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FOR EUROPE



# At the Kiev crossroads



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## Introduction

There is much that we as individuals can do to protect our environment and make this world a better place. We can recycle old batteries, cycle to school or to the office, take the bus, refuse to buy over-packaged goods, take empty bottles to the bottle bank, and not drop litter in the street. But have you ever wondered what the so-called international community does to save the planet and improve our lives? What do our elected representatives talk about at international conferences? How are their decisions put into practice? And does it make a difference?

At the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) every voice counts. The UNECE region -- Europe, North America, Central Asia and Israel -- is very diverse and includes some of the most economically and industrially developed countries in the world. At the same time, its 55 member States are responsible for two thirds of the world's pollution, and are among the biggest consumers of natural resources and energy. So protecting the environment and improving the quality of life in cities and in the countryside figure high among UNECE's priorities.

This booklet is intended to throw light on the UNECE's environment and human settlements work. If you want to find out more, contact us at:

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## E n v i r o n m e n t

The broad aim of UNECE's environment activities is to safeguard the environment and human health, and to promote sustainable development in its member countries in line with Agenda 21. The practical aim is to reduce pollution so as to minimize environmental damage and avoid compromising environmental conditions for future generations.

To this end, UNECE has adopted a three-pronged approach:

- 1. Its Committee on Environmental Policy brings together governments to formulate environmental policy, develop international environmental law and support international initiatives. It organizes seminars, workshops and advisory missions. The Committee has negotiated five environmental treaties, all of which are now in force. Their governing bodies are serviced by the UNECE secretariat, which also helps them to monitor the implementation of the treaties.
- 2. The Committee on Environmental Policy also takes a very active role in certain regional and cross-sectoral processes, e.g. 'Environment for Europe', and environment, transport and health.
- 3. Finally, through its environmental performance reviews, the Committee assesses individual countries' efforts to bring down pollution levels and manage their natural resources, and makes recommendations to improve their environmental performance.

## Air pollution

In the 1960s scientists demonstrated the link between sulphur emissions in continental Europe and the acidification of Scandinavian lakes. Later studies confirmed that air pollutants could travel several thousand kilometres before being deposited and causing damage. Cooperation at international level was necessary to solve problems such as acidification. This is how the idea of a convention on air pollution was born.



The UNECE Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution is one of the main means of protecting our environment. It was the first internationally legally binding instrument to deal with problems of air pollution on a broad regional basis. It was adopted in 1979 and entered into force in 1983. It now has 49 Parties. Since the Convention's entry into force, its Executive Body has negotiated eight protocols. They are intended to tackle specific environmental problems, such as acidification or eutrophication, or specific pollutants, such as sulphur, nitrogen, volatile organic compounds, persistent organic pollutants and heavy metals.

Thanks to the Convention and its protocols, the air that we breathe is much cleaner now than a decade or two ago. In Europe, sulphur emissions have declined by 60 per cent since 1980, emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) have been cut by 25 per cent since 1990, emissions of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are down 30 per cent and those of ammonia 18 per cent on their 1990 levels.

## Environmental impact assessment

Pollution can often be anticipated. It is possible, for instance, to assess the impact that a factory or a power plant will have on the environment when it is still on the drawing board. Such an assessment early on in a project's development is particularly useful because it makes everyone involved think through the different options before it is too late.



The UNECE Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context was negotiated to help countries carry out such an assessment when a project is likely to have a cross-border impact. It stipulates what needs to be considered at an early stage of planning. It also lays down the general obligation of countries to notify and consult each other on all major projects that are likely to have a significant adverse environmental impact across borders. The Convention was adopted in 1991 and entered into force in 1997. It now has 40 Parties.

The Meeting of the Parties to the Convention has recently negotiated a Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment to apply the principles of environmental impact assessment to plans, programmes and policies. It will be adopted and signed in 2003 at the "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference in Kiev.



## Water pollution



Water is life. Be it for drinking, for industry, for agriculture or for leisure, water is indispensable. However, water supplies are becoming scarcer and it is estimated that up to 100 million people in UNECE member States do not have access to clean water. Although water pollution is an environmental problem, it is also a serious threat to public health.

The UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes was negotiated to help countries curb water pollution and ensure that international rivers are well managed so that future generations will be able to continue to extract clean water from them. The Convention is primarily intended to strengthen national measures for the protection and the ecologically sound management of international surface water and groundwater. It also includes provisions for monitoring, research and development, consultations and early-warning systems. It encourages its Parties to help each other in times of need, to make institutional arrangements for cooperation, to share information and to provide public access to information. The Convention was adopted in 1992 and came into force in 1996. It now has 33 Parties.

In 1999, its Meeting of the Parties negotiated a Protocol on Water and Health in cooperation with the World Health Organization's Regional Office for Europe to protect public health by improving water management. Following a spate of industrial accidents that polluted international rivers, the Meeting has recently also negotiated a protocol on civil liability for damage to transboundary waters (see below).





## I n d u s t r i a l   a c c i d e n t s

Industry is the backbone of many economies and, with new technology, industrial operations are becoming increasingly complex. Unfortunately, even the safest industrial plant is never totally risk-free and industrial accidents hit the headlines only too frequently.

The UNECE Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents spells out what countries have to do to reduce risk and to prevent industrial accidents that can have cross-border effects as far as possible. Yet, no matter how stringent the safety standards, accidents will occur and countries must be prepared to deal with their consequences. The Convention, therefore, also outlines how Parties can maintain a high level of preparedness to respond to an industrial accident, especially if its effects spill over into another country. Hazardous operations must have on-site and off-site contingency plans. If several Parties could be affected by a hazardous operation, they are expected to get together to ensure that their plans are compatible or even to draw up joint off-site contingency plans. If an industrial accident does occur, the Convention expects the Parties to take steps to minimize its effects and help one another if asked to do so.

The Convention was adopted in 1992 and came into force in 2000. It now has 26 Parties. Its Conference of the Parties has recently negotiated a protocol on civil liability for transboundary damage caused by industrial accidents, together with the Parties to the above-mentioned Water Convention. The protocol will be adopted and signed in 2003 at the "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference in Kiev.





## P u b l i c   p a r t i c i p a t i o n

Information is power, and environmental information in the hands of citizens enables them to play a meaningful role in shaping a sustainable future. Too often people are left in the dark about environmental disasters and degradation.

The UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, or Aarhus Convention, is not only an environmental agreement; it is also a Convention about government accountability, transparency and responsiveness. It grants the public the right to access environmental information and to participate in the decision-making processes and, if need be, to go to court to protect the environment. It links environmental rights and human rights. It acknowledges that we owe an obligation to future generations. It establishes that sustainable development can be achieved only through the involvement of all stakeholders. The Convention was adopted in 1998 and came into force in 2001. It now has 22 Parties.

Its Meeting of the Parties has recently negotiated a protocol on pollutant release and transfer registers requiring polluting companies to provide information on their releases of certain polluting substances, such as greenhouse gases, dioxins and heavy metals, to a national register accessible and searchable through the Internet. The Protocol will be adopted and signed in 2003 at the "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference in Kiev.





## E n v i r o n m e n t   f o r   E u r o p e

When the Iron Curtain was finally raised in 1989, no one had a clear idea of the state of Europe's environment. Several environmental problems became visible, many of them cross-border problems. So environmental protection and restoration emerged as new issues for pan-European cooperation.

The region's Environment Ministers initiated the 'Environment for Europe' process back in 1991 at Dobris Castle in what was then Czechoslovakia. Their aim was to improve the region's environment and to work towards the convergence of environmental policies throughout the continent. They needed an accurate overview of Europe's environmental conditions and their request for more information on the environment's state of affairs led to the publication of the so-called Dobris Assessment (see below).

The 'Environment for Europe' Conferences are convened every three or four years. They bring together all the big environmental players, including NGOs, from all parts of the UNECE region. UNECE is the Conferences' coordinating secretariat and also provides substantive contributions. The fifth Ministerial 'Environment for Europe' Conference will take place in Kiev in May 2003.

## Environmental performance reviews



After the Dobris Assessment had drawn a first overall picture of the state of the environment in Europe in 1993, the Environment


Ministers decided that countries would be reviewed individually in much more detail. The aim was to pay attention not only to these countries' environmental conditions, but also to the strategies, policies and tools that they used to manage the environment. UNECE carries out these reviews in its East European and Central Asian member States. The UNECE reviews are a useful tool for helping these countries upgrade their environment in line with the pan-European objectives set in the 'Environment for Europe' process.

Environmental performance reviews assess a country's efforts to reduce its overall pollution burden and manage its natural resources; to integrate environmental and socio-economic policies; to strengthen cooperation with the international community; to harmonize environmental conditions and policies throughout Europe and North America; and to contribute to sustainable development in the UNECE region.

### The reviews have three main objectives:

- To assist countries in transition to improve their management of the environment by establishing baseline conditions and making concrete recommendations for better policy implementation and performance;
- To promote a continuous dialogue between UNECE member countries by sharing information about policies and experiences; and
- To stimulate greater involvement of the public in environmental discussions and decision-making.

The following countries have already been reviewed (in chronological order): Estonia, Slovenia, Republic of Moldova, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Croatia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Bulgaria, Uzbekistan, Romania, Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Georgia.



## Environment, transport and health



Agenda 21 identified transport as a priority for national and international action. In recent years Europeans have become increasingly concerned about the sustainability of transport developments in their region. The challenge today is therefore to develop sustainable transport systems that allow transport to continue to foster economic growth and integration, while addressing health and environmental concerns.

The UNECE has emphasized that only close intersectoral cooperation can bring about sustainability. To this end it initiated an integrated, pan-European approach to transport-related problems, which led to the Vienna Declaration and the Programme of Joint Action on Transport and the Environment in 1997. The World Health Organization (WHO) followed the same approach and expanded its intersectoral work by adopting the London Declaration and the Charter on Transport, Environment and Health in 1999.

To further improve international cooperation and respond to concerns about sustainable transport, UNECE and WHO's Regional Office for Europe (Euro) have joined forces. In July 2002, a High-level Meeting on Transport, Environment and Health decided to bring together and focus the relevant activities of UNECE and WHO/Euro on a few priorities, where international action is estimated to have the most impact. They include (1) integrating environmental and health aspects into transport policy, (2) supporting demand for environmentally friendlier modes of transport and (3) urban transport.

Specific attention will be given to developments in Eastern Europe, where a sharp increase in the use of private cars and urban transport combined with a low level of investment in public transport infrastructure is expected to lead to congestion and smog in urban areas.

## Human settlements

The general aim of UNECE's human settlements activities is to promote sustainable development in its member countries in line with the Habitat Agenda and with Agenda 21. More specifically, UNECE aims to improve the quality of life in towns and villages, and to facilitate social cohesion.



Its Committee on Human Settlements provides policy guidance on housing and urban sector reform in its member States. To this end it explores trends and policies in housing and urban development. The Committee also investigates the link between economically viable settlement structures and urban forms and their social and environmental qualities - introducing urban regeneration as an instrument for developing a liveable city. To improve the quality of life in the UNECE member States, the Committee promotes cooperation among central government, local authorities, the business community and NGOs.

Over the past decade the Committee's subjects and methods of work have changed radically. The overall trend has been to move from narrow, sectoral and technical subjects to integrated and multidisciplinary issues, and from rigid and formal working methods to smaller groups and greater organizational flexibility. The nature of its output has also changed from general reports to practical guidelines and country-specific studies.

## Housing

Countries in transition have made some progress in solving their housing problems, but much work still lies ahead. Housing agendas need to be developed in a way that addresses local priorities, mobilizes resources and assigns responsibilities to the various housing providers. Given the complexity of the situation, there is a need to constantly reformulate housing policies using reliable information on the housing sector, its institutional framework and related legislative and financial policies.

The Committee on Human Settlements reviews housing policy and reform to obtain such reliable information. It has already published country profiles for: Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Albania. These studies, which contain conclusions and policy recommendations, are of interest not only to the countries themselves, but also to potential investors. Moreover, the review process itself can be very valuable. The collection of data for the country profiles may reveal a need to streamline housing statistics and improve their availability. The process also brings together local experts from different organizations or administrations. Finally, the reviews expose specific problems, such as the management of condominiums, that are common to several countries, enabling the Committee to publish guidelines on the subject.

The Committee's Statistical Bulletin of Housing and Building Statistics for Europe and North America is posted on the Internet. The statistics collected for this Bulletin are also put in a database, which is accessible through the Internet.

## Land administration

The societies which have created an operational market economy and enjoy internal stability recognize that, to a certain degree, this was achieved thanks to an effective system for registering private land rights and an inexpensive system of real-estate transfers. Appropriate land administration and land information systems are vital for land management, urban and regional planning, housing, the banking sector, taxation, agriculture and environmental protection.

In view of the current progress in information technology, all market economies of the UNECE region are modernizing their traditional cadastre and land registration systems. Such reforms are needed to improve customer services, to involve the private sector more and to have accurate data available at the right time.

To support their transition to a market economy, Central and East European countries are establishing land registration systems, which will guarantee title to land and other real property. However, the backlog in registrations of property rights still hampers the development of real estate and housing markets, especially in the urban areas of these countries.

All these issues are taken up by the UNECE Working Party on Land Administration at its biennial meetings. The Working Party has also published Guidelines on Land Administration, which are widely applied, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.



## Urban development

Human settlements problems are becoming increasingly global, yet they continue to have a strong regional dimension. In the UNECE region there are significant differences in economic development, in the degree of decentralization and in the quality of the environment. However, UNECE countries are following broadly similar objectives and principles to achieve sustainable development. If policies and instruments fail to achieve the expected results, it is very often owing to a lack of in-depth knowledge of the forces influencing the configuration of urban development, of the trends that these forces produce and of the consequences of urban policies.

That is why it is in the interest of UNECE countries to analyse the driving forces and current trends in urban development. To this end, the Committee on Human Settlements organizes regular conferences on urban and regional research, as a forum for policy makers and researchers to discuss and better understand the situation and its root causes, and to make policy recommendations.



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