

ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/INF/5

ENVIRONMENT FOR EUROPE
UN ENVIRONNEMENT POUR L'EUROPE
ОКРУЖАЮЩАЯ СРЕДА ДЛЯ ЕВРОПЫ
გარემო ევროპისათვის

BATUMI, 8–10 June 2016



Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference

**Batumi, Georgia
8–10 June 2016**

**20 years of Environmental Performance Reviews:
Impacts, lessons learned and the potential to integrate the
Sustainable Development Goals**

Information paper

20 years of Environmental Performance Reviews: Impacts, lessons learned and the potential to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals

**Submitted by UNECE and UNEP
27 May 2016**

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Introduction

During 20 years, the Environmental Performance Review (EPR) Programme of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has been assisting UNECE member States that are not part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in assessing their environmental performance. The reviews have analyzed progress and challenges and provided advice to help these countries move towards environmental sustainability. The reviews have been a collaborative effort of many governments and a number of international organizations: European Commission (EC), European Environment Agency (EEA), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), World Health Organization (WHO) and World Bank.

This paper looks at examples of the past 20 years and, given the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, also discusses the potential for supporting the national efforts on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) follow-up and review, building on the EPR methodology.

The main objectives of this paper are:

- (i) to determine the impacts of EPRs by reviewing implementation of policy recommendations on the ground and highlighting the lessons learned
- (ii) to support the member States' aim to use existing mechanisms for the effective follow-up and review of the progress towards achieving SDGs.

In this context, the paper describes the evolution of the EPR Programme over the last decades in response to new environmental challenges in the region, as well as the contribution of the EPR recommendations to effect positive environmental changes in the reviewed countries. The paper then evolves into a discussion of possible approaches to introduce a review of SDGs into the EPR process and what changes would be needed to facilitate this new development. In addition, there is a presentation of other existing mechanisms and tools that could potentially support the integration of SDGs in EPRs.

Seven countries that were reviewed by the EPR Programme after the Seventh "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference (Astana, Kazakhstan, 2011) have been selected for the evaluation of the contribution of the EPR process on environmental sustainability in the region: Belarus, Croatia, Georgia, Montenegro, Morocco, Republic of Moldova, and Serbia (hereinafter, selected reviewed countries). The analysis of the implementation of EPR recommendations has been carried out on the basis of a review of the implementation of EPR recommendations included in EPR reports, additional information provided by countries, and a self-evaluation prepared by the EPR Programme. Interviews conducted with EPR national coordinators, members of the Expert Group on EPRs and the Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP), experts of UNECE and UNEP also served as inputs to this paper.

Part I: Environmental Performance Reviews: Impacts and lessons learned

“The EPR Programme is a major stepping stone for the improvement and harmonization of environmental policy in the UNECE region based on trust, transparency and a mutual learning process.”

Hans-Joachim Hermann, Member of the UNECE Expert Group on EPRs, Germany

Overview

An EPR is an assessment of the efforts made by individual countries to reduce their overall pollution burden and manage their natural resources sustainably, decouple economic growth from environmental degradation through integrating environmental concerns into sectoral policies, and strengthen cooperation with the international community. EPRs also support the advancement of sustainable development and the transition to a green economy.

A brief history

Following the launch of the EPR Programme by OECD for its member States in 1991, European environment Ministers mandated the UNECE at the Second Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe” (Lucerne, Switzerland, 1993) to carry out the EPR Programme in countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and South-Eastern Europe. The challenge was to assist these countries in improving their environmental situation and promote the harmonisation of environmental policies in the UNECE region¹. In 1996, the Committee on Environmental Policy decided to include the EPRs into the regular programme of the UNECE.

Based on the positive results of the first reviews, Ministers requested UNECE to undertake a second cycle of EPRs at the Fifth “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference (Kiev, Ukraine, 2003). A few years later, they reaffirmed their support for the EPR Programme at the Seventh “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference (Astana, 2011) and encouraged UNECE to pursue the third cycle of reviews.

EPRs in numbers

Over the last 20 years, the EPR Programme conducted 44 EPRs in 24 countries, of which 21 countries were reviewed in the first cycle, 18 countries in the second cycle and 5 countries in the third cycle. Two more countries are undergoing their third reviews in 2016.

Two decades of successful collaboration on EPRs have brought together 12 international organizations: EC, EEA, IUCN, OCHA, OECD, OSCE, UNDP, UNECA, UNEP, UNISDR, WHO and World Bank.

Thirty-five countries have served on the Expert Group on EPRs and/or have provided financial and/or expert support to the EPR Programme: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Uzbekistan.

Experts of more than 40 different nationalities have participated in the reviews.

More than 2,000 recommendations were provided by EPRs so far, covering about 23 environment-related topics, from legal and policy frameworks to the integration of environmental concerns into sectoral policies.

¹ As of May 2016, UNECE has 56 member States: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, and Uzbekistan.

Three cycles

Over the last two decades, the EPR Programme has evolved in order to respond to new challenges faced by the reviewed countries.

In the first cycle, EPRs assisted reviewed countries in assessing their environmental situation and in establishing baseline conditions regarding policy commitments, institutional arrangements and capacity. The second cycle EPRs showed that the majority of reviewed countries had attained significant progress since the first reviews, but not at the same pace. The main reasons were different starting points and transition paths, in spite of emerging from similar political and economic systems. For the second cycle EPRs, countries were able to implement a more complex and comprehensive approach, and more ambitious targets were set. Emphasis was placed on the implementation and financing of environment policy, integration of environmental concerns into economic sectors, and promotion of sustainable development.

The challenges faced by the reviewed countries further evolved and guidance was then needed to integrate new targets into national environmental policies. A third cycle of reviews was decided upon in 2011 and started in 2013. It focused on improving environmental governance and financing in a green economy context, strengthening cooperation with the international community and environmental mainstreaming in priority sectors. The reviews also integrated an assessment of the progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

Recently, the EPR methodology has attracted the attention of countries outside of the UNECE region, leading to requests for a transfer of knowhow from UNECE to other regional commissions. Morocco was the first country outside the region for which a review was carried out by UNECE in cooperation with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in 2012.

Map 1 shows countries that underwent an EPR, specifying the last cycle of the review for every country. So far, five countries have been reviewed for the third time: Belarus, Georgia, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova and Serbia and two more countries are undergoing third cycle reviews: Bulgaria and Tajikistan.

Map 1. Countries reviewed by the EPR Programme



Notes: The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Countries in *brown* went through the first cycle of EPR, *green* – through the second cycle and *violet* – through the third cycle. The map does not show Morocco, which has undergone an EPR in 2012.

Environmental Performance Review methodology

The main stages of carrying out an EPR include preparation, review mission, expert review, peer review, publication and launch (Figure 1). Each stage consists of a number of activities to be completed by various actors, i.e. the government of the country under review, the EPR Programme secretariat, the EPR review team, the Expert Group on EPRs and the Committee on Environmental Policy. Each EPR is managed on the basis of an implementation plan prepared by the secretariat in cooperation with the country under review. A key challenge is to ensure that all relevant activities are implemented in time and the whole review process is carried out in a cost-effective way. Overall, the whole EPR process takes 12 to 18 months.

Figure 1. Summary of the main stages of an EPR



Following the request from a country, the EPR Programme secretariat organizes a preparatory mission to the country under review. At this stage, the review's outline and the implementation plan are agreed upon by the secretariat and national officials. An international expert team, which usually includes national experts from countries in the region, as well as experts from international organizations and consultants, is assembled. The expert team carries out a review mission in the country and works with government officials, representatives of business, donor community, NGOs, local governments and independent experts. A draft report is then prepared. It focuses on the progress achieved and challenges ahead, and provides a series of recommendations on ways to overcome problems and advance sustainable development.

Subsequently, the draft report undergoes an expert review conducted by the Expert Group on EPRs. The Expert Group consists of experts from UNECE member States, who review in detail all chapters of the draft report. A one-and-a-half-day meeting is allocated for the expert review of one country, usually held at UNECE headquarters in Geneva. Experts from the reviewed country are invited to participate in this meeting and

interact with the Expert Group. At the end, the report is amended, as decided by the Expert Group, in consultation with the delegation of the country under review.

Finally, a peer review is carried out by all UNECE member States represented in the Committee on Environmental Policy. During this review, the Committee focuses on major policy issues that have been highlighted by the review and adopts the recommendations of the EPR report, with amendments, if any. Country's high-level environmental authorities also attend this meeting and participate in the debate. In this way, the adopted recommendations reflect the collective views of the UNECE countries as well as the voluntary commitment of the reviewed country to implement them.

Once the secretariat has updated the report's facts and figures and incorporated possible changes in line with the conclusions of the Expert Group and the Committee, the report is published and distributed. Upon request of the reviewed country, a launch is organized to present the findings of the EPR report to the governmental authorities, international community, NGOs and other stakeholders. The launch event is attended by the media, allowing the national environmental authority to draw attention to the most pressing environmental issues highlighted by the EPR.

Advantages of the EPR methodology and challenges for the EPR process

The main advantages of the EPR methodology include:

- Independent review
- Participatory and transparent approach
- Tailor-made approach taking into account different national contexts and capacities
- Use of temporary international teams with different expertise
- Evolution over time to cover emerging issues and new regional and global challenges
- Evidence-based review informed by national information and data and inputs from a variety of stakeholders
- Identification of solutions and best practices, and issuing of recommendations for improvements

Through the peer review mechanism, the reviewed and reviewing countries learn from each other and share experiences and best practices. The reviews also contribute to the implementation of many international environmental agreements.

Currently, the challenges for carrying out the reviews are mostly capacity-related. The EPR Programme secretariat includes three professional staff and one and a half support staff. Operational budget for the Programme's activities depends on extra-budgetary funds provided by donors and in-kind contributions, mostly in the form of experts from donor countries and international organizations. The current capacity allows a maximum of four EPRs to be completed per biennium.

Another key challenge in carrying out EPRs concerns difficulties in measuring performance and changes in the state of the environment of reviewed countries due to problems related to the availability of high-quality, reliable and timely data. The EPR process relies mostly on the collaboration with national authorities to obtain the necessary data for the report. The main sources of EPR data include national statistical offices, national environmental authorities and other relevant bodies in the country under review, as well as international organizations. Countries' data are sometimes inconsistent, incomplete or outdated, that results in incomplete and outdated information in international databases.

Main impacts of Environmental Performance Reviews

The average rate of implementation of EPR recommendations in 2008-2015 as evaluated by the EPR Programme secretariat has been 72 per cent. Some of the recent reviews indicate a rather high implementation rate: e.g. 83 per cent of recommendations of the second review of Belarus and 84 per cent of recommendations of the second review of Montenegro were fully or partially implemented by the time of the third review of these countries.

On the basis of the assessment undertaken for selected reviewed countries, this paper describes the contribution of EPRs to six major areas:

- Improved policy and legal frameworks and better integration of environmental concerns into sectoral policies
- Stronger institutions for environmental management
- Increased financial resources for environmental protection and greening the economy
- Improved environmental monitoring and information systems
- Strengthened public participation
- Increased international cooperation

Improved policy and legal frameworks and better integration of environmental concerns into sectoral policies

“EPRs are an invitation to policy dialogue and an opportunity for a mutual learning process. They foster environmental convergence throughout the UNECE region”.

Harry Lehmann, Federal Environment Agency of Germany, Third High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, UNECE side event, New York 2015.

Policy and legal frameworks

EPRs of the selected reviewed countries have included recommendations related to the development of policy and legal frameworks for environmental protection and sustainable development. Following the EPR recommendations, the majority of these countries have adopted a number of environmental and sectoral policies, strategies, programmes and action plans, including national and local environmental and sustainable development strategies, and have improved environmental legislation.

In some countries, in the framework of harmonization of national policy and legal frameworks with the European Union (EU) *acquis communautaire*, substantial reforms towards a more integrated approach to environmental protection have been carried out. This process is reported to have triggered implementation of a number of EPR recommendations and many recommended legislative acts and subsidiary regulations on environment have been developed and adopted.

In order to improve the integration of environmental issues into sectoral policies, EPRs have promoted the introduction of strategic environmental assessment into legal frameworks, and its effective implementation. The majority of selected reviewed countries started introducing related requirements in the legislation (e.g. Georgia, Morocco, Republic of Moldova) and enforcing them (e.g. Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia). The reviews have also guided countries' efforts to raise awareness of green economy principles to be integrated into national policy and legal frameworks. There are signs that this guidance influenced developments in legislative frameworks concerning energy efficiency, renewable energy, greening of transport systems and sustainable waste management, among others (e.g. Belarus, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia).

EPR's contribution to the strengthening of legal frameworks on Strategic Environmental Assessment in Morocco and Georgia

The EPR of **Morocco** (2014) has recommended the introduction of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) tool in the legal framework. In response, the Government adopted in 2014 the Framework Law No. 99-12 on the National Charter for Environment and Sustainable Development whose Article 27 introduced the principles of SEA. Also, the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is currently being revised in order to integrate SEA. At the institutional level, SEA has been implemented through the creation of an Environmental Assessment Division under the Department of Environment of the Ministry of Energy, Mines, Water and Environment. This division is composed of a service responsible for SEAs and another dealing with EIAs. The implementation of this EPR recommendation has enhanced the political importance of the Ministry of Energy, Mines, Water and Environment in the national context and its ability to ensure the integration of environmental considerations into sectoral policies, strategies and programmes.

In line with the recommendation from the second EPR of **Georgia** (2010), the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection started the development of a new law on environmental impact permitting in 2014. This law is

expected to introduce the mandatory use of SEA for plans and programmes. It will transpose into national legislation the requirements of the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment to the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, and relevant EU legislation.

Environmental mainstreaming in priority sectors

“EPRs are not only focused on countries’ environmental problems. They also pay considerable attention to the integration of environmental concerns into other policy areas and therefore help mainstreaming environment into different socio-economic sectors in reviewed countries.”

*Gizo Chelidze, EPR national coordinator,
Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection, Georgia*

Progress has been attained in integrating environmental concerns into sectoral policies in all selected reviewed countries over the last two decades. The analysis carried out for this assessment points out that tailor-made EPR recommendations have contributed to improvements in the development and implementation of national sectoral strategies, programmes and legislation which, in turn, have resulted in environmental improvements in these sectors.

There are also signals that the reviews have triggered the developments in the water sector through recommending the introduction of integrated water resources management principles in national policies and legislation. Most of the selected reviewed countries adopted strategies, programmes and plans on water supply and sanitation, irrigation, flood protection or river basin management (e.g. Belarus, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Serbia). In the majority of these countries, water legislation has been amended to incorporate improvements in line with related EPR recommendations.

EPRs have also influenced the adoption of programmes and legislation focused on sustainable land management, agricultural development and poverty alleviation in rural areas. Countries have adopted or improved their laws on soils, on pastures and on genetically modified organisms (e.g. Georgia, Serbia).

EPR recommendations have contributed to the establishment of comprehensive policy and legal frameworks for sustainably managing forests, conserving biodiversity, and protecting natural heritage in all selected reviewed countries. In this context, related national strategies, programmes and plans were adopted and implemented (e.g. Croatia, Georgia). Additionally, several laws have been adopted or amended as recommended by the EPRs, such as the laws on protected natural areas and on biosafety and forest codes, among others.

Overall, governments have considerably developed the policy and legal frameworks for waste management over the last years guided, among others, by EPR recommendations. In this context, selected reviewed countries have adopted or revised their laws on waste management, leading to improved waste collection, remediation of unregulated landfills and illegal dumpsites, development of waste management centres, and investments in primary recycling and separation systems (e.g. Croatia, Serbia).

In addition, in some countries, there are indications that EPRs have positively affected the development of national strategies and programmes on energy efficiency, renewable energy and reduction of environmental pressures from the energy sector. They seem to have also triggered advances in the legal basis through the introduction of measures to increase energy efficiency of households and economic sectors and promote a wider use of renewable energy. The analysis indicates that implementation of EPR recommendations contributed to the installation of cleaner and efficient energy technologies based on best available techniques in thermal power plants, and in improvements of metering systems and grid maintenance in selected reviewed countries (e.g. Croatia, Georgia, Montenegro, Serbia).

The reviews have also encouraged countries to introduce cleaner transport policy measures in recent years. For example, there are signs that the implementation of recommendations related to the adoption of strategies and laws on the promotion of clean and energy-efficient road transport vehicles has positively impacted the “greening” of public transport in some cities and municipalities (e.g. Croatia, Serbia).

Moreover, EPRs have provided recommendations that contributed to improvements in environmental performance by industry. Environmental issues relevant to industrial activities have been included in various sectoral strategies, action plans and programmes, e.g. national waste management strategies and cleaner production strategies. Legislation related to the introduction of integrated pollution prevention and control (IPPC) and/or pollutant release and transfer registers has been adopted (e.g. Belarus, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia). Also, the number of industrial enterprises that have introduced environmental management systems and obtained environmental certification (e.g. ISO 14001, EMAS) has increased in most selected reviewed countries.

EPR's guidance for a better waste management in Croatia

In line with a recommendation of the second EPR of **Croatia** (published in 2014) to continue implementing options for reducing the number of local landfills and driven by the EU accession requirements, the Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection and the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund (EPEEF) has been carrying out the remediation of official unregulated landfills as well as illegal dumpsites. At the end of 2015, out of 300 contracted landfill remediation, 170 were completed. In cooperation with local and regional self-governments, activities of the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund are continuing on the remaining 79 active landfills. Remediation of 18 landfills is in progress, and preparation for remediation is underway for another 61 landfills. Also, work is being carried out on 5 closed landfills, and the preparation for remediation is underway for another 46 closed landfills. Construction projects of two county waste management centres, "Kaštijun" and "Marišćina" are on their way. The Fund's investments in these centres increased progressively from 2013 to the end of 2014, from US\$9.5 million in 2013 to almost US\$27 million in 2014 and continued in 2015 in the amount of US\$12.7 million.

EPR's contribution to the production and use of renewable energy in Serbia

In line with the recommendation of the second EPR of **Serbia** (2007) aimed at stimulating both the production and use of renewable energy, a new legal framework for production of electricity from renewable sources was developed in the country. In addition, economic incentives were introduced. For example, a feed-in tariff for electricity produced from renewable energy sources was introduced in 2009 and amended in 2013. However, the licensing procedure for facilities generating renewable energy is still complex and responsibilities are split among many different institutions.

The second EPR also recommended the Government to engage in developing a range of investment projects in the energy and other sectors, which reduce greenhouse gas emissions or enhance sequestration, and are therefore eligible for funding from the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Following efforts by the Government, many CDM projects were developed and registered, including for renewable energy.

As also recommended by EPRs, many selected reviewed countries have adopted national strategies and programmes on education for sustainable development, environmental health, tourism, or disaster risk reduction and management (e.g. Belarus, Croatia, Morocco).

Stronger institutions for environmental policy development and management

«More than 80 per cent of the EPR recommendations addressed to Morocco were or are currently being implemented. They are greatly contributing to strengthen national environmental policies as well as enhance the mandate of our ministry in charge of the environment».

***Mohammed Maktit, EPR national coordinator,
Ministry of Energy, Mines, Water and Environment, Morocco***

The EPR has been a key instrument to support the selected reviewed countries in strengthening their institutional frameworks for environmental protection. All of these countries have now a national environmental authority in place at ministerial level, although not always as a standalone environment ministry. Also, some have enhanced the status and widened the mandate of their environmental authorities (e.g. Republic of Moldova). Moreover, environmental authorities' staff capacity and qualifications have been improved, at both central and local levels, through the implementation of regular training programs recommended by EPRs and, in some cases, there has been an increase in human resources.

As the environmental sector deals with cross-cutting issues that necessitate the integration of environmental considerations in other sectors, other governmental bodies play an important role in the countries' environmental management. In this context, EPRs have often provided advice to governments on how to ensure a clear distribution of functions among institutions in order to avoid overlapping of responsibilities and

competencies (e.g. Belarus, Montenegro) and promoted a better definition of responsibilities. In addition, as recommended by EPRs, the majority of selected reviewed countries have established inter-ministerial cooperation and coordination mechanisms that facilitate the development and implementation of environmental policies. This cooperation may take a number of forms, from the more formal exchange through the Cabinet of Ministers, to inter-ministerial commissions or working groups.

EPR contribution to the strengthening of environmental institutions in the Republic of Moldova, Belarus and Montenegro

The first EPR of the **Republic of Moldova** (1998) urged the country to strengthen the institutional framework on environmental protection and raise the status of its environmental authority. To take environmental decisions to a higher level, the Department of Environmental Protection was upgraded to a Ministry of Environment in 1998, and then restructured several times until becoming the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources in 2004 with extended responsibilities.

The second EPR of **Belarus** (2005) called for improving the structure of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection by separating policy development and decision-making on natural resources use from monitoring and control. These functions are now separated, and relevant departments in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection were established and assigned with the policy development and decision-making functions that were previously performed by specialized inspectorates. However, the tasks of issuing permits and enforcement have not been separated yet.

In line with a recommendation from the second EPR of **Montenegro** (2007), the Environmental Protection Agency was established in 2008 and became operational in 2009. This Agency is in charge of environmental permitting and data collection, analysis and reporting.

Stronger compliance and enforcement mechanisms

EPRs have provided recommendations to countries on establishing regulation and compliance assurance systems that respond to the needs arising from international environmental requirements. In many countries, environmental impact assessment related legislation and regulations have been further developed and the EIA scope aligned with EU requirements and the provisions of the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (e.g. Serbia). Environmental permitting procedures have been modified to make them more efficient and transparent. Some selected reviewed countries have started introducing IPPC permits (e.g. Belarus, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia). Coordination of administrative processes, such as integrated permitting procedures, have been improved in these countries.

There are also indications that EPRs have had impacts on the environmental inspection systems of many selected reviewed countries (e.g. Belarus, Georgia, Serbia). The consolidation and strengthening of inspection authorities have been accompanied by an institutional separation of inspection and permit-issuing functions. Unified planning methods and guidelines for inspections, as well as reporting and record-keeping on inspections have been established. Efforts were applied to enhance inspectors' qualifications in order to ensure adequate compliance and enforcement through regular training. In addition, analytical laboratories have been strengthened from a technical and methodological viewpoint, and related accreditation systems have been introduced following EPR recommendations.

Positive effects of EPR recommendations on the system of environmental self-monitoring in Belarus

The second EPR of **Belarus** (2005) recommended to include self-monitoring requirements in the permits and use data obtained from self-monitoring as part of the general environmental monitoring system. It also urged that uniform quality assurance requirements should apply to both governmental environmental monitoring and self-monitoring systems.

In line with these recommendations, self-monitoring requirements were included in the permits and are now enforced by environmental inspectors. The Code on Misdemeanours foresees sanctions for not providing information on environmental pollution in due time. In addition, sampling and laboratory analysis within the enterprises' environmental self-monitoring system must be done by accredited laboratories, and quality assurance mechanisms are well established. Methodological guidance for measurements is assigned to the Republican Centre for Analytical Control in the Field of Environmental Protection under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection. Self-monitoring data reported by the largest polluters are part of the National Environmental Monitoring System. The challenge is now to achieve a level of data processing that would allow integrating pollutant emissions data into environmental quality forecasts.

Improved financing for environmental protection and greening the economy

“Environmentally related economic instruments and both the polluter-pays and user-pays principles need to be introduced and implemented in the environmental protection areas (air, water, waste) and in different economic sectors (agriculture, energy, industry and tourism). In the third cycle of the EPRs, it became evident that those countries, which have increased the use of charges and fees, have better succeeded in implementing their priority environmental commitments.”

Harry Liiv, Chairperson of the Expert Group on EPRs, Estonia

The majority of selected reviewed countries have made progress in mobilizing financial resources for environmental protection and greening the economy. Also, most of the governments have increased efforts to ensure adequate funding to reach their commitments on MDG-7 “Ensure environmental sustainability”.

In order to promote the sustainable use of natural resources and protect the environment, EPRs have recommended to introduce charges for natural resources use and environmental pollution, increase and adjust their rates to inflation and strengthen their enforcement. In countries where this recommendation was effectively implemented, collection rates have substantially improved (e.g. Croatia, Serbia). Moreover, there are signs that EPRs have contributed to making tariffs for utility services more cost-reflective, and related collection rates had increased in the majority of selected reviewed countries.

EPR contribution to the improvements in energy efficiency in Montenegro

Following a recommendation of the second EPR of **Montenegro** (2007) to improve energy efficiency through phasing out subsidization of electricity prices to private households and large enterprises, cross-subsidies were eliminated in 2011. According to the Energy Regulatory Agency, tariffs are now cost-reflective. The Government has also introduced a system of subsidies to ensure affordability of electricity bills for vulnerable groups, including low-income households. However, investments required to reduce losses in electricity transmission and distribution systems were not increased. Losses in electricity transmission and distribution systems have declined to a small extent, but are still very high, especially in the distribution system. Efforts are necessary to modernize the grid. Moreover, data on electricity bill collection rates are scarce and appear not to be accurate.

Overall, environmental expenditures have grown in recent years, but are still low and represent a small share of the State budget in all selected reviewed countries.

Some selected reviewed countries have established national environmental funds, which have financed the implementation of projects with positive impacts on the environment and human health (e.g. Croatia, Republic of Moldova). Revenues to finance these funds were increased with improvements in the national environmental charges system in recent years. At the same time, EPRs have recommended using economic instruments to provide incentives for the reduction of environmental pollution rather than for the generation of governmental revenues.

EPRs have also influenced governments in moving towards a green economy. This includes the implementation of measures to encourage sustainable production and consumption, energy-efficiency and cleaner transport (e.g. Croatia, Serbia). Moreover, the reviews urged countries to introduce charges on products. Some selected reviewed countries, such as the Republic of Moldova and Serbia, adopted charges for the import or domestic production of plastic (polyethylene) packaging and tetra-pak packaging, and charges on products that after use become special waste streams (motor vehicle tyres, products containing asbestos, batteries and accumulators, mineral and synthetic oils and lubricants, electric and electronic products, and motor vehicles).

Increasing financial resources for environmental protection in the Republic of Moldova and Croatia

In the **Republic of Moldova**, available resources for environmental protection have significantly increased since 2008, but the overall size of resources is still small relative to the environmental problems in the country. Total revenues of the National Environmental Fund amounted to some €15.2 million in 2012, up from €2.55 million in 2007. In contrast, aggregate revenues of the local funds amounted to only €0.36 million in 2012, with no clear tendency since 2007. The Fund accounted for 97.7 per cent of total earmarked revenues in 2012. The revenues of the Fund accounted for 0.7 per cent of total general government revenue in 2012, corresponding to 0.3 per cent of GDP. The strong growth in Fund revenues was almost

entirely on account of the introduction of the levy on imported plastic and tetra-pak packaging in 2008, which is part of the levies on imported environmentally harmful goods. During 2011–2012, the levy on imported environmentally harmful products accounted, on average, for 86.5 per cent of total earmarked revenues for the Fund.

Croatia has taken some measures in the application of its taxation policy (e.g. exclusion of electric cars from special tax on road vehicles) that help finance green initiatives. The Government has been financing through extra-budgetary sources of the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund green initiatives and environmental projects. However, the proportion of green horizontal subsidies in the Fund was relatively low and the second EPR of Croatia (2014) recommended the Government increase the proportion of green horizontal subsidies in the Fund. In order to implement this recommendation, the National Energy Efficiency Action Plan defined green horizontal measures and certain financial instruments and amounts. It also identified the reduction of energy consumption and harmful emissions as the main indicators of success in implementing the measures. According to the Plan of using the resources from the trade of emission allowances through auctions in Croatia for the period from 2014 to 2016, the Fund, along with the collected charges, also disposes of revenues from emission allowances, which are fully invested in environmental protection and energy efficiency projects.

EPR triggers the transition to cleaner transport in Croatia

In line with a recommendation of the second EPR of **Croatia** (2014) to review and adjust the current system of transport-related taxes in order to encourage transition to less polluting practices and choices, the Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection developed a package of measures related to cleaner transport. The first measure includes co-financing in the amount of US\$2.35 million by the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund for the purchase of ecologically acceptable vehicles through the “I Drive Economically” project. The second measure is a change in the excise duty with the introduction of ecological criteria when determining the amount of the special tax for vehicles, which is currently based on the average carbon dioxide emissions and type of fuel used by the vehicle, besides the vehicle’s price. The third measure concerns the adoption of a new regulation that entered in force in 2015, which modified the existing ecological tax for vehicle registration to be in line with the actual level of pollution from a vehicle. Thus, owners of vehicles that pollute more will pay a higher fee, while those with lower emissions will pay less. Previously, “small” and “big” polluters paid almost the same amount since neither CO₂ emissions nor the vehicle’s miles travelled were taken into account. The fourth measure includes the Fund’s subsidies of 40-80 per cent to the “greening” of public transport in cities and municipalities (e.g. eco-driving project). Finally, the fifth measure is the “Green Line” project. Through this project, procurement of electric vehicles, vessels and hybrid vehicles by national and nature parks has been co-financed by the Fund.

Improved environmental monitoring and information systems

EPRs have triggered positive developments in national monitoring systems. In this context, selected reviewed countries have strengthened their monitoring networks, improved methodologies and indicators, and started to enhance institutional exchange of environmental data in accordance with shared environmental information system² (SEIS) principles. They also made progress in the process of harmonization of national environmental standards with international ones.

The EPR recommendations also contributed to improvements in national self-monitoring and reporting systems, increased number of well-equipped analytical laboratories with accreditation, and development of national registers of pollution sources (e.g. Serbia). Some selected reviewed countries have started preparing methodological rules for operating a pollutant release and transfer register (e.g. Croatia).

EPRs have frequently promoted the use of environmental information systems as an effective tool to improve decision-making processes and raise public awareness of key issues related to environmental protection and sustainable development. In this respect, all selected reviewed countries significantly improved their environmental information systems. Some of them established a central agency to manage environmental data and information regularly provided by various monitoring networks from different institutions, and made efforts to build a framework for environmental statistics based on international guidelines and practices (e.g. Belarus, Croatia, Montenegro).

EPRs have also recommended countries to develop and use national state of the environment reports to support environmental policy development and decision-making. All selected reviewed countries continue to prepare these reports and their quality has improved over the years.

² In 2008, in response to Europe's environmental information challenge, the EC proposed establishing the SEIS. SEIS became a collaborative initiative of the EC, and the EEA and its European environment information and observation network. Since 2011, the Ministers participating in the 7th Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference, agreed to establish SEIS in the pan European region. It aims to improve the collection, exchange and use of environmental data and information across the pan European region through an integrated web-enabled, environmental information system, by simplifying and modernizing existing information systems and processes.

Contribution of the EPR to improving environmental monitoring in Belarus

The second EPR of **Belarus** (2005) recommended to review the national ambient environmental quality standards to make them consistent with international air and water quality standards and monitoring guidelines, and set time schedules to phase in monitoring of the standards that were not measured, as well as revised or new standards that could not be introduced immediately. The country has since then made progress in revising and updating its extensive set of ambient environmental standards to make them compatible with international air and water quality standards.

The current national air and water quality regulations are based on limiting the maximum acceptable concentration (MAC) of a hazardous substance into air or water. As of 1 January 2015, there were 654 MACs for air pollutants and 1,324 MACs for pollutants in the water bodies designated for water supply of the population and bathing waters. These norms are usually consistent with relevant norms recommended by WHO and stipulated in the EU directives, but the large number of MACs remains an issue for proper implementation.

In addition, many technical regulations, rules and procedures for monitoring air and water quality have been formulated or revised. The harmonization of national environmental standards with international standards intensified recently. Over the last few years, seven national standards on the procedures for water quality sampling and testing and a standard on monitoring small particles in air, which are identical to ISO standards, were approved.

Belarus also upgraded monitoring stations, equipment and devices, and analytical laboratories, as recommended by the second EPR. Moreover, the recommendation of the second EPR to establish and develop land monitoring in the country was implemented.

Strengthened public participation

Overall, public participation in environmental decision-making has improved in all selected reviewed countries in line with EPR recommendations. Governments have made efforts to strengthen the involvement of environmental NGOs and other stakeholders and to create a system for their participation in policy and decision-making. In some selected reviewed countries, memoranda of cooperation were concluded between national environmental authorities and environmental NGOs (e.g. Montenegro). Also, various advisory bodies with participation of NGOs were established (e.g. Belarus, Montenegro), often not only at national but also at local level.

Progress was observed in terms of public access to national environmental data, and there are signs of improved public participation in environmental decision-making as a result. National statistical agencies established their own websites, which provide free access to statistical data in various areas, including environment and sustainable development. In addition, they also publish statistical yearbooks and periodic bulletins on environmental topics. In all selected reviewed countries, the national environmental authority has its own website although the availability and comprehensiveness of information on these websites vary from country to country.

In some countries, the revision of the legal framework for public participation in EIA, as recommended by EPRs, gave way to improved public participation in EIA procedures. The introduction of SEA in legal frameworks has started in recent years, as recommended by EPRs (e.g. Georgia, Morocco) and is expected to lead to strengthened public participation in decision making on plans and programmes.

The creation of Aarhus centres³ in the majority of the selected reviewed countries (e.g. Belarus, Georgia, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Serbia) has improved the dissemination of environmental information and enhanced the capacity for public participation.

Increased international cooperation

Another area in which the EPR recommendations have exerted an influence on environmental policy is regarding the cooperation of the selected reviewed countries with the international community. These countries implemented most of the EPR recommendations related to participation in key multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and enhanced their implementation of MEAs. For example, Serbia fully implemented the

³ The OSCE has been supporting a network of Aarhus centres in an effort to support the implementation of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters and provide members of the public with practical resources to exercise their environmental rights under the Convention.

recommendation of its second review (2007) concerning the ratification of 12 environmental conventions and protocols. Moreover, following EPR recommendations, implementation strategies and action plans for international conventions have been developed or updated, and relevant implementing legislation adopted.

The EPR recommendations related to international cooperation supported the national environmental authorities' aspiration to ratify environmental agreements at the national level and access national budget resources and international assistance for the implementation of MEAs. They have also been instrumental in putting in place the mechanisms for coordination of international financial assistance. In addition, the EPR recommendations served as a useful tool for bilateral donors and international organizations in prioritizing international financial assistance.

EPR in Belarus: Strengthening the preparation of national strategies and action plans for the implementation of MEAs

The second EPR of **Belarus** (2005) addressed a recommendation to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection to continue preparing national strategies and action plans for the implementation of conventions where such documents were lacking. As of late 2015, the Ministry is responsible for 21 MEAs and develops related national strategies and action plans. Examples include the 2011 National Plan of Implementation of the Republic of Belarus under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants in 2011–2015; 2015 Strategy on Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa; and 2009 Strategy on Implementation of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat. In 2015, the Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity was updated. All national strategies and action plans for the implementation of conventions are approved at the level of the Council of Ministers or the President, and their implementation is closely monitored.

EPR in Georgia: Increasing the effectiveness of international assistance

The second EPR of **Georgia** (2010) recommended to the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection to designate a lead unit to improve project coordination, and enhance the Ministry's ability to fully utilize past experience when designing new projects suitable for external funding. In response, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection organizes biannual donor coordination meetings and maintains a database on donor-financed projects. The project coordination unit has been established under the Ministry's Department of Environmental Policy and International Relations.

Challenges ahead

Environmental authorities in selected reviewed countries are considerably stronger than they were a decade ago. Still, their status often does not allow them to act on an equal footing with the sectoral ministries. Moreover, frequent changes in the structure and leadership of institutions dealing with environmental management have impacted the continuity of efforts to improve environmental policy and legislation and ensure their effective application. Shortcomings in administrative organization, such as overlapping mandates or poorly defined responsibilities, are still in place in some of these countries. Both horizontal and vertical institutional coordination on environmental management often remains a challenge. Another significant issue is the inadequate financial and human capacity of environmental authorities. Although there have been improvements in the past years, investments in material assets such as computers and analytical laboratory equipment are still needed in some of these countries.

There has been good progress with development of policy frameworks for environmental protection and sustainable development, yet most of the selected reviewed countries face the lack of harmonization of national policy documents and of coherent indicators to track progress in implementation. Sometimes core strategies and programmes on environment and sustainable development do not have action plans and there is a lack of reporting on their implementation.

The selected reviewed countries have considerably advanced their legal frameworks on environmental protection and sustainable development. However, primary legislation often is not sufficiently supported by secondary legislation, so related implementation lags behind the intensive efforts to develop the legal basis. In addition, in some cases, legal frameworks are not yet in conformity with international standards (e.g. the legislation on integrated permitting is in place but thresholds do not correspond to international benchmarks) and related national implementation capacity remains weak.

Even though significant efforts have been made towards the integration of environmental requirements into sectoral policies and primary legislation, there is still room for improvement at the level of subsidiary legislation and in terms of practical implementation. The integration of green economy considerations into

national strategic documents is becoming more of a common practice; however, the institutional capacity for implementation of green economy approaches is missing.

The use of the SEA tool in many of these countries reviewed for this report is either non-existent or in its early stages. Sectoral authorities are still to be convinced of the benefits of SEA and quality assurance mechanisms for effective implementation are not yet in place.

Overall, the effectiveness of compliance and enforcement systems still requires improvements. In those selected reviewed countries where the IPPC related legislation has been adopted, the introduction of integrated permitting has been hampered by insufficient institutional capacity. Separating inspection and permit issuing functions has not been implemented in all countries.

The operations of national financing systems for environmental protection have improved in all selected reviewed countries. However, in most of these countries, the rates of both environmental pollution charges and fees for the use of natural resources are often still low for promoting the reduction of pollution and sustainable use of natural resources. In some countries, the low rates of fines for environmental offenses, together with the failure to adjust such rates to cumulative inflation, have eroded potential behaviour effects. Tariffs are also low in some countries and do not create incentives for more rational use of water and electricity, as well as for reducing waste generation. Persistent financial losses of service providers result in a consequential lack of funds for adequate investments in maintenance and modernization of the infrastructure.

Despite the increase in environmental expenditures in recent years, domestic environmental protection expenditure remains low in the majority of selected reviewed countries. There is a general lack of regular review of environmental expenditures and they are not always aligned with priorities in environmental and sectoral strategic documents. In most selected reviewed countries, legal frameworks for public sector green procurement or for eco-labelling are not yet developed. In addition, incentive measures for the use of renewable energy sources, improvements in energy efficiency, sustainable production and consumption, and development of cleaner transport systems are still at an early stage of development.

Furthermore, while there are improvements, remaining deficiencies in national environmental monitoring and the establishment of SEIS result in the low availability of high-quality, reliable and timely data for developing evidence-based policies, strategies and programmes on environment and sustainable development. This also hampers the measurement of the progress a country has made in related implementation. Communication between different institutions involved in environmental monitoring is often a challenge, whereas reporting and dissemination of environmental information need to be improved to reach both policy makers and the general public.

While the selected reviewed countries have become parties to many MEAs, for some countries gaps in participation in key MEAs still exist, especially as refers to the protocols to the conventions. Many of these countries still rely on international assistance and financial support for MEA implementation; and, therefore, developing respective national capacity and allocating adequate financial resources for implementation of international commitments remains a challenge.

While the environmental NGO community has grown and public participation in decision-making has generally improved in all selected reviewed countries, especially at the level of projects, ensuring public participation in policies, programmes and legislation, as well as making public participation a systematic and effective element of environmental decision-making, are also challenges to be addressed.

Lessons learned in implementation of policy recommendations

The major bottlenecks in the implementation of EPR recommendations have been the still low prioritization of environmental issues on national agendas and inadequate resources allocated for environmental protection at the national level. More specifically, difficulties with implementation of EPR recommendations have been connected with changes of governments, resulting in changes of priorities and sometimes overall governmental policy vectors, as well as institutional instability.

Correct targeting of EPR recommendations has been crucial for their implementation. EPR recommendations requiring combined implementation efforts of several ministries have proven more difficult to implement than recommendations addressed to the national environmental authority alone.

EPR recommendations requiring additional and substantial financial investments proved more difficult and time consuming to implement, than those for which funding was readily available. At the same time, EPR recommendations have proven to be useful in attracting the resources and attention to significant but neglected environmental issues.

In some cases, time has shown that EPR recommendations were overly ambitious for a given country in a given moment of time and would require a longer term for their proper implementation.

EPR recommendations formulated in a more specific rather than general language provided a clearer guidance to the countries. Overall, countries appreciate seeing clear action points in the recommendations; some had even asked for roadmaps to be developed as part of the EPR process. At the same time, experience has shown that in some cases too much detail in the recommendations may hinder implementation, therefore a clear focus on the most important issues would be more appropriate.

Some countries have adopted implementation plans for addressing EPR recommendations. Some have been doing self-assessments of implementation of EPR recommendations especially before making an internal decision on whether to request the next cycle review. Such steps have positively impacted on the implementation of EPR recommendations.

In the analysis carried out for this assessment, it is clear that the EPR recommendations have played an important role in the reviewed countries' actions to improve their environmental performance. Yet it is certainly also clear that the EPRs are not alone in influencing or contributing to the countries' improved environmental performance. For some selected reviewed countries, the EU accession process and associated requirements have played a crucial role in enhancing their environmental performance and in this way speeding up the implementation of EPR recommendations. EPR recommendations related to issues that are high on the agenda of the international community active in a country have tended to receive stronger backing by the international community and increased support for the implementation.

Part II: Reviewing progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals: the opportunities arising from the Environmental Performance Review methodology

“...A regional component for peer reviewing, tailored to regional and subregional needs, undertaken by existing mechanisms in a participatory, multi-stakeholder process, to consider national reports, identify regional trends, obstacles, commonalities, best practices and lessons learned and to generate solutions and mutual support and solutions: regional reviews would incorporate and build on the experiences and successes of mechanisms such as the regional economic commissions, the Africa Peer Review Mechanism process, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the Economic Commission for Europe environmental performance reviews and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee peer reviews.”

Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General

Follow up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The vision enshrined in the recently adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is ambitious and transformational. This new framework includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets agreed upon by member States to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. The SDGs seek to build upon the progress previously achieved through MDGs established at the Millennium Summit in 2000. At the same time, they attempt to address persistent issues and new challenges facing humanity and the planet. Instead of addressing the three dimensions of sustainable development separately, the SDGs follow an approach that fully integrates them.

In order to review progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, member States will engage in systematic follow-up and review of its implementation. In this context, the new Agenda encourages member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels which will draw as far as possible on the existing network of follow-up and review institutions and mechanisms. Follow-up and review at the regional and subregional levels will provide useful opportunities to countries for peer learning, including through voluntary reviews, and sharing of best practices and discussion on shared targets. In this respect, the 2030 Agenda promotes the cooperation of regional and subregional commissions and organizations. At the global level, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) will have a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes, working coherently with the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and other relevant organs and forums. One of the core elements of the follow-up and review framework will be Voluntary National Reviews by the HLPF. In parallel, the HLPF will carry out thematic reviews of progress on the SDGs including cross-cutting issues and will examine the report on global progress towards the SDGs.

Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development decided that the HLPF, when it meets under the auspices of ECOSOC, shall carry out regular voluntary reviews. The 2030 Agenda also encourages member States to conduct regular and inclusive country-led and country-driven reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels. Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF will likely build on such reviews. They will be aimed at sharing best practices and lessons learned to enable mutual learning across countries and regions and the mobilization of adequate support and partnerships to achieve the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda does not stipulate a frequency for the national and sub-national reviews. As highlighted by the Secretary General's report, Critical Milestones Towards Coherent, Efficient and Inclusive Follow-Up and Review at the Global Level, more frequent reviews, grounded in a national context, will support stronger national engagement. As the 2030 Agenda is a universal agenda, all countries would be expected to regularly carry out reviews at the HLPF. Each country could thus consider carrying out up to two Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF between now and 2030. Those reviews will be timed by countries so that they are most useful to their own national policy-making process.

To build an effective framework for the follow up and review of SDGs, Member States tasked the Statistical Commission with overseeing the development and implementation of the related global indicators. The Commission's Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators has recently developed a proposal for the global indicator framework based on an assessment of inputs provided by experts from a large number of countries, regional and international organizations, and civil society. UNECE and UNEP have actively participated in this work.

The Conference of European Statisticians (CES), to which UNECE provides the Secretariat, is currently working on a road map on Statistics for SDGs with the aim to provide practical guidance to countries. The work focusses on five areas: assessing readiness of countries to report on SDG indicators, selecting regional indicators, clarifying the set-up of reporting on SDG indicators, identifying needs for capacity-building for SDG indicators, and communication and dissemination of statistics for SDGs.

Data needs are a crucial aspect for the follow up and review of SDGs. Improving statistics and information and the capacity of national authorities and statisticians to manage data would substantially increase the availability of reliable and comparable data and statistics and be instrumental for the follow up and review of SDGs.

Peer learning and cooperation at the regional level

“Follow-up and review at the regional and sub-regional levels can, as appropriate, provide useful opportunities for peer learning, including through voluntary reviews, sharing of best practices and discussion on shared targets. We welcome in this respect the cooperation of regional and sub-regional commissions and organizations. Inclusive regional processes will draw on national-level reviews and contribute to follow-up and review at the global level, including at the high level political forum on sustainable development.”

Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para. 80

As mentioned above, the 2030 Agenda acknowledges the relevance of the regional level, both in terms of implementing those aspects of the agenda which require cross-border cooperation, and in terms of supporting implementation at the national level by providing opportunities for exchanging experiences and for policy learning. It invites the regional United Nations entities, including UNECE, to be part of this process.

On 10 May 2016, UNECE member States held a Regional Forum on Sustainable Development and discussed, together with representatives of 19 United Nations system entities and of civil society, first steps in SDG implementation as well as elements for a future regional follow-up and review mechanism. It became clear at this event that many countries have started reviewing their national policies, strategies and structures as a first step towards SDG implementation. There is also an increasing awareness that the new Agenda requires a much more intense inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Peer learning, exchange of best practices, identification of shared goals, discussion of regional trends and challenges and to inspire solutions for transboundary issues were seen as main objectives to be achieved through a regional review platform. The Regional Forum on Sustainable Development could be designed as a ‘docking station’ that integrates existing review mechanisms as well as a range of different stakeholders. Inputs could include reviews carried out by the eight UNECE sectoral committees, including EPRs and other UNECE reviews outlined below, and reviews and inputs from the regional United Nations system and other stakeholders in the region. Informal consultations in the UNECE Executive Committee will continue, and a decision on a regional follow-up and review mechanism is expected at the Commission session in 2017.

Integrating a review of progress in achieving SDGs in the current Environmental Performance Review process

“We believe that countries can learn from each other when it comes to the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As EPR plays a strong role as a regional peer review mechanism, it can also play an important role with regard to the SDGs follow-up and review.”

Edwin Koning, Member of the Committee on Environmental Policy, Netherlands

“Croatia participated in two EPR processes, which helped to improve the national environmental policy in the process of Croatia's accession to the European Union. They were also a significant instrument in our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals”.

Hrvoje Dokoza, Deputy Minister of Environmental and Nature Protection of Croatia, Third High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, UNECE side event, New York, 2015.

In a departure from MDG, the new Agenda calls for a dedicated process at the national, regional and global levels for monitoring progress, and for facilitating implementation through policy learning.

Among the principles guiding the follow-up and review process, the following are particularly noteworthy:

“f. [Follow-up and review processes] will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.

g. They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations [...].”

The follow-up and review processes are expected to draw, as far as possible, on initiatives and activities that already exist. They are expected to be based on evidence at the country level.

Over the last years, the EPR Programme has contributed to the review of achievement of the MDGs. Not only MDG-7, but also other MDGs often have been assessed in relevant chapters of the reviews. The latest EPRs (Belarus, Georgia) also present an annex with data on MDGs to provide a more comprehensive picture of the achievement of the MDGs by the reviewed country. EPRs have been instrumental in bringing to the attention of governments the systemic problems related to the achievement of MDGs, such as lack of integration of MDGs into national policies and strategies and inadequate financing to meet MDG commitments.

Building on the experience with assisting countries in the review of progress towards the achievement of MDGs, EPRs could be used to assist countries with review and follow up of the SDGs. EPRs could assess the progress a reviewed country is making in achieving relevant SDGs and provide recommendations to overcome the challenges. In this way, EPRs could effectively contribute to the follow up and review of SDGs at national and regional levels. Ultimately, they could support the future Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF. The major advantage would be the opportunity to rely on an already available process and methodology of EPRs, which has proven its functionality for over two decades.

Table 1 shows the links between SDGs and the different topics covered by current EPR reports. It demonstrates that some SDGs issues have already been partially addressed by EPRs. Some topics of Goal 14 (“Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”), for example, have been partially reflected in some EPRs at the request of the reviewed country. For example, in the second EPR of Ukraine, a chapter covered environmental issues linked to the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, and in the first EPR of Kazakhstan, a chapter covered the management of the Aral and Caspian Sea regions.

Table 1. Links between SDGs and chapters of current EPRs

<i>Chapters of current EPRs</i>	1 NO POVERTY	2 ZERO HUNGER	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	4 QUALITY EDUCATION	5 GENDER EQUALITY	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	13 CLIMATE ACTION	14 LIFE BELOW WATER	15 LIFE ON LAND	16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS
<i>Introduction: Environmental Conditions and Pressures</i>	●				●	●		●		●		●	●		●		
<i>Legal, Policy and Institutional Framework</i>																●	●
<i>Compliance and Enforcement Mechanisms</i>																	●
<i>Economic Instruments for Greening the Economy</i>	●							●	●			●					●
<i>Environmental Monitoring, Information and Education</i>				●												●	●
<i>Implementation of International Environmental Agreements</i>						●							●	●	●	●	
<i>Climate Change</i>							●		●		●		●		●		
<i>Water Resources Management</i>			●			●					●						
<i>Air Protection</i>			●				●						●				
<i>Waste Management</i>											●	●					
<i>Biodiversity and protected Areas</i>		●											●		●		
<i>Agriculture and Environment</i>		●				●		●					●		●		

<i>Chapters of current EPRs</i>	1 NO POVERTY 	2 ZERO HUNGER 	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 	4 QUALITY EDUCATION 	5 GENDER EQUALITY 	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 	7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY 	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES 	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 	13 CLIMATE ACTION 	14 LIFE BELOW WATER 	15 LIFE ON LAND 	16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS 	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS 
<i>Energy and Environment</i>																	
<i>Forestry and Environment</i>																	
<i>Industry and Environment</i>																	
<i>Land Management</i>																	
<i>Tourism and Environment</i>																	
<i>Transport and Environment</i>																	
<i>Health and Environment</i>																	
<i>Environmental Education and education for sustainable development</i>																	
<i>Human Settlements and Environment</i>																	
<i>Risk Management of Natural and Technological Hazards</i>																	
<i>Special chapters on issues linked to the environmental management and sustainable use of the seas</i>																	

Notes:

Main chapter(s) linked to the goal



Other chapters linked to the goal



Contribution of EPRs in reviewing progress towards the achievement of Millennium Development Goals in Montenegro and Belarus

The third EPR of **Montenegro** (2014) devoted a section to evaluation of achievement of MDGs as part of the chapter on implementation of international environmental agreements. It concluded that progress was achieved on some indicators with regard to the national commitments on MDGs, e.g. the country managed to increase the proportion of territory protected to preserve biodiversity and the proportion of renewable energy out of total energy consumption. At the same time, the EPR warned that Montenegro was about to fail to reach some of its MDG commitments. It drew attention of the Government that there was no progress on increasing the proportion of protected marine ecosystems, on decreasing the anthropogenic impact on the quality of surface water, or on reducing losses in the water supply network. The EPR recommended that the Government ensure adequate funding for addressing the country's commitments to MDG-7.

The second EPR of **Belarus** (2005) recommended the involvement of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection in the preparation of the national progress report on MDGs, particularly with regard to Goal 7. It also recommended that based on the conclusions of the report, the Government consider setting higher targets than those in the MDGs to be achieved by 2015. The Government has implemented this recommendation. Official reports on achievement of the MDGs were prepared in 2005 and 2010. In 2012, a statistical book was issued with MDG-related data. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection was fully involved in the preparation of official reports. No higher targets were set though.

The third EPR of **Belarus** (2015) has addressed, in its various chapters, the achievement of Goal 2, Target 2.A (primary schooling); Goal 3, Target 3.A (eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education); Goal 7, indicators 7.2 (CO₂ emissions), 7.3 (consumption of ODS), 7.5 (total water resources used), 7.8 (improved drinking water), 7.9 (improved sanitation) and Target 7.D (slum dwellers); Goal 4 (health-related indicators); Goal 5, Target 5.A (maternal mortality ratio) and Target 5.B (universal access to reproductive health); Goal 6, Target 6.A (combating HIV/AIDS) and Target 6.C (combating tuberculosis). The third EPR also included an annex with data for all MDGs. It recommended to the Government to launch an inclusive process to identify lessons learned from its work on addressing the MDGs and set up an ambitious national agenda on the basis of the globally agreed SDGs.

Integrating a review of progress in achieving SDGs in the current EPR process would address those SDGs that are relevant for the particular EPR content requested by the reviewed country — EPR-relevant SDGs. There are various options how a SDGs review could be embedded into the EPR process at the request of the countries:

1. To integrate EPR-relevant SDGs into the contents of the chapters of the EPR reports.
2. To introduce a comprehensive chapter on the assessment of the progress that a country has made towards achieving EPR-relevant SDGs. Such a chapter could provide a detailed coverage of all EPR-relevant SDGs.
3. To integrate EPR-relevant SDGs into the contents of the chapters of the EPR report and cover in an additional chapter those SDGs that were not addressed by other chapters and as requested by the country under review.

It is clear that there are challenges for applying the current EPR set-up to contribute to the SDGs follow-up and review. The SDGs are based on an integrated approach and cover a large range of topics as well as interlinkages between them. This may represent a significant challenge for covering progress towards the achievement of SDGs by the EPRs, even though the EPRs have already addressed a wide spectrum of environmental problems and cross-cutting economic and social issues and touched upon many important issues related to SDGs.

The broader scope of the SDGs would require the following aspects to be considered:

- Bringing additional expertise into the review teams: the current engagement between the EPR Programme and partner organizations such as UNEP, WHO, EEA, OECD and others would need to be strengthened, and the collaboration with new partners would need to be developed, in order to enhance the expertise for the review teams.
- To ensure that the quality of the reviews is maintained and to be able to carry out “expanded” EPRs, some additional financial resources would be required, mostly to secure the availability of broader expertise.
- From the side of the reviewed countries, participation in EPRs of governmental institutions beyond the national environmental authorities would need to be enhanced.
- Furthermore, enhancing the current practice of inviting additional experts from other sectors to participate to the Expert Group on EPRs would be needed.

Other potential mechanisms and tools to support the follow-up and review of progress towards the achievement of SDGs

Apart from EPRs, there are other mechanisms and tools that could contribute to the national follow-up and review of progress towards the achievement of SDGs and enhance data support to the review process. These include, among others, the national reporting processes under various MEAs, a number of global processes and instruments, including the UNEP-Live platform and its Indicator Reporting Information System (IRIS) and the Global Environment Outlook (GEO) process and several UNECE review mechanisms and processes besides the EPRs. All these mechanisms offer an in-depth analysis of national issues, including those related to SDGs, even though the data, information, conclusions and recommendations that they make are specific to the topics covered by respective mechanisms.

In the case of integrating a review of progress in achieving SDGs in the current EPR process, the mechanisms and tools described below should be taken into account to ensure complementarity and efficiency of efforts.

Multilateral Environmental Agreements reporting processes

National reports produced as part of the reporting obligations under the global and regional MEAs include data and quantitative and qualitative analysis of the progress towards achieving the objectives of MEAs. National reports could provide relevant information on SDGs, which are linked with the MEAs' topics. In this way, they could support the follow up and review of progress towards attaining SDGs. For example, the national reports produced under the Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change could include information and data related to Goal 15 ("Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss"), among others. National reporting under the chemicals and waste related MEAs could support the follow up and review of progress towards sound management and safe use of chemicals, the reduction and recycling of waste, therefore responding to Goals 3, 6 and 12. Some MEAs are now making specific efforts to align their reporting frameworks to SDGs.

Global mechanisms and processes

UNEP-Live

The UNEP-Live⁴ and its Indicator Reporting Information System (IRIS) facilitate the exchange and sharing of data, information, assessments and knowledge amongst countries. Therefore, they can effectively contribute to evaluating the progress countries have made towards environmental goals and targets, including commitments under MEAs, progress towards the implementation of a SEIS in the pan-European region, and towards achieving SDGs. To this end, countries will need to continue increasing their efforts in collecting data and streamlining their national monitoring and reporting systems to support SEIS implementation in the region and deliver on statistical monitoring and reporting objectives under the new SDGs monitoring framework. UNEP-Live's in-built functionalities to identify and map synergies between specific SDG targets and relevant MEA obligations can be of further support to countries in organizing their national reporting systems with consistent and timely data.

UNEP-Live: an efficient tool for data and information sharing

UNEP-Live is a dynamic and innovative platform launched in 2014 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which collects, processes and shares the world's best environmental science and research. It focuses on the latest environmental information and emerging issues. Through the platform's applications, multimedia content and digital publishing tools, both public and policy makers have access to data from UNEP, national and regional resources and other knowledge and data providers. In its framework, UNEP-Live allows countries to link their national portals and datasets to dedicated country pages, making national data flows widely accessible and discoverable to support assessments. It includes national data flows from 192 countries, lists national environmental reporting obligations, and hosts a dataset of resource efficiency indicators and material flow data for each country. Near real-time data and maps available in UNEP-Live

⁴ <http://www.uneplive.org>

cover themes such as air quality, sea level rise, the Antarctic ozone hole, and threatened species. The platform is currently extending its knowledge base for global environmental policy-making and evidence-based analysis, supporting the GEO-6 global and regional assessment processes.

UNEP-Live also presents an interactive SDG portal⁵, where multiple pathways from indicators to targets and goals show their connections through data and definitions in the SDG Interface Ontology. Moreover, the SDG portal provides access to a set of tools to help users to map and identify synergies between specific SDG targets and relevant MEA obligations. New UNEP-Live functionalities currently under development will allow users to see up-to-date information on progress towards achieving the SDGs by enabling users to access, chart and analyze data relevant to the environmental dimension of the SDGs.

Indicator Reporting Information System

The Indicator Reporting Information System (IRIS) is an online software that supports environmental data management and facilitates reporting on national, regional and global obligations, state of environment reports and SDGs reporting. It was developed by UNEP with support from the Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative. Also, the IRIS technology is an element of UNEP-Live that supports the implementation of SEIS principles of open access to data, data managed as close as possible to source, and data collected once and shared for many purposes.

Once deployed at the national level, IRIS is owned and managed by the country. It enables multiple users (ministries, statistical agencies, etc.) to upload indicators, add analysis and use them to fill in reporting templates. In this way, IRIS facilitates sharing of data within a country, expedites reporting for timely and informed decision-making and can be used for multiple reporting purposes, from national reporting processes on specific indicators to reporting to MEAs and on the environmental dimension of SDGs.

Global Environment Outlook

The UNEP's Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is a consultative and participatory process that builds capacity for conducting integrated environmental assessments and reporting on the state, trends and outlooks of the environment. The main goal of GEO is to keep governments and stakeholders informed of the state and trends of the global environment.

Over the past 15 years, the GEO reports have examined a wealth of data, information and knowledge about the global environment, identified potential policy responses, and provided an outlook for the future. The assessments, and their consultative and collaborative processes, have worked to bridge the gap between science and policy by turning the best available scientific knowledge into information relevant for decision makers. The upcoming GEO-6, expected to be launched in mid-2017, will lay the foundation for continued socio-environmental assessments across relevant scales, with a thematic as well as an integrated focus, enabling and informing societal transitions and the tracking of SDG targets and goals.

The upcoming GEO-6 assessment will be built upon the findings of GEO regional assessments, one for each UNEP region⁶. The GEO regional assessments provide a comprehensive picture of the environmental factors contributing to human well-being in the regions, accompanied by an analysis of policies leading to greater attainment of environmental objectives and goals, including those comprised in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Therefore, the GEO pan-European regional assessment, which also includes a focus on the SDGs, could contribute as a source of information and data in reviewing progress in the region towards achieving SDGs.

Universal Periodic Reviews

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a process which involves a periodic review of the human rights records of all United Nations Member States. It is a State-driven process, under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, which provides the opportunity for each State to declare what actions they have taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to fulfil their human rights obligations. As one of the main features of the Council, the UPR is designed to ensure equal treatment for every country when their human rights situations are assessed. The report is adopted at a plenary session of the Human Rights Council. Recommendations include suggestions made to the State under review to reduce inequalities and improve the

⁵ <http://www.uneplive.org/portal>

⁶ UNEP regions: Africa, Asia and the Pacific, pan-European region, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, and West Asia

human rights respect in different fields (e.g. poverty, health, education, gender, environment, migration, justice, etc.).

Since the human rights based approach is integrated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UPRs could support the follow up and review of progress towards the achievement of SDGs. It is important to note that the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda address both civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights.

UNECE review mechanisms and other processes

Innovation Performance Reviews

The Innovation Performance Reviews are carried out upon request of a member State in collaboration with international and national experts and the UNECE secretariat, under the auspices of the UNECE Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships. Although the Innovation Performance Review Programme has started rather recently, in 2010, conclusions and recommendations of these reviews have already resulted in major policy changes, including new laws on innovation and intellectual property protection in Belarus, a new strategy for international cooperation on innovation in Kazakhstan and more financial support for innovation centres in Ukraine.

As the main purposes of the Reviews are to foster innovation activities, enhance innovation capacity and improve the efficiency of national innovation systems, they could be instrumental for the follow up and review of a number of SDGs, including e.g. Goal 8 (“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”) and Goal 12 (“Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns”).

Country Profiles on Housing and Land Management

Country Profiles on Housing and Land Management, undertaken only at the request of the country, assist governments in assessing their housing, urban development and land administration policies, strategies, institutional and financial frameworks. The programme was initiated in 1994 under the auspices of the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management. The recommendations for improving policies and practices are an essential part of the programme, and have resulted in important policy reforms. For example, Country Profiles led to the development of a state programme on housing for special population groups in Armenia, amendments to the housing code in Azerbaijan, establishment of a state mortgage lending agency in Kyrgyzstan, creation of a legal framework for social housing in Serbia, and establishment of a government programme for energy-efficient housing in Belarus.

Country Profiles could contribute to the follow up and review of progress towards the achievement of SDGs, most prominently Goal 5 (“Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”), Goal 7 (“Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all”), Goal 8 (“Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all”), Goal 11 (“Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”), Goal 13 (“Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”), Goal 15 (“Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss”) and Goal 17 (“Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”).

Studies on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade

Studies on Procedural and Regulatory Barriers to Trade focus on related barriers to trade in goods. They have an eye on on-going development efforts in the areas of trade facilitation, technical regulations and standardization policies. The Studies are undertaken upon request of member States under the auspices of the UNECE Committee on Trade since 2011. The recommendations from the Study in Tajikistan resulted in detailed action-oriented recommendations, which were integrated into the country’s post-World Trade Organization accession plan in 2014 and into the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for the period 2016-2020.

The Studies on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade could serve as a basis for reviewing the progress made in achieving trade-related targets of SDG, e.g. targets related to correcting and preventing restrictions and distortions in global agricultural markets, listed under the Goal 2 (“End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”) and promoting a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trade system, listed under Goal 17 (“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”).

Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy in the pan-European region

The Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy in the pan-European region was adopted by the UNECE CEP at its Special Session in February 2016 and will be submitted to Ministers at the Eighth “Environment for Europe” Conference (Batumi, 2016) for endorsement. The Strategic Framework will help countries in the development and implementation of their policies, strategies and plans for greening the economy and achieving sustainable development. The three main objectives to be attained by greening the economy in the pan-European region are reduced environmental risks and ecological scarcities, enhanced economic progress, and improved human well-being and social equity.

The links between the Strategic Framework’s objectives and focus areas on the one hand, and the SDGs on the other, demonstrate that the transition to a green economy could support the achievement of many SDGs. Reporting on the implementation of countries’ commitments under the Strategic Framework for those countries which participate in the Batumi Green Economy Action could be useful for reviewing progress towards the attainment of several SDGs.

Looking back, moving forward

Over the last 20 years the Environmental Performance Reviews proved to be an efficient and useful instrument in assisting UNECE member States with assessment of their environmental and sustainable development policies and their implementation. The reviews, their content and methodology have evolved throughout the last decades to better respond to the needs of member States and priorities of the international environmental and sustainable development agendas. There are strong signals that the reviews have had an important impact on the ground, having resulted in improved policy and legal frameworks and better integration of environmental concerns into sectoral policies, stronger institutions for environmental management, improved financial resources for environmental protection and greening the economy, improved environmental monitoring and information systems, strengthened public participation, increased international cooperation, which taken all together contribute to improved environmental conditions in the reviewed countries. Still, there are remaining challenges in all of these areas which require increased efforts of the governments and other stakeholders, also in view of the ambitious programme set for the years to come in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The challenges in successfully implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are enormous, and all the organizations of the United Nations system are looking for ways to contribute to the efforts in this area using their existing tools. The EPR process can support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by integrating a review of progress in achieving SDGs into the methodology. Also, as countries move forward with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and review of the SDGs, the lessons learned from the EPR methodology can be very useful in designing peer-learning processes for reviewing the achievement of the SDGs. The ideas presented in this paper are a starting point for further discussion on the ways to move forward.