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## Economic Commission for Europe

Committee on Environmental Policy

### Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

Nineteenth session

Geneva, 27 and 28 June 2017

## Report of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment on its nineteenth session

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## **I. Introduction**

### **A. Background**

1. At its twenty-second session (Geneva, 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). This 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. In accordance with its new mandate, the Working Group will continue to review progress made by countries in Europe and Central Asia in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) 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 with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, green economy and other related areas of work. Finally, the Working Group is mandated to 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 to engage in capacity-building assistance with regard to specific challenges in environmental monitoring and assessment.

3. At its twenty-second session, the Committee on Environmental Policy also requested the Working Group to take into account the financial and human resources available in developing its annual timetable activities for 2018 and to develop a more detailed outline of activities leading up to 2021.

4. The nineteenth session of the Working Group was held in Geneva, Switzerland, on 27 and 28 June 2017.

### **B. Attendance**

5. The nineteenth session was attended by representatives of ministries or agencies of environment, and in some cases the statistical offices, of the following countries: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

6. Representatives of the following the United Nations system entities participated in the session: the International Telecommunication Union (ITU); the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR); and the United Nations Statistics Division.

7. In addition, representatives of the European Environment Agency, the Ecologic Institute (by video conference), the European Investment Bank, the Group on Earth Observations, the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the University of Geneva, Vienna University of Economics and Business and Zoï Environment Network participated in the meeting.

### **C. Procedural matters**

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

9. The Working Group adopted the agenda for its nineteenth session as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2017/1.<sup>1</sup>

10. The Working Group decided that a new chair and vice-chair would be elected during its next session. Members of the Working Group were invited to submit nominations for the posts of chair and vice-chair to the secretariat.

## **II. Adoption of the report of the eighteenth session of the Working Group**

11. The Working Group considered the outcomes of its eighteenth session (Geneva, 28–29 June 2016) and adopted the report of the meeting (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2016/2).

12. The secretariat informed the Working Group about the status of implementation of the Working Group's decisions and recommendations from its eighteenth session.

## **III. New mandate and terms of reference for the Working Group**

13. The secretariat reported that the new mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group had been approved by the ECE Executive Committee at its ninety-first meeting (Geneva, 24 March 2017). The secretariat presented an annual timetable of activities for 2018 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2017/3) and a draft outline of activities leading up to 2021 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2017/4).

14. Following up on the work carried out by the Working Group during its eighteenth session, the secretariat also reported on the status of the vision document "Sharing our Vision for the pan-European Region — Setting Strategic Goals and Objectives for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment for 2030" (ECE/CEP/182, forthcoming), which was being prepared in conjunction with the new mandate and terms of reference.

15. Representatives of Italy, the Russian Federation and Switzerland and the European Environment Agency noted that the programme, as described in the outline of activities leading up to 2021, was very ambitious. It was suggested that the main activities of the Working Group should be prioritized on an annual basis, taking into account available financial and human resources.

16. A representative of the European Environment Agency noted that it would be important to monitor progress towards the objectives set out in the new mandate and terms of reference. It was suggested that future annual timetables of activities should include indicators of achievement to allow for monitoring and benchmarking.

17. Following the discussion, the Working Group approved the annual timetable activities for 2018 and the outline of activities leading up to 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Documentation for the meeting and other information is available on the web page for the meeting on the ECE website: <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=44829#/>.

18. The Working Group agreed that the secretariat should take into account available financial and human resources when preparing its annual timetable activities for 2019 to ensure that the work was prioritized accordingly. It was also agreed that the secretariat would develop indicators of achievement to be included in the next annual timetable of activities, which would allow for monitoring and assessment against the objectives set out in the new mandate and terms of reference.

#### **IV. Streamlining monitoring and reporting obligations in environmental policy**

19. It was recalled that the new mandate and terms of reference for the Working Group included a call for a consultation process on the regular pan-European environmental assessment and the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting by 2020 (ECE/CEP/2017/2, annex II, para. 2 (b)).

20. A representative of the European Environment Agency gave a presentation on streamlining the environmental reporting process, based on Shared Environmental Information System principles. The Agency's data policy provided guidelines regarding data handling to ensure consistency and transparency. The presenter described planned action on e-reporting by the European Union and the European Environment Agency, and provided an overview of emerging trends and future challenges in that area of work.

21. A representative of the Ecologic Institute, participating by video conference, presented the conclusions of a report on opportunities and risks in streamlining planning and reporting within the European Union Energy Union framework.<sup>2</sup> The presenter described existing planning and reporting regimes in the Energy Union leading up to 2020.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the report had been to identify overlaps and gaps and assess opportunities and risks for four specific streamlining options. Those streamlining options had been based on criteria derived from overarching principles of good governance and addressed the challenges of the next phase in the European Union energy transition and the establishment of appropriate reporting mechanisms.

22. The representative of Austria spoke about experiences in air quality monitoring and reporting by enterprises. He highlighted good practices in and approaches to data management and dissemination in Austria. The Austrian Air Quality Database provided all national and European Union level reporting on air quality. The Austrian electronic data management system for operators acted as a "one stop shop" aimed at simplifying reporting and data management for both businesses and public authorities.

23. Representatives of UNEP and ECE, as custodians for monitoring certain Sustainable Development Goal indicators, described the processes foreseen to collect data on the indicators. They highlighted some of the challenges and opportunities facing custodian agencies and countries regarding the compilation and verification of country data and for submitting data to the United Nations Statistics Division.

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<sup>2</sup> Katharina Umpfenbach, "Streamlining planning and reporting requirements in the EU Energy Union framework: An opportunity for building consistent and transparent strategies", Report for the European Climate Foundation (Berlin, Ecologic Institute, 8 September 2015). Available from <https://europeanclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Ecologic-2015-Planning-Reporting-final.pdf> (accessed on 28 September 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See European Commission, Energy Strategy and Energy Union. Available from <https://ec.europa.eu/energy/en/topics/energy-strategy-and-energy-union> (last update 28 September 2017).

24. The Working Group noted that further actions would be needed with regard to the streamlining of environmental monitoring and reporting, in particular to facilitate improved environmental decision-making. It was decided that the Working Group would continue discussions on the streamlining of environmental monitoring and reporting in its coming sessions in order to agree on the next steps.

## **V. Establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks**

25. The secretariat recalled that the new mandate to improve communication and cooperation built on an earlier mandate from the Committee on Environmental Policy for the Working Group to serve as an environmental knowledge and assessment network of networks for the ECE region, bringing together the European Environment Agency and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet), UNEP and interested parties for a regular process of consultation on an environmental assessment to keep the pan-European environment under review (ECE/CEP/2015/2, para. 91 (b) (ii)).

26. Following the successful launch of the European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environmental Outlook at the Batumi Ministerial Conference and the support expressed in the Batumi ministerial declaration for adopting the regional assessment as the regular pan-European environmental assessment (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1, para. 10), there was a continuing demand for a strong Working Group to serve as a network of networks and facilitate continued dialogue on the regional assessment.

27. It was further highlighted that the new mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group called for a consultation process to investigate the possibility of establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks (ECE/CEP/2017/2, annex II, para. 2 (c)). The aim of a consultation process was also to involve relevant thematic networks and interested parties, including secretariats of conventions and other institutions, at both the regional and national levels, to elaborate potential working modalities of a regional network of networks.

28. As a first step in the consultation process, the secretariat had circulated a questionnaire related to the establishment of a regional network of networks in May 2017. The secretariat presented the results of the questionnaire, which explored potential drivers and topics for a regional network of networks, and attempted to determine the level of support for its establishment and to identify expectations with regard to how it should function.

29. In addition, the secretariat presented an informal background paper on possible working modalities of the regional network of networks. The secretariat described three strategies concerning possible ways in which a regional network of networks could be operationalized.

30. Furthermore, the secretariat informed the Working Group that the consultation process would later include a workshop on the working modalities of the regional network of networks. The workshop would be organized during the fourteenth session of Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators (Rome, 2-3 October 2017).<sup>4</sup>

31. The Working Group agreed that inputs received through the questionnaire and the discussion on establishing a regional network of networks would be incorporated into the background document. That information would form the basis for the recommendations to

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=43952#/>.

be submitted to the Committee of Environment Policy at its twenty-third session (Geneva, 14-17 November 2017).

32. The Working Group further agreed that while it was highly relevant to establish a regional network of networks it might not be feasible owing to human and financial constraints. It was noted that efforts at the present stage should rather be directed towards improving overall participation in the meetings of the Working Group, while ensuring that it capitalized on pre-existing structures to achieve that objective.

33. The Working Group recommended that the priority would be to improve participation at its coming meetings and activities. It was further recommended that the establishment of a regional network of networks should only be pursued if adequate human and financial resources were secured.

## **VI. Integration of economic, social and environmental data**

34. In an introduction to the discussion on the integration of economic, social and environmental data, the secretariat highlighted that several major international initiatives had moved towards integrated monitoring, analysis and policymaking, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting. However, developing appropriate indicators for the integration of economic, social and environmental information in support of a more integrated approach to decision-making was a fundamentally challenging task. Addressing that challenge, the Working Group had set out to develop a platform for countries to discuss the integration of environmental, economic and social considerations within its new mandate and terms of reference (ECE/CEP/2017/2, annex II, para. 2 (c)).

35. The Working Group discussed the integration of economic, social and environmental data, taking into account the important and complex work of measuring progress towards and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals, data interoperability and existing gaps between sectors regarding the existence of, access to and the content of economic, social and environmental data.

36. The representative of the United Nations Statistics Division presented a questionnaire on water and waste issued by the United Nations Statistics Division and UNEP.<sup>5</sup> The presenter explained the relevance of the questionnaire to the Sustainable Development Goals and addressed the integration of economic and social statistics. Representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan then showcased country experiences in providing data in response to the questionnaire (2016 round).

37. A representative of ECE presented the role of the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) in scoping environmental information and promoting integration. The Aarhus Convention provided a broad definition of environmental information that encompassed a non-exhaustive list of elements (e.g., air, water and soil). It also promoted cooperation between national focal points in different international forums dealing with access to environmental information, including the promotion of electronic information tools to facilitate information sharing and effective cooperation at the national and international levels.

38. The representative of the Group on Earth Observations presented the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) and efforts to integrate observation systems and

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ENVIRONMENT/questionnaire.htm>.

the sharing of data by connecting existing infrastructures using common standards. The presenter noted the work being carried out by the Group regarding geospatial and environmental data, in particular related to reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>6</sup>

39. The representative of the European Investment Bank presented the Bank's Public Register.<sup>7</sup> The Public Register contained policy and procedural documents that had both environmental and social content. It had been established in accordance with European Community Regulation 1367/2006 on the application of the provisions of the Aarhus Convention to Community institutions and bodies.<sup>8</sup> The speaker highlighted the benefits and challenges inherent in the use of both environmental and social content.

## **VII. Reporting on the Shared Environmental Information System: data quality, comparability and self-assessment**

40. The secretariat recalled that, at its eighteenth session, the Working Group had made several decisions and recommendations regarding reporting on progress in establishing the Shared Environmental Information System (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2016/2, paras. 31-32). It had been agreed that the secretariat would revise the review criteria and integrate a quality component as part of the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework ahead of the current session. The purpose of that continuing review of the assessment framework was to utilize the revised assessment framework in the preparation of a mid-term assessment that would be submitted to the Committee on Environmental Policy.

41. The secretariat presented the results of the review of the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework, as contained in a background document on reporting and data quality (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2017/5). The revised assessment framework was meant to replace the criteria for review that were used in the first Shared Environmental Information System progress report (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/8).

42. A representative of UNITAR opened the discussion on the revised assessment framework with a presentation on the development of national profiles based on Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration.<sup>9</sup> A country-driven self-assessment was an important stepping-stone towards systematic national action in specific areas of environmental management. Such an assessment could help to provide important information on existing national policies and programmes and serve as a tool to identify their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the presentation covered some of the inherent challenges in developing national profiles through a country-driven process, such as a lack of knowledge and skills, a lack of resources and a lack of intersectoral collaboration.

43. A representative of ECE presented the role of the Aarhus Convention in providing public access to environmental information. There was a need to exchange experiences regarding the provision of environmental information by public authorities and to reflect on data quality, comparability and interoperability when considering the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System across the pan-European region.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Earth Observations in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, version 1.1, (Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, March 2017). Available from [http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/europe/monitoring/19th\\_Meeting/201703\\_geo\\_eo\\_for\\_2030\\_agenda.pdf](http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/europe/monitoring/19th_Meeting/201703_geo_eo_for_2030_agenda.pdf) (accessed 28 September 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.eib.org/infocentre/registers/index.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> 2016 O.J. (L 264), pp. 13-19.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.unitar.org/ksi/publications-and-documents>.

44. The representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina presented experiences from piloting the Indicator Reporting Information System. The online national reporting system had been developed by UNEP to facilitate reporting at all levels and to make it easier to take stock of the environment. Some of the key values of using the Indicator Reporting Information System included automation, improved data sharing and having a shared knowledge base that was publicly accessible. The presenter also reported on possible next steps for the system in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

45. A representative of ECE presented the revised Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework. The Working Group was invited to discuss the provision of information on progress against the target and performance indicators adopted by the Committee on Environmental Policy and the establishment and implementation of the revised assessment framework. The Working Group was further invited to discuss next steps in piloting the revised assessment framework ahead of the mid-term Shared Environmental Information System assessment.

46. A representative of UNEP presented the progress made in developing the online Shared Environmental Information System reporting application. The presentation demonstrated how the reporting application could be used to implement the assessment framework and introduced how the self-assessment tool could be piloted in practice. The Working Group was invited to consider how the reporting application could complement and support regular environmental assessments and reporting.

47. Finally, the secretariat presented the objectives of the mid-term assessment of the Shared Environmental Information System and informed the Working Group about the launch of a special issue of *Environmental Science and Policy* devoted to the Shared Environmental Information System.

48. The Working Group agreed that it would be necessary to pilot the assessment framework and its associated reporting application before moving on to data collection for the mid-term assessment. It was also noted that steps would need to be taken to ensure that the assessment framework was streamlined with other initiatives, such as the data quality assessment framework being developed by the European Environment Agency.

49. Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia agreed to participate in piloting the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework. The European Environment Agency also expressed its interest in taking part in the process. It was further agreed that the secretariat would prepare a guidance document and clarify which of the ECE set of environmental indicators would be used for the piloting. It was also agreed that the full list of questions would be converted into a paper-based questionnaire that could be shared with other relevant agencies on the national level.

50. The Working Group noted that the Shared Environmental Information System mid-term assessment would be reviewed at the twentieth session of the Working Group. Members of the Working Group were also invited to contribute to the special issue of *Environmental Science and Policy*.

## **VIII. Other business and closure of the meeting**

51. The Working Group was informed that a United Nations Development Account project would be launched in 2018 by the ECE Programme on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment. The main objective of the project would be to improve environmental data collection and strengthen environmental reporting and national assessments to report on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the 2030

Agenda for Sustainable Development. In addition, the project would promote comparability of environmental data sets and indicators in line with the ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators.<sup>10</sup>

52. The Working Group agreed that its next meeting would be held back to back with the fifteenth session of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators.<sup>11</sup>

53. The Working Group thanked Switzerland and the European Environment Agency for the financial support provided to organize the nineteenth session. The Chair then closed the meeting.

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.unece.org/env/indicators.html>.

<sup>11</sup> The Working Group and Joint Task Force are expected to meet back to back in the period 26-29 March 2017.