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Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators

Seventeenth session
Geneva, 26 October 2020

Report of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators on its seventeenth session

I. Introduction

A. Background

1. The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators was established by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy and the ECE Conference of European Statisticians to support the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in improving their environmental statistics and indicators. The aim of the work being carried out by the Joint Task Force is to strengthen environmental reporting and make environmental statistics available and comparable throughout the pan-European region in the long term. The terms of reference of the Joint Task Force (ECE/CEP/2017/12) were approved by the ECE Executive Committee on 4 July 2018 (ECE/EX/2018/L.7).

2. The Joint Task Force held its seventeenth session in Geneva, in a hybrid format, on 26 October 2020.

B. Attendance

3. The meeting was attended by environmental experts and statisticians from the following countries: Albania, Austria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

4. Representatives of the United Nations Statistics Division, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Environment Agency, the Institute for Sustainable Innovation (Russian Federation), the Aarhus Information Centre Vlora (Albania), Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and the University of Vienna also attended the meeting. The meeting was serviced by the ECE secretariat.



C. Organizational matters

5. The meeting was chaired by Ms. Ekaterina Poleshchuk (Belarus).

II. Adoption of the agenda

6. The Chair invited the Joint Task Force to adopt its agenda.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

7. The Joint Task Force adopted the agenda of its seventeenth session as set out in document ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2020/1.

III. Adoption of the report of the sixteenth session

8. The secretariat summarized the outcomes of the sixteenth session of the Joint Task Force (Geneva, 28 and 29 October 2019) as contained in the corresponding report (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2019/2) and invited the Joint Task Force to adopt the report.

9. The secretariat informed the Joint Task Force about the status of implementation of the decisions and recommendations made at the sixteenth session.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

10. The Joint Task Force adopted the report of its sixteenth session and took note of the information provided by the secretariat on the implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the sixteenth session of the Joint Task Force.

IV. Data needs, statistics and indicators on environment and health in response to the coronavirus disease pandemic

11. A representative of WHO presented water, sanitation and hygiene statistics that are relevant in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

12. A representative of the University of Vienna then presented early findings from studies conducted on the mental health benefits of contact with nature during the pandemic.

13. Several member States then shared their experience in producing and sharing information, data and statistics on COVID-19 and their use for policymaking. A representative of Ireland covered in his presentation issues such as data needs in a pandemic, the role of national statistical offices, the dissemination of data and environment-relevant behavioural changes as a response to COVID-19. A representative of the Netherlands shared experience on dashboards used related to fast indicators in the COVID-19 crisis. A representative of Kazakhstan then delivered a presentation on “Assessing air quality changes in large cities during COVID-19 lockdowns: the impacts of traffic-free urban conditions in Almaty, Kazakhstan”.¹

14. The secretariat then provided an overview of national statistical office responses to novel requests to inform policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ECE platform on COVID-19 and official statistics and the outcomes of the sixty-eighth plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians (Geneva, 22 June 2020) and related webinars.

¹ Presentations are available on the web page for the meeting: <https://unece.org/statistics/events/joint-task-force-environmental-statistics-and-indicators-0>.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

15. The Joint Task Force:

- (a) Took note of information provided on data needs, statistics and indicators on environment and health in response to the COVID-19 pandemic related to its own activities;
- (b) Invited its members, international organizations and partners to provide it with regular updates on recent developments related to environment and health statistics, indicators and data.

V. Review of the Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators

16. At the sixteenth session, the Joint Task Force had requested the secretariat to revise the ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators² to better inform global policies, link them with statistical frameworks and increase the user-friendliness of the metadata (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2018/2, paras. 31–40) and to present the completed parts of the revised Guidelines as an official document at its next session.

17. The secretariat therefore presented the completed parts of the Revised Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2020/3) and the draft metadata sheets for 42 indicators (28 of which had also been made available in Russian prior to the meeting) for discussion and approval. The secretariat also informed the Joint Task Force about the multidimensional review process, among other things, reporting that:

- (a) The Revised Guidelines made a clear distinction between “indicators” and “data and statistics”, using the definitions contained in the United Nations Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics (FDES) as presented and discussed at the sixteenth session of the Joint Task Force;
- (b) The indicators were presented according to the FDES structure and had been reviewed accordingly;
- (c) The indicator metadata had been updated;
- (d) Some of the earlier indicator placeholders had been filled;
- (e) All the information had been stored in a bilingual database (English and Russian).

18. The secretariat also informed the Joint Task Force that the remaining indicators (approximately 120, including new proposals for indicators) would be gradually finalized and sent to Joint Task Force members for comments.

19. Twenty members of the Joint Task Force participated in a live polling on the level of agreement with the proposals made by the secretariat, using a scale from one to five points. The results showed that most participants agreed with all the following statements:

- Using the structure of the FDES for presenting the set of indicators is useful (average: 4.5 points)
- There are important thematic areas which are not covered by the current list of indicators (average: 3.5 points)
- The structure and content of the indicator metadata are useful (average: 4.6 points)
- The presented way forward makes sense to me (average: 4.3 points)

20. Comments received through the live polling tool were mainly in support of the revisions already made or planned. One comment was on the importance of keeping consistency with European Union indicator development to ensure comparability across the pan-European region.

² Available at <https://unece.org/guidelines-application-environmental-indicators>.

21. The Joint Task Force then examined, through a panel discussion, the Revised Guidelines and the review process for the remaining indicators, including whether certain indicators needed to be replaced or added, for example, those related to climate change. Panellists also took into account the anonymous results and comments received through the live polling tool. The panel consisted of representatives of Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

22. Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine expressed support for the revised structure of the Guidelines. Switzerland highlighted the importance of harmonizing the ECE indicators with the indicator framework employed by the European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET) of the European Environment Agency, to the extent possible, to ensure comparable indicators and environmental information across the ECE region to support, among other things, regular pan-European environmental assessments.

23. The members of the Joint Task Force were invited to review and provide substantive comments on the Revised Guidelines by the end of November 2020.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

24. The Joint Task Force:

(a) Agreed with the general structure of the Revised Guidelines as proposed by the secretariat, using FDES as the overall framework and structure;

(b) Noted the importance of harmonizing the indicators with the European Environment Agency/EIONET indicator system;

(c) Decided to follow up in two parallel ways regarding the content of the Guidelines with:

(i) The secretariat leading one expert group, together with the Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Joint Task Force. The group would continue the review of the Guidelines, taking into account all comments that had been expressed during the meeting and those made in writing. It would then prepare a new version of the revised guideline materials. All materials would be shared with the Joint Task Force for comment;

(ii) A second expert group, consisting of members of the Joint Task Force and led by one of the member States, would be established to review the list and number of all indicators and to propose new indicators as needed. Suggestions for which country would take the lead should be submitted to the secretariat;

(d) Requested the secretariat to share all revised documents with it for written feedback after the meeting.

VI. Ongoing developments with relevance for the work of the Joint Task Force

25. The secretariat summarized the main outcomes of the Fifth Joint Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)/ECE Seminar on Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (Geneva, 13 and 14 February 2020) and the Expert Forum for Producers and Users of Climate Change related Statistics (Geneva (online), 28 September–1 October 2020). It also provided an update on the planned Sixth Joint OECD/ECE Seminar on Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, tentatively scheduled for March 2021 as a hybrid meeting. The secretariat then presented the main outcomes of activities of other related expert groups, including on measuring hazardous events and disasters, climate change-related statistics and indicators and the in-depth review of measuring circular economy.

26. A representative of the United Nations Statistics Division then presented recent updates related to its work on FDES and the United Nations Statistics Division/UNEP Questionnaire on Environment Statistics, waste and water statistics and climate change statistics.

27. Representatives of UNEP and ECE then presented joint capacity development activities and projects related to the work of the Joint Task Force. The European Environment Agency and other organizations were subsequently invited to provide a brief overview of other related capacity-development activities.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

28. The Joint Task Force:

(a) Took note of the information provided on ongoing developments with relevance to the work of the Joint Task Force;

(b) Invited its members and representatives of international organizations and other initiatives and projects to provide regular updates to the Joint Task Force on recent developments in implementation of their activities.

VII. Other business

29. The Joint Task Force was invited to discuss any other business with relevance for the Joint Task Force

30. The Chair informed the Joint Task Force of recent developments related to the indicator selection for the biodiversity and ecosystem chapter of the pan-European environmental assessment and invited the members of the Joint Task Force to provide comments on the selected indicators, which were made available on the web page for the meeting.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

31. The Joint Task Force took note of the information provided on the pan-European environmental assessment and confirmed its readiness to provide input and feedback on the selection of indicators for relevant chapters.

VIII. Closure of the meeting

32. The Chair, with the assistance of the secretariat, summarized the conclusions of the Joint Task Force, presented the decisions and closed the meeting. She announced that the reports of the meeting would be finalized by the secretariat after the meeting and would be posted on the web page of the meeting in due course.

33. The Chair informed the Joint Task Force that its next meeting would be held on 18 and 19 October 2021 in Geneva.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

34. The Joint Task Force noted that its next session was scheduled to be held in Geneva on 18 and 19 October 2021.

35. The Joint Task Force adopted the decisions taken during the session.
