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Item 6 of the provisional agenda

Environmental monitoring, assessment and reporting**Modalities for the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks****Note by the secretariat in consultation with the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment****Summary*

At its twenty-first session (Geneva, 27-31 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, including for the Working Group “to serve as the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks, bringing together the United Nations Environment Programme Global Environment Outlook expert teams and the European Environment Agency’s European Environment Information and Observation Network to formulate the regional priorities and scope for the pan-European assessments. The Working Group would also link with thematic networks, including those under the ECE multilateral environmental agreements” (see ECE/CEP/2015/2, para. 91 (ii)).

At its twenty-second session (Geneva, 25-27 January 2017), the Committee on Environmental Policy renewed further the mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group for the period 2017-2021, including to serve as the regional environmental network of networks, with specific provisions presented in the term of reference (see ECE/CEP/2017/2, para. 32 and annex II para. 3 (c)).

The present document outlines proposed modalities to enable the Working Group to serve as the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks. A first version of the document was discussed by the Working Group at its nineteenth session (Geneva, 27-28 June 2017). The present document will be further considered at a workshop with the participation of relevant actors from the region, organized in Rome on 3 October 2017, in line with the Committee’s twenty-second session outcomes.

The Committee on Environmental Policy will be invited to consider the document.

* This document was not formally edited

I. Background

1. At its twenty-first session (Geneva, 27-31 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, including for the Working Group: “to serve as the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks, bringing together the United Nations Environment Programme Global Environment Outlook expert teams and the European Environment Agency’s European Environment Information and Observation Network to formulate the regional priorities and scope for the pan-European assessments. The Working Group would also link with thematic networks, including those under the ECE multilateral environmental agreements” (see ECE/CEP/2015/2, para. 91 (ii)).

2. At its twenty-second session (Geneva, 25-27 January 2017), the Committee on Environmental Policy renewed further the mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group for the period 2017-2021, including to serve as the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks (hereinafter, regional network of networks), with specific provisions presented in the term of reference (see ECE/CEP/2017/2, para. 32 and annex II, para. 3 (c)), as follows:

(c) Initiate a process of consultation on the development of a regional network of networks and, as part of this process, develop an inclusive platform to discuss the integration of environmental, economic and social considerations regarding the 2030 Agenda, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, 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 and how to present environmental information on geospatial platforms;

(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;

3. The present document outlines proposed modalities to enable the Working Group to serve as the regional network of networks. A first version of the document was discussed by the Working Group at its nineteenth session (Geneva, 27-28 June 2017). The present document will be further considered at a workshop with the participation of relevant actors from the region, organized in Rome on 3 October 2017, in line with the Committee’s twenty-second session outcomes.

4. Following the successful launch of the European regional assessment of the Sixth Global Environmental Outlook at the Sixth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference and the support expressed in the Ministerial Declaration for the regional assessment as the regular pan-European environmental assessment (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1,

para. 10), there continues to be a demand for a strong Working Group to serve as a regional network of networks and facilitate the continued dialogue on the regional assessment.

5. The present document includes outcomes from the consultation process, including a questionnaire and consultation with the Working Group during its nineteenth session as set out in the annexes to this document. It furthermore contains suggestions that have been developed by the secretariat in consultation with the Working Group.

6. The Committee on Environmental Policy will be invited to consider the present document.

II. Consultation process

7. The secretariat has followed up on the request for a consultation process on the regional network of networks through a number of concrete steps. The first was to engage in informal consultations with interested parties to explore whether it would be possible to jointly elaborate the working modalities of a regional network of networks.

8. From these initial discussions, it became clear that any final proposal by the Working Group would have to be based on several consultations and not only one workshop, as was originally foreseen in the new mandate and terms of reference for the Working Group. It was therefore decided that the secretariat would seek inputs through a questionnaire and organize opportunities to participate in the consultation process, not only in connection with the nineteenth session of the Working Group, but also in a workshop during the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators.

9. The following activities have been carried out as part of the consultation process since the twenty-second session of the Committee on Environmental Policy:

(a) The secretariat circulated a questionnaire to members of the Working Group regarding the regional network of networks in May 2017. Results from the questionnaire can be found in annex I. The purpose of the questionnaire was to explore potential drivers and topics for a regional network of networks and attempt to identify expectations as regards to how a regional network of networks should function, including the level of support for its development, ahead of the nineteenth session of the Working Group;

(b) The secretariat prepared an informal background document on the possible working modalities of the regional network of networks, which was presented to the Working Group during its nineteenth session. The informal background document is reproduced in annex II. The purpose of the informal background document was to explore a range of possible scenarios for how a regional network of networks could be operationalized;

(c) The secretariat consulted the Working Group during its nineteenth session. Results from the consultation can be found in annex III. The Working Group discussed extensively the results from the questionnaire and three possible scenarios for developing a regional network of networks;

(d) The secretariat is organizing a workshop in connection with the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators.¹ The workshop will be held after the submission of the present document. Results from the workshop will for this reason be reported orally during the twenty-third session of the Committee on Environmental Policy. The workshop will continue efforts to address the feasibility of operationalizing the regional network of networks into the work of the Working Group.

¹ See <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=43952#/>.

10. The consultation process, as outlined above, has provided the necessary inputs to prepare a proposal regarding the development of a regional network of networks. This document has been prepared by the secretariat in consultation with members of the Working Group, other relevant organizations and interested parties.

III. Conclusions

11. During its nineteenth session, the Working Group noted that the development of a regional network of networks would be highly relevant (see annex III). This was also supported by the questionnaire responses received ahead of the session and the many suggestions for potential drivers and relevant topics (see annex I). However, the discussion on possible working modalities of a regional network of networks also highlighted a number of concerns.

12. Though the consultative process provided the opportunity for the Working Group to explore a range of different scenarios, the Working Group concluded that it would not be feasible to establish a distinct regional network of networks due to the limited availability of financial and human resources. The regional network of networks should be within the framework of the Working Group and reliant upon the secretariat and financial resources that are already dedicated to the Working Group.

13. Another challenge relates to increasing the attendance of representatives from across the ECE region at the sessions of the Working Group. The focus should be on attracting the participation of countries, organizations and institutions in the activities of the Working Group, rather than exploring new structures.

14. Finally, the development of the Working Group as a regional network of networks would ultimately be dependent on the commitment and willingness of its members. These would be crucial to ensure that there is sufficient interest and commitment from other networks to take part in any activities that would be pursued by a regional network of networks. Members of the Working Group agreed that the diverse interests across the pan-European region mean that finding common ground and consensus for a regional network of network would be challenging.

IV. Suggested next steps

15. The Working Group agreed that inputs received through the questionnaire and the discussion on developing a regional network of networks would be incorporated into the current document. They have been utilized as a basis for preparing the proposals below:

(a) The Working Group proposed that efforts should be directed towards improving participation in its activities and ensuring that the Working Group capitalizes on the existing structures to achieve the objective of serving as a regional network of networks and to strengthen relations with current partners and other interested parties;

(b) The Working Group proposed that the secretariat should be tasked with developing a document setting out how to use available structures to enhance the visibility of the Working Group, improve participation in its meetings and activities and find topics of common interest for the pan-European region. In this way, the Working Group would attract wider participation and thus itself continue to develop as a regional network of networks;

(c) The Working Group agreed that the secretariat would inform the Committee on Environmental Policy on outcomes from the workshop on the working modalities of the regional network of networks during its twenty-third session. The outcomes of the workshop will complement the proposals in this document.

Annex I

Questionnaire on establishing a regional network of networks

I. Background

1. As part of the process of preparing the informal background paper for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment (see annex I), the secretariat issued a questionnaire on the working modalities of the regional network of networks. The purpose of engaging the Working Group members and other interested parties was to determine how the regional network of networks could be established and, more importantly, what its overall objectives should be.
2. The questionnaire included questions on possible objectives, drivers and topics for the regional network of networks. It also aimed to identify expectations regarding how the regional network of networks should function and to gauge the level of support for its establishment.
3. The questionnaire was composed of six questions:
 - (a) How would you estimate the relevance of establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network-of-networks?
 - (b) What would be your proposals for the objectives for the regional network-of-networks?
 - (c) Please list up to 5 topics that could be “top priorities” for events organized by the regional network-of-networks;
 - (d) Please list up to 5 key factors that would motivate you to join the regional network-of-networks;
 - (e) Please indicate how your organization could contribute to the establishment and development of the regional network-of-networks;
 - (f) Please indicate any other information you think may be relevant.
4. The secretariat received 18 replies to the questionnaire. The following countries replied: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. UNEP also replied to the questionnaire.

II. Results from the questionnaire

5. The 18 respondents thought that it would be highly relevant to establish a regional network of networks, with 11 giving the highest score and the others the second-highest score on a five-point range from “least relevant” to “most relevant”.
6. Regarding possible objectives for the regional network of networks, based on the responses received from the Working Group, it could:
 - (a) Provide a new and innovative approach to the sharing of knowledge, ideas, lessons learnt and good practices between relevant environmental networks and countries;
 - (b) Determine future needs and associated measures;
 - (c) Involve national and regional networks and this would facilitate horizontal and vertical interactions between networks and relevant experts;
 - (d) Provide and share information on current trends.

7. Regarding top priorities for events organized by the regional network of networks, the respondents thought that the network could be a platform to share knowledge and know-how across environmental networks in the pan-European region. Suggested topics included: innovative technologies, geospatial information, the Sustainable Development Goals, biodiversity, air quality, renewable energy, green economy, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting and the Shared Environmental Information System.

8. The regional network of networks would allow for a regular process of interactions, covering topics such as:

- (a) Improving coordination and communication;
- (b) Streamlining of environmental reporting and the state of environment reporting;
- (c) Monitoring methods and tools;
- (d) Data interoperability and compatibility.

9. Regarding key factors that would motivate the respondents to join the regional network-of-networks, some of the following topics were noted as important:

- (a) Sharing of information, experiences and knowledge;
- (b) Involvement of relevant (national and international) experts;
- (c) Additional visibility of national authorities in charge of environmental monitoring and assessment;
- (d) Expanding cooperation and communication across the pan-European region.

10. Regarding the last question, on the level of support for establishing the regional network of networks, the respondents answered that they could:

- (a) Involve experts and transfer existing skills and experience in the process of creating and developing a regional environmental information and assessment network-of-networks;
- (b) Disseminate information on the activities of the regional network-of-networks on the national level and contribute to the development of appropriate communication services;
- (c) Share experiences with the pan-European region.

Annex II

Background document on possible working modalities of a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks

1. The informal background document set out below was prepared ahead of the nineteenth session of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment. The purpose of the document was to prepare for a discussion on the development on the regional network of networks and to set out initial ideas for how to operationalize the regional network of networks.

I. Objectives of the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks

2. The objectives of the regional network of networks would be to:

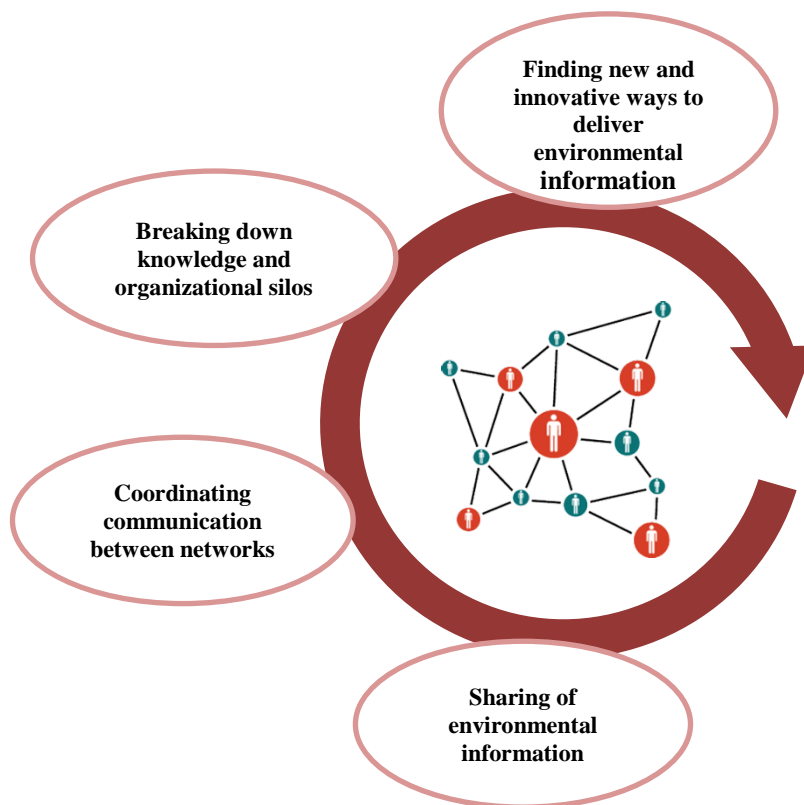
(a) **Share environmental information between the networks that are members of the regional network of networks.** The regional network of networks will create new opportunities to share environmental information, ideas, experiences and good practices between relevant networks around common challenges. It will include the Working Group, Eionet, UNEP, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, academic institutions and other interested actors;

(b) **Improve coordination and connection between environmental information and data networks.** The regional network of networks will provide a platform to develop coordinated ways through which environmental information and data can be more effectively communicated to relevant target groups. It will also facilitate co-learning and establish connections between stakeholders to encourage new and fruitful collaborations and partnerships;

(c) **Break down organisational and knowledge silos.** The regional network of networks will provide a space that encourages communication between relevant actors across the pan-European region, which aim to break down organizational and knowledge silos and facilitate the provision of comparable environmental data and information across the region;

(d) **Find new and innovative ways to deliver environmental information and data to policymakers.** The regional network of networks will endeavour to find new and innovative tools and methods to deliver environmental information and data to policymakers, members of the regional network of networks and other relevant bodies. The emphasis will be on making available environmental information more accessible to decision-makers and to improve information management, communication and dissemination.

Figure 1
A regional network of networks



II. Working modalities of the regional network of networks

3. Three scenarios for possible working modalities of the regional network of networks have been prepared as suggestions for the Working Group:

4. **Scenario 1:** The regional network of networks is managed by the secretariat of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment.

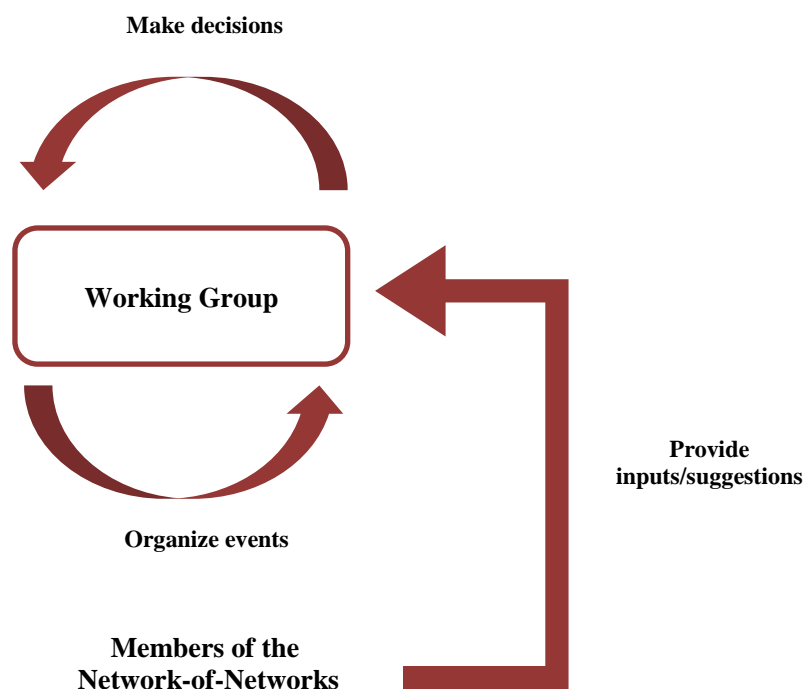
(a) The secretariat of the Working Group coordinates and prepares the draft programme on all proposed activities for the regional network of networks (see Figure 2).

(b) This programme is based on the inputs and suggestions provided by the Members of the regional network of networks. The Working Group will review and decide upon these inputs and suggestions at its annual meeting.

(c) The Working Group will produce an annual programme and oversee the organization of all events, as presented by the secretariat.

(d) Members of the regional network of networks will be invited to participate in the organization of events based on an expression of interest during the annual meeting of the Working Group.

Figure 2
Scenario 1: Business as usual



4. **Scenario 2:** The regional network of networks is established as a sub-group to the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment.

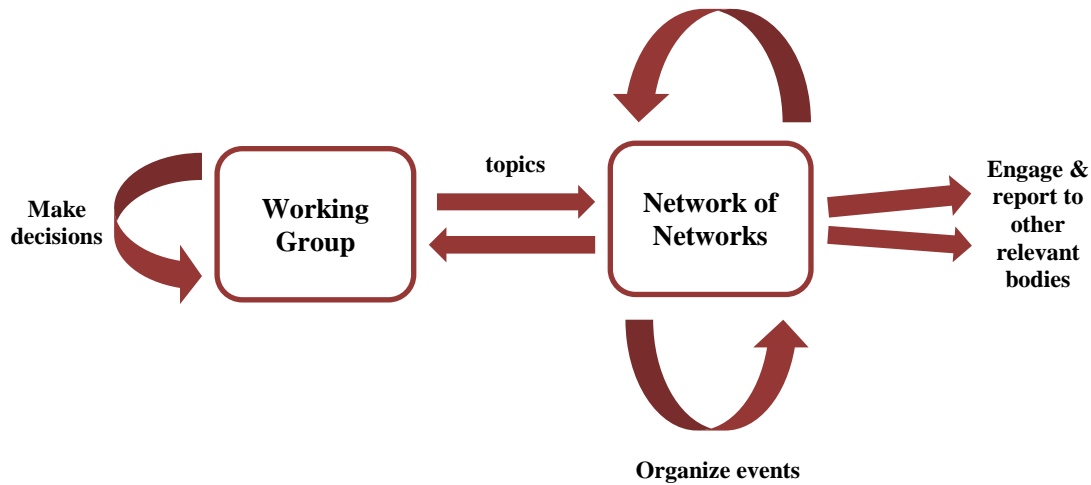
(a) The regional network of networks is established as a sub-group to the Working Group (see Figure 3).

(b) The setup is envisaged as being similar to that as between the Committee on Environmental Policy and the Working Group. More specifically, this means that the sub-group would be separate and have its own chair, under the supervision of the Working Group.

(c) Possible topics and associated events to be organized by the regional network of networks would be prepared by the sub-group. The Working Group will review and decide upon these suggestions at its annual meeting.

(d) Following the decision by the Working Group, the sub-group will take the lead in organizing events and meetings for the regional network of networks and its members under the supervision of the secretariat of the Working Group.

Figure 3
Scenario 2: Regional network of networks as a sub-group.



4. **Scenario 3:** The regional network of networks is established as several sub-groups to the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment based on topics.

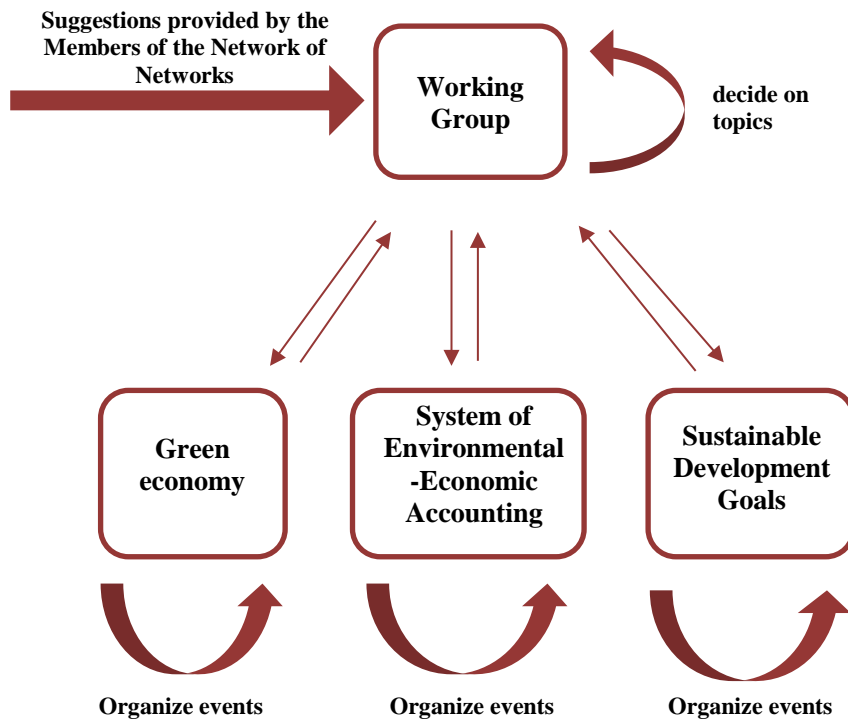
(a) The Working Group coordinates and makes decisions on all proposed activities for the regional network of networks (see Figure 4).

(b) Members of the regional network of networks will be invited on an annual basis to provide to the secretariat suggestions regarding possible topics and associated events to be organized by the network-of-networks.

(c) Topical sub-groups (e.g., on green economy, the sustainable development goals and the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting) will then be established by the Working Group based on selected topics. Members of the regional network of networks will then be invited to join relevant topical sub-groups.

(d) Each topical sub-group will be in charge of organizing the meetings and events associated with its assigned topic, under the supervision of the Working Group. This also means that each sub-group will be managed by the members that have volunteered to take the lead.

Figure 4
Scenario 3: Regional network of networks as topical sub-groups.



Annex III

Discussion in the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment on developing a regional network of networks

I. Background

1. The nineteenth session of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment included an agenda item on the establishment of a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks.
2. The discussion on the establishment of a regional network of networks was attended by representatives of ministries or agencies of environment, and in some cases the statistical offices, of the following countries: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.
3. Representatives of the following organizations also participated in the discussion: EEA; Ecologic Institute (via video conference); Group on Earth Observations (GEO); the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CISSTAT); International Telecommunication Union (ITU); UNEP; European Investment Bank (EIB); the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR); and the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD); the University of Geneva; the Vienna University of Economics and Business; and the non-profit organization, Zoë Environment Network.

II. Objectives of the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks

2. The agenda item started with two presentations by the secretariat, which focused on the results from the questionnaire as well as the informal background document on the working modalities of the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks (see annexes I and II). The secretariat elaborated on, amongst other things, the three scenarios described in the background document and outlined possible ways for how the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks could be operationalized.
2. The representative of Austria suggested that more ECE countries should be represented in the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment and that duplication of efforts should be avoided in developing a regional network of networks.
3. A representative from EEA noted that the interest of Eionet member countries to develop a regional network of network was rather low and that it may be more worthwhile to review already existing model and structures of the Working Group. At the same time, the EEA representative suggested that the Working Group identify subjects and topics that could facilitate wider participation in its activities. It was for instance noted that the Sustainable Development Goals are a topic that could help not only in the development of a regional network of networks but that could also improve participation in the meetings of the Working Group and help to attract financial contributions.
4. The EEA representative also noted that the preparation of a strategic document that provides the ideas and strategies on how the Working Group could become a real pan-European network should be considered as a priority.

5. The representative of Switzerland noted the importance of ensuring that the contact with other partners and international organizations is expanded but that there was no additional value in establishing a regional network of networks in comparison with the existing Working Group. It was further noted that it would be more efficient to continue the collaborative work being carried out by the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators.
6. The representative of Georgia agreed that Working Group should be strengthened and expanded, and supported scenario 1 for establishing a regional network of networks.
7. A representative of the Russian Federation agreed with the representative of Switzerland and noted that duplications should be avoided when considering the establishment of a regional network of networks. The Russian representative encouraged the members of the Working Group to attend the workshop on the working modalities of the regional environmental information and assessment network of networks (Rome, 2-3 October).
8. Members of the Working Group suggested that it would not be feasible to establish a regional network of networks due to the current financial constraints facing the Working Group. It was noted that the representation of the Working Group at its meetings should be improved, but that the regional network of networks was not the solution for this. It was suggested that efforts should rather be focused at improving current attendance through already existing structures.
9. The Working Group agreed that inputs received through the questionnaire and the discussion on establishing a regional network of networks would be incorporated into the background document. This would be utilised as a basis for preparing recommendations to be shared with the Committee of Environment Policy at its twenty-third session (Geneva, 14-17 November 2017).

III. Conclusions

10. The Working Group noted that it would be highly relevant to establish a distinct regional network of networks but that it may not be feasible due to human and financial constraints. It was further noted that efforts at this stage should rather be directed towards improving overall participation at the meetings of the Working Group, ensuring that it capitalize on the existing structures to achieve this objective.
 11. The Working Group recommended that the priority would be to improve participation at its upcoming meetings and in its activities. It was further recommended that the establishment of a regional network of networks should only be pursued if adequate human and financial resources are secured.
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