



Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1995/24
20 March 1995

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Third session
11-28 April 1995

National information

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In pursuance of a decision taken by the Commission on Sustainable Development at its first session, some 60 Governments and organizations provided information at the second session on the activities they were undertaking to implement Agenda 21. 1/ While the Commission was appreciative of the analysis undertaken by the Secretariat, it nevertheless decided that a simplification of the guidelines for future reporting was necessary. Thus, in August 1994, simplified guidelines for the presentation of national information to the Commission at its third session, in 1995, were transmitted by the Secretariat to all Member States and organizations concerned.

2. As of 1 March 1995, 16 developing countries, 15 developed countries, one country with an economy in transition and the European Union had submitted voluntary information to the Secretariat, for a total of 33 reports. This year, although there were few written comments on the guidelines, most unofficial comments have on the whole been positive.

3. The purpose of this report is twofold. First, it presents, in text form, summaries and findings on the sectoral issues under review and, in table form, information on national level coordination of Agenda 21 actions (annex I). Second, the report presents in matrix form the key aspects of each sectoral chapter, including elements relating to sectoral funding, capacity and major group involvement (annex II). For technical reasons and in order to reflect input from as many Member States as possible, the sectoral matrices will also be circulated as a background document at the beginning of the third session of the Commission. The graphic presentation should provide a visual impression of national activities and problems. An informal background document in the form of a directory of national coordinating mechanisms and contacts, which builds on the database initiated in 1994, is also available.

4. Most of the information submitted by Governments is very detailed and provides the Commission with a wealth of data which the Secretariat hopes to incorporate in a systematically maintained database that will continue to be expanded in the future. More precise information can be found in the complete country submissions. Although the guidelines for 1995 sought more precise information than in 1994, many of the responses are based on estimates rather than on statistically exact data.

I. COMMENTS ON SUBMISSIONS

5. The complexity and plethora of the data collected and the processes involved in collecting, analysing and presenting the data underline the need for further standardization and simplification of data collection and presentation of findings. The work on sustainable development indicators is very important in this respect and is relevant not only to the Commission but also to other United Nations organizations, programmes and the Bretton Woods institutions. At the third session, the Commission may wish to draw on the attached annexes as indicators of trends at the national level.

6. The Secretariat has received too few reports to allow global conclusions to be drawn. While most of the developed countries and several Latin American countries have reported, there have been few submissions from other areas. However, the information received was in many cases very detailed and provides a good picture of what the reporting countries are doing and where their problems lie.

7. The reports were used by agency task managers as inputs into the sectoral and cross-sectoral documents being presented to the Commission at its third session. Regrettably, no reports were received by the deadline, and thus the sectoral and cross-sectoral documents reflect data received from only a very few countries.

8. As mentioned above, the matrices covering the sectoral presentations have been prepared to provide a quick visual picture. The matrices are based primarily on information provided for the third session of the Commission. However, in 1994 a few countries submitted national versions of Agenda 21 or comprehensive reports, and information gleaned from them relevant to the 1995 review has been included. The information provided by a number of Governments in the 1995 reports is very specific. In some cases, it is immediately obvious that the reports have been completed by the departments most directly concerned and, in these cases, very detailed information has been submitted. The Secretariat found that information submitted in 1994 was, generally speaking, more difficult to quantify.

II. CROSS-SECTORAL ISSUES

9. Inputs from national reports have been included in the cross-sectoral reports. Annex I of the present report provides an updated summary of key coordination mechanisms, their membership or composition and their mandates. The most important national level follow-up actions have also been listed. By

/...

the beginning of March 1995 information on national coordination and structures had been received from 74 countries. It is evident that many legislative and organizational matters are being dealt with to address issues related to Agenda 21 through sustainable development strategies, plans and legislation. A number of countries indicate that the Agenda 21 structure makes it difficult to report on funding since the criteria commonly used for reporting on development assistance (criteria established by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)) are not easily converted. Several developing country reports suggest that coordination efforts among aid organizations and programmes could be improved. The sectoral matrices also reflect the participation of relevant major groups in the national processes. The information provided in the national submissions does not always give details of such participation, but on the whole major groups appear to be consulted or at least given an opportunity to provide comments and inputs.

III. 1995 SUMMARIES AND FINDINGS ON SECTORAL ISSUES

Chapter 10. Integrated approach to the planning and management of land resources

10. This is an "umbrella" chapter for the other land chapters under review in 1995. Its only programme area deals with the reorganization and, where necessary, strengthening of the decision-making structure, including existing policies, planning and management procedures. It does not deal with the operational aspects of planning and management, which are covered under the sectoral programmes that follow. The matrix for the chapter reflects its specific nature. A few of the countries reporting have addressed the integration of land resources fully, but the majority of countries appear to be in the midst of the review process. A few developing countries lack or show gaps in capacity and funding.

11. Federal Governments such as the United States of America, Canada and Germany have indicated in their reports that they have difficulty in providing information on actions that have been decentralized to state and community levels.

Chapter 11. Combating deforestation

12. Of the countries reporting on chapter 11, eight have rated combating deforestation as a very high national priority. Five of these countries are industrialized. Seven countries give the subject low national priority. In several countries giving high priority to this chapter, deforestation is not a national concern. All but three countries appear to have national plans or strategies covering the sector, and these plans have been integrated into a broader national plan. Nearly all of the countries have reviewed their plans or strategies since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in June 1992, and in all but one country relevant major groups have been involved in the process. Developing countries, to a varying degree, have reported national funding and capacity constraints. Some industrialized countries also indicate funding constraints, most likely arising from the general economic

/...

slow-down, cut-backs and streamlining. Whether or not this has had an impact on deforestation is difficult to determine.

13. Among developing countries, agricultural encroachment ranks highest as a sectoral concern, with logging, urban encroachment and the need for fuelwood listed as serious in some cases. The industrialized countries as a whole report very few serious problems in the forestry sector, except for one country, which faces problems with air pollution and urban encroachment as well as the natural elements.

14. Several developed countries and a few developing countries whose forests play a significant role in the national economy have submitted reports and annexes that are qualitatively impressive.

Chapter 12. Combating desertification and drought

15. Desertification is not an issue for the developed countries that reported, with the exception of the United States of America, which reports that approximately 37 per cent of its land area could be described as a desert area or an area prone to desertification. The United States does not have a specific strategy for the sector and the report indicates some capacity constraints.

16. Nine developing countries have provided detailed information and identified their most serious concerns. They report problems with capacity and funding; as a consequence, the monitoring of soil and land degradation is poor. The most commonly reported factors impacting on desertification appear to be grazing and the demand for fuelwood.

17. Most countries seem to involve local community groups in the national planning process. Chile, Turkey and Uganda have assigned high or very high national priority to desertification issues. Namibia states that 85 per cent of its land area is covered by desert. As of 1 March 1995, 100 countries and the European Union had signed the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought. Of the developing countries that have reported, nearly all have signed the Convention.

Chapter 13. Sustainable mountain development

18. Three industrialized countries and 11 developing countries have addressed chapter 13 (six in great detail). Seventy-seven per cent of Switzerland consists of mountain areas, and national legislation is in preparation. Mountain areas in Switzerland and Japan are of very high national priority. Switzerland reports some constraints with funding and national capacity. Japan, Switzerland and France consider soil erosion, flooding and avalanches to be serious problems.

19. Of the developing countries, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Malaysia, Turkey, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania consider sustainable mountain development to be of high or very high priority. Of these, Colombia, Cuba and the United Republic of Tanzania have legislation addressing mountain

development, either specifically or as part of forest legislation. Colombia and the United Republic of Tanzania report national funding and capacity constraints and poor physical monitoring. Physical monitoring in other developing countries is also weak. Soil erosion, flooding, avalanches and earthquakes are listed as serious problems, but quantifiable data are scarce.

Chapter 14. Promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development

20. Most of the countries reporting consider sustainable agriculture and rural development to be of very high priority.

21. All the developed countries appear to have well integrated strategies and plans for sustainable agriculture and rural development. European Union members frequently refer to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The numerous programme areas under the chapter have been or are being addressed in full by all developed countries.

22. Most of the developing countries also have national plans, legislation or strategies, but the implementation rate of the various programme areas is lower. Mozambique and Uganda reflect constraints in capacity and implementation.

Chapter 15. Conservation of biological diversity

23. All but one of the countries reporting give high or very high priority to the conservation of biological diversity. Most have ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity. Information on national capacity and funding is sketchy, perhaps because in the national context biodiversity is very often covered under other chapters.

24. Habitat destruction is the most frequently reported problem affecting the conservation of biodiversity, followed by over-harvesting.

25. As of 1 March 1995 the Convention on Biological Diversity had been ratified by 114 members.

IV. FUTURE REPORTING TO THE COMMISSION

26. Based on the decision taken at the second session of the Commission, guidelines covering the fourth session (1996) will be made available to Member States by the Secretariat at the end of the present session for those chapters of Agenda 21 that will be reviewed in 1996.

Notes

1/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda), resolution 1, annex II.