www.unece.org/press/pr2003/03env_n01e.html

Under a major new international environmental treaty countries will assess the environmental consequences of their official draft plans, programmes, policies and legislation. Negotiators from Europe, North America and Central Asia have worked for two years to finalize the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

The Protocol provides for extensive public participation in government decision-making in numerous development sectors, from land-use planning to transport and from agriculture to industry, covering everything from oil refineries to ski-lifts. The public will not only have the right to know about plans and programmes, but also the right to comment, have their comments taken into account, and be told of the final decision and why it was taken. The participation of the public in strategic decision-making builds on the practice of the UNECE Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context and the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters.

SEA allows the identification and prevention of possible environmental impact right from the start in decision-making—developing a more sustainable transport policy rather than just minimizing the environmental impact of building a road, for example—and it enables environmental objectives to be considered on a par with socio-economic ones, bringing sustainable development closer.

Besides considering the typical environmental effects of plans and programmes, the Protocol places a special emphasis on the consideration of human health, going beyond existing legislation in the region. This reflects the involvement of the World Health Organization in the negotiations as well as the political commitments made at the 1999 London Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health.

The Protocol is expected to be formally adopted and signed at the forthcoming Ministerial 'Environment for Europe' Conference' in Kiev, Ukraine, on 21-23 May 2003. Although negotiated under UNECE, the Protocol will be open to all members of the United Nations, which means it will have a worldwide effect when it comes into force.

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