

Welcome Address
Workshop on Environment Statistics
Yaoundé, 5-9 December 2011

Reena Shah
United Nations Statistics Division

Dear Colleagues,

On behalf of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) I would like to welcome you to this Workshop on Environment Statistics for the Central African region. I would like to thank the Economic Commission for Africa, both the offices in Addis Ababa as well as in Yaoundé, for their overall support and cooperation in assisting UNSD with the organization of this Workshop. In addition, I would like to express our appreciation to ISSEA for hosting this Workshop and to the National Statistical Institute of Cameroon for their underlying support in the process. Finally, I would like to thank the resource persons from various institutions for taking the time to be with us and for sharing their knowledge.

It has been almost twenty years ago when the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 declared that the long-term sustainability of economic performance is impaired and future economic and social development is impossible without environmental sustainability. The Rio Summit also declared in its Agenda 21 that adequate information on the environment for decision making is an indispensable tool in achieving sustainable development. In 2000, environmental sustainability was declared as an integral part of the Millennium Development Goals, more specifically, Goal 7 focuses on “Ensuring Environmental Sustainability”. Recent assessments of climate change and its possible impacts play a significant role in the understanding that environment and development are intimately linked together.

Sound policy and decision making as well as the monitoring of progress are impossible without accessible, timely and reliable information on the environment. Environment statistics is still considered to be a relatively new field of statistics compared to national accounts, trade statistics, etc., and is extremely challenging and evolving. That having been said, we must still try to collect data on the environment even though the concepts, methods and classifications are not fully established.

Strengthening national statistical systems is a crucial component of environment statistics. Ad hoc data collections without the countries' involvement will not provide sustainable statistical programmes. To improve monitoring, it is imperative to bring together the various sectors in a unified and coordinated statistical system. This is particularly relevant in environment statistics, where the data come from a variety of different sources. Setting up such systems takes time and investment, but the payoff is great, especially if these systems have a common framework with other official statistics, so that meaningful inter-linkages can be drawn between the society, the economy and the environment.

Countries should be encouraged to establish robust and coherent national strategies for their data needs on environment statistics. These strategies should be based on the countries' environmental concerns and the requirements of international and regional commitments. In addition to national strategies, the development of regional strategies should also be encouraged.

For example, there has been a significant amount of work in environment statistics that has taken place in the ECOWAS region. UNSD collaborated with the ECOWAS Commission, initiated by a capacity building project, and which continued with further assistance to develop a *Framework for Strengthening Capacity in the Development and Institutionalization of Environment Statistics in the ECOWAS Region*, as well as an agreed set of environmental

indicators and accompanying methodology sheets for the ECOWAS region. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has also contributed to these efforts. We will use these materials to guide our discussions in the working group sessions of this Workshop. Originally, the idea from a UNSD/ECA/UNEP Workshop in Addis Ababa in 2007 was to develop an African set of environmental indicators, but since Africa has so many Member States it was impossible to organize such an activity on a large scale, so as a practical matter, we have worked mostly in the ECOWAS region to advance their regional programme. This current Workshop in Yaoundé will give us the opportunity to assess whether the ECOWAS set of environmental indicators and methodology sheets are applicable to this group of Central African countries. We are very pleased to have a representative of the ECOWAS Commission with us who will elaborate more on these activities later this week. We also invited CEMAC and CEEAC, which are the two regional organizations covering these countries in Central Africa, but unfortunately, they could not participate.

The expected outputs of this Workshop are the: adoption of a set of environmental indicators for the Central African region; review of methodologies for the ECOWAS regional core set of environmental indicators for use in this region; and development of a plan for a regional programme and compendium on environment statistics; and that participants are trained in best practices in the development and compilation of environment statistics.

I hope that the discussions we will have during the next five days will be successful and an important step forward in firmly anchoring environment statistics as part of the countries' official statistical systems. I believe that the strengthening of environment statistics will make a significant impact in preparation for the Rio+20 Conference that will take place in Brazil in June 2012, as well as for regional and national policy planning and decision making in the environmental and sustainable development fields.