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**COORDINATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL WORK IN THE REGION OF
THE UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE.
ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS**

IN-DEPTH REVIEW OF ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The paper provides information on the outcome of the in-depth review of environment statistics carried out by the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians in February 2008. The paper presents the reasons for selecting the topic for an in-depth review, main points from the Bureau discussion and conclusions from the review. Information on international activities in environment statistics extracted from the Database of International Statistical Activities in 2008 is provided in document ECE/CES/2008/8/Add.1.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) reviews each year 4-5 statistical areas in depth. The purpose of the reviews is to improve coordination of statistical activities in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), identify gaps or duplication of work, and address emerging issues. The review focuses on strategic issues and highlights concerns of statistical offices of both a conceptual and a coordinating nature. The criteria for selecting a topic for review are that (i) there are significant developments in that area, (ii) there are significant coordination issues, or (iii) there is a lack of activities at international level.

2. The Bureau discussed environment statistics in February 2008 based on a paper by Eurostat, and comments by the following members of the Bureau: Germany and the UNECE. The readers are encouraged to consult the Rapporteur Report by Eurostat and the contributions by Germany and UNECE at: <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2008.02.bureau.htm> (paper no. 2 and Addenda). Furthermore, information on international activities in environment statistics in 2008 is provided in document ECE/CES/2008/8/Add.1: Excerpt of the UNECE Database on International Statistical Activities.

II. REASONS FOR SELECTING THE TOPIC FOR AN IN-DEPTH REVIEW

3. Environment statistics was selected for an in-depth review by the Bureau because the field needs further development and improved coordination. Recent intensified debate about the impact of climate change has put environment high on the political agenda, as well as has increased the demand for high quality statistics in this field.

III. THE BUREAU DISCUSSION ON INTERNATIONAL WORK ON ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

4. The Bureau acknowledged that coordination of international work in environment statistics has improved over the last few years and efforts have been made to streamline the different international initiatives. Therefore, at the current stage, the main problem is not the coordination of work but prioritisation and convergence of the activities towards a coherent system of environment statistics.

5. The following comments were made in the discussion:

(a) The two main problems with environment statistics are:

(i) The architecture of environment statistics as a domain is not clear,

(ii) There is no overview of the many different activities that are undertaken and whether this work will lead to a coherent system of environment statistics;

(b) It would be useful and necessary to extend the mapping of the ongoing initiatives, complementary to the coordination work: there are still some overlaps and gaps in the work although cooperation is good. Some of this mapping is being currently undertaken by the United Nations Committee of Experts on Integrated Environmental Economic Accounting (UNCEEA) and in the European context by the so-called Group of Four (Eurostat, joint research Centre (JRC), European Environment Agency (EEA) and the Directorate General on Environment);

(c) So far too many priorities in environment statistics have been expressed from the policy side at national and international levels;

(d) There is great diversity in how environment statistics are organised in countries, which also makes international coordination difficult; more attention should be paid to coordination with other fields of statistics;

(e) Official statistics in this area implies certain quality requirements and adherence to fundamental principles; official statisticians can give advice on methodology, sampling, etc. to the other producers of environment statistics that do not seem to fall within the realm of official statistics (like data on fauna, flora, biodiversity, etc.);

(f) The use of environmental accounting data in policy monitoring needs to be highlighted; it is difficult to obtain financing for environmental accounting when there is little use and understanding of it. One of the problems is the timeliness of data: data often refer to 2-5 years ago which is not sufficient for policy analysis;

(g) Looking at environment from the environmental capital services viewpoint could bring together the data on biodiversity, flora, fauna, etc. in a way that is understood both by economists and statisticians;

(h) Dealing with global problems (e.g. climate change) requires data across borders; this can only be solved by a top-down approach based on theory, not by a country-driven process;

(i) A survey carried out by the UNCEEA shows that the current situation and future plans in countries diverge depending on local problem areas;

(j) The work in environment statistics should focus on outcomes that can be achieved within the next 2-3 years, for example, to see what data countries are expected to produce within the coming years, what are the user expectations and priorities, and how can data comparability be improved.

IV. CONCLUSIONS OF THE IN-DEPTH REVIEW

6. As a conclusion, the Bureau decided to ask the UNCEEA through its Chairman to prepare a proposal on how to address the issues raised in the in-depth review, taking into account the interests of different groups active in the area. The paper will be considered at the CES Bureau 2008 October meeting.

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