European Environment Agency

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DAS/AGE

NOTES FROM THE HIGH LEVEL CONSULTATION MEETING REFORMING THE PAN-EUROPEAN ASSESSMENT REPORTING PROCESS EEA, COPENHAGEN

Friday 3 July 2009

Summary and conclusions

The meeting agreed on a way forward for the next pan-European environmental assessment. The proposed pan-European "Assessment of Assessments" (AoA) report, was recognized as an important step forward. It would assess the environmental assessment capacities in the pan-European region providing the basis for developing a sustainable assessment process including inter alia the regular updating and sharing of relevant information. The Astana AoA report would be built on what already exists creating a stock-taking document that plays a role in providing a better analysis of information gaps, capacities and resource requirements for an on-going process and to support decisions required to realise this aim.

Taking on board inputs from the meeting participants, the EEA would develop this proposal further and, in consultation with partners, support upcoming discussions in the UNECE/CEP meeting in October.

Setting the scene

On the 3rd July 2009 the EEA organised a high-level consultation meeting to discuss the input to the Astana Conference in light of the reform of the pan-European assessment process. The meeting was chaired by the Executive Director of the European Environment Agency, Professor Jacqueline McGlade, and attended by over 30 people from UNECE/CEP Bureau members, UNEP, OECD, OSCE, European Commission's DG Environment, WHO, NGOs, RECs, members of the EEA Board, some other interested UNECE countries, observers and the Swedish Presidency of the EU.

This meeting was called following extensive discussions over the past few months on the preparation of a next pan-European assessment and after a specific request to the EEA to convene a special meeting dedicated to this subject. Throughout the past year, the Environment for Europe (EfE) process has been through a comprehensive review process in order to make it more targeted and policy relevant. A reform plan was approved by the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy on 29 January 2009 and adopted at the 63rd session of UNECE at the end of March. In this reform plan, a pan-European assessment report was identified as one of the key inputs and outputs of the ministerial conferences.

The aims of the high-level consultation meeting were to:

- Clarify the need, production and use of future pan-European environment assessment reports and especially of the fifth assessment for the 2011 Astana Ministerial conference.
- Advance discussions on ways to improve the effectiveness of different environmental assessment activities in Europe through better streamlining, sharing and cooperation.
- Provide good support for the discussion at the UNECE/CEP meeting in October.

The context

A presentation was made by Jacqueline McGlade on the overall picture and challenges we face in the next few years. This included the EEA history of European-level environmental assessments and the broader landscape of relevant assessments in the past and expected in the future. She emphasised that the Agency's daily work is to conduct assessments and to build and manage the needed information and data flows for this. The importance was also underlined of maintaining the investment and experience of the past where the Agency's SOERs and pan-European assessments are recognised and built upon (at the moment the Agency is working to deliver the 2010 State and Outlook Report that is produced every five years as a core activity of the Agency).

Over the past 15 years or more there has been a silent revolution in the development of integrated assessments and state of environment reports. There is a growing awareness that we must move from "Big Bang" once-off approaches to continuous review, including inter-country comparisons, the use of own languages and reflecting different contexts. Also, there is a major quality assurance issue affecting consistency between major assessments. These issues can only be tackled successfully by maximising digital practices in our work and developing long-term partnerships and processes between the different stakeholders, countries and organisations. The EU initiative to develop SEIS (the Shared Environment Information System) is a fundamental contribution to this.

The significance was also outlined of the EEA Management Board decision in June this year. This supported the EEA's involvement in the pan-European assessment process and the Board recommended "producing a concise report for the Astana conference, with a focus on a sustainable approach for the future".

It was explained that the EEA has been contributing to the UNECE/EfE process from its beginning in the early 1990s. Since that time the assessment landscape has become considerably more crowded, putting heavy demands on all parties to contribute, often creating competing demands. This makes it all the more important to be clear about goals of assessment activities and to take stock of past experiences when planning and launching new initiatives.

Following the Belgrade assessment the EEA produced a report on lessons learnt to be used for future environmental assessment and reporting work in the

region[1]. The report concluded that to improve the pan-European assessment it was necessary to:

- Allow systematic data exchange (every year as a minimum) with EECCA countries (non-ENP, Russia and Central Asian countries);
- Strengthen the cooperation and partnerships between international organisations in terms of working together to obtain good environmental information, sharing the information available, and better coordinating their information demands towards countries;
- Continue UNECE/WGEMA activities on a more regular basis;
- Run open consultations with the countries during the different stages of the report preparation.

After this introductory presentation a number of comments were made by participants including:

- Policy relevance is key (e.g. address progress in environmental integration);
- Report length should be reduced to 60-80 pages;
- We should focus our assessments on the actual problems being faced now and expected in the future;
- The assessment has to make clear the reasons why the problems are important;
- The basic structural and systemic issues need to be addressed which underlie these problems in a more complex analysis to help lead to more effective recommendations and actions;
- We should be aware of the effects of politicization on the identification and analysis of the issues;
- Thus, a strategic "independent" report is needed, relevant to the political discussions with recommendation to the governments to ameliorate the environment in the region;
- Greater involvement of countries in the assessment should be promoted, as recommended in the Belgrade lessons learnt report;
- There is no alternative but to develop a sustainable review process of Europe's environment, which is useful not just for the Astana 2011 conference but for other processes going on in the region and in the mid-term between Ministerial Conferences;
- This requires a good coordination process to allow the whole region to participate effectively;
- The EEA is the best suited organisation to coordinate this, supported by other bodies and countries in the region;
- Financial issues need important consideration together with the role of WGEMA;
- National state of environment reports help provide the information on which to base the European assessment;

[1] Belgrade lessons learned – EEA note "Pan European Assessment Reports on the State of the Environment and associate activities lessons learned in working with countries in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia on the preparation of the Belgrade Report. ECE/CEP/AC.10/2008/3, 10 June 2008.

- The European assessment should not to be seen as an auditing of other assessments;
- Global issues should be addressed in a way which will help the issues to be tackled not just described;
- Highlight regional problems which can be solved by own efforts.

The assessment framework

From these considerations the discussion moved on from introducing the topic to highlighting three main aspects: How to better identify the needs? How to ensure strong stakeholder participation? And how to improve the information base? EEA emphasised the importance of clarifying the specific needs of an assessment at the start of the process, especially taking into account the multiple purposes such assessments can play and the necessary interrelationships between all the different people, organisations and other components involved.

Given the major challenges we face at pan-European level, EEA's Executive Director underlined two recent developments to be taken into consideration for reforming the pan-European environment assessment process: the UN experience in the preparation of the Marine Assessment of Assessments, (see http://www.unga-regular-process.org/); and the EU initiative on the Shared Environment Information System (SEIS) (http://www.eea.europa.eu/about-us/what/shared-environmental-information-system).

The scope of the SEIS concept is to establish an integrated and sustained environmental information system to improve the sharing of data and information within the EU and beyond. Such an information system should lead to an improvement in both the quality of environmental data and information, and in its management access, use and dissemination. SEIS is a concept, based on a number of important principles: information should be provided once and used for many purposes; managed as close as possible to its source; readily available to the public authorities to enable them to easily fulfil various reporting obligations; accessible to enable end-user to make comparisons at the appropriate geographic scale and to participate meaningfully in the development and implementation of environmental policy; available to the general public.

The UN Marine Assessment of Assessment was a major achievement involving a mix of country contributions, international organisations, experts and NGO participation. The idea was to appraise what had been achieved to date with the many marine assessments regionally and globally and to make recommendations to streamline and improve such activities in the future to improve quality and effectiveness.

Building the knowledge network was the most valuable part of the Marine AoA. The assessment demonstrated the importance of scientific credibility, political relevance and legitimacy for effective assessments. This was underpinned by good data flows and indicators. The success of these factors relies on the set-up and management of the process.

Given the similarities of the challenges faced by the pan-European and marine assessments (many players, many related assessments, many thematic areas to

be addressed, etc), it was proposed that a similar AoA approach could be adopted for the Astana report. To conduct such an AoA would require a secretariat, a pool of expertise and a management and review body with an explicit membership constituted by countries, international organisations, representation of scientific expertise and civil society. Given the complex interaction of tasks, roles and responsibilities from the monitoring and data gathering to the analysis, assessment, report writing and communication, the challenge is to connect all these part effectively in a sustainable and lasting process.

Overall, participants reacted positively to the proposal. A large number of comments were made including:

- The importance of clearly defining the objectives and products of the process up-front in a pragmatic way, with clear roles and responsibilities and of separating the management and review bodies;
- How an Astana AoA would be a first step in a multi-stage process, and how it would have a dual role of: helping to improving the environment; and improving the management of the monitoring and assessment work itself;
- The importance of avoiding too much focus on the ministerial process itself with more being given to the broader range of needs and actors including different sectors in a sustainable long-term process;
- How the EEA should have a central role and be the driver of the process;
- The significance of making links with the Millennium Development goals;
- How an assessment of actions taken should be included with an appraisal of what still has to be done;
- How the information base should be independent.

After this discussion Jacqueline McGlade made a more specific proposal for an Astana AoA. This included at Part A containing the overarching assessment itself; a Part B including comparisons and distance to target analysis; and a Part C analysing the situation in countries and what would have to be done, with options, to improve matters to develop an on-going sustainable assessment and review process for the environment based on SEIS principles. A very different approach would need to be made assessing the past with appraising the future, involving in particular scenario analysis. Such an analysis would have to be developed through discussions in various workshops with all stakeholders. Also, links would need to be made to harness the necessary data flows. Costs considerations would need to be clearly evaluated.

The resulting assessment would not be a full “Integrated Assessment” of Europe’s environment as such. While it would provide an overview of the issues being faced now and emerging in the future, it would use this as a starting point to assess the capacities and requirements for conducting on-going and continuous assessments of these issues. In this way the Astana AoA would aim to provide a discipline for the future. The potential costs and secure funding needed for this exercise should be evaluated with a continuous process in mind, where a long-term perspective can provide a more secure basis for ensuring the necessary resources than only focusing on a succession of once-off exercise, as has been the experience hitherto.

After these more in-depth explanations, a discussion ensued. The main points raised are summarized and synthesised below:

- We need to understand better how the Astana report can help the next conference;
- We need to distinguish between the continuous process of assessment needed to be developed for the pan-European area (for which the Astana AoA will be an essential step) and the requirement to identify two discussion themes specifically for the Astana ministerial conference;
- We should nevertheless, try and link the AoA to the two themes for the Astana conference by for example using two themes to focus the AoA. The chosen themes should also be linked to the main themes arising out of UNFCC COP15;
- We need a new cross-cutting way, as proposed, to view the issues to detect information and policy gaps and new environmental challenges – indeed, we should focus on a gap analysis to put priorities on future work (which could provide a link to Astana conference priorities);
- While the AoA proposal would answer the question about information and assessment gaps, we should identify the big gaps now and not wait;
- We should assess the four pan-European assessments done since 1995, and appraise what has been done since the Dobris conference in 1991, including the changes in the importance of the issues and actions;
- The original objectives of the Dobris conference are still valid: promote convergence and identify hot spots.

- The pan-European reports need to be based on the information from national and regional SOERs and use should be made of other activities such as environment and security assessments;
- It is difficult sometimes to find the policy relevance of the pan-European reports to small countries. We need to incorporate in the pan-European assessment a regional approach;
- Many problems are already known (e.g. Aral Sea), so we should not only focus on filling data gaps. We need decisions to be taken at the Astana ministerial conference to allow improved cooperation between C. Asia states, EU and others, both for developing a sustainable on-going monitoring and assessment process as well as to respond better to the problems;
- Concentrate on the comprehensive picture and link with others to do focused thematic and regional assessments;
- Try also to make links with border regions and organisations, especially with China and ESCAP (UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), in order to benefit from their activities, data and assessments.

- Clarify who should be members of the team developing the Astana assessment?
- EEA should be in the lead but there should be cooperation with other international organisations bodies and structures (e.g. UNEP,

UNECE/WGEMA, Conventions, RECs and OECD) who can participate in the work and offer own institutional networks, data and experiences from their partners.

The EEA proposal for the Astana Report

After the lunch break a more revised and concise proposal was made concerning an Astana Assessment of Assessments, covering both content and governance, taking into account the contribution made by the participants during the first round of discussions in the morning.[2]

The EEA proposed a general approach for future pan-European assessment that is based on a regular, sustainable, long-term process and a shared information base. This process would allow the pan-European environment, to be kept under continuous review, including modalities to report to the EfE ministerial meetings every four years and to provide up-to-date information to the public and decision makers on demand.

EEA's proposal for the Astana Report is to prepare an Assessment of Assessments using available assessments in the region. This will be different from previous pan-European assessments serving the wider objectives of appraising the capacity to deliver assessments in addition to an update assessment of the environment itself.

Taking the experience of the UN Marine AoA, the preparation of such an assessment will imply the set up of ad hoc structures supporting the process including: a management group, an expert advisory monitoring and review body; a nominated pool of experts; and a secretariat. National contact points will also be needed in each country in order to be responsible for the country contributions to the assessment.

A report of 60 to 80 pages was proposed, representing a synthesis of data and information available which directs the public and the policy maker to the sources of existing data. To ensure the regular data flow it is proposed to gradually extend SEIS beyond the EEA countries. A short presentation on SEIS was also given to the meeting at this time.

Participants' view on the EEA proposal

The participants were to a large degree positive towards the more concise proposal outlined by the EEA and indicated willingness to cooperate with the EEA in joining the group of experts, offering their assistance, networks and expertise to this process. Below is a summary of comments made in the discussion:

- The gap analysis and needs assessment needs to be carried out in a very participatory and interactive manner;
- All the Eastern countries of the EU European Neighbourhood Policy have said they would cooperate with the EEA;

[2] See the letter from the EEA Executive Director of 8 July, 2009.

- The vision is clear. We very much need this AoA. However, we will need to very clear that the Astana report will be very different to the previous pan-European Assessments;
- While a short report is the aim, there will be no shortage of SOERs inside the AoA, with many annexes and access to Web related material;
- The long-term perspective is the most interesting aspect to this proposal;
- We will need to revisit the intervals between reports (and the lack of synchronisation between different reporting processes with 4 or 5 years between them) and understand better how a more on-going continuous process will relate to this and how SEIS will contribute to it;
- More specifically we need to foresee what will happen in 2016 and beyond.

Finally, a few requests for clarification were raised during the discussion:

- How to ensure ownerships of countries in delivering the assessment as in the past they felt not sufficiently involved in the process?
- How to fill in the gaps?
- How to avoid that the Assessment of Assessments is not seen as an external auditing type report?
- The need to better define the EEA role in the process?
- The need to establish and agree the objectives of the Astana assessment report?

Conclusions

In conclusion it was agreed to send to all participants shortly after the meeting a copy of the proposal discussed and of the presentations made. After receiving further inputs and comments, the EEA would develop the proposal further to support upcoming discussions, especially in the UNECE/CEP meeting in October, and furthermore make a concrete request to partners to join the preparatory process and nominate their experts.