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**BACKGROUND PAPER ON THE 2002 SERIES OF COUNTRY PROFILES AS
SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Note by the secretariat

1. The 2002 series of Country Profiles was published on the occasion of the WSSD held in Johannesburg in 2002. They have been prepared on the basis of the national reports submitted annually by governments to the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) since 1993. The National Information Analysis Unit in the Division for Sustainable Development of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) has analysed and maintained national reports submitted to the CSD by Governments and the 1997 and the 2002 Country Profiles. Based upon the national reports and the 2002 Country Profiles submitted by Governments to the CSD, the report "National Implementation of Agenda 21" was published containing a graphical presentation of the general status of the national implementation of Agenda 21. The Country profiles provide the most comprehensive overview to date of the status of the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level.

2. The purpose of the Country Profiles is to:

- (i) Help countries monitor their own progress;
- (ii) Share experiences and information with others; and
- (iii) Serve as institutional memory to track and record national actions undertaken to implement Agenda 21.

3. The following 51 UNECE member States submitted Country Profiles: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Uzbekistan.

4. The Country Profiles follow a standardized format and cover all 40 Chapters of Agenda 21, as well as those issues which have been addressed separately by the CSD since 1997 such as trade, energy, transport, sustainable tourism and industry.

5. The format for each chapter includes the following headings and information has to be provided under each heading:

- Decision-making
- Programmes and Projects
- Status

- Capacity-Building, Education, Training and Awareness-Raising
- Information
- Research and Technologies
- Financing
- Cooperation

6. In the explanatory note concerning the preparation of the 2002 Country Profiles, the information to be considered under the headings for each chapter is suggested and it is recommended that the information given be a maximum of 2 pages per issue. Countries have largely not complied with this recommendation

7. The Country Profiles are a very useful source of information from a national perspective. Countries provide extensive information about the respective coordinating bodies and institutions, decision-making process, relevant legislation and regulations, and programmes and projects put in place. There is also a great deal of statistical information. Reference is made to various strategies, policies, programmes and projects at national or international level, which the countries have undertaken in their efforts to implement Agenda 21. Sometimes initiatives are described at length.

8. The information contained in the profiles can provide an important input to policy development, and enable widespread learning from experience. However, although a large mass of information has been accumulated, it is difficult to use this for policy feedback, mainly because of its diversity and incomparability.

9. The reports vary in length from 36 to more than 100 pages. The length of individual responses varies from one or two paragraphs to more than 10 pages. The information varies considerably, both in terms of quantity and in terms of level of detail, both across countries and across chapters for the same country. The answers are non-uniform which makes comparisons extremely difficult.

10. Sometimes information is provided only on measures taken, or various projects or programmes are listed in directory form. Sometimes policies are announced and objectives stated, at other times only statistical information about results achieved is given. In other cases, there is a great deal of background information, including description of physical or geographical characteristics, or of the historical development of a whole sector in the past 10 years, but sustainability issues are not highlighted. Sometimes, there is ambiguity or gaps in the texts which allows for different interpretations. There are cases when the information is outdated or missing, or irrelevant. Some examples are mentioned below.

11. There may have been some lack of clarity about the information being sought under chapter 3 "Combating poverty". Combating poverty has been interpreted in two ways: from a domestic perspective and from a global perspective. The majority of countries have given information on their policies to tackle poverty in the national context. They have provided extensive information on their systems for social security and assistance, pension systems and their policies to reduce unemployment and fight social exclusion. Some countries have elaborated national strategies to combat poverty. In this context the definition of poverty is relative. In most of the western countries the poverty line is defined as an income which is less than half the national median. Statistical information is often provided, but this is not consistent. For example, it includes information on the percentage of people living below the national poverty line, the percentage of people with low income, the rate of unemployment, the percentage of people receiving social assistance, the expenditure for the social welfare system as

a percentage of GDP. It should also be noted that the statistical information is not always up to date.

12. Countries in transition describe the social consequences of restructuring their economies. War conflicts in some regions have brought the additional problem of assisting internally displaced persons. Several countries have mentioned the problem of adequate housing. Some countries in the region note that they benefit from international programmes to combat poverty. Some of the transition countries, for whom poverty is presumably an issue, have not provided information.

13. Only a few countries have referred to combating poverty on a global scale and have provided information on the official development assistance they provide. Two countries have made reference to the United Nations target of 0.7 percent of GDP for development assistance.

14. Under Chapter 5 “Demographic Development and Sustainability” some countries have provided a variety of statistical information on population and demographic trends, birth rate, age structure of the population, infant mortality rate, life expectancy, etc., often quoting United Nations sources. Issues like family planning, social protection, ageing, decreasing birth rates, and local self-government are also evoked. Some countries state that they do not have official population policies; in a couple of countries there has been a national debate on the linkages between population and environment. Under “Cooperation”, most often participation in conferences, contribution to the UNFPA or a list of organizations is provided.

15. The diversity and the different scope of the answers may also be due to some extent to the different problems and priorities of the countries. For example, in the chapter on sustainable human settlements, one country shares very useful experience on tackling the problems of internally displaced persons, another country shares its experience with launching an urban cadastre programme, a third country provides an example of converting an old school building into modern flats for social housing.

16. There are also frequent overlaps between information provided under different chapters. For example, issues of air pollution are covered under the chapter on energy, on transport, and on protection of the atmosphere. To help overcome this, it might be useful to include some kind of specific questions under each chapter. This would facilitate the reporting task for the countries and would also facilitate the use of the information.

17. Much of the information provided in the Country Profiles has been reported to other United Nations bodies and conventions. For example, under “Cooperation” countries often mention the ratification of United Nations conventions or provide lists of those to which they are a Party. The countries also mention a number of programmes and projects. It could be useful to clarify further the type of information that is sought: whether the countries are expected simply to list programmes and projects or to provide a summary of results.

18. More emphasis on reviewing progress against international and national goals and targets and less on providing details would improve the contribution of reporting to policy development. Reporting could be streamlined and more use could be made of indicators, to allow for qualitative and quantitative comparison.

Conclusions and recommendations for future work

19. The Country Profiles, in their present form, are very valuable as a presentation and as a source of good information about each individual country. However, for the reasons mentioned above, the information is difficult to use for comparative analysis and evaluation.

20. Most countries have developed and adopted national strategies or programmes for sustainable development, or are in the process of doing so. The information provided in the Country Profiles, however, is insufficient to draw a conclusion about the content or the progress in implementation of these strategies.

21. Meeting the reporting requirements of the United Nations system and other international bodies has become quite burdensome and a time and resource consuming task due to the increased number of agreements, protocols and processes. However, as more information is available, it does not always achieve its potential to provide policy feedback and encourage learning from experience. To increase the cost-effectiveness and utility of the information that is accumulated, including through the Country Profiles, the following future actions might be considered in due course at the regional level:

- (i) streamlining of reporting and more systematic use of indicators for sustainable development; much similar information is reported to different organizations and United Nations agencies, which creates an additional burden on national administrations. Efforts could be made to make an inventory of what kind of information is reported where, at the regional level, and synergies can be sought between the different reporting requirements. The reporting should also be made more problem-oriented and assessing success stories and problems in a succinct and substantive manner.
- (ii) for evaluation of national progress towards sustainable development, more focused and systematic information is needed, allowing for analysis and easy comparability.
- (ii) better use of the information related to the various aspects of sustainable development, made available at the regional level through reporting to the UNECE conventions, through studies, surveys and statistical bulletins, carried out as part of the work programme of different Principal Subsidiary Bodies, such as Country Profiles on the Housing Sector and Environmental Performance Reviews, carried out by the Environment and Human Settlements Division; the Economic Survey of Europe, prepared by the Economic Analysis Division; the Surveys on population and gender issues, and the In-Depth Studies on Migration in Central and Eastern Europe, carried out by the Population Activities Unit. These studies and surveys are in a standard format, provide relevant, comparable and updated information, analysis of trends, policy options and projections.
- (iii) further to the Regional Assessment Report for the Johannesburg Summit, a regional review of the development of national strategies and their implementation could be undertaken, as appropriate, highlighting good practices and obstacles to implementation.