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Joint UNECE/OECD Seminar on Implementation of SEEA

Geneva, 14-15 October 2015

Final Report

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The Joint UNECE/OECD Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA), 14-15 October 2015, was organised in accordance with the decision of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in April 2014 to organise such a seminar, following the request of Member States to provide a forum to share experiences on the SEEA implementation.

The present document is the report of that seminar, and is provided to inform the Conference of European Statisticians of the organisation, outcomes and recommendations of the meeting.

I. Introduction

1. The Joint UNECE/OECD Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) was held in Geneva on 14-15 October 2015. It was jointly organized with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and an organizing committee with members from Australia, Canada, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Sweden and the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat). The seminar was organized in accordance with the decision of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in April 2014 to organize such a seminar, following the request of Member States to provide a forum to share experiences on the SEEA implementation.

2. The main objective of the seminar was to share experience and knowledge on the implementation of SEEA and its use for various policy needs. Furthermore, the seminar provided a forum to present and discuss the activities of international organizations related to the implementation of SEEA, and contribute to their coordination. The target audience were primarily producers of environmental-economic accounts, in particular the managers of environmental-economic accounts programs from National Statistical Offices (NSOs) and related agencies.

3. The meeting was attended by representatives from Albania, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mongolia, Netherlands, Norway, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Uzbekistan.

4. The meeting was also attended by representatives of various international organizations: Eurostat, the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Trade Centre (ITC), the Eurasian Economic Commission, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank. The London Group on Environmental Economic Accounting was represented by its Chair. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were represented by the Global Footprint Network, the Institute Cadaster and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Representatives of academia came from the Kyushu University (Japan), the Wageningen University (Netherlands), and the Luc Hoffmann Institute and Valuing Nature. The editor of the SEEA Central Framework, Mr. Carl Obst, participated as consultant to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO).

5. Mr. Mark Lound (Australian Bureau of Statistics) was elected as Chair of the seminar.

6. The provisional agenda was adopted.

II. Organisation of the seminar

7. The seminar was structured into five sessions with presentations and discussions.

Session 1: Introduction, setting the Scene

8. The session introduced the agenda and the expected outcomes of the seminar. UNSD presented the SEEA Central Framework, the latest international developments and future activities.

Session 2: SEEA Policy Uses, Analytical Tools and Indicators

9. Chair of this session was Mr. Gerard Eding from Statistics Netherlands

10. The session discussed the purpose of SEEA by giving examples of concrete policy issues and showed how environmental-economic accounts are being used to respond to these issues. Analytical tools such as input-output analysis, decomposition analysis etc. were presented in the form of two national case studies (Austria and Sweden). The session also discussed how SEEA is used to support the various international initiatives, such as OECD Green Growth Indicators (presentation by OECD) and in developing countries (presentation by the World Bank) and in the European Union (presentation by Eurostat).

Session 3: SEEA Implementation

11. The session discussed strategic, organisational, technical and methodological issues related to the implementation of SEEA. The session was divided into three sub-sessions:

- (a) Sub-session 3a - Identification of priorities for the implementation of SEEA: This sub-session informed about implementation priorities from international organizations' point of view (Eurostat, OECD, UNSD) and discussed various aspects related to international coordination. Canada informed about its environment statistics framework development and related implementation priorities, and Kyrgyzstan presented its national implementation priorities. This sub-session was chaired by Mr. Michael Wright from Statistics Canada.
- (b) Sub-session 3b - Institutional setting and co-ordination: Four countries (Czech Republic, Italy, Kyrgyzstan and United Kingdom) presented their institutional settings with regard to SEEA implementation and important issues related to intergovernmental coordination. This sub-session was chaired by Mr. Arturo de la Fuente from Eurostat.
- (c) Sub-session 3c - Production processes and capacity building: This sub-session discussed technical, methodological and organisation aspects including main data sources and data gaps, methodological problems, data quality and dissemination. The case examples were from Serbia and Denmark. Statistics Norway presented its experience from international cooperation projects. This sub-session was chaired by Ms. Viveka Palm from Statistics Sweden.

Session 4: Emerging Issues

12. Chair of this session was Mr. Mark Lound from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

13. This session informed about selected emerging issues, namely the valuation of ecosystem accounting and the new SEEA sub-system System of Environmental Economic Accounting for Agriculture (SEEA AGRI). A presentation of valuation methods was given by the Wageningen University and practical examples on valuing ecosystems were presented by the World Bank and Australia. An introduction into the new SEEA AGRI was given by the FAO's consultant.

Session 5: Conclusions and Recommendations for further work

14. This session was chaired by Mr. Peter van de Ven from OECD.

15. In this session the main outcomes and recommendations were discussed and agreed, based on a draft document which was circulated as a room document. Minor, mostly editorial changes were made after a one week consultation process among the participants of the seminar. The agreed main outcomes and recommendations are presented below.

III. Summary of the main conclusions reached at the meeting

General introduction

16. SEEA has a long history of development by engaging many people and countries since 1993. The adoption of the SEEA Central Framework as a global standard in 2012 built on that history and experience. Since then there has been major progress in the awareness of the usefulness of SEEA and increasing efforts in its implementation. While further development of the SEEA is important, the focus on the implementation of the central framework should be strengthened.

17. Fifty four countries worldwide have developed a program for the SEEA implementation, and it is progressively being used as a policy tool. Moreover, the implementation of SEEA offers a unique opportunity to support the measurement of SDG goals and targets in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular for the integration of environmental and economic statistics.

18. Developing environmental-economic accounts is to be considered as an achievement but not as the end goal. The broader purpose of the SEEA is to encourage more informed discussion of environmental issues in an economic context.

SEEA and policy use

19. The environmental-economic accounts are currently used in a wide range of policy uses. However, in some countries it is more developed than in others. The potential use of SEEA in the policy context still has to be further explored. In this respect, there is a need to exchange experience among countries and international organizations, and also to identify the potential future users of SEEA and improve the communication with them.

20. It is important to seek opportunities for highlighting the use of SEEA accounts in economic and environmental policy. It was recalled that the primary objective of SEEA is to integrate environmental information into economic discussion. The importance of SEEA for policy questions related to employment and “green jobs” was also highlighted.

21. Looking at environmental policy more generally, an important role for SEEA is in measuring productivity and intensity of water, energy, waste, etc.

22. Timeliness of data is of utmost importance for policy use. The issue here is how the statisticians can react to this. The link between SEEA data and forecasting (models) should be further strengthened.

23. It is important to develop links to and promote the potential benefits of the use of SEEA in international policy frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and Green Growth indicators. In this regard the development of SEEA compliant databases was also considered important.

24. Among recent success stories is the EU Regulation on European environmental economic accounts, the OECD Green Growth Strategy, and the use of SEEA by the World Bank's WAVES Program to inform economic decision making on natural resources.

Communication on potential use of SEEA

25. SEEA does not yet have a status similar to national accounts including its headline indicators like GDP and household disposable income. In fact key people in government environment agencies often are not even aware of the SEEA framework. There is need to communicate its value added to policy analysts and politicians as well as the research community. Development of a communication strategy is therefore considered important, in order to raise awareness. In doing so, it is considered important to frame SEEA in such a way that a broader audience becomes aware of the benefits and potential of SEEA implementation. Developing policy stories may be a way forward, but other channels of communication, including social media, should also be explored. It would be good to exchange experiences in this field. International organizations were asked to look at potential avenues to further align their initiatives in this respect.

26. The seminar was informed that a sub-group of the UN Committee on Environment-Economic Accounts (UNCEEA) is currently dealing with communication and branding, and is developing tools to assist countries and international organisations in the communication of SEEA.

Implementation of SEEA

27. Participating countries expressed interest in advancing the SEEA implementation. Similarly to the SNA implementation strategy in the region, a common approach to implementation should be assured by the development of a regional strategy, as much as possible aligned with the global strategy for the SEEA implementation. The participants recognized the importance of a strategic approach and national ownership of the SEEA implementation, including development of national plans and mainstreaming the SEEA as part of national statistical and other policy strategies.

28. The implementation of SEEA is not just the responsibility of national statistical offices, it encompasses the coordination and the cooperation with a range of agencies, both data suppliers and accounts users, with responsibilities for environment, economic and social issues. Statistical confidentiality was identified as a possible constraint.

29. Developing capabilities is a key factor in expanding the implementation of the SEEA. This can be done through various modes: international training programs, bilateral assistance, developing a knowledge platform with country practices, etc. International organizations were requested to coordinate their programs as much as possible. There is a demand for a better knowledge base on valuation principles.

30. In developing capabilities, it was considered important to have a helpdesk or web forum, including a list of experts for consultation as well as different groups working on various topics that countries could use to raise questions related to the practical compilation of SEEA-modules. The Seminar was informed that the Technical Committee of the SEEA Central Framework, which operates under the auspices of the UNCEEA, has been using the E-mail seea@un.org as a helpdesk whereby UNSD answers the questions it can or – in case uncertainties arise – the opinion of the Committee is sought.

31. Participants also emphasized the importance of having a centralized and regularly updated knowledge base. UNSD has established a knowledge base to serve as repository of

SEEA relevant documents, including an archive of publications of country practices. The website is undergoing renovation to improve its users interface. In this respect, OECD would also consider making public the information collected by the Working Party on Environmental Information after consulting with its members.

32. The availability of (financing of) human resources for the implementation of SEEA may be a bottleneck in many countries. Financing by commissioned work (a user pays for implementing parts of the SEEA which he needs) can be a feasible alternative.

33. In respect of the implementation of SEEA, it was noted that source data may be (far) less than perfect, and that the compilation of SEEA-tables may require “boldness” in making assumptions or applying some modelling. Good experience has been gained by first publishing “experimental accounts”, and gradually improving the results by interacting with users and other key players.

34. The availability of good environment statistics is an important prerequisite for the implementation of SEEA. Developing environment statistics following the structure of the UN-FDES (Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics) is a possible starting point.

35. Participants from EECCA suggested that the existing UNECE Joint Task Force on Environment Statistics and Indicators provide a platform for technical and methodological support to these countries.

36. Considering the increasing demand and the limited availability of experts on the SEEA, it was suggested to use tools such as blended learning that allow countries to take on-line training, thus training a large number of experts from NSOs and different ministries.

37. A regional strategy for the SEEA implementation, including a set of priorities and a program of work, could be useful to advance the work.

Prioritization of implementing SEEA

38. Priorities in environmental economic accounts programs will vary from country to country, depending on policy demand, and it is important to recognize this diversity.

39. Despite differences in priorities of countries and international organisations, it is important to look for commonalities and to further coordinate efforts at the international level, as the international comparison provides an important value added for policy analysis and monitoring.

40. It is also considered important to continue the work on the SEEA research agenda, in particular the development of classifications and methods for the development of land use and land cover accounts.

41. The Seminar was informed that within a given topic (water, energy, etc.) the Technical Committee for the SEEA Central Framework is currently developing core accounts and a limited set of physical and monetary core tables. These core tables aim to assist countries in the implementation of the SEEA by making clear to compilers what data is included in the core tables and accounts and what key information can be derived. The focus of the core accounts is on policy relevance.

International coordination

42. Coordination of the work of international organizations is key in a successful implementation strategy. There was a call for further aligning the activities of international

organizations in the area of environmental-economic accounting, predominantly consisting of the United Nations, World Bank, the OECD and Eurostat. Regional Commissions and international organizations such as Eurostat and OECD could play an important role in the coordination with the major players among their member countries.

43. There was a call for making an inventory of various international initiatives supporting the implementation of SEEA.

Conclusions and Recommendations

44. In respect of the above participants in the Joint UNECE/OECD Seminar on the Implementation of SEEA agreed:

- (a) The exchange of best practices and providing possibilities for discussion of particular issues, both conceptual and practical, as well as the use of SEEA is important.
 - (b) Joint UNECE/OECD seminars on the implementation of SEEA should continue to allow for exchange of practical experience, advancing the implementation and discuss coordination issues among international agencies active in the SEEA work in the UNECE region. Other topics to be addressed in such seminars may include the exploration of ways forward to promote the use of SEEA and the integration of social data. These seminars will be complementary to other international initiatives such as the London Group.
 - (c) A regional UNECE implementation strategy will be developed, which identifies implementation priorities for groups of countries and which will allow a common implementation approach. Existing mechanisms should be used as far as possible to support capacity building.
 - (d) The existing helpdesk of UNSD could be used and, if needed, further strengthened with an expanded network of experts.
 - (e) An inventory of international activities should be developed and maintained in close cooperation with international organizations.
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