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Eighth meeting of the Executive Committee of the  
Statistical Conference of the Americas of the  
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

Santo Domingo, 22-24 October 2008

**ACTIVITIES REPORT OF THE INITIATIVE GROUP OF THE WORKING GROUP  
ON ENVIRONMENTAL STATISTICS \***

\* This document was prepared by the Initiative Group which comprises the Chair of the Executive Committee, the secretariat of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the following countries: Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico and Panama.

## A. INTRODUCTION

Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the richest regions in the world in terms of biodiversity and natural resources. Its economies depend heavily on the use of those resources for economic growth and human development. With the exception of Mexico and Brazil, the countries of the region export primary goods, such as agricultural and forestry products and hydrocarbons, in other words, products that make intensive use of natural resources. Other production activities, such as industry, transportation and tourism, which are of tremendous importance in the Caribbean countries, create pollution and exert considerable pressure on the environment. The overexploitation of the natural capital that sustains so many of the economies in the region therefore poses a threat to their development and jeopardizes present and future generations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The environmental problems facing Latin America and the Caribbean are many in number and complex in kind. Rapid unplanned urbanization, the degradation of ecosystems (river basins, forests and seas, among others) and the loss of biodiversity threaten the region. Water resources, soils and coastal areas are becoming increasingly polluted, and the region is proving to be more and more vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Meeting the challenge of sustainable development has become a sine qua non condition for ensuring economic development and guaranteeing the future for generations to come.

Tremendous headway has been made over the past 30 years in the institutionalization of environmental issues in Latin America and the Caribbean. Special laws have been passed, ministries and secretariats for the environment have been set up, and a wide array of international and regional agreements have been signed. Civil society has also played a fundamental role in environmental protection and development activities. There is no doubt that the environment has been gaining importance in national policy agendas throughout the region.

What the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean now need is timely and reliable data on the state of the environment and natural resources so that they can make informed decisions and public-policy choices that further sustainable development.

In response, national statistics offices and environment ministries all over the region have been working to formalize the compilation of environmental statistics, indicators and accounts. These efforts have been both heterogeneous and fruitful. Several new institutions have been set up to carry out environmental statistics programmes over the last decade, and an increasing number of these institutions have units devoted exclusively to environmental data collection.<sup>1</sup> Also, more countries are publishing regular indicators and statistics, and inter-institutional platforms for coordinating and expanding the production and diffusion of environmental statistics are becoming more common. Furthermore, regional and horizontal cooperation in this area is increasing.

This trend towards enhancing the development of environmental statistics as a means of monitoring public policies and supporting decision-making processes is reflected in the work of the Statistical Commission of the United Nations and of the Statistical Conference of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, at the global and regional level, respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> The broad concept of environmental statistics that includes both environmental statistical series and environmental indicators and accounts is used here. It is recommended that these three products be built up gradually and synergistically.

The inclusion of environmental issues in the regional agenda of the Conference is an important step forward in the development of official environmental statistics systems in the region. There is still a long way to go, however, before the region has consolidated environmental information and statistics systems that can provide timely input for public policymaking.

## **B. BACKGROUND**

The Statistical Conference of the Americas of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean was set up as a subsidiary body of ECLAC to contribute to the advancement of statistics policies and activities in the countries of the region.

One of its main objectives is to promote the development and improvement of national statistics and work to ensure that they are comparable internationally, bearing in mind the recommendations of the United Nations Statistical Commission, the specialized agencies and other relevant organizations.

Goal 3 of the Statistical Conference of the Americas is to promote the development of technical and methodological capacities in order to generate high-quality statistical information in the region. In this regard, the Conference's Strategic Plan 2005-2015 sets out the following objective:<sup>2</sup>

“Ensure that all countries, according to their circumstances, have relevant statistics on their natural resources and environment, in addition to a minimum set of common sustainability indicators for the region as a whole.”

The Strategic Plan also indicates the following line of action: “Exchange experiences and best practices for the development of statistics on natural resources and the environment and encourage the implementation of a minimum set of common sustainability indicators for the region as a whole”.

The Executive Committee of the Statistical Conference, at its seventh meeting held in Bogotá on 29 and 30 November 2007, approved the creation of an initiative group to establish the terms of reference and mandate of a future working group on environmental statistics for consideration and approval at the next meeting of the Executive Committee.<sup>3</sup>

“Approves the creation of an initiative group composed of the Chairperson of the Executive Committee, the secretariat of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the United Nations Environment Programme and invites the member countries of the Statistical Conference of the Americas interested in participating in this group to indicate their interest to the Chairperson for the purpose of establishing the terms of reference and mandate of a future working group on environmental statistics for consideration and approval at the next meeting of the Executive Committee.”

In February 2008, the composition of the initiative group for the working group on environmental statistics was as follows: the Chair of the Executive Committee (Colombia), the secretariat of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Strategic Plan 2005-2015* (LC/L.2715(CEA.4/3/Rev.1)), Santiago, Chile, August 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the seventh meeting of the Executive Committee of the Statistical Conference of the Americas* (LC/L.2870), Santiago, Chile, February 2008.

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico and Panama.<sup>4</sup>

### C. GENERAL OBJECTIVE

The general objective of the working group on environmental statistics is to promote the development of relevant statistics on natural resources and the environment and their integration into the national statistics systems of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

### D. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Identify and promote regional and subregional cooperation activities to boost the capacity of the member countries to produce high-quality national and subnational (or local) environmental statistics.
- Ensure the documentation and exchange of experiences and good practices in the development of national and subnational (or local) environmental statistics systems.
- Develop a minimum set of common environmental statistics for the region that respond to the information needs of the region's countries and international initiatives, bearing in mind previous regional initiatives in this area.
- Develop a set of common harmonized environmental sustainability indicators that can meet national, regional and international information demands, bearing in mind previous regional initiatives in this area.
- Promote the creation of inter-institutional platforms for collaboration in, and coordination and integration of, regional initiatives in environmental statistics, indicators and accounts.
- Promote the use of the System of Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting (SEEA) as a framework of reference for the development of related statistics and indicators in the region.

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<sup>4</sup> The Committee's first activity was to hold a videoconference on 6 February 2008 to define the programme of work and each participant's responsibilities. At this conference it was decided to:

- Create a subcommittee, composed of Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico and Panama, to draw up a proposed biannual work plan for the group.
- Create a subcommittee, composed of Colombia, Brazil and Chile, to draw up a plan for obtaining financial support for the group's activities, which is subsequently to be presented to donor governments and regional and international development agencies.

The deadline for the presentation of these documents was 30 April 2008.

ECLAC offered to draw up preliminary terms of reference for the functioning of the working group on environmental statistics and to submit them to the consideration of the countries and organizations participating in the initiative group and to create a virtual forum so that the subcommittees could participate in the drafting of the proposals.

The final versions of the documents outlining the group's terms of reference will be presented at the eighth meeting of the Executive Committee for discussion and approval.

## **E. EXPECTED RESULTS**

The following results are expected:

- The environmental statistics systems in the countries of the region are stronger.
- Regional coordination of the production of high-quality environmental statistics, indicators and accounts by the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean improves.
- A basic set of environmental statistics is defined, bearing in mind the information priorities of each country as well as previous regional initiatives in this field, with a view to ensuring the development of a set of common harmonized indicators that can meet the needs of international agencies and initiatives for environmental information.
- A minimum set of common environmental sustainability indicators is compiled, taking into account previous regional initiatives.
- National and regional metadata is prepared using a common format to facilitate the comparison of variables and their future harmonization.
- There is greater collaboration in, and coordination and integration of, regional initiatives in statistics, indicators and accounts.
- A training programme (that includes distance training) on environmental statistics, indicators and accounts that can stimulate and harmonize their development in the region is outlined and proposed.
- Greater use is made of the System of Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting (SEEA) for the development of related statistics in the region.

## **F. MEMBERS**

Producing environmental statistics is a complex, cross-cutting and multisectoral undertaking that involves various stakeholders and institutions. In most countries, the national statistics offices, together with the ministries of the environment, are responsible for compiling and disseminating environmental information, whether this be statistics, indicators or accounts.

The correct and adequate production of environmental statistics, indicators and accounts, however, requires the collaboration of the central bank, as well as of various other ministries, agencies and divisions that generate data on environmental resources, dynamics and phenomena or on environmental problems, such as pollution and the production and elimination of waste.

Given the complexity of environmental statistics at both the thematic and the institutional level, it is recommended that the Conference's working group on environmental statistics consist of national teams comprising:

- The directors responsible for official environmental statistics in the member countries (or their delegated representatives) who work either in the national statistics office, the ministry of the environment, or other official agencies responsible for environmental statistics.

The group should ideally also include:

- Representatives of international and regional environmental agencies, such as: the United Nations Statistics Division, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Andean Community (CAN), the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the MERCOSUR working group on the environment (SGT6), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These members would act in an advisory capacity, contributing their specialized knowledge and experience and helping the group obtain better financing and conditions for the development of its activities.

The group's members must make a firm commitment to participate actively in the work of the group, to attend meetings, carry out tasks, seek financing and prepare reports, among other activities.

### **G. GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE WORK PLAN**

The Executive Committee of the Statistical Conference of the Americas of ECLAC will consider and approve the biannual work plan drawn up by the working group on environmental statistics in accordance with the following general guidelines:

- The proposed activities must be in line with the Conference's Strategic Plan 2005-2015.
- The heterogeneity of statistics development and the differences in the progress each country has made in compiling environmental statistics, indicators and accounts must be taken into account.
- The needs of the users of environmental statistics must be taken into account so as to optimize the generation of such statistics and their use in public policymaking.
- The organization of the activities must bear in the mind the various ministries involved, such as the ministries of the environment, agriculture and energy.
- The organization of the activities must take into account existing initiatives in the field in and outside the region (the Database of Environmental Statistics and Indicators for Latin America and the Caribbean (BADEIMA), the database for sustainable development evaluation in Latin America (BADESALC), indicators for the follow-up of the seventh Millennium Development Goal, the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development (ILAC), the Andean Community, the GEO Data Portal, among others), as well as the activities of other working groups of the Statistical Conference of the Americas, such as the Working Group on the Monitoring of Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.
- The financial resources needed to carry out the proposed activities must be identified.

## H. MODE OF OPERATIONS

As proposed by the Conference, one of the region's countries will coordinate the working group's activities and work to ensure close collaboration among the other countries and organizations in the group. The Executive Committee of the Conference will decide at its eighth meeting which country this will be. Based on the Conference's experience with different working groups, it is recommended that the coordinating country be one that has significant experience with, as well as a unit devoted to, environmental statistics, and that it has an officer available to devote an adequate amount of time to coordinating the working group's activities.

The following work methods shall be used:

- Electronic communications for sharing information and monitoring the implementation of the work plan.
- The creation of an electronic forum in the ECLAC website.
- Annual meetings to examine the progress made, share experiences and define the next steps, subject to the availability of resources.
- The establishment of subgroups to address specific and emerging issues, as needed and according to the group's lines of action. Experts may participate in these subgroups.
- Annual reports for presentation to the Executive Committee of the Conference.
- The preparation of an evaluation and monitoring plan to measure progress made and adjust the work plan as necessary.

The Statistics and Economic Projections Division of ECLAC will be the secretariat of the working group. ECLAC, in collaboration with the coordinating country, will support its activities by organizing meetings, drawing up agendas, monitoring and evaluating the work programme and communicating the group's results and achievements. The group, together with the Statistics and Economic Projections Division of ECLAC, will also arrange technical assistance to promote and identify horizontal cooperation projects.

## I. FINANCING

The activities of the working group on environmental statistics will, as far as possible, be financed by its members and by donations from countries and international organizations that are willing to support this initiative. The group will also have to make constant efforts to seek adequate financing to carry out the activities contemplated in its work programme.

To guarantee a steady flow of financing, a financing proposal must be drawn up in keeping with agency guidelines for cooperation. Prioritizing the incorporation of the group's work into environmental policy throughout the region will further ensure the provision of additional resources for data collection.

The following are possible donors to the project: the Global Environment Fund (GEF), the ministries of foreign affairs and cooperation agencies of Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden; German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the Netherlands Fellowship Programmes Tailor-Made Training (NFP-TM); the Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Bank.

Several of these funds require the projects they support to have executing agencies, which in this case could be ECLAC or UNEP or other regional agencies that handle environmental statistics programmes.



## Annex

**WORK PLAN FOR THE WORKING GROUP ON ENVIRONMENTAL STATISTICS  
OF THE STATISTICAL CONFERENCE OF THE AMERICAS OF ECLAC**

**Proposed activities for the Work Plan for 2008-2012**

The following is a list of the necessary and possible activities that the working group on environmental statistics should consider once it has been established by the Executive Committee of the Statistical Conference of the Americas of ECLAC.

These activities, which are grouped by specific objective, reflect the consensus of the initiative group of this working group, which is composed of the Chair of the Executive Committee, the secretariat of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the United Nations Environment Programme and the following countries: Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico and Panama.

The definition of the group's agenda, the identification of possible sources of financing and the specification of deadlines are tasks that will have to be carried out once the working group is officially established.

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**ACTIVITIES**

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**A. General activities**

- (a) Executive Committee approval for the creation of a working group on environmental statistics.
- (b) Confirmation of the member countries of the working group and selection of the coordinating country.
- (c) The first meeting of the working group.

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**B. Activities related to specific objective 1**

Identify and promote regional and subregional cooperation activities to boost the capacity of the member countries to produce high-quality national and subnational (or local) environmental statistics.

- (a) Identification of national focal points for the establishment of a regional and subregional cooperation network.
  - (b) Assessment of the general and specific diagnoses of national environmental statistics production.
  - (c) Identification of national statistics offices and ministries or departments of the environment that could offer horizontal cooperation.
  - (d) Identification of international organizations, in coordination with ECLAC, that can provide cooperation for building national capacity for environmental statistics production.
  - (e) Prioritization of the countries that require cooperation for building national capacity for environmental statistics production.
  - (f) Design of a training programme, specifying the country in charge, as well as the topics to be covered and the timeframes involved, on the basis of the results of the aforementioned diagnoses.
  - (g) Selection of the coordinating country for the training programme. This country will promote concerted efforts to ensure the full implementation, assessment and adaptation of the programme as it progresses.
  - (h) Preparation of environmental information management protocols based on experiences acquired in different national contexts.
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**C. Activities related to specific objective 2**

Ensure the documentation and exchange of experiences and good practices in the development of national and subnational (or local) environmental statistics systems.

- (a) Establishment, with ECLAC support, of an electronic forum to facilitate communication among the working group's national focal points and the exchange of experiences, successful or otherwise, in the development of environmental statistics, as well as the drafting of good practice manuals, report writing standards and similar activities.
  - (b) Development of training and knowledge-exchange activities through the forum.
  - (c) Meetings and events for sharing experiences and good practices.
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**D. Activities related to specific objective 3**

Develop a minimum set of common environmental statistics for the region that respond to the information needs of the region's countries and international initiatives, bearing in mind previous regional initiatives in this area.

- (a) Proposal of a set of core environmental statistics that are relevant to the region, based on:
    - An assessment of the recommendation of the United Nations Statistics Division regarding core environmental statistics associated with the seventh Millennium Development Goal.
    - A review of the ECLAC recommendation regarding the expansion of the indicators to monitor compliance with the seventh Millennium Development Goal and the ensuing need for basic environmental statistics.
    - A review of the basic statistics needed to construct the indicators proposed by the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean and the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development.
    - Indicators commonly used in the region and not considered by the aforementioned entities.
    - Studies of the principal results of the Conference on Climate Change and Official Statistics, and the incorporation of the applicable elements at a later stage of the programme.
  - (b) Development of a common format for metadata to facilitate the comparison of a minimum set of environmental statistics and their future harmonization.
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**E. Activities related to specific objective 4**

Develop a set of common harmonized environmental sustainability indicators that can meet national, regional and international information demands, bearing in mind previous regional initiatives in this area.

- (a) Preparation of a proposed set of common and harmonized environmental sustainability indicators for the region based on:
    - The indicators proposed by ECLAC for following up on compliance with the seventh Millennium Development Goal.
    - The indicators proposed for monitoring the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development.
    - The experience of the working group on environmental statistics and indicators of the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean.
    - Common indicators currently applied by the region's countries and not contemplated in the aforementioned initiatives.
  - (b) Design of a common format for presenting metadata to facilitate the comparison and harmonization of the set of indicators considered and approved for the proposed system.
  - (c) Validation of the methodological coherence of the proposed system's indicators, in terms of concept and scope.
  - (d) Drafting of recommendations for harmonizing any unresolved methodological aspects of the system.
  - (e) Proposed timetable for the implementation of the indicators system in phases, according to the current stage of development and complexity of the indicators involved.
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**F. Activities related to specific objective 5**

Promote the creation of inter-institutional platforms for collaboration in, and coordination and integration of, regional initiatives in environmental statistics, indicators and accounts.

- (a) Establishment of an alliance and a mechanism for coordination with the working group on environmental statistics and indicators of the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean.
- (b) Establishment of alliances with the environmental commissions of the subregions (CCAD, CAN, CARICOM, MERCOSUR, among others).
- (c) Creation of ties with the Latin American Energy Organization to define common points of interest in energy-related statistics.
- (d) Drafting of a publication on environmental statistics and indicators for Latin America and the Caribbean with the joint sponsorship of other regional entities and United Nations agencies, taking into consideration previous regional initiatives, such as the *Statistical Yearbook of Latin America and the Caribbean* and the *Global Environment Outlook (GEO)* of UNEP.

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**G. Activities related to specific objective 6**

Promote the use of the System of Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting (SEEA) as a framework of reference for the development of related statistics and indicators in the region.

- (a) Activities with countries that have already made progress in implementing the SEEA designed by the United Nations, to pave the way for the System's gradual adoption in the other countries as their basic accounting processes develop, placing special emphasis on water.
  - (b) Identification of the countries in the region that have already made progress in integrated environmental and economic accounting and are willing to help others.
  - (c) Design of a scheme for the SEEA to be used as a frame of reference for developing related statistics in the countries interested in so doing, based on a diagnosis of the production of basic statistics on the environment and natural resources in the countries of the region.
  - (d) Design and organization of courses on the SEEA (general, promotional and more specialized courses), with special emphasis on water accounting.
  - (e) Identification and review of the basic statistics recommended as necessary by the United Nations Statistics Division for drawing up environmental accounts (on energy, forestry and water).
  - (f) Support for the more extensive adoption of the SEEA through the provision of direct technical assistance and the establishment of a regional position with regard to the London Group and the United Nations Statistics Division.
  - (g) Pursuit of collaboration with international agencies that work on the topic.
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