

ROUND TABLE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

CHAIRMAN'S SUMMARY NOTE

The Sixth Meeting of the OECD Round Table on Sustainable Development was held at the Château de la Muette on Thursday 6 December 2001 at 9.30 a.m. in Room Roger Ockrent

Measuring Sustainability

The following is a short summary note (issued under my own responsibility) of our discussion on 6 December. *Please note*, in keeping with Round Table procedures a detailed note of the meeting will not be circulated.

Key Outputs of the Meeting:

- The Chair will seek to facilitate further collaboration between the scientific community and OECD member countries via the OECD Global Science Forum; and
- In the context of the Round Table discussion, the World Bank will improve and refine its paper on indicators as a possible contribution to the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Item One: Current Approaches to Indicators for Sustainability

The OECD and the European Commission updated the Round Table meeting on their respective work programmes. The subsequent discussion noted the difficulty of defining the term sustainable development and, while both approaches were lauded for their practical focus and the emphasis on measurement as well as policy settings, some drawbacks were identified including:

- The apparent absence of a clear link between the indicator sets and the most recent scientific information;
- Nationally focussed measures may obscure global or regional responsibilities; and
- Questions about the utility of decoupling analysis outside a very limited range of indicators.

Item 2: How Good is the Science?

Scientists from the International Geosphere-Biosphere Project briefed the meeting on some of the science gaps. They identified three main areas where more scientific research is required, including the:

- chemistry of the atmosphere;
- biological processes and structures, including biodiversity; and
- ocean circulation patterns.

The scientists argued that any indicators of sustainability would need to be closely related to the work underway by the scientific community and should be characterised by:

- Solid scientific understanding;
- Information which can distinguish between human and natural interference;
- Timeliness; and
- Flexibility.

Against this background, the discussion strongly supported wider engagement with the scientific community both at the national level and at the inter-governmental level. One specific proposal was to use the OECD Global Science Forum as a way of linking policy analysts more directly with the scientists.

Item 3: Monetary and Biophysical Measurements of Sustainability

The World Bank, Redefining Progress and WWF presented a paper, which brought together monetary and biophysical measures of sustainability. There was a lengthy exchange on the methodology. There were also differences of opinion about the utility of such a complementary approach. A number of points were raised, some of which were also noted in the discussion of the OECD/EC projects including:

- Developing country concerns about nationally based measurement systems need to be reflected upon in the context of WSSD;
- The level of imperfection which is acceptable in any measurement needs to be minimised;
- Any measurement system needs to be more or less 'beyond contention' so that discussion focuses less on the methodology of the measures and more on the problems revealed; and
- Any measure needs to take into account economic and ecological definitions of sustainable development.