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PROPOSALS FOR THE STREAMLINING OF REQUESTS FOR NATIONAL REPORTING

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. At its fourth meeting, in April 1996, the Commission on Sustainable Development, in paragraph 6 of its decision 4/8 on information provided by Governments and organizations, noted that in the period following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), States were being confronted with a growing number of reporting requirements in the field of sustainable development. In order to reduce duplication of work, the Commission requested the Secretary-General, in cooperation with interested States, to provide the Commission at its fifth session with proposals for streamlining national reporting in the field of sustainable development. The country profiles could be the initial step towards streamlining reporting requirements. The present report has been prepared in compliance with that request.

2. Concern at the increasing number of national reports that countries are required to submit has been growing and expressed in various forums. Member States have noted that they must prepare reports not only for the Commission but also to comply with the requirements of conventions, agreements reached at major conferences and global programmes of action. For all countries, the requests constitute a burden; but for countries with limited capacity, the burden has become overwhelming. It has also become apparent that some of the information being requested is duplicative and redundant.

I. SCOPE OF THE REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

A. Reports to the Commission on Sustainable Development

3. In pursuance to a decision taken by the Commission at its first session, in 1993, Governments and organizations were invited to submit information to the Commission in order to allow it to monitor progress at the national level in the implementation of Agenda 21.

4. In preparation for its special session to review and appraise the implementation of Agenda 21, the General Assembly, in paragraph 13 (b) of its resolution 50/113 of 20 December 1995, requested the Secretary-General to prepare country profiles providing a concise presentation of progress made and constraints encountered in implementing Agenda 21 at the national level, compiled on the basis of national information received and in close cooperation with the Governments concerned. Those profiles, which cover all chapters of Agenda 21, have been prepared and are available electronically as well as in hard copy, facilitating their use, as suggested by the Commission as a basis for streamlining.

B. Other reporting requirements

5. In the context of conventions, national information is requested with a view to monitoring compliance with implementation by parties to the conventions. The conventions requiring reporting on sustainable development issues include: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on

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Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Requests vary from information on national legislation to highly technical and detailed data at the national level. Most of the conventions have or are formulating guidelines to assist countries in reporting, and most require the formulation of national strategies.

6. A number of extensive national reports have also been requested in the context of the preparation of major conferences held since UNCED, such as the World Summit for Social Development, the International Conference on Population and Development, and the Fourth World Conference on Women. Those conferences have also resulted in requests for information on agreements reached and requests for follow-up to global plans of action. The Economic and Social Council has discussed the issue, and in its agreed conclusions 1995/1, requested the Secretary-General to prepare a standardized and simplified format that could be used by Governments in preparing information on a single subject or in clusters of subjects. In response to that request, the Secretary-General, in his report on the implementation of agreed conclusions 1995/1 (E/1996/59), noted that the General Assembly had requested the Secretariat to prepare country profiles for the special session to be held in June 1997 for the purpose of an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21. It was also noted that similar efforts would need to be pursued in following up the other conferences.

II. FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS/CONSULTATION PROCESS

7. In that context and in order to ascertain the extent of reporting requirements and identify overlaps, a survey of reporting requirements was undertaken (see annex I) and a reporting calendar prepared (see annex II). Inter-agency consultations were held on 5 and 6 December 1996, resulting in a report with proposals on streamlining for discussion at the ninth meeting of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) (20 and 21 February 1997). Subsequently, as requested by the Commission, the responsible Vice-Chair of the Commission convened informal consultations with member States on 25 February 1997.

8. Throughout, the focus was on the streamlining of reporting processes, that is, on requests for information made to Governments, and not on the products of those requests, bearing in mind that reports themselves are generally prepared in response to legal commitments or legislative mandates. Given that scope, the exercise was limited to information requested within the context of the United Nations. There was, however, recognition of the fact that many countries are also required to submit reports in response to requests by regional and other non-United Nations organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. In addition, the focus was primarily on those reporting requirements that have emerged since UNCED.

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III. CONCLUSIONS REACHED AND PROPOSALS FOR STREAMLINING

9. Based on the meetings and consultations described above, the proposals set out below are brought to the attention of the Commission for its consideration and decision.

10. Information relevant to Agenda 21 should be shared by requesting it in such a manner that Governments would not be requested to provide the same information to more than one United Nations organization or convention secretariat.

11. Information mandated from legally binding instruments, as well as by decisions and resolutions of intergovernmental bodies should continue to be provided to the respective secretariats. In addition, other United Nations system organizations that request national information should continue to do so. In both cases, the respective secretariats should make that information available, as appropriate for Agenda 21, to the secretariat of the Commission on Sustainable Development, for inclusion in future updated country profiles. Without prejudice to future decisions of the Commission, countries should not be requested to provide that information separately to the Commission unless they have not reported it previously (e.g., where reports are requested by a convention but a country is not a party to that convention). It was also agreed that, at all times, Governments have the discretion to report further to the Commission or to any other body, particularly where they find the process of reporting beneficial to their own strategic planning and participatory decision-making.

12. Organizations that have not yet done so should move towards making their information available electronically, on a country-by-country basis, in a manner that facilitates electronic linkages among the organizations of the United Nations system and the secretariats of the conventions. The streamlining exercise should be integrated with the programme of work related to the inter-agency exercise to improve access to United Nations system information on sustainable development. Further to earlier decisions of the Commission, and IACSD, such access is being provided through the creation of a system-wide sustainable development site on the World Wide Web in 1997, which will provide the linkages among relevant databases. Country files are intended to be part of the Web site (see annex III).

13. The reporting calendar (see annex II) should be updated annually and made available to the Commission on Sustainable Development and other intergovernmental bodies, as well as electronically. The calendar was drafted with a view to identifying all major reporting requirements in the field of sustainable development through the year 2000. It is intended to demonstrate how the various reports requested interrelate, and to assist Governments in planning for all reports related to sustainable development. It has been circulated to all convention secretariats and task managers, but still requires completion.

14. A longer-term objective is also proposed for the consideration of the Commission, namely, movement towards the eventual creation of national sustainable development Web sites by each member State. Such Web sites would allow each country to post the data necessary as a part of its reporting

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requirements to all relevant bodies, as well as other information to be determined by the country. Information could then be extracted from the national Web site electronically, thereby circumventing the need to request information. Such an approach would help link institutions and departments within a country; would provide all decision makers in that country with comprehensive information; and would facilitate the sharing of information internationally.

15. It is understood that some countries might need technical and/or financial assistance to accomplish this, as well as to build capacity in the area of reporting in general, and that should be kept in mind in the development of any such programme of work.

16. A related activity is the production of a manual on sustainable development reporting along the lines of the Manual on Human Rights Reporting.¹ The latter Manual is a reference guide for countries that contains general information on the reporting process and guidelines for reporting under six major human rights instruments. A similar manual for sustainable development could also serve as a training and reference guide for countries, and, inter alia, could contain the matrix, calendar and guidelines for reporting to the various conventions and other organizations. In the informal consultations with member States, it was suggested that the compilation and preparation of such a manual be considered.

IV. PROPOSALS FOR FUTURE WORK/ACTION

17. Based on the above, the Commission may wish to consider the following work programme:

(a) The Secretariat will continue its efforts to complete and update the information in the reporting matrix and calendar (see annexes I and II) so that they may be circulated and used as planning tools;

(b) The Secretariat will work together with other organizations in the United Nations system, as well as with the secretariats of the relevant conventions, to share information on sustainable development in such a way as to avoid duplication of requests to Governments for information;

(c) In order to share information, efforts will continue within the United Nations system to make information available electronically, on a country-by-country basis, in a manner that facilitates electronic linkages among the organizations of the United Nations system and the secretariats of the conventions;

(d) The streamlining process will be linked to the parallel exercises of ensuring common access to United Nations system databases and establishing the sustainable development Web page;

(e) Consultations will be undertaken within the United Nations system, including with the system of resident representatives, to facilitate support for capacity-building at the national level for both the preparation of national

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reports and their provision in an electronic format that is convenient for the country concerned. Donor countries are called upon to assist countries in that regard.

Notes

- ¹ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.91.XIV.1.

Annex I

REPORTING MATRIX

The attached Matrix includes a list of the topics covered by Agenda 21, the corresponding intergovernmental bodies, United Nations organizations and convention secretariats that request such information on a regular basis, and both the periodicity and manner in which information is sought from Governments. Information reflects the reporting status as of March 1997, as provided by the relevant secretariats.

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Annex II

REPORTING CALENDAR

The attached calendar of reporting requirements through the year 2000 (see annex II), was drafted to demonstrate how the various reports requested interrelate in terms of timing and periodicity. It is hoped that such a calendar might assist Governments in planning for all reports related to sustainable development, and give the various secretariats a clear idea of when reports will be available.

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Annex III

COMMON ACCESS TO UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM INFORMATION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WEB SITE

Mandate

At its third session, in April 1995, the Commission on Sustainable Development:

"Noted the importance of developing, among the organizations of the United Nations system, a common or compatible system of access to their respective databases, in order to share data fully, to streamline the collection and interpretation of data and to identify data gaps, for the purpose of providing more comprehensive and integrated data to decision makers at national, regional and international levels."

The Commission also invited the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD):

"To refine measures for establishing such a common or compatible system and to report thereon to the Commission at its fourth session."

In January 1996, the first inter-agency meeting on common and compatible systems of access to data was organized in New York. Among the recommendations of that meeting was that a sustainable development home page be established on the World Wide Web, with "hot links" to the "value-added" databases to be identified by the Agenda 21 task managers.

At its seventh meeting, in February 1996, IACSD reviewed the recommendations of the above-mentioned inter-agency meeting and agreed that there was need for further action, bearing in mind the role of the Information Systems Coordinating Committee and the International Computing Centre, and invited the task managers for information for decision-making and Earthwatch (the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat and the United Nations Environment Programme, respectively), in consultation with focal points in concerned United Nations organizations, to consider, inter alia, how to address the issue of home pages related to sustainable development on the World Wide Web and the development of hot links between them.

The sustainable development home page: organization and content

The IACSD proposals were submitted to the Commission on Sustainable Development at its fourth session, in April/May 1996, at which time the Commission requested the Department, in cooperation with other organizations and bodies of the United Nations system and within available resources to establish a sustainable development home page on the World Wide Web, with hot links to relevant databases throughout the United Nations system, as a means of facilitating access by countries to sources of information relevant to sustainable development.

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The issue of how to operationalize that decision was further discussed at an inter-agency workshop on information for sustainable development and Earthwatch, organized at Geneva, in September 1996. The recommendations made at that meeting are set out below:

1. The Web site should contain:

- (a) Historical information on sustainable development;
- (b) Virtual regional and country files, and links to city files elsewhere;
- (c) Virtual indicator files;
- (d) A youth corner;
- (e) Key issues, including small island developing States;
- (f) Relevant documentation of the Commission and other bodies;
- (g) Information on partners in sustainable development;
- (h) Sustainable development activities.

The Web site may also contain a section on new and emerging ideas, and another on mechanisms for user feedback.

- 2. All information should be completed with data and source tags to ensure that it is accurate and up to date.
- 3. Only official information would be posted on the Web site.
- 4. Every effort would be made to make information as accessible as possible, including providing an option to turn off graphics; establishing mirror sites in two or three different time zones; and continuing to make information available both in print and by other electronic means, such as gopher sites and e-mail.
- 5. The Web site would be created and maintained by the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. Certain core data, particularly for the regional and country files, would also be maintained by the Department, based on the country profiles being prepared for the special session of the General Assembly in 1997.
- 6. Consistent with the principles of subsidiarity, efficiency and economy, other information would be accessed through linkages to the Web sites of the other organizations and bodies of the United Nations system. Those organizations would have a responsibility to organize data on their home pages consistent with this approach.

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The sustainable development Web site: current status

Funds were made available through the existing regular budget of the Department to support the work of two consultants, who are in the process of designing the Web site. The design will permit searching for information by country, issue or indicator. It will also, as stipulated, place high priority on linkages with other World Wide Web sites throughout the United Nations system.

A third consultant is being funded through the United Nations Development Programme. Working within the format that is being designed specifically for the United Nations system sustainable development Web site, it is the task of this consultant to populate the site with country data, as provided by Governments through their country profiles. As indicated, only official information will be included in the virtual country files.

The new United Nations system sustainable development Web site is intended to be installed and accessible in time for the fifth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, although the loading of data and establishment of linkages may not be complete by that time.
