



## An evaluation of the EE-AoA approach

The EE-AoA approach is evaluated with respect to the building elements of the process as outlined in Annex 1.1 of the EE-AoA report ('Comparing the main elements of the EE-AoA with the Marine AoA') and briefly summarised in the coloured boxes below, for easy of reference. For each element, strong and weak points of the approach are highlighted as well as remarks on needs and options for improvement.

Building element 1	
Policy driven	The reform of the 'Environment for Europe' process was initiated at the 2007 Belgrade environment ministers' conference. The reform plan approved by the UNECE Committee in January 2009 was followed by the agreement, in October 2009, to carry out an assessment of existing European environmental assessments. This agreement was endorsed by the UNECE Executive Committee in February 2010.

### Strengths:

Strong policy willingness and commitment at the international, European and sub-regional level allowed the process to begin and be completed in due time.

### Weaknesses:

Some countries showed low interest and commitment to the process.

### Needs/options for improvement:

The EE-AoA approach should not be a one-off effort in the policy process expected to lead to the establishment of SEIS. It should imply a medium-to-long term policy commitment at all levels if the conditions for follow-up to the findings of the assessment are to be created. The EE-AoA itself only generates vision and knowledge. Both vision and knowledge need being shaped into actions that are still dependent on policy support, such as, for example: the adjustment of organisational or institutional competences, the establishment of regular data flows or coordination mechanisms for data collection and sharing, the avoidance of duplication of efforts in assessing, the tackling of complementing assessment processes, etc.

The EE-AoA approach needs to become the starting point of a more focussed process able to increase the efficiency of reporting. By making this process a practical instrument for policy-making, i.e. by developing a more 'practical' application of the AoA, the level of commitment by relevant authorities is expected to increase.

Building element 2	
Reference framework	Since its launch, the EE-AoA process was conceived as an integral part of the development of a sustainable Regular Assessment Process (RAP) of Europe's environment, in line with the reform of the UNECE Environment for Europe (EfE) process and coherently with the establishment of the EU/EEA Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) and ENPI-SEIS project.

### Strengths:

The clear linkages established between the EE-AoA and the SEIS principles laid down coherent and solid foundations for further developments.



**Weaknesses:**

The process was insufficiently focussed on content-related components.

**Needs/options for improvement:**

In order to significantly contribute to the two overarching processes, i.e. the development of a sustainable RAP and the establishment of the SEIS, it is deemed necessary for the AoA to become more focussed on 'content' than it actually was. The conceptualisation of the EE-AoA, in fact, put the spotlight on governance, implementation modalities and structural components (indicators, models, organisational frameworks, etc.) of the reviewed assessments, rather than on theme-related matters. This led, in turn, to very general theme-related conclusions.

<b>Building element 3</b>	
Ownership	The EE-AoA implied a participatory process overseen, overall, by the UNECE Steering Group on Environmental Assessments specifically set up for the EE-AoA and co-chaired by the EEA and the Kazakh government. Within the guidelines and criteria laid down to frame the process, the countries had the freedom to decide on the information to be input to the process and on the critical appraisal of such information. The carry out of the sub-regional modules contributing to the EE-AoA was placed with the relevant RECs.

**Strengths:**

The highly participatory approach envisaged by the EE-AoA is one of the most remarkable achievements of the process.

**Weaknesses:**

'Official' mechanisms overseeing the participatory approach did not turn out to be sufficient to ensure the contribution of all countries to the process.

**Needs/options for improvement:**

The EEA took over the responsibility to fill the gaps for those countries that did not show interest in participating to the process. By creating the relevant knowledge base (in particular, through the country fiches) the work load of the EEA should be reduced in the future, shall similar processes be carried out; however, in that case, it would be advisable to establish a formal mechanism to keep the country fiches regularly updated through the Eionet National Focal Points.

<b>Building element 4</b>	
Scale	The process run at pan-European level, with sub-regional modules implemented in Central Asia, Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and the Russian Federation. A trial at the national level was implemented in Finland.

**Strengths:**

The process is highly flexible to adapt to any scale.

**Weaknesses:**

-



#### Needs/options for improvement:

There is scope for implementing the AoA process at the national and sub-national level and, at these levels, for using the findings of the process to initiate the practical implementation of the SEIS principles. Within a country, the AoA is potentially able to highlight where to intervene, in order to, for example: (i) adjust responsibilities and capacities within relevant ministries or departments; (ii) overcome weaknesses related to data collection/processing arrangements; (iii) foster cooperation among relevant stakeholders; (iv) improve the efficiency of human and financial resources needed for reporting; (v) address gaps in knowledge; (vi) harmonise reporting timetables, in particular with respect to reporting obligations; etc.

Expectations from the AoA need to be proportional to the scale. A pan-European assessment will produce general conclusions or, rather, policy guidance on *'the regional needs, priorities and sustainable long-term mechanisms to keep the pan-European environment under continuous review'*<sup>1</sup>. Conclusions may be expected to be more focussed at the sub-regional level, and even 'precise' at the national level.

#### Building element 5

Content	The process focused on two major 'themes' (water resources and water resource management for 'water and related ecosystems'; green economy and resource efficiency for 'green economy') and on multiple topics within each theme.
---------	---

#### Strengths:

The process is highly flexible to adapt to any theme.

#### Weaknesses:

The choice to focus the process on a theme not yet clearly defined (i.e. green economy) or, rather, on a 'concept' did not help in focussing the scope of the exercise.

#### Needs/options for improvement:

There is wide scope for improving the way the AoA deals with content-related matters. The choice of the priority areas to be investigated needs to be policy-driven but technically defined. That would avoid, for example, the request to investigate on concepts (i.e. 'green economy' or 'sustainable development') instead of thematic sectors.

#### Building element 6

Structure	The process is based on a modular structure. In particular, the EE-AoA encompassed one pan-European module and four sub-regional modules (Central Asia, Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Russian Federation) for each of the themes, for a total of ten modules, two at pan-European level (one for water and one for green economy) and eight at sub-regional level (four for water and four for green economy).
-----------	--

#### Strengths:

The process has a high potentiality to be replicated and thus to be compared across countries, sub-regions or regions.

<sup>1</sup> Establishment of the Steering Group on Environmental Assessments and its Terms of Reference, ECE/EX/2010/L.6., 18 December 2010, UNECE Executive Committee: Thirty-fourth meeting, Geneva, 26 February 2010.



**Weaknesses:**

The AoA process still misses the definition of a standard module for reporting. The lessons learnt during the SOER 2010 AoA pilot were not built upon.

**Needs/options for improvement:**

The AoA lacks of a standard tool to draw conclusions and logically organise the findings of the whole process. The EEA filled this gap by producing ‘annotated outlines’ for the production of both the water and the green economy components of the AoA. The outlines partially succeeded in producing comparable outputs.

In the view of a more pragmatic use of the AoA, the development of a format for reporting is recommended. Further, in the light of a more pragmatic approach of the AoA at the national level, such format should clearly link the findings of the RT to the principles of SEIS and allow the drawing of recommendations on actions to be implemented for concretely tackling these principles.

**Building element 7**

Guidance	The process was developed along the guidelines elaborated by the EEA and under the supervision of the Steering Group, defining, overall: (i) the conceptual framework of the EE-AoA, including guiding principles; (ii) the main tools for implementation (glossary, guidelines for assessments' selection and prioritisation, templates for assessments' screening, and reporting formats). Tools were adjusted and enriched during implementation, including hints for their correct use.
----------	---

**Strengths:**

Comprehensive guidance was made available throughout the AoA process in English and Russian to facilitate the use of the tools.

**Weaknesses:**

-

**Needs/options for improvement:**

Guidance was satisfactorily implemented and no major needs for improvement are identified in this sense. Instead, weaknesses were noted in the type of tools but this is dealt with under ‘building element 11’.

**Building element 8**

Monitoring and coordination	According to the decisions of the UNECE Executive Committee, the UNECE Steering Group on Environmental Assessment was charged, in general, to oversee the preparation of the EE-AoA and, in particular, to: (i) set the scope, focus and outline for the AoA; (ii) guide and assess the work in progress on the AoA; (iii) review the draft report on the AoA; and (iv) facilitate contacts with participating countries and organisations (source: see footnote 5 of this Appendix).
-----------------------------	---

**Strengths:**

The UNECE Steering Group on Environmental Assessment effectively guided, monitored and facilitated the process.

**Weaknesses:**

Responsibilities for the daily coordination of the process were not formally allocated by the decisions of the UNECE Executive Committee, even though the highly participated process



required a relevant and daily effort in that sense. The EEA took over the day-to-day responsibilities for coordination.

**Needs/options for improvement:**

It is advisable for any AoA process in the future to have clearly allocated monitoring and coordination responsibilities, and, if possible, to keep such responsibilities distinguished. Coordination implies daily liaison with all involved stakeholders and needs to be implemented by an operative unit rather than by a political body.

Building element 9	
IT infrastructure	The process relied on the establishment of an EE-AoA knowledge base portal. The portal collates information from existing assessments across the pan-European region, allowed online direct contribution from individual countries, and provides all necessary tools for implementation, including analytical instruments.

**Strengths:**

All the necessary tools for implementation were made available online, facilitating the participation to the process and the sharing of information.

**Weaknesses:**

Some of the tools and outputs were not conceptualised in a user-friendly manner.

**Needs/options for improvement:**

From the point of view of the user, the IT interface was not always developed in a smooth manner. As a general rule, the comprehensive testing of applications should be made by developers and not by users. Similarly, testing should happen prior to the beginning of implementation to avoid the disruption of the service to the users and the losing of information/time.

Other options for improvement include:

- (i) Applying simple rules for the filling of the RT would avoid common mistakes by those uploading the information and would speed up the process of quality control (for example, automatically excluding the options 'If Yes, ....' when the reply was 'No').
- (ii) Automatically elaborating statistics where absolute values are separated by percentage values (i.e. absolute and percentage values are given in separate cells rather than in the same cell). Data handling was delayed by the manual split of the values and chances to make data handling mistakes increased.
- (iii) Improving the graphic interface for the presentation of results (see, for example, the modest representation of charts in the 'Comparative statistics').

Building element 10	
Networking	The process was implemented through existing networks (National Focal Points from EEA member and cooperating countries and UNECE/WGEMA Contact Points from Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Russian Federation and Central Asia) and regional bodies (the RECs).

**Strengths:**



The process has been using existing and well established networks and/or bodies.

**Weaknesses:**

-

**Needs/options for improvement:**

Not creating new bodies, institutions or networks but strengthening existing ones is the way forward in any possible follow up to the AoA process.

**Building element 11**

Tools for implementation	The process relied on a series of tools, some of which were developed further from the Marine AoA while others were created <i>ad hoc</i> for the EE-AoA. Tools included: glossary, virtual library and assessment atlas, country fiches, prioritisation criteria, and the Review Template.
--------------------------	---

**Strengths:**

Created tools are subject to be improved but they represent a solid basis for further developments. They are the means to translate concepts into concrete actions.

**Weaknesses:**

The information provided within some of the tools was not precise enough or mandatory, leading to important misunderstandings or to very diverse approaches by participating stakeholders.

**Needs/options for improvement:**

Major needs for improvement include:

- Glossary: a more pragmatic approach is needed in the definition of 'assessment'. The AoA suffered from the lack of a common understanding of what an assessment is, ending up in encompassing a wide range of products.
- Prioritisation criteria: there is evidence that prioritisation criteria were hardly applied by countries in their selection of assessments. Application of such criteria should be made compulsory, even for the assessments to be highlighted in the country fiches.
- Review Template: it needs adjustments in several of its parts, especially within the section related to content. However, in general, it is to be considered a good starting point for being turned into a more pragmatic instrument. An improved RT should, ideally, be able to gather and organise all the necessary information to shape actions towards the SEIS.



## The way forward

The EE-AoA represents a substantial progress on the way towards the gradual establishment of SEIS and the development of a sustainable RAP for Europe's environment. Among its main achievements are:

- Significant *conceptual development* of the 'assessment of assessments' approach.
- Increased *awareness and understanding* of the approach and related processes (i.e. SEIS and RAP) by regional, sub-regional and national stakeholders, as well as by the international community.
- Development of *common tools* for implementation, of an *IT platform* for information sharing, and of a *wide knowledge base*.
- *Capacity building* within existing networks and institutions through a highly inclusive process.

Following the Astana Conference, the future of the AoA process is not clear. The draft Ministerial Declaration<sup>2</sup> calls for the development of both a regular process of environmental assessment and of SEIS, inviting the EEA to propose suitable actions to foster these targets. Even though the EE-AoA was developed around the two themes of water and green economy, the Ministerial call refers to the 'environment' as a whole and further specifies that the EE-AoA clearly demonstrates '*the means to evaluate and address*' the '*linkages and gaps between the challenges that exist*'.

In this context, it is questionable whether the scope of the AoA process is exhausted. In fact, the AoA has the potential to become the instrument through which the understanding of what is needed at the national and sub-national level to implement the SEIS principles is gained. The basic idea is that whatever is produced (assessments) and the way products are developed mirror the country's situation in terms of capacities, resources, infrastructure, and arrangements for monitoring the environment.

Indeed, a more pragmatic interpretation of the AoA is necessary to encourage its take up and to concretely help countries to identify the necessary actions towards the establishment of an environmental information system that is comparable and thus shareable with others. While initiatives at the international and European levels are fundamental (especially in terms of tools, applications and guidelines), a bottom-up approach (i.e. from the country level upwards) is mandatory to complement such efforts.

In brief, it is believed that action at two levels is needed:

- At the international/European level, producing assessments that meet the SEIS principles so that these assessments may start feeding the SEIS and, at the same time, may provide the evidence of what SEIS is and what it is for.

---

<sup>2</sup> UNECE (2011), Draft Ministerial Declaration "Save water, grow green!". ECE/ASTANA.CONF/2011/L.1. Seventh "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference, Astana, Kazakhstan, 21–23 September 2011.



- At the national/sub-national level, implementing a simplified and result-oriented AoA allowing the identification of the policy interventions needed towards the establishment of the SEIS and, as a consequence, the production of SEIS-compatible assessments. The result-oriented AoA could, for example, be based on: (i) few and unequivocal definitions; (ii) comprehensive and updated country fiches; (iii) mandatory selection criteria for assessments and/or other products included in the country fiches; and (iv) a functional RT focused towards the collection of the information needed for meeting the SEIS principles, be this information included in the assessments under review or not.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The EE-AoA process highlighted the existence of a significant number of low quality assessments in terms of level of information provided to the readers. To overcome this problem, the concept of 'RT' needs to be upgraded from a 'gathering' tool to an 'investigation' tool guiding the collection of all relevant information, be it included in the assessment reports or not.