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**The Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference:
developing the Shared Environmental Information System**

Outcomes of the work of the Group of Friends of the Shared Environmental Information System for the period March–July 2014

Report by the Group of Friends of the Shared Environmental Information System

Summary

At its nineteenth session (Geneva, 22–25 October 2013), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) established a Group of Friends of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) to support the development of SEIS in the pan-European region. Subsequently, the ECE Executive Committee formally approved the establishment of the Group of Friends of SEIS, its mandate and its terms of reference and financial requirements (see ECE/EX/11).

CEP requested the Friends of SEIS to look into several related issues, including monitoring and evaluating the progress in SEIS development and organizing and shaping the regular assessment process, taking into account the benefits of SEIS (see ECE/CEP/2013/2, paras. 38–39 and 116 (g) (v)).

To fulfil the above mandate, the Friends of SEIS worked via electronic consultations and met in Geneva on 12 May 2014. The present document outlines the outcomes of the Friends of SEIS work, including its May meeting, with a view to supporting the CEP work on SEIS at its twentieth session.

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Background, mandate and scope

1. Timely, reliable, high quality and easily accessible environmental information is essential both to underpin policymaking and to inform citizens about the quality of their environment. At the same time, organizing a vast array of environmental data and information and making it available in a comprehensible and targeted manner to decision makers and the public, as well as using it for reporting on the state of the environment nationally and internationally is a challenging task.

2. At the Seventh Environment for Europe (EfE) Ministerial Conference (Astana, 21–23 September 2011) ministers decided to establish a regular process of environmental assessment and to develop the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) across the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region in order to keep the pan-European environment under review (ECE/ASTANA.CONF/2011/2/Add.1, para. 14).

3. The ministers emphasized that those two developments should serve multiple policy processes, including the multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), and include the building of capacity in countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia to monitor and assess their environment.

4. The Bureau of the Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) agreed that the decision to develop SEIS across the region was one of the most important outcomes of the Astana Conference, and recommended that progress in its development be reported at the next EfE conference.

5. At its nineteenth session (Geneva, 22–25 October 2013), during the mid-term review of the Astana Conference outcomes, CEP assessed the development of SEIS in the region, and found the progress to be rather limited. In spite of an increasing number of SEIS and regular reporting activities, the landscape remains fragmented and a lack of coordination between these activities still persists.

6. Understanding SEIS and its benefits for enabling regular assessment and reporting, as well as for increasing the level of environmental awareness and education, continue to be both a top priority and a key challenge. Countries should develop SEIS based on their national needs and international commitments, e.g., under the MEAs and other environmental policies, as well as taking into account the SEIS principles.

7. To strengthen the work of CEP at the political level and the work of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment at the technical level, CEP decided to establish a coordination mechanism in the form of a Group of Friends of SEIS and approved the terms of reference for such a group (ECE/CEP/2013/2, paras. 38–39 and 116 (g) (v)).¹

8. Subsequently, the ECE Executive Committee formally approved the establishment of the Group of Friends of SEIS, its mandate and its terms of reference and financial requirements (see ECE/EX/11).²

9. Following the Executive Committee's approval of the Friends of SEIS, the ECE secretariat sent out e-mails inviting the SEIS stakeholders to nominate their representative to the Group. As a result, nominations were received from 13 ECE members States, as well as from all of the intergovernmental bodies and organizations and the non-governmental organizations, as stipulated in the Friends of SEIS terms of reference.

¹ The document is available from <http://www.unece.org/env/cep/2013sessionoctober.html>.

² The document is available from <http://www.unece.org/commission/excom/welcome.html>.

10. The Group of Friends of SEIS includes representatives of: Austria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Turkey and Uzbekistan; the CEP Bureau; the Bureau of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment; the Working Group of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers; the ECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention); the Protocol on Water and Health; the European Commission; the European Environment Agency (EEA); ECE; the United Nations Environment Programme; the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe; the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; four Regional Environmental Centres (for Central Asia, for the Caucasus, for the Republic of Moldova and for the Russian Federation); the European ECO Forum; Zoï Environment Network; and the European Union-funded Environmental Monitoring in Central Asia (MONECA)³ project.⁴

11. In accordance with its terms of reference, the main purpose of the Friends of SEIS is to provide a platform for the exchange of information about ongoing and planned activities relevant to the development of SEIS and to build synergies among and join the efforts of the main interested stakeholders.

12. At the same time, CEP mandated the Friends of SEIS to look into and provide answers to the following questions during the period 2014–2015:

(a) How should progress be monitored and evaluated: what should be the clear targets and performance indicators for the development of SEIS?;

(b) How should the regular assessment process be organized and shaped, taking into consideration the benefits of SEIS?

13. The geographical scope for SEIS development covers the pan-European region, including all 56 countries of ECE.

14. To fulfil its mandate, the Friends of SEIS worked via electronic consultations and met in Geneva on 12 May 2014. The first meeting was chaired by the CEP Vice-Chair from Belgium. Due to resource constraints at the national level, some Friends of SEIS were not able to participate in this meeting.

I. Workplan for 2014–2015

15. Its terms of reference stipulate that, at its first meeting, the Friends of SEIS will agree on a workplan with concrete and results-oriented activities, taking into account SEIS-related developments, including, among others, the SEIS-related documents submitted to the nineteenth session of CEP (ECE/CEP/2013/13, ECE/CEP/2013/15 and ECE/CEP/2013/18).

16. It is foreseen that the Group of Friends of SEIS will hold two or three meetings during the period 2014–2015, organized back to back with meetings of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment or the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators. In between its meetings the Group is mandated to work by e-mail, as necessary.

17. At its first meeting in May 2014, the Friends of SEIS worked on developing targets and performance indicators for monitoring and evaluating the progress in establishing

³ MONECA is a component of a wider project on Forest and Biodiversity Governance including environmental monitoring (FLERMONECA).

⁴ The list of Friends of SEIS is available on the ECE website from <http://www.unece.org/env/cep/friendsofseis2014sessionmay.html>.

SEIS, based on a working document prepared by the ECE secretariat in consultation with EEA. The final document (ECE/CEP/2014/8) is being submitted to CEP for approval. The Group also commenced the discussion on organizing and shaping the regular assessment process, taking into consideration the benefits of SEIS.

18. At its second meeting, in 2015, the Friends of SEIS will finalize the organization and shape of the regular assessment process, taking into account the benefits of SEIS, based on a working document prepared by the ECE secretariat in consultation with EEA. The final document will be submitted to CEP for approval in 2015. Should CEP request additional work to be done regarding the development of targets and performance indicators, the Group will also address that issue.

19. Depending on decisions by CEP and on available resources, the Group will consider whether to hold a third meeting during the period 2014–2015.

20. The servicing of the Group will be ensured through the existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources.⁵ At the same time, extrabudgetary funds will be required to cover participation costs of eligible members of the Group and the costs of possible coordination missions with the main stakeholders. A detailed table presenting ECE extrabudgetary resource requirements is annexed to the Executive Committee document (see ECE/EX/11, annex III).

21. The annex to this document provides a table with the workplan of the Group of Friends of SEIS for 2014–2015. The Group adopted its workplan for 2014–2015 at its first meeting. The workplan might need to be revised in the light of relevant decisions by CEP. Should CEP decide to expand the activities related to SEIS beyond the two tasks assigned by CEP at its nineteenth session, for example to provide technical expertise to support SEIS development in some countries, provision of additional funds would be necessary to support such additional activities.

22. CEP is invited to take note of the workplan of Friends of SEIS for 2014–2015.

II. Monitoring and evaluating progress in establishing the Shared Environmental Information System

23. Pursuant to the mandate given by CEP, friends of SEIS met in Geneva on 12 May 2014 and worked on developing targets and performance indicators for assessing progress in establishing SEIS. Friends of SEIS considered a draft version of targets and performance indicators prepared by the ECE secretariat and made suggestions for a further development of those targets and performance indicators. Consequently, the ECE secretariat in cooperation with EEA finalized the document for submission to CEP.

24. Friends of SEIS agreed on a framework with a view to support each country to measure progress in the development of its national SEIS. The framework is designed to

⁵ The ECE secretariat will support the work of the Group of Friends of SEIS within the existing financial resources and through extrabudgetary funds by: (a) servicing on average one meeting per year of the Group (with simultaneous interpretation), including the preparation of meeting agendas and reports; (b) preparing working and background documents for the Group; (c) arranging for financial support to eligible members of the Group for their participation in the Group's meetings; (d) liaising and coordinating with the Chair of the Group and Group members; (e) arranging for country inputs, as necessary; and (f) identifying and networking with relevant organizations and institutions in SEIS development.

meet the national needs as well as to comply with international commitments made by the country, including under the MEAs.

25. The three building blocks of SEIS comprise Content, Institutional cooperation and Infrastructure. A key feature of SEIS is its “common content”, which should enable the preparation of regular state-of-the-environment and thematic reports, based on, but not limited to, a core set of common indicators agreed internationally. The framework comprises targets and underpinning performance indicators as well as related actions. Those are defined within the three building blocks of SEIS.

26. CEP will be invited to consider the document presenting targets and performance indicators for measuring progress in establishing SEIS across the pan-European region in support of the regular environmental assessment process, as well as decide on modalities to review the progress (ECE/CEP/2014/8).

III. Organizing and shaping the regular environmental assessment process

27. At their May 2014 meeting, Friends of SEIS commenced the discussion on organizing and shaping the regular environmental assessment process. Participants agreed that the organization and shaping of the regular environmental assessment process and the development of targets and performance indicators in measuring the progress in establishing SEIS are interrelated. In that regard, it was suggested to work on organizing and shaping the regular environmental assessment process after the twentieth session of CEP, taking into account the outcomes related to the SEIS targets and performance indicators.

28. CEP will be invited to share its preliminary views on the regular environmental assessment process in order to guide the further work of the Friends of SEIS in that regard.

IV. Calendar of meetings

29. Friends of SEIS considered the proposal for its second meeting to be organized back to back with the tenth session of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators (i.e., on Monday, 11 May 2015). At the same time, should the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment revise its schedule to hold its annual meetings in spring, the date of the next meeting of Friends of SEIS could be adjusted with a view to organizing it back to back with the Working Group meeting in 2015.

V. Lessons learned from the organization of the first meeting

30. The first meeting of the Friends of SEIS was a one-day event, organized back to back with the meeting of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators, given the financial constraints, so as to support the participation of eligible delegates (i.e., thus far only limited resources have been provided to support the establishment of SEIS across the pan-European region). Consequently, the meeting had a rather busy agenda, focusing mostly on developing targets and performance indicators.

31. In that regard, some participants suggested allocating time during the meeting to share experience in establishing SEIS at the national level with a view to learning best practices and challenges encountered in the practical establishment of SEIS on the ground. Also, it was felt that ways to engage MEA representatives participating in the Friends of

SEIS meeting more actively should be sought. Depending on the agenda for the next meeting, the organization of an up to two-day event in 2015 should be considered.

32. Furthermore, holding discussions among some of the main SEIS partners, such as ECE, EEA and UNEP, prior to the Friends of SEIS meeting, should be considered with a view to agreeing on common approaches for the further consideration of the Group.

33. Regarding meeting documentation, some Russian-speaking participants expressed the wish to have the meeting documents translated into Russian. At the same time, the secretariat cannot process documents for expert meetings as official documents, including translating them. Thus, SEIS stakeholders, including the ECE members States, wishing to support the translation into Russian of documents for the next meeting of the Friends of SEIS are invited to inform the secretariat of this.

Annex

Workplan of the Group of Friends of the Shared Environmental Information System for 2014–2015

| <i>Activity/meetings</i> | <i>Output</i> | <i>Tasks (responsibility)</i> | <i>Timing/deadlines</i> | <i>Financial implications</i> |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| First meeting of the Friends of SEIS, Geneva, 12 May 2014 | Targets and performance indicators to monitor and evaluate the progress in SEIS development | Preparing a draft document for the meeting (ECE secretariat in consultation with EEA and the Chair of the Friends of SEIS) | By 30 April 2014 | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |
| | | Revising and finalizing the document (Friends of SEIS with support from the ECE secretariat) | In-session | Extrabudgetary resources to support participation of eligible Friends of SEIS |
| | | Processing and submitting the official document to CEP at its twentieth session for approval (ECE secretariat in consultation with the Chair of the Friends of SEIS) | By 21 July 2014 (for editing) By 18 August 2014 (for submission and posting on the website of the twentieth session (CEP-20)) | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |
| | Initial vision/concept of how to organize and shape the regular assessment process, taking into account the benefits of SEIS | Commencing the discussion (Friends of SEIS) | In-session | Extrabudgetary resources to support participation of eligible Friends of SEIS |
| | Report of Friends of SEIS on its first meeting | Preparing, processing and submitting the report to CEP at CEP-20 for consideration (ECE secretariat in consultation with the Chair of the Friends of SEIS) | By 21 July 2014 (for editing) By 18 August 2014 (for submission and posting on CEP-20 website) | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |

| <i>Activity/meetings</i> | <i>Output</i> | <i>Tasks (responsibility)</i> | <i>Timing/deadlines</i> | <i>Financial implications</i> |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Intersessional work by e-mail | Advanced vision/concept of the organization and shaping of the regular assessment process, taking into account the benefits of SEIS | Continuing the work on organizing and shaping the regular assessment process, including SEIS (Friends of SEIS with support from the ECE secretariat) | November 2014– May 2015 | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources Extrabudgetary resources for possible coordination missions with the main stakeholders |
| | If additional work requested by CEP, revised targets and performance indicators to monitor and evaluate progress in SEIS development | If additional work requested by CEP at its twentieth session, revising the targets and performance indicators to monitor and evaluate the progress in SEIS development (Friends of SEIS with support from the ECE secretariat) | November 2014– May 2015 | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |
| Second meeting of Friends of SEIS, Geneva, 11 May 2015 (<i>to be confirmed</i>) | Final document on organizing and shaping the regular assessment process, taking into account the benefits of SEIS | Preparing a draft document for the meeting (ECE secretariat in consultation with EEA and the Chair of the Friends of SEIS) | By 30 April 2015 | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |
| | | Revising and finalizing the document (Friends of SEIS with support from the ECE secretariat) | In-session | Extrabudgetary resources to support participation of eligible Friends of SEIS |
| | | Processing and submitting the official document to CEP at its twenty-first session for approval (ECE secretariat in consultation with the Chair of the Friends of SEIS) | By 20 July 2015 (for editing) By 17 August 2015 (for submission and posting on the website of the twenty-first session (CEP-21)) | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |

| <i>Activity/meetings</i> | <i>Output</i> | <i>Tasks (responsibility)</i> | <i>Timing/deadlines</i> | <i>Financial implications</i> |
|------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| | If additional work requested by CEP, final targets and performance indicators to monitor and evaluate progress in SEIS development | If additional work requested by CEP, finalizing the targets and performance indicators (Friends of SEIS with support from the ECE secretariat) If additional work requested by CEP, processing and submitting the official document to CEP at CEP-21 for approval | In-session By 20 July 2015 (for editing) By 17 August 2015 (for submission and posting on CEP-21 website) | Extrabudgetary resources to support participation of eligible Friends of SEIS Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |
| | Report of Friends of SEIS on its second meeting | Preparing, processing and submitting the report to CEP at CEP-21 for consideration (ECE secretariat in consultation with the Chair of Friends of SEIS) | By 20 July 2015 (for editing) By 17 August 2015 (for submission and posting on CEP-21 website) | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources |
| Intersessional work by email | If additional work requested by CEP, final document on organizing and shaping the regular assessment process, taking into account the benefits of SEIS | If additional work requested by CEP, finalizing the document on organizing and shaping the regular assessment process, taking into account the benefits of SEIS (Friends of SEIS with support from the ECE secretariat) | November–December 2015 (to be confirmed by CEP at CEP-21) | Existing regular ECE secretariat staff resources Extrabudgetary resources for possible coordination missions with the main stakeholders |