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**Lessons learned from the Environment for Europe mid-term
review of the Astana Conference main outcomes**

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Note by the secretariat and the Bureau of the Committee on Environmental Policy

Summary

Pursuant to a decision by the Seventh Environment for Europe (EfE) Ministerial Conference (Astana, 21–23 September 2011), the EfE mid-term review of the Astana Conference main outcomes was organized during the nineteenth session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP), which was held in Geneva from 22 to 25 October 2013.

CEP expressed satisfaction with the level of organization, the quality of documents and the outcomes of the EfE mid-term review. In this context, CEP requested its Bureau and the ECE secretariat to follow up and assess the lessons learned from the organization of the review (ECE/CEP/2013/2, para. 116 (g) (vii)).

Pursuant to that request, the present document was prepared by the ECE secretariat in consultation with the CEP Bureau, with a view to facilitating the discussion of the review at the twentieth session, including on the prospect of future mid-term reviews organized under the EfE process.



Background

1. In accordance with the 2009 Environment for Europe (EfE) Reform Plan,¹ and following a decision by ministers at the Seventh EfE Ministerial Conference (Astana, 21–23 September 2011), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) convened a mid-term review in October 2013 to assess progress in implementing the main outcomes of the Astana Conference. The mid-term review aimed to provide renewed impetus to the EfE process, and, further to the Reform Plan, its findings are to be taken into account in the preparatory process for the next conference.

2. The 2013 EfE mid-term review was a first event of such nature organized under the EfE process. In their interventions, delegates expressed their satisfaction with the level of organization, the quality of documents and the outcomes of the EfE mid-term review of the Astana Conference outcomes. The CEP Bureau and the secretariat were to follow up and assess the lessons learned from the EfE mid-term review (ECE/CEP/2013/2, para. 116 (g) (vii)).

3. Concerning the assessment of lessons learned from organizing the EfE mid-term review of the Astana outcomes, the Bureau agreed that a survey would be too burdensome for countries. Therefore, the Bureau requested the secretariat to draft, in consultation with it, a short assessment from the perspective of organizational issues and to submit it to CEP for the further consideration (see ECE/CEP/2014/3, para. 11). The present document contains such an assessment.

4. CEP may wish to consider the information provided herein to serve as guidance for the organization of future mid-term reviews.

I. Overview of the Environment for Europe mid-term review of the Astana Conference main outcomes

5. The EfE Reform Plan stipulates that particular efforts should be made by all relevant responsible actors to implement the outcomes of the EfE ministerial conferences. Member States should regularly consider how to promote the objectives and priorities of the EfE process and strengthen implementation of the outcomes of the EfE conferences, including through national policies and relevant partnerships. Active participation by and input from all interested countries of ECE, and in particular of interested countries of subregions with specific needs for improving their environmental situation, is crucial for the success of the activities under the EfE process. Accordingly, the scope of the first mid-term review covered the main outcomes of the Astana EfE Ministerial Conference.

6. The Astana Conference main outcomes for follow-up action include: (a) ratifying and implementing the relevant ECE multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs); (b) implementing the Astana Water Action (AWA); (c) promoting a green economy in the region and the Green Bridge Partnership Programme; (d) conducting a third cycle of environmental performance reviews (EPRs); (e) establishing a regular process of environmental assessment and developing a Shared Environmental Information System

¹ The Reform Plan of the EfE process was developed by CEP during 2008 and adopted on 29 January 2009 (ECE/CEP/S/152 and Corr.1, annex I); the plan was subsequently endorsed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe at its sixty-third session (Geneva, 30 March–1 April 2009).

(SEIS); and (f) continuing the work of the Environmental Action Programme Task Force (EAP Task Force) and strengthening the work of the Regional Environmental Centres (see ECE/ASTANA.CONF/2011/2/Add.1).²

7. The mid-term review was organized as an integral part of the nineteenth session of CEP (Geneva, 22–25 October 2013) during the first and second days of the meeting. In total, one-and-a-half days were dedicated to the review. The meeting was attended by over 100 delegates, comprising representatives of 41 Governments, the United Nations system, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, the European Investment Bank, and the Regional Environmental Centres. The mid-term review sessions were chaired by the CEP chair.

8. The mid-term review was organized in the form of thematic plenary sessions, i.e., on EPRs, SEIS and the work of the EAP Task Force and the Regional Environmental Centres, as well as multi-stakeholder panel discussions, i.e., on MEAs, the AWA and on greening the economy. The panel discussions included some five³ panellists per panel (representatives of Governments and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations). Each panel discussion commenced with keynote addresses by panellists to kick-off the discussion, and was followed by a facilitated interactive discussion from the floor.

9. Brief documents (mid-term review reports) on the progress achieved in implementing the main outcomes of the Astana Ministerial Conference were prepared by the relevant EfE partners, following a template for such reports approved by CEP.

10. The mid-term review included a session on the main findings of the review, during which participants discussed the results of consultations (in the format of a survey) with ECE member States to collect information on how they were promoting the objectives and priorities of the EfE process and strengthening implementation of the outcomes of the Astana Conference, including through national policies and relevant partnerships.

11. Three lunchtime side events were organized on the margins of the CEP session: “SEIS in practice and the way forward in the pan-European region” (by the European Environment Agency); and “Briefing on the First Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme” and “UNEP’s contribution to the post-2015 development agenda and update on the implementation of the 10 Years Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production” (both by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)).

II. Results of the Environment for Europe mid-term review of the Astana Conference main outcomes

12. The outcomes of the mid-term review are presented in the CEP report on its nineteenth session (see ECE/CEP/2013/2). A brief summary of the main results is included below.

13. The ECE MEAs were found to be robust instruments, having progressed both in terms of increased membership and improved national implementation. CEP praised the

² The Astana Ministerial Declaration and other Conference documents are available on the ECE website (<http://www.unece.org/env/efe/astana/welcome.html>).

³ The panel discussion on MEAs comprised seven panellists, given that there were eight ECE MEAs in force at the time of the mid-term review (the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment were represented by the Vice-Chair of the Espoo Convention).

work of the MEAs, stressing, however, that more efforts were needed to ensure adequate political support for their implementation. In particular, the secretariats of the MEAs should be strengthened and more resources allocated from the United Nations regular budget for that purpose. CEP requested that a report on the opening of the ECE MEAs and other ECE environmental instruments to accession by States outside the region be prepared for its next session.

14. AWA, an action framework to advance the sustainable management of water and water-related ecosystems, had overall made good progress. AWA stakeholders were encouraged to continue to implement the actions still under way and invited to provide a progress report to CEP at its session in 2015 or 2016. The secretariat was asked to disseminate the AWA commitments and results either through a brochure or on the ECE website.

15. Regarding efforts to establish a green economy, a comprehensive overview, prepared jointly by the ECE and UNEP secretariats, showed that many organizations were carrying out a wide range of activities to green the economies in the region. Kazakhstan and its partners were working on the further development of the Green Bridge Partnership Programme, including its procedural and institutional set-up. An updated report on the progress in and future prospects for greening the economy in the pan-European region, including the priorities for greening the economy in the region and possible modalities and options to achieve it, was requested for the twentieth session of CEP in 2014.

16. The third cycle of EPRs was advancing well. CEP supported the detailed structure proposed by the secretariat for the third cycle of EPRs and agreed to revisit it in the future in the light of experience gained in its practical application. Green economy is integrated in the third cycle both in various chapters, as relevant, as well as in a dedicated chapter, for example, on “economic instruments and environmental expenditure and investments for greening the economy”. The Republic of Moldova was the first country to undergo successfully a third review in 2013, followed by Montenegro and Serbia in 2014.

17. The establishment of a regular process of environmental assessment and reporting and the development of SEIS were progressing rather slowly. Countries and other SEIS stakeholders were invited to engage more actively in the establishment of SEIS both at the national and regional levels. To support this process, a coordination mechanism for the development of SEIS in the form of a Group of Friends of SEIS was established. CEP invited MEAs to consider whether their reporting mechanisms were aligned with SEIS principles and to revise them as necessary. CEP further requested that the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators support the activities of the Friends of SEIS in pursuing the implementation of its mandates.

18. The work of the EAP Task Force on promoting better policies and tools for water resources management and green growth had progressed well. The work of the Regional Environmental Centres on promoting green economy and governance for sustainability was progressing and could be further strengthened within the Centres’ activities.

19. Many Governments participated actively in the survey on the promotion of the EfE process and the outcomes of its ministerial conferences. Out of the 44 countries that participated in the Astana Conference, 29 had responded, i.e., 66 per cent. The responses showed an overall wide support for the continuation of the EfE process as a valuable platform to improve the environmental governance in the region and to promote the mainstreaming of the environment into other sectors.

III. Lessons learned from the Environment for Europe mid-term review of the Astana Conference main outcomes

20. A number of lessons were learned from the organization of the EfE mid-term review of the Astana Conference main outcomes which should be taken into consideration in preparing any future mid-term reviews.

21. With regard to administrative aspects of the mid-term review, lessons were learned from the preparatory process. The mid-term review was organized two years after the Astana Ministerial Conference, which allowed adequate time for progress to be made in the implementation of its outcomes in order to be assessed during the review. Overall, the schedule of preparations was adequate. The CEP discussion and decision on the scope, format and modalities of the mid-term review, made at its session in April 2012, were of paramount importance in guiding the preparation of the review. Also, the extensive involvement of the CEP Bureau during the intersessional period had been essential. This is a positive lesson learned and such a preparatory process could be replicated for future mid-term reviews under the EfE process.

22. Concerning the timing of the review, its organization during a regular annual session of CEP had some positive effects, such as ensuring a good attendance by delegates and allowing for savings for both the secretariat and delegates, i.e., by avoiding the need to prepare an additional meeting or additional travel to Geneva.

23. At the same time, combining the event with a regular CEP session, especially at the end of a United Nations biennium (i.e., 2010–2011, 2012–2013, 2014–2015) when a number of programmatic documents need to be processed, put a heavy burden on the secretariat at an already busy time. For future reviews, CEP may wish to consider whether to continue organizing them during the regular sessions of CEP or whether to convene them during a special session.

24. Regarding the length of the mid-term review, having a one-and-a-half-day review during a four-day CEP session, alongside the CEP Bureau meeting and the joint informal meeting of the MEAs and CEP Chairs — organized the day before the CEP session — resulted in a rather busy agenda for the delegates and a large amount of information for them absorb, and also overstretched the available resources in the secretariat.

25. Concerning the quality of the discussion, while discussions during the panels and plenary sessions were of an adequate quality, it would be advisable to avoid the above-mentioned time constraints in the future. Delegates praised the quality of the documents and at the same time some delegates found the number of documents and amount of information provided to be somewhat overwhelming.

26. Also, some discussions, both during the mid-term review and on the regular items of the CEP session, had to be “squeezed” within the available time frame. Reflections on how to ensure a good balance between the required level and depth of substance versus the number and the length of all the related meetings would be necessary for future mid-term reviews.

27. As concerns the secretariat workload regarding documents, a total of 22 pre-session official documents were prepared for the nineteenth session of CEP, of which 11 related to the mid-term review. Also, a total of 12 pre-session information papers were prepared, of which one (235 pages) related to the mid-term review. The large amount of documents put an unforeseen burden on the secretariat, including the regular staff servicing CEP, but also on the other staff who provided input into various documents, as well as on the Environment Division’s editor. It will be necessary to consider the overall number of documents and their length when planning the future mid-term reviews. In that regard, consideration should be given to finding the correct balance between the resources

available in the secretariat and the estimated cost for participants' travel, with a view to underpinning a decision on holding separate meetings dedicated to the mid-term review in future.

28. With reference to the workload for delegates, the intense four-day session, including the side events (for the CEP Bureau members it was a total of five days), as well as the large number of documents, which required consideration for subsequent decision-making, proved to be demanding. While many delegates praised the substance and the organization of the meeting, a few mentioned that the large amount of information and the intensity of the sessions. In addition, participants experienced discomfort owing to the renovations going on at that time in near to the meeting room in the Palais des Nations.

29. One possibility to address some of the challenges mentioned above would be to consider organizing the mid-term review during a special session of CEP, held at a six-month interval from the regular annual CEP session and at an interval of some two-and-a-half years between EfE ministerial conferences. Alternatively, if the reviews are to be convened during the regular CEP session, it might be necessary to allocate additional resources from the extrabudgetary funds for a six-month contract for professional staff to support the regular staff of the secretariat.

30. The organizational aspects include lessons learned from developing the agenda and the format of the mid-term review. The scope of the mid-term review reasonably covered all the main outcomes of the Astana Conference. In addition, including the results from the EfE survey in the mid-term review contributed to broadening the perspective of the review with regard to the future of the process. Using panel and plenary formats for discussion proved to be a good balance, albeit intensive for some topics because of the time limits.

31. The organization of side events on the margins of the CEP session, and in particular those of relevance to the EfE mid-term review topics, proved to be a valuable contribution to the official sessions.

32. The substantive aspects include lessons learned from preparing the mid-term reports and from carrying out the EfE survey, which included questions regarding the implementation by countries of the EfE Reform Plan, as well as questions about the substance and format of the eighth EfE Ministerial Conference.

33. Developing mid-term reports to assess progress in implementation of each of the Conference outcomes was very helpful in supporting the discussion during the review. At the same time, as already mentioned above, the total number and length of the mid-term review reports and other related documents exceeded the existing capacity, both of the secretariat and other EfE partners as well as of the delegates.

34. The responses to the survey provided a wealth of information, which was useful and continues to be a valuable reference. Carrying out a second round of a similar survey might be considered for the next mid-term review in some five years' time.
