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

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I. Introduction

A. Background

1. At its twenty-second session (25–27 January 2017), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy approved the new mandate and terms of reference for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment (ECE/CEP/2017/2, para. 32 and annex II). The mandate sets out objectives leading up to 2021 that follow up on the ministerial declaration (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1) adopted at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016).

2. The mandate of the Working Group sets out that it will review progress made by countries in Europe and Central Asia in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System by 2021. It will also identify and explore options for establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks and, as part of this process, develop an inclusive platform for countries to discuss the integration of environmental, economic and social considerations regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, green economy and other related areas of work. Moreover, the Working Group will lead a process of consultation on the regular pan-European environmental assessment and the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting by 2020 and engage in capacity-building assistance regarding specific challenges regarding environmental monitoring and assessment.

3. At its twenty-third session (14–17 November 2017), the Committee on Environmental Policy decided to organize a one-day mid-term review of the Batumi Conference main outcomes as part of the Committee's twenty-fourth session (29–31 January 2019). The Committee further invited the ECE secretariat to proceed with the organization of mid-term reviews of the main outcomes in accordance with the provisions in document ECE/CEP/2017/16. This includes the mid-term review of progress in establishing the Shared Environmental Information System.

4. At its twenty-third session, the Committee on Environmental Policy also requested the Working Group to revise and streamline the outline of its activities up to 2021 (ECE/CEP/2017/13). The Committee further requested the Working Group to encourage and facilitate broadened participation by member States, relevant organizations and existing regional environmental information and assessment networks.

5. The twentieth session of the Working Group was held in Geneva on 3 and 4 September 2018.

B. Attendance

6. The twentieth session was attended by representatives of ministries or agencies of environment, and in some cases the statistical offices, of the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Ukraine.

7. Representatives of the following the United Nations system entities participated in the session: the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Statistics Division (by video conference).

8. In addition, representatives of the European Environment Agency, International Centre for Environmental Research, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Zoï Environment Network participated in the meeting.

C. Procedural matters

9. The meeting was chaired by Ms. Katerina Nikolovska (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

10. The Working Group adopted the agenda for its twentieth session as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/1.¹

11. The Working Group re-elected Ms. Nikolovska as its Chair and Ms. Maia Javakhishvili (Georgia) and Mr. Yuri Tsaturov (Russian Federation) as its Vice Chairs for a term of up to two years.

II. Adoption of the report of the nineteenth session of the Working Group

12. The Working Group considered the outcomes of its nineteenth session (27–28 June 2017) and adopted the report of the meeting (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2017/2).

13. The Working Group noted the information provided by secretariat on the status of implementation of decisions and recommendations from its nineteenth session.

III. Implementing the renewed mandate and terms of reference

14. The secretariat recalled that, at its twenty-third session, the Committee on Environmental Policy requested the Working Group to revise and streamline the outline of activities leading up to 2021, by including measurable outcomes and giving priority to core activities in accordance with the financial resources available.

15. The secretariat presented a revised draft outline of activities leading up to 2021 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/3) and the annual timetable of activities for 2019 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/4). The secretariat informed the Working Group about the financial resources presently available under the ECE Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Programme for the period 2018–2021. The Working Group took note of information provided by the secretariat on financial resources available, including from a United Nations Development Account project

16. Representatives of UNEP and the ECE Statistical Division reported on the European Union-funded “Capacity building for environmental data sharing and reporting in support of the Shared Environmental Information System” project, the joint UNEP and ECE project “Programme on Statistics and Data”, funded through the United Nations Development Account, and associated workshops that took place in Astana (28–30 November 2017) and Dushanbe (16–18 October 2017). They invited members of the Working Group to propose possible further workshops.

17. A representative of the Russian Federation stated that the revised draft outline of activities adequately considered the financial and human resources available. However,

¹ Documentation for the meeting and other information is available on the web page for the meeting on the ECE website: <https://www.unece.org/index.php?id=47577>.

concerns were raised regarding the separation of the meetings of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators, which used to be held back-to-back.

18. A representative of the European Environment Agency noted that the draft outline of activities leading up to 2021 was very ambitious and that the Working Group needed to define better the priorities in its outline of activities. It was furthermore suggested that the Working Group address topics that could increase the interest of European Union member States and to raise awareness of the Working Group's activities among other relevant actors.

19. Representatives of Georgia, Italy, the Russian Federation and Switzerland welcomed the draft annual timetable activities for 2019, though concerns were raised regarding the financial resources available.

20. A representative of Serbia thanked UNEP for the financial support provided for his attendance at the meeting and highlighted the relevance of continued financial support for South-Eastern European countries to participate in the meetings of the Working Group.

Decisions and recommendations by the Working Group

21. The Working Group asked the secretariat to add a column to the main tables in both the draft outline of activities leading up to 2021 and the annual timetable of activities for 2019 to indicate priorities and include a summary of activities and priorities by year in the former. In addition, the expected achievements should be toned down. The Working Group also asked the secretariat to send the revised documents to the meeting participants and the Austrian Presidency of the European Union, give two weeks for concrete changes to be suggested to the secretariat and, once further revised, send it again to participants for approval by a written silence procedure.

22. The Working Group expressed strong concerns regarding the availability of funds for the financial support of meeting participants, especially from South-Eastern Europe but also from other subregions, and suggested to raise this matter at the next session of the Committee on Environmental Policy.

23. The Working Group requested the secretariat to ensure that members of the Working Group would continue to be invited to meetings of the Joint Task Force and vice versa, while avoiding a duplication of topics.

24. The Working Group welcomed the information provided by UNEP, the ECE Statistical Division and EEA on projects that relate to its activities and encouraged early sharing of information on such activities and coordination between the international organizations.

IV. Reporting on the Shared Environmental Information System to support a regular process of environmental assessment

25. At its nineteenth session, the Working Group had agreed to pilot the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/5) as part of a process to prepare the mid-term review of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/6) for the twenty-fourth session of the Committee on Environmental Policy.

26. The secretariat presented the assessment framework. The presentation highlighted steps taken to develop the self-assessment questionnaire, including revisions made during a technical workshop (13–15 September 2017) and further amendments introduced during the

fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force (2–3 October 2017). It also covered decisions by the Joint Task Force on the modalities and data flows that were included in the assessment.

27. A representative of UNEP informed the Working Group about the status of the online reporting tool on the Shared Environmental Information System, specifying the need for continued development. He noted that certain analytical functionalities should be added to the tool leading up to the next phase in reviewing establishment of the System. The Working Group took note of the presentations of the assessment framework made by ECE and UNEP.

28. The secretariat presented the draft mid-term review report, noting the improvements that had been made since the progress report in 2016 (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/8). The draft report demonstrated considerable progress in addressing all three pillars of the Shared Environmental Information System (content, infrastructure and cooperation) and identified category-specific areas (e.g., institutional and organizational arrangements, timeliness and punctuality, accuracy and relevance) needing further improvement. The secretariat also noted that the limited number of data flows included meant that it was not possible to determine whether countries were on track to establish the System in Europe and Central Asia by 2021. The Working Group took note of the presentation on the draft mid-term review report.

29. A representative of Armenia reported on national experiences in using the self-assessment questionnaire. Armenia highlighted that its national performance score was 96 per cent and that steps had been taken to facilitate data harmonization as part of the review process. However, she recognized that the national performance score was overestimating the real situation and that the set of mandatory questions would need to be broadened. Armenia further noted that limiting the assessment to seven data flows did not show the real status of the establishment of the System and more data flows would need to be considered in the future.

30. A representative of the Republic of Moldova also reported on national experiences in using the self-assessment questionnaire. She highlighted that her country's performance score was 78 per cent. She reported that the spreadsheet version of the self-assessment questionnaire was too large, and that information was lost as a consequence. The speaker therefore suggested that the online tool would be more useful and that it should be translated into Russian. She also noted that certain questions were not relevant for the Republic of Moldova (e.g., those labelled D.5 and D.6) and should be examined in the planned revision of the assessment framework.

31. Representatives of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Finland, Switzerland, Ukraine and the European Environment Agency recognized the relevance of the self-assessment questionnaire but noted that:

(a) The method of calculating the performance score would need to reflect better the actual situation on the ground (e.g., national performance scores are presently too high);

(b) The list of data flows would need to be significantly increased for the assessment in 2021, for example, to include all core ECE environmental indicators;

(c) The mid-term review report would need to be revised according to comments received during the meeting, including by organizing the conclusions by pillar of the Shared Environmental Information System.

32. A representative of the European Environment Agency further stressed the importance of reviewing the key messages in the mid-term review to avoid language that might discourage countries from participating in the continued review of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System. The member States of the European Environment Agency often do not use the ECE set of environmental indicators and that the

focus should rather be on comparable data flows underlying international reporting obligations.

Decisions and recommendations by the Working Group

33. The Working Group agreed to adjust the assessment framework, as elaborated prior to and during the session, notably on the clarity of the questions, the terminology used and the scoring. The Working Group also allowed a two-week period until 20 September 2018 for meeting participants to send further concrete suggested changes to the secretariat.

34. The Working Group proposed that the planned training session during the upcoming Joint Task Force session could review questions used and consider related experiences of the European Environment Agency. The Working Group asked the secretariat to adjust the assessment framework in the light of comments provided prior to, during and after the meeting, and integrate input provided later by the Committee of Environmental Policy, while continuing to consult the European Environment Agency and UNEP. It also asked the secretariat to present a revised assessment framework to the next meeting of the Working Group.

35. The Working Group decided that the revised framework, once approved, would be used for a final report of progress in the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System at the pan-European level for the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference, to be initiated at a time determined by the Committee on Environmental Policy in preparation for the Conference.

36. The Working Group also agreed that a larger number of indicators would have to be reported upon and the actual indicators to be assessed would be determined at the time when it is decided to initiate the report. It requested UNEP to finalize the online reporting tool once the revised framework has been agreed.

37. The Working Group asked the secretariat to revise the draft mid-term review report to address comments made prior to and in session, notably by:

- (a) Structuring the analysis according to the three pillars of the Shared Environmental Information System instead of by subregion;
- (b) Highlighting key policy recommendations and the way forward to show progress;
- (c) Making some comparisons with the progress report from 2016;
- (d) Adding self-assessments provided by member States after 14 June 2018.

38. The Working Group asked the secretariat to send the revised draft mid-term review report to the meeting participants, copied to the Austrian Presidency of the European Union and the European Commission, and allow a two-week period for further suggested concrete changes to be sent to the secretariat. It also asked the secretariat to send the further revised, as appropriate, draft report to the meeting participants, copied to the Austrian Presidency of EU and the European Commission, for approval by the meeting participants by a written silence procedure.

39. The Working Group asked the secretariat to start preparation of a publication on the Shared Environmental Information System, in English and Russian, to include the assessment framework, progress in the establishment of the System, case studies and country profiles, as appropriate.

V. Streamlining reporting obligations in environmental policy

40. The secretariat recalled that the Working Group, as part of its mandate, aims to contribute to the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting by 2020 (ECE/CEP/2017/2, annex II). The work on the Shared Environmental Information System is considered integral to the environmental data reporting underlying regular state-of-the-environment reporting.

41. A representative of the ECE secretariat for the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution presented the reporting and modelling processes under the Convention, particularly as related to the provision of relevant data. The presentation covered guidelines for reporting on emissions and projections data as well as the use of emissions data within and outside the Convention, including interlinkages with the ECE set of environmental indicators and the Shared Environmental Information System.

42. A representative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature presented the reporting processes handled by the Union, particularly those that align with the ECE set of environmental indicators and the Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The secretariat recalled that one of the challenges in the mid-term review report was that different countries used different definitions of protected areas, not all using the Union's categories.

43. Representatives of Azerbaijan and Italy shared national experiences regarding the provision of data for international reporting processes. They presented both improvements and challenges inherent in national monitoring and reporting systems.

Decisions and recommendations by the Working Group

44. The Working Group welcomed the presentations made and invited its members to continue their efforts in streamlining reporting obligations through the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System.

VI. Regular pan-European environmental assessment and streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting supported by the Shared Environmental Information System

45. The Working Group has been tasked with leading a process of consultation on the regular pan-European environmental assessment (ECE/CEP/2017/2, annex II) for consideration by the Committee on Environmental Policy and leading up to the next Environment for Europe ministerial conference.

46. A representative of UNEP presented a possible concept for the next pan-European environmental assessment as set out in a paper developed by the secretariat and UNEP, in consultation with the European Environment Agency.² The presentation also covered related processes for the UNEP Global Environment Outlook and described the possible role the Working Group could take with regards to the pan-European assessment.

47. A representative of Kazakhstan presented the country's national online and interactive state-of-the-environment report. She indicated that regular state-of-the-environment reports had been produced annually in Kazakhstan since 2016. The online version of the interactive national report was produced with support from UNEP, Zoi and ECE. The Working Group welcomed the presentation by Kazakhstan.

² See <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=47577>.

48. A representative of Belarus noted that concept for the pan-European assessment was ambitious and interesting but stated that it would important to include also other United Nations agencies in the discussion. For instance, when it comes to air quality related issues, the World Health Organization should be invited to contribute.

49. Representatives of the Russian Federation and Georgia stressed that the Working Group should participate actively in the work leading up to the next pan-European assessment. It was further noted that the second option presented in the concept paper could be considered as a possible basis for the next assessment.

50. A representative of the European Environment Agency noted that it would be important to identify objectives and actors that could be involved in the development of the next Global Environment Outlook, to help ensure that it would be successful. It was also stressed that the Working Group should ensure that the pan-European assessment is streamlined with other reporting activities that are underway.

Decisions and recommendations by the Working Group

51. The Working Group noted the draft concept for the next pan-European environmental assessment, as presented by UNEP, and invited its members to send to the secretariat by 20 September 2018 concrete suggestions for the modalities, scope and form of such an assessment. It requested the secretariat and UNEP, in consultation with the European Environment Agency, to develop a revised concept and share it with the Working Group members.

52. The Working Group also requested the secretariat to inform the Committee on Environmental Policy on the outcomes of this agenda item and the suggestions made for the pan-European assessment.

VII. Sharing and integration of economic, social and environmental data with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

53. Given the objective to discuss interlinkages between environmental, economic and social considerations regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the green economy and other related areas of work, the Working Group was invited to consider data interoperability and sector-specific data concerns within the context of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System.

54. A representative of the ECE Sustainable Transport Division provided an overview of the provision of transport-related data by ECE member States, including for the development of policy. The speaker explained why transport statistics that relate to the environment are important and presented activities being carried out to improve data sharing to support the achievement of transport-related Sustainable Development Goals.

55. A representative of the United Nations Statistics Division joined the meeting by video conference to provide an update on environment-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators for which the Division is co-custodian (6.3.1, 6.4.1, 6.4.2, 11.6.1, 12.4.2 and 12.5.1). The presentation covered the questionnaire issued by the Division and UNEP to provide internationally-comparable statistics on environmental issues based on standard questionnaires and methodology.

56. The Working Group welcomed the presentations.

VIII. Regional environmental information and assessment network of networks

57. The secretariat informed the Working Group that it had been encouraged by the Committee on Environmental Policy to facilitate broadened participation by ECE member States, relevant organizations and other regional networks. The secretariat engaged the Working Group in a discussion on, amongst other things, what motivated countries to join the meetings of the Working Group.

58. A representative of the European Environment Agency highlighted the importance of cooperation with the European Commission and in the value of contact with the Presidency of the European Union to raise awareness and attract the attention of other countries.

59. A representative of UNEP suggested further exploring how to motivate other countries, organizations and related agencies to attend the meetings of Working Group. For example, he pointed out that all countries in the region had an interest in both the preparation of the next pan-European environmental assessment and the final assessment framework for the Shared Environmental Information System. He also suggested sharing some outcomes from the Working Group with the European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet) and asking the Committee on Environmental Policy to encourage participation.

IX. Guidance and information on environmental statistics and indicators

60. The secretariat informed the Working Group that the Joint Task Force had requested the secretariat to consider establishing a web-based portal through which users could seek guidance and information on environmental statistics and indicators (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/6).

61. Representatives of Belarus, Georgia, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia supported the idea of creating a web-based portal. However, delegations expressed concerns regarding the financial resources available and how to maintain the portal over time.

Decisions and recommendations by the Working Group

62. The Working Group noted the information provided by the secretariat on a possible web-based portal. It was concerned about the resource implications of establishing a web-based portal and the difficulty of maintaining it, while recognizing the value of such a system. The Working Group invited the secretariat to explore further possibilities in this regard and to report back during the next session of the Working Group.

X. Progress in environmental monitoring and assessment, including institutional and regulatory mechanisms and infrastructure at the national level

63. A consultant for ECE presented a series of country factsheets that had been prepared under the project "Support to the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment", funded by the Russian Federation. The factsheets provide information about the status of implementation of the Shared Environmental Information System in countries

in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The countries were invited to provide comments on the drafts by 20 September 2018. The Working Group welcomed the presentation by the consultant.

64. A representative of Tajikistan presented recent work to expand the range of indicators being produced and published on the website of the Statistics Agency of Tajikistan. The Working Group was also informed about new national legislation regarding environmental monitoring and that Tajikistan was preparing an annex to its state-of-the-environment report through a joint project with Zoi. The Working Group welcomed the presentations made by Tajikistan.

65. Representatives of the Republic of Moldova and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia furthermore presented recently published state-of-the-environment reports. The Working Group welcomed the presentations.

66. A representative of the Russian Federation noted that the country factsheets were highly appreciated and requested the secretariat to produce a similar factsheet for the Russian Federation.

67. A representative of Switzerland suggested that the country factsheets could be included in the mid-term review report on the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System as supplementary material.

68. The secretariat presented the project “Support production and regular update of the regional set of indicators and strengthening environmental statistics and accounting in the six Eastern Partnership countries under ENI SEIS II East project”, funded by the European Union through the European Environment Agency. The presentation showcased the project aims to strengthen capacities of national environmental authorities and statistical agencies and to support regular updating and production of environmental indicators. The Working Group noted the information provided by the secretariat and the European Environment Agency.

69. Representatives of Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Ukraine reported on national actions taken in 2018 to strengthen environmental monitoring and assessment. The Working Group welcomed the information provided by the 13 countries.

70. The secretariat recalled that the countries with economies in transition had also been sent a questionnaire for sharing information on major actions taken this year to strengthen environmental monitoring and assessment. To support their preparation, the secretariat also shared a list of recent recommendations to the countries provided in environmental performance reviews. The Working Group appreciated the submission of 10 completed questionnaires on this topic, by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The Chair invited countries, especially those in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, to share this information.

Decisions and recommendations by the Working Group

71. The Working Group decided that the country factsheets would be made available on the ECE website once comments had been collected and integrated.

XI. Other business and closure of the meeting

72. The Working Group welcomed a summary of conclusions and recommendations made during the twentieth session and expressed thanks to the secretariat for its effective work.

73. The Working Group noted that its next session was scheduled to be held in Geneva on 7 and 8 May 2019, following a one-day regional conference under the United Nations Development Account project. Representatives of the Russian Federation and Tajikistan asked the secretariat to investigate the possibility of a change in dates due to state holidays on 9 May 2019.³

74. A representative of Ukraine expressed the wish for the rotation of representatives of different countries in the Bureau of the Working Group, specifically in the roles of the Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Working Group.

75. The Working Group and the secretariat thanked Austria, the Russian Federation, the European Union through European Environment Agency and UNEP for their financial support of participants in this meeting. The Chair then closed the meeting.

³ Consequently, the order of the two events was reversed with the twenty-first session of the Working Group to be held from 6–7 May 2019, followed by the one-day conference.