

International Conference “Global Implementation Programme for the SEEA”

(New York, June 17-19, 2013)

Background

1. The System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) Central Framework was adopted as the international standard on environmental-economic accounts by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its 43rd session in March 2012, on par with the System of National Accounts. The SEEA Central Framework is a multipurpose, conceptual framework that describes the interactions between the economy and the environment, and the stocks and changes in stocks of environmental assets. As an internationally agreed standard for organising and analysing environmental-economic data, the SEEA Central Framework supports development of indicators that directly respond to the demand of integrated policymaking. Countries requiring such information for tracking of policy targets benefit from the consistent, comparable and comprehensive statistics and indicators provided by the SEEA Central Framework accounting approach. Importantly, the trade-offs of decisions that affect natural resources and associated services become explicit.
2. The SEEA Central Framework directly focuses on the relationship between the environment and well-being, which is not revealed through traditional measures of economic activity such as GDP and national income. It does not propose or recommend any single indicator or group of indicators for use in developing and assessing policy. Indeed some of its major strengths are in its approach to integrating statistics to allow for multiple purposes and multiple scales of analysis.
3. At its 43rd session in March 2012, the Statistical Commission “encouraged Member States and regional or international organizations to initiate compilation activities in accordance with the Central Framework” and noted that the framework should be implemented “flexibly and incrementally, giving full consideration to national circumstances”. It further “[r]equested international agencies and other donors to make resources available for technical assistance for the implementation of SEEA and the development of basic economic and environmental statistics in countries, in particular in developing countries.”¹
4. At the 44th session in March 2013, the Statistical Commission “adopted the implementation strategy for the SEEA Central Framework recommending a flexible and modular approach, and urged the Committee of Experts to agree on a medium-term programme of work for the implementation of SEEA, including advancing the issues on the SEEA Central Framework research agenda and the development of a core set of tables and accounts, in order to develop coordination mechanisms among

¹ Statistical Commission – Report on the forty-third session. Official Records 2012. Supplement No. 4. E/2012/24 E/CN.3/2012/34 Decision 43/105.

the relevant international and regional agencies for effective management of the programme and to actively seek funding to support the implementation activities.”²

5. While the SEEA Central Framework standard addresses the linkages between the economy and the environment and the stocks of individual environmental assets (e.g., mineral and energy resources, land, soil resources, timber resources, aquatic resources) a broader approach was considered necessary to take ecosystem condition and the resulting flow of services into account. The SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting has been developed to provide a consistent and coherent accounting structure for ecosystem assets and the associated service flows to economic and human activity. To the extent to which valuation of ecosystems is consistent with market valuation principles, the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting will also address this information and policy need.

6. The SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting is not an international standard, but provides a robust framework for testing and experimenting with approaches to accounting for ecosystem assets, their associated service flows and values. The Statistical Commission at its 44th session considered the UNCEEA report on the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and “encouraged its use by international and regional agencies and countries wishing to test and experiment in this new area of statistics.” It further “recognized the policy demand for information on ecosystem accounting” and requested the UNCEEA to develop a medium term programme of work with timelines and deliverables as well as a proper mechanism to address these issues, considering the multi-disciplinary nature of the topic.

7. In addition to the draft SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting, the Statistical Commission also received a research agenda for the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting for its review. The proposed research agenda includes three areas of focus: (1) physical ecosystem accounting (including spatial analysis questions), (2) monetary ecosystem accounting, and (3) communication and dissemination. The Statistical Commission endorsed the work done on the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and the research agenda for continued testing of the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting.

Purpose of the International Conference “Global Implementation Programme for the SEEA”

8. The overall objectives of the international conference are: a) to facilitate the implementation and outreach of the SEEA and supporting statistics in countries while ensuring that national, regional and international actions are sustainable and efficient; and b) to develop strategies to improve the scope, quality and detail of environmental-economic accounts and supporting statistics at the country level.

² Statistical Commission – Report on the forty-fourth session. Official Records 2013. Supplement No. 4. E/2013/24 E/CN.3/2013/33 Decision 44/104.

9. Specific objectives of the international conference include developing recommendations on: (a) promoting international coordination among development partners through strategic planning and programming; (b) implementing sub-regional and regional programmes and adopting procedures for coordination, monitoring and reporting on performance through a common programme information structure; (c) strengthening national statistical capacity for environmental-economic accounts and related basic statistics through training and technical cooperation, publication of manuals and handbooks, research and advocacy of environmental-economic accounts and statistics for policy purposes as part of a national statistics development strategy; (d) timing for the stages of implementation of the SEEA and (e) resource identification and mobilisation.

10. The SEEA Central Framework implementation will require collaboration and coordination between a range of governmental ministries (e.g., National Statistical Offices (NSOs), environmental, planning and finance ministries), international agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and academic institutions. This international conference will provide a forum for these various stakeholders to understand the SEEA Central Framework implementation strategy, discuss ideas for and examples of implementation and its application. Participants will share their experiences in setting up the institutional framework for environmental-economic accounts; discuss the role of international agencies; develop a programme of work including preparation of common tools to assist in the SEEA implementation such as the self-assessment tool, training materials, and policy applications for the accounts; and discuss cooperation with the broader research and academic community.

11. As countries begin to move forward with implementation of the SEEA Central Framework, some may wish to begin testing the application of selected ecosystem accounts according to the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting framework. Participants at the conference will be able to share their plans for testing of the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and provide feedback on the proposed research agenda. Testing of the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and work on its research agenda will require an interdisciplinary team of statisticians, scientists, economists, and policymakers. By bringing representatives of these diverse groups together, this conference will facilitate a dialogue regarding the determination of research and testing priorities and plan for next steps for the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting testing.

Structure of the International Conference “Global Implementation Programme for the SEEA”

12. The conference will consist of a series of presentations and discussions over 3 days covering key issues related to the SEEA implementation. After receiving an overview of the SEEA, including the SEEA Central Framework and the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting, participants will learn about the SEEA implementation strategy and have an opportunity to provide feedback on its phased approach.

13. In addition to the discussion of the implementation strategy, participants will also be presented with the latest information on the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting testing and research agenda. Following the presentations, participants will have an opportunity to provide feedback and recommendations related to these items.

14. A portion of the conference will consist of parallel groups discussing six key areas for the SEEA implementation: (1) capacity building, scaling up and associated resources for SEEA implementation; (2) developing the institutional framework for implementation; (3) SEEA diagnostic tools and data evaluation; (4) SEEA implementation and relation to policy frameworks (Post-2015 UN Development Agenda and SDGs, WAVES, VANTAGE, Green Growth, TEEB); (5) SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting testing and research agenda, and (6) SEEA outreach and communication strategy. Each of the parallel groups will report back to the conference regarding the outcome and any recommendations from their focused discussions across these areas.

15. The conference will conclude with a summary of recommendations for global implementation and outreach for the SEEA and supporting statistics, including next steps and a proposed timeline.

Organizers

16. Under the auspices of the UNCEEA, the conference will be jointly organized by UNSD, UNEP, UNDP, Eurostat, FAO, IMF, EEA, CBD, OECD and the World Bank, in close collaboration with countries, regional commissions, and other international organizations. The conference will be held at the United Nations in New York from 17-19 June 2013.

Participants

17. Participants at the conference will include a range of national representatives, including national statistical offices and the heads of other relevant government agencies, such as environment. Those represented should include developing, emerging, and developed countries.

18. Given the conference objective of facilitating coordination, representatives from the regional commissions (UNESCAP, UNECE, UNECA, ECLAC, UNESCWA), from other international organizations, from NGOs as well as the donor community will be invited to participate.