

Latin America and the Caribbean Conference  
Environmental Information for Decision Making - Data, indicators and reporting

Statements by  
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Dear colleagues,

I would like to convey the greetings of the Director of the UN Statistics Division Dr. Paul Cheung, who is unfortunately unable to participate personally in this meeting. He has asked me to transmit to you his best wishes for the success of this meeting. He has also asked me to transmit the following statement to you.

UNSD congratulates OECD and the Mexican Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources for organizing this important conference, which brings together users and producers of environmental information in the Latin American and Caribbean countries. There is an increasing need within environment data circles for user-producer dialogue, both at national and international level.

Thirteen years ago the Rio Earth Summit 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 moving towards sustainable development. In 2000, environmental sustainability has been declared as an integral part of the Millennium Development Goals.

Sound policy and decision making, public participation, and monitoring progress are impossible without accessible and reliable information on the environment.

Following Rio many countries and international organizations made major efforts to improve environmental information in many areas. And as a result, there have been major improvements, especially in the area of concepts, definitions, and methodologies.

Examples include the work on inventories of emissions of air pollutants and greenhouse gases, and the important work carried out on environmental-economic accounting. Both of these rely heavily on statistics, statistical classifications, and partly on statistical services to collect and/or to validate the data.

Today, in spite of this work and the increasing political importance, availability and quality of environmental data and information is still far behind what is needed.

Environmental policy makers come from a wide range of backgrounds, such as life sciences, geography, hydrology, sociology, town planning, agriculture, etc. And as such they will have different expectations for statistics and different data needs. Their needs tend to change as new threats to the environment emerge or new treaties or conventions are agreed to tackle known problems.

Statisticians, on the other hand, work with a long term perspective – statistics are most useful if they are compiled in a consistent manner over a long time period. This allows real analysis of trends in the pressures on the environment, and the effect of the policy measures on those pressures. Examples again are treaties and conventions. To be

effective, treaties need to be monitored, and monitoring is often based on statistics. The Kyoto Protocol and the Montreal Protocol are good examples of this.

Setting up such systems takes time and a certain investment, but the pay off is great, especially if these systems have the a common framework with other official statistics, so that meaningful inter-linkages can be drawn between the behavior of society, the environment, the economy, and the impact of environmental changes on society.

Another major problem in environment statistics is the multiplication of often uncoordinated data requests by numerous national and international organizations. Several international organizations may ask for the same or similar data, creating an unnecessary burden on countries. Equally, more than one national organization may collect similar data in parallel, ending up with diverging figures for the same country. Poor definitions of the data to be collected add to the heterogeneity of available data. Only if we manage to coordinate the work in a better way, we will be able to raise data quality to the required level and to free resources for improving data collection.

UNSD is actively promoting coordination between international and regional organizations and data collection based on international standards. One of the objectives of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics is the harmonization of international data and the coordination of international data collection activities. At the same time, the UN Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting sets

standards and promotes the use the environmental accounting, which allows to link environmental and economic data in a meaningful way.

In this context, I want to congratulate ECLAC and UNEP-ROLAC for having started an efficient collaboration based on the Framework Convention on environmental information and statistics. This convention, which foresees a far-reaching collaboration including common data collection and capacity building, will be a major step forward in focusing environmental information and statistics activities in Latin American and Caribbean countries on what is most needed, by combining forces for an efficient and high-quality data collection.

I hope that the discussions during the next two days will build up on these initiatives and will be a successful and an important milestone in the Latin American and Caribbean collaboration on environmental information.

Thank you for your attention.