
Preface

Alain Ayong Le Kama

University of Lille 1, Facultés des Sciences Economiques et Sociales,
59655 Villeneuve d'Ascq Cedex, France
E-mail: Alain.Ayong-le-Kama@equipement.gouv.fr

Biographical notes: Alain Ayong Le Kama is Professor of Economics at University of Lille 1. He specialises in macroeconomics, public economics and environmental and resource economics. For seven years he has been Scientific Advisor to the French Prime Minister's Planning Office, in charge of environmental and energy policies. He is now Scientific Advisor to the Head of the Economics and Statistics Department of the Ministry of Infrastructure, Transport, Housing, Tourism, and the Sea. He has contributed, as an expert, to different reports (national and international) on assessment systems for sustainable indicators.

The fact that, for centuries, only the economic dimension of development was given priority, has led humanity to a worrisome situation as regards the environment and social inequalities. It has become vital to find a form of development in which the balance between the four main pillars of development (economic, social, environmental and institutional) is constantly and automatically sought. The response will require a sustainable development approach that encourages integration and fosters concurrent and balanced developments of all four pillars of developments. In that sense, the sustainable development process can be seen as an opportunity for the future.

Sustainable development is understood in many different ways. The most representative definition was set forth in 1987¹ and can be summarised as follows: "a form of development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The sustainable development approach provides, in that sense, an outstanding opportunity for humanity, as stated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan: from the economic standpoint, to create markets and jobs; from the social standpoint, to fight exclusion; from the political standpoint, to reduce pressure on resources, which can lead to violence; from the environmental standpoint, to protect the ecosystems and resources on which life depends.

To achieve such a long-term approach, consensus needs to be reached and cooperation developed between the general public, the governments and the business community – in short, the prerequisite is support from all sides.

The introduction of effective environmental policies in a country or a region requires a new definition of the reference system for government action in the name of sustainable development. The new properties can be summarised by three points:

- definition of strategic objectives
- measurement and assessment systems
- means of organising and circulating information.

On these points, action is urgently needed as, until such time as there are measurement and assessment tools, no effective sustainable development policy can be set out.

It is important to distinguish between defining strategic sustainable development indicators for a country or a region and indicators that serve only to inform the issues and reflect the efforts made with regard to them. A sustainable development indicator is valuable only in that it helps to inform the political decision-maker about the efforts already made on a specific issue and on the efforts needed to attain a given strategic objective. The two have often been confused, leading to the main strategic sustainable development issues to be determined based on a range of sustainable development indicators.

Yet it is the opposite that should be done, as issues are chosen on a purely political basis, whereas sustainable development indicators are statistical, first and foremost. The risk then becomes that one moves toward a situation where the government's statistical departments would set out the sustainable main political lines for the environment and sustainable development.

Nevertheless, the issue of choosing strategic development issues is not an easy one. Taking into account, integrating and prioritising the said issues within the economic and social systems is a real societal problem. For this reason, the issue needs to become the focus of democratic debate, with universal participation. The procedures by which this debate should be organised, despite being urgently needed, remain to be defined. It is the duty of national or decentralised governments, if they wish to put sustainable development at the centre of their decision-making process on societal issues, as they rightly should.

Once the political stakes of sustainable development are defined democratically, then comes a major statistical effort consisting of building (if necessary), selecting and prioritising the indicators best suited to characterising each of the issues at stake. The national, regional or infra-national governments need therefore to play a central part in devising sustainable development indicators. This reflects the fact that producing indicators requires a certain degree of continuity in the producing structures and resources devoted to surveys and, at the same time, a relatively high degree of responsiveness, to adapt to developments underway.

The indicators produced are designed to enable international benchmarking on the main overall issues that a country must face. In contrast, they must include a degree of desegregation or adaptation to regional or infra-national sector-wide scales so as to allow the various public and private stakeholders involved to see where they stand and take action that is conducive to sustainable development.

The ability to set forth cross-cutting indicators is hindered by the fact that data are produced sector by sector. Information about sustainable development is an issue in itself owing to the type of data available. As the administration is organised by sector (whether at the national level or the decentralised level, with the regions and departments) it is difficult to put together integrated data.

Information gathering about sustainable development issues comes up against a major challenge: the mismatch between the administrative perimeters within which data are integrated and the way the regions are divided up – this is the area in which the disparities are most obvious. As a result, there are problems not only in how environmental risks are perceived, but also social and economic difficulties.

The aim of this Special Issue of *IJSD* is to go forward in the setting forth of cross-cutting indicators. This should also be seen as the only way to return legitimacy and credibility, both scientifically and politically, in the proportions required by sustainable development. Moreover, this would indirectly make it possible to put information about the environment at the same level of importance previously credited to economic and social data, in the eyes of the public and, above all, of political decision-makers.

The papers introduced in this volume use specific frameworks to provide a common language and perspective which are necessary to facilitate the indicator development process, in particular when there are many different stakeholders involved. These papers should act as tools for measuring the progress of existing policies as well as for steering further action.

The mobilisation of scientific papers provided by this volume is an essential component for strategies promoting sustainable development. Besides, given that scientific capacity alone is not sufficient for the purposes of producing credible sustainable development indicators, some of the papers provided in this volume also introduce a capacity building with emphasis placed on supporting the wider processes that will insure legitimacy and credibility of the indicator development process.

Note

¹ Definition suggested in a report by the World Commission on the Environment and Development, chaired by Ms Gro H. Bruntland, and entitled *Our Common Future*.