Economic and Social Council

Economic Commission for Europe

Committee on Environmental Policy

**Working Group on Environmental
Monitoring and Assessment**

Seventeenth session
Geneva, 7 and 8 September 2015

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

I. Introduction

A. Background

1.   At its twentieth session (Geneva, 28–31 October 2014), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy mandated the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment to review progress made by pan-European countries in developing the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS). The Committee requested that the progress be reviewed against the targets and performance indicators (ECE/CEP/2014/8) that it had approved at its twentieth session, and noted that the review should serve as a basis to prepare an evaluation report on SEIS development for consideration at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016). The Working Group was further requested to provide an initial version of its evaluation report to the Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-first session (Geneva, 27–30 October 2015).

2.   At its sixteenth session (Istanbul, 16–17 April 2015), the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment began its review of SEIS development by the pan-European countries. The seventeenth session of the Working Group was held on 7 and 8 September 2015 in Geneva, Switzerland, in order to continue and further advance the review process.

B. Attendance

3.   The seventeenth session was attended by representatives of ministries or agencies of environment, and in some cases from the statistical offices, of the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Finland, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan,

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Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

4.   In addition, representatives of the following organizations and forums participated: the European Environment Agency (EEA); the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia; the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo; and the international non-profit organization, Zoï Environment Network.

C.   Procedural matters

5.   The Working Group adopted the agenda for its seventeenth session, as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2015/3.

II.   Outcomes of the sixteenth session of the Working Group

6.   The secretariat summarized the outcomes of the sixteenth session of the Working Group. In particular, the Working Group had agreed:

(a)   Eight thematic areas for which access to data and information produced in common formats and standards should be facilitated under the pan-European SEIS;

(b)   A list of 67 specific data sets, falling under eight thematic areas, for the pan-European SEIS that should be produced and shared, to the extent possible, in the course of 2015 by all the pan-European countries;

(c)   To establish a development group to develop further and test the reporting mechanism for assessing the performance of countries in establishing the pan-European SEIS. It was further agreed that the group would consist of eight members of the Working Group — from Armenia, Austria, Georgia, Finland, Italy, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia — as well as representatives of EEA and UNEP, and be supported by the ECE secretariat.

7.   The secretariat reminded the Working Group that, by testing the reporting mechanism, the development group, with support from the secretariat, was expected to assess the availability and accessibility of data and related information for the list of 67 data sets for the pan-European countries. Based on that test, the secretariat was further requested to prepare a document presenting the results of the test for the Working Group's consideration.

8.   The secretariat further mentioned that the report of the sixteenth session (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2015/2) was being translated into Russian at the time of the seventeenth session. The English version had been made available on the Programme's official web page as an advance copy until both language versions were officially released.

III.   Reporting mechanism for the review of progress in establishing the Shared Environmental Information System in the pan-European region

9.   The member of the reporting mechanism development group from Austria presented the progress made by the group. The group had agreed that:

(a)   The reporting mechanism should consist of the five rating elements (online accessibility; update regularity; application of a standard production methodology; data

interpretation availability; and information on data source) proposed by the secretariat in its initial concept. Each of those elements should have equal weight as per its significance to assessing the effective production and sharing of the data sets and their related information. The rating should be done by indicating "Yes" (value of 1) or "No" (value of 0), depending on whether the specific requirements of an element were or were not met;

(b)   The reporting mechanism should offer the possibility to provide comments or explanations on the assessment given. It should also include for the rating element "data set up to date", a clear requirement for the periodicity of the update;

(c)   The process of the SEIS performance assessment should be a dual one: self-assessment by the country as well as a review by reviewers (presumably the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) secretariat for countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and EEA for European Union member countries and other EEA member countries). For the self-assessment, countries should be offered the possibility to nominate more than one SEIS focal point;

(d)   The reporting mechanism should incorporate the feature for identification of possible SEIS performance gaps by using the logical question streams as suggested by the secretariat in the initial concept;

(e)   The reporting mechanism should be developed as a simple online application. It should enable opening multiple user accounts for the same country for its SEIS performance assessment. It should also keep a record of the performance assessment, identification of performance gaps, comments and additional explanations provided, and allow for aggregation of records per country or data set.

10.   The member of the development group further reported that while the development of the simple online application was considered feasible only in the medium term, the development group had agreed that for the purpose of testing, and with it assessing the availability and accessibility of the 67 data sets for the pan-European countries in the short term, an Excel table would be prepared to rate country performance for each data set per the five rating elements. The development group further agreed that only data sets published, i.e., accessible online (as assessed under the first element) were to be assessed on the remaining four elements. It was also agreed that for the testing no assessment of the fulfillment of data set production standards or quality of data interpretation would be done. The test results should be shared with the countries concerned for their review.

11.   The UNEP representative reported that UNEP would be in a position to develop a simple SEIS online reporting mechanism within the available capacity of the Information Technology Service in charge of UNEP Live.

12.   Following a discussion, the Working Group agreed that, to adequately serve the countries in assessing their performance, the reporting mechanism should be developed as a simple online application, and in that context, the offer from UNEP was appreciated and welcomed.

13.   The Working Group further agreed that the development of the simple online application should be carefully managed. To that end, it requested the development group to work closely with the UNEP Information Technology Service.

14.   The members of the development group expressed their interest in working with UNEP to develop the simple online application. They noted, however, that their involvement was subject to confirmation by their Governments, which they would communicate to the secretariat after the meeting.

15.   The Working Group requested the secretariat, once a majority of members of the development group were able to confirm their continuation in the work of that group, to

arrange the process for developing the simple online application with UNEP and to report on progress at the next session.

IV. Evaluation report on the Shared Environmental Information System for the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference

16. The secretariat presented the results of a desk study assessment of the establishment of SEIS in the pan-European countries (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2015/5). The assessment had been done as part of the testing of the reporting mechanism. In the exercise the availability and accessibility of the 67 SEIS data sets and related information were rated for 53 pan-European countries[1] as well as Kosovo[2] in accordance with the criteria agreed by the SEIS reporting mechanism development group (see para. 10) and recorded in individual country desk study assessment Excel tables.

17. The secretariat reported that the Excel tables had been reviewed and validated by countries concerned in only nine cases, presumably due to the limited time available for making the review. In that connection, it should be noted that the secretariat's desk study did not present the confirmed state of SEIS performance by pan-European countries; it had been prepared to help the Working Group to discuss the content of its report on the establishment of SEIS in the pan-European region for submission to the Committee on Environmental Policy, and should be used solely for that purpose.

18. The secretariat further suggested that, should the desk study review be validated by all of the countries, the validated SEIS establishment status should serve as baselines for assessing SEIS performance in the coming years. The goal for each country would be to first achieve and then maintain a high level of performance.

19. The secretariat emphasized that in the future the SEIS performance assessment would need to also assess the fulfilment of the data set production standards and the quality of data interpretation.

20. The Working Group thanked the secretariat for the desk study and for compiling the report presenting the assessment results. It noted the importance of country desk study assessment review and regretted the short time available for the review prior to the seventeenth session.

21. The Working Group then discussed the secretariat's report in detail and agreed to use it as the basis for its report to Committee on Environmental Policy, with the following changes:

(a)   The analysis of the performance assessment should be updated in view of further reviews by countries of the desk study assessments;

(b)   The criteria applied for assessing performance should be precisely specified. In particular, it should be clearly stated that only countries with data and information published online — fulfilling the "data sets online accessible" criterion — were assessed on other criteria;

(c)   Figure 1 of the secretariat's report should be deleted;

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[1] All ECE member States except Andorra, Monaco and San Marino.

[2] All references to Kosovo in this report should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

(d)   Assessments reviewed by countries should be referenced, and it should be specified if the SEIS status information had or had not been validated by the country;

(e)   Key messages on SEIS should be added, linking the work to the generation of environmental assessments.

22.   The Working Group urged pan-European countries to review and validate the desk study assessments and agreed that reviewed country Excel files should be sent to the secretariat at the latest by 2 October 2015. The Working Group requested EEA and members of the EEA European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet) present at the seventeenth session to communicate within that network its request for the assessment review.

23.   The Working Group requested the secretariat to finalize its report on progress in establishing SEIS for the Committee on Environmental Policy, taking into consideration the comments provided during the discussion.

V.   Data and information of the Shared Environmental Information System

24.   The member from Austria presented the process for a review of priority data flows currently being carried out under Eionet, where data flows were identified for reporting to EEA by its member countries. As the review had not been finalized, and data flows were not comparable one to one with the pan-European SEIS data sets, including potential data sets for inclusion under the pan-European SEIS (the data set pool as considered at the sixteenth session), he suggested that such a comparison should be done before further data sets were added under SEIS. The comparison could be made once the review led by EEA was completed.

25.   The Working Group thanked the member from Austria for the information provided. It agreed that the list of data sets for the pan-European SEIS was already a wide-ranging one. Therefore, before it was further extended, good progress in producing and sharing the 67 already-agreed SEIS data sets should be attained in the pan-European region.

26.   The Working Group agreed to come back to the discussion on possible further extension of the list of SEIS data sets at its future sessions.

VI.   Other business and closure of the meeting

27.   The secretariat presented the proposal by the Group of Friends of SEIS on the organization and shape of the regular process of environmental assessment in the ECE region and the role proposed for the Working Group in that process. The secretariat also presented its own proposal for possible ways to streamline the work of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators, as well as potentially incorporating the responsibilities of the Group of Friends of SEIS, with a view to enhancing the coordination of activities and reinforcing the work on environmental monitoring and assessment. Those proposals had been developed at the request of the Committee on Environmental Policy and would be submitted to it at its twenty-first session for consideration.

28.   The Working Group welcomed both proposals. It appreciated that it was proposed to strengthen its role and that its work should encompass the technical leadership for the assessment process at the pan-European level.

29.   The Working Group invited the secretariat to inform the Committee on Environmental Policy that it welcomed both proposals.

30.   The Working Group did not agree on any specific date for its next session. The Chair together with the Vice-Chairs and the secretariat should evaluate the need for meeting in the first quarter of 2016, if needed in view of decisions taken by the Committee on Environmental Policy at its next session. Otherwise, the next session of the Working Group should be organized after the Batumi Ministerial Conference.

31.   The Working Group thanked donors — Norway, the Russian Federation and Switzerland — for the financial support provided to organize the seventeenth session. The Chair then closed the meeting.

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