

Breaking News: The Revised SEEA on the Web

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GUEST EDITORIAL

by

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Outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and Implications for Statistics - A Perspective



The World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa from 26 August to 4 September 2002, was a conference about action and results. It was the culmination of a decade of discussions and decisions on various aspects of sustainable development arising from Agenda 21, Rio+5, and other relevant international conferences including most recently the Millennium Summit and the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development.

World leaders from governments, international organizations, the private sector, and major groups from civil society agreed, through the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation to take action - in some cases very specific action. The Plan set forth more than 30 goals, targets and objectives, as well as time-bound measures and actions for all stakeholders. While a number of these reaffirm the Millennium Development Goals, others represent new commitments with specific time frames for their achievement. The Summit directed the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), whose role it is to oversee the process, to focus on monitoring progress towards these commitments and seeking solutions to obstacles.

Clearly, with this emphasis on reaching specific targets in specific time frames and monitoring progress, there is a need for mechanisms and instruments that measure and track progress. Data, statistics, indicators and information systems will be required. Where will these come from and how will they be generated?

Certainly some exist. For the Millennium Development Goals, the UN Statistics Division (UNSD) has established a statistical database for the 48 social, economic and environmental indicators that were selected to help track progress towards these goals. The CSD work programme derived a core set of 57 indicators relevant for tracking progress at the national level on issues identified in Agenda 21 and Rio+5. And there are other international indicator programmes for specific issue areas. However, while it is one thing to identify the indicators, it is quite another to support them with the appropriate underlying data and statistics.

Data collection, analytical resources and information systems, particularly in developing countries as well as countries in transition, are insufficient to cope with the existing demands, never mind the new targets and commitments that now have to

be tracked. The need for new data and new indicators will add to the already strained capacity of these countries, and the call for CSD to make more effective use of national and regional reports will engender requests for more quantitative data in such reports, leading to additional pressures on existing national statistical offices.

With the many, sometimes overlapping international requests for information, there is a need for coherence among the programmes and harmonization among the reporting requirements to reduce the country burden and streamline the activity. But above all there is an urgent need for capacity building in data collection, statistical analysis and information management. This need did not go unnoticed at the World Summit.

The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation calls upon countries and the international community to:

- Strengthen national and regional information and statistical and analytical services relevant to sustainable development policies and programmes ... (WSSD: X,129);
- Encourage and promote further work on indicators for sustainable development by countries at the national level ... (WSSD: X,130,131);
- Develop information systems that make the sharing of valuable data possible ... (WSSD:X,132 (b));
- Support countries, particularly developing countries in their national efforts to collect data that are accurate, long-term, consistent and reliable (WSSD:X,133 (a)).

These sections of the Plan do not garner the same attention as the time-bound targets, but action on them is essential. UNSD, with UN Regional Commissions, has initiated a number of Development Account projects in the last couple of years to augment regional capacities for statistical development, and the UN Division for Sustainable Development has a modest Development Account project underway in Caribbean SIDS region on information management. Other activities include the promotion, by several countries and international agencies, of the development and use of global observation technologies to improve data collection. But, a much more systematic capacity-building effort can and must be undertaken. Countries can only really know if they are making progress towards the goals and targets of sustainable development if they have the capacity to measure them.



Breaking News: The Revised SEEA on the Web

by

Alessandra Alfieri, UNSD and
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The revision of the handbook *Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting*, commonly referred to as SEEA is now completed. The final draft has been posted on the UNSD website <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/environment>. The document will be distributed in a white cover format shortly and, at the same time, will be submitted to the formal UN publication process. A glossary and an index are being developed and will also be posted on the web at a later stage.

The SEEA revision process has been undertaken under the joint responsibility of the United Nations, Eurostat, IMF, OECD and the World Bank. Much of the work was done by the London Group on Environmental Accounting with Ms. Anne Harrison being the editing coordinator. The revision process started in 1998 at the 5th London Group meeting in Fontevraud, France, following the recommendation of the Statistical Commission in February 1997, which “welcomed the proposal of UNSD to collaborate with the London Group on the revision of the SEEA”.

The handbook was the result of several meetings of the London Group, its Coordinating Committee (composed of the publishing agencies, Statistics Canada as Secretariat of the Group and the countries which hosted the previous and future meeting) and a wide consultation process. The consultation process involved the posting of the document on the London Group web site for public comments, the solicitation of comments from experts and the presentation of the SEEA chapters in international meetings, such as the International Association for Research on Income and Wealth, and international workshops in different regions of the world.

In March 2001, the Statistical Commission at its twenty-second session established a “Friends of the Chair Group”, chaired by Mr. Svein Longva of Statistics Norway, to review the draft. The following year, upon recommendation of the Group, the Statistical Commission approved the document subject to the implementation of the changes indicated by the Group. The changes have been implemented with the assistance of Mr. Robert Smith of Statistics Canada and an editorial oversight board, formed by the publishing agencies, reviewed and approved the final draft.

The SEEA represents a major step towards standardizing and harmonizing concepts, definitions and methods in environmental-economic accounting. It is a handbook of best practices. However, since environmental accounting is a new and developing field of statistics, in few areas consensus on one single approach could not be reached. In those few cases, the handbook discusses advantages and disadvantages of the different methods.

The SEEA is a satellite system of the *System of National Accounts* (1993 SNA), which brings together economic and environmental information in a common framework to measure the contribution of the environment to the economy and the impact of the economy on the environment. It provides policy-makers with indicators and descriptive statistics to monitor these interactions as well as a database for strategic planning and

policy analysis to identify more sustainable paths of development. The SEEA thus enables governments to formulate and monitor economic policies more effectively, enact more effective environmental regulations and resource management strategies and use taxes and subsidies more efficiently. It also offers a way to improve policy dialogue among different stakeholders by providing a transparent system of information about the relationship between human activities and the environment.

The system comprises four categories of accounts:

- *Flow accounts for pollution, energy and materials.* These accounts provide information at the industry level about the use of energy and materials as inputs to production and the generation of pollutants and solid waste. They produce eco-efficiency and pollution and material intensity indicators that can be used to assess the pressure on the environment and to evaluate alternative options for reducing this pressure.
- *Environmental protection and resource management expenditure accounts.* These accounts identify expenditures incurred by industry, government and households to protect the environment or to manage natural resources. They take those elements of the existing SNA which are relevant to the good management of the environment and show how the environment-related transactions can be made more explicit. They can be used to assess the economic impact of environmental regulation and taxes and their effect in reducing pollution.
- *Natural resource asset accounts.* These accounts record stocks and changes in stocks of natural resources such as land, fish, forest, water and minerals, allowing more effective monitoring of a nation's wealth. They also allow the calculation of such indicators as the total value of natural capital and the economic costs of natural resource depletion.
- *Valuation of non-market flow and environmentally adjusted aggregates.* This component presents non-market valuation techniques and their applicability in answering specific policy questions. It discusses the calculation of several macroeconomic aggregates adjusted for depletion and degradation costs and their advantages and disadvantages. It also considers adjustments concerning the so-called defensive expenditures.

An increasing number of OECD and developing countries have introduced environmental accounts, compiling different components according to their environmental concerns and priorities. Resource-rich countries have usually developed asset accounts in order to design policies for better natural resource management. Countries in which pollution is a main concern have implemented physical flow accounts, often linked to environmental protection accounts so as to analyze the impact of consumption and production patterns on the environment and the impact of environmental expenditure in reducing emissions.

WHAT?



UNSD/CARICOM Project - UNSD has been assisting the CARICOM region since 2000 in the development of environment statistics through the Project “Strengthening Capacity in the

Compilation of Statistics and Indicators for Conference Follow-up in the CARICOM Region”. The Project, jointly carried out by UNSD and CARICOM, covers the areas of social/gender and environment statistics, with a supporting component of information technology. One of the main outputs of the environmental component of the Project is the publication “The CARICOM Environment in Figures”, which has been submitted for printing. It presents the major environmental issues in the region through textual summaries, tables, charts and graphs together with detailed comments on the data.

The Project has spurred a number of initiatives in environment statistics at the national level. Several Member States have organized workshops or seminars and have increased inter-agency collaboration. The Project has provided stimulus and support to the existing initiatives of Belize and Jamaica. Two environment statistics compendia have been published in Belize in 1999 and 2000, and one in Jamaica in 2002. Belize is expecting to publish its third compendium shortly. Grenada published its first environment statistics compendium in 2001 and Dominica, St. Lucia and Suriname published their first compendia in 2002. St. Kitts & Nevis and St. Vincent & the Grenadines have initiated work on draft compendia. These efforts have been achieved through a combination of Government commitment and the additional technical assistance provided by the Project.

Since the Project is now drawing to a close, the CARICOM Advisory Group, comprising directors of selected national statistical offices, and CARICOM and UNSD representatives, has been assuming more responsibility for the future work of social/gender and environment statistics in the region. Three meetings of the Group have been held to date (see *WHEN* and *WHERE* below), to agree on the terms of reference, procedures for its operation and to develop programmes in social/gender and environment statistics.

UNSD/ASEAN Project - UNSD jointly with the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) of the Republic of Indonesia organized a **Workshop on Environmental-Economic Accounting in Jakarta, Indonesia, 23-27 September 2003**. The Workshop was the second on environmental accounting held under the UN project “Strengthening Regional Capacities for Statistical Development in South-East Asia”. The Workshop provided hands-on training in the implementation of environmental and economic accounts with focus on selected resources such as water, fisheries and forest. It also provided a forum for the exchange of information among countries on their experience in the compilation of the accounts. As compared to the workshop organized in 2000 in Manila, a significant progress in the implementation of environmental accounting in countries in the region was noted.

Joint Statistical Meetings of the American Statistical Association (New York, 11-15 August 2002) - UNSD organized a session on “Some Issues in International Statistics” which covered missing data and imputation models, advantages and problems in the development of environmentally-adjusted macro-aggregates, and the development of statistical indices.

Staff members of the Environment Statistics Section gave two presentations: “Multiple Imputation Models in the 2002 Environmental Sustainability Index” and “A System Approach to Environmentally-adjusted Macro-aggregates”.

Seminar on Environmental Accounting - Anton Steurer (Eurostat) visited UNSD from 9 - 11 December 2002. During his visit, Mr. Steurer gave a seminar on the European experience and strategy in integrated environmental-economic accounting and held consultations with staff of the Environment Statistics Section on issues related to water accounting and the finalization of the SEEA.

Electronic Discussion Group on Terms and Definitions Related to Water Resource Accounting – The preparation of the section on Water Resources of the revised handbook of *Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting* has revealed a variety, and sometimes inconsistent use of terms and definitions used by hydrologists, economists, statisticians, and other producers and users of information on water resources. In response to this, UNSD in close cooperation with Division for Sustainable Development – Water, Natural Resources and Small Island Developing States Branch, has developed a web based discussion forum with the objective of harmonizing concepts and definitions used in water accounts. The results of the electronic discussion group will serve as an input in the handbook of Water Resource Accounting, which is being prepared by UNSD and Eurostat. A glossary of terms will also be developed and will be included in the handbook. The electronic discussion group will present the accounting framework and schemes of the hydrological and economic sub-systems at different levels of details. It will contain a suggested definition for each term together with a list of definitions currently in use and a series of points for discussion to which experts are invited to respond. It is based on an extensive research of the available literature (such as questionnaires, hydrological glossaries, etc.) and consultation with hydrologists, water experts and environmental accountants. The Electronic Discussion Group will be open to experts in this area who will be invited to participate.

WHO?



Staff news

Astra Bonini joined the Environment Statistics Section in November 2001 to assist in compiling a Compendium of Environment Statistics and Indicators. She was previously consulting with the UNDP Sustainable Energy Group and recently completed her Master of International Affairs at Columbia University concentrating in Environmental Policy Studies. Her undergraduate degree is in civil engineering.

The following **interns** assisted the Environment Statistics Section as part of the United Nations Internship Programme between June and November 2002. **Marta Vicarelli** (Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, France), **Yungmin Lee** (Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA), **Anvar Nasritdinov** (Iowa State University, USA) and **Adrian Ruiz Carvajal** (Freiburg University of Mining and Technology, Germany).

WHEN AND WHERE?



Third Session of the UNECE Ad-hoc Working Group on Environmental Monitoring (WGEM) (Geneva, 29-30 August 2002) - Under the mandate of the Working Group falls the coordination and facilitation of the assessment on the state of

the pan-European environment for the ministerial conference to be held in Kiev, Ukraine, in May 2003. At the 3rd session, the participating countries and observing entities (UNEP, UNFCCC, CITES, WTO, UNSD, Eco-forum) discussed the data collected for the Kiev report, early draft chapters, and measures to be taken to improve and streamline national environmental monitoring activities. The Russian Federation and the Newly Independent States presented papers on their state of environment reporting, followed by a presentation on a new TACIS project for 2002-3 aimed at strengthening national monitoring capacities. The session furthermore conferred upon options to improve country coverage in international environmental databases and the benefits that derive from the application of remote sensing technologies.

Joint Meeting of the Working Group "Environment and Sustainable Development" and the Working Party "Economic Accounts for the Environment" (Luxembourg, 1-3 October 2002) - The Meeting reviewed issues of data reporting, discussed work related to Sustainable Development Indicators and indicators for the integration of environmental concerns into other policies, and considered ways to better satisfy data requirements. An overview of developments in the area of environmental accounting was given, and priorities for future work were set. Eurostat's 2003 work programme in the area of environment and sustainable development was discussed in light of priorities expressed by the Environment Directorate General of the European Commission. UNSD informed the Meeting about its ongoing and planned activities in environment statistics, indicators and accounting, including those carried out jointly or in collaboration with Eurostat and/or OECD.

Workshop on Environment Statistics (Suriname, 5-6 November, 2002) - The General Bureau of Statistics of Suriname, in collaboration with Conservation International, Suriname, organized a national workshop on environment statistics to present Suriname's first national environment statistics publication. UNSD made a presentation on international and regional programmes of environment statistics to the workshop and participated in the working group sessions that reviewed the draft chapters of the publication.

Third Meeting of the Advisory Group on Social/Gender and Environment Statistics (Grenada, 7-9 November 2002) - To ensure sustainability of the work initiated by the UNSD/CARICOM Project, the Meeting further discussed, *inter alia*, the framework to institutionalise the compilation and dissemination of social/gender and environment statistics. The development of environment statistics at national level, sources of funding and technical assistance, as well as training opportunities, were also discussed. The programme for the compilation of statistics and indicators in the field of social/

gender statistics was further elaborated upon, and concrete activities and outputs were formulated. A parallel programme will be formulated for environment statistics in 2003. UNSD will continue to support CARICOM and its Member States in further strengthening regional and national statistical systems in the compilation and dissemination of environment statistics, as well as assist in the development of a draft framework/schedule for environment statistics and list of indicators to be presented at the next meeting of the Advisory Group.

Special Session of the UNECE Ad-hoc Working Group on Environmental Monitoring (WGEM) (Geneva, 28-29 November 2002) - The members of the WGEM discussed drafts of the executive summary and chapters of the Kiev report as prepared by the European Environment Agency (EEA). EEA introduced a paper on the lessons learned in the data collection and derived recommendations for future improvements. Eco-forum presented the draft guidelines for strengthening national environmental monitoring systems. The Working Group also began deliberations on strategies for post-Kiev reporting on the state of the environment at the Pan-European level. The final Kiev report will be distributed to the members of the WGEM in English accompanied by the Executive Summary in all EEA languages and Russian at the end of April 2003. A special meeting of the WGEM and senior country officials took place 18-21 February 2003 and the 4th Session of the WGEM is scheduled for 3-5 September 2003.

Statistical Office of the European Communities (EUROSTAT) (Luxembourg, 2-3 December 2002) - UNSD met with the Head and members of Unit F3, Environment and Sustainable Development, to get to know the structure and functions of the Envstats and NewCronos databases maintained by Eurostat and to discuss means of strengthening environmental data sharing, collaboration in methodological developments and technical cooperation.

Final Conference of the MEDSTAT Environment Project (Istanbul, 18-20 February 2003) - The conference was organized by Eurostat and Plan Bleu that are responsible for the MEDSTAT-Environment project. The objective of the project, part of the Euro-Mediterranean statistical co-operation programme MEDSTAT, has been to strengthen the capacity of the national statistical services of 12 Mediterranean countries in producing and publishing comprehensive, reliable, timely, relevant environmental statistics following international standards. The main results of the project in the international framework of environmental information were presented and the links of the latter with transport, tourism, agriculture and economic issues were emphasized. UNSD participated in the conference and took part in a discussion group on the "needs for environmental information; coordination and visibility required by international and national data users".

Forthcoming meetings:

Thirty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission (New York, 4 - 7 March 2003).

Meeting of the London Group on Environmental and Natural Resource Accounting (to be announced).

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