

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

First meeting of the 2004/2005 Bureau
Washington, D.C., 18-19 October 2004

Item 7: Seminar on
Measurement of Sustainable
Development: what is the role
of official statistics?

SEMINAR ON MEASUREMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Note prepared by Statistics Sweden

BACKGROUND

1. At the meeting of the CES Bureau on 12-13 February 2004, it was proposed that one of the seminars in June 2005 would deal with measurement of sustainable development. Statistics Sweden volunteered to be the organiser. The following countries/organizations are suggested to be included in the Organising Committee: Australia, Canada, Estonia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, OECD and UNECE. The countries have not yet been contacted, but Spain and Switzerland have expressed their interest.

THE ISSUE

2. Sustainable development was definitely accepted as a priority principle for future work of the UN at the World Summit in Johannesburg 2002. Several countries have implemented Sustainable Development Strategies, and the work with measurement and sustainable development indicators has become an important tool to follow up the strategies. The quality of data and statistics lying behind the indicators is therefore an important issue to address and so the role of statistical offices and the future needs of statistics should be clarified.

STRUCTURE OF THE SEMINAR

3. The chair of the seminar will be Mr. Svante Öberg, Statistics Sweden.

Session 1: The role of official statistics

4. How can official statistics contribute to the work on Sustainable Development Indicators (SDI)? SDI presupposes long-term time series and continuity - can the statistical system provide this? How can we provide high quality data? The work also requires integration between the three dimensions of sustainable development: ecological, economical and social. Ultimately, the countries should profit by having the bulk of statistical data within their respective organizations.

Proposed invited papers from Canada and Sweden.

Discussant: open

Time: around 1½ hours.

Session 2: Case studies

5. As mentioned earlier, one of the main issues for the work with SDI is how to integrate the ecological, economical and social dimensions. An example of this can be found within integrated frameworks or decoupling indicators¹. The set of indicators have been selected in various ways in different countries. Some countries have based the indicators according to the main goals of their national strategies for sustainable development. So far, sustainable work has involved environmental experts with little interest from the economic and social spheres. How can official statistics benefit and learn from this? Other important questions are related to how to finance production of a set of SDI and how other sources of statistics can be integrated by statistical offices.

Proposed invited papers from Australia and Spain.

Discussant: open

Time: around 1 hour.

Session 3: Analytical tools

6. A great number of SDI sets include many indicators, which makes these sets difficult to handle. In particular, decision makers need a small number of indicators to be able to follow the development. GDP is a well-known aggregated economic indicator, which has become one of the most important economic indicators. There are also examples of aggregated measurements in the social area (welfare indices) as well as in the environmental field (the ecological footprint). Does the need for a small number of indicators motivate aggregated indicators? Are aggregated measurements needed? How can official statistics cover the indicators required?

Proposed invited papers from Estonia and OECD.

Discussant: open

Time: around 1½ hours.

Session 4: Future need of statistics

7. In the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, areas like global partnership², good governance³ and production and consumption patterns were highlighted as important for future work. These areas, as well as the environmental area, may need other types of data and new statistics. How do we promote new statistics in the light of limited resources and the need for reduced response burden? Another issue connected with future work is to engage countries which have not yet built up a system of measurement for sustainable development. How do we best provide support to countries to build up a Sustainable Development Indicator System?

Proposed invited papers from UK and UNCSD⁴.

¹ Decoupling indicators compare the economical and environmental development (sometimes even the social development) through index time series. Decoupling aims at breaking the connection between economic growth and environmental pressure. E.g. GDP should rise at the same time as carbon dioxide emissions decline.

² Global partnership mainly refers to how industrial countries affect developing countries.

³ Good governance covers, among other things, questions on democracy.

⁴ United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

Discussant: Eurostat
Time: around 1¾ hours.
NEXT STEP

8. Statistics Sweden welcomes comments on this proposal. A detailed programme will be developed after the October 2004 Bureau meeting in close cooperation with the Organising Committee (to be agreed at the meeting). Contact person at Statistics Sweden is Mrs. Eiwor Höglund Dávila, Head of the environment statistics unit (eiwor.hoglund@scb.se).

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