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**Recent developments
on SDIs at the European Union level**

First meeting of the
Working Group on Sustainable Development Indicators
Meeting of 5-6 April 2006
Luxembourg, BECH Building Quetelet Room

The aim of this document is to inform participants of the recent developments in Eurostat's work on sustainable development indicators.

1. BACKGROUND

Chapter 40 of Agenda 21 called on countries and the international community to develop indicators of sustainable development. According to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, "such indicators are needed to increase focus on sustainable development and to assist decision-makers at all levels to adopt sound national sustainable development policies".

Eurostat's early work on SDI involved following and supporting the work of the UNCSDD in developing a global set of indicators. However, the direction and approach of Eurostat was to be heavily influenced by two events which taken together implied that a set of indicators specifically tailored for the EU would need to be developed.

The first of these was the International Workshop on CSD Indicators of Sustainable Development held in Barbados in December 1999. One of the principle aims of this workshop was "to assess the national testing of CSD indicators of sustainable development, their applicability and usefulness in supporting national decision-making". And an important conclusion was that "Indicators have to be adapted to country specific conditions and requirements due to different priorities and circumstances in each country. A process of experimentation and iteration is often necessary to arrive at the most suitable list of indicators for a specific country".

The second was the adoption of an EU sustainable development strategy at Gothenburg in June 2001.

2. THE SDI TASK FORCE

In September 2001, the SPC established a Task Force to develop a common response from the European Statistical System to the need for a set of EU indicators on Sustainable Development. The Task Force met nine times between April 2002 and April 2005. Because of the wide-spread interest in this work, the initial volunteer group of Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Norway and the Czech Republic, quickly expanded to include Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Spain and Switzerland.

Only a brief summary of some aspects of the Task Force's work will be given here. The final report of the Task Force (see document SDI/WG/6 (2006)) was submitted to the November 2005 meeting of the SPC, and provides a detailed summary of the activities and achievements of the Task Force. Further documents and information can be found on the Circa interest group on Sustainable Development Indicators (<http://forum.europa.eu.int/Members/irc/dsis/susdevind/home>).

The Task Force had to take a number of difficult decisions. One of the initial issues confronted was how to define the scope and purpose of the indicators. What should be measured? Should it be sustainable development per se? Or sustainable development strategies? In line with the thinking of the UN, it was decided that the principal purpose of the indicators was to assist policy makers and therefore work should concentrate on SD strategies. The next question was whether to limit the work to the EU strategy or whether to also consider national and regional strategies. It was decided that at this stage the priority was to focus resources on developing a system for monitoring the implementation of the EU strategy. These decisions considerably simplified the work.

Instead of discussing definitions of sustainable development and instead of comparing national and regional strategies, the Task Force could concentrate its efforts on how to monitor implementation of a single strategy.

The next step was to develop a clear understanding of the EU strategy itself. This proved more difficult than expected. The Commission had presented a proposal¹ for a strategy to the Gothenburg European Council. This proposal did not provide a complete vision of sustainable development but focused "on a small number of problems which pose severe or irreversible threats to the future well-being of European society". The proposal also left unclear the distinction between the Lisbon and sustainable development strategies. This lack of a clear distinction between the two strategies was maintained in the conclusions of the Gothenburg European Council, and has remained ever since.

The Commission followed its initial proposal with supplementary White Papers on governance² and the global dimension of sustainable development³. The priority areas of the initial proposal as well as the additional headings of governance and global partnership were then adopted by the Task Force as the main headings forming the backbone of an indicator system. In the course of discussions two further issues, (production and consumption patterns, and economic development) which are generally considered to cut across the eight other headings, were added instead as separate headings.

Within each of these 10 headings (or themes), indicators were chosen according to the major policy commitments and objectives of the strategy and related EU strategies. These indicators were grouped into sub-themes and were allocated into three levels of importance. As mentioned previously, more detailed information can be found in document SDI/WG/6 (2006) which presents the framework and set of indicators developed by the Task Force.

3. A CRITICAL PROJECT

In 2004, in view of the increasing political interest, the SDI project was designated "critical" by Eurostat's management board. This designation is applied by Eurostat to projects which are considered to be of particular importance to the organisation, and demands rigorous project management and reporting. Any change of circumstances presenting risks or threats to a critical project must be reported to Eurostat's management who are obliged to find solutions. Although requiring a moderately heavier workload, the critical designation of the SDI project has ensured the support of Eurostat's management so that any problems facing the project have been quickly resolved.

4. THE SDI COMMUNICATION

In February 2005 the Commissioner responsible for Eurostat, Joaquín Almunia, presented the framework and indicator set to his fellow Commissioners in the form of an internal communication (document SDI/WG/7 (2006)). This was an important step through which the Commission formally endorsed the work initiated by the Task Force.

¹ A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development, COM(2001)264.

² European governance, COM(2001) 428.

³ Towards a global partnership for sustainable development, COM(2002) 82.

It entailed the consultation and agreement of the majority of the Commission's Directorate-Generals and this inevitably led to a new round of discussions on which indicators to include and at what level. The modified list of indicators was discussed in detail at the final meeting of the Task Force, and members were able to express their disagreement with some of the compromises made. These concerns were noted and the list was adopted for the final report to the SPC.

5. SDI WEB PAGES

Amongst other things, the communication committed Eurostat to making the set of SDI available on its website. This was achieved in March 2005 (<http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/sustainabledevelopment>) and includes access to the indicators which have been compiled to date, a repository of background documents and links to related web sites.

6. SDI MONITORING REPORT

Eurostat has also recently prepared a first report monitoring the implementation of the EU sustainable development strategy, which was part of the project adopted in 2004. An English version was published in December 2005 and French and German versions are currently in the process of being printed. PDF versions are available on the SDI web pages.

From the very beginning, it was agreed within Commission services that the publication would be part of the Commission package (document SDI/WG/3 (2006)) for the review of the EU SD Strategy. Although Eurostat was the principal author, substantial contributions and comments were received from other Commission services and from members of the Task Force. The publication was disseminated to the December 2006 European Council jointly with the Commission Communication.

7. METADATA AND QUALITY PROFILES

It is Eurostat's policy to provide appropriate metadata and quality profiles for the data and indicators it disseminates. The preparation of metadata sheets and quality profiles is currently underway. The expertise and knowledge of the ESS will be invaluable in this process and members of this working group will be consulted on this work.