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Committee on Environmental Policy

Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

Twenty-third session
Geneva, 4 and 5 May 2021

Report of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment on its twenty-third session

I. Introduction

A. Background

1. At its twenty-sixth session (Geneva, 9 and 10 November 2020), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy decided to extend the mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment until mid-2023 to allow the Working Group to prepare a new draft mandate and terms of reference after the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference, and requested the secretariat to submit that decision on extension (as contained in document ECE/EX/2017/L.2) to the ECE Executive Committee for approval.¹
2. The Executive Committee approved, during its 114th meeting (Geneva, 12 February 2021), the extension of the current mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group,² as contained in document ECE/EX/2017/L.2 and the annex to document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/4, until 30 June 2023.
3. The mandate of the Working Group states that it should review progress made by countries in Europe and Central Asia in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System by 2021. The Working Group should also identify and explore options for establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks and, as part of that process, develop an inclusive platform for countries to discuss the integration of environmental, economic and social considerations regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, the green economy and other related areas of work. Moreover, the Working Group should 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

¹ See ECE/CEP/2020/2, para. 38 (c).

² See Chair's conclusions from the 114th meeting of the Executive Committee (EXCOM/CONCLU/114, para. 12). Available at <https://unece.org/115th-excom-meeting-5-march-2021>.



engage in capacity-building assistance regarding specific challenges in environmental monitoring and assessment.³

4. The twenty-third session of the Working Group was held in Geneva in a hybrid format, on 4 May 2021, and, in an online format, on 5 May 2021.⁴

B. Attendance

5. Environmental experts and statisticians from the following countries attended the meeting: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Finland, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

6. Representatives of the European Commission, the European Environment Agency, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also attended the meeting.

7. Furthermore, representatives of the Institute for Sustainable Innovation (Russian Federation), Zoï Environment Network and the Ukrainian Scientific Research Institute of Ecological Problems participated in the meeting.

C. Procedural matters

8. The outgoing Chair of the Working Group, Ms. Katerina Nikolovska (North Macedonia), opened the twenty-third session of the Working Group.

9. The outgoing Chair informed the members of the Working Group about the special procedures adopted by the ECE Executive Committee on decision-making for formal meetings with remote participation,⁵ including the meeting of the Working Group. She explained that the decisions of the Working Group would therefore be considered as having been agreed *ad referendum*, meaning that they would be subject to agreement by the Permanent Missions to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva. That agreement would be sought through a silence procedure that would conclude on 13 May 2021, with the secretariat informing the members of the Working Group if the silence had been broken.

II. Adoption of the agenda

10. The outgoing Chair of the Working Group provided an overview of the agenda of the Working Group as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/1/Rev.1 and asked the Working Group for comments.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

11. The Working Group adopted the agenda as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/1/Rev.1.

III. Election of the Chair and Vice-Chairs

12. The outgoing Chair and Vice-Chairs had already been elected for two terms and could not be re-elected to their current posts. Members of the Working Group were therefore invited

³ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/4, annex, para. 3.

⁴ Meeting documents and other information, including informal documents and presentations, are available on the session web page: <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/twenty-third-session-working-group-environmental-monitoring-and>.

⁵ See ECE/EX/2020/L.12, para. 3. Available at https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/commission/EXCOM/Agenda/2020/EXCOM_111_05_Oct/ECE_EX_2020_L.12-2013121E.pdf.

to submit nominations to the secretariat prior to the session, while ensuring a regional balance in the nominations in compliance with the terms of reference of the Working Group.⁶

13. The secretariat provided an overview of the candidates already nominated for the posts of Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Working Group before the Working Group was invited to suggest any additional nominations. The Working Group was then invited to elect the new Chair and Vice-Chairs.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

14. The Working Group elected Ms. Maia Javakhishvili (Georgia) as its new Chair and Ms. Nikolovska (North Macedonia) and Mr. Johannes Mayer (Austria) as its new Vice-Chairs for a period of up to two years.

IV. Adoption of the report of the twenty-second session

15. The secretariat summarized the outcomes of the twenty-second session of the Working Group (Geneva, 27 October 2020) as contained in the report of that session (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/2), and informed the Working Group of the status of implementation of the decisions and recommendations that had been made at the twenty-second session, as well as of the consideration of the Working Group's activities by the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-sixth session.

16. The secretariat invited the Working Group to adopt the report.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

17. The Working Group adopted the report of its twenty-second session as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/2 and noted the information provided by the secretariat on the status of implementation of the decisions and recommendations from its twenty-second session.

V. Implementing the mandate and terms of reference

18. The Working Group's terms of reference required that it prepare an annual timetable of activities and achievements.⁷

19. The secretariat informed the Working Group that the Committee on Environmental Policy, at its twenty-sixth session, had taken note of the modified timetable of activities of the Working Group in 2021.⁸

20. The secretariat then presented the draft annual timetable of activities for 2022 (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/3), which had been shared with the Working Group prior to the session. No amendments had been requested by the members of the Working Group. The Working Group was therefore invited to approve the draft annual timetable of activities for 2022.

21. The secretariat reported on the decision by the Committee on Environmental Policy to extend the mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group until mid-2023 as requested by the Working Group,⁹ and the subsequent approval of the decision by the ECE Executive Committee at its 114th meeting (Geneva, 12 February 2021).¹⁰

⁶ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/4, annex, para. 12.

⁷ Ibid., para. 5.

⁸ See ECE/CEP/2020/2 (advance unedited version), para. 38 (b).

⁹ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/2, para. 20 (g).

¹⁰ See Chair's conclusions from the 114th meeting of the Executive Committee (EXCOM/CONCLU/114, para. 12).

22. The secretariat then provided informal information on the financial resources available to support meetings of the Working Group and other activities of the ECE Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Programme.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

23. The Working Group:

(a) Adopted the timetable of activities for 2022 as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/3;

(b) Took note of the financial resources available for the implementation of activities under the Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Programme;

(c) Expressed appreciation to those countries supporting financially the pan-European environmental assessment – Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Serbia and Switzerland – and to the Russian Federation for its support of the current meeting;

(d) Requested its members and the secretariat to continue their fundraising efforts to enable the full implementation of activities planned for 2021–2022, including the preparation of the pan-European environmental assessment and the holding of the next sessions of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators and the Working Group.

VI. Reporting on the Shared Environmental Information System to support a regular process of environmental assessment

24. The terms of reference for the Working Group specified that it should: regularly evaluate the performance of ECE countries in establishing and implementing the Shared Environmental Information System against the System's targets and performance indicators adopted by the Committee; and prepare a mid-term and a final report for the Committee on the establishment and implementation of the System leading up to 2021.¹¹

25. During its twenty-fifth session (Geneva, 13–15 November 2019), the Committee had invited the Working Group to oversee the preparation of a final review report on the establishment of the System in Europe and Central Asia for consideration by the Committee, with a view to its subsequent forwarding to the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference as an information document. It had also encouraged all member States in Europe and Central Asia to report on their progress in establishing the System using the online reporting tool developed for that purpose.¹²

26. At its twenty-second session, the Working Group had adopted the revised outline of the final review report further developed by the secretariat (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/5/Rev.1) and requested all member States to submit their self-assessments by 15 December 2020 at the latest to the secretariat through the Shared Environmental Information System online tool. The Working Group had also requested the secretariat to prepare a revised version of the final progress review report on the establishment of the System (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/7) based on additional self-assessments submitted by member States for the Working Group's next session.¹³

27. The Committee on Environmental Policy, at its twenty-sixth session, had encouraged all member States to submit their self-assessments by 15 December 2020.¹⁴

¹¹ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/4, annex, para. 3 (a) (iii) and (v).

¹² See ECE/CEP/2019/15, para. 37 (i) and (j).

¹³ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/2, para. 29 (a), (b) and (d).

¹⁴ See ECE/CEP/2020/2 (advance unedited version), para. 38 (e).

28. The secretariat subsequently presented a final review report on the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System in Europe and Central Asia (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/6) at the current session.

29. The members of the Working Group were informed that, prior to the Working Group's twenty-third session, no comments on the report had been provided and members of the Working Group were then invited to reflect on the reporting exercise and the use of the System in the future, considering the continuing relevance of the principles of the Shared Environmental Information System.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

30. The Working Group:

(a) Adopted the final review report on the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System in Europe and Central Asia as contained in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/6;

(b) Suggested the continued use of the Shared Environmental Information System reporting tool and assessment framework for upcoming reviews for selected indicators and in support of pan-European environmental assessments;

(c) Requested the secretariat to inform the Committee on Environmental Policy of the outcomes of the agenda item.

VII. Regular pan-European environmental assessment supported by the Shared Environmental Information System

31. The Working Group had been tasked with leading a process of consultation on the regular pan-European environmental assessment¹⁵ for consideration by the Committee on Environmental Policy and leading up to the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

32. During its twenty-first session (Geneva, 6 and 7 May 2019), the Working Group had considered the draft concept for the next pan-European environmental assessment (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/6) and had recommended that option 2 – an indicator-based and thematic assessment – be used as a basis for preparing a detailed proposal on the pan-European assessment.¹⁶

33. During its twenty-fifth session, the Committee had: welcomed the information provided by the secretariat and a representative of UNEP on the next pan-European assessment; selected option 3 from among the options for the next pan-European environmental assessment, as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/6, subject to the availability of resources; requested the secretariat and UNEP, working in close cooperation with the European Environment Agency, to prepare a limited indicator-based and thematic assessment, and to regularly inform the Bureau of progress made; and encouraged all member States to provide the necessary funding to enable the preparation of the assessment.¹⁷

34. During its twenty-second session, the Working Group had approved the final outline of the assessment as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/6/Rev.1, while noting that it might not be possible to address all environmental themes listed, that themes needed to be addressed in an integrated manner and that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic should be considered.¹⁸

¹⁵ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/4, annex, para. 2 (b).

¹⁶ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2019/2, para. 37.

¹⁷ See ECE/CEP/2019/15, para. 37 (k) (i)–(iii).

¹⁸ See ECE/CEP/AC.10/2020/2, para. 38 (a).

35. During its twenty-sixth session, the Committee on Environmental Policy had expressed its appreciation to those member States that had provided financial contributions to support the preparation of the next pan-European environmental assessment, encouraged member States to provide further support in terms of expertise and funding, and requested the secretariat to continue to inform the Bureau of progress made.¹⁹

36. The secretariat provided an overview of the latest developments related to the assessment, including on completed parts, as well as on next steps, and reminded participants to identify partners, institutions and experts who could contribute to the development and review of specific chapters of the next pan-European assessment.

37. Consultants hired by ECE then presented preliminary selected indicators and draft findings related to:

(a) Chapter III (Environmental state and trends), thematic sections:

(i) A. Air pollution and ozone depletion;

(ii) B. Climate change;

(iii) D. Coastal waters, marine ecosystems and oceans;

(iv) F. Land and soil;

(b) Chapter IV (Themes for the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference), thematic section B. Applying principles of circular economy to sustainable tourism.

38. In addition, the Working Group was invited to: discuss and identify partners, institutions and experts who could contribute to the development and review of specific parts of the next pan-European assessment; identify relevant indicators and case studies; and determine the next steps, including how to mobilize additional financial and in-kind support for the assessment.

Working Group decisions and recommendations

39. The Working Group:

(a) Welcomed the draft elements of the next pan-European environmental assessment as set out in document ECE/CEP/AC.10/2021/5;

(b) Took note of the progress made, timeline and next steps for the assessment;

(c) Welcomed the presentations of thematic sections of the assessment by the authors;

(d) Requested the authors of the thematic sections of the assessment to take into account the comments made by the members of the Working Group and to focus on policy-relevant conclusions;

(e) Encouraged member States to support preparation of the assessment with further financial contributions;

(f) Requested the secretariat to inform the Committee on Environmental Policy and its Bureau of the outcomes of the agenda item;

(g) Also requested the secretariat to engage the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators in the review of progress and clearance of draft elements of the assessment;

(h) Further requested the secretariat to provide an update on the assessment at its next session, for final clearance.

¹⁹ See ECE/CEP/2020/2 (advance unedited version), para. 38 (f).

VIII. Sharing and integration of economic, social and environmental data with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

40. The secretariat informed the Working Group that no comments or feedback had been received from member States on the questions shared during the previous session, on the way forward regarding sharing and integration of economic, social and environmental data with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

41. The secretariat and representatives of the European Environment Agency and UNEP then provided an overview of upcoming and ongoing regional environmental events and initiatives promoted in 2021 by regional and international organizations with relevance to the Working Group. Events presented included: the ECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Region (Geneva and online, 10–18 March 2021); the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, their joint High-level Segment and associated meetings (Geneva, 18–22 October 2021); the ninth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Geneva, 29 September–1 October 2021); the eighteenth session of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators (Geneva, 18 and 19 October 2021); the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (Kunming, China, 11–24 October 2021); and the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 31 October–12 November 2021).

42. A representative of the European Environment Agency referred to the new European Environment Agency and European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet) strategy for 2021–2030 and its implementation together with Eionet and cooperating countries, and also mentioned that the Agency would contribute to the relevant ECE and global events mentioned.

43. A representative of UNEP highlighted initiatives and reports produced, such as the report entitled *Measuring progress: Environment and the SDGs*,²⁰ the final lessons learned report of the project on the Shared Environmental Information System in Central Asia and the draft report on European and Central Asian actions on air quality, on which members of the Working Group were invited to provide feedback.

44. In addition, representatives of international and regional organizations were invited to report briefly on extrabudgetary projects related to the activities of the Working Group. A representative of the European Environment Agency presented the strategy of the Agency for the period up to 2030, followed by presentations by a representative of UNEP, on the outcomes of the first part of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP (online, 22 and 23 February 2021), and the representative of OECD, on relevant activities under the European Union “EU4Environment” Programme. Other presentations included a joint presentation by representatives of UNEP, the Environment Agency Austria and ECE on progress in the implementation of the United Nations Development Account project “Improved environmental monitoring and assessment in support of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus”, followed by a presentation by the representative of the ECE Statistical Division on the status of the revision of the ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators.

45. The agenda item also included presentations on new technologies, big data, artificial intelligence and Earth observation used in projects by international and regional

²⁰ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/Convention on Biological Diversity (Nairobi, UNEP, 2021).

organizations in order to enhance the full use of data, technology and digitalization to complement and potentially replace established monitoring practices and information sources. A representative of the European Environment Agency presented a new project on “Mainstreaming Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) data sharing and management principles in support of Europe’s environment”. That was followed by a presentation by a representative of UNEP on a new project in Central Asia on the use of geospatial data for reporting on Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 15 (clean water and sanitation for all and life on land, respectively).

46. The Working Group was then invited to discuss:

(a) How the work on environmental information, data and indicators, including related to a green and circular economy, could support the development of the pan-European environmental assessment(s) and other activities related to the Working Group;

(b) Topics to consider for the twenty-fourth session of the Working Group (Geneva, April 2022).

47. The representatives of Austria and the European Environment Agency made a number of suggestions, including that the Working Group could discuss more in detail the aspects of sustainable tourism and circular economy in the future (Austria) and that it could enhance the activities related to digitalization, also in the area of accessibility to environmental information and exchange of experience, which would be in line with the new strategy of the Agency and would respond to the greater need for digitalization because of the pandemic (European Environment Agency). The secretariat suggested that the second specific theme of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference on “Greening the economy in the pan-European region: working towards sustainable infrastructure” also be included in upcoming activities.

48. After the presentations and the discussions, the Working Group adopted the conclusions and recommendations listed below.

Working Group conclusions and recommendations

49. The Working Group:

(a) Took note of the information provided on upcoming regional events and initiatives promoted in 2021 by international and regional organizations related to the activities of the Working Group;

(b) Invited representatives of regional and international organizations to provide regular updates to the Working Group on upcoming events and initiatives of relevance;

(c) Took note of the suggestions related to how the work on environmental information, data and indicators could better support the development of the pan-European environmental assessment(s) and other activities related to the Working Group;

(d) Took note of the suggestions on topics for the twenty-fourth session of the Working Group.

IX. Progress in environmental monitoring and assessment, including institutional and regulatory mechanisms and infrastructure at the national level

50. Members of the Working Group, and especially those representing countries of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, were invited to present and report on major actions taken at the national level to strengthen environmental monitoring and assessment since the twenty-second session of the Working Group, including institutional and regulatory mechanisms, infrastructure at the national level, and efforts and remaining challenges in enhancing digitalization of environmental information. The secretariat had circulated a template to member States prior to the meeting.

51. Representatives of Armenia, Belarus, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova and Turkmenistan reported on progress in environmental monitoring and assessment and efforts in enhancing digitalization since the twenty-second session of the Working Group.

X. Other business

52. The newly elected Chair invited the Working Group to discuss the relevance of digitalization and digital transformation in the area of environment for member States and how the Working Group and international partners could support the countries in their efforts. Members of the Working Group were also invited to discuss that issue in upcoming meetings.

53. The newly elected Chair, with the assistance of the secretariat, briefly summarized the conclusions and recommendations of the Working Group and informed participants that the report of the meeting and the list of participants would be finalized by the secretariat for circulation to the Working Group after the meeting. Those documents would be posted on the meeting web page.

54. The Working Group noted that its next session was scheduled to be held in Geneva on 11 and 12 April 2022.

55. The newly elected Chair then invited the Working Group to take part in the evaluation of the meeting.

56. The Working Group approved the decisions made *ad referendum* regarding agenda items 1–6 during the hybrid part of its twenty-third session and welcomed a summary of the conclusions, decisions and recommendations made during the entirety of its twenty-third session.

XI. Closure of the meeting

57. The newly elected Chair closed the meeting.
