Labour/Management Programme

USES AND LIMITS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

Report on a meeting of trade union experts held under the OECD Labour/Management Programme

Paris, 11 February 2002

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After meetings held under the Programme, a rapporteur draws up a report of the discussion on his own responsibility, for distribution to the social partners and to the relevant OECD Committees. The opinions expressed in such reports are those of the rapporteur, except where they are specifically attributed to individual participants, and do not necessarily reflect the views of other participants or of the OECD.
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FOREWORD

Under the OECD Labour/Management Programme for 2002, a meeting of trade union experts on "Uses and Limits of Sustainable Development Indicators" was held in Paris on 11th February 2002. The meeting was prepared in collaboration with the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC).

Below you will find the Agenda for this meeting, along with the Discussion Paper and the overall report of the discussions of the meeting of experts, which were both prepared by Mr. David Pearce, designated as General Rapporteur for this activity.

THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED AND ARGUMENTS EMPLOYED IN THIS REPORT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THOSE OF THE OECD
AGENDA

1. General introductions

Brief introduction by TUAC on its views of the role of indicators for sustainable development and their implications for work, workers and workplaces. An overview of the trade union background discussion document, “Fashioning A New Deal”, will be provided, with a particular focus on the importance of properly integrating social with environmental and economic indicators.

Brief introduction by Marco Mira d’Ercole, Principal Administrator, Private Office of the Secretary–General, on the work underway in the OECD to respond to the Ministerial mandate and the role of developing sustainable development indicators in this process, including those that relate to the social dimension of sustainable development.

2. The feasibility of measuring comprehensive single–valued indicators of sustainable development

Professor David Pearce, University College London, will review the possibility of developing comprehensive measures of sustainable development, and identify the principal challenges involved in integrating the three groups of indicators of sustainable development.

3. Core sets of indicators as a toll to monitor progress towards meeting agreed policy goals: a review of national experiences

Enrico Giovannini, Director of the OECD Statistics Directorate, will review some of the experiences of national and international organisations in compiling core sets of indicators of economic, social and environmental conditions.

4. Sustainable development indicators as a tool to assist policy making

Sveinbjörn Blöndal, Head of the Structural Policy Analysis Division II in the Economics Department, will briefly review on–going work on developing agreed sustainable development indicators for use in OECD peer review processes.

Kenneth Ruffing, Deputy Director in the Environment Directorate, will outline recent work on de–coupling indicators.

5. The concept of social sustainability

Peter Scherer, Head of Social Policy Division in the Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, will review on–going work to better understand the importance of the social pillar of sustainable development.
Larry Kohler, ILO Specialist on Sustainable Development, will reflect on the development of indicators and the WSSD process, with a particular focus on social issues and the integration of the three pillars of sustainability.

Dwight Justice (ICFTU) and Lucien Royer (TUAC) will provide their perceptions for the implications of the day’s discussion for the trade union document “Fashioning A New Deal” and on issues of integrating the social dimension, in the longer term. They will also explore what their analyses imply for the OECD programme of work.

6. **Summary of the results of the meeting by the Rapporteur**

Concluding remarks.
DISCUSSION PAPER

by

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AIMS

This brief paper raises issues that can profitably be discussed at the February 11 meeting. The aim is to raise questions about the uses and limitations of indicators of sustainable development, and, secondarily, to provoke discussion that can inform and refine the ICFTU/TUAC draft paper for WSSD 2002.

DEFINITIONS

It is important not to get lost in a wide-ranging discussion of definitions. However, without some definitions there is a real risk that discussions about indicators will extend so widely that little of real world consequence will emerge. Documents comprising vague and extensive generalisations are not conducive to action since those who are mandated to act on them can interpret them as they wish. “Sustainable development” is politically attractive in this respect. Equally, very precise formulations limit the flexibility of discussions about sustainability and appropriate indicators, making agreement less likely.

Defining “sustainable development” ought not to be complex. Reference to the original World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report captures the essentials:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

• the concept of “needs”, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given, and
• the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs” (WCED, 1987, p.43).

“Development” is a value word: it will mean different things to different people because there will be differences of view about the relative weight to be given to the constituent parts of “being developed”. Nonetheless, there is international consensus that it has to do with rising per capita real incomes, with open opportunity for education and skills acquisition, with opportunities for acceptable health status, with personal and political freedoms, and with human dignity. Numerous indicators of “development” exist. Little is gained by debating in detail their relative merits since the focus should be on what has to be done to secure development, however defined. Hence the suggestion is that “sustainable development” be defined simply as “sustained increases in average per capita wellbeing” but with the added requirement that “per capita wellbeing of the current poor should rise faster than the overall average”.

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The WCED definition suggests two foci: ensuring that human well-being rises, in per capita terms, on a sustained basis over time, and ensuring that special efforts are made to improve the well-being of the poorest in the world now. Sustainable development therefore exists in two dimensions: through time and across social groupings now. Caring about the future is about minimising the chances that actions today will make generations in the future worse off, i.e. potential redistribution of wealth between the present and the future. Caring about the poor now is about the current redistribution of wealth.

**IMPLICATIONS OF DEFINITIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS**

The Brundtland definitions are helpful in pointing to the kinds of issue that have to resolved when selecting indicators.

- There is a difference between indicators OF sustainable development and indicators that may not tell us whether an economy, corporation, region etc. is “sustainable” but which are useful in discussing progress towards sustainability. An indicator OF sustainability would answer a question such as, “are we on a path of sustainable development or not?” Other indicators may not be able to answer this question, but may point to desirable or undesirable directions that are being taken. As a brief example, “decoupling” indicators – such as energy used per unit GNP – do not answer the question of whether or not the economy is sustainable. But they do provide a good measure of progress away from unsustainability or towards more sustainability. They cannot, however, tell us when we have moved from one state to the other. Measures such as “green” GNP, changes in true wealth per capita, and “genuine savings” may answer the former question, but may obscure some of the underlying policy directions needed.

**Issue 1:** how useful are single valued indicators OF sustainability? What evidence do we have that, even if they can be estimated, politicians and others take notice of them in the same way that they take notice of e.g. change in GNP? To date, there is little evidence that “green” measures of GNP have had an influence on decision-making. On the other hand, the World Bank now includes related indicators in their annual series of World Development Indicators.

**Issue 2:** measures of decoupling (“dematerialization”) tell us something about how much more (or less) efficient we are becoming in the use of materials and energy. Are decoupling indicators alone sufficient, or must they be accompanied by some targets for desirable levels of decoupling? Examples of “stand alone” decoupling indicators would be energy per unit GNP. The same indicator accompanied by a target might be illustrated by asking what rate of improvement in energy efficiency is needed to just offset expected rates of economic growth and population growth, so as to keep annual energy consumption constant.

**CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The literature on the economics of sustainable development helps to define the conditions for sustainable development as sustained growth of per capita wellbeing. Wellbeing is created by individuals in society, and the ability to create wellbeing is determined by the assets that individuals, firms etc. have available. Any asset is like a form of capital: it is a stock of something that yields a flow of services over time. Machinery is therefore capital since it yields output up to the point where it is fully depreciated. Machinery

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1 The various terms will be discussed by Professor Pearce in his presentation on “single valued” indicators.
is man–made capital and conventional investment is the means of adding to the stock of man–made capital. Knowledge is a form of capital since it can be used again and again. Knowledge is embodied in human beings – “human capital”. Education and training are the processes of investing in human capital. Human health is also like capital since individuals in a healthy state generate better services through time. Natural assets such as forests, rivers, oceans, the global atmosphere are also capital assets since they all yield flows of services — ecological services — through time. They constitute environmental (or natural) capital. Finally, and fundamental to the Workshop, social capital might be defined by the “cohesiveness” of society, the ties between individuals and between individuals and institutions that enable society to flourish. The nature of this social capital might best be understood by thinking of its negatives — family breakdown, crime, public disorder, conflict and war, loss of political and personal freedoms, these are all losses of social capital.

If sustainable development depends on these forms of capital then a “safe” strategy for sustainability is (a) to ensure that future generations have more of all these forms of capital (in per head terms) than we have today, and (b) to ensure that the capital assets of the poor now are increased faster than the average. But what if the assets substitute for each other? The whole process of industrialisation might be thought of as a process of substituting man–made capital for environmental capital, for example (forests have been systematically converted to agriculture). This conversion has its historic justification in the supposed fact that the social “rate of return” to land conversion was (is) higher than the social rate of return to conservation.

Issue 3: what is the potential trade–off between environmental quality and rising per capita incomes? How far can this potential trade–off be overcome by “decoupling” economic growth (consumption) from the materials and energy basis of that growth? Or does decoupling simply postpone an inevitable conflict between the pursuit of rising living standards for all and the environmental basis for achieving that rise? Examples of trade–offs within the context of sustainable development include: securing gains in future wellbeing at the expense of current wellbeing; reductions in social or workplace standards in return for higher wages; more economic growth at the risk of reductions in “social capital” (more crime, less social cohesion, more distrust etc.)

Issue 4: what indicators might be developed to capture the notion of potential trade–offs? Some obvious ones would be measures of change in the incidence of poverty (with all the associated problems of defining poverty) in a country, region or globally. Other indicators could include changes in human freedoms (there are various indexes of human freedom and democracy), and corruption (e.g. indicators published by Transparency International). On their own, such indicators will not point to trade–offs and complementarities, but if they are linked to measures of, say, income per head, they might do this.

GLOBALISATION

The ICFTU/TUAC document refers in several places to globalisation and calls for restrictions on unregulated market forces, especially where these involve monopoly exploitation of labour. Recent World Bank work suggests that globalisation, via the move to more “open” economies, can result in short–term disruption in labour markets, especially as labour itself becomes more mobile internationally. It has been argued that what globalisation does is to shift the government–worker compact away from “more wages for less industrial unrest” towards “more long–term wages for short–term disruption and unemployment”. But if labour is increasingly mobile in a globalised world, it may be that it becomes permanently substitutable by non–indigenous labour. The labour force may then be unemployed on a longer–term basis, and the country may move to a “knife edge” situation where small changes in costs result in significant changes in comparative advantage.
Issue 5: what are the risks of globalisation and what are its benefits? The evidence seems to suggest that more open economies grow faster, and that the poor also benefit from globalisation. Demands for more regulation of the globalisation process might reduce these benefits. Indicators of these relationships are extensively discussed in the economic development literature. Equally, globalisation certainly seems to be implicated in short-term labour market change, so that there is a short-run cost, long-run benefit trade-off. The globalisation process may have progressed for sufficiently long periods that these short-term/long-term changes can be detected by indicators of per capita incomes, unemployment rates, etc.

THE MISSING DIMENSION: SOCIAL CAPITAL

The ICFTU/TUAC document rightly states that, in the context of sustainable development, “efforts to fully integrate the social dimension have been left behind”. Nonetheless, in terms of indicators some progress is being made.

Positive indicators of social capital

One major dimension of “social capital” is the whole array of inter-personal relationships that define “trust” between human beings. This trust facilitates social exchange and assurance, e.g. an implicit social contract exists to the effect that no one person behaves unsocially to others since they could do the same to that person. This form of trust is embodied in notions of community, from simple clubs all the way up to political behaviour. The World Values Survey provides some indicators of the extent to which individuals trust each other and trust institutions. These might be termed “positive” indicators of social capital. At the political level, there are now quite widely used indicators of political freedoms, corruption and good governance. These tend to rank whole countries, and various statistical efforts have been made to determine the role that they play in securing or inhibiting rising living standards.

Second, there is the social capital embodied in workplace agreements and co-operative behaviour within the workforce. In both cases, the greater the degree of social capital, the less need there is to enforce agreements by written contracts, regulations, guidelines etc. It might be fruitful, therefore, to think of “true” social capital as those forms of co-operative behaviour that go beyond compliance with labour law, etc. Indeed, the ICFTU/TUAC document gives a number of examples of this: voluntary agreements, co-operative activities between employers and unions, and corporate social responsibility developments. If this line of reasoning is even remotely correct, it suggests searching for indicators of this “overcompliance” behaviour. Corporate social responsibility offers one such possibility because there are now regular indices (such as FTSE4Good) which list corporations and rank them by their degree of social responsibility. Some of the indices mix measures or scores of behaviour towards society generally and scores relating to workforce; others appear to be exclusively concerned with external social indicators only. Use of these indicators might be best advised for workplace concerns.

Third, individuals concern for each other can be thought of as a positive indicator of social capital. This prompts the idea that expenditure on charitable donations provides a “first cut” indicator of social capital. Very large efforts are being made internationally to construct databases on comparative social giving.

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Negative indicators of social capital

Fourth, social capital may often be recognised through indicators of its decay — e.g. crime rates, as measures of social insecurity. Even expenditures on policing might give some measure of social insecurity⁴.

Issue 6: measuring the social component of sustainable development is probably the greatest challenge to the use of indicators. It is important to consider what is needed rather than proceed by seeing what is available. The candidate concepts appear to be measures of (a) trust, (b) caring for others, and especially the disadvantaged, (c) social cohesion and/or its opposite — social disintegration, (d) the achievement of social goals by private agents such as corporations. What are the prospects for developing these indicators?

⁴ One set of indicators focusing on “negative social capital” is provided by R. Klitgaard and J. Fedderke, Social integration and disintegration: an exploratory analysis of cross country data, World Development, 23, 3, 357–369
FINAL REPORT ON THE MEETING

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Trade Union experts met with the OECD Secretariat in Paris on 11th February 2002 to consider the role that indicators may play in furthering the goals of sustainable development.

UNDERLYING CONCERNS

Delegates expressed a concern that the social aspects of sustainability had not so far secured the same status as the environmental features of sustainability. Environmental progress is essential to the wellbeing of people now and in the future, but there is a need for more emphasis than there has been on the social 'pillar' of sustainable development. The meeting heard of the progress that had already been made within the OECD on the political dialogue about economic change, globalisation and the environment. The social dimension appeared to be largely missing at this stage, although it was signalled for further work. A second concern was the need for all the pillars of sustainability – social, economic and environment – to be integrated in a coherent fashion. Allied to this, any indicators should reflect (a) a deliberative process in which stakeholders are consulted about meaningful and policy relevant indicators, and (b) notions of transparency so that users of the indicators can identify with them. As an example, the OECD programme of work on indicators of 'decoupling' has focused on ratios of resource use and environmental impact per unit of economic activity. There is no comparable work effort on social impacts. Broad based social indicators, such as access to basic needs (e.g. clean water), could be developed in this way.

SINGLE 'VERSUS' PLURALISTIC INDICATORS

Two, largely separate literatures have emerged with respect to sustainability in general. The first seeks to find a few indicators, or even one indicator, that captures the notion of sustainability such that economies can be characterised as being 'on' or 'off' a sustainable development path. This literature focuses on the assets that are available to current and future generations. These assets are generally categorised as man–made, environmental (natural), human, and social. Man–made assets represent the traditional notion of 'capital' that figures in the literature on economic growth and development. Environmental assets refer to natural resources and to the receiving capacities of the environment for waste from economic systems. Human capital refers to the skills and knowledge embodied in human beings. Social capital is perhaps the most elusive of these assets in terms of definitions, but it is generally thought to refer to the cohesiveness of society such that there is trust between individuals and between institutions, individuals and government, and to social ties within and between communities. The general rule emerging from this strand of the indicators literature is that economies are (potentially) sustainable if the stock of these assets
(expressed in per capita terms) rises systematically over time, and not otherwise. One way of characterising this literature is to say that it is an indicator of sustainability in the broad, aggregate sense.

The second literature does not purport to measure sustainability as such, but rather focuses on pluralistic indicators that are of value and importance as contributors to sustainability. There are many such indicators and these include those issued by national governments (‘headline’ indicators), by the United Nations CSD and by the OECD itself. A weakness of this literature is that it has tended to under-emphasise the social indicators and, in particular, social indicators that reflect workplace concerns, e.g. accident rates, workplace health, and exploitative processes (as reflected in, for example, wages). Broader social concerns include freedom of association, political freedoms and access to basic needs. An additional concern lies with measures of inequality and the vulnerability of specific groups, e.g. women and ethnic minorities. At the moment, the indicators associated with social issues selected for the EDRC peer review process in the OECD appeared not to address the basic concerns of the trade union delegates at the meeting. They focus on retirement incomes and access by developing countries to OECD markets. Doubts were also expressed about the extent to which social concerns could be treated as 'reversible', i.e. if not addressed today they could be addressed in the future, in contrast to environmental impacts which may be irreversible (e.g. climate change).

The two approaches are not exclusive and it is clear that there is a role for each of them in the continuing debate. Nonetheless, the former ‘single value’ indicators could easily obscure the multiplicity of concerns, and may also reduce the emphasis on social factors because of the greater difficulty of defining and measuring notions such as social cohesion. The pluralistic indicators are easier to identify and measure, and tend to be more transparent in meaning and relevance. Nonetheless, they do not measure sustainability as such, but rather the ingredients that many would consider are relevant to determining progress towards a sustainable future.

In both cases, there is a concern to separate means and ends, instruments and goals. Indicators need to be clearly distinguished in terms of whether they measure the ultimate goals of a sustainable society – e.g. human freedoms, greater equality, protection of vulnerable groups, rising standards of living – and whether they measure the means of securing those goals – e.g. more participatory procedures, greater investment in education etc. In some cases, means and goals will intertwine – e.g. participation is seen by many as a goal in itself as well as a means to securing the goal of equity and democracy. Trade unionists have a particular interest in indicators of process. Once goals are in place, the issue is whether or not there are institutions that enable those goals to be expressed, evaluated and secured. This again points towards indicators that reflect whether or not these processes are in place and, if they are, whether they are functioning well or not. The fundamental point is that social goals matter in themselves but are also a critical part of the process of achieving the broader goal of sustainability.

THE ROLE OF INDICATORS

To a considerable extent, the development of indicators has produced its own momentum. There is a risk that indicators are developed simply because there are some data that permit their development. The issue of the use to which indicators can be put was briefly discussed. It was agreed that they can serve a valuable function of awareness raising. Provided the chosen indicators reflect social priorities, then changes in an index over time can be used to exert political pressure to ensure policies are aimed more emphatically at improving the conditions reflected in the index. Some concerns remain that the process of developing indicators is seen as an end in itself and that, without careful use, they will have limited political relevance.
Any 'set' of indicators is unlikely to be useful for short-run purposes. Rather the aim should be to monitor progress in indicators over time so see whether there is progress or regress. Such time trends can then signal the need for policy interventions. Cross-sectional use of indicators (comparisons across countries, for example) can nonetheless have a use as a 'league table', stimulating countries that appear low down the league table to take action to catch up with others. For either time series or cross-sectional purpose, there is a need for a 'protocol' to determine how data are collected and to ensure that like is being compared to like. OECD is already involved in such initiatives.

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE AND MULTI-LEVEL INDICATORS

The meeting noted that most of the discussion in indicators was in terms of aggregate measures, whether of the single valued or pluralistic kind. TUAC delegates noted the need to focus some indicators at the micro-level, and especially at the level of the corporation and especially multinational corporations. Here the developments in 'corporate social accounting' could point the way to greater accountability, but there is a real risk that such procedures simply redefine what has always been regarded as good business behaviour. The meeting accepted that there was a need for greater involvement of trade unionists in the various international movements to deliver corporate accountability – e.g. the GRI process and the implementation of the OECD guidelines on multinationals. Again, the developments in this area have tended to focus on the environmental impact of corporate activities through such things as Environmental Reports. There is a need to expand the efforts to deliver Social Reports in the same way. 'Social externalities' are as important as 'environmental externalities' and it is important to ensure that those who create the externalities pay the full social costs of their activities.

The meeting emphasised that, while social indicators would be extremely important in the developing world, where deprivation and social concerns would be deepest, they should be generalised to cover OECD countries as well. It may be that different sets of social indicators would apply in the two contexts, for example, access to safe water would be more relevant to developing economies than to OECD countries where access is close to 100 per cent. But many indicators would overlap – e.g. indicators of employment and workplace accidents.

INTERNATIONAL CO–ORDINATION

Trade unions can bring substantial expertise to bear on the development of social indicators. There is also a need for greater involvement in collaborative ventures among different organisations. The trade union representatives at the meeting urged the OECD to co-operate with other bodies such as the ILO with a view to develop a common approach on labour markets and workplace conditions, and with the other international bodies already involved in indicator work.

TRADE–OFFS

To some extent the single–valued approaches to indicators are an explicit attempt to deal with inevitable trade–offs between the various pillars of sustainability. It is probably not possible to have indicators showing advances along all fronts. Rising per capita living standards may not be compatible with the conservation of all environmental assets, for example, and care has to be taken that gains in future human wellbeing are not secured at the expense of current wellbeing. Because they focus on many separate indicators, pluralistic approaches may fail to identify the trade–offs. The meeting did not directly address the issue of how trade–offs could be determined, but the emphasis on participatory procedures points to the need to ensure that institutions are in place to record the preferences of ordinary people for what they
consider to be the priorities in sustainable development. The trade–off issue again points to the need to develop both single–valued and pluralistic indicators, and to make greater efforts to co–ordinate the two.

THE WORKPLACE

Trade unionists are concerned with the broad issues of sustainability – environmental, social and economic. But their specific role is to emphasise the social aspects and, within the social aspects, the workplace. Indicators such as occupational accident rates need to be developed as 'first cut' measures of the safety environment. Employment indicators provide a clear basis for determining employment security. The extent of child labour would provide a further indicator of social exploitation.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Trade unionists emphasise that the social aspects of sustainability constitute not just ends in themselves but also the means to secure economic and environmental sustainability. To this end, there is a need for a greater emphasis on social indicators. At the broad level, the relevant indicators should focus on inequality, on access to basic needs, and poverty. At the level of the labour market, there is a need to focus on indicators of overall employment, child labour, gender inequality and workplace conditions. Above all, the social dimension of sustainability needs far greater political exposure.
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