

Opening Remarks
by
Dr. Shamshad Akhtar, Assistant Secretary General,
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
at the
Linking Ecosystems and Ecosystem Services to Economic
and Human Activity”
27 November 2012

Distinguished delegates,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the international seminar “Linking Ecosystems and Ecosystem Services to Economic and Human Activity.” I would like to acknowledge and thank our co-organizers of the meetings, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank and the European Environment Agency.

This international seminar is a unique occasion. It brings official statisticians and researchers together to develop a new conceptual framework for the measurement of ecosystems for official statistics. The System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) Experimental Ecosystem Accounting is a cross disciplinary effort between the statistics, science, policy and ecological-economics community in advancing the measurement framework to assess the condition of the ecosystems and its capacity to service economy and human beings. This international seminar will allow us to have multi-disciplinary dialogue on the scientific and statistical robustness of the proposed conceptual framework, its relevance and practical utility with stakeholders from the various communities.

The demand for integrated information on the environment to support policy, analysis and decision making is increasing. Rio+20 underscored the need to strike a balance across the three dimensions of inclusive economic development, inclusive social development and environmental sustainability. It called upon the UN Statistical Commission to develop a programme of work on broader measures of progress.

Post-2015 Development Agenda will build upon the MDGs framework and define indicators of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that capture environmental sustainability and integrate various thematic areas such as climate change, preservation of biodiversity, energy and water access and food security. The thematic policy framework adopted for the Post 2015 Development Agenda calls for integration of information and monitoring progress towards achieving targets. One specific target from the *Strategic Plan on Biodiversity* for the 2011-2020 period that has relevance to the biodiversity accounts of the proposed conceptual framework being discussed in the seminar, is the *Biodiversity Aichi Target 2 of the Convention of Biological Diversity*, which reads:

By 2020, at the latest, biodiversity values have been integrated into national and local development and poverty reduction strategies and planning processes and are being incorporated into national accounting, as appropriate, and reporting systems.

Regardless of the targets and indicators that will be selected, the statistical community is developing an integrated information system beyond the System of National Accounts. This will allow us to offer perspectives on questions related to the environment, its relationship with the economy and some of the social aspects. The statistical community's ongoing efforts to meet the demands of the policy frameworks by developing internationally agreed methodologies and launching a research programme on a new and promising conceptual framework are noteworthy. This will help derive coherent indicators for the Post-2015 Development Agenda that are concrete, scientifically-based and measurable.

The SEEA Central Framework, measures the individual components of the environment (e.g. water, energy and minerals, timber, fish, land) and their relationships with the economy. It was adopted in February this year by the UN Statistical Commission as an initial international statistical standard on par with the System of National Accounts. This was a major milestone as the measurement of the environment was elevated to the level of official statistics. The challenge now is implementing it in all countries. A strategy that takes into account countries' priorities, environmental concerns and data availability is developed and deliberation on it on the third day of this seminar for submission to the next session of the UN Statistical Commission in February 2013 will be useful.

To provide a holistic picture, we need to broaden the measure of the environment from the perspective of the ecosystem and take into account its condition and capacity to produce both material and non-material services. The SEEA Experimental Ecosystem aims to build on the scientific and economic theory and organizes it in a statistical framework by applying statistical definitions, concepts and classifications to better understand the functioning of ecosystems to better manage them, so that they can continue to provide services to human beings.

The present draft of the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounts is an attempt to experiment and test using a common conceptual approach and in time this would lead to an agreement on the scientifically based methodologies to measure ecosystems. It is a journey that should be undertaken in partnership. No single community can do it on its own.

The scientific community needs to offer the scientific underpinning of the physical measurement of the environment; and the ecological-economic community needs to offer the valuation methods, in particular, for the non-market services which are not transacted, but which are consistent with the market-based valuation principles. The policy community needs to better articulate the demands and priorities and understand the limitations of the information that can be provided. The statistical community needs to

offer the conceptual framework to organize data on ecosystems and link it to the other official statistics through a common set of concepts, definitions and classifications. Rigour of the statistical methods will help ensure quality of the underlying information.

This seminar will ensure that state-of-the-art thinking and practice is well reflected in the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and will help to cement the partnership among the different communities, which will be an important element in moving forward the research agenda.

We have a full agenda ahead of us.

The first day is dedicated to sharing different perspectives: the policy, scientific and statistical perspectives followed by the demand for ecosystem accounts from the international and national perspectives. The second day will discuss the type of information that can be derived from the physical and monetary ecosystem accounts and the challenges and feasibility in compiling the data.

The session on the role of official statistics in the implementation of the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounts will help share ongoing experiences on the statistical infrastructure and operations. The demand for quality and integrated data is such that the statistical offices need to reflect on the role they wish to play in the development of the research programme for the ecosystem accounts.

This discussion will provide important considerations on this topic at the next UN Statistical Commission in February 2013. I am confident that you will be able to agree on the way forward in advancing the research agenda and the experimentation of this exciting new area of statistics. I look forward to the outcome of your deliberations.

I thank you.