

UNITED NATIONS  NATIONS UNIES

**THE FIFTEENTH MEETING OF THE UN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON
ENVIRONMENTAL-ECONOMIC ACCOUNTING (UNCEEA)**
6, 8 and 9 July 2020, Virtual

Stefan Schweinfest
Director, United Nations Statistics Division
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Dear Committee members,

Welcome to the 15th Meeting of the UNCEEA!

This Committee has done significant work for a number of years in the field of environmental-economic accounting and setting standards, and I would like to take this opportunity to elaborate upon three points—all focusing on how the Committee and the SEEA have been pioneers in the statistical world. The first point is on integration of statistical domains. The list of statistical topics for the Statistical Commission seems to keep growing longer and longer with each year. But we cannot continue to add topics endlessly and discuss these things in silos, without integration. The integration of all of the statistical domains, tools and users is a critical theme right now. In that sense, the SEEA and the Committee have been pioneers from the outset because the idea of the SEEA is to integrate different statistical domains. That said, we all know how difficult this is because this requires getting people that all have different professional backgrounds to the table, who sometimes speak different languages. Thus, in this sense, this Committee has been a pioneer in the type of work that we most urgently need: bringing statistical domains together.

My second point is the importance of bringing statistical data and other information elements together—including geospatial information, big data and official statistics. Integrating this data in a timely manner is a big challenge these days. And again, the work of the Committee and the SEEA is a pioneer. The SEEA is setting an example, and now many areas are emulating what the SEEA has achieved. The growing use of Earth observation is a prime example of this.

My third point is a reflection of my role as the Director of UNSD. Along with the heads of national statistical offices, we are all reflecting on the role of national statistical offices. The idea of national statistical offices playing the role of data stewards is growing. We need to move from a “goods producing” model to a “service producing” model, or a “mixed production”

model. In this way, national statistical offices will be responsible for data production, but they will also be responsible for data quality assurance of information that is produced elsewhere. This is the central question of the data stewardship and again, all of this Committee's work feeds right into that.

Focusing on the next Statistical Commission, we want to get the revised SEEA EEA adopted as a standard. The word "standard" is very critical, and of course the key task of the Statistical Commission is to develop methodologies, norms and tools—our common statistical language. Let us reflect what it really means for a methodology to be a standard, and why it is I think time to drop the "experimental". We have been working to develop the SEEA for many many years now. I, myself, have worked with some Committee members on environmental accounting, almost 30 years ago. Thus, there has been a lot of experimentation, and it's time to move, to be bold, and say we have something to offer. The moment is now and let me elaborate upon why.

First of all, what does it mean to be a statistical standard? The United Nations does not have any enforcement power, even if we declare something as a statistical standard. It is simply a universal recommendation and ensures a common approach among countries. It also ensures the validity of cross-country comparisons, enables aggregation and even allows different countries to learn from each other. In addition, a standard should not be thought of as a straitjacket. There is always flexibility in country implementation. Instead, a statistical standard is a core framework.

In addition, when we develop standards, there usually is a long, ongoing discussion. For example, in national accounts, we first started with the 1953 System of National Accounts (SNA). I started my professional career with the third revision of the SNA and I will probably finish my career in 2025 with the fifth revision of the SNA. Thus, the development of standards is always an ongoing process; it is never static. So saying something is a standard at a particular point in time means it is version 1.0, 2.0 or 3.0. There are always aspects that have not been resolved and are on a research agenda. If we frame this in a broader picture and time horizon, one thing becomes clearly obvious: the perfect is the enemy of the good. We can discuss forever and try to get something perfect, but at some point, we need to be bold and propose a methodology as an initial standard.

There are three other points on this topic that I would like to discuss. The first is that establishing a standard helps us get noticed as a statistical community. If we are able to establish the revised SEEA EEA as a standard at the next Statistical Commission session, then the climate change community, the CBD¹ community, and others will start paying attention. It will also provide national statistical offices with the impetus to move to more a regular production. Finally, there is the threat that, at the end of the day, if we do not do it somebody else will, and they may not have as many scruples. It will not be done as well as it would have been done by the statistical community, which has a long tradition of quality assurance. So, with all of this in mind, I think it is time for the Committee to move forward to make a bold statement to drop the "experimental" and to work with the Statistical Commission to declare the revised SEEA EEA a standard.

¹ Convention on Biological Diversity

I have two final topics of discussion. Based on recent conversations with international organizations, including the CBD¹, I strongly feel that there is an opportunity for the statistical community to get involved in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, particularly the monitoring framework. This is being established now, to be adopted in 2021. Thus, it is ongoing right now, in parallel with our work, and we would be remiss if we missed that opportunity. Thus, I will send a letter to all national statistical offices to encourage them to look at the proposed monitoring framework. I hope that all Committee members engage in this dialogue with the biodiversity community, and once again act as pioneers in engaging with other domains.

My final point is on communication. Regrettably, we had to postpone our high-level conference, Communicating the Path to Sustainability through Natural Capital Accounting, which was supposed to be held in March at Yale. This conference is so important, because we cannot simply do our technical work, but must engage in constant dialogue with users, encouraging them. We also need to better understand how to articulate the considerable value added that this community brings to the table. This is particularly important, given where we are right now, in the middle of 2020, with the opportunities for a green recovery from the pandemic laying ahead of us.

I wish you all the best for the next few days. Let me also not forget to thank Bert Kroese, our Committee chair, for his continuous leadership; Chief Economist Elliot Harris, for being our best ambassador always; and Alessandra Alfieri and her team, who have been working day and night to make this happen.

Thank you all and have a fruitful meeting.