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Environmental performance reviews

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Environmental Performance Review Programme: fourth cycle of reviews

Note by the Expert Group on Environmental Performance Reviews

Summary

At its twenty-fourth session (Geneva, 29–31 January 2019), the Committee on Environmental Policy requested the Expert Group on Environmental Performance Reviews to begin work, in cooperation with the reviewed countries, on proposals for the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews and to prepare a paper on that issue for the Committee's twenty-sixth session (ECE/CEP/2019/2, para. 31 (f)).

The present document contains the proposal for the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews for the consideration of the Committee on Environmental Policy.



I. Introduction

1. At its twenty-fourth session (Geneva, 29–31 January 2019), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy requested the Expert Group on Environmental Performance Reviews to begin work, in cooperation with the reviewed countries, on proposals for the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews and to prepare a paper on that issue for the Committee’s twenty-sixth session, taking into account the suggestions made by the members of the Committee during the twenty-fourth session.
2. On 30 October 2019, the Expert Group held a brainstorming session on the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews, including the main objectives and scope of the fourth cycle, the possible content and structure of the reviews, procedural aspects of conducting environmental performance reviews and ways to enhance the implementation of environmental performance review recommendations. The results of the discussion are reflected in the following proposal for a fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews.
3. In addition, the Expert Group decided to conduct a survey of the reviewed countries and other interested countries to solicit views and ideas on the fourth cycle. At its twenty-fifth session (Geneva, 13–15 November 2019), the Committee supported the proposal of the Expert Group to organize, in the first half of 2020, a survey and a meeting to discuss possible options for the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews (ECE/CEP/2019/1, para. 44 (g)). Because of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Expert Group worked by electronic means in preparing the document on the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews.
4. Members of and observers to the Committee on Environmental Policy, and several international experts participating in environmental performance reviews, were consulted by means of a survey circulated in January 2020. The results of the survey are presented in information paper No. 9 and were taken into consideration in the current proposal for a fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews.
5. The Committee is invited to consider the present document with a view to providing further guidance on the proposal for the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews for its prospective adoption.

II. Background

6. Pursuant to a decision by ministers of environment at their Second Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Lucerne, Switzerland, 28–30 April 1993), ECE conducted a pilot environmental performance review of Estonia (1994–1996) and established the ECE Environmental Performance Review Programme in 1996. Since then, three cycles of reviews have been carried out under the Environmental Performance Review Programme.
7. The first cycle environmental performance reviews established baseline conditions regarding trends, policy commitments, institutional arrangements and routine competences for carrying out national evaluations. The second cycle environmental performance reviews assessed progress made since the first review and helped to stimulate greater accountability. Emphasis was placed on the: implementation and financing of environment policy; integration of environmental concerns into economic sectors; and promotion of sustainable development.
8. The third cycle environmental performance reviews focus on environmental governance and financing in a green economy context, countries’ cooperation with the international community and environmental mainstreaming in priority sectors. The third cycle commenced following a decision by ministers of environment at the Seventh Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Nur-Sultan, 21–23 September 2011) and is ongoing. Since 2017, environmental performance reviews have addressed relevant Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, pursuant to a decision by ministers of environment at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016). An overview of

countries and their environmental performance reviews is provided in annex II to the present document.

9. The efficiency and effectiveness of the environmental performance review methodology have attracted the attention of countries outside the ECE region, leading to requests for the transfer of know-how from ECE to other United Nations regional commissions. Morocco was the first country outside the ECE region for which a review was carried out by ECE, in cooperation with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, followed by Mongolia, in cooperation with United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. The second environmental performance review of Morocco, which will be conducted according to the methodology of the third cycle, is forthcoming.

10. Several documents guide the current activities under the Environmental Performance Review Programme, including:

(a) Environmental Performance Review Programme: Third cycle of reviews (ECE/CEP/S/2011/3);¹

(b) Astana and Batumi Ministerial Declarations (respectively, ECE/ASTANA.CONF/2011/2/Add.1 and ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1);²

(c) Role of Environmental Performance Reviews in supporting the achievement and monitoring of Sustainable Development Goals in the pan-European region (ECE/CEP/2017/11);³

(d) Environmental performance reviews beyond the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region (ECE/CEP/2019/15, annex).⁴

11. Progress made in conducting the third cycle of environmental performance reviews was reported to the Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-fourth session during the mid-term review of the main outcomes of the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (ECE/CEP/2019/8).⁵ The Committee on Environmental Policy expressed appreciation for the progress achieved since the Batumi Conference in conducting the third cycle of reviews, and welcomed the positive experience gained in integrating the relevant Sustainable Development Goals and targets into the environmental performance reviews conducted since 2017 (ECE/CEP/2019/2, para. 31 (a) and (b)).

12. Two evaluations of the environmental performance review process to assess the strengths, gaps, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact of environmental performance reviews, were conducted in 2015 and 2019.⁶ The evaluations made several recommendations for improving and optimizing the process. Recommendations made in 2015 have been implemented nearly 100 per cent, except for one recommendation, which is no longer relevant. The ECE secretariat has commenced implementing the 2019 recommendations (see annex I to the current document). Two specific assessments are being conducted in 2020 in response to the recommendations to consider enhancing the coverage of green economy and human rights and the environment. These assessments aim to support an informed decision by the Expert Group regarding the content of the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews.

¹ Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=23594>.

² Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=42518> and <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=4711>.

³ Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=45618>.

⁴ Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=52014>.

⁵ Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=50063>.

⁶ Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=29391>.

III. Fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews

A. Objective

13. An environmental performance review is an external assessment of the progress a country has made in reconciling its environmental and economic targets and in meeting its international environmental commitments.

14. With the overall objective of achieving a high level of environmental protection in the ECE region, the ECE Environmental Performance Review Programme will continue to:

(a) Assist countries in improving their management of the environment and associated environmental performance by making concrete recommendations for better policy design and implementation;

(b) Help in integrating environmental policies into sector-specific economic policies, such as agricultural, energy, transport and health policies;

(c) Promote greater accountability to the public;

(d) Contribute to the achievement and monitoring of the relevant Sustainable Development Goals;

(e) Promote the exchange of information among countries on policies and experiences;

(f) Strengthen cooperation with the international community;

(g) Promote coherence of environmental and sustainable development policies at the national level and across the region;

(h) Assist member States in the implementation of environmental performance review recommendations.

15. Environmental performance reviews will continue to be carried out at the country level.

B. Content

16. The decision on the substantive content of fourth cycle environmental performance reviews will continue to be taken in a flexible manner, guided by the specific needs of each reviewed country.

17. The fourth cycle environmental performance reviews will cover similar topics to the third cycle reviews, addressing environmental governance and financing, domestic-international interface, media and pollution management, and integration of environment into selected sectors. Assessment of the status of implementation of environmental performance review recommendations made in previous reviews will continue to figure prominently in fourth cycle environmental performance reviews.

18. The climate change chapter will be strengthened and continue to focus on the impact of climate change on priority sectors, mainstreaming climate adaptation into priority sectors, mitigation of greenhouse gases and low-carbon development, among other issues.

19. Covering green economy in fourth cycle environmental performance reviews remains important. If requested by the country under review, the content on green economy can be enhanced to address circular economy.

20. The fourth cycle environmental performance reviews will address environmental media and pollution management at a similar level to the third cycle. The level of detail will be agreed with the reviewed country, depending on national circumstances and priorities.

21. The sectoral focus continues to be valuable. Chapters similar to the third cycle looking at how environmental concerns are mainstreamed into priority sectors, such as energy and the environment, agriculture and the environment, transport and the environment and

industry and the environment, will be available for the reviewed countries to choose for their environmental performance review. An integrated chapter on greening selected sectors (for example, the agriculture, energy, industry and transport sectors) will also be available as an alternative option.

22. In addition, the possibility of including one predefined nexus option (for example, water-food-energy-ecosystems, air-transport-health, or water-soil-waste) will be offered to interested countries. The benefit of the nexus approach lies in assessing the multi-dimensional interlinkages of the actions taken in each component of the nexus, which can have effects in one or several other components, and in making recommendations for more targeted and coherent actions. Should a country choose a nexus option, related environmental media topics will nonetheless remain essential in addition to the nexus (for example, water management in addition to the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus, or air protection in addition to the air-transport-health nexus).

23. The nexus approach will be guided by the principle of integration of governance and management across nexus components, with a view to making recommendations that increase policy coherence, improve synergies and mutual benefits and highlight trade-offs (or compromises) and decrease them over time. Such an approach is also expected to support the transition to a green economy and increase resource efficiency.

24. The implementation of recommendations made in a nexus approach chapter would require boosted joint actions and collective efforts from relevant institutions and stakeholders.

25. Terms of reference for a specific nexus option will be developed based on the experience acquired by relevant organizations, such as, for example, the expertise of the secretariat of the ECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes on the transboundary aspect of water-food-energy-ecosystem nexus.⁷

26. Sustainable Development Goals will continue to be addressed at the same level of detail as in the third cycle and guided by the options agreed by the Committee on Environmental Policy in 2017 (see ECE/CEP/2017/11). At the same time, given that the timeframes for the fourth cycle environmental performance reviews and for implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development coincide, greater consideration of Sustainable Development Goals could be envisaged depending on the needs of the reviewed country, including an enhanced assessment of the Goals and an increased number of recommendations focused thereon.

27. The fourth cycle environmental performance reviews will continue to address issues related to human rights and the environment as per current practice, by explicitly covering procedural rights under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, and by addressing issues related to substantive rights – such as the right to access to safe water and adequate sanitation, the right to clean air, the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to adequate food – in various chapters, depending on the reviewed country's needs. These issues are already covered to some extent by the third cycle environmental performance reviews, although not from a human rights perspective. Also, the fourth cycle environmental performance reviews will continue to make recommendations that consider the needs of vulnerable groups.

28. To help countries' efforts to respond to, recover from and prevent future pandemics, the fourth cycle environmental performance reviews will address issues identified in the reviewed countries as being of concern during the pandemic, such as the management of hospital and plastic waste, the safe use of public transport, the promotion of active mobility and the reduction in fine particulate matter, which may be a vector for the virus. They will also address how countries responded to the pandemic with policy packages increasing resilience and supporting a green economic recovery.

⁷ For additional information, see <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=34781>.

C. Structure

29. The structure of the fourth cycle of environmental performance reviews will largely remain the same as for the third cycle. Some adjustments might be made to the presentation of the implementation status of recommendations from previous environmental performance reviews, for example, by integrating the assessments into the respective chapters. Also, assessments of Sustainable Development Goals might be integrated directly into the text of chapters rather than being presented in boxes.

Suggested structure of fourth cycle environmental performance reviews

Executive summary

Introduction: concise overview of country's geographical, economic, social and governance context

Part I. Environmental governance and financing

Legal, policy and institutional frameworks
Regulatory and compliance assurance mechanisms
Greening the economy and financing environmental protection
Environmental monitoring and information
Public participation and education

Part II. Domestic-international interface

Implementation of international agreements and commitments
Climate change

Part III. Media and pollution management

Air protection
Water management
Waste and chemicals management
Biodiversity and protected areas

Part IV. Integration of environment into selected sectors/issues*

Energy and the environment
Transport and the environment
Industry and the environment
Agriculture and the environment
Human settlements and the environment
Health and the environment
Greening selected sectors (for example, agriculture, energy, industry and transport sectors)

Part V. Nexus**

For example, water-food-energy-ecosystems, air-transport-health, water-soil-waste

* Part IV is optional and the list of possible topics in Part IV is indicative. The actual list of chapters will reflect the needs and circumstance of the reviewed country.

** Part V is optional and only one nexus option may be chosen. Environmental media within the nexus would still need to be reviewed separately.

D. Implementation of environmental performance review recommendations

30. The reviewed countries are expected to enhance ownership and implementation of the environmental performance review recommendations. Follow-up and support to the implementation of such recommendations will have a prominent role in the fourth cycle.

31. The ECE secretariat will advise reviewed countries to: establish implementation mechanisms; identify partnerships for implementing environmental performance review recommendations; and organize in their countries events on implementing environmental performance review recommendations.

32. The secretariat will continue to support reviewed countries in their efforts to implement environmental performance review recommendations through projects similar to the ongoing United Nations Development Account project,⁸ subject to the availability of resources.

33. Collaboration and engagement with United Nations Country Teams in the implementation of environmental performance review recommendations will be enhanced, for example, by: encouraging the consideration of environmental performance review recommendations in the preparation of Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks in the reviewed countries; promoting the integration of environmental performance review recommendations in Common Country Analyses; and engaging the United Nations Resident Coordinators more extensively in advocating for implementation of environmental performance review recommendations.

34. Subject to the availability of resources, the ECE secretariat will organize further peer-learning workshops to share experience in the implementation of environmental performance review recommendations.

35. In addition, the ECE secretariat will enhance its efforts to draw the attention of the international and donor communities to environmental performance review recommendations to help reviewed countries in fundraising to support their implementation. To the extent possible, the ECE secretariat will help the reviewed countries to identify recommendations that can be implemented more efficiently through projects for further fundraising.

E. Procedural issues

36. The ECE secretariat will continue its efforts to speed up the publication of environmental performance reviews to the extent possible. Options will be explored with the reviewed countries to release electronic versions of environmental performance reviews earlier by launching them at the national level, prior to the printed version release. Additional staff resources (for example, Junior Professional Officers, consultants, secondments) could also help in speeding up the release of environmental performance reviews.

37. The exchange with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development on methodological issues will continue.

⁸ For additional information see <http://www.unecce.org/index.php?id=50851>.

Annex I

Conclusions and recommendations of an external independent evaluation of the environmental performance review process based on reviews carried out in the period 2015–2019

1. The final report of the external independent evaluation of the environmental performance review process based on reviews carried out in the period 2015–2019, commissioned by ECE and undertaken in 2019, can be consulted on the ECE website.¹ For easy of reference, an excerpt from the report containing the conclusion and recommendations is provided below.

Conclusions

2. Environmental performance reviews played an important catalytic and advisory role in addressing the specific needs and priorities of beneficiary countries in mainstreaming environmental considerations into sectoral policies.

3. Environmental performance reviews are in line with ECE mandate and ECE subprogramme I “Environment” objectives, in full consistency with global and regional priorities.

4. Environmental performance review recommendations addressed gender aspects and special needs of vulnerable groups when these issues were identified as a matter of concern for the countries reviewed.

5. Environmental performance reviews completed in the period 2015–2019 were successful in achieving expected accomplishments. Related activities achieved their objectives within the anticipated budget and according to the planned timeframes, thanks to the Environmental Performance Review Unit’s diligent approach in seeking out cost and performance efficiencies, choosing the right partners in the beneficiary countries and among international experts.

6. The principal challenges or obstacles to achieving the objectives of the environmental performance review activities, which were faced in some beneficiary countries, were: changing political directions; low profile attached to environmental agenda; limited institutional and individual capacities; and information-sharing barriers.

7. Environmental performance reviews have integrated green economy aspects and the Sustainable Development Goals (Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17) in line with the mandates provided by the Seventh and Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conferences (respectively, Nur-Sultan, 21–23 September 2011, and Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016).

8. The overall sustainability and ownership of the environmental performance reviews in the reviewed countries was partial during the period 2015–2019. The Environmental Performance Review Unit has limited capacity for accompanying countries in follow-up and implementation of recommendations. Nonetheless, sustained efforts were put in place by the reviewed countries to ensure a sound level of implementation of recommendations following the publication of environmental performance review reports. In recent years, the Environmental Performance Review Unit started to provide assistance to the reviewed countries in implementation of recommendations.

9. The impact of environmental performance reviews during the period 2015–2019 was judged by the interviewees as partial. Nevertheless, in many countries positive results leading to new policies or policy changes in the beneficiary countries were achieved. Equally, the replication effects in the programmes and analysis of other international organizations were very good.

¹ Available at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=29391>.

10. Content wise, a challenging task during the period 2015–2019 was to devote adequate attention in the environmental performance reviews to environmental governance and financing in a green economy context and to specific green economy initiatives.

11. Considering the commitment made by the States Members of the United Nations to implement Sustainable Development Goal 16, which applies across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the reviewed countries could benefit significantly if the Environmental Performance Review Programme were also to address the relationship between human rights and the environment to a greater extent.

12. Technical cooperation workshops held in the period 2017–2019 strengthened the beneficiary countries' capacities in the implementation of the environmental performance review recommendations. A similar positive impact is expected from a recently initiated capacity-building project funded from the United Nations Development Account.

13. During the period 2015–2019 there were several unintended positive and no unintended negative impacts of the Environmental Performance Review Programme observed. All but one of the third cycle reviews included the evaluation of the recommendations in the second cycle reviews, with clear indication of implemented, not implemented and partially implemented recommendations.

14. Considering increased calls to align environmental performance reviews with Sustainable Development Goals and green economy, additional expertise might be needed for the future environmental performance review activities, requiring more funding.

Recommendations

15. ECE should continue aligning environmental performance reviews with the specific needs and priorities of the beneficiary countries and with an emphasis on greater sectoral integration.

16. Future environmental performance reviews should provide greater guidance to the beneficiary countries in development or refining of legal and policy frameworks for green economy and the putting into place of specific green economy initiatives and financing. This approach is in line with the ECE mandate.

17. The role of environmental performance reviews in supporting the achievement and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals in the pan-European region should be boosted.

18. Taking into account the increased attention to the relationship between human rights and environment, environmental performance reviews should continue to provide the reviewed countries with recommendations for pursuing the relevant aspects of Sustainable Development Goal 16 and on procedural environmental rights such as access to information, public participation and access to justice. The Environmental Performance Review Unit should seek advice from the Expert Group on Environmental Performance Review on the need and modalities for deeper coverage of human rights and environment in environmental performance reviews.

19. ECE should extend cooperation with other United Nations entities and other international organizations for organization of future environmental performance reviews since the Environmental Performance Review Programme covers several fields that are beyond the expertise of ECE, such as industry, health, agriculture, waste management and environmental risk management.

20. The ECE environmental performance review core team should be strengthened to address in greater depth Sustainable Development Goals and sectoral integration by adding an economist or capacity-building expert to the team. Such an addition could greatly enhance the usefulness of environmental performance reviews to beneficiary countries, especially in sectors other than environment. An enhanced team could provide more post-review support and ownership building through tailored capacity-building.

Annex II

Eligible United Nations Economic Commission for Europe countries for a review conducted under the Environmental Performance Review Programme

<i>Countries</i>	<i>EPRs (publication year)</i>		
	First EPR	Second EPR	Third EPR
Albania	2002	2012	2018
Andorra			
Armenia	2000	<i>Forthcoming^d</i>	
Azerbaijan	2003	2011	<i>Ongoing</i>
Belarus	1997 ^b	2005	2016
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2004	2011	2018
Bulgaria	1995 ^b	2000	2017
Croatia	1999	2014	
Cyprus			
Estonia ^a	1996	2001	n.a.
Georgia	2003	2010	2016
Kazakhstan	2000	2008	2019
Kyrgyzstan	2000	2009	
Latvia ^a	1998	n.a.	n.a.
Lithuania ^a	1998	n.a.	n.a.
Liechtenstein			
Malta			
Monaco			
Montenegro	n.a. ^e	2007	2015
North Macedonia	2002	2011	2019
Poland ^a	1995 ^b	n.a.	n.a.
Rep. of Moldova	1998	2005	2014
Romania	2001	2012	<i>Ongoing</i>
Russian Federation	1999 ^b		
San Marino	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Serbia	n.a. ^e	2007	2015
Slovenia ^a	1997	n.a.	n.a.
Tajikistan	2004	2012	2017
Turkmenistan	2012 ^c		
Ukraine	1999	2007	
Uzbekistan	2001	2010	2020
Yugoslavia	2002	n.a.	n.a.

Abbreviations: ECE, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; EPR, environmental performance review; n.a., not applicable; OECD, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

^a Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia became members of OECD.

^b Environmental performance review carried out by OECD in cooperation with ECE.

^c The First Environmental Performance Review of Turkmenistan was carried out according to the methodology of the third cycle of ECE environmental performance reviews.

^d The Second Environmental Performance Review of Armenia will be conducted according to the methodology of the cycle in force at the time of the review.

^e Montenegro and Serbia were reviewed as part of the First Environmental Performance Review of Yugoslavia.