

Audit of environmental observation

Federal Office for the Environment

Key facts

Good information and decision-making tools are at the heart of a fact-based policy and administration. In the environmental sector, such tools are produced by the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), along with other federal offices and the cantons for CHF 21 million per year. Added to this are internal payments of several million. This means that more than a tenth of the FOEN budget goes to data and indicators in order to provide information on the state of the environment.

In the age of digitalisation, achieving a balance between what is possible and sensible is difficult. In principle, it is possible to produce an almost infinite amount of data on the state of the environment. The question of utility is thus all the more pertinent. The economic law of diminishing marginal utility also applies to environmental information.

Multitude of indicators

The FOEN covers 12 thematic environmental areas such as air, waste, forests and wood with 530 indicators, which is much higher than international requirements. The survey carried out by the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) in collaboration with the FOEN revealed that, aside from very good indicators, the utility of various indicators is declining. This is partly due to the fact that they are not used for internal decisions or because target values are missing. Environmental information is useful only if it is evaluated and is thus relevant for decision-making. The "ammonia emissions" indicator in the environmental area of "air" is very good, for example, with the definition of clear thresholds, as well as measures if they are exceeded.

Although many indicators are used in the FOEN's environmental report or other topic-specific publications, their quality on the FOEN's website could be improved. The indicators are only partially evaluated and the underlying data is not systematically available. Consequently, it is difficult for the general public or politicians to get an idea of the state of an environmental sector. The bottom-up nature of the office is aggravated by the specialist divisions' inventories and own concepts. Uniform guidelines would be desirable.

The role of the legislator and the issue of measurement data resolution

The legislator is jointly responsible for the large number of indicators. For example, the Nature and Cultural Heritage Act (NCHA) forms the basis for extremely time-consuming biodiversity monitoring. However, there is leeway in terms of the spatial and temporal resolution of measurement data. Measurement frequency and the number of measuring points are decisive cost drivers especially in the case of a low degree of automation.

The FOEN's measuring networks differ greatly in this respect. Indicators on measurement data with a very high resolution do not stand out because of better utility values, however, not least because of diminishing marginal utility. Here, the SFAO surmises that potential

savings can be made even if the selected resolutions are generally scientifically sound. Individual indicators with the underlying data generate costs of several hundred thousand francs.

Awareness of the financial magnitude of activities

The office's controlling reports are standardised and of high quality. The only drawback is that they neglect internal personnel costs. Although the office plans person-days, they are not actually accounted for with the services. Management is based mainly on external costs. This is difficult to justify in the case of an office where personnel expenses account for 40% of the total function-specific expenses.

The SFAO found that clarifications to support decisions were missing from the predefined process when introducing new indicators or data surveys. Aside from the justification of the added utility of a new indicator, financial implications must be quantified – including the internal resources committed. Based on that, the requested indicator or data survey should pass through the approval stages defined according to financial authority.

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