

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

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Sustainable Development Indicators: OECD plans

Note prepared by the OECD

1. Sustainable development is one of the five priority areas for the future work of the OECD identified in 1997 by the Secretary-General, Donald J. Johnston. This follows the recommendations of the Report of the High-Level Advisory Group on the Environment (HLAGE), in November 1997. In response to this challenge, the OECD has developed a strategy for work to be undertaken over the period 1998-2001, involving many parts of the Organisation and its affiliates. This strategy, endorsed by the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting, in April 1998, is summarised in a recent Policy Brief on Sustainable Development.

2. The OECD horizontal work on sustainable development is currently focusing on five projects: (i) climate change, (ii) the impact of support measures, taxes and resource pricing, (iii) technology and sustainable development, (iv) indicators of sustainable development and (v) natural resources. This horizontal work is co-ordinated, at the Director-level, by a "Sustainable Development Steering Group" chaired by the Secretary-General. The culmination of the work is a report to be published in 2001 which will cover the five themes above and will present an integrated approach to sustainable development policy and analysis.

3. As part of the overall sustainable development programme the OECD conducted a workshop on Sustainable Development Indicators in October 1998 in which various OECD directorates presented their work on such indicators and discussed with a number of outside experts the possible direction of future work for the OECD in this area. The proceedings of the workshop (including papers presented) have been prepared and are available on the Internet or as a printed document*. The direction the OECD sees itself taking up to 2001 with respect to indicators: "... is to identify - and measure - a 'limited and manageable set of indicators,' highlighting countries progress towards sustainable development. ... the challenge ... is also that of suggesting an intellectual framework which would allow to decompose a multi-dimensional and qualitative concept such as "sustainable development" into a set of analytically tractable components." (Proceedings of OECD workshop on sustainable development indicators, p 11.)

4. While the workshop itself did not come to firm answers to these goals it was clear that in order to develop solutions it was necessary for the OECD to keep in close contact with other international organisations, national bodies and research institutes. To this end discussions have commenced toward holding other workshops on sustainable development indicators in the second half of this year, specifically one in Paris in September 1999 and one in Rome in December 1999. Particular targets of these workshops will be the further understanding and construction of

* Internet address: <http://www.oecd.org/subject/sustdev>.

frameworks for interpreting the range of indicators available and the development of the social dimension in the context of sustainable development, particularly at a sectoral or industry level.

5. As a step towards the 2001 report, the OECD is in the process of co-ordinating an Interim Report which is aimed at explaining the current state of knowledge, the gaps that need to be filled and the OECD work programme over the next two years. The interim report is planned for release in May 1999. It is composed of a number of chapters covering overall frameworks for assessing sustainable development, policies for addressing climate change, issues concerning pricing and taxation policies, the role of technology, natural resources and indicators of sustainable development. The separate chapter on indicators of sustainable development is being co-ordinated by the OECD Statistics Directorate but will receive input from many other directorates.

6. Particular areas which will be covered in the interim report and which the OECD see as its focus topics over the next two years are:

- frameworks for the analysis of sustainable development;
- the extension of national accounting to natural resources and the environment;
- consideration of valuation and aggregation issues;
- sectoral frameworks and indicators of sustainable development (e.g. agriculture, transport energy)
- increased consideration of the social dimension in sustainable development analysis; and
- generating indicators at different spatial levels (e.g. global indicators, developing countries, sub-national regions).

7. While much work has been done both inside and outside the OECD there remain some very difficult measurement issues. The OECD sees sustainable development and the development of appropriate indicators as an area in which it can use its considerable network of researchers and its international standing positively. Significantly, this work cuts across the work of several directorates; statistics, environment, labour and social affairs, agriculture, economics as well as the energy agencies. Consistent with this, staff are keeping in touch with and drawing on work by colleagues from statistical agencies concerned with national accounts, social accounts and the environment as well as those with more specialised sectoral responsibilities via regular committee and ad-hoc meetings as well as by personal contact.

The Bureau is invited to comment on the work envisioned and these means of interaction with official statisticians. Specifically,

- How can NSOs support this work and help to be useful?
- Can some experts from NSOs be suggested to participate in the September workshop?
- In what ways can the CES influence this undertaking?
