

**Final Report of the Meeting of National Focal Points  
on the UN's Commission on Sustainable Development  
(CSD) Reporting Process**

New York, 2-3 March 2009

United Nations Secretariat  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
Division for Sustainable Development

## **Introduction:**

The National Focal Points (NFP) Meeting on CSD National Reporting was a day-and-a-half workshop, sponsored by Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) of Canada and organized by the Division for Sustainable Development of DESA, United Nations. The workshop provided an opportunity for CSD national focal points to exchange experiences in reporting and to consider ways and means of improving future reporting for mutual benefit of both the CSD and the countries themselves. National focal points from active reporting countries were invited, taking into account of geographical balance and the balance between developed and developing countries.

### Objectives of the Meeting

This one and a half-day meeting among the national focal points after the CSD-17 intergovernmental preparatory meeting (IPM) at United Nations Headquarters in New York was expected to catalyze countries to better provide and optimize national reports for the CSD-18/19 cycle and beyond. The meeting provided an opportunity for meeting participants to:

- 1) Exchange experiences among national focal points in preparing national reports to the CSD, including:
  - a. How countries have benefited from the exercise;
  - b. Their respective and collective challenges faced;
  - c. Stakeholder involvement, if any.
- 2) Propose ways for countries to use CSD national reporting for their own planning and monitoring purposes;
- 3) Recommend ways in which guidelines provided by the Secretariat can be further simplified to facilitate more countries to report while also being optimized as inputs to the CSD;
- 4) Discuss the role of national focal points and how to strengthen it, including for supporting partnerships in their respective countries.

### Expected outcomes

The meeting is expected to enhance the recognition for the key role of national reporting for the CSD to monitor the progress made in the national implementation and to highlight the importance of non-negotiated outcomes of the CSD by adopting a series of recommendations which would:

- Provide possible solutions to barriers on reporting;
- Analyze capacities needed in the countries for regular reporting and to link it to their respective planning process;
- Consider ways to increase the quality of reports;
- Identify opportunity areas for improvement;
- Create a space to discuss and improve reporting by agreeing a specific set of reporting principles and terminology, which are palatable to all stakeholders

## **Main Meeting Activities – In sequential order**

1. A welcome address was made by Mr. Tariq Banuri, Director, Division for Sustainable Development, within the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. In this address, Mr. Banuri made two major suggestions for participants to review and possibly incorporate in their work. The first was the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), an international collaborative effort among private sector corporations to act and report on their respective SD efforts. Their website says, “The GRI produces the world’s de facto standard in sustainability reporting guidelines.

Sustainability reporting is the action where an organization publicly communicates their economic, environmental, and social performance. The GRI's mission is to make sustainability reporting by all organizations as routine and comparable as financial reporting. The GRI Guidelines represent one of the most common frameworks used in the world for reporting. As of January 2009, more than 1,500 organizations from 60 countries use the Guidelines to produce their sustainability reports.” (<http://www.globalreporting.org/Home>). In his second suggestion, Mr. Banuri made a reference to the work of Professor Arthur Mol in the Netherlands on taking actions and tracking what countries do in three domains – environmental outcomes (air, water, soil, etc.); commitments (laws, regulations, etc. both international and national); and what organisations exist or are created within countries to facilitate SD efforts. Professor Mol advocates that those monitoring SD efforts should focus on the positive aspects of change, rather than what is not yet achieved. Also he and others have been developing a concept of ecological modernization which relates to environmental re-adaptation of economic growth and industrial development. On the basis of enlightened self-interest, economy and ecology can favourably be combined: Environmental productivity, i.e. productive use of natural resources and environmental media (air, water, soil, ecosystems), can be a source of future growth and development in the same way as labour productivity and capital productivity.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological\\_modernization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_modernization)

2. A presentation was made on Canada's Approach to National Reporting to the CSD by Ms. Diane Cameron, DFAIT Canada. This presentation outlined key considerations, Canada's approach, as well as the benefits and challenges of reporting. She noted that in the past Canada's reports were lengthy, time-consuming, ad hoc, and not directly linked to planning for the CSD cycle. She said that, with Canada's new approach, they tried very hard to integrate the reporting process into the overall plan, and use the reporting process to build a “team” approach and an *esprit de corps* among team members. They created a set of templates in an effort to make the reporting task easier for all concerned. With these templates they tried to answer the question “where are we now” within the context of a longer-term process of change. Their templates are more qualitative than quantitative in the nature of the information they try to capture. The reports are meant to be 10-12 pages (maximum length) with internet links to more detailed information and references to case studies. Their ultimate goal is to integrate sustainable development into the normal national planning and reporting processes, and to eliminate duplication of work required to satisfy different reporting requirements. While they have made progress in taking a more integrated approach to national reporting, challenges remain. One of the difficulties Canada is still working to address is applying a sustainable development (and CSD) lens that considers all three pillars of sustainable development. Another challenge is timing – the process of reporting on the next cycle of CSD must start before the end of the previous cycle and this creates resource pressures. They create a new inter-departmental committee for each cycle of the CSD, drawing on subject expertise in different government departments depending on the themes of the cycle. Over the course of every CSD cycle, they also conduct stakeholder consultations with provinces and territories, civil society and industry. Several questions were raised by other countries about the stakeholder consultation process. In particular, questions were posed about how to handle sensitive subjects and disagreements, how to manage the scope of consultations, and how to carry out consultations in a timely fashion that does not delay the overall process. Canada's approach is to schedule consultations well in advance and provide deadlines for feedback. To manage the timeline, it is made clear that feedback received in advance of the deadline will be taken into consideration. Every effort is made to provide a considered response to feedback received before the deadline. Stakeholder input is valued and a sincere and serious effort is made to reflect on the input; however, the outcome is not meant to be a consensus document, rather, a Federal Government document.

3. A presentation was made which reviewed the CSD National Reporting (NR) systems and activities as well as the status of National Focal Points (NFP) by Mr. Nikhil Chandavarkar, DSD/UNDESA. This showed which UN global conferences created SD reporting demands and how countries' responses have varied over time – both in the numbers of countries that responded to SD reporting requests; the changing quality or completeness of reporting; and the changing types of reporting topics.
4. Four other countries made presentations on their SD organisational changes and reporting activities. Short oral presentations were made by Italy, Jordan, France and Ghana. After each presentation, other participants asked questions. Without any suggestion or guidance to do so, most of each countries' presentation related to the organisational changes and new structures countries had made to accommodate SD planning, implementation, monitoring, and reporting. The two European countries stressed how EC recent agreements had placed significant planning, action, and reporting demands on every EC member. In the case of France, this and other national political factors created a major overhaul of ministries and priorities to focus on SD government-wide and all sectors nationwide.
5. Participants were then asked to individually rank what they perceived as the most important issues or problems with national SD reporting and reporting to CSD. They were asked to select only two issues for each of 3 time horizons. Results were summarized and discussed.
6. The next day participants were then asked to individually rank (for their respective country) what they perceived as the most important or optimal characteristics for the future for their country vis-à-vis SD actions and reporting as well as optimal characteristics for DSD's operations vis-à-vis CSD reporting and other support to countries. They selected priorities for two time horizons – 1-3 years from now and 3-15 years from now. Their views were discussed without the benefit of the summary which was done after the meeting concluded.

## **Methodology**

There was an effort from the beginning to make this meeting an informal working event. Even though initial presentations were a little more structured with Powerpoint presentations, there was open discussion after each one. The later four country presentations were more informal and only oral descriptions followed by questions. While the questions and comments did come from a good cross section of participants, it was recognized that some participants may not express their views. Particularly in an event that is only one and a half days and a mixed nationality group, it was planned that in order for everyone to express their views some type of written responses would have to be collected in order to get a reasonable profile of the whole groups' views. Without this methodology, participants who felt more comfortable expressing their views would tend to dominate and drive the results and conclusions of the meeting.

## **Results**

1. There was considerable interest in the Canadian presentation, as indicated by the number of the questions and requests from other countries for the formats Canada has developed over the last several reporting periods. These formats were to assist staff both at the Federal, Provincial, Territory, NGO, private sector, and civil society participants/respondents in the national SD, as well as the UN's CSD, reporting process.
2. Some of the reporting performance issues came out in the Canadian presentation and discussion as well as during the other four country presentations. In order to see whether

there were common issues among NFP participants, they were offered a format that classified types of problems. The format on CSD reporting Performance Issues had a menu of nine (9) types of issues (see Table 1 below) , but meeting members were at liberty to add more if they did not feel these nine covered their nation’s priority issue(s). Each participant was asked to select only two types of issues for each of the 3 time horizons – the reporting during CSD-14; CSD-16 (just past); and CSD-18 (currently underway). If participants were not involved in CSD reporting during CSD-14, then they were advised to leave that row (time horizon) blank. This is why there are fewer scores in the CSD-14 line.

Table1

<b>Performance Issues</b>										
	Lack Funding (major shortfall)	Lack of Human Resources	Lack Organisation structure	Low Political priority	Low Civil Service management priority	Intra-Gov't. Cooperation	External Cause - beyond direct control	Weak monitoring &/or incomplete info system		
	Number	Capability								
CSD-14	3	2	2	1	3	1	4	1	3	
CSD-16	3	7	2	0	6	6	12	1	6	
CSD-18 (est.)	7	4	4	1	4	6	11	3	3	
<b>Sub-Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>106</b>
	<b>12%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>11%</b>	

Not surprisingly, “Intergovernmental Cooperation” was by far the most mentioned Performance Issue in each time horizon and overall. Four other issues tied for second most mentioned and “Weak monitoring and/or incomplete information systems” was closely behind as third most mentioned. From the follow-on discussion it seemed, quite logically, that most of the nations who mentioned a “lack of funding” as an issue in carrying out CSD reporting were non-industrial nations. They were also the ones who most mentioned a “lack of human resources - numbers” to carry out this task. All types of nations later mentioned the lack of priority SD is given at the political level as well as among civil service managers. Finally, if nations had strong monitoring and information systems that captured SD-relevant information, reporting both domestically and internationally (to CSD, etc.) would be quite easy; therefore, it is logical that this issue would score high at this point in time.

During the follow-on discussion, some of the more notable comments made were:

- Low political priority is partly a function of past poor efficiency/limited success of past CSD cycles; CSD isn't clear on what the purpose and value of reporting is for the countries;
- Some suggest their preference is just to share SD best practices through case studies rather than any other reporting;
- CSD reporting information demands are too comprehensive;
- There is a lack of follow-up & feedback by DSD – there is a need to make clear the value added of the Report(s);
- Other SD monitoring & reporting is very demanding (e.g. EU) & it is not consistent with UN/CSD demands;

- There is a lack of Organisational (corporate) memory within countries on SD issues and reporting on them; and
  - There is a lack of clarity in the Guidelines as to exactly what was wanted by CSD.
3. After completing and discussing the Performance Issues format it was decided that participants should focus on how to create a better future system, rather than belabor past or existing problems. Therefore, they were asked to profile what they thought the characteristics would be of an ideal future CSD/DESA-DSD process would be as well as what the characteristics of their SD national system should be. Again each participant was allowed two priorities (scorings) for each of the two time horizons. Table 2 below displays the results.

Table 2

	DESA Priorities - Future Optimal Profile								
	Seek & Provide more Funding for National Reporting	Directly Support NFP - regularly seek their needs & respond to majority	Make Reporting easier - e.g. menu driven software	Increase indicator & quantitative focus	Create international SD Index (like HDI & HD Reports)	Provide learning materials; learning portal on SD	Increase geo-political support for SD	Get other UN Agencies to support (UNDP)	Make clear utility of Reports to UN & options for national use
<b>1-3 Yrs Total</b>	5	9	5	6	3	2	2	7	10
<b>3-15 Yr. Total</b>	6	1	3	5	7	3	7	10	6
<b>Total Both Time Horizons</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16</b>
Total Number of All Scores									97
	11%	10%	8%	11%	10%	5%	9%	18%	16%
	20 Countries reported								

The results suggest that in the short term DESA-DSD should make clear the utility of CSD reporting and provide support to reporting nations – particularly in defining the options for national use of CSD reporting guidelines. Linked to that, participants called for more direct support to NFP’s, beginning with seeking their needs (much like this meeting did) and responding to the majority. In the medium to longer term, participants felt that DESA-DSD should get other UN Agencies to become involved with and provide support to national SD efforts, including CSD reporting. Other longer term priorities were to increase geo-political support for SD, and create an international SD index which rates countries (something like the Human Development Index).

Some of the participants’ written comments on these formats were the following:

- Under “Make Reporting Easier” – in particular make it easier to “pull out” information for national purposes;
- Make querying against CSD reporting database easier and more flexible so that countries can do some of their own analysis of how they compare to others;
- Make the SG’s CSD Report more useful which could, in turn, make national reports more useful; and
- Related to the second comment above, DSD’s CSD portal should be enhanced to more easily share lessons learned across countries.

4. For the national desired future priorities participants were given a menu of eight types of generic characteristics which profiled their situation vis-à-vis all aspects of SD in general, not reporting to CSD. Again they were given the same two time horizons and asked to enter only two priorities for each of the time horizons. The results are below in Table 3.

Table 3

	National Priorities - Future Optimal Profile							
	Clearly defined national organisation responsible for SD coordination (Committee, Ministry, Agency, or all)	Easy & regular Interaction mechanism for public sector to interact on SD issues	Campaigns to clarify what SD is and why it is important	Easy & regular Interaction mechanism for public, private, NGO, civil society to interact on SD issues	National integrated planning, monitoring (reporting), and evaluation system for SD	Requisite legal & regulatory framework for SD implementation	Government incentives for SD actions	Strong ongoing political and public support (e.g. always one of the top 5 political priorities)
<b>1-3 Yrs Total</b>	4	7	13	6	5	2	4	6
<b>3-15 Yr. Total</b>	3	0	3	6	10	5	7	7
<b>Total Both Time Horizons</b>	7	7	16	12	15	7	11	13
								88
	8%	8%	18%	14%	17%	8%	13%	15%
	<b>20 Countries reported</b>							

There was a clear priority for the short term to develop and implement national campaigns in order to clarify to the public and policy makers what SD is and why it is important for the nation. This was later highlighted in discussion when one participant said that, “If an issue isn’t regularly mentioned in the news or media, it isn’t an issue.” Several others said that many of their politicians and other national opinion leaders still are not clear what SD is or why it should be high on the nation’s political agenda. There is a need for more toward complete integration of SD into normal national planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. It seems that in most countries thus far SD efforts have been created and operated as a parallel system(s) in the public sector. Very much linked to the above desired characteristic of full integration, both in the short and medium/long term participants seem to feel a need to build SD mechanisms for easier interaction among public, private, NGO, civil society. Next participants felt that it is important to build and maintain into long term future political and public support for SD. Finally as a mechanism to support and reinforce SD actions, nations should begin and build programmes of Government incentives for SD.

Some of the participants’ other written comments on these formats were the following:

- It seems it is best to create a body to look after SD issues and reporting with full-time staff;
- There is a need to show the added value of CSD in general and how they relate to and follow-on and feedback to national reports;
- We should make sure that SD solutions are front-and-center in global financial crisis discussions;

- If an issue doesn't appear in the news, it doesn't exist; it won't get any political support;
- Governments should provide incentives to correct market failures and internalize environmental and social externalities.

All of the five countries' presentations on the first day and other countries discussion of the status in their countries throughout tended to dwell extensively on requisite organizational and process changes in order to support SD activities and reporting. However, interestingly the first characteristic, "Clearly defined national organisation responsible for SD coordination (Committee, Ministry, Agency, or all)" was not highly scored as a future priority.

## Discussion

This NFP meeting provided a rare reality check of DSD's report work, through direct contact with national sustainable development focal points. The participants, who numbered over 30, included a wide cross-section of regions and countries.

By and large, although sustainable development is a cross-cutting issue, its most fervent advocates still tend to be environment ministries. In a few cases the coordination of sustainable development activities was focused in the Prime Minister's office or in the planning ministry. However, a powerful ministry of the environment, energy or mines, depending on the country's natural resource endowments, seems to provide sustainable development with a strong impetus. Often, environment ministries were able to provide continuity from one CSD cycle to the next, as the thematic issues, and hence counterpart line ministries, varied. It was interesting to see the difference that a politically powerful Ministry of the environment, as in the case of France and the Sudan, can make and promoting sustainable development.

National focal points said that part of the difficulty in getting line ministries to respond to CSD questionnaires resulted from the fact that ministries were not sure the national reports were actually used in the preparation of the Secretary-General's reports since the reports themselves tended to be very panoramic with a high level of aggregation. As related during their presentation, the Canadians have made serious efforts to transform and adapt this CSD reporting process so that it serves their federal purposes first, and then the CSD. For most other participants it seemed there was little evidence they felt much value added from themselves or their nation. Among other issues, they did not see that national data and indicators are even considered in the SG's reports. Some participants felt that SG CSD Reports need to be more relevant to actual policy needs at the country level rather than making reference to international decisions.

It was interesting that none of them countered each others' positions with arguments similar to those found on GRI's website for annual reporting:

"Why companies and other organizations do sustainability reports: Reporting on sustainability performance is an important way for organizations to manage their impact on sustainable development. The challenges of sustainable development are many, and it is widely accepted that organizations have not only a responsibility but also a great ability to exert positive change on the state of the world's economy, and environmental and social conditions.

Reporting leads to improved sustainable development outcomes because it allows organizations to measure, track, and improve their performance on specific issues. Organizations are much more likely to effectively manage an issue that they can measure.

As well as helping organizations manage their impacts, sustainability reporting promotes transparency and accountability. This is because an organization discloses information in the public domain. In doing so, stakeholders (people affected by or interested in an organization's operations) can track an organization's performance on broad themes – such as environmental performance - or a particular issue - such as labor conditions in factories. Performance can be monitored year on year, or can be compared to other similar organizations."

While GRI's audience/partners are different, the arguments for annual international reporting are essentially the same.

Several participants criticized poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP) for focusing on economic and social issues, but generally giving short shrift to the environment. The same seems to be true of many other national plans in many nations which do not prepare PRSP plans. This was also reinforced by the number of comments on the need to integrate SD into normal national processes, and the fact that participants made this full integration the top medium/long term priority. Some suggested that CSD (DESA/DSD) and nations develop a symbiotic processes and cycles. An informed national planner would suggest that **all good quality national and sub-national development planning should generate sustainable plans** - then implement, monitor, and report on those plans to complete the cycle.

National focal points would much appreciate a continuing dialogue with the DESA's Division for Sustainable Development that goes beyond soliciting and receiving national reports. They would ideally like to see a live and active network of focal points, perhaps even with electronic interaction and sharing of experiences and good practices through the DSD website.

## **Outcomes:**

The most important conclusion of the workshop was that it is extremely important to consider CSD national reporting as an integrated system consisting of:

1. an active system of national sustainable development focal points;
2. national SD monitoring processes and reporting; and
3. Secretary General's reporting process and reports to the CSD.

These three components should be seen as the overall CSD reporting system. They all need to interact effectively together. There was a perception that the three elements are currently disconnected.

As above, there were repeated expressions of frustration among some NFP related to the CSD reporting requirements and tasks. However, to some extent this would always be the case regardless of what data sets, information profiles, or case study format would be proposed. One defined information requirement will never perfectly fit all countries' information availability, nor their own national priorities at any given point in time.

This meeting sought every participant's view (and then summarized the results), it seemed that a new spirit of UN-national cooperation began to form. As above there are a number of actions which DSD can carry out to support countries' SD efforts – not just better support the CSD reporting efforts. In addition there was clear interest in inter-country sharing of practices related to SD actions in general, but in particular SD national reporting. The by-product of these inter-country interactions can also be better reporting to the CSD. For example, there were a considerable number of request to Canada to share their methodology.

## **Recommendations:**

- 1) DSD/DESA must improve DSD support and relationships with NFPs by:
  - a) Communicating directly with NFPs and not via Permanent Missions;
  - b) Provide information about available resources directly to NFP's;
  - c) Involve other UN agencies (UNDP) within countries to help or support NFP's;
  - d) Hold more regular meetings of NFP to share and provide feedback; and
  - e) Make reporting more useful to countries – especially in SD policy decision making.

- 2) Many participants called for e-learning tools to help them with their work related to CSD reporting and participation. This is one clear and inexpensive avenue of assistance that DSD can support nations NFP in their priority efforts to launch campaigns to clarify what SD is and why it is important (their number one priority for the short term).
- 3) Participants recommended that the outcome of the Copenhagen COP - 15 should have a strong sustainable development dimension, emphasizing adaptation, technology transfer, and development finance as much as mitigation. Virtually all participants were concerned about current climate change negotiations and the related commitments could overshadow and overwhelm the broader sustainable development agenda. Various techniques were discussed by which climate change could be projected as a sustainable development issue and the momentum for climate change taken advantage of to promote Agenda 21 and the JPOI.
- 4) Begin to assist nations in the process to integrate SD into normal decision making processes – planning, implementation management, monitoring, and reporting.
- 5) Given the discussions at this meeting emphasized requisite organizational and process changes needed to make any CSD reporting possible, DESA/DSD should document these changes among countries. These experiences and practices could then be generalized to create a menu of options which nations not so advanced to consider in getting their CSD processes and reporting off the ground. This should be a key initial part of DSD's above mentioned e-learning facility to assist countries making a successful start at this effort.