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Environmental monitoring, assessment and reporting

Renewal of the mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

Note by the secretariat in consultation with the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

Summary

At its twenty-first session (Geneva, 27–30 October 2015), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy renewed the mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment for one year. The Committee requested the secretariat to submit the renewed mandate to the Executive Committee for approval, and also to prepare for the Committee's twenty-second session an updated proposal for the terms of reference for the Working Group (ECE/CEP/2015/2, paras. 91–92). At its meeting in Geneva on 10 May 2016, the ECE Executive Committee approved the renewed mandate of the Working Group (ECE/EX/2016/L.11).

The present document contains a review of the Working Group's achievements for the period 2015–2016 and presents, in an annex, a draft decision on the renewal of its mandate and terms of reference for a further five-year period. The document was prepared by the secretariat with the Working Group's support and in consultation with the ECE Statistical Division.

The Committee on Environmental Policy will be invited to consider the document with a view to adopting the renewed mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group and subsequently submitting them to the ECE Executive Committee for approval.

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I. Background

1. At its twenty-first session (Geneva, 27–30 October 2015), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy expressed its appreciation for the work of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment. It mandated the Working Group to review progress on the development of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS), based on the adopted targets and performance indicators, with a view to preparing an evaluation report for submission to ministers at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016).

2. Furthermore, the Committee renewed the Working Group's mandate and terms of reference for one year, and requested the secretariat to prepare for the Committee's twenty-second session an updated proposal for the Working Group's terms of reference. The proposal was to take into account the outcomes of the Batumi Conference and suggestions from further consultations with Committee members and observers on possible additional activities to be carried out by the Working Group. In addition, the Committee specified that the proposal should include provisions for the Working Group to report on activities to increase cooperation with the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators, with a view to enhancing coordination and streamlining and reinforcing the work on environmental monitoring and assessment. The ECE Executive Committee approved the renewed mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group at its meeting in Geneva on 10 May 2016 (ECE/EX/2016/L.11).

3. In Batumi, ministers welcomed progress in developing SEIS to support a regular process of environmental assessment, and invited countries to continue their efforts and to further develop their national information systems to have SEIS in place in the countries of Europe and Central Asia by 2021. In that regard, ministers noted the value of UNEP Live and the Group on Earth Observations as global knowledge-sharing platforms and welcomed the launch of the European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environment Outlook as the regular pan-European environmental assessment. The assessment for the pan-European region in this framework is built on existing national, subregional and thematic assessments, including *The European environment — state and outlook 2015* report produced by the European Environment Agency.

4. At its eighteenth session (Geneva, 28–29 June 2016), the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment, as part of preparing its new terms of reference, requested inputs from its members to develop a vision document for 2030 and a road map, leading up to 2021 (see ECE/CEP/AC.10/2016/2 and Corr.1).¹ That included addressing earlier demands for streamlining the work, and a discussion on how the activities of the Working Group could contribute more effectively to enhancing environmental monitoring and assessment in the pan-European region.

5. A proposal for a new mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group, as presented in the annex to the current document, was prepared in consultation with the ECE Statistical Division and takes into account:

(a) Inputs provided by the members of the Committee on Environmental Policy during its twenty-first session, and the need to streamline the activities of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators and Statistics (see ECE/CEP/2015/12).

¹ Available from www.unece.org/index.php?id=42166.

(b) The Batumi Ministerial Declaration “Greener, cleaner, smarter!” (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1), and the call for countries to continue their efforts and to further develop their national information systems to have SEIS in place in the countries of Europe and Central Asia by 2021;

(c) The Working Group’s request to engage in a consultative process, including a national consultation and an interactive round-table discussion during its eighteenth session, in order to develop a vision document and a five-year road map.

6. The present document includes the following parts:

(a) History and achievements of the Working Group 2015–2016;

(b) Working Group vision until 2030;

(c) Working modalities for the Working Group serving as the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks;

(d) Proposed mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group (annex).

7. The Committee on Environmental Policy will be invited to consider the present document with a view to adopting the proposed mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment for the next five-year period, up until the Committee’s regular session in 2021, and to subsequently submit the mandate and terms of reference to the ECE Executive Committee for approval.

II. History and achievements of the Working Group 2015–2016

8. The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment was originally established by the Committee on Environmental Policy in 2000 as the Ad Hoc Working Group on Environmental Monitoring. The body was to serve all the ECE member States as a platform to exchange good practice and information, develop action plans and strengthen initiatives in the area of environmental monitoring and related areas with a view to supporting environmental decision-making and assisting in the preparation of the Fifth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Kyiv, 2003). The Working Group obtained its current name in 2003 when its mandate was expanded to cover environmental assessment and, in particular, helping to streamline international environmental reporting in the pan-European region.²

9. The Working Group was mandated in 2007 to assist countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and interested countries of South-Eastern Europe (the target countries) to make monitoring and assessment an effective instrument for environmental policymaking, and to improve international environmental reporting. This assistance was further expanded, by later mandates, to supporting the efforts of the target countries in establishing SEIS to underpin regular reporting and assessments in accordance with the requirements and obligations under relevant multilateral environmental agreements.

10. Between 2007 and 2014 the Working Group focused on delivery of the mandated assistance to the target countries. It also continued to contribute to an appraisal of monitoring and assessment requirements within the framework of the Environment for Europe process and other relevant processes. In 2014, the Committee specifically mandated the Working Group to support the establishment of the pan-European SEIS and added the task of reviewing SEIS progress. From the onset, the Working Group was created mainly to

² The pan-European region under the Environment for Europe process covers the full membership of ECE, i.e., the 56 ECE member States.

serve the national institutions from all ECE member States dealing with environmental monitoring and assessment (environmental agencies or ministries), but was not limited to the participation of experts from these institutions.

11. To support the work of the Working Group, and specifically to assist the target countries with methodological challenges related to indicators used for environmental assessments, in 2009 the Committee together with the Conference of European Statisticians created the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators, recently renamed the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators (Joint Task Force).

12. The Committee on Environmental Policy and the Conference of European Statisticians requested the Joint Task Force to assist national statistical agencies and institutions responsible for environmental data and information in the target countries to improve the collection, processing and validation of environmental data underpinning the environmental indicators, in line with internationally accepted methodologies and statistical classifications. The objective was to gradually improve environmental statistics and the production and sharing of the agreed indicators by the target countries. The Joint Task Force focused on statistical methodologies and analysing the availability and quality of the data produced by the target countries.

13. The communication and cooperation between the Joint Task Force and the Working Group has always been exemplary. While the Joint Task Force helps the target countries to understand the indicator methodologies and supports them in applying the methodologies to produce and share specific environmental indicators, the Working Group assists these countries in analysing and assessing their national environmental policies, using the indicators produced, thereby improving their capacity for producing good quality, indicator-based state-of-the-environment reports. At the same time, the Working Group supports the establishment of SEIS, including monitoring the progress in its establishment, in all ECE countries. Taken together, the two bodies complement each other's work, and activities are carried out collaboratively between the ECE Environment and Statistics Divisions.

14. The work carried out by the Working Group in 2015 and 2016 focused on preparing the first report on progress in establishing SEIS in support of regular reporting in the pan-European region (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/8) and the European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environmental Outlook (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/INF/14) together with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This culminated in the launch of these reports during the Batumi Conference. On the basis of the progress report ministers welcomed progress in developing SEIS and invited countries to further develop their national information systems to have SEIS in place in the countries of Europe and Central Asia by 2021 (see ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1).

15. The eighteenth session of the Working Group was organized shortly after the Batumi Conference and provided a good opportunity to review the lessons learned from the SEIS progress report and consider the implications of the Batumi Ministerial Declaration. Among other things, the Working Group examined the review criteria applied in the SEIS progress report and considered how these could be improved. The outcome from this discussion was a decision by the Working Group to include data quality considerations into future SEIS progress reporting. Steps for the continued development of a SEIS reporting application through UNEP Live were also agreed upon (see ECE/CEP/AC.10/2016/2).

16. The eighteenth session was also dedicated towards the development of a vision for the Working Group for 2030, including a road map with more specific guiding objectives leading up to 2021. It should be noted that the 2030 vision is only meant to characterize the spectrum of potential developments and options for the Working Group, and to set out general principles that can be followed in the future.

III. Sharing our vision for 2030

17. The Working Group held national consultations and a foresight-oriented panel discussion at its eighteenth session as part of the process of preparing its new terms of reference (see ECE/CEP/AC.10/2016/2). The purpose of engaging the Working Group members and partner organizations in this process was to proactively address how the Working Group can contribute more effectively to enhance environmental monitoring and assessment in the pan-European region leading up to 2021.

18. The foresight-oriented work was furthermore set in motion by the Working Group to take into consideration new and future challenges, in particular, to consider recent developments, such as:

(a) The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015;

(b) The Paris Agreement on climate change, adopted at the twenty-first session of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on 12 December 2015;

(c) The Batumi Ministerial Declaration, “Greener, cleaner, smarter”, adopted by ECE ministers on 10 June 2016;

(d) The Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy, adopted by the Committee on Environmental Policy and endorsed by ministers in Batumi (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/6), and the Batumi Initiative on the Green Economy (BIG-E), which ministers welcomed in Batumi (ibid, annex).

19. These commitments, coupled with the request for new terms of reference from the Committee, provided the perfect conditions for the Working Group to reflect on past achievements, consider lessons learned, and discuss how all of that could fit into the bigger picture with regard to where the Working Group wants to be by 2021.

20. The discussion included reflections on how the Working Group could carry on its present activities, interlinked with the renewed call for establishing SEIS in the countries of Europe and Central Asia by 2021. Also taken into account was the request from the Committee that the Working Group serve as a regional environmental information and assessment “network of networks”, bringing together the experts contributing towards the UNEP Global Environment Outlook and the European Environment Agency’s European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet), together with other interested partners, to consider and oversee the publication of the regular pan-European environmental assessment.

21. The purpose of the consultative process was to define recommendations for immediate action, so that the secretariat could take the appropriate steps to realize the strategic goals and objectives set out in the vision document. The vision is a synthesis of past and current activities of the Working Group, as associated with its mandate and present terms of reference, taking into account recent developments and requests made by the Committee on Environmental Policy.

22. The process involved a questionnaire survey in which all members of the Working Group were asked to identify and clarify major institutional drivers and environmental priorities for national institutions concerned with environmental monitoring and assessment for the coming five-year period. The survey was organized as part of the regular process of consultations on environmental assessment by the secretariat. The questionnaire also aimed to take into account a longer time perspective to be able to consider the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

23. Results from the survey allowed the secretariat to define strategic and thematic priorities, which in turn provided the basis for round-table discussions focusing on three thematic topics:

- (a) Reporting and assessments;
- (b) Sustainable Development Goals and the green economy;
- (c) Environmental statistics.

24. Inputs provided by the Working Group during its eighteenth session were utilized by the secretariat to compose a draft vision document and road map, which was circulated to the Working Group to allow for feedback and additional contributions by all members and interested parties.

A. Changing to meet the future

25. The work underlying the vision document was organized with the interest of the Working Group's members at heart. Throughout this exercise and dialogue, it has been encouraging to hear stories about the real and enduring impact that the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment has had on the ground and to understand that there is true value in the work that is being carried out.

26. Since its inception in 2001, the Working Group has provided a joint and collaborative platform that has allowed its members to learn, find new opportunities and obtain new capacities and experiences. It has created interlinkages, spanning different policy areas and institutions, through the organization of regular sessions and capacity-building, and it has created a common space through which its members have been able to operationalize joint activities and set targets.

27. The vision set forth below is meant to lead the way, setting long-term strategic goals and objectives, including the type of activities that the Working Group wants to focus on in the years to come. The question the Working Group had to consider was, essentially, how it could build on its strengths to address new challenges in a way that was advantageous for all.

28. The vision takes into consideration that it is ultimately high-quality and robust environmental monitoring, reporting and assessment that represents the core function and driver behind the activities of the Working Group, complemented by the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators work on the collection, production, analysis, sharing and dissemination of environmental statistics and data — whether these activities concern support for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure successful progress reporting on the 2030 Agenda, the continued streamlining of activities under the Working Group and the Joint Task Force, or the integration of environmental, social and economic data under the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting. The provision of environmental information and data for monitoring and assessment has a central position in the Working Groups vision for 2030.

B. Cross-cutting goals and objectives

Capacity-building

29. The goal of the Working Group will be to focus on strengthening human capacities needed to address key challenges with regard to regional and national capacity gaps. This includes guidance on the production of regionally and internationally agreed environmental data flows and indicators in a manner coherent with the principles of SEIS for indicator-based assessments and reporting obligations, such as those for the Convention on Long-

range Transboundary Air Pollution and the Sustainable Development Goals. This includes taking into consideration new data demands that will surface in the years to come.

30. It should be noted that the Working Group has played an important role in establishing SEIS on many levels, e.g., by building capacity, gathering and assessing data, and by advocating for the implementation of SEIS in the pan-European region. The range of actions for the future should build on this expertise when considering the type of capacity-building support that can be provided by the Working Group. To increase the capacity of its target countries to monitor and report on the environment, it is foreseen that the Working Group will continue to produce guidelines and (scalable) methodologies that address capacity-related challenges and gaps unique to the pan-European region. The goal will also be to focus on scaling-up technical assistance activities, by training national stakeholders how to improve the production of and access to environmental information and data for monitoring and assessment as part of building organizational capacity.

31. It should also be recognized that capacity-building is not only about human resource development. The approach will be integrative, and consider the sustainability of capacity-building efforts, national ownership and policy-level impacts. Perhaps even more important will be to help create a systemic and enabling environment through the sessions of the Working Group and the development of tools, guidelines and methodologies, addressing key capacity gaps and new data demands. The long-term goal is to focus not only on outputs, but also to harness the processes that lead to these outputs, which is a key strength of the Working Group.

Communication and cooperation

32. The Working Group recognizes the importance of cooperation and the strategic value in addressing the lack thereof, in particular, as this may help to streamline activities and improve the efficiency of environmental monitoring and reporting. It is therefore important that the Working Group finds new momentum to revitalize the forum as a first step to address this concern. This is a prerequisite to having a clear vision and the Working Group is uniquely positioned to drive the formulation and realization of this vision.

33. The overarching goal is to deepen the collective effort to promote the sharing of knowledge, experiences and technology to support capacity-building and human resource development in the pan-European region leading up to 2021. In order to do so, the Working Group must consolidate its regional profile and establish a distinct position in which it can play a constructive and complementary role together with other international, regional and subregional forums. The Working Group will also need to increase participation in its activities to cover the pan-European region as a whole.

34. The key element to achieve this will be to enhance the Working Group's role as an active forum for dialogue and collective action on regional issues of common concern and to promote the Group's engagement with relevant stakeholders, including international organizations. Also, it is important to consider how the Working Group could improve its continued cooperation with the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements, such as the ECE environmental treaties. In this regard, it will be crucial to enhance the Working Groups capacity to support cooperation through the review and restructuring of existing areas of cooperation to promote focused, activity-driven and results-oriented cooperation.

Mobilizing more and better resources in support of the Working Group

35. One key objective for the Working Group, which underpins all of its activities, is improved access to, and deepening of, financial resources to support the range of actions that will be carried out. This will, in part, focus on increased streamlining of activities in an effort to reduce costs and the expansion of the range and type of activities being carried out.

Secondly, it will entail proactive steps to ensure that the Working Group mobilize direct support from prospective contributors and international organizations, leading up to the establishment of SEIS by 2021 and the monitoring and reporting related to the Sustainable Development Goals.

36. To reach the ambitious targets and objectives set out in this document, it will be necessary to enhance the long-term stability of the Working Group to guarantee that it can carry out all the activities set out in the vision document — with all the costs this would imply — and to provide it with the financial capability to increase the scale and impact of its activities. Ensuring additional financial support will for this reason be essential to make sure its vision becomes reality.

C. Sustainable Development Goals and the green economy

37. Monitoring and reporting mechanisms for tracking progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals provides an enormous opportunity for learning and building on existing efforts that have been carried out by the Working Group. Ongoing and planned reporting activities provide opportunities to identify shortcomings and find solutions, and there is a clear call from members to provide assistance on how to define, collect and analyse environmental information and data to measure progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the green economy. Results from both the questionnaire and panel discussion stress the complex set of challenges underlying the obligation to report on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and highlight that traditional approaches and tools are not fit for this purpose. Such reporting requires integration.

38. Challenges emphasized by the Working Group include the absence of Sustainable Development Goals in national strategic documents, methodological and procedural obstacles, and insufficient available data and knowledge about international methodologies and standards. Among some of the key challenges highlighted in the panel discussion were the considerable data requirements and analysis needed to track progress and, for countries that have already started integrating Sustainable Development Goals into their national development plans, the customization of indicators. A host of solutions were also noted, including efforts to promote legislative improvements, increased information exchange and engagement of international experts and capacity-building focusing on Sustainable Development Goal and green economy indicator-related methodologies and data collection for national use.

39. The goal for support in the area of the 2030 Agenda and the Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy is to build on past achievements and lessons learned in connection with the establishment of SEIS and the sharing of environmental indicators. This will be done both through the Working Group and the Joint Task Force, in collaboration with relevant partners, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other ECE divisions. The objective is to complement planned activities to develop national reporting mechanisms for the member countries to self-monitor and self-evaluate progress on SEIS establishment so that they contribute also to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to improving green economy monitoring capabilities. The aim would also be to ensure that ongoing collaborative activities are maintained, in particular with OECD and the work being carried out on green economy indicators through the OECD Green Action Programme. This should furthermore entail proactive steps to engage other ECE divisions and interested parties in their work on the Sustainable Development Goals.

40. The overarching goal would be to strengthen capacities of national environmental authorities and statistical agencies so that the member countries are able to prepare regular, indicator-based reports on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the

green economy. Steps should also be taken to influence national policy demand in this regard.

D. Reporting and assessment

41. Environmental reporting and assessments set the stage for the compilation of robust information or an evidence base as an essential component for better policymaking. This is the core purpose of the Working Group, namely, to help improve national capacities to monitor and evaluate the environment. It is the main driver behind all the activities being carried out by the Working Group, both through its sessions and collaboration with the Joint Task Force together with its work with other organizations, such as the European Environment Agency, OECD and UNEP.

42. It is clear from the preceding chapter that the challenges in monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the green economy is inherently interlinked with the overall work being carried out by the Working Group to enable informed decision-making processes, both nationally and regionally, in the environmental sector. However, inputs provided by its members demonstrate that national operational expertise and capacities to monitor the environment continue to be insufficient, emphasizing the continuing demand for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment.

43. Even though much progress has been made, challenges emphasized by the Working Group include the absence of integrated national monitoring programmes and methodologies and the absence of cross-national and inter-agency mechanisms that would enable knowledge exchange. It was also noted that the financial viability and sustainability of national monitoring systems needed to be improved and that there was a clear and continued demand for capacity-building strategies and activities, both at the regional and national level.

44. The overarching goal for support in the area of monitoring, assessment, and reporting is continued efforts to deliver guidance to help make national monitoring programmes an efficient and practical tool for environmental policy, including assistance towards the development and improvement of national environmental monitoring systems, their technical specifications and modernization. This includes increased, targeted efforts to provide capacity-building on how to use and harmonize indicator-related methodologies, data collection and quality assurance and quality control aspects of environmental data and indicators for national and international reporting obligations, taking into account the call for increased cooperation and communication. The short- to long-term objective is to facilitate the establishment of SEIS by 2021 — as called for in the Batumi Ministerial Declaration — and to assist in the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting by 2020. This also sets the time frame for the request of a five-year mandate for the Working Group.

45. The objective is also to assist in common activities being carried out by ECE, the European Environment Agency and UNEP, as characterized by the common approach laid out by the three organizations, to achieve these goals and to support the countries in the pan-European region. This objective should be operationalized in tandem with efforts to provide guidance on how to monitor progress towards the 2030 Agenda and the green economy.

E. Environmental statistics

46. Environmental statistics was picked up as a thematic topic for several reasons. Among these are earlier calls by the Committee on Environmental Policy to streamline

activities of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force; in particular, it had been suggested that the two bodies should be merged. The main argument against merging the two bodies in this discussion was that the Working Group and the Joint Task Force have different geographical coverage and principally target different governmental institutions, one servicing environmental authorities and the other both environmental authorities and statistical agencies. The Joint Task Force's members are countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, while the Working Group has a wider membership. At the twenty-first session of the Committee, it was agreed that while merging the two bodies would not be efficient, the Working Group and Joint Task Force should ensure that their activities were streamlined to reduce costs and increase their relevance.

47. The preparation of a vision for the Working Group was seen as an opportunity to further clarify the different objectives of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force and to consider their interlinkages. In addition to earlier arguments, it should be highlighted that the Joint Task Force principally deals with the production of environmental statistics and indicators while the Working Group's focus is on national, regional and international environmental monitoring, reporting and assessment. More specifically, the Joint Task Force focuses on the information and data that feeds into the environmental reports and assessment covered by the Working Group. This explains the need for close cooperation between the two bodies but is also an argument against merging the two groups.

48. There are two additional factors that can be noted. The Working Group, in contrast to the Joint Task Force, plays a more active role in facilitating and coordinating activities between the member countries and relevant organizations, such as through the establishment of a network of networks. The Joint Task Force is also unique in that it explicitly offers statistical capacity-building, through the provision of technical assistance and training in the pan-European region. Attempts to merge the two bodies would thus not only risk making the two bodies less relevant for the respective types of agencies that the Working Group and Joint Task Force service, it would reduce the ability to perform the specific functions being carried out.

49. The overarching goal for support in the area of environmental statistics is to ensure that the Working Group and Joint Task Force continue to work closely together in setting priority areas for action and that the activities carried out by the two bodies are done in synergy. This would, among other things, entail the continued and close cooperation between the ECE Environment and Statistical Divisions. The sessions of the Working Group and Joint Task Force are furthermore held back to back and they provide the perfect platform through which cross-national and cross-agency communication on the production of environmental statistics can be stimulated. This should include addressing concerns about methodologies in the field of environment statistics and the comparability of environmental indicators and statistics across the pan-European region.

50. The Working Group will also address the demand for integration of economic, social and environmental considerations and the call for capacity development in this regard. The work being carried out through System of Environmental-Economic Accounting should be considered by the Working Group more extensively in the years to come, and in particular the relevance this will have for monitoring and reporting on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. The Working Group recognizes that sustainable development will not be possible without taking into account information and data from economic, social and environmental sources, and the formidable challenge that underlies this task. It would be of relevance to ensure that the sharing and increased accessibility of all environmental statistics is coherent with SEIS principles and to build linkages that help to facilitate integration with the Joint Task Force.

IV. Working modalities of the network of networks

51. The request by the Working Group to improve communication and cooperation (see sect. III.B) builds on the mandate to serve as an environmental knowledge and assessment network of networks for the ECE region, bringing together the European Environment Agency and its European Environment Information and Observation Network, UNEP and interested parties for a regular process of consultation on an environmental assessment to keep the pan-European environment under review.

52. Following the successful launch of the European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environmental Outlook at the Batumi Conference and the Ministerial Declaration to support the regional assessment as the regular pan-European environmental assessment (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1, para. 10) there is a continuing demand for a strong Working Group to serve as a network of networks and to facilitate the continued dialogue on the regional assessment.

53. These developments have been followed up by the secretariat through informal consultations with interested parties to explore how it would be possible to jointly elaborate the working modalities of the network of networks. From these discussions it has become clear that any final proposal by the Working Group would have to be based on additional consultations to explore how a network of networks could be designed and operationalized. This is crucial to ensure that there is sufficient interest and commitment from other networks to take part in the activities foreseen.

54. The formation of a network of networks is made more complex due to the fact that the European Environment Agency and its Eionet are presently undergoing an evaluation. This is part of a regular evaluation, every five years, and may result in changes to the Agency's mandate and functions. It is difficult to obtain any significant commitments until this process has been finalized. It would furthermore be relevant to include other organizations in the discussion on and preparation of the working modalities of the network of networks. This could include, for example, the Group on Earth Observations, as part of an effort to reach out and involve other relevant networks. Taking all of this into account means that more time and preparation will be necessary before a final proposal is put forward to the Committee.

55. The intent is to organize a foresight-oriented workshop that will address the feasibility of operationalizing a network of networks (e.g., financially and practically) and to determine the appropriate way for this to be accomplished. Recognizing that any network of networks would be dependent on the commitment and willingness of its members, it will be essential to engage all relevant actors in a collaborative effort to establish the working modalities of the network of networks.

56. It is foreseen that the foresight-oriented workshop will be organized in connection with the nineteenth session of the Working Group in June 2017. The output from this work will be a strategic document on the establishment of a network of networks to be presented at the next session of the Committee for its consideration.

Annex

Proposal for the mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

I. Mandate

1. The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment shall serve as the environmental knowledge and assessment network for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region, under the oversight of the Committee on Environmental Policy. It shall report annually to the Committee on its achievements and the implementation or modification of the objectives and activities set out herein. These terms of reference are valid for a period of five years, until the Committee's regular session in 2021.

II. Objectives

2. The aim of the Working Group, under the oversight of the Committee, is to:

(a) Assist in the establishment and operation of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) in Europe and Central Asia by 2021;

(b) Lead a process of consultation on the regular pan-European environmental assessment and the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting by 2020;

(c) Serve as a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks and, as part of this process, develop an inclusive platform through which countries can discuss interlinkages between environmental, economic and social considerations as regards the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the green economy, and other related areas of work;

(d) Engage in capacity-building assistance with regard to specific challenges in environmental monitoring and assessment, including the development and improvement of national environmental monitoring systems, their technical specifications and modernization, and the collection of environmental knowledge through national monitoring systems in the ECE countries. The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators (Joint Task Force) will continue to carry out all activities relating to statistical capacity-building for countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

III. Planned activities and outputs

3. The Working Group shall:

(a) Assist in the establishment and operation of SEIS in Europe and Central Asia, and in particular:

(i) Continue supporting the establishment of SEIS with regard to its specific content and principles in support of regular environmental assessment processes and reporting;

- (ii) Continue cooperating with the Joint Task Force in its work on environmental statistics and indicators, associated data sets, and accompanying environmental information and data necessary to establish SEIS;
 - (iii) Regularly evaluate the performance of ECE countries in establishing and implementing SEIS against the SEIS targets and performance indicators adopted by the Committee;
 - (iv) Prepare a mid-term and final report for the Committee on the establishment and implementation of SEIS leading up to 2021;
 - (v) Provide annual recommendations on how SEIS can be further strengthened in European and Central Asian countries;
- (b) 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 in particular:
- (i) Bring together experts involved in the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Global Environment Outlook process and the European Environment Agency's European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet), including interested parties, to discuss and oversee the regular pan-European environmental assessment;
 - (ii) Discuss and detail regional priorities concerning the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting, involving also other thematic networks, including those under the multilateral environmental agreements, in the discussion;
 - (iii) Oversee the implementation of proposed recommendations and guidance provided through the consultation process on the regular pan-European environmental assessment and the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting;
- (c) Serve as a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks and, as part of this process, develop an inclusive platform to discuss interlinkages between environmental, economic and social considerations regarding the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the green economy, and other related areas of work, and in particular:
- (i) Coordinate a consultative process, involving all relevant thematic networks and interested parties, including secretariats of conventions and other institutions, at both the regional and national levels, to elaborate the working modalities of a regional network of networks;
 - (ii) Cooperate with the Joint Task Force to ensure that all planned and future activities are synergetic and streamlined;
 - (iii) Develop capacities to engage other communities and networks, such as the Group on Earth Observations, to discuss how environmental, social and economic information and data can be integrated and utilized in decision-making;
 - (iv) Operationalize proposed recommendations and guidance provided through the consultative process to ensure the sustainable implementation of a regional network of networks;
 - (v) Publish outcomes from the Working Group's collaborative activities (e.g., best practices, guidelines and lessons learned) to share outputs and guide future activities in the area;

(d) Engage in capacity-building assistance addressing specific challenges related to environmental monitoring and assessment and environmental knowledge maintained through national monitoring systems in the European and Central Asian countries. The identification of specific challenges (e.g., air quality, water and waste monitoring) will depend on regional and national capacity gaps and the identification of priority areas for action to be defined by the Working Group members. In particular, the implementation of all subsequent activities will depend on the mobilization of resources to enable the Working Group to organize and offer additional capacity-building assistance to enhance environmental monitoring and assessment capabilities. Such activities include:

(i) Detailing regional and national capacity gaps, in collaboration with the Joint Task Force, in information and data needed for producing the ECE set of environmental indicators, the European Environment Agency core set of indicators, OECD green growth indicators and Sustainable Development Goal indicators. This will include identifying data and information gaps in the target countries;

(ii) Supporting countries in the development of regional and national indicator frameworks to monitor the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda, and activities to support its implementation, including the review and establishment of national reporting mechanisms, procedures and methodological approaches associated with the Sustainable Development Goal indicators in all ECE countries;

(iii) Engaging and liaising directly with other relevant actors working on capacity-building in related areas of work, such as Global Environment Facility-funded Cross-Cutting Capacity Development projects, throughout the pan-European region;

(iv) Implementing capacity-building activities to provide assistance in accordance with priority areas of action identified for targeted ECE countries.

4. The following outputs will be achieved leading up to 2021:

(a) SEIS data sets, as contained in the ECE Online Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators, will be gradually reviewed and extended in collaboration with the Joint Task Force and as part of refining the SEIS progress reporting;

(b) Assistance will be provided to target countries for reporting on SEIS establishment and starting preparations for the mid-term and final SEIS performance reports in 2018 and 2021, respectively;

(c) Recommendations and advice will be provided to ECE countries to improve their SEIS performance;

(d) Working modalities of the regional network of networks will be defined and operationalized;

(e) Assistance will be provided in the preparation of the regular pan-European environmental assessment and other relevant state-of-the-environment reports;

(f) Support will be given for the preparation of regional and national indicator frameworks to monitor the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda and the establishment of national reporting mechanisms, procedures and methodological approaches associated with Sustainable Development Goal indicators;

(h) Thematic conferences, meetings and workshops to prepare publications that address the integration of environmental and economic data will be organized, subject to the availability of funding;

(i) Focused capacity-building activities will be carried out to address specific national priorities, including the preparation of training materials and the provision of advisory services, subject to the availability of funding.

IV. Timetable

5. The Working Group shall prepare an annual timetable of activities and achievements, as an official document, and regularly report to the Committee. This will ensure that the Working Group can accommodate new demands over time and allow the Committee to comment and monitor ongoing and future activities. The Working Group shall also endeavour to submit a mid-term review to the Committee as a stocktaking exercise.

6. During 2017 the Working Group shall:

- (a) Review the SEIS content to see if it can be extended with additional data sets;
- (b) Operationalize the online SEIS reporting application through UNEP Live, in collaboration with UNEP, and present the outcomes to the Committee at its twenty-third session;
- (c) Present the working modalities of the regional network of networks to the Committee at its twenty-third session;
- (d) Organize a consultation and workshop to detail regional and national priorities regarding monitoring and assessment capabilities needed for compiling environmentally related Sustainable Development Goal indicators as part of defining priority areas of action for the Working Group for 2018;
- (e) Organize a thematic workshop that addresses how environmental and economic data can be integrated and engage other communities and networks, such as the Group on Earth Observations, in these activities;
- (f) Continue efforts to mobilize resources and support from regional and international organizations to enable the Working Group to increase its capacity-building assistance.

V. Methods of work

7. The Working Group shall meet at least once annually. It shall also communicate through e-mail and other electronic collaborative platforms, such as its newsletter and social networks, in the period between meetings.

8. Additional meetings, workshops and capacity-building activities will be organized subject to the availability of funding.

VI. Membership

9. The Working Group shall be composed of members from all of the ECE member States. They should represent the national institutions dealing with environmental knowledge and assessments.

10. The Working Group shall also involve representatives of programmes and policies and multilateral environmental agreements dealing with the collection of environmental

data and information and the generation of environmental assessments — whether covering the environment as a whole, or only certain themes — as well as expert teams.

11. The Working Group shall elect a chair and two vice-chairs for a term of up to two years, ensuring a regional balance in the nominations. The chair and vice-chairs shall be eligible for re-election for one additional term..

VII. Secretariat support and resources

12. In its operation, the Working Group shall be serviced by the ECE secretariat, supported by UNEP and the European Environment Agency, and guided by the relevant procedures established by the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy.

13. Donors will be invited to provide support for the Working Group's activities.
