

Working Paper No. 8  
27 March 2006

ENGLISH ONLY

**ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

Joint UNECE/OECD/Eurostat Working Group on Statistics for Sustainable Development  
First meeting  
Luxembourg, 3-4 April 2006  
Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda

**INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: EXPERIENCES AND GOALS OF  
THE UNITED NATIONS DIVISION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**  
Submitted by UNCSD

This meeting is organised jointly with Eurostat and OECD

## **Indicators of Sustainable Development: Experiences and Goals of the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. First Set of SDI (1995-1999)**

In response to Chapter 40 of Agenda 21, the action programme adopted by the 1992 Rio Summit, the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development (DSD) prepared a work programme on indicators, which was adopted by the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) in 1995. The programme focused on a set of 134 indicators, embedded in a Driving Force-State-Response framework, organized along four “pillars” (social, economic, environmental and institutional) that had been identified through a series of meetings among major international and national stakeholders in a consensus-building and iterative approach.

DSD coordinated the implementation of the work programme, which took place in three main phases, from 1995 to the end of 2000. During phase 1 (1995 to 1996), international agencies developed methodology sheets for each of the 134 indications, based on a common template. The results were published in the first of the “Blue Books.”<sup>2</sup> In phase 2, (1996 to 1999), 22 countries from across the world volunteered to pilot test the indicator set.<sup>3</sup> The DSD complemented the testing through a series of regional briefing and training workshops. Phase 3, (1999 to 2000), was used to evaluate and revise the CSD indicator set.

### **2. Testing and Revision (1999-2001)**

The country testing was highly valuable, and the involvement and commitment of high-level policymakers was critical to achieving rapid progress. At the same time, institutional challenges, especially in the areas of human resource and policy coordination, often posed binding constraints. Integrating indicator initiatives with national development policies and transforming them into permanent work programmes ranked high among the recommendations to ensure their success. Most countries found that the initial CSD indicator set was too large to be manageable and that the underlying DSR framework was not always suited to emphasizing policy issues and linkages. Consequently, a revised CSD-SDI set was developed and presented to the CSD in 2001. It consisted of 58 indicators organized in a theme/sub-theme framework, along the four dimensions of sustainable development. These were published in the second of the “Blue Books.”<sup>4</sup>

In general, the focus of the CSD and its secretariat on indicators provided a very useful and timely forum for the discussion of national-level indicators with the involvement of governments, international organizations, and various stakeholders at a time when thinking on the role of

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<sup>2</sup> Indicators of Sustainable Development: Framework and Methodologies. United Nations Sales Publication No. E. 96.II.A.16 (New York, August 1996)

<sup>3</sup> Africa: Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, South Africa and Tunisia; Asia and the Pacific: China, Maldives, Pakistan and Philippines; Europe: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany and the United Kingdom; the Americas and the Caribbean: Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico and Venezuela.

<sup>4</sup> Indicators of Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Methodologies Second Edition. United Nations Sales Publication No. E. 01.II.A.6 (New York, September 2001)

indicators in sustainable development was immature and evolving. The proactive role of the CSD proved to be instrumental in advancing work in this area. The large set of indicators assisted countries initially in selecting indicators that reflected their priorities. At the same time, the testing helped to identify indicators of common importance and to reduce the set to a more manageable size. Given the heterogeneity among countries, the lack of relevance of some indicators to certain countries is probably unavoidable. The testing and the flexibility of the work programme allowed the development of the theme/sub-theme framework for the revised CSD-SDI, which is also, often in adapted form, the major framework for many national indicator sets.

### **3. New iteration (2005- )**

The Division for Sustainable Development has now begun to review the 2001 set of indicators. For this purpose, the DSD has adopted a two-track approach. The objective of the first track is to evaluate and revise the current indicator set. For the second track, it is to assess the need for future international work on indicators on sustainable development, including SDI frameworks. As part of this process, the Division convened an expert group meeting (EGM) in December 2005.<sup>5</sup> Additional EGMs will be organized to continue the work. The next one is tentatively scheduled for September 2006.

One result of the December 2005 EGM was agreement on an interim (revised) set of SDI, which should be finalized in 2006. This set includes both core and non-core indicators. The non-core indicators offer a larger set of sustainable development issues that may be relevant for some but not all countries. They also provide guidance for countries that may wish to delve into more detail in any given issue. Indicators are no longer divided among the four “pillars,” but the thematic framework has been retained, with some adjustments. The interim list consists of 54 core indicators, 33 additional indicators and 12 further indicators to be developed, organized along 14 themes: poverty; governance; health; education; demographics; atmosphere; land; oceans, seas and coasts; freshwater; biodiversity; economic development; equity; global partnership; and consumption and production patterns. Wherever appropriate, the SDI have been aligned with similar MDG indicators.

### **2. Working Group on Statistics for Sustainable Development (WGSSD)**

The working group is of direct relevance to the second track of the DSD’s current review and is likely to provide the major input to the discussion on frameworks. One of the important factors in this regard is the extent to which the work of the WGSSD is relevant to sets of SDI in all countries, whether developing, developed or in transition.

As concerted efforts by many actors are necessary for enhancing global cooperation in the development and implementation of sustainable development indicators, the DSD considers the WGSSD an important partner in providing guidance and in acting as a catalyst for national policy makers to develop and strengthen their indicator programmes.

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<sup>5</sup> Documents and the report of the meeting can be found at [Hhttp://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/indicators/egmIndicators/egm.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/indicators/egmIndicators/egm.htm)H.