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Eighteenth session

Geneva, 28 and 29 June 2016

Report of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment on its eighteenth session

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I. Introduction

A. Background

1. The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment was established by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy in September 2000 to support and strengthen the capacities of countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia¹ (target countries) in the field of environmental monitoring, assessment and reporting.

2. At its twentieth session (Geneva, 28–31 October 2014), the Committee mandated the Working Group to review progress made by pan-European countries in developing the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS), using the targets and performance indicators (ECE/CEP/2014/8) prepared by the Group of Friends of SEIS. The review would serve as a basis to prepare a progress report on SEIS development for consideration at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016). It was furthermore agreed that the Sixth Global Environmental Outlook for the pan-European region² would be launched as the regional environmental assessment at the Batumi Conference, bringing together the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Global Environment Outlook expert teams and the European Environment Agency's European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet) to jointly formulate the regional priorities for and scope of the pan-European assessments. It was agreed that the Working Group would serve as a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks for that process.

3. At its twenty-first session (Geneva, 27–30 October 2015), the Committee renewed the Working Group's mandate for one year after considering options for streamlining the work on environmental monitoring, assessment and reporting (ECE/CEP/2015/12). Further extension of the mandate of the Working Group is subject to a decision by the Committee at its twenty-second session.

4. At the Committee's special session in February 2016 (Geneva, 23–25 February 2016), the Committee approved the final version of the SEIS progress report (ECE/CEP/S/2016/L.9) and agreed that it would be presented to the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

5. The eighteenth session of the Working Group was held in Geneva, Switzerland, on 28 and 29 June 2016.

¹ The countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The countries of South-Eastern Europe include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

² The pan-European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environmental Outlook covers Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, the Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, the Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

B. Attendance

6. The eighteenth session was attended by representatives of ministries or agencies of environment, and in some cases the statistical offices, of the following countries: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

7. In addition, representatives of the following organizations and forums participated: the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States; the National Biodiversity and Biosafety Centre of Tajikistan; UNEP; the United Nations Development Programme; and the United Nations Statistics Division. The international non-profit organizations, Covance EthicalQuote, International Center for Environmental Research and Zoï Environment Network were also represented.

C. Procedural matters

8. The Working Group adopted the agenda for its eighteenth session as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2016/1.

II. Adoption of the report of the Working Group on its seventeenth session

9. The Working Group considered the outcomes of its seventeenth session (Geneva, 7–8 September 2015) and adopted the report of the meeting (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2015/4).

III. Relevant outcomes of the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference and launch of the regional assessment

10. The secretariat reported on the outcomes of the Batumi Ministerial Conference, including the discussion on progress in establishing SEIS in support of regular reporting in the pan-European region and the key findings and policy messages from the pan-European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environment Outlook.

11. The secretariat noted that, in the Batumi Ministerial Declaration, ECE ministers welcomed the progress in developing SEIS to support a regular process of environmental assessment, and reiterated the need for countries to continue their efforts and to further develop their national information systems to have SEIS in place in the countries of Europe and Central Asia by 2021 (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1, para.10).

12. The Working Group was also informed that the launch of the pan-European regional assessment had been carried out in collaboration with UNEP and that several ECE ministers and high-level participants had presented testimonials, including a video on SEIS and the regional assessment that had been especially prepared for the Conference.

13. The secretariat further noted that at its eighteenth session the Working Group would consider the next steps of implementation of the directions given by ministers in the Batumi Declaration regarding the further establishment of SEIS by 2021 and the regular pan-European assessment.

IV. Revised terms of reference of the Working Group

14. The secretariat recalled that, at its twentieth session, the Committee had requested it to prepare a proposal on possible ways to streamline the work of the Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators and Statistics, as well as potentially incorporating the responsibilities of the Group of Friends of SEIS, to enhance the coordination of activities and reinforce the work on environmental monitoring and assessment (ECE/CEP/2014/2, paras. 26 and 98 (m)). The secretariat had submitted its proposal including new terms of reference of the two bodies to the Committee at its twenty-first session (see ECE/CEP/2015/12).

15. Following the review of the proposal, the Committee had decided to wait until after Batumi to engage in another discussion on the streamlining of activities. The mandate for the Working Group had therefore been extended for one year, covering the period 2015–2016. As the draft terms of reference for the Working Group had proposed a term of four years to work on the various tasks associated with establishing SEIS, the present activities, outputs and timetable of the Working Group (see sect. VIII) would have to be revised according to the present mandate of one year, ending in 2016.

IV. Responding to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: developing a vision and road map for the Working Group

16. The secretariat suggested that, as part of preparing new terms of reference of the Working Group for a further period, there was a need to develop a clear vision and a road map, addressing the demand for streamlining and including a discussion on how the activities of the Working Group could contribute more effectively to enhancing environmental monitoring and assessment in the pan-European region within its present and future mandate.

17. The Working Group expressed concern regarding the decision of the Committee to limit the mandate of the Working Group to one year. It agreed to use the eighteenth session to define a vision and road map to be submitted to the Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-second session (Geneva, 25–27 January 2017) together with the request for a new mandate.

18. The secretariat noted that the members of the Working Group had been invited in May 2016 to answer a brief questionnaire, as part of the regular process of consultation on environmental assessment, to identify and clarify major institutional drivers and environmental priorities for national institutions concerned with environmental monitoring and assessment for the coming five-year period. The results from the questionnaire would serve as a basis for focused forward-thinking round-table discussions at the current session to provide the materials for a vision document and a five-year road map for the Working Group.

19. Presenting the results of the questionnaire, the secretariat enumerated the strategic and thematic priorities that had emerged from the responses. Three of these would guide the round-table discussions, namely: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the green economy; reporting and assessment; and environmental statistics.

20. The Chair called on country representatives to present ongoing and relevant work related to environmental monitoring and assessment with a view to setting the stage for the round-table discussions on the strategic and thematic priorities.

21. A representative from the National Biodiversity and Biosafety Center of Tajikistan outlined the structure of the environmental information management and monitoring system

in Tajikistan. Tajikistan was currently working towards strengthening capacity for environmental monitoring and information management under a UNDP/Global Environment Facility project in order to improve the reporting process to the Rio Conventions and to ensure sustainable development through better environmental policy. Among other things, there remained a need to improve the regulatory framework governing the interaction of various executive bodies exercising environmental monitoring, to continue development of methodologies on environmental monitoring and for technical and financial support for monitoring system initiatives in Tajikistan.

22. The representative of the Russian Federation presented the development of a national network to monitor air pollution in the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation had adopted important decisions on its legal framework with regard to environmental monitoring, including air monitoring, in 2013. According to those decisions, it had been decided to create a State network to monitor air pollution across the Russian federal system. Roshydromet, the federal executive body under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology, was in charge of organizing the authorities involved in the establishment of the air pollution monitoring network. There was a need to further develop the network in cities through its expansion and methodological and technical modernization, both in the scope of the monitored territories and with regard to the list of pollutants monitored.³ The initial production, processing and archiving of data on the state of air pollution by the organizations concerned, including the development of computational methods of air pollution modelling and forecasting, also needed to be improved.

23. The presentations by country level representatives were followed by simultaneous round-table discussions. Following an exchange between members of the Working Group on the strategic and thematic priorities, a rapporteur from each table presented the outcome of the discussions to the Working Group.

24. The secretariat provided information about the continued development of the vision document (tentatively entitled “Our 2030 Mission and Vision: Setting strategic goals and objectives for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment”) and the road map (tentatively entitled “Road Map 2021: Defining a strategy for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment”). The inputs provided by the Working Group through the questionnaire and round-table discussions would be used by the secretariat to produce a draft version of the vision document and road map. The secretariat suggested that the draft documents be shared with the Working Group to allow for a third round of consultations and feedback from all its members. The documents would then be finalized by the secretariat and submitted to the Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-second session.

25. The Working Group agreed to provide additional comments and inputs on the draft documents, which would be circulated by the secretariat in October 2016.

³ The Ukrainian delegation noted that the map portrayed in the presentation of the Russian Federation was inaccurate and reminded the Working Group about United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262 concerning the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

V. Moving forward from Batumi: establishment and implementation of the Shared Environmental Information System in the pan-European region

26. The representative of Austria gave a presentation on how the SEIS assessment process could be improved in the future, drawing lessons learned from the first progress report on establishing SEIS in the pan-European region, which had been launched at the Batumi Ministerial Conference (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/8). As the Working Group moved on to address the requests in the Batumi Declaration (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1, para. 10), further use and update of the progress report could profit from refined review criteria and better inclusion of quality considerations. Before expanding and including additional indicators in the review process, the Working Group should address how access to up-to-date environmental data on air quality could be introduced into the SEIS assessment process as part of the follow-up on the first progress report.

27. The representative of Austria also noted that the Working Group could take the opportunity to follow-up on ongoing initiatives in that regard, such as the air-quality-focused twinning project in Azerbaijan. A regional workshop on harmonizing approaches and methodologies for modernizing air quality monitoring systems and data management could be organized in connection with that project, where international co-organizers, such as the European Environment Agency (e.g., ENI SEIS II), the International Association of Computer Investigative Specialists Environment Committee and the Working Group could be involved.

28. The representative of Austria furthermore suggested that a reporting template, using air quality indicators, could be developed as a basis for piloting the online SEIS reporting application, within the context of UNEP Live. He volunteered to develop the draft version of such a reporting template.

29. The secretariat presented the proposed next steps for the annual SEIS progress reporting, focusing on the need to amend the review criteria. The presentation covered some of the results from the first progress report and highlighted the need to take into account quality characteristics in the progress report to be submitted for the Environment for Europe mid-term review.

30. The secretariat suggested that the review criteria should be revisited, with the intent to integrate a quality component as part of the overall assessment, before including additional indicators and data sets. It was also recommended that, as part of piloting the SEIS online reporting application, a quality definition and associated quality components should be created, taking into account specificities of the data producer, as an inherent component of the self-assessment in future progress reports.

31. The Working Group agreed to develop a reporting template on air quality and welcomed the offer by the Austrian member to draft the template. It also welcomed the suggestion to amend the review criteria to include quality considerations as part of the self-assessment when developing the SEIS online reporting application, starting with a focus on air quality. It was agreed that, rather than reforming or establishing a new sub-group on that topic, the Working Group as a whole would be involved in the process and have the opportunity to give comments and inputs once the draft template and updated review criteria had been produced.

32. The Working Group also agreed to develop guidelines on the SEIS reporting mechanism. That would follow the piloting and completion of the SEIS online reporting application, expected to be finalized in 2018.

33. A scheduled presentation on recent developments in UNEP Live — the future platform for reporting — had to be cancelled due to time constraints. The secretariat informed the Working Group that the presentation would be made available online.⁴

VI. Supporting the establishment of the pan-European Shared Environmental Information System

34. A representative from the United Nations Statistics Division presented the proposed global Sustainable Development Goals indicators framework, as agreed by the United Nations Statistical Commission, and the challenges in measuring progress on the Goals. The Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics and its accompanying tools could help countries to compile environmentally related Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The growing demand for robust environmental statistics was highlighted, especially statistics to track progress towards environmental sustainability being the weakest area.

35. The speaker noted that the Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics, the Basic Set of Environment Statistics, the Environment Statistics Self-Assessment Tool and the forthcoming Manual on the Basic Set of Environment Statistics could contribute to the production of environment statistics needed for producing environmental indicators, Sustainable Development Goal indicators and environmental-economic accounting. Among the challenges faced in developing the indicators were overlapping mandates across institutions and ministries and the need for the new data sources required. There was also a need for statistical capacity-building with a focus on developing and strengthening underlying or basic environment statistics to firmly anchor environment statistics in national statistical systems.

VII. Keeping the pan-European environment under review and the pan-European Global Environmental Outlook

36. A representative of UNEP informed the Working Group about the launch of the pan-European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environment Outlook (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/INF/14). The presenter outlined the Global Environment Outlook process, emphasizing that the sixth edition had been an inclusive process for the co-generation of knowledge, engaging a wide range of expertise. For example, some 71 experts from 25 countries had participated in the drafting of the Sixth Global Environment Outlook assessment for the pan-European region. The two overarching themes of the report were the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the relationship between the environment and human health and well-being. Some of the main results from the report were presented.

37. The secretariat informed the Working Group that the pan-European regional assessment had been made available in electronic format, in the English and Russian languages, on the ECE website.⁵

38. The representative of Italy presented the key findings and policy messages of the pan-European regional assessment (see ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/9) and the process of bringing together relevant European networks, such as the Working Group and the Bureau

⁴ See <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=42166#/>

⁵ Available from <http://www.unece.org/environmental-policy/environment-for-europe/efe-conferences/batumi-conference/documents-and-materials.html> (INF documents tab).

of the Committee of Environmental Policy, as part of developing the key findings and policy messages. The key findings and policy messages reflected the structure and the content of the regional assessment, which had been designed to specifically address policy makers and to highlight that urgent action was needed, in particular to: (a) establish a robust connection between regional and global trends; (b) interlink environmental policies and economic-social components; (c) establish a new governance system for sustainable development, as a fundamental prerequisite for Governments to address the challenges faced; and (d) identify the green economy and other cross cutting instruments as major players for the necessary paradigm shift to be realized. It was furthermore noted that the key findings and policy messages introduced the concept of planetary boundaries, clearly stating that the region alone could not halt the depletion of resources and reverse the negative trends, and that the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda could contribute significantly to reversing that trend.

39. The secretariat recalled the Working Group's mandate to serve as a regional environmental information and assessment "network of networks" (see ECE/EX/2016/L.11), linking networks dealing with thematic assessment or specific international agendas (e.g., the Sustainable Development Goals). The regional network should link with pre-existing networks dealing with thematic assessments, in particular those under multilateral environmental agreements or specific international agendas, or the parts of those processes that were related to the environment.

40. The secretariat noted that, as a next step, it would be relevant to further characterize the functional role of the "network of networks" as a coordination mechanism, and to provide practical guidance to the Working Group on how that would be achieved. The network priority themes, key working modalities and the scale and level of engagement for the network should be defined as part of developing guidelines for the Working Group.

41. The secretariat proposed that it would produce such guidelines, setting out the objectives and modalities of the "network of networks", for the Working Group. The draft guidelines, once completed, would be shared with the Working Group for comments. It was suggested that relevant organizations, such as UNEP and Eionet, should also be involved in that process, to ensure that all relevant actors would have the opportunity to provide inputs. The aim would be to present the guidelines to the Committee on Environmental Policy at its next session.

42. The Working Group welcomed the suggestion to prepare guidelines on the working modalities of the "network of networks" to be presented at the twenty-second session of the Committee of Environmental Policy in January 2017.

VIII. Other business and closure of the meeting

A. Decisions and recommendations for work in the period leading up to the twenty-second session of the Committee on Environmental Policy

43. Following the discussions at its eighteenth session, the Working Group decided:

(a) To revise the review criteria and integrate a quality component as part of the self-assessment. The aim would be to utilize the revised review criteria in the preparation of an updated mid-term progress report, focusing initially on air quality, for submission to the Committee on Environmental Policy;

(b) To produce guidelines on the working modalities of the Working Groups as a "network of networks" and to present them to the Committee of Environmental Policy at its twenty-second session;

(c) To develop a reporting template for air quality indicators together with the SEIS reporting application. That would be done in collaboration with UNEP and the Working Group as a whole;

(d) To produce guidelines on the use of the SEIS reporting mechanism and its application. It was foreseen that the guidelines would be published mid-2018, in the English and Russian languages, and that they would be produced in parallel with the development of the SEIS reporting application.

44. The Working Group requested the secretariat to explore possibilities with partners and donors to organize capacity-building activities at the subregional and country level as soon as possible.

45. The secretariat would inform the Committee on Environmental Policy on its decisions and recommendations for work in the next period.

B. Launching the Working Group's Newsletter and Facebook group

46. The secretariat informed the Working Group that a Facebook group⁶ had been launched specifically for the Working Group, as a social platform, to connect its members more actively and to provide another way to communicate. It was also noted that the secretariat intended to launch a newsletter in September 2016. The purpose of the newsletter would be, in part, to share news and announcements from the secretariat, but also to provide the opportunity to all Working Group members to share information with the network as a whole.

47. The secretariat invited the Working Group to join the Facebook group as well as to inform the secretariat of any topics that they would like to be included in the newsletter. That could include sharing information on relevant projects, publications and upcoming events.

C. Closure of the meeting

48. The Working Group did not agree on any specific date for its next session. The Chair together with the Vice-Chairs and the secretariat were to evaluate the need for a meeting in the first quarter of 2017 in view of decisions taken by the Committee on Environmental Policy at its next session. Otherwise, the next session of the Working Group would be organized in the second quarter of 2017.

49. The Working Group thanked donors — Norway, the Russian Federation and Switzerland — for the financial support provided to organize the eighteenth session.

⁶ See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/wgema/>.