

Opening Address
of
Dr. Shamshad Akthar, Senior Advisor to the Secretary General and
Assistant Secretary General Department of Economic and Social Affairs
at the
International Conference
Global Implementation of the System of Economic-Environmental Accounting
14 June 2013

Experience with the MDGs reinforces the importance of setting goals with measurable targets and indicators. The MDG indicators used for measuring progress were in most cases not closely linked to national accounts, nor interlinked with environmental dimensions. There may be some merit in having few stand alone indicators, such as child or maternal mortality. However there is a need to break partial and silo approaches in structuring goals. MDG7 further illustrated the problem of having targets and indicators that are not integrally linked to social and economic outcomes.

In depth reflection on how environmental dimensions and resource accounting innovations are captured and how all this shapes and reinforces the economic and social development agenda is warranted. We know that natural resource management, biodiversity conservation and protection of forests have significant social and economic benefits. There is clear inherent value in protecting them, but it is their instrumental value -- their utility -- to human beings (whether direct or indirect -- e.g., by ensuring low cost provision of goods and services like clean drinking water or carbon storage) that provides the more compelling case for policy makers. Thus, a target and associated indicator (s) should aim for establishing environment links explicitly to the level of social and economic benefits.

The System of Economic-Environmental Accounting (SEEA) Central Framework and the evolving Experimental Ecosystem Accounting framework can do so effectively through rigorous statistical advancement, theory and consistent methods. Swift action with accounting frameworks and measurement tools to capture adequately the integration among economic, social, and environmental goals and related targets is critical. Accelerated work in this area will advance support and facilitate anchoring sustainable development as a core element for the post-2015 development agenda.

The strength of the SEEA framework, now elevated to the level of a statistical standard for environmental information on par with national accounts, is precisely that it allows for organizing integrated information on the environment in relation to the economy and other human activities. Integrating and organizing statistics are the keywords of the SEEA. It allows for monitoring integrated policies and measuring nexuses, such as the one on water, energy and food security.

The Follow up to the Rio +20 agenda calls for a transformational change in the way sustainable development is mainstreamed in statistical fields and operations – referred to as the

data revolution needed for today's world. The role of national statistical systems is setting the vision for:

- measuring and monitoring the post 2015 agenda,
- progressing in the global implementation of the SEEA and its contribution to the goals-targets-indicators setting and
- developing new, while strengthening existing, partnerships in statistics, learning from past experiences

Vision

The UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics envisage open access to impartial data that is relevant for national, regional and global policy and national providers should endeavor to develop modern national statistical systems. The post 2015 development agenda emerging vision is to eradicate poverty, but this time around within the context of sustainable development, within a framework anchored on the acknowledgement inter-linkages among economic, social, cultural, ecological, political and legal factors. The statistical community has now to consider:

- how to set the statistical agenda so that it meets the statistical demands for the post-2015 agenda
- how to keep the agenda under review so that it remains relevant
- how to promote the statistical agenda and
- how to ensure that the official statistical agencies are able to deliver impartial, relevant and accurate information in a timely manner

In tandem, we need to explore new approaches to address challenges, in particular regarding:

- ways to mobilize stakeholders using a bottom up approach, starting with national priorities to define the regional and global priorities, making use of the on-going processes on the formulation of the SDGs for the post 2015 development agenda
- ways to integrate policy and statistics in operations
- ways to integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions making use of existing normative standards
- ways to mobilize official statistical community to inform the political process that is tasked with defining development goals, targets and indicators

Strengthening and equipping national statistical agencies with newer concepts and tools has to be a first order of priority. Counting with the presence of representatives from ministries of planning, environment, private sector and academia in one room, we should seize the opportunity to forge partnerships between the statistical community and the policy and scientific community. The SEEA implementation can only be successful and sustainable if supply and demand of information are brought together and agreement among the stakeholders is reached on the right measurement of indicators for common goals and targets.

Role in goals-targets-indicators setting

Let me now turn to the role of the statistical community in determining goals, targets and indicators. MDGs formulation and implementation of concrete and time bound goals and targets, monitored by robust statistical indicators, have provided many lessons. While over time data coverage and availability have progressed, critical data gaps at country level persist.

In this regard, consideration is to be given to:

- involve statisticians at an early stage
- redress perceived top down approach
- prevent inconsistencies between goals, targets and indicators
- redress poor specification of targets and indicators
- ensure link between economic, environmental and social dimensions and promote a balance of monitoring of the three dimensions
- advance the highest level of political motivation and outreach for impartial and open access to official statistics, fostering independent national statistical offices and strengthening of national statistical system
- ensure that indicators are policy relevant and theoretically/scientifically sound and adhere to international standards
- establish a programme of work for determining the baselines, meta data and narrative and communication strategies

Partnerships

The SEEA has already been identified as a framework to advance the monitoring of goals and targets and its application and dissemination will be instrumental for the post 2015 agenda. Establishing a renewed global statistical partnership for this transformative, people centered and planet sensitive framework would facilitate implementation. The partnership could consider developing a global strategy to fill critical data gaps, expand data accessibility, and galvanize international efforts to ensure early statistical strategic assessments and baselines for the post-2015 targets are in place by January 2016.

In the context of the SEEA implementation, the partnership should include liaising with different policy communities including those focused on the environment, science (biodiversity, ecosystem conditions, functions and services), the economy, the geospatial and remote sensing one, and business. Mobilizing existing partnerships, expert groups and collaborative arrangements such as WAVES, the Poverty and Environment Initiative, TEEB, UN GGIM, as well as drawing on UN regional commissions and MDBs would be useful. Close coordination could also be established with the global implementation programme of the 2008 SNA and the global strategy to improve agriculture and rural statistics.

To take these ideas further an overall governance structure for the partnership on the SEEA implementation should be established to ensure appropriate coordination and monitoring

mechanisms between the global, regional and national levels based on complementary responsibilities.

Monitoring and accountability

Going forward, for a robust monitoring and accountability mechanism it would be good to build on best practices in statistical capacity building, adopting a strategic planning approach for the implementation of the SEEA with system wide partnerships and linked to (sub-) regional South-South integration processes.

There is however a need to accelerate and scale up national statistical capacities by addressing a range of issues such as adequate institutional arrangements, proper statistical infrastructure and rationalization of operations on a priority basis. Regarding monitoring, priority should be given to developing:

- a) *the strategic planning frameworks* such as the national strategy for the development of statistics (NSDS) and their linkages to national development strategies and national biodiversity strategies and action plans
- b) *the information structure for coordination, monitoring and reporting* based on the integrated economic statistics approach¹, the internationally agreed scope of the SEEA core tables for the main themes, appropriate project management structure and stakeholders communication
- c) *the modalities of implementation* such as training and technical cooperation, the publication of manuals and handbooks, research and advocacy and
- d) *the stages of implementation* for the SEEA by 2020

In closing, this Conference is a unique opportunity to discuss the way forward to scale up a statistical agenda and face the increasing policy demands for integrated statistical data in the context of the deliberation on the SDGs and the Post 2015 development agenda.

¹

Covering standards, statistical production process, institutional arrangements.