

TASK FORCE ON ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

Minutes of the first meeting
(New York, 12 September 1994)

Item 1. Opening session

The Director of the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSTAT) welcomed the participants to the first meeting of the Task Force on Environment Statistics. He briefed the Task Force about the views of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination which had stressed the need to develop an integrated work programme. Such a programme should clearly specify objectives and outputs in order to achieve coordination and avoid duplication of effort.

The meeting had before it two documents, "Synopsis of Programmes and Activities in Environmental Statistics, Indicators and Accounting" presented under agenda item 3 and "Towards an action-oriented work programme in environment statistics" presented under agenda item 4. The agenda and list of participants are attached.

Item 2. Adoption of agenda

The Chairman of the meeting introduced the draft agenda which was adopted.

Item 3. Discussion of the survey of programmes and activities of members of the Task Force

The Task Force expressed its appreciation for the synopsis of programmes and activities in environmental statistics, indicators and accounting. It was pointed out that the survey covered only the activities of Task Force members and that there were other important actors in the field. It was decided, therefore, that the activities of selected non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in particular of the World Resources Institute and the World Wide Fund for Nature, should be included in the synopsis. In addition, the synopsis could also include government agencies (such as statistical agencies) and informal groupings of such agencies focused on the development of relevant statistics. The necessary information would be collected and forwarded by Task Force members on a regional basis (for instance, EUROSTAT has undertaken to collect and supply information on the London Group dealing with "national accounts and the environment").

It was also pointed out that the distinction between current activities and future plans needed to be more clearly specified and that actual dates should be indicated as far as possible. In the revision of the synopsis, members of the Task Force should be more specific about country coverage in their current and future activities. The Task Force felt that the synopsis should be made a working document and be continuously updated.

Item 4. Discussion of the draft action-oriented work programme

The Task Force felt that the work programme presented by the convener was a useful document but did not state choices, priorities or timing. It was recognized, however, that, given the different mandates established for international organizations by their governing bodies, the document should be more in the nature of an *integrated presentation* of programmes than a fully integrated work programme. The names of institutions should be included with respect to the various outputs outlined in the document without, however, identifying explicitly any "lead" agencies. It was agreed that UNSTAT, in consultation with the Task Force, would address overall coordination issues in the fields of environmental statistics, indicators and accounting. More specific comments made on the work programme should be included in the revision of the draft work programme. Those comments included, in particular, the following:

Environment statistics

There was general support for the planned Directory of Environment Statistics. The Task Force felt, however, that it was premature to consider the development of a data base and the preparation of a joint compendium of environment statistics at the global level. Such data collection could be developed at the regional level, possibly in connection with state of the environment reports prepared by the regional commissions.

Environmental indicators

Some members of the Task Force expressed concern about sending out new questionnaires for indicator compilation. The need to link up with existing indicator compilations, notably those of the OECD, and to use existing information as far as possible was stressed. It was noted that a draft list of indicators would be discussed by the planned meeting of the Inter-governmental Working Group on the Advancement of Environment Statistics. The list of indicators should be as far as possible a subset of a tool list of indicators for sustainable development being developed by DPCSD and UNSTAT (with involvement of organizations and governments). It is intended to present the list as part of a work programme to the third session of the Commission on Sustainable Development in April 1995.

Environmental accounting

Plans for revising the SEEA were considered to be premature. More practical field work would be necessary before refining concepts and methods. Comparative studies of country projects should be linked to the planned second special session of IARIW on environmental accounting. It was also pointed out that a clear distinction between physical and monetary approaches to environmental accounting should be made in the work programme. The need for research on the use of physical and monetary environmental accounts was stressed. Seminars, such as the one organized by the OECD on the subject, could play a useful role in promoting such research.

The World Bank representative expressed concern that a more user-driven framework is needed to shape an action-oriented work programme in environmental statistics. He noted the conclusions of the UNEP/UNSTAT Consultative Expert Group Meeting of December 1993 as the basis for the Bank's own action planning in the overlapping fields of data or statistics, indicators, or accounting. He also expressed uncertainty whether the outputs flagged by the Task Force meeting reflect the Bank's views about priorities for its own near-term efforts to improve monitoring and evaluation of environmental performance at the global, national, and local levels. As a priority, the Bank believes that more attention is required on minimizing the prospective increase in reporting burden on national and local compilers; and the limited attention given to the products (including indicators) assigned priority by the Task Force meeting.

The representative of UNSTAT reminded the Task Force members of the request of the Statistical Commission and the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination to present programmes, objectives and outputs in the well-established areas of environmental statistics, indicators and accounting. Those categories served well in the survey of programmes and activities and should therefore be maintained at least for the time being. He also referred to difficulties of obtaining consensus on user needs and international reporting requirements as a possible framework for programme presentation and development at the international level.

5. Other business

The representative of the World Bank proposed to develop an outline for electronic networking to facilitate communication between international organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations in the field of environmental data. He suggested that UNDP, DPCSD and UNSTAT consider hosting such a network and offered assistance in its establishment. The Task Force agreed that this idea should be further discussed.

It was decided that the World Resources Institute and the World Wide Fund for Nature would be invited to possible future meetings of the Task Force.

6. Conclusions and recommendations for future work

The Task Force decided that UNSTAT would circulate to all members the draft minutes as discussed by the meeting and the revised work programme, for comment. It was also decided to circulate the synopsis with a request to be more specific about country coverage and timing of activities and outputs (see item 3 above). The convener of the Task Force would incorporate any comments received and submit the report of the Task Force to the Statistical Commission. The report would consist of the work programme and the minutes of the meeting; the synopsis would be made available to the Commission as a background document.

7. Date and venue of the next meeting

The Task Force considered that its second meeting be held inbetween the meetings of the Statistical Commission and the Commission on Sustainable Development, pending the outcomes of the Statistical Commission.

Agenda

1. Opening session
2. Adoption of agenda
3. Discussion of results of the survey of programmes and activities of members of the Task Force
4. Discussion of draft action-oriented work programme
5. Other business
6. Conclusions and recommendations for future work
7. Date and venue of the next meeting
8. Closing of the meeting

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