

SOUTH AFRICA

MEETING FOR NATIONAL FOCAL POINTS ON IMPROVING FUTURE NATIONAL REPORTING TO THE UN COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

1. The role of the national focal point in South Africa

Prior to 1994, the year when the first democratically elected government took office, South Africa had been denied participation in activities of the United Nations system. South Africa therefore was not officially represented at UNCED and its preparatory meetings or subsequent meetings of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), until 1995. As a consequence, the government of South Africa has initiated the coordination of compiling national reports to the CSD only since 1996.

The role of the focal point is to manage the process, to coordinate the compilation and edit the national report and country profile report. The focal point is responsible for the communication between the relevant national departments, the South Africa Cabinet and CSD Secretariat. The focal point has to maintain communication and contact with the drafters in the relevant national departments and ensure information of a reasonable quality. Most of the times, contributions to the report depend on the good working relationship between the focal point and the technical drafters. It happens sometimes that information exists but the focal point is not in a position to access the information. The focal point is also responsible for the final edit of the report.

The focal point in South Africa is also responsible for dissemination of information related to sustainable development. The South Africa information on sustainable development on the Internet was published and distributed, due to the fact that less than 5% of the population have access to Internet.

The national focal point in South Africa was also involved in the coordination and preparations of the South African delegation to the intersessional and sessional meetings of CSD-5, CSD-6, CSD-7, and CSD-8.

2. Inter-ministerial coordination in preparing national reports

As determined by its Constitution, South Africa has three spheres of government, namely national, provincial and local, each with its own legislative and executive powers, as well as government institutions.

The national focal point receives the guidelines for reporting via the Department of Foreign Affairs from the CSD Secretariat. The national focal point will identify the relevant national departments and prepare letters requesting their contributions. Communication takes place from the Director-General (head of the national Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism) to the Directors-General of the relevant national departments.

No formal structure exists that makes provision for representation of national, provincial and local government, and of major groups. In the drafting of the national and profile reports other structures such as the Committee for Environmental Coordination, MinTech, the National Substance Committee for the WSSD, and the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Committee are used. The process to make contact with the coordinators/drafters from the other national departments

may take as long as a month to establish. The working relationship between the national focal point and the technical drafters rely heavily on good communication and continuous follow-up.

National Departments are responsible to coordinate information from their provincial and local government counterparts and specific major groups. High priority is given to involve the major groups to secure their input in the national and profile reports. By the time the focal point receives the inputs, the necessary information collected through consultation should have been incorporated.

The focal point receives the contributions from national government, compile and edit a first draft and send it out for comments. The comments are taken into consideration for the final draft. Although the ideal is to send out the final draft for comments, time usually does not allow for this crucial step. The national focal point is responsible for the process to submit the final draft to the Cabinet of South Africa and only after approval of the national report or country profile report by Cabinet will the national focal point submit it to the CSD Secretariat.

Even when the information exist, there are often difficulties in obtaining and combining information from different levels of government and from different government departments for an integrated view of sustainable development. The difficulties to access existing information will improve due to the Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000. The Act gives effect to the institutional right of access to any information held by the state and another person that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights. The National Environmental Management Act, 1998, states that every person and organs of state are entitled to have access to information on the state of the environment and actual and future threats to the environment.

3. Consolidation of reporting requirements from different UN system bodies including mandatory reporting for conventions.

South Africa is in a process to consolidate environmental reporting requirements within the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism.

South Africa does not only report annually to the Commission on Sustainable Development, but through the National Environment Management Act, 1998, is obliged to compile an annual government performance report on sustainable development indicating government's commitment to implement Agenda 21.

Guidelines have been created for this purpose by the focal point in accordance with the CSD guidelines. Due to the fact that it is a government performance report, only the three levels of government are involved to provide information for the compilation of this report. The information collected through this report was used to update the country profile report.

The different reporting requirements related to the conventions, are however very difficult and almost impossible to consolidate due to the different convention secretariats' mandates. The timeframes of the various reports need to be aligned. Some of these reports are monthly, annual or bi-annual reports. The reports should be linked in a way that the information created could be in support of other reporting requirements of the UN system. Although the focal point in South Africa is not involved in these reporting requirements, the drafters use the information collected by means of these reports as inputs to the national and country profile reports.

4. Capacity and resources available in preparing the national report

For the compilation of sustainable development reporting in South Africa, since 1996 to date, only one person from national government was responsible to manage and coordinate the

compilation of the national reports and country profile reports. One notebook computer is available.

With regard to the relevant national departments/ministries, each department appoints a coordinator on an ad hoc basis to provide information as requested for the national and profile reports. The coordinators in the national government departments have access to computers. This is not necessarily the case with provincial and local government.

In terms of sustainable development reporting skills and knowledge, the focal point gained this capacity since 1996. No consistency exists however in the other national government departments related to the contact persons. It depends largely on the availability of technical excerpts for the period of reporting.

Financial resources are provided for through the national government budget. No donor funding has been accessed for the purpose of compiling national reports.

Lack of capacity in the national and provincial departments led to insufficient collection of information on sustainable development, while the lack of expertise and capacity in local authorities impact on national reporting on sustainable development.

The focal point developed and provided information on the processes of the Commission to inform the drafters of the national report.

5. Other issues including difficulties/obstacles encountered in national reporting.

South Africa found the process of national reporting a very useful tool in starting the national preparations for the meetings of the Commission.

The information collected and compiled in the five-year review and in the ten-year review gave a good idea of the progress towards sustainable development. It is however difficult with the available resources to evaluate, analyze and assess the reports to indicate the progress, gaps and priorities for further implementation. Country specific indicators of sustainable development could be a useful instrument to measure progress towards sustainable development. South Africa participated in the testing process of the Commission on indicators of sustainable development. South Africa initiated a process to develop environmental indicators.

Much has been done to collect information, the ability however to analyse and assess this information has lagged behind. The process of developing a national strategy on sustainable development in South Africa has however embarked on a process to analyse and to assess the sustainable development information in South Africa to identify constraints, gaps and priority areas for further implementation of Agenda 21.

Efforts to integrate and use available information in decision-making processes are needed. The capacity to analyse and present sustainable development information in understandable ways does not exist.

The guidelines for the national and profile reports reached the focal point too late (e.g. profile received on 6 August). The timeframe to compile the national report and update the country profile report is not sufficient. More time is needed for comprehensive consultation to compile quality national and profile reports. The guidelines should be provided directly to the focal points, at least six to eight months in advance of the due date required by the CSD Secretariat.

