

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

Environment @ UNECE

Safeguarding the Environment for Future Generations



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the UNECE Environment Division



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INTRODUCTION

The UNECE region stretches from San Francisco to Vladivostok. Its member States include the countries of Europe, but also countries in North America (Canada and the United States of America), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and Israel. This very diverse region includes some of the most economically and industrially developed countries in the world, as well as being home to numerous developing countries with economies in transition. At the same time, its 56 member States are the cause of 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 priorities.

This booklet introduces UNECE work on the environment. It walks the reader through the work of the various treaties and programmes, and clarifies the role of international law and cooperation in improving our lives. Weblinks offer access to more information on the various topics.





OVERVIEW

UNECE environment activities seek to protect the environment and human health and to promote sustainable development, in line with the global commitments undertaken at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Conference). UNECE does this by working to improve environmental governance across the region and to reduce pollution and the damage it causes so that future generations can also benefit from our natural resources.

UNECE, through its Committee on Environmental Policy and other bodies:

- *Improves environmental governance* by formulating environmental policy, developing international environmental law and supporting international initiatives. It also helps member countries put these into practice by organizing seminars, workshops and advisory missions and by publishing guidance and compilations of best practice in numerous areas of pollution prevention.
- *Helps individual countries in transition improve their environmental performance* by assessing their efforts to reduce pollution and manage their natural resources, and by making targeted recommendations.
- *Enhances synergies on environmental issues*, and takes a very active role in regional and cross-sectoral processes such as “Environment for Europe”, “Transport, Health and Environment”, “Environment and Health” and “Education for Sustainable Development”.
- *Serves the governing bodies of its five environmental treaties and their protocols*, helping them to monitor implementation and to organize meetings to further their work.
- *Organizes regional meetings to provide input to global conferences on sustainable development* to ensure that regional perspectives and priorities are included in global policies.





AIR POLLUTION

In the 1960s scientists demonstrated the link between sulphur emissions in continental Europe and the acidification of Scandinavian lakes. More recent studies have confirmed that airborne pollutants can travel several thousand kilometres before causing damage.

Because air pollution does not respect borders, the UNECE Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution was negotiated and adopted in 1979 — the first legally binding international agreement to deal with air pollution on a broad regional basis. Since the Convention's entry into force in 1983, its Executive Body has negotiated eight protocols to tackle specific environmental problems as well as specific pollutants, such as heavy metals, often leading the way for a wider global approach to these issues.

The Convention and its Protocols are living legal frameworks, capable of adapting to emerging threats: in May 2012, the Convention's Gothenburg Protocol to Abate Acidification, Eutrophication and Ground-level Ozone was amended to include national emission reduction commitments for fine particulate matter, a cause of respiratory diseases, and black carbon (soot), now known to be an important factor in global warming and climate change.

Thanks to the Convention and its protocols, the air that we breathe is much cleaner now:

- Sulphur emissions in the European region have declined by more than 60 per cent since 1980.
- Emissions of nitrogen oxides have been cut by more than 40 per cent since 1990.
- Emissions of volatile organic compounds are down by some 50 per cent.
- Ammonia emissions are 30 per cent lower than in 1990.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/lrtap/welcome.html>

<http://www.ceip.at/gothenburg-protocol/>



ASSESSMENT

Using appropriate measures and procedures, environmental damage can often be avoided. It is possible to assess the environmental impact of a nuclear power plant, a motorway or a gas pipeline when it is still on the drawing board. Such an assessment early in a project's development is particularly useful because it makes everyone involved think through the different options before construction actually starts.

The UNECE Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) helps countries to make such assessments. It sets out what needs to be considered at an early stage of planning and requires its Parties to notify and consult each other and the public on all major projects that are likely to have a significant negative environmental impact on other countries. The Convention was adopted in 1991 and entered into force in 1997. It has been applied to over 800 projects so far.

The Convention's Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, adopted in 2003, applies the same anticipatory and participatory approach to government plans and programmes as well as policies and legislation that are likely to have significant environment and health effects.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/eia/welcome.html>



WATER COOPERATION

Be it for drinking, for industry, for agriculture or for leisure, water is indispensable. However, water supplies are dwindling and today nearly 140 million people in the UNECE region do not have access to safe drinking water.

The UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention), adopted in 1992, helps countries prevent conflicts with neighbours over water resources, curb water pollution and ensure that international rivers, lakes and groundwaters are well managed so future generations can benefit from them. It requires Parties to enter into agreements and establish institutions to jointly manage and protect their shared waters, to share information, consult with each other and to help each other in times of need. Since February 2013 the Convention is open to accession by all United Nations Member States.

Water pollution and water scarcity are also a serious threat to public health. The Protocol on Water and Health, adopted in 1999 under UNECE and the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe and in force since 2005, protects human health and well-being through the development of integrated water and health policies and the setting of targets to achieve access to clean water and sanitation for all.

Because of the Water Convention:

- Almost all countries sharing transboundary waters in the pan-European region now have cooperation agreements with their neighbours.
- Countries throughout the world receive support in developing transboundary cooperation to limit the impacts of climate change and reduce the risks posed by floods and droughts.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/water.html>.



INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENTS

Industry is the backbone of many economies, and new technology is making industrial operations increasingly complex. Unfortunately, even the safest industrial plant is never totally risk-free, and industrial accidents are all too often headline news.

The UNECE Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents, adopted in 1992, spells out what countries have to do to reduce the risk of industrial accidents that can have cross-border effects. It also outlines how Parties can maintain a high level of preparedness to respond to an industrial accident, should it occur, especially if its effects spill over into another country. If an industrial accident does occur, the Convention expects the Parties to take steps to minimize its effects and to help one another if asked to do so.

The Convention's Assistance Programme supports countries from South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in implementing the Convention. Activities have included training sessions on how to evaluate safety reports, a project addressing hazard and crisis management for oil terminals and national training sessions on how to identify hazardous activities falling under the Convention.

Following a spate of industrial accidents that polluted international rivers, in 2003 the Meetings of the Parties to the Industrial Accidents and Water Conventions together adopted the Protocol on Civil Liability for Damage to Transboundary Waters in Kyiv, though the Protocol has not yet entered into force.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/teia>.



PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Sometimes people feel that they are left in the dark about decisions that may lead to environmental disasters and degradation.

The UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), adopted in 1998, is not only an environmental agreement, it is also a powerful international instrument to ensure the rights of present and future generations to play a meaningful role in shaping a sustainable future. It gives the public the right to access environmental information, to participate in decision-making processes and, if need be, to go to court to protect the environment.

The Convention's Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, adopted in 2003 and in force since 2009, requires companies to provide information on their releases of certain polluting substances — such as greenhouse gases and heavy metals — to a national register that is publicly accessible and searchable through the Internet.

The Convention and its Protocol in turn foster access to environmental information directly to the public: the Aarhus Clearinghouse, launched in 2004, is an electronic database tool to share good practices in environmental democracy and to promote the Convention's application; and PRTR.net serves as a global portal to provide assistance in the development and improvement of pollutant release and transfer register (PRTRs) around the world.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/pp/welcome.html>

<http://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org/>

<http://www.prtr.net/>



“ENVIRONMENT FOR EUROPE”

Since its launch in 1991 the “Environment for Europe” (EfE) process supports countries’ efforts to improve their environmental governance. The EfE process is a unique partnership of UNECE member States, intergovernmental organizations, Regional Environmental Centres, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and other major groups. UNECE, which has been closely associated with the process from the start, serves as its secretariat.

The EfE process and its ministerial conferences provide an effective high-level platform for stakeholders to discuss, decide on and join efforts in addressing environmental priorities across the 56 countries of the UNECE region. At the same time, the process maintains a particular focus on supporting the countries of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in their efforts to raise environmental standards and comply with international commitments.

The main achievements of the process include:

- Four assessments of the state of the environment in the pan-European region and an assessment of environmental assessments.
- Setting up institutional mechanisms for cooperation, such as the Environmental Action Programme Task Force and the Regional Environmental Centres.
- Acting as a driving force for developing international conventions and other environmental policy instruments, and promoting their implementation.
- Promoting cross-sectoral activities and policy integration (energy efficiency, education for sustainable development and greening the economy).
- Enhancing cooperation between Governments and civil society organizations.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/efe/welcome.html>



ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

While it is important to target specific environmental issues, such as air and water pollution, it is also crucial to look at the broader picture and determine what countries are actually doing to protect the environment, through strategies, policies and other tools, and to help them improve their environmental governance.

For this reason, in 1993, UNECE ministers in Lucerne, Switzerland, decided to build on the Environmental Performance Review (EPR) programme launched by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and requested UNECE to undertake reviews in its member countries not covered by the OECD programme (essentially, the countries in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia).

Environmental performance reviews have four main objectives:

- *To help countries improve their management of the environment and environmental performance* by undertaking assessments and making recommendations.
- *To strengthen cooperation with the international community and promote the exchange of information among countries* on policies and experiences.
- *To help integrate environmental policies into economic policies* in relevant sectors, such as agriculture, energy, transport and health.
- *To promote greater accountability to other countries and to the public.*

In the first cycle of UNECE EPRs, launched in 1994, 20 countries underwent reviews, which established the baseline conditions on the ground. Since 2000, 18 countries have undergone second EPRs, which looked at progress made and the implementation and financing of environment policies. In 2011, ministers in Astana invited UNECE to undertake a third cycle, which will look, among others, at financing in a green economy context, cooperation with the international community and environmental mainstreaming in priority sectors.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/epr/welcome.html>



TRANSPORT, HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

The transport sector has a major impact on the environment and on the health of its inhabitants. The challenge is to allow transport to continue to foster economic growth and integration, while addressing health and environmental concerns.

The Pan-European Programme on Transport, Health and Environment (THE PEP), run jointly by UNECE and the WHO Regional Office for Europe, is a unique policy platform that makes the critical link between the three sectors. Set up in 2002, THE PEP focuses on a few priorities where international action can have the greatest impact:

- *Integrating environmental and health concerns* into transport policy and planning.
- *Supporting green and health-friendly mobility* management schemes for schools, work and leisure.
- *Promoting walking and cycling in urban areas* to reduce individual car use and encourage physical activity.

Through an innovative workshop series launched at the Third High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment in Amsterdam (2009), THE PEP builds capacity in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia by sharing experience, technical know-how and helping countries forge the link between the three sectors for the benefit of all. THE PEP tools and methods include:

- Disseminating information on transport, health and environment via an Internet-based clearing house (www.thepep.org/ch).
- Analysing the health effects of transport, especially on children, and their cost.
- Providing practical guidance on how to translate national policy into local action, and to help ministries of transport, health and environment to communicate, cooperate and collaborate better.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/thepep/en/welcome.html>



MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

It is difficult to motivate politicians and lawmakers to take action on the environment without adequate and accessible information and data to assess the need for action and the effectiveness of any measures taken.

The UNECE Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Programme works closely with the UNECE multilateral environmental agreements, relevant United Nations bodies and international institutions to build capacity in the countries of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia to monitor the environment, produce harmonized indicators and publish environmental assessments.

The UNECE Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment contributes to the development and establishment of a regular assessment and reporting process in the pan-European region, including developing the Shared Environment Information System (SEIS). In 2012, the Working Group also decided to launch national-level assessments of assessments produced over the past five years on a variety of environmental themes, such as air pollution, biodiversity, climate change and waste, in order to identify gaps in the national assessment reports and to improve them in the future.

The UNECE Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators works to improve environmental data collection and reporting in the countries of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and to promote comparability of environmental statistics and indicators in the region. It also publishes Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators in the subregion.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/europe/monitoring/index.html>



EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

To achieve sustainable development we need to change the way we think and the way we act. Unfortunately, our education systems — so crucial to fostering these changes — often contribute to unsustainable living.

To reverse this trend, in 2005 UNECE environment and education ministers adopted a Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The UNECE Strategy is a practical instrument that encourages countries to develop and incorporate education for sustainable development into their formal education systems, in all relevant subjects, and in non-formal and informal education.

An evaluation report on the Strategy shows that the majority of participating countries now either have or are very close to putting in place policy, regulatory and operational frameworks that support ESD.

Three ambitious goals have been adopted for the Strategy's third phase of implementation:

- To have an ESD school plan in every school by 2015.
- To reorient technical and vocational education and training in support of sustainable development and green economies.
- To incorporate ESD into teacher education.

Looking forward, UNECE, in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), held consultations for the UNECE region to determine priorities for action on ESD following the United Nations Decade on ESD (2005–2014).

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/esd.html>



GREEN ECONOMY

The financial crisis, with its multiple impacts, including volatile markets, food crises and rising unemployment, has led to widespread concern that the present model of producing and consuming is unsustainable. We urgently need to recast our ways of living and find an economic model that will enhance the well-being of all within the limits of our planet.

Green economy seeks to create such an economic model, by ensuring human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. Specifically, it aims to boost green investment, which is expected to help reverse environmental degradation and create decent jobs for all, and ultimately to result in healthier and happier — and thus more productive — citizens.

UNECE, with its multifaceted environment programme, plays an important role in the region's transition towards a green economy, helping to shape and inform opinion on international good practice, policies, norms, standards and indicators. Governments, civil society and the private sector will also need to join forces to draw up and implement regional and national road maps towards green economy. The UNECE online Green Economy Toolbox provides tools for environmental protection; greening the energy, housing and transport sectors; measuring progress; and better understanding the role of standards, education or innovation in the transition to green economy. It can provide the cornerstones for national green economy road maps in the UNECE region and beyond.

The toolbox also provides information on opportunities for green investments and lists upcoming and past UNECE green economy events.

For more information:

<http://www.unece.org/env/greeneconomy/welcome.html>



UNECE PARTNERSHIPS

UNECE is also working with other United Nations agencies and international organizations in the region to improve environmental governance and the state of the environment.

ENVIRONMENT AND SECURITY INITIATIVE

The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) partners assist the Governments of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in their efforts to achieve sustainable development and peace by focusing on preventing conflicts over the use of shared natural resources and on jointly coping with transboundary pollution.

Recent UNECE activities under the ENVSEC umbrella have included work to foster dam safety in Central Asia, workshops to exchange information on and address climate change in transboundary water basins, joint assessment projects on transboundary impacts in the Danube Delta and pilot projects and advisory services to foster implementation and ratification of the UNECE environmental conventions and their protocols.

For more information:

<http://www.envsec.org/>

<http://www.unece.org/env/cep/currentsession.html> (information paper No. 3)



ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH PROCESS

Cooperation between UNECE and WHO on environment and health, which dates back to the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in London in 1999, has been strengthened over recent years. The Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Parma, 2010) adopted a new institutional framework for the period 2010–2016, including a European Environment and Health Ministerial Board, of which UNECE is a member, and which includes four ministers appointed by the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy for the environment sector and four appointed by the WHO Regional Committee for Europe for the health sector.

For more information:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/pages/european-process-on-environment-and-health>.



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