

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

What **UNECE** does for you



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The broad aims of the UNECE's environment activities are to safeguard the environment and human health, and to promote sustainable development in its member countries. Monika Linn, Team Leader of the UNECE Environment for Europe and Sustainable Development Team, presents the UNECE's active role in the "Environment for Europe" Ministerial process.



What is the Environment for Europe process and how did it start?

It goes back to the political changes in Eastern Europe in 1989. At that time, no one really knew much about the environmental situation in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The Environment Minister of what was then Czechoslovakia took the initiative and invited Ministers to a meeting held at Dobris Castle, near Prague, in 1991 to discuss the development of pan-European environmental policies. And that was the start of what was then called the Environment for Europe process.

And from then on we have had a series of international conferences that take place every 4 or 5 years. The conferences are held in different parts of the UNECE region and

so, in addition to an overall look at the development of the environment and policies, there is also a focus on the specific subregion where the conference is held. The last one took place in 2003 in Kiev, so the countries of that subregion had the specific focus.

Overall, the general objectives of the process are to address environmental problems in the region and to help Eastern and Central European countries to gradually raise their standards so that in the end there is a similar standard throughout the region.

What were the main objectives at the first meeting?

The first meeting provided the basis for the development of the Environment for Europe process. It started with an assessment of the environmental situation in

the region. The UNECE and the European Commission jointly conducted this assessment, which described the current state of the environment in Europe. So this first conference started to develop the political framework for more coherent environmental policies in the region and the second conference, in Lucerne in 1993, set up different mechanisms, for example a financing facility and environmental action programme for the region.

UNECE was involved from the start, but was not the only partner. There are other important partners including the European Environment Agency which conducts the assessments, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

How many conferences have there been so far and when is the next one?

There have been five conferences so far. The next conference is in 2007 in Belgrade and in addition to UNECE-wide discussions, the talks will also have a focus on South-eastern Europe.

Today, what is the UNECE's main function with regard to the Environment for Europe process?

The UNECE works at many levels of the process. One of our main functions is providing the secretariat services. In other words, we are servicing the working group of senior officials who, beginning two years before the next ministerial conference, hold a series of preparatory meetings to define the agenda for the next ministerial conference and agree upon its focus. We service this entire process. And of course, we are also contributing on the project-level, contributing ideas in our areas of competence.

What does "work at the project level" entail?

For example, with some of these countries that lack the capacity to enforce environmental standards, we at the UNECE and other organizations work at the project level in these countries to help them implement environmental legislation or regional environmental agreements, among other things. Probably the best known is the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution. This is a very well developed and quite technical convention and, in some cases, these countries simply don't have the infrastructure to implement it or the data to accurately monitor the situation. In these cases we try to help at the expert and technical level with better facilities for data collection and with experts to help assess what the situation is.

How does the ECE help countries with environmental monitoring?

This also falls under the responsibilities of my team. There is a working group on environmental monitoring and assessment

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and they got their mandate from a previous Environment for Europe conference. They really focus on the less developed countries in Central Asia (the EECCA region) to help them develop guidelines for environmental monitoring, assessment, and data collection, and we hold training workshops. All of these activities are designed to help them build up their technical capabilities.

What exactly does the phrase “technical capabilities” mean?

It depends. If you are talking about environmental monitoring and assessment, this term certainly has to do with having enough measuring stations and monitoring stations and also being trained how to use the equipment and how to evaluate the data, and knowing how to share this data with the appropriate authorities. And then of course, at the international level, it is important to have a harmonized approach and methodologies, so in the end comparisons of data can be conducted.

What progress have the individual subregions made on reaching goals set out in the process?

It differs very much because the UNECE region is very diverse. You have Western Europe, Canada and the United States, and then the Central and East European countries, some of which are relatively new EU members. Of course, in the process of their accession to the EU, those countries had to comply with certain legislations set out by the EU and they certainly have made progress in their environmental policies. But there are lots of challenges. Some of these countries are still in situations where there is not really political stability, and living standards in some of these countries are comparable to developing countries. You can imagine how big the challenges are. If there is not much economic progress, if there is not political stability, there is also not much priority given to environmental policies.

What do the individual countries think of the Environment for Europe process?

If you talk to the representatives of the environmental Ministries from these countries, they say that for them, this process is crucial both as a way to lobby inside their governments and at the national level as a means to develop environmental policies and implement environmental legislation. They really need the international back-up that the Environment for Europe Process provides.

Also, the ministerial conventions provide an impetus for governments to make an additional effort to try to reach an agreement on a new convention or legally binding instrument. For instance, at the Aarhus conference in 1998, the delegates were able to agree upon and sign the Aarhus Convention on Public Participation.

People often use the word “unique” to describe the Environment for Europe process, why?

Yes, the process is the only framework for the entire region with so many partners involved. It is sort of a meeting place where all organizations working in the region, like the EU, OECD, UNECE, the World Bank, UNEP, and EBRD come together to work with the governments of the region. The NGOs from the region are also important partners in this process.

What do some of these other organizations contribute to the process?

I will give an example. At the last preparatory meeting, we managed to agree on the basic agenda for the upcoming Belgrade Conference. At that meeting, UNEP together with the NGOs said they

would like to have a ministerial round-table discussion on biological diversity. So they are preparing this part of the agenda. There is also an initiative by the Government of Sweden, in partnership with UNEP, to put sustainable consumption and production patterns on the agenda.

How is the final agenda set for the Ministerial Meetings, is it a vote?

No, we don't vote to set the agenda; we discuss and negotiate. We sometimes have some quite intense discussion to sort out the opinions and then, in the end, all the actors in the room come to an agreement. Ultimately, it is the governments who need to reach agreement and the participating international organizations make suggestions to the governments, or governments say “we want to work with you” on this topic.

Why is the setting of the agenda so important?

Ministers have very busy schedules and need to make the best use of their time. They come to the meetings to see concrete results.



So far, we have been successful at making progress and moving forward: at all five of our meetings there has been a ministerial declaration with recommendations for follow-up work. And it is also important to note that ministers, by agreeing to the declarations, commit their governments to the declarations and they also have an outcome that they can refer to in their home state.

Looking to the future, what is the main focus of the Environment For Europe process in the coming years?

We are now moving away from a phase where we create new norms and legally binding protocols to a phase where we assess our progress, and in situations where progress has not been made, we ask why.

We have reached a stage where governments agree that there is not really an urgent need to cover other areas with new legal instruments. Instead, we need to put the emphasis on implementation and how we can really follow through with commitments made. There will be a new assessment done by the European Environment Agency which will show what the trends are – where improvements in environmental management can be made, where the remaining challenges are, and whether there are particularly big challenges in any specific subregion. And so the focus of the discussion should really be on implementation and on how to deliver and get better results on the ground.

In the next three months, what main tasks would you like to accomplish with regard to your responsibilities as Team Leader of the Environment for Europe and Sustainable Development?

We now know the main issues on the Conference agenda. As governments have agreed what they want to talk about, we need to flesh out this agenda. For instance, let's assume that capacity building is a topic on the agenda. What are the capacity building needs in Eastern European and Central Asian countries? What are the substantive questions governments want to address and which recommendations would they like to adopt at the Belgrade conference? You see, these broad ideas have to be filled with substance and this is what we are working on now.

We are communicating with governments, international organizations, and NGOs who send us their ideas.

And, in close cooperation with the Chairperson of the preparatory process (a government official from Serbia, the host country of the upcoming Belgrade Conference) we compile and refine the ideas for discussion at the next meeting of the Working Group of Senior Officials, which will be held on 12-13 October.

Another issue we have started working on is creating a communication plan to raise awareness for the Ministerial Conference. We have put together a list of activities that will help generate awareness and at the October meetings, governments and other stakeholders will comment on our proposed activities and hopefully approve them and assist in carrying out some of the activities.

For more information:
www.unece.org/hlm/welcome.html

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