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FOURTEENTH MEETING OF THE UN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON ENVIRONMENTAL-ECONOMIC ACCOUNTING

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Opening Remarks

Stefan Schweinfest

Director

United Nations Statistics Division
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Dear colleagues, members of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting

Welcome to the Fourteenth Meeting of the Committee. I would have liked to be here in person with you. Unfortunately, for the second year in a row your meeting coincides with my obligation to represent the United Nations Statistics Division's global programme at the Conference of European Statisticians. Nonetheless, it is important to me to address you at the outset of your meeting to express, my and my office's full support for the important work of your Committee and to share with you a couple of initial thoughts.

As we all know, the first SEEA was issued in 1993. I fondly remember those days, as even I, as a young professional, had the privilege and pleasure to work in this interesting and exciting new area. Almost 20 years later, in 2012, we witnessed the SEEA Central Framework become an international statistical standard. And today, I see that the work you all are doing is quickly picking up considerable momentum. The uptake over the past few years has been very impressive, and methodologies have advanced quickly thanks to the engagement and expertise of various communities. We, as a statistical community, have been able to leverage this engagement and expertise. For instance, with the ongoing revision process, there has been substantial progress made on the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting.

Many in this room have contributed significant time, effort, and funds to this process. I sincerely thank those who have contributed. However, I also want to acknowledge those who are not in the room. There has been strong collaboration between statistical, scientific, geospatial and academic communities throughout this process, which I thoroughly commend. The broad involvement of so many communities and experts has allowed us to reach a point in time where we

can, and should, elevate the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting to the level of a standard, in support of sustainable development for all. I look forward to the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2021, as this will be the opportune moment for doing just that.

In terms of the SEEA Central Framework, I am aware that the Committee is assessing the need for a possible revision, also taking into consideration alignment with the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and the System of National Accounts. A single SEEA could provide a harmonized standard for national statistical offices to account for the environment and its relation to the economy. This would be very timely given the revision process of the Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and future revision of the System of National Accounts. It will also give an opportunity to do minor tweaks to the Experimental Ecosystem Accounting if the need arises after 2021.

I would also like to address the work of the Committee on coordination and mainstreaming of the SEEA. At the last United Nations Statistical Commission, the Commission voiced strong support for the use of the SEEA for the SDGs, climate change and post-2020 biodiversity agenda. There is currently a significant window of opportunity to mainstream the SEEA, particularly in terms of the SDGs and the post-2020 biodiversity agenda. I strongly encourage the Committee to continue its work in coordination and mainstreaming the SEEA, to collaborate with the Interlinkages Group of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDGs and to increase implementation and the use of the SEEA for policy.

Closely related to coordination and mainstreaming of the SEEA, is the communication of the accounts. More and more, we, as the statistical community, understand that it is not enough to just provide numbers. If we do not think about how we communicate the numbers and the importance of official statistics, we risk irrelevance. Thus, I applaud the focus of the Committee on communications. I would also like to mention that a number of chief statisticians, myself and others in the room, met with the Chief Economist of the United Nations during the last Commission. Moving beyond GDP and promoting integrated systems such as the SEEA is a focus for DESA and the wider UN system. During this meeting, our Chief Economist pinpointed case studies as a critical vehicle for communicating the policy applications of the accounts. I understand that the Committee is now collecting case studies for this purpose, and I look forward to seeing how they help promote the use of the accounts.

While the use of the accounts for policy should be prioritized, so too should greater country implementation of the accounts. There has been good progress towards the 2020 implementation targets. At the moment, over 85 countries have compiled accounts. However, more must be done to reach the implementation targets. I urge the Committee to look at what more can be done in terms of capacity building, technical assistance and cooperation between countries and international organizations.

Greater country implementation can also be encouraged through the development of global databases. Global SEEA databases will allow potential users and compilers to understand, first hand, the power of the accounts. Moreover, global databases can help close a large gap when it comes to the use of the SEEA for monitoring the SDGs. Following the advice and the encouragement of this Committee, my office, the United Nations Statistics Division, has initiated

work on the dissemination of global databases, beginning with the compilation and dissemination of existing datasets through the SEEA website.

Lastly, as part of the European Union-funded Natural Capital Accounting and Valuation of Ecosystem Services project, the Division is exploring how to align corporate sustainability accounting and reporting with the SEEA. While business statistics have already been aligned with the SNA in many respects, this has not yet happened for the SEEA. Achieving better alignment with private sector accounting and reporting can create a mutually beneficial relationship and result in better quality accounts.

In closing, I would like to remark that the SEEA is now about a quarter of a century old. This seems like a lot, but it is really not, in terms of statistical standards. Despite the SEEA's relatively young age, it is exemplary in the way it has been set up. It exemplifies the new paradigm in which national statistical offices operate. National statistical offices are now the data stewards to the world, organizing existing data using data quality standards. They no longer work in isolated silos, but in partnerships. The Experimental Ecosystem Accounting revision process and the wider implementation of the SEEA truly demonstrate the way of the future for national statistical offices.

Dear Colleagues,

All the intelligent things that I have said so far have of course been written up by my phenomenal Environmental Economic Accounts Team, but they should know me better. I cannot be trusted to just read a script, so allow me to deviate for a few moments to thank my own team under the leadership of Alessandra Alfieri for the phenomenal work they have done to prepare for this meeting and all the other meetings this week. I know how much work is involved, so thank you Alessandra, Bram, Julian, Marko, Jessica and Elsa.

[Back to the teleprompter.]

May I wish you a fruitful – and also enjoyable two days – with your professional global expert community. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to hearing about the outcomes of the meeting.