

Coordination of Environment Statistics - Problems, Actions and Expected Results

Note by UNSD

PROBLEMS

1. In the area of *environmental statistics and indicators* various frameworks have emerged such as the Pressure-State-Response Framework for environmental indicators (OECD), Driving Force-State-Response Framework for indicators of sustainable development (DESA/DSD), Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics (UNSD). As a result, different lists of indicators have been advanced, reflecting differences in approaches and priorities of data users and producers.
2. Similar problems can be observed in the area of *integrated environmental and economic accounting* where different systems and methodologies have been advocated by different organizations and countries. They include, in particular, UN (SEEA), the Dutch NAMEA (promoted by EUROSTAT), Material Flows Accounts (World Resources Institute (WRI) and EUROSTAT) and a “neoclassical” approach to environmental accounting (Peskin). The consistency of these approaches with the 1993 SNA and its environmental satellite accounts varies widely.
3. The multitude of approaches is in response to users’ need for information for integrative policy making in the relatively new field of environment and development. There are now no internationally adopted recommendations on the concepts and methods of environment statistics, with most methodological reports being still more of an experimental and technical nature. Data users, to satisfy short-term data needs, develop their own frameworks and wish-lists of indicators that are seldom coordinated among themselves or with existing statistical systems.
4. *Compilations of environmental indicators* by international organizations (UNEP, OECD, DESA/DSD, EUROSTAT, World Bank, WRI, FAO) often yield uneven results in terms of quality and comparability, depending on the approaches, priorities and data sources. Moreover, *compound indices* have been compiled largely outside any established data system or framework with sometimes arbitrary and differing assumptions about scope, coverage and indicator weighting. Examples are the Genuine Progress Indicator (Cobb, Halstead), Natural Wealth and Genuine Savings (World Bank) and Total Material Requirement (WRI).
5. In the absence of agreed international methodologies, national and international organizations are thus actively promoting different approaches at national and international levels, sometimes in the same countries and regions. The consequences are often duplication of work and confusion about the pros and cons of the different indicators, indices and accounting systems proposed.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

6. Given the different mandates and priorities of international organizations and the still experimental nature of concepts and methods, it is unlikely that an agreement can be reached in the short term. The following suggested actions represent the initial views of UNSD on steps towards improved coordination, identification of commonalities and long term harmonization of methodologies and data compilation. They are to stimulate the discussion on the coordination problems mentioned above.

- Organize ad-hoc meeting of the Task Force (UNSD 1999) to:
 - discuss commonalities, differences and priorities of data producers in order to agree, as far as possible, on a common work programme and follow-up meetings
 - agree on data sharing, including the UNSD survey of environmental indicators
- Steps towards harmonization of different concepts and methods of environment statistics through:
 - the SEEA review/revision process (London Group, Nairobi Group, Task Force)
 - Inter-Governmental Working Group for the Advancement of the Environment Statistics (IGWG) meeting on the development and compilation of environmental indicators (host country, UNSD, year 2000)
 - joint work on selected environmental issues, e.g. operational manual (Nairobi Group), report on forestry accounting (FAO, UNSD, EUROSTAT, World Bank), guidelines on fishery accounting (FAO, UNSD, UNU), collaboration with OECD on UNSD survey on environmental indicators.
- Disseminate methodological developments/guidelines through the World Wide Web.
- Organize regional workshops on environmental statistics and accounting in cooperation with regional commissions and collaborate with international statistical training institutes in the development of courses in environment statistics.
- Create regional groups to share experiences on methodological and operational issues (regional commissions and countries, e.g. the planned Manila Group (1998)).

EXPECTED RESULTS

7. The following are UNSD views on expected results within 1 or 2 years, based on the suggested actions:

- OECD-UNSD joint survey of environmental indicators (1999).
- Agreement on data provision and exchange between agencies and organizations (Task Force 1999)

- Agreement on a common environmental accounting framework with different modules (London Group 1999)
- Agreement on the treatment of depletion in environmental accounting (London Group 1999).
- Evaluation and revision of the survey on environmental indicators (IGWG 2000).
- Implementation of international methodologies presented at regional workshops and training seminars (on-going).