

## Vilnius declaration

*We, the high-level representatives of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) member States and the European Union, gathered in Vilnius, from 8 to 11 December 2020, on the occasion of the eighth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) and the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment,*

*Celebrating* the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Espoo Convention and the considerable impact on international environmental law and the environment it has had over the past decades,

*Celebrating also* the value added produced by the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, since its entry into force 10 years ago, by extending the Convention's application to the earliest stages of decision-making with regard to plans and programmes and, where appropriate, to policies and legislation,

*Recognizing* the important contribution of both treaties to improving environmental governance and transparency in planning and decision-making,

*Emphasizing* the need for a healthy and green recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and to prevent pandemics in the future, and the role that the Convention and the Protocol in particular can play in this regard by ensuring a prior assessment of significant environmental, including health, effects of activities, as well as of plans and programmes, in consultation with environmental and health authorities,

*Recalling* the objectives and principles of, and the commitments under, the Convention and the Protocol, in particular to:

- (a) Prevent and mitigate significant adverse environmental, including health, impacts likely to arise from envisaged economic activities or development,
- (b) Render decision-making regarding planning in the relevant economic sectors more transparent and participatory through consultation with the environmental and health authorities, other stakeholders and the public at the local, national and international levels,
- (c) Enhance international cooperation in assessing environmental impacts, in particular in a transboundary context,
- (d) Further sustainable development,

*Acknowledging* that the Convention and the Protocol are also effective instruments for realizing benefits worldwide, including by contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the global commitments related to climate and biodiversity,

*Acknowledging also* the potential of the treaties to promote green growth and green infrastructure, sustainable and smart cities and circular economy,

*Taking note with concern* of the long-standing scarcity, unpredictability and uneven distribution of funding by Parties to the two instruments that put at risk the implementation of the workplans and the functioning of the Convention and the Protocol, also taking into consideration future accessions by countries not member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe,

1. *Reaffirm* our strong commitment to fully implementing and complying with our respective obligations under the Convention and the Protocol;
2. *Commit* to strengthening efforts in contributing to the functioning of the treaties in a sustainable manner by providing adequate resources – both human and financial;
3. *Also commit* to further strengthening the implementation and impact of both treaties, including by improving the uniformity of the interpretation, and the clarity of their

scope and provisions, as well as by enhancing political support through increased awareness of the treaties and their benefits;

4. *Undertake* to boost the application of the Convention and the Protocol, including, as needed, through guidance, awareness-raising and capacity-building, with a view to making full use of their potential for addressing new and emerging national, regional and global challenges and goals;

5. *Call upon* all Parties that have not yet ratified the second amendment to the Convention to do so to ensure unified application of the Convention by all its Parties;

6. *Invite* any State not yet a Party to the Convention and the Protocol to accede thereto with a view to increasing the impact of those treaties in the region, and, pending accession, to develop sufficient capacity for their successful implementation;

7. *Encourage* also countries from other regions to take steps to accede to the treaties and/or replicate and implement their provisions and good practice gathered thereunder;

8. *Stress* the need to accelerate the operationalization of the first amendment to enable the accession of non-ECE countries through the attainment of the remaining ratifications, and strongly urge the concerned Parties to ratify the first amendment as soon as possible;

9. *Undertake* to assist countries from within and outside the ECE region in their efforts to implement the Convention and to implement and accede to the Protocol;

10. *Call for* the strengthening of cooperation among countries and with other relevant international treaties, national and international organizations, civil society, the private sector and financial institutions and the active participation of all those actors to support the application of the treaties worldwide;

11. *Welcome* the long-term strategy and the action plan for the implementation of the Convention and the Protocol,<sup>1</sup> adopted through decision VIII/3-IV/3,<sup>2</sup> and commit to implementing the long-term strategy and the action plan through operational activities set out in the workplans;

12. *Also welcome* the Guidance on the Applicability of the Convention to the Lifetime Extension of Nuclear Power Plants,<sup>3</sup> adopted through decision VIII/6,<sup>4</sup> which seeks to assist the Implementation Committee as well as Parties in the consistent practical application of the Convention;

13. *Further welcome* the work carried out to draft the guidance on assessing health impacts in strategic environmental assessment,<sup>5</sup> and commit to finalizing that work in the next intersessional period, subject to the availability of resources, prior to the formal adoption of a guidance document at the next session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol;

14. *Thank* the Government of Lithuania for its committed and generous support for the organization of the eighth and fourth sessions, respectively, of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention and the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, which, due to the pandemic, were held remotely, rather than in Vilnius, as originally planned.

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<sup>1</sup> ECE/MP.EIA/2020/3-ECE/MP.EIA/SEA/2020/3.

<sup>2</sup> See ECE/MP.EIA/30/Add.1-ECE/MP.EIA/SEA/13/Add.1.

<sup>3</sup> ECE/MP.EIA/2020/9.

<sup>4</sup> See ECE/MP.EIA/30/Add.2-ECE/MP.EIA/SEA/13/Add.2.

<sup>5</sup> ECE/MP.EIA/WG.2/2020/7.