to assist countries to develop suitable reporting standards.

The reporting countries are, in principle, Fund members and territories associated with Fund members. However, in practice no reports have been received for the last ten years from Chad, Equatorial Guinea, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the People's Republic of Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, Uganda, and Viet Nam. No reports are received from Albania, Cuba, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Internationally comparable data on exports and imports by country are received on an ongoing basis by the Statistics Department from designated correspondents in each reporting country. The correspondent is usually an official in a reporting country's statistical office, customs office, or central bank, depending on the country's arrangements for the dissemination of external trade statistics. The data are normally sent by airmail but may be sent by facsimile to reduce mailing delays. Data transmittal reaches a peak during April each year—the cut-off date for the publication of the *DOTS Yearbook*.¹

2.3 Format of Reported Data

There is no standard report form for collection of direction of trade statistics, because current Fund data base procedures process practically all the varieties of formats submitted by the national compilers. This flexibility of format spares correspondents the effort of transcribing the data, enabling them instead to submit data as up-to-date as possible in the form most convenient to themselves, such as national bulletins, printed trade tables, computer printouts, magnetic tapes, and/or typed tables. Staff of the Fund's Statistics Department sometimes find it necessary to consolidate several sets of data to obtain the total trade data for a country.

With respect to format used, countries report data (1) in national currency or in U.S. dollars, (2) on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis, (3) cumulatively or noncumulatively,² (4) with exports on an f.o.b. or customs value basis, (5) with imports c.i.f. or f.o.b., and (6) with differing country codifications.

With respect to currentness and frequency of the data, approximately 40 countries (virtually all industrial countries and about 20 developing countries) report monthly data on a regular and current basis. A few countries report quarterly data on a regular basis. Other countries report data that are less current on a monthly, quarterly, or annual frequency.

¹For the preparation of the *DOTS Yearbook* at the beginning of each year, cables are sent to request up-to-date data from all reporting countries whose *DOTS* data are not current.

²Cumulative data represent the summation of data over time on a calendar year basis, while noncumulative data represent data for a single period of time (for example, a month).