

INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABILITY

How to identify indicators of sustainable development in Israel? Which indicators are best suited to assess Israel's progress toward or retreat from sustainable development? Over the past several years, academics, environmentalists and professionals from different sectors and disciplines have closely examined these questions. The answers are not simple, but progress is definitely being made as witnessed by the publication of a summary report on the first phase of the project by the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies: "Sustainable Development Indicators in Israel."

The project itself, conducted by the Jerusalem Institute with the cooperation of the Ministry of the Environment and the Central Bureau of Statistics, focused on three primary efforts in the first phase: assessment of existing knowledge in Israel, survey of indicator systems accepted worldwide and assessment of the applicability of the system proposed by the Mediterranean Action Plan, and identification of the indicators necessary in Israel

In order to identify the indicators that would best respond to conditions in Israel, background papers were prepared by Israel's leading experts in seven primary sectors from an environmental point of view (e.g., open spaces, air, water, transport, etc.) along with proposals of relevant indicators for each realm. These were then further scrutinized in seven workshops, each attended by the leading experts in the field. In addition, the indicators necessary to assess the subjects raised in Israel's draft strategy on sustainable development were identified. These were divided into indicators designed to monitor the achievement of the strategy's targets and indicators designed to monitor those processes which were identified as contradicting sustainable development (e.g., economic deterioration, overexploitation of resources, etc.).

The indicators found to accord with the Mediterranean Action Plan, the thematic background papers and the review of the sustainable development strategy were then integrated into one list. Within the list, the indicators were classified into six groups according to the main components of the sustainable development strategy. At the same time, indicators linked to more general indicators were also integrated into the list in order to reduce the total number of indicators. Lastly, the availability of necessary data for the different indicators was checked.

The sustainability view that was developed in the indicators strategy allowed for the identification of six groups, which were considered to be essential to any definition of sustainable development. The six groups into which the indicators were grouped were:

- Sustainable economic growth;
- Social and environmental equity in the present generation;
- Ability to cope with environmental issues;
- Protection of the interests of future generations;
- Efficient utilization of resources;
- Quality of life of the present generation.

Several indicators were proposed for each of the above fields, a total of over 50 indicators in all. However, since this list, which summarized the first phase of the study, is only now being reviewed with respect to the subjects it covers and the quality of the coverage, the list remains tentative. Efforts are currently being made to update the list and to propose a summary list which will form a basis for data collection efforts by the relevant bodies in Israel, foremost among which are the Jerusalem Institute, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Central Bureau of Statistics. In parallel, and in order to advance the implementation process, the latter two bodies have prepared a list of 65 environmental indicators based on data already available in Israel that was published in 2004.

The process of identifying Israel's sustainability indicators is open-ended and dynamic, but with the publication of Israel's first sustainability indicators, the country is better equipped to monitor its progress. In the words of the editor of the Jerusalem Institute publication, Prof. Eran Feitelson, "Indicators are signposts that can point the way to sustainable development. Although there is no agreed and exact definition of sustainable development, indicators may show the direction toward which we are moving and even pave the way toward sustainable development." (An abstract of the publication "Sustainable Development Indicators in Israel", Eran Feitelson, 2004, English section, may be found on the website of the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies: www.jiis.org.il).