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Sustainable development in the region

Role of the Committee on Environmental Policy in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Note by the secretariat

Summary

At its twenty-second session (Geneva, 25-27 January 2017), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Committee on Environmental Policy invited countries to consider the Committee's role in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), and to continue to discuss the matter at future meetings. In that regard, the Committee requested the Bureau, with support from the secretariat, to prepare a short background document to facilitate further discussion on the topic (ECE/CEP/2017/2, para. 19).

Following up on that request, the current document elaborates on the role of the Committee in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The document reflects comments made by the Bureau at its meeting on 28 and 29 June in Lisbon.

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I. Introduction

1. At its twenty-second session (Geneva, 25-27 January 2017), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy invited countries to consider the Committee's role in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), and to continue to discuss the matter at future meetings. In that regard, the Committee requested the Bureau, with support from the secretariat, to prepare a short background document to facilitate further discussion on the topic (ECE/CEP/2017/2, para. 19).
2. Following up on that request, the current document elaborates on the role of the Committee in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The document reflects comments made by the Bureau at its meeting on 28 and 29 June in Lisbon.
3. The Committee is invited to consider its role in supporting delivery of the 2030 Agenda.

II. Follow-up on and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level

4. On 25 September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, along with a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 associated targets.¹ This new development agenda is the international community's primary guide for sustainable development in the years to come. As never before, the sustainability aspects of development are considered of primary concern at the local, national, regional and international levels.
5. The high-level political forum on sustainable development (high-level political forum) is the central United Nations platform for follow-up on and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, providing for the full and effective participation of all States Members of the United Nations and States members of specialized agencies.
6. To facilitate the follow-up on and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the period 2017-2019, the Sustainable Development Goals are clustered into three sets, with Goal 17 being included in each set, as follows:²
 - (a) 2017: Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world (Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17);
 - (b) 2018: Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies (Goals 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17);
 - (c) 2019: Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality (Goals 4, 8, 10, 13, 16 and 17).
7. As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda encourages Member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are to be country-led and country-driven. These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the high-level political forum, meeting under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council. As stipulated in paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda, regular reviews by the high-level political forum are to

¹ General Assembly resolution 70/1.

² See General Assembly resolution 70/299, paras. 4 and 5.

be voluntary, State-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries and involve multiple stakeholders. The voluntary national reviews aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The voluntary national reviews also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of Governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.³

8. At the global level, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in cooperation with relevant partner organizations engages stakeholders in the implementation, evaluation and monitoring process of the Sustainable Development Goals, and assists countries in translating the global goals into national policies and national policies into action on the ground.

III. Follow-up on and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the regional level

9. At its sixty-seventh session (Geneva, 26-27 April 2017), ECE formally established the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (Regional Forum) for the ECE region to serve as a regional mechanism to follow-up and review the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Commission decided to convene the Regional Forum annually in 2018 and 2019, in close cooperation with the entities of the regional United Nations system. The Regional Forum will focus on practical value added, taking into account the work of existing regional bodies and mechanisms, including peer review mechanisms, while avoiding additional reporting burdens for member States (E/ECE/1480, decision B(67)).

10. Focusing on practical value added and peer learning, the Regional Forum creates a regional space to share policy solutions, good practices and challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and helps identify major regional and subregional trends. It is open to the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including international and regional organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector.

11. At the regional level, ECE convenes sessions of the Regional Forum in partnership with all relevant organizations. The first stand-alone session of the Regional Forum took place in Geneva on 25 April 2017.⁴ Two meetings on 24 April 2017 preceded the Regional Forum: a preparatory civil society consultation; and a regional preparatory workshop for the countries from the ECE region conducting voluntary national reviews at the 2017 meeting of the high-level political forum.

12. The outcome of the Regional Forum meetings — a report including the Chair's summary of substantive discussions — is transmitted to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to serve as input into the work of the high-level political forum.

³ For more information, see United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, "Voluntary National Reviews", available from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.

⁴ See <http://www.unece.org/rfsd2017>.

IV. Committee on Environmental Policy support to follow-up on and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

A. Ongoing work

13. The ECE Committee on Environmental Policy, through its work, is supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Strategic Framework for 2018-2019 for the ECE Environment subprogramme contains specific provisions related to the Goals, as follows:

Given that the environment represents one of the dimensions of sustainable development, the subprogramme will support the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goals 3, 4, 6, 11, 12, 13, 16 and 17. The work will be carried out through international policy dialogue, normative work, capacity-building and the dissemination of best practices and lessons learned in the areas of air quality, water, industrial safety, public participation, environmental assessment, monitoring and performance, education for sustainable development and mainstreaming of environmental concerns into other dimensions of sustainable development.⁵

14. The programme of work of the ECE Environment subprogramme covers the activities of the Committee on Environmental Policy and 10 other governing bodies, namely, 8 ECE multilateral environmental agreements, the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP) and the ECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development. In addition to the overall programme of work of the Environment subprogramme, the 10 governing bodies adopt their own programmes or plans of work. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, all 11 governing bodies have assessed or are in the process of assessing their activities with a view to providing efficient support to member States in implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. At its twenty-first (2015) and twenty-second (2017) sessions, the Committee considered information on developments under the multilateral environmental agreements and the Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development regarding efforts made to adjust their respective activities, as appropriate, to better support countries' efforts in delivering on the 2030 Agenda.

15. At its sessions, the Committee on Environmental Policy considers advancing the Sustainable Development Goals under several agenda items. For instance, at its twenty-second session, in January 2017, the Committee discussed the existing approaches at the national level to implement the Sustainable Development Goals with a focus on Goals 3, 9 and 17. The Committee welcomed the information shared by Belarus, Czechia and Kazakhstan on their experience in identifying practical ways and means of approaching national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and relevant Sustainable Development Goals from an environmental perspective, and invited its members to continue such exchanges of experience and good practice on that topic at its future meetings. Also, the Committee invited relevant partners to share information on their activities in support of the 2030 Agenda, with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals that would be reviewed by the high-level political forum during that year.

16. Furthermore, the Committee approved the proposed approach for the Environmental Performance Review Programme to support the review of relevant Sustainable Development Goals and recognized the role of environmental performance reviews as a

⁵ See A/71/6 (Prog.17), para. 17.9.

mechanism for peer learning. Moreover, the Committee is following up on the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System in the pan-European region by 2021 to make available comprehensive data to monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

17. In addition, at the Committee's twenty-second session, Chairs and other representatives of ECE multilateral environmental agreements discussed with the Committee members and observers the efforts made thus far under each multilateral environmental agreement to define their roles in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Committee recognized the importance of transparency, including easy access to information, and underlined that cooperation at the national and international levels between relevant sectors, including effective engagement of stakeholders, was key to the coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

18. At its sessions, the Committee considers the issue of mainstreaming a gender perspective into environmental activities. In that regard, at its twenty-second session the Committee recognized the importance of gender mainstreaming in environmental activities, particularly in the light of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, and emphasized that gender equality was both a goal in itself and a means to contribute to achieving sustainable development.

19. In organizing its activities, the Committee is working on adapting its outputs to efficiently support country efforts in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Committee provides a platform for sharing experience and exchanging good practice in identifying practical ways and means of approaching national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and relevant Sustainable Development Goals from an environmental perspective. Of particular interest for the Committee is the information on steps taken to foster the integration foreseen in the 2030 Agenda.

20. A highlight of the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8-10 June 2016) was the discussion on the environment dimension of the 2030 Agenda. Ministers and the representatives of several organizations, including civil society, participated in an interactive discussion organized in a "talk show" format, moderated by the ECE Executive Secretary and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Deputy Executive Director. The discussion was backed by a mapping of the Environment subprogramme processes and activities that support countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The mapping included the relative bearing of the Environment subprogramme for each Goal — strong, moderate or limited — based on an estimate of the number of relevant targets and the uniqueness of the ECE instruments in addressing the related challenges (see figure below). Participants reflected upon the potential role of ECE multilateral environmental agreements, environmental performance reviews, education for sustainable development and other instruments in supporting countries to implement the 2030 Agenda, shared good practice examples and reiterated their commitments to the various instruments, thereby inspiring, enabling and encouraging all countries to make progress. They also identified where further support might be needed or new directions could be explored.

Overview of the Environment subprogramme's relative bearing for each Sustainable Development Goal



21. Since 2009, the Committee on Environmental Policy has been working on the issue of “greening” the economy as an approach to foster economic progress while ensuring environmental sustainability and social equity. The ECE secretariat jointly with UNEP, and in cooperation with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other organizations active in the region, support the work of the Committee on green economy, which is considered to be a promising approach to sustainable development. A key result is the endorsement by ministers in Batumi of the Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy, a voluntary tool that supports countries’ efforts in transitioning to green economy and, at the same time, assists them in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Strategic Framework is expected to serve environment ministers in initiating and sustaining discussions on the green economy transition in their national Governments and, ultimately, in creating an interministerial policy process to bring forward such an agenda involving key constituencies, including the public at large and the private sector. Also in Batumi, ministers launched the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy (BIG-E), which consists of voluntary commitments to operationalize the Strategic Framework until 2030. Ministers encouraged countries and other stakeholders to implement commitments under the initiative in order to facilitate the transition to a green economy. At present, 117 commitments have been submitted by 25 countries and 13 organizations. The Batumi Initiative on Green Economy is promoted through the Green Growth Knowledge Platform. The initiative remains open for more stakeholders to join.

22. Another initiative helping to achieve Sustainable Development Goals is the voluntary Batumi Action for Cleaner Air (BACA), which was endorsed by ministers in Batumi to support countries’ efforts in improving air quality and protecting public health and ecosystems, thereby also contributing to the achievement of several of the Sustainable Development Goals (most notably, Goals 3, 11 and 12). Ministers welcomed the actions launched by interested countries and other stakeholders aimed at improving air quality and protecting public health and ecosystems. At present, 108 commitments have been submitted by 27 countries and 4 organizations. The Batumi Action for Cleaner Air remains open for more stakeholders to join.

Cooperating with other ECE sectoral committees and organizations

23. The work to support countries' efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals is part of all the activities under the Environment subprogramme, including many cross-sectoral activities that are successfully implemented in cooperation with other ECE subprogrammes and organizations of the United Nations system and other organizations active in the region.

24. The ECE Environment subprogramme supports the cross-sectoral work under: the ECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNEP and others); THE PEP (jointly with the ECE Transport subprogramme and the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe); the Protocol on Water and Health (jointly with the WHO Regional Office for Europe); and the Environmental Performance Review Programme (in cooperation with UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme and the European Environment Agency).

25. Under the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention), among many joint activities, work is ongoing on the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus in cooperation with the ECE Energy subprogramme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Under the Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents (Industrial Accidents Convention) and the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, work has been done on land-use planning and industrial safety. The work under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters cuts across all the Sustainable Development Goals and especially Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, involving many partners inside and outside the United Nations system.

26. Under the Environment for Europe process, together with UNEP, OECD and other partners, the Environment subprogramme is supporting the implementation of the Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy and the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy. Furthermore, the Environment subprogramme is also actively participating in the activities under the European Environment and Health Process, and participates in the environment activities under the Environment and Security Initiative.

27. The Committee also follows developments in the area of green building and greening the forestry sector, and welcomes closer cooperation with the ECE Committee on Housing and Land Management and the ECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry. Also, the various inter-agency mechanisms (e.g., under the ECE Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, the Industrial Accidents Convention and UN-Water) foster integration as the different actors involved address different sectors.

28. The Committee on Environmental Policy jointly with the Conference of the European Statisticians established the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators to support countries of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe to improve their data systems and indicators, thereby supporting the review and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goal targets.

29. Annex I to the memorandum of understanding between ECE and UNEP (concluded in 2015) outlines priority areas for cooperation on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, including in the area of greening the economy, environmental performance review and the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System for the region.

30. The Environment subprogramme's cross-sectoral and integrative work is successful; the Committee on Environmental Policy undertakes joint activities and involves relevant partners in its activities. At the same time, implementing cross-cutting activities, ensuring coordination with all relevant stakeholders and making sure the integrative nature of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals is put into practice is time and resource intensive. Overall, the key challenge experienced is the lack of adequate resources (both operational and for managing activities), exacerbated by cuts in existing resources. Many activities are carried out with extrabudgetary support by voluntary contributions. Another challenge is the complexity of intersectoral policymaking and of national inter-institutional coordination.

B. Possible future activities

31. The Committee on Environmental Policy could continue to conduct its work in the current areas by paying specific attention to how these activities are adjusted to better support the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, and ensuring the cross-sectoral integration and cooperation. Possible additional activities are set out below.

32. At its sessions, the Committee could decide to strengthen its engagement in and allocate more time for the discussion related to advancing sustainable development in the region. For instance, for the next three years (2017-2019), such a discussion could take place at each session of the Committee and be organized in the format of a panel, round-table or peer-learning discussion lasting up to two hours. The discussion would cover the Sustainable Development Goals most relevant to the Committee's work out of the set of Goals under consideration at the global level in a given year. The discussion could involve both countries and organizations and focus on sharing experience about mechanisms, tools and approaches established at the national, subregional and regional levels to ensure the cross-sectoral and integrative work in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, all from the environment perspective. The Committee or its Chair could transmit the results of such discussions to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE region in the form of a note or summary and engage in the discussions in the framework of the Regional Forum. Such contributions and related discussions could be reflected, as appropriate, in the Chair's summary of the meetings of the Regional Forum, which constitutes the regional input into global discussions at the high-level political forum. At the same time, the preparation for these sessions will help countries to reflect on and assess additionally the level of integration of their activities and cross-sectoral outreach in delivering the 2030 Agenda. In addition, the work done for the Committee on Environmental Policy will be of help to those countries preparing their national voluntary reports.

33. At its sessions, the Committee could continue to consider developments to adjust activities under the ECE multilateral environmental agreements, the Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development and THE PEP with a view to supporting countries in more efficiently and effectively delivering on the 2030 Agenda. At a later stage of implementing the 2030 Agenda, the Committee could also consider efficient and value added ways to regularly review progress made under these treaties and policies in supporting countries to achieve relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

34. Regarding monitoring the contribution and impact of the Committee's activities to achieving the 2030 Agenda, the members of and observers to the Committee could be invited to share information during Committee sessions on how the Committee's outputs have been reflected in reports and interventions at relevant global, regional, subregional and national meetings and events. For instance, the two Batumi initiatives could be promoted

broadly as efficient, practical tools to support countries green their economies and clean the air in support of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. Also, review and assessment activities, such as environmental performance reviews and environmental monitoring and assessment — including the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System across the pan-European region — help countries to assess their progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, each of the ECE multilateral environmental agreements has activities supporting countries' efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, THE PEP and the Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development are built on cross-sectoral cooperation.

35. The Committee on Environmental Policy could share with other ECE sectoral committees the mapping of the Environment subprogramme processes and activities conducted by the Committee in 2016 that support countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and propose to the ECE Executive Committee to consider encouraging other sectoral committees to conduct similar mapping exercises. Consolidating those mapping exercises into one would facilitate the identification of potential joint activities in support of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

36. Also, raising awareness about the Sustainable Development Goals in countries broadly and at all levels, in addition to capacity-development, including across governmental institutions and the public at large, is necessary and could be a joint endeavour of the ECE sectoral committees. It could be done by joining forces in carrying out integrated awareness-raising and capacity-development activities and workshops at the regional, national and subnational levels. Awareness-raising activities need to be tailored to each target group to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals are widely recognized and to fuel a societal movement towards achieving them.

37. Organizing thematic discussions by setting up back-to-back sectoral committee meetings with joint sessions aimed at exchanging information and experiences could be considered with a view to identifying possible areas of closer cooperation and appropriate mechanisms for such cooperation. In addition, inviting chairs and members of bureaux of other sectoral committees to the relevant sessions of the Committee on Environmental Policy could be explored.

38. The committees under the Sustainable Energy, Transport and Environment subprogrammes could explore possibilities to work together on policy and technical options to address the demand for increased electrical supply for electrical vehicles and their electrical storage capacity, while also looking into the environmental consequences of such policies, thereby supporting the achievement of relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

39. Also, using the nexus approach to conducting activities is an effective means to ensure integration across silos. A good example is the work on the assessment of the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus in selected transboundary water basins, which brought together the Water Convention bodies, the ECE Sustainable Energy Division, FAO and other partners. The partners are carrying out intersectoral assessments of the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus in a number of transboundary basins, in line with the integrated approach of the 2030 Agenda.

40. In the next few years the Committee on Environmental Policy will continue to promote the Batumi initiatives on clean air and green economy to attract more actions and stakeholders and enhance the practical value of the initiatives and their contribution to relevant Sustainable Development Goals. Given the cross-cutting nature of green economy, it will be valuable if other ECE sectoral committees and governing bodies, as appropriate, could consider promoting the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy to their constituencies, and also exploring their potential interest (as bodies) in participating in that initiative by

submitting green economy actions and participating in the reporting on their implementation.

41. A survey is being conducted jointly by ECE and UNEP to map undertakings in the area of green economy by organizations active in the region, with a view to advancing the implementation of the Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy and the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy. The purpose of the survey is to map the expertise available in organizations with a view to facilitating policy coherence, inter-agency coordination and the identification of existing gaps in the activities of regional players and, ultimately, to detect opportunities for joint work. Responses to the survey have been received from several ECE divisions and will be included in the analysis and mapping of the green economy expertise in the region. This work too could be continued and developed by the Committee.

42. When preparing the Environment for Europe ministerial conferences, the Committee could consider organizing a half-day segment dedicated to the 2030 Agenda. Such a segment could be organized in a manner similar to the Batumi Conference segment on the 2030 Agenda. It could include thematic discussions with a focus on cross-sectoral integration by inviting ministers from relevant line ministries in addition to the environment ministers.

43. Other activities in support of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals could be identified at a later stage in accordance with developments taking place at the global, regional, subregional and national levels.
