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Hubert David

Good afternoon, we have a first session now, where we will learn what happened in the session we did not attend this morning. We first have a report by Viriato Soromenho-Marques, the vice-president of the network, on workshop one on the function of the indicators within the national environmental policies and then we have Harriet Lonka from Finland, the other vice-president of the network, who reports on workshop two, on how indicators are selected.

Viriato Soromenho-Marques

Hello, greetings to everybody! I will try to summarise in five topics the principal issues that were identified during the discussion we had this morning. I will try to address the general theoretical features, extracting from the papers that were presented, and also from the discussion thereafter, the driving ideas and matters that could interest a broader audience. Therefore I am not going to sum up each one of the morning's presentations. The first one of the mentioned five topics will be 'the aim of indicators'; the second deals with the 'limits of indicators'; the third topic tackles the 'types of indicators and sets of indicators'; 'how to create and select indicators' will be the fourth point; and finally I'll address the task of determining 'some problematic areas', aiming at the same time to some 'possible recommendations'.

1.The aim of indicators

Concerning the aim of indicators, I think that we may identify five central features. The first aim of indicators is the effort to reflect a complex reality – a complex reality that is crossed by the environmental

crisis. We need indicators because we face a situation in which we identify some critical aspects connected with the state of the environment. We also need indicators – not only for a description of the situation -- in order to allow us the anticipation of trends.

In that line of thought, Simon Upton called our attention to ‘the need to see if there are some critical thresholds that could be reached without previous notice’. We also need to understand that while speaking about indicators, we are drawing upon a vast experience: in 1920 with Charles Pigou, later with Kenneth Boulding, recently with Herman Daly, Robert Costanza, and so many others. The idea of a threshold hypothesis was raised a decade ago by professor Manfred Max-Neef. We also need indicators to identify challenges, and also to help political decisions. We may call this the need of a political responsibility and we should distinguish that from political accountability. Finally, the indicators are final-oriented or teleological-oriented. They aren’t neutral; we use them because we are seeking for something that we call sustainable development.

2.Limits of indicators

The intrinsic limitations of indicators are also a very strong and important characteristic. First of all, every indicator is a human imperfect tool. They are artefacts, constructions. They need a continuous effort of improvement. Someone said this morning that an indicator is not the Holy Grail, I think that is a beautiful metaphor we shall bear in mind. Secondly, they are always a perspective, which means that they also reflect our biases, our culture, our location in space and time. Consequently they are not the point of view of a god, but they are the point of view of certain human individuals and communities. They also reflect not only what we already know, but above all the lack of knowledge, the uncertainty of science. They reflect as well some features connected with science, namely the fact that the concrete results of scientific research are always linked to the complex maze of science as a domain of public policy. Finally in terms of limitations, all indicators need social and political acceptance. That is a very hard issue. Sometimes we do not use the most objective, most needed indicators but only those, which will suite the audiences we are reaching for.

3.Types of indicators and sets of indicators

We also discussed different types and sets of indicators this morning. I just try to cover the different kinds of indicators, including the various sets of indicators that were identified: core indicators, headline indicators, state indicators, performance indicators, composite or aggregate indicators, sustainable national income – that was an experience brought by a Dutch colleague -, the already classical ecological footprint, and also the DPSIR-methodology of the European Environment Agency. In all those different kinds and types of indicators, we may identify what we may define as a general tension between indicators that are more analytical and those departing from a more holistic perspective; the former trying to address and to tackle with more accuracy more specific issues and the latter trying to draw a general picture, a broader vision. Both are needed but the coalition of these two kinds of indicators is never a peaceful matter.

4.How to create and select indicators

Another essential issue that was raised is precisely how to create and select indicators. We may identify several interesting features here. The indicators that are used have a certain relation with our values, with our implicit values, with our shared values both as individuals and communities. That is the reason why different countries probably will choose different methodologies and sets of indicators. There is here a central philosophical problem: indicators are the expression of interest and value, through the mediation of scientific techniques and expertise. Therefore the indicators give expression to our anthropocentric perspective and we have to face and to live with that insight. At the same time, we need to create and select indicators using the best scientific information available.

On the other hand we have to look at science, not just as a process in order to produce results, but also as an area of public policy and public choice. I mean that science it is not a neutral matter. The way in which for instance there is a larger or a smaller share of our national GDP allocated for scientific research and development is a rather hot political issue. Therefore when we look for indicators we have to understand also the important role of a strong national and European research policy. We need to supply the means that the scientific community needs in order to give us good instruments, good indicators. Many times these delicate and crucial issues are neglected and overlooked.

In the process of creating and selecting indicators, we need also to organise in a systematic way the consultation of different stakeholders and actors, enlarging it to the wider field of broader public participation - the citizens' role in the framing of an effective public environmental policy is an axiom for modern democratic societies -, and we also need transparency in the political decision process. Earlier I mentioned the importance of political responsibility and now I would like to introduce another concept, very intimately connected with the first one: political accountability. Governments and politicians should be responsible and accountable before their citizens. We need to establish what we may call a more accurate monitoring process concerning the effects (also the side effects...) of political decisions having strong environmental impacts

5. Problematic areas and possible recommendations

Finally the last topic deals with problematic areas and possible recommendations. Many of the speakers this morning underlined the importance of a balance among the three pillars of the sustainable development concept. Some doubts were raised about the possibility of maintaining in this new triadic arrangement, the economic indicators untouched, in a mere 'business as usual' perspective. That is a very important issue. Can we just put together, without an organic change and a shift of nature, the classical economic indicators along with the new environmental ones? Isn't there a need for a more intrinsic and profound shift of perspective? There is also the urgency for further research in order to obtain a better understanding of the relations among local, regional, national and global indicators. We also need to balance the effort towards a broader set of indicators that are used for the sake of accuracy, and the need for wider and comprehensive indicators, which probably allow us a larger and realistic view of both the state and the trends of our societies, as far as the environment and sustainable development are concerned.

There is also a need for more harmonisation. We are current or future members of the European Union, coming from different countries and we all know how difficult is to find a common language among us, even using these indicators, which are sophisticated instruments, based on mathematics and empirical sciences. Even then it is difficult to find a common grammar, so to speak. Consequently further research is needed in that domain. We have the task to fill up the holes of the picture as well. This morning, Hubert David underlined that for instance in the six

environmental indicators that were presented by the Commission, all the 'green' ecological indicators connected with nature conservation and agriculture were lacking. Therefore we need to complete the whole picture. The picture is in itself a work in progress of course, but if we identify lacks and holes, we have to try to supply those shortcomings the sooner the better. A more precise evaluation of the political performance is needed as well. That is an essential topic. Many persons spoke about this topic: how to measure not only the environment, but also the effects of our tools and political instruments upon the environment.

The last message I would like to deliver is the need for us to better monitor the efficiency of indicators, developing a kind of meta-indicators approach. That job is also part of our duty towards the European citizens as members of advisory environmental councils. We should not criticize the politicians for not evaluating their own activities if we aren't able to criticize ourselves for not taking in consideration a thoroughly evaluation of our own work in the field of indicators.

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