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Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators

Fourteenth session
Rome, 2–3 October 2017

Report of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators on its fourteenth 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 Conference of European Statisticians to support the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia¹ in improving their environmental statistics and indicators. The work being carried out by the Joint Task Force aims at strengthening environmental reporting and making environmental statistics available and comparable throughout the pan-European region in the long term. The terms of reference for the Joint Task Force (ECE/CEP/2015/12) were approved by the ECE Executive Committee on 31 March 2015 (ECE/EX/28).

2. The fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force was hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, from 2–3 (morning only) October 2017.

¹ The countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The countries of South-Eastern Europe include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.



3. The meeting was held back-to-back with the Expert Forum for Producers and Users of Climate Change-related Statistics, which was hosted by FAO from 3 (afternoon) –5 October 2017.

B. Attendance

4. Environmental experts and statisticians from the following countries attended the meeting: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Mongolia, Nepal, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Sweden, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

5. Representatives of the European Environment Agency (EEA), FAO, the Scientific Information Centre of the Interstate Commission on Water Cooperation, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the Turkmenistan Aarhus Centre also attended the meeting. The meeting was serviced by the ECE secretariat.

C. Organizational matters

6. The meeting was chaired by Ms. A. Yepbayeva (Kazakhstan).

7. The Joint Task Force adopted the agenda for its fourteenth session, as contained in document ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/5.

8. The following substantive topics were discussed at the meeting:

(a) Implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the thirteenth session of the Joint Task Force;

(b) The Workshop on establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks;

(c) Climate change-related statistics and indicators;

(d) Other relevant developments;

(e) The Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) assessment framework;

(f) Other business.

II. Implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the thirteenth session of the Joint Task Force

9. The secretariat presented the status of implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the thirteenth session (Geneva, 29–30 June 2017) of the Joint Task Force (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/2). The fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force discussed the following issues:

(a) Request to the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-third session (Geneva, 14–17 November 2017) to renew the mandate of the Joint Task Force;

(b) Inclusion of a glossary in the SEIS assessment framework;

(c) Piloting of the SEIS assessment framework by a group of countries;

(d) Revision of the production tables for biodiversity indicators and energy indicators and the integration of simple validation rules for testing purposes;

(e) Requests for national capacity-building workshops and subregional capacity-building activities.

10. Other actions based on recommendations and decisions made at the thirteenth session of the Joint Task Force were in progress. These included the continuation of the involvement of the Joint Task Force in the ECE Task Force on Waste Statistics and the organization of capacity-building activities under a United Nations Development Account project.

11. Water quality indicators will be discussed at an upcoming meeting of the Joint Task Force.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

12. The Joint Task Force took note of information provided by the secretariat on the implementation of decisions and recommendations of the thirteenth session of the Joint Task Force.

III. Workshop on establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks

13. The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment discussed the establishment of regional environmental information and assessment network of networks during its nineteenth session (Geneva, 27–28 June 2017). A questionnaire on working modalities of the network of networks was issued. The workshop aimed to engage the Joint Task Force members and other interested parties in establishing the network of networks and discussing its overall objectives.

14. The secretariat presented the summary of the process so far and the paper to be considered by the Committee on Environmental Policy (ECE/CEP/2017/14).

15. FAO presented its work on agri-environmental statistics and related country processes. FAO collects basic sets of core environment statistics directly from countries, but also produces and disseminates analytical estimates and indicators in support of national, regional and global evidence-based decision making.

16. The discussion was organized around the following guiding questions:

(a) Which existing networks do we need in a network of networks and why?

(b) What are the topics of interest to these networks and their members?

(c) What would be the benefits for countries in transition from participation in the network?

17. Kyrgyzstan suggested the development of a single website which would accumulate all relevant information, including data and guideline documents, in English and in Russian.

18. The Russian Federation mentioned challenges regarding coordination across different institutions within the same country. Information about existing guidelines for environment statistics needs to be shared also with other relevant expert communities who are working in similar fields (e.g., those working on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal indicators).

19. Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan emphasized the importance of having official translations of key documents. Glossaries defining key terms in official languages of the United Nations are of great importance.

20. UNSD brought to the attention of the Joint Task Force the discussion on coordination of statistical activities at the recent thirteenth session of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (Muscat, 27–28 September 2017). All Chief Statisticians of international organizations had participated in the meeting. UNSD furthermore informed the Joint Task Force about UNDATA,² a global website to which more than 30 international organizations provide data, including environment statistics, for public access.

21. Submitting documents in all official languages of the United Nations has recently become a priority in UNEP. This results, however, in a lower number of publications. UNEP also stressed the importance of the meetings of the Joint Task Force as an opportunity to bring together experts from national statistical offices and ministries.

22. The ECE secretariat took note of the comments received on the guiding questions, in particular on the need of having more key documents officially translated into Russian, better clarification of terminology and the need to establish a common Internet platform. The inputs received from the Joint Task Force would be included in a report on the possible establishment of a regional network of networks to the Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-third session.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

23. The meeting participants discussed the challenges of coordination at the national level and between international organizations. The Joint Task Force asked that an eventual regional environmental information and assessment network of networks facilitate coordination at both these levels and engage subregional organizations. The Joint Task Force also requested the secretariat to consider establishing a web-based portal through which users could seek guidance and information on environmental statistics and indicators, while recognizing the secretariat's resource constraints.

24. The Joint Task Force emphasized the importance of availability of information in Russian as well as English. Providing key documents in the official languages of the United Nations is important for the international organizations to fulfil their objectives. The crucial role of the availability of official translations of terminology was underlined. The secretariat will share these observations with the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-third session.

IV. Climate change-related statistics and indicators

25. Under this agenda item, the Joint Task Force discussed environmental statistics and indicators needed for different international climate-related policy frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

26. The ECE secretariat gave an overview of its activities on climate change-related statistics and how they link to SEIS and environmental indicators. The presentation covered the three climate change-related statistics work strands at ECE: (i) the Steering Group

² <http://data.un.org>

chaired by Norway, (ii) the Task Force on a set of core climate change-related statistics and indicators chaired by Italy and (iii) the Task Force on measuring extreme events and disasters, also chaired by Italy.

27. UNFCCC presented current and upcoming information needs for international climate change-related policies, with a particular focus on the reporting obligations of the Paris Agreement. UNFCCC informed the Joint Task Force that, compared to earlier reporting, the Paris Agreement sets out further requirements, such as the reporting on climate-related action through Nationally Determined Contributions. Many provisions of existing requirements may change, as part of the implementation of the Paris Agreement's transparency framework. The work on relevant modalities, rules and procedures, in the framework of the Paris Agreement Work Programme, was ongoing, with the completion deadline of December 2018.

28. A practical example on the importance of sound climate change-related statistics and indicators was given by the Scientific-Information Centre of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia. The presentation showed the importance of reliable and relevant statistics, which are the basis for the analysis and forecasting of the development of the water management situation in Central Asia. The presentation concluded that access to reliable and up-to-date statistics is currently difficult.

29. Albania presented national climate change policies and related data management. An important policy focus in Albania is on adaptation in coastal areas as the rising sea level and increased flooding leads to erosion, saltwater intrusion and degradation of coastal ecosystems. The close cooperation between line ministries and the newly-established Environment Agency ensures the availability of the necessary data for the national Greenhouse Gas Inventory, but also for addressing the specific national climate change-related policy questions.

30. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia also presented national climate change policies and related data management. The presentation showed how the set of recommended ECE environmental indicators supports climate change-related policymaking. The energy indicators (G1 – Final energy consumption, G2 – Total primary energy supply, G3 – Energy intensity and G4 – Renewable energy supply) in addition to the climate change indicator (B3) provide important information on the efficiency of energy use and the use of renewable energy.

31. UNSD gave a presentation on the progress of its work on developing a global set of climate change indicators. UNSD has started to develop this global set of indicators based on a decision by the forty-seventh session of the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2016 (decision 47/112 in E/CN.3/2016/15³). UNSD used as a starting point the ECE set of core climate change-related indicators and has initiated a pilot test of its applicability for developing countries. A discussion of the set of indicators has also started in various forums, including the UNSD Expert Group on Environment Statistics.

32. FAO presented its agri-environmental statistics and indicators, which are of relevance for climate change information needs. The production of statistics is regulated by the FAO constitution and provides a core pillar of FAO. Data which are relevant to food and agriculture are provided by countries via national focal points and disseminated on FAOSTAT.⁴ Based on these statistics FAO also produces global indicators that support national analysis and international reporting (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals, UNFCCC). Among these indicators are the greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, the

³ <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/47th-session/documents/Report-on-the-47th-session-of-the-statistical-commission-E.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data>

use of bioenergy, the percentage of soil degradation and indicators on agricultural water withdrawals. FAO highlighted that FAOSTAT data provides a good starting point for countries at an early stage of development of environmental and climate change-related indicators. It could also be used for comparisons with a country's own national data sets.

33. In the subsequent discussion, EEA stressed the importance of a good institutional setting for developing climate change-related statistics and indicators. National environment agencies could play an important role and the implementation of national pollutant release and transfer registers may provide a starting point for reporting and production of environmental information.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

34. UNFCCC encouraged members of the Joint Task Force to engage actively in the process of defining the reporting requirements of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. By 2019 the reporting requirements will be clearer, and the Joint Task Force asked UNFCCC to inform it regularly about these developments.

V. Other relevant developments

35. The secretariat informed the Joint Task Force about the planned reduction in the number of meetings of the Joint Task Force to one per year. It is also planned to propose an extension of the mandate of the Task Force until 2021 at the next meeting of the Committee on Environmental Policy.

36. As agreed in the thirteenth session of the Joint Task Force, the secretariat presented a proposal for revising the production tables for the ECE set of energy-related indicators (G1 – Final energy consumption, G2 – Total primary energy supply, G3 – Energy intensity and G4 – Renewable energy supply) and biodiversity indicators (D2 – Biosphere reserves and wetlands of international importance, D6 – Invasive alien species).

37. Armenia and Belarus suggested, similarly to the review of the energy and biodiversity indicators, to review the entire set of indicators towards today's realities (mainly towards fitness for Sustainable Development Goal indicators).

38. On the revised energy table Ukraine mentioned some problems in using different units of measurement nationally.

39. The Russian Federation requested a clarification on the purpose of the production tables, which resulted in a discussion whether these kind of tables are still state of the art.

40. Azerbaijan recommended to consider the fact that energy balance data is produced with a delay of a year.

41. Kazakhstan saw the proposed changes as a step into the right direction.

42. EEA considered a mapping of the entire set of indicators against Sustainable Development Goal indicators as a useful exercise, but recommended to not change the indicators too much. Concerning the revised terms of reference, EEA noted that the current version is focussed on SEIS in terms of production, but it should also include more about information sharing.

43. The secretariat presented the progress of work of the Task Force on Waste Statistics. The main developments have been assessing the fitness for purpose of current waste statistics, the definition of the scope of waste statistics and drafting of a generic waste flow scheme.

44. Participants asked the secretariat to continue reporting on the progress of work in this Task Force.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

45. The Joint Task Force took note of the planned reduction in the frequency of its meetings, which would allow a greater focus on capacity-development activities and measurement of progress on an annual basis, while recognizing the secretariat's resource constraints. The secretariat will share this plan with the Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-third session and with the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians.

46. The Joint Task Force agreed with the submission of its terms of reference to the Committee on Environmental Policy with a view to the extension of the mandate to 2021 (the Conference of European Statisticians had already approved the mandate of the Task Force until 2021). The Joint Task Force emphasized the need to:

- (a) Keep the guidelines on environmental statistics and indicators under review and work towards the alignment of the guidelines with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- (b) Support countries in the production and use of environmental indicators;
- (c) Apply the SEIS principles with regard to both the production and sharing of environmental information.

47. Regarding the drafts of revised energy and biodiversity templates, the Joint Task Force expressed satisfaction with the good progress made and decided to take more time to review and test the templates by the time of the next session of the Joint Task Force.

48. The Joint Task Force agreed to review in future sessions the current practice of using Excel-based templates in the data production and sharing process.

VI. The Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) assessment framework

49. Under agenda item 3, the Joint Task Force followed up on the progress made on the SEIS assessment framework (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2017/5), as introduced during the nineteenth Session of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment.

50. The secretariat presented the outcomes of piloting the assessment framework and the online SEIS reporting application in line with the decisions made during the thirteenth session of the Joint Task Force (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/2). The secretariat informed the meeting that four out of the five pilot countries (Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) responded to the questionnaire. The time needed per indicator-level questionnaire was about one hour. All five countries joined the SEIS workshop that was held at the Environment Agency Austria on 14–15 September 2017 in Vienna. The next step would be the finalization of the SEIS assessment framework in consultation with member States, EEA and UNEP. The SEIS assessment framework would be translated into Russian and made available as an online reporting tool. Members of the Committee on Environmental Policy and relevant focal points would be invited to complete the questionnaire by February 2018.

51. UNEP informed the Joint Task Force about the main results of the SEIS workshop in Vienna, which were (i) agreement to replace a general questionnaire by a thematic one,

(ii) agreement on proposals for rephrased questions, (iii) agreement on suggested weighting and (iv) a proposal for a new compliance scale for testing.

52. The secretariat proposed several options for data sets and indicators for which countries would need to report. Options for discussion were the entire ECE set of 42 indicators, the core set of 14 indicators or the 8 biodiversity, energy and air quality indicators.

53. The suggested weighting was based on the rationale that:

(a) All aspects of the SEIS assessment framework could be considered of equal importance when determining an overall national performance score, therefore a weighing scheme would be needed;

(b) Each question would be assigned a score (0–1);

(c) Each of the seven categories (relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility etc.) would be assigned a weight (0–100 %);

(d) Each indicator and theme would receive an overall performance score (0–100 %).

54. In response to questions from members of the Joint Task Force, the secretariat clarified that a working document on the assessment framework would be presented to the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment, and a formal discussion on the scoring and weighing would still be possible.

55. The Russian Federation suggested to indicate clearly in the questionnaire which of the questions would be completed by the secretariat and which would be answered by member States. UNEP and the secretariat replied that the questions to be filled by the secretariat would be greyed-out in the online tool and could not be changed by countries.

56. Armenia suggested to use a methodology for assessing implementation similar to the one applied for the Human Development Index.

57. Georgia requested time to provide comments on the proposal in writing. One important aspect would be a clarification of which indicators would be part of the assessment.

58. Ukraine mentioned that for many countries it would be difficult to identify the responsible institution for filling in the survey. It suggested to indicate in the survey who should complete the questionnaire. The secretariat replied that formally it was the Ministries of Environment as they made the political commitment for this at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016).

59. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia demonstrated live how the questionnaire could be completed.

60. EEA stressed the importance of clarifying key terms used in the questionnaire, such as “primary data”. A clear distinction between indicators and data should be made. EEA also mentioned that next to a scoring of the status of SEIS implementation, the results of the assessment should also help to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses (e.g., due to the availability of conventions on air quality, data is generally available, whereas not all countries have implemented indicators on waste or biodiversity). The element addressing use of the information could be strengthened in the assessment framework.

61. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation made suggestions for indicators to focus on. These included energy, biodiversity, water and waste. However, it was also recommended to use two indicators only.

62. EEA suggested to focus on indicators related to environmental quality instead of energy or waste, because these data flows would be under the control of Ministries of Environment. These could be, for example, air quality or water.

63. The secretariat informed the meeting that the answers given by the countries in the questionnaire would be reviewed and there might be requests for clarification.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

64. The Joint Task Force requested the secretariat to circulate for a short consultation the complete package of revised SEIS assessment framework documents, including the questionnaires, guidance, glossary, scoring and weightings and a timetable containing the next steps. The Joint Task Force agreed to provide timely comments to the secretariat.

65. Regarding the scope of the mid-term assessment, the Joint Task Force stressed the need to focus primarily on the indicators of quality of the environment and environmental conditions, such as air quality or water. The Joint Task Force requested the secretariat to solicit feedback on a limited number of themes and indicators to inform a final selection.

VII. Other business

66. The secretariat informed about the National Workshop on SEIS and Environmental Statistics for the Sustainable Development Goals, to be held from 16–18 October 2017 in Dushanbe. The workshop is part of the activities under the United Nations Development Account Programme, eleventh tranche, which aims to strengthen the capacity of countries to produce Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The workshop will be organized through close cooperation between the United Nations Development Programme, ECE and UNEP. Similar activities could be organized in other countries upon request.

67. Furthermore, the secretariat announced the launch of a training programme on the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA), which consists of online self-paced learning, webinars and a training workshop that will be held in January 2018. The training programme is co-organized by ECE and UNSD and open to all interested countries of the region, with priority given to participants from South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

68. The secretariat also informed the meeting about the Joint Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and ECE Seminar on SEEA Implementation that was to be held from 21–22 February 2018 in Geneva, Switzerland.

VIII. Closing session

69. The Joint Task Force adopted its decisions and recommendations.

70. The Joint Task Force took note that its next session was planned to be held in March 2018 in Geneva, back-to-back with the twentieth session of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment. Note that these dates were subsequently changed after the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force, with both meetings postponed to autumn 2018.

71. The Joint Task Force thanked donors, Switzerland, EEA and the United Nations secretariat, for the financial support provided to organize the fourteenth session.