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## CSD INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP HIGHLIGHTS: MONDAY, 12 MARCH 2001

The Intersessional *Ad Hoc* Working Group on Information for Decision-making and Participation and on International Cooperation for an Enabling Environment (AHWG) began its work on Monday, 12 March 2001 at the UN headquarters in New York and is expected to conclude its work on Friday, 16 March 2001. Delegates considered organizational matters and discussed the Secretary-General's report on information for decision making and participation during the morning session. Discussion on the report was concluded in the afternoon.

### MORNING SESSION

The Chair of the ninth session of the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD-9), Bedrich Moldan (Czech Republic) opened the session and invited delegates to consider organizational matters. Delegates elected by acclamation Alison Drayton (Guyana) and Madina Jarbussynova (Kazakhstan) as Co-Chairs.

Co-Chair Drayton introduced, and delegates adopted, the agenda and other organizational matters (E/CN.17/ISWG.II/2001/1). She noted that the session would produce two papers: a Co-Chairs' summary that reflects the discussions, positions stated by delegations and alternative views; and a concise, action-oriented paper on elements for a draft decision for negotiations at CSD-9.

**INFORMATION FOR DECISION MAKING AND PARTICIPATION:** Co-Chair Drayton invited the Secretariat to introduce the report of the Secretary-General on information for decision making and participation (E/CN.17/2001/4 and Add.1). Lowell Flanders, Assistant Director, UN Division on Sustainable Development, elaborated the three-phase process undertaken to develop the set of indicators for sustainable development. He said the Secretary-General's report recommends that the Working Group could recognize the important role countries have played in testing the indicators and endorse the core set of indicators. He also suggested that the Working Group could support: continuing the work programme on indicators; advancing work on modalities for the linkages between and aggregation of indicators; and encouraging countries to make better use of the indicators.

CANADA reported on an international experts' workshop on information for decision making held in September 2000 in Ottawa, Canada, which was co-hosted by the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Environment Programme

(UNEP). The workshop considered the themes of access to and uses of information, data gaps in information systems, and new technology, and concluded that reliable access to information, access to data at the right time, and free and unrestricted access to information, as appropriate, are critical for sustainable development.

The EU and associated countries said the accuracy, coherence, cost-effectiveness and accessibility of data available on sustainable development and decision making must be enhanced. He outlined four priority areas and possible recommendations for CSD-9: improving coordination and harmonization of information collection and dissemination about the state and evolution of the environment and societies, and the pressures and potentials of economic and human activities; developing and using sets of indicators for sustainable development to help countries develop their own national sets of indicators; involving actors at various levels in developing legal instruments for access to information, public participation in decision making, and access to justice in environmental matters; and providing an operational environment for an independent, objective and reliable media and the involvement of the private sector.

JAPAN noted that Japanese companies and local governments are encouraged to disclose environmental information to the public. He highlighted the use of satellites for environmental study and supported the Global Mapping Project for digital spatial data. He supported references to increased investment in human resources and stakeholder participation in preparation of the CSD-9 draft decision, and encouraged initiatives toward environmental accounting. He called for continued convergence between the CSD and other organizations on the CSD work programme on indicators of sustainable development. He also supported: development and integration of satellite observation systems; training and capacity building; use of remote sensing data sharing systems; collaboration among global observation systems; and promotion of free data exchange among scientists. The US said international efforts cannot replace strong domestic actions to ensure collection and dissemination of national and local information, and noted the need for collaboration with stakeholders, including the business community. He supported the work of the CSD in developing indicators and highlighted the intergenerational component of sustainable development. SWITZERLAND said data is either not aggregated or not available on all areas of sustainable development and stated that his government would assist developing countries to harmonize and standardize data collection for improved integration into the multilateral trading system. He raised the issue of handling existing data,

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including different quality and collection methods. He outlined the requirements for synthesizing data and making it available for decision making.

CANADA acknowledged the value of the "information highway" in supporting development assistance, and recognized the knowledge built by Aboriginal communities. He encouraged the CSD to further pursue work on sustainable development indicators and to develop indicators for emerging problem areas such as disaster vulnerability, and recognized the benefits and the need for strategic partnerships between governments, civil society, the private sector and multilateral organizations. Noting that information is the cornerstone of sustainable development implementation, AUSTRALIA stated that the CSD should promote continuing dialogue between countries on the framework for sustainable development indicators as well as development and deployment of standards for collection and management of data, and encourage countries to consider accessibility of information as a priority for discussions leading up to Earth Summit 2002.

The RUSSIAN FEDERATION highlighted work undertaken to improve legislation on information for decision making, stating that current legislation in the Russian Federation guarantees environmental rights and access to information, and provides for various forms of participation in environmental decisions. He supported the work of the Århus Convention. The WORLD CIRCLE OF THE CONSENSUS submitted two documents for inclusion in CSD-9 documentation: the Global Energy Charter and the International Standards series 14000 and 13600. The GLOBAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATES called for greater partnership with existing civil society networks, such as UNEP's Interfaith Partnership for the Environment, to assist in disseminating information on sustainable development indicators. Describing the evolution of global interest in information for decision making, the UN ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE (UN/ECE) highlighted the Århus Convention, which establishes obligations for public authorities regarding environmental information.

#### AFTERNOON SESSION

NORWAY drew attention to the work of international organizations in streamlining international data collection and called for the development of international standards. He outlined criteria for decision making processes involving the public, including ensuring: public participation during stages when it is possible to influence results; broad sectors of society are able to submit comments; the timeframe accords sufficient time to submit comments; and authorities are duty-bound to consider the comments submitted.

The G-77/CHINA underscored that: the two main challenges are bridging the data gap within and between countries and improving the availability and access to information; information, as a necessary medium of realizing sustainable development goals, should be embodied as a matter of principle; access to information and indicators should be distinguished as separate issues; and government scrutiny is needed on the applicability and development of the indicators. He said developing countries are threatened with further marginalization from the benefits accruing from information technology due to inadequate capacity and infrastructure, and noted the need for goodwill in international cooperation. SOUTH AFRICA called for support to developing countries in training and capacity building, including in the use of indicators, information management and statistical capacity. He underscored that public access to environmental information is a requirement for improved environmental governance, noted that the poorest of the poor are still excluded from the new knowledge economy and emphasized the need to investigate the impact of information on society.

CHINA called on the UN system to: take hasty action to assist developing countries to bridge the "digital divide"; consider the development of indicators that are, *inter alia*, objective, flexible and operable; ensure developing country participation in the development of

rules for information formatting; and on public access to information for sustainable development, give due regard to countries' cultural and infrastructural differences in decision making. INDIA said the international community must commit financing for developing countries to strengthen national statistical resources and to train human capacity for data collection. She underscored that review requirements and indicators should take into account the level of development in countries and warned against data duplication due to the multiplicity of reporting systems. BRAZIL said bridging the data gap is fundamental and that the real value of information depends on adequate dissemination. She also highlighted common but differentiated responsibilities and the need to take into account national particularities. NIGERIA said the lack of resources impedes access to digital devices and communications. He said the CSD should not endorse indicators that have been developed without the participation of interested countries. EGYPT concurred and further noted that indicators should be harmonized by the UN without the involvement of external international organizations, and that the indicators should be organized as a menu from which countries can choose according to their level of development and national particularities. He said indicators need prior intergovernmental endorsement and should measure the performance of international, as well as national, commitments.

In response to issues regarding convergence among different indicators that were raised in the discussions, the Secretariat pointed out that extensive consultations had been carried out with various organizations, and that different indicator programmes have different objectives, emphasis and priorities. On issues relating to international consensus, he underscored that the indicators programme is voluntary, and that every country can adapt the indicators to national requirements. Referring to Agenda 21, NIGERIA said developing countries did not object to the development of harmonized indicators, but wanted to see the process open to countries' contributions. EGYPT inquired about who has the mandate to review and endorse the indicators framework, and with SAUDI ARABIA, enquired about the role of the UN Statistical Commission regarding the core set of indicators. The Secretariat explained that the CSD was mandated with developing the indicators, and therefore has the authority to either endorse or reject them.

#### IN THE CORRIDORS

The intensity of the discussion on indicators for sustainable development led to an impromptu meeting between the Secretariat and some members of the G-77/China at the end of the day. Although many participants agree that indicators are needed, they said indicators should be voluntary, in which case they could be endorsed. However, some were cautious that the indicators may later be adopted by the UN Statistical Commission, as ECOSOC has been discussing harmonization of indicators within the UN system. Some participants are concerned that the indicators could then be used as conditionalities in the provision of financial resources, yet not all countries have contributed to their development, and developing countries have limited resources to implement the indicators at the national level.

#### THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

**PLENARY:** The Working Group will reconvene at 10:00 am in the ECOSOC Chamber to begin consideration of the Secretary-General's report on international cooperation for an enabling environment for sustainable development (E/CN.17/2001/5). During the afternoon session, delegates are expected to continue general discussion on the report.

**SIDE EVENT:** A side event on "Information for Decisions: From Data to Information to Knowledge" will be held in the ECOSOC Chamber starting at 1:15 pm. This event will cover Australia's experience in drawing effective knowledge together from a sparse information base.