United Nations

Economic and Social Council

ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/2

Distr.: General
31 May 2019

Original: English

Economic Commission for Europe

Committee on Environmental Policy

**Working Group on Environmental
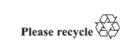Monitoring and Assessment**

Twenty-first session
Geneva, 6 and 7 May 2019

Report of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment on its twenty-first session

Contents

1908885

Please recycle

I. Introduction

A. Background

1.   At its twenty-second session (25–27 January 2017), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy had adopted the new mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment (ECE/CEP/2017/2, para. 32 and annex II). The mandate set out objectives leading up to 2021 that followed up on the ministerial declaration (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1) adopted at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016).

2.   The mandate of the Working Group stated out that would review progress made by countries in Europe and Central Asia in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System by 2021. The Working Group would also identify and explore options for establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks and, as part of that process, develop an inclusive platform for countries to discuss the integration of environmental, economic and social considerations regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, the green economy and other related areas of work. Moreover, the Working Group would lead a process of consultation on the regular pan-European environmental assessment and the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting by 2020 and engage in capacity-building assistance regarding specific challenges in environmental monitoring and assessment.

3.   The twenty-first session of the Working Group was held in Geneva, on 6 and 7 May 2019.

B. Attendance

4.   Environmental experts and statisticians from the following countries attended the meeting: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

5.   Representatives of the European Commission, the European Environment Agency and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) also attended the meeting.

6.   Furthermore, the National Council for Science and the Environment (United States of America) and Zoï Environment Network participated in the meeting.

C. Procedural matters

7.   The meeting was chaired by Ms. Katerina Nikolovska (North Macedonia).

8.   The Working Group adopted the agenda for its twenty-first session, as contained in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/1.

II. Adoption of the report of the twentieth session of the Working Group

9.   The secretariat summarized the outcomes of the twentieth session of the Working Group (3 and 4 September 2018) as contained in the report of that session (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/2) and informed the Working Group of the status of implementation of the decisions and recommendations that had been made at the twentieth session, as well as of the consideration of the Working Group's activities by the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-fourth session (29–31 January 2019).

10.   The representative of the Russian Federation requested that the word "produce", as contained in paragraph 66 of the meeting report of the twentieth session

(ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/2), and its Russian translation, be amended to indicate that no new information had been collated when preparing the country factsheet for the Russian Federation.

11.   The Working Group adopted the report of the meeting (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/2) and noted the information provided by the secretariat on the status of implementation of decisions and recommendations from its twentieth session.

III.   Implementing the renewed mandate and terms of reference

12.   The secretariat recalled that the Committee on Environmental Policy, at its twenty-fourth session, had taken note of the outline of the Working Group's activities up to 2021 and the annual timetable of activities for 2019. The Committee had also taken note of the serious concerns expressed by the Working Group regarding the availability of funds for the financial support of meeting participants, especially from South-Eastern Europe but also from other subregions.

13.   The secretariat presented the annual timetable of activities for 2020 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/4), including the main objectives of the Working Group and priorities for the implementation of activities in 2020.

14.   The secretariat informed the Working Group about the financial resources available to support meetings of the Working Group and its other activities, highlighting the gap in financial resources to support participants, especially those from South-Eastern Europe.

15.   A representative of UNEP presented a Russian-funded project on capacity development and technology transfer to improve the generation and use of data and information in support of environmental monitoring in Central Asia, aimed at building the capacities of environmental authorities and equipping countries with state-of-the-art information technology systems. The representative highlighted the importance of conducting science-policy dialogues to integrate environmental information into policymaking.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

16.   The Working Group took note of the revised outline of activities leading up to 2021 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/3).

17.   The representative of Switzerland requested that item B.1. in the annual timetable of activities for 2020 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/4) be reclassified as high priority. The Working Group then adopted the annual timetable for 2020.

IV.   Reporting on the Shared Environmental Information System to support a regular process of environmental assessment

18.   The terms of reference for the Working Group specified that it would regularly evaluate the performance of ECE countries in establishing and implementing the Shared Environmental Information System against the targets and performance indicators adopted by the Committee. They also specified that the Working Group would prepare both a mid-term and a final report for the Committee on Environmental Policy on the establishment and implementation of the Shared Environmental Information System leading up to 2021.

19.   During its twenty-fourth session, the Committee had welcomed the mid-term review report on the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System (ECE/CEP/2019/7) and expressed appreciation for the progress achieved in Europe and Central Asia since the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference. The Committee had also requested the Working Group to lead a further review of progress in advance of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

20.   At its twentieth session, the Working Group had agreed to adjust the assessment framework (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/5) used to produce the mid-term review report and had asked the secretariat to present a revised assessment framework during the next meeting of

the Working Group. The Working Group had also decided that the revised framework, once approved, would be used for the final report on progress in the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System at the pan-European level for the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

21. The secretariat presented a revised assessment framework of the Shared Environmental Information System (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/5). The presentation covered the timeline, the results of the online survey on the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework and the design of a questionnaire proposed for further discussion by the Working Group.

22. The secretariat also presented possible four options for the Shared Environmental Information System performance score (informal document): the performance score used to report to the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference; the performance score used for the mid-term review; a performance score based on the three pillars of the Shared Environmental Information System (content, infrastructure and cooperation); and no performance score for the next progress report.

23. A representative of North Macedonia reflected on the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework, noting that some changes must be made, including providing clarifications and revising or dividing some questions.

24. A representative of Georgia presented perspectives regarding measuring the Shared Environmental Information System performance score and options for the next progress report. She stressed that the performance score highlighted areas that needed improvement and that it was a useful tool for assessing the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System. There were still many important open questions that were not being scored and there were difficulties related to understanding some terminology used in the questionnaire. The representative of Georgia supported the use of a pillar-based performance score and stated that the assessment framework should include questions on the macro, thematic and data-flow levels.

25. A representative of UNEP presented the next steps for the Shared Environmental Information System online reporting tool, which had been developed in tandem with the assessment framework. UNEP provided a timeline and the next steps for its finalization and for making results from the assessment available for drafting the progress report. UNEP invited countries, on a voluntary basis, to test the final version of the online reporting tool.

26. The secretariat presented the timeline for the finalization of the Shared Environmental Information System progress report and an outline for a publication on progress in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System in Central Asia and Europe – a mid-term perspective, for further discussion by the Working Group.

27. The Working Group took note of the information provided and discussed the revised Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework, with a focus on the questionnaire and the approach to measuring progress, including arrangements required for the final report on progress in the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System ahead of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

28. The Working Group decided that the pillar-based performance score option would be included in the assessment framework for use in the final review of progress in establishing the Shared Environmental Information System in Europe and Central Asia.

29. The Working Group decided on the following timeline for the finalization of the assessment framework:

(a) Members of the Working Group could send comments on the assessment framework by email to the secretariat until 31 May 2019. Proposals to limit the number of questions or to elevate them from the data-flow level to the thematic or macro level would be especially welcome;

(b) In June 2019, a small group comprised of representatives of countries would review comments, revise the questionnaire and agree on the data flows to be assessed in the final review of progress;

(c)   The secretariat would prepare a draft outline of the final review of progress, to be considered by the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators at its sixteenth session (28 and 29 October 2019);

(d)   Data collection for the final assessment of progress might begin in December 2019.

30.   The Working Group agreed that a written silence procedure would be applied for the approval of the following:

(a)   The finalized assessment framework to be used for the final review of progress, including the questions to be posed, the indicators and data flows to be reviewed and the application of the chosen scoring system, in July 2019;

(b)   The outline of the final review of progress, in November 2019.

31.   The Working Group requested UNEP, in close coordination with the secretariat, to finalize the online reporting tool in time for the sixteenth session of the Joint Task Force.

32.   The Working Group agreed that the online reporting tool would be used as the primary tool for data collection for the final review of progress. It was highlighted that the tool would need to be able to upload content from a file, such as an Excel or Portable Document Format file.

33.   The Working Group approved the proposed outline for a publication on progress in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System in Central Asia and Europe and requested the secretariat to circulate the draft publication for review and to allow time for comments prior to its finalization.

V. Regular pan-European environmental assessment and streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting supported by the Shared Environmental Information System

34.   The Working Group had been tasked with leading a process of consultation on the regular pan-European environmental assessment (ECE/CEP/2017/2, annex II) for consideration by the Committee on Environmental Policy and leading up to the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

35.   During its twenty-fourth session, the Committee had taken note of the draft concept for the next pan-European environmental assessment (informal document) and the suggestions made by the Working Group for the modalities, scope and form of the assessment. Furthermore, it had requested the Working Group, with the support of the secretariat, working in close cooperation with the European Environment Agency and UNEP, to prepare a detailed proposal, including a timetable, budget and expanded outline for the assessment, to be presented to the Committee at its next session (ECE/CEP/2019/2, forthcoming).

36.   A representative of UNEP presented the options contained in the draft concept for the next pan-European regular assessment (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/6). The presentation covered three options, including timetables, budgets and expanded outlines for further discussion by the Working Group. UNEP also informed the Working Group that a steering committee would be established to develop, during the period 2019–2020, options for the Seventh Global Environment Outlook and the future direction of the Global Environment Outlook series. The representative of UNEP stressed that waiting for the outcome of the United Nations Environment Assembly mandate was not an option, as, by the time the outcome had been made known, it would be too late to start a process and find resources to produce the next pan-European regular assessment.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

37.   The Working Group decided to recommend that option 2 of the draft concept for the next pan-European environmental assessment (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/6), an indicator-based and thematic assessment, be used as a basis for preparing a detailed proposal on the pan-

European assessment. The proposal would need to include an annotated table of contents, a timeline for the assessment, costs for the elements of the assessment and the foreseen outputs. The proposal should be presented in such a way that it would make it clear how the assessment would be affected if inadequate financial resources were to be made available.

38.   The Working Group requested the secretariat to inform the Committee on Environmental Policy, at its twenty-fifth session (12–14 November 2019), of the outcome of the agenda item and of the recommendation made regarding the pan-European assessment.

39.   The Working Group requested the secretariat to share the detailed proposal with potential donors leading up to the session of the Committee on Environmental Policy.

VI. Sharing and integration of economic, social and environmental data with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

40.   In the light of the objective of discussing interlinkages between environmental, economic and social considerations regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the green economy and other related areas of work, the Working Group considered data interoperability and sector-specific data concerns within the context of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System.

41.   The secretariat informed the Working Group of progress in the implementation of a United Nations Development Account project on improving environmental monitoring and assessment in support of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and presented the next steps for 2019. Those included the finalization of seven gap analysis reviews, the development of national workplans or road maps and the conducting of national training sessions based on the recommendations contained in the gap analysis reviews.

42.   An ECE consultant presented preliminary findings from the gap analysis reviews produced for the project, noting that in almost all countries there was a lack of modern methods in environmental monitoring, and suggested allocating funds to accelerate full implementation of automated environmental monitoring and the provision of methodological assistance and training for the collection, storage and digitization of data.

43.   The Working Group discussed how it could continue its work on integrating economic, social and environmental data into the Shared Environmental Information System. It also considered topics for its next sessions.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

44.   The Working Group decided that green growth indicators would be considered during the next session of the Working Group.

VII. Guidance and information on environmental statistics and indicators

45.   During its fourteenth session (Rome, 2 and 3 October 2017), the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators had requested the secretariat to consider establishing a web-based portal through which users could seek guidance and information on environmental statistics and indicators, while recognizing the secretariat's resource constraints (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/6).

46.   The secretariat reported on further possibilities to establish a web-based portal, noting that limited human and financial resources and the ongoing process of migrating the ECE website into a new system meant that there was a lack of capacities to set up and maintain a dedicated web-based portal at the current time.

47.   Representatives of UNEP and the ECE Statistical Division provided updates on their most recent and planned activities. They informed the Working Group about workshops that

had been carried out recently under a joint United Nations Development Account-funded UNEP/ECE project and a European Union-funded capacity-building project.

48.   At its fifteenth session (25 and 26 October 2018), the Joint Task Force had considered how the ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators could be further revised and improved. It had requested the secretariat to draft a workplan for the review of the guidelines and invited experts from the Joint Task Force and other expert communities to participate in the review.

49.   A representative of the ECE Statistical Division presented the progress made in reviewing the ECE set of environmental indicators and the associated guidelines. The main constraints on the process were limited resources in countries and in the secretariat and the fact that international indicator sets and methodologies were still in development.

50.   The Working Group discussed the next steps for reviewing the ECE guidelines.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

51.   The Working Group decided that no further action would be taken with regard to the establishment of a web-based portal and that existing resources would be utilized to update relevant content on the ECE website when possible.

52.   The Working Group took note of the progress made in revising the ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators and approved suggested changes to the metadata sheet. The Working Group further agreed to use the presented database to produce the metadata sheets.

53.   The Working Group agreed to stop using the environmental indicator production templates once the revision of the guidelines had been completed and proposed that the Joint Task Force discuss the process of phasing out the use of the production templates during its next session.

VIII.   Progress in environmental monitoring and assessment, including institutional and regulatory mechanisms and infrastructure at the national level

54.   Representatives of Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan shared information on major actions carried out since the Working Group's previous meeting regarding the production of environmental reports, improvements in data policy, institutional and regulatory mechanisms, data quality assurance and technical solutions for data exchange between various ministries, as well as on the modernization of national monitoring networks and the implementation of recommendations regarding environmental monitoring and assessment carried out as a part of national environmental performance reviews.

55.   A representative of the European Environment Agency informed the Working Group about progress and results of the European Neighbourhood Instrument Shared Environmental Information System East II project on the implementation of the principles and practices of the Shared Environmental Information System in the Eastern Partnership countries, funded by the European Neighbourhood Instrument and implemented by the Agency. She highlighted the fact that the focus of the European Neighbourhood Instrument Shared Environmental Information System East II project was on providing assistance to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to improve capacities to manage and use environmental information to support decision-making and regular state-of-the-environment reporting and indicator-based assessments, in line with European Union and European Environment Agency methodologies.

56.   A representative of the European Environment Agency and the secretariat together presented findings from a report on the current status of production, sharing and use of ECE environmental indicators in the European Union Eastern Partnership countries. The report

had been prepared as a part of work to support production and regular update of the regional set of indicators and strengthen environmental statistics and accounting in the six Eastern Partnership countries under the European Neighbourhood Instrument Shared Environmental Information System East II, funded by the European Union through the European Environment Agency. In the mid-term review, countries had specified that the data flows were readily available and accessible online in 90 per cent of cases, though that proportion dropped to 77 per cent for water-related data flows. The speakers suggested continuing the work on the integration and harmonization of environmental data flows, in line with the Shared Environmental Information System principles, taking into account the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, and increasing the use of indicators for different purposes.

57.   The secretariat introduced the Regional Conference on Environmental Data, which would be held back-to-back with the twenty-first session of the Working Group. The Regional Conference aimed at improving environmental monitoring and assessment in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

IX.   Other business and closure of the meeting

58.   The Working Group noted that its next session was scheduled to be held in Geneva, on 4 and 5 May 2020.

59.   The Working Group welcomed a summary of conclusions and recommendations and approved the decisions made during the twenty-first session.

60.   The Working Group and the secretariat thanked Austria, Norway, the Russian Federation, Switzerland and the European Environment Agency for their financial support. The Chair then closed the meeting.