



DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
STATISTICS DIVISION
UNITED NATIONS

ESA/STAT/AC.189
UNCEEAA/4/14

**Fourth Meeting of the UN Committee of Experts on
Environmental-Economic Accounting
New York, 24-26 June 2009
Millennium UN Plaza Hotel – Manhattan Room**

**REVIEW OF THE MANDATE OF THE INTERSECRETARIAT WORKING
GROUP ON ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS**

Paper prepared by ISWG-Environment Statistics

(for discussion)

REVIEW OF THE MANDATE OF THE INTERSECRETARIAT WORKING GROUP ON ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

BACKGROUND

The Statistical Commission at its thirty-fourth session in 2003 recognized that despite significant developments in international environment statistics, much work, both methodological and practical, remained to be done. Progress in work on environmental indicators, indicators of sustainable development as well as work on integrated environmental and economic accounting is still hindered by the lack of sufficient good-quality, relevant and timely basic environmental data.

Some of the major reasons behind this situation were the lack of harmonized and globally relevant methods, concepts, definitions and classifications; insufficient information and guidance on best practices; insufficient training and capacity building; and problems of coordination at both the national and the international level.

The Statistical Commission agreed that the United Nations Statistics Division should set up an Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics (IWG-ENV), with a special focus on the development and harmonization of methods, concepts and standards, coordination of data collection and training.

The creation of the Intersecretariat Working Group should enable the enhanced coordination of international work in the field, by helping to establish cooperative working relations in the areas where the avoidance of unnecessary duplication and the pooling of resources can provide faster progress.

The IWG-ENV was established in December 2003, with the participation of the following international organizations/agencies: the United Nations Statistics Division, OECD, the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). FAO joined the IWG-ENV in 2005.

OBJECTIVES, TERMS OF REFERENCE AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK (as adopted by the Statistical Commission)

The main objective of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics has been to firmly anchor environment statistics as part of official statistics by improving and strengthening basic environmental data, and thus to make an important contribution to the development of environmental indicators, indicators of sustainable development and integrated environmental and economic accounting.

The Group intended to accomplish its objective by enhancing cooperation and by the pooling of knowledge bases and resources in the areas of (i) methodological work, (ii) data collection and dissemination, (iii) training and capacity-building, and (iv) the organization of joint events.

(i) Improvement of methodological practices in international environment statistics

The IWG-ENV consolidates work in those subject areas that are fairly advanced, through the dissemination of international recommendations on definitions and methodologies, guidelines and best practices. It identifies priority areas for further methodological work and initiate work in those areas by organizing subgroups and providing a regular forum for discussion and exchange of expertise.

(ii) Harmonization of international environmental data collection

The IWG-ENV reviews international data collection mechanisms in priority areas of environment and sustainable development information and, where appropriate, will draw up proposals to streamline and to further harmonize international data collection through the application of joint data collection activities such as questionnaires, the establishment of shared responsibilities and distribution of work among its members at both the geographical and the subject-matter level.

(iii) Technical cooperation, training and capacity-building

The members of the IWG-ENV contribute to each others' technical cooperation activities as appropriate and feasible and undertake joint technical cooperation projects to make better use of the knowledge base and resources available at each international organization.

(iv) Organization of joint events

The IWG-ENV organizes, when appropriate and feasible, joint events (seminars, workshops) to enhance communication about and raise the profile of environmental data issues, promote the exchange of information, particularly concerning best practices in important subject areas, and further discussions on selected issues in environment statistics.

The permanent members of the IWG-ENV are in principle those international organizations or agencies that have a well-established international programme on environment statistics including direct and regular collection of comprehensive environment statistics from countries.

International organizations or agencies that have programmes focusing on specific areas of environment statistics as well as countries with outstanding experience should be

associated with the work of the IWG-ENV as required and feasible and will be invited on an ad hoc basis to join the subgroups set up on a geographic or subject-matter basis.

The IWG-ENV will maintain strong collaboration with other groups active in related fields, and in particular with the London Group on Environmental Accounting, as well as with groups working on indicators of sustainable development.

The IWG-ENV will propose topics and subgroups for action and will be responsible for overall coordination of these subgroups.

The Secretariat will be provided by the United Nations Statistics Division. The Secretariat will report annually to the United Nations Statistical Commission on the work of the Group. Tools to facilitate communication and exchange of information among members of the IWG-ENV will be developed.

The IWG-ENV will meet regularly, at least once a year, preferably back-to-back with convenient international meetings.

The objectives, terms of reference and organization of work of the IWG-ENV were adopted by the Statistical Commission at its 35th session in 2004.

Since then the IWG-ENV has carried out its work programme according to annual workplans that were submitted to the Statistical Commission. The most important activities included harmonization work in water statistics, the organization of an international meeting on water statistics, coordination of data collection and data sharing between the member and regional organizations, work on a common glossary and on an agreed set of metadata. Several co-sponsored training and capacity building events were (are being) organized in different regions.

THE IWG-ENV AND THE UNCEEA

The United Nations Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEA) was established by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its 36th Session in March 2005. Its overall objectives are (a) to mainstream environmental-economic accounting and related statistics; (b) to elevate the *System of integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting (SEEA)* to an international statistical standard; and (c) to advance the implementation of the SEEA in countries.

The Statistical Commission repeatedly asked for the careful adjustment of the mandates of the two groups to ensure their complementarity. The two groups worked in collaboration, with the IWG-ENV focusing on the coordination and harmonization of international data collection activities and on methodological issues related to data collection. The IWG-ENV has taken into account in its work developments in

environmental-economic accounting. The IWG-ENV participated at the UNCEEA meetings and informed the UNCEEA about its activities.

The UNCEEA at its third meeting in 2008 discussed the extension of its mandate to environment statistics, including climate change statistics and submitted the revised mandate to the 40th session of the Statistical Commission in February 2009. The IWG-ENV was requested by the UNCEEA to review its mandate with respect to the planned expansion of the UNCEEA mandate.

The Statistical Commission did not adopt the expanded mandate of the UNCEEA. The UNCEEA was requested to review again its mandate to reflect the focus on its priority task, namely the standardization and implementation of the SEEA, and to clarify its role in environment/climate change statistics.

Although the expansion of the UNCEEA's mandate to environment statistics has not been approved by the Statistical Commission, the IWG-ENV still felt it necessary to review its objectives, terms of reference and work programme in order to have a better focus and enhance its role in the improvement of the availability and quality of basic environment statistics without duplicating efforts.

The members of the IWG-ENV met to discuss these issues and in the following a summary of its conclusions is given.

RE-FOCUSING THE IWG-ENV OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

1. The objectives of the IWG-ENV are to improve the availability and quality of basic environmental data and derived indicators at the regional and global level and to increase complementarity and effectiveness of the associated data collection process. To achieve these objectives, the IWG-ENV will focus its activities on (i) coordination and harmonization of international data collections; (ii) coordination and harmonization of activities related to environmental indicators; (iii) coordination and harmonization of technical cooperation and capacity building activities, and (iv) signaling methodological issues related to data collection.
 - (i) Coordination and harmonization of international data collection (based on agreed thematic priorities)
 - Harmonization of questionnaires, relevant concepts, classifications, definitions and data collection methods (including harmonization with environmental economic accounting where appropriate)
 - Streamlining data collection (subject areas, geographic coverage)
 - Harmonization of data validation and editing
 - Harmonization of metadata
 - Coordination and harmonization of timetables
 - Agreements on data sharing

- (ii) Coordination and harmonization of activities related to environmental indicators
 - Comparison of existing indicator sets
 - Identification of commonalities of international indicator sets
 - Harmonization of methodology to produce the common indicators
 - (iii) Coordination and harmonization of training and capacity building activities
 - Joint planning of training and capacity building activities
 - Developing and sharing of common training materials and knowledge base
 - Pooling of partners' human and financial resources for conducting training activities
 - (iv) Conceptual and methodological work
 - Identification of conceptual and methodological issues related to the data collected
 - Referring methodological issues to existing expert groups
 - Setting up new expert groups when appropriate
2. The membership of the IWG-ENV should be extended to the UN Regional Commissions active in the area of environment statistics to ensure full coordination and support. Other agencies will be invited on an ad hoc (topic) basis
 3. The IWG-ENV will work in close collaboration with the UNCEEA and other relevant mechanisms to ensure that their activities are complementary and that developments in environmental-economic accounting are taken into account, when appropriate, in the work of the IWG-ENV.
 4. The IWG-ENV will continue to report to the Statistical Commission. It will continue to participate in the UNCEEA and will inform the UNCEEA about its activities and work programme.
 5. The IWG-ENV will set up a website to communicate its activities.

After further consultations the detailed 2009-2012 work programme of the IWG-ENV will be finalized and circulated by the Secretariat (UNSD).