

Indicators to Track Sustainable Development

Sustainable development indicators are useful integrative tools that measure our progress toward sustainable development and signal whether we are heading in the right direction. They provide a bridge between the detailed data found in core data sets and interpreted information. Three indicators shed light on the economic, social, and environmental aspects of the sustainability of a system:

- the driving forces (e.g., pressures from human activities, process, and patterns) that society places on the system environmentally, economically, and socially
- the resulting state of the environment, economy, and social systems
- the human response to this state, with measures such as government policy, business activity, and citizen action.

The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development approved a work program on indicators of sustainable development at its third session in 1995. In this program, Canada provided expert advice in the identification of indicators, the evaluation of the indicator methodology sheets, and the capacity-building phase. Countries from all regions of the world tested the indicators over a three-year period, and subsequently Canada participated in a small group of experts to prepare a final framework, themes, and a core set of indicators for sustainable development. Canada's support for international sustainable development indicators also includes work on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's environmental, agri-environmental, and sustainable development indicators and on the Montréal Process's criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management. In September 2000, Canada and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Environment Programme hosted an International Expert Meeting on Information for Decision Making and Participation at which there was a special session on indicators for sustainable development.

At the national level, Canada has a number of indicator initiatives to track different aspects of sustainable development. The following are three examples.

- The National Environmental Indicator Series reports on indicators for environmental issues of national significance in the areas of ecological life-support systems, human health and