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GENERAL DISCUSSION ON PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF  
AGENDA 21, FOCUSING ON THE CROSS-SECTORAL COMPONENTS OF  
AGENDA 21 AND THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

National information

Report of the Secretary-General

1. At the first session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, Governments were encouraged to provide the Commission at its second session with information on activities they were undertaking to implement Agenda 21.
2. Based on the guidelines provided by the Commission and following Agenda 21 as closely as possible, the Secretary-General sent a letter to all Governments in August 1993 proposing a format for presenting the information and seeking voluntary responses by 30 November 1993.
3. As at 31 March 1994, 26 replies had been received. Ten were from developing countries, three from countries with economies in transition, 11 from industrialized countries and two from regional organizations. Included in these figures are some reports which not only contain the information requested for the second session of the Commission, but go beyond that by presenting national action plans for Agenda 21. The replies vary in length and detail, the most elaborate being in excess of 150 pages. As in the case of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the time needed for preparing reports was significantly underestimated and, for many developing countries in particular, the lack of national capacity has not made it easier to provide information.

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\* E/CN.17/1994/1.

#### A. Method of analysis

4. Agenda 21 served as the framework for the present analysis. To facilitate the analysis, a basic database programme was developed to make it possible to sort and review material country by country on both a sectoral and cross-sectoral basis. Country replies have been studied in detail and the information has been entered in the database. Some countries provided replies which easily fit the structure of the database. However, other reports required analysis, cross-referencing and retyping. At this juncture, the database is only an internal tool for assisting the Secretariat in preparing the necessary reports for the second session of the Commission. The Secretariat will adapt the database as appropriate to meet future reporting requirements.

5. A sample of the database structure in matrix form, showing one chapter of Agenda 21 with its programme areas on the vertical axis and the information requested under the guidelines on the horizontal axis, is contained in annex I to the present report. In analysing the national information, the Secretariat has looked for relevant information for each and every box in the matrix. The information extracted from the country reports on sectoral and cross-sectoral issues has been included in the relevant thematic documents before the Commission; the present report only summarizes the main findings from the national information provided, as well as information on the national level mechanisms and arrangements for addressing the follow-up to Agenda 21.

#### B. Summary of findings

6. Although the reports received are not numerous enough to permit the Secretariat to draw any definite conclusions, they nevertheless provide some useful information for the future. In most of the countries from which the Secretariat has received information, action is being taken to follow up on the decisions of UNCED. Many countries have also reported on actions taken regarding international conventions.

7. Some reports stated clearly that it was still too early to be able to measure any significant progress since UNCED and that the format used by the Secretariat was too complex.

8. All developing country reports reflect or stress the lack of human, financial and/or technological resources. The responses concentrate on steps taken in conjunction with preparations for UNCED and the immediate follow-up to it, consisting of the formation or strengthening of consultative groups and the identification of focal points as necessary first steps in the process. Initial meetings of consultative groups, introduction of new legislation, strategies and/or draft action programmes are often mentioned. Some developing country reports list programmes and projects, indicating funding estimates and technology needs being directed to international financial and development institutions. Whether these activities are new initiatives taken after UNCED or whether they have been revised is not always clear.

9. The three countries in transition seem to have fewer constraints in the human resources sector but lack the sound technology required to tackle

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identified, often serious, environmental problems and also lack the funding for such technology. As far as basic knowledge of the problems is concerned, however, these countries appear to have a relatively good understanding of the situation.

10. The developed countries have provided solid data and addressed the various issues raised in Agenda 21. But they have not always presented the data in a format that matches Agenda 21, since changing their existing statistical and reporting systems to adapt to the Agenda 21 format would involve financial costs and, in some cases, new legislation.

11. Brief country summaries, based on the national information are provided in a separate informal paper.

#### National level coordination mechanisms

12. The main national level coordination mechanisms and actions described in the country and regional information provided to the Secretariat are covered in annex II to the present report. The table shows that most of the actions are related to a review or strengthening of existing mechanisms or the establishment of new national coordination mechanisms for sustainable development. Action has started, frequently with the involvement of non-governmental organizations, in the countries and regional organizations that have reported, and coordination mechanisms are solidifying.

#### Future reporting to the Commission

13. Serious work has gone into the preparation of the replies. They provide data to those who follow specific sectoral or cross-sectoral topics. These accounts are valuable at the national and perhaps the regional level and for sectoral specialists, but less so for countries geographically and economically far apart.

14. Adhering to the guidelines established by the Commission on Sustainable Development at its first session, the Secretariat will simplify the 1995 exercise by endeavouring to narrow the focus of the programme areas so that more concise information can be provided.