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Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

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Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Implementing the mandate and terms of reference

Draft mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment for the period 2024–2028

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The current mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment will expire at the end of 2023. The present document provides the draft future mandate and terms of reference of the Working Group beyond 2023.

The Working Group will be invited to approve the draft set out below or agree on changes and determine next steps. The mandate and terms of reference, incorporating agreed changes, will be submitted for consideration by the Committee on Environmental Policy and subsequently to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Executive Committee for approval.

The present draft was prepared based on the current mandate and terms of reference, a survey on the newly proposed mandate and terms of reference that was conducted during the twenty-fourth session of the Working Group (Geneva, 11–12 April 2022), and outcomes of past sessions of the Working Group and the Committee on Environmental Policy and the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Nicosia, 5–7 October 2022). Furthermore, the publication *Sharing our vision for the pan-European region: Setting strategic goals and objectives for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*, which presents strategic goals and objectives up to 2030,^a was taken into account.

^a United Nations publication, ECE/CEP/187.



I. Introduction

1. Environmental policies in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region are evolving to allow a transition to sustainable development and an inclusive green and circular economy. A broad set of policy interventions aims at socioeconomic development in the region, while respecting planetary boundaries. Relevant policies for the region include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Ministerial Declaration and other outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Nicosia, 5–7 October 2022), multilateral environmental agreements including ECE conventions and the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and other relevant instruments, including policies at the subregional level such as the European Union European Green Deal.
2. Effective and sound policymaking and informed decision-making in a rapidly changing world require integrated, relevant, timely and easily accessible information and its appropriate assessment to allow a sound transition. To achieve this, adequate monitoring systems and programmes, data and information management systems, assessment and reporting routines and methods must be in place. In addition, non-traditional sources, such as big data, the Internet of things, machine learning and citizen science, need to be tapped into.
3. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has demonstrated the importance of the availability of integrated data and information, and the crucial role of sound national monitoring and assessment systems. While environmental monitoring and assessment are critical for measuring and monitoring progress regarding the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, a circular economy and other global policies, there are still significant data and knowledge gaps in some areas that may contribute to a failure to achieve certain goals and policy targets. In many areas of the world, including in the ECE region, natural resources are not used sustainably, and the situation is projected to worsen in the coming decades owing to increasing pressures from population growth, agriculture and enhanced energy production and consumption, as well as from the impacts of climate change.
4. The World Economic Forum publication *The Global Risks Report 2023* lists failure to mitigate climate change, failure of climate change adaptation, natural disasters and extreme weather events and biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse as the four most severe global risks for the coming 10-year period.¹ Another two environment-related risks are ranked in the top ten risks over a 10-year period: natural resources crises and large-scale environmental damage incidents. At the same time, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) publication *Measuring Progress: Environment and the SDGs* reports that “unfortunately ... our comprehension of the environmental dimension of the [Sustainable Development Goals] is lagging. Our limited capacities to collect, disseminate and effectively use environmental data have hindered our holistic understanding of the environment and the effect on it of socioeconomic factors”.² For the pan-European region, various monitoring and data gaps have been identified in the publication *Europe’s Environment: The Seventh Pan-European Environmental Assessment*.³
5. The ECE Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment therefore assists member States in enhancing their monitoring and assessment systems and producing and working with environmental data and information to ensure their timely flow and adequate assessment. The assessment supports informed decision-making processes, both nationally and internationally, on the environment and helps to operationalize the Sustainable Development Goals and other relevant policy frameworks.

¹ World Economic Forum, *The Global Risks Report 2023*, 18th ed. (Geneva, 2023), p. 6, figure A.

² United Nations Environment Programme, *Measuring Progress: Environment and the SDGs* (Nairobi, 2021), p. 3.

³ United Nations publication, ECE/CEP/192.

II. Mandate

6. The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment shall serve as the environmental monitoring, knowledge and assessment network for the ECE region as a whole and as a platform to exchange good practice and information, develop action plans and strengthen initiatives on environmental monitoring- and assessment-related areas. The Working Group shall serve under the oversight of the Committee on Environmental Policy, to aid informed decision-making in support of the transition to sustainable development and a green and circular economy in the ECE region and shall report annually to the Committee on its achievements and the implementation or modification of the objectives and activities set out below. These terms of reference are valid for a period of five years, until the Committee's regular session in 2028.

III. Objectives

7. The Working Group's overall objective is to enable informed environmental decision-making through regular monitoring, assessment and reporting to support the transition to sustainable development and a green and circular economy in the ECE region, in cooperation with partners. Furthermore, the Working Group aims to support the implementation of the outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference, the multilateral environmental agreements and global policy frameworks including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

8. The Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference resulted, among other things, in the Ministerial Declaration, which refers to various activities directly related to the work of the Working Group. Ministers committed to ensuring adequate monitoring of, and public access to, relevant information on air pollution, in particular ground-level monitoring, and recognized the crucial importance of having access to diverse information sources and reliable, up-to-date, quality data and statistics, namely by using modern tools and techniques, for facing both current and emerging needs and challenges. Ministers also reaffirmed their commitment to facilitate partnerships and mutual support among national statistical offices and related agencies, for example, environmental agencies, to produce data and statistics for monitoring progress in environmental protection. Furthermore, ministers acknowledged the importance of regular, indicator-based environmental assessments, and committed to keeping the pan-European region under regular review in support of sustainable development and the transition to a circular, green and sustainable economy. They also invited countries to continue their efforts to implement all pillars of the Shared Environmental Information System – content, infrastructure and cooperation – and to address any remaining gaps, and recommended that countries make environmental information publicly available, findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable, and encourage collection of local and indigenous knowledge, citizen science and crowdsourced data. Moreover, ministers encouraged countries, when developing digitalization of environmental information systems relying on open data, big data and state-of-the-art digital technologies, to improve data availability, transparency and public involvement in decision-making.

9. The Working Group aims to support these commitments and, under the oversight of the Committee, the specific objectives of the Working Group are, therefore, to:

(a) Support the development of environmental monitoring and information systems in Europe and Central Asia, and their alignment with the Shared Environmental Information System and open data principles and pillars, to aid informed decision-making. Besides traditional environmental monitoring areas, the Working Group will support the monitoring and measuring of emerging themes such as sustainable infrastructure and tourism and circular economy, as well as green economy;

(b) Also support the development of regular pan-European environmental assessments (e.g., indicator-based assessments) and regular national state-of-the-environment reporting to support policy with scientific evidence;

(c) Provide an inclusive platform for ECE member States, partner organizations and other institutions and networks with relevant expertise in the area to discuss advances in

the area of environmental monitoring and assessment (e.g., technological progress, legislative and policy developments or governance), and the integration of environmental, economic and social information and data;

(d) Enable the development of capacity to tackle specific challenges in environmental monitoring and assessment, including through providing guidance on the development and improvement of environmental monitoring systems, their technical specifications and modernization, financing, the collection and sharing of environmental knowledge through national monitoring systems and other mechanisms and technologies, the enhancement of data disaggregation and the integration of gender aspects in monitoring- and assessment-related activities;

(e) Strengthen partnerships, including with UNEP, its network and other organizations and programmes within the United Nations system, institutions of the European Union, including the European Commission and the European Environment Agency and its European Environment Information and Observation Network, the European Space Agency, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Health Organization, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, the Group on Earth Observations and international financial institutions, among others, and mobilize people and resources to create, analyse and use knowledge to inform policymaking across the pan-European region.

10. The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators will continue to support the Working Group and carry out all activities related to statistical capacity development for target countries.

IV. Planned programme areas, activities and outputs

11. The Working Group shall work on the following relevant areas, subject to the availability of resources:

(a) **Programme area 1. Support the development of environmental monitoring and information systems** in support of regular environmental assessment and reporting, and their alignment with open data and the Shared Environmental Information System principles and pillars, and in particular:

(i) Support institutional strengthening and legislative improvement;

(ii) Promote the use of new technologies and tools (such as big data, the Internet of things and artificial intelligence), as well as the integration of official statistics and administrative data with both environmental data from new sources, including from Earth observation and geospatial data, and data for other sectors, including health and transport;

(iii) Regularly evaluate the performance of environmental monitoring and information systems in line with the principles and pillars of open data and the Shared Environmental Information System, and provide recommendations on how environmental monitoring and information systems can be further strengthened;

(iv) Contribute to the process of implementing the main environmental monitoring- and assessment-related outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in the period 2024–2027, including those related to a green and circular economy and sustainable infrastructure and tourism;

(v) Also contribute to the closure of monitoring gaps in Europe and Central Asia, including in the areas of biodiversity and ecosystems, air and climate change, fresh water, chemicals and waste, land and soil, coastal waters, marine ecosystems and seas, as well as monitoring of sustainable infrastructure, monitoring of circular economy and sustainable tourism, monitoring of environmental financing and environmental reporting, and support the development and use of standardized methods and guidance on environmental monitoring;

(b) **Programme area 2. Support the development of regular pan-European environmental assessments and regular state-of-the-environment reporting**, to assist the transition to sustainable development and a green and circular economy and, in particular:

- (i) Bring together experts from the partner organizations and other interested parties to discuss and oversee the eighth pan-European environmental assessment;
- (ii) Discuss and support state-of-the-environment reporting and detail regional priorities concerning the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting, also involving other thematic networks, including those under the multilateral environmental agreements, in the discussion;
- (iii) Oversee the implementation of proposed recommendations and guidance provided by the seventh pan-European environmental assessment and the streamlining of regular state-of-the-environment reporting;
- (iv) Also oversee the assessment, where possible, of the overall achievement of commitments made in the last three to five pan-European declarations;

(c) **Programme area 3. Continue the process of consultation between ECE member States, partner organizations and other institutions and networks**, including the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements, international financial institutions and the private sector, with relevant expertise in the area. Provide an inclusive platform for countries to discuss recent developments in the area of monitoring and assessment and the integration of environmental, economic and social information and data with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, a green and circular economy and other related areas of work. In addition:

- (i) Cooperate with the Joint Task Force and other relevant bodies under other ECE sectoral subprogrammes, including those on Housing and Land Management, Population, Sustainable Energy and Transport, to ensure that activities are synergetic and streamlined;
- (ii) Engage with other communities and networks to discuss how environmental, social and economic information and data can be integrated and utilized in decision-making and how best to use new technologies and geospatial information;
- (iii) Publish outcomes from the Working Group's collaborative activities (e.g., good practices, guidelines and lessons learned) to share outputs and guide future activities in the area;

(d) **Programme area 4. Engage in capacity-development assistance** addressing specific challenges at the regional, subregional and national levels related to environmental monitoring and assessment and environmental knowledge. The specific challenges to be addressed will depend on regional and national capacity gaps and be defined by the Working Group members. The implementation of capacity-development activities is subject to the availability of resources. Such activities might include:

- (i) Detailing regional and national capacity gaps in environmental monitoring, information and reporting and data needed for producing environmental indicators. This will involve identifying institutional, legal, monitoring, data and information gaps in the target countries;
- (ii) Supporting countries, in collaboration with the Joint Task Force, in the development, implementation and use of regional and national indicator frameworks to monitor relevant environmental policy developments and activities to support their implementation, including the review and establishment of national reporting mechanisms, procedures and methodological approaches associated with the indicators in all ECE countries;
- (iii) Engaging and liaising directly with other relevant knowledge-sharing actors working on capacity development in related areas of work;

(iv) Implementing capacity-development activities to provide assistance in accordance with priority areas of action identified for targeted ECE countries at the regional, subregional or national level;

(e) **Cross-cutting activities.** See list below for details:

(i) Holding of annual sessions of the Working Group, including capacity-development activities;

(ii) Conduct of a mid-term review in 2025 to assess progress in the implementation of the relevant outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference;

(iii) Draft new mandate and terms of reference for the Working Group for the period 2029–2033;

(iv) Draft annual timetables of activities;

(v) Supporting the evaluations of the performance and activities of the Working Group, as required;

(vi) Mainstreaming gender into the activities of the Working Group and strengthening the collection and use of disaggregated data;

(vii) Mobilizing resources to ensure that the Working Group can implement all needed tasks to effectively support the transition to a green and circular economy and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda;

(viii) Presenting outcomes and relevant documents (annual timetables, terms of reference, progress reports, etc.) of the Working Group at the sessions of the Committee on Environmental Policy.

12. The following outputs will be delivered in the period to the end of 2028:

(a) Regular meetings of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment and sharing and exchange of knowledge;

(b) Assistance to target countries for fulfilling international reporting obligations and on regular reporting on the Shared Environmental Information System, to address gaps in its implementation, if needed;

(c) Progress reports on selected indicators related to the enhancement of the Shared Environmental Information System;

(d) Regular review of the ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators, in collaboration with the Joint Task Force, and the publication of updated editions or addendums, as needed;

(e) Support to the implementation and use of regional and national indicator frameworks to contribute to environmental monitoring, national reporting, regular assessments and methodological approaches associated with environmental indicators;

(f) Continued efforts to mobilize resources and support from Governments and regional and international organizations to enable the Working Group to implement its activities and to support countries in enhancing environmental monitoring and information systems;

(g) Mid-term review in 2025 to assess progress in the implementation of the relevant outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference;

(h) Evaluations of the performance and activities of the Working Group, as required.

13. The following outputs will be delivered in the period to the end of 2028, subject to the availability of additional resources:

(a) Review and update of the Guidelines on Environmental Monitoring and Reporting and development of other relevant guidance material (e.g., related to the use of both geospatial information and new technologies);

(b) Support to the assessment of regional and national capacity gaps in environmental monitoring, information and data needed for producing environmental indicators;

(c) Recommendations and advice to ECE countries to improve their performance in developing environmental monitoring and information systems, aligned with the Shared Environmental Information System and open data principles;

(d) Support to the implementation of the environmental monitoring- and assessment-related outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference and, as appropriate, assessment of the state of implementation of commitments made in Ministerial Declarations from earlier Conferences;

(e) Assistance in the preparation of the regular pan-European environmental assessment and national state-of-the-environment reports;

(f) Thematic meetings, workshops and publications that address environmental monitoring, digitization and use of new technologies, assessment and reporting and the integration of environmental, social and economic data, data disaggregation and gender mainstreaming;

(g) Focused capacity-development activities to address specific national priorities, including the preparation of training materials and the provision of advisory services.

V. Timetable

14. The Working Group shall prepare an annual timetable of activities, as an official document, and regularly report to the Committee on the progress of its work. This will ensure that the Working Group can accommodate new demands over time and allow the Committee to comment on and monitor ongoing and future activities.

15. The mandate of the Working Group will be reviewed and amended by the Committee in its regular session in 2028.

VI. Methods of work

16. The Working Group shall meet at least once annually. It shall also communicate through email and other electronic collaborative platforms in the period between meetings.

17. Additional meetings, workshops and capacity-development activities will be organized subject to the availability of funding.

VII. Membership

18. The Working Group shall be composed of members from all ECE member States. They should represent the national institutions dealing with environmental monitoring, knowledge and assessment.

19. The Working Group shall also involve representatives of partner organizations, such as other international and regional organizations, programmes and policies and multilateral environmental agreements dealing with the collection of environmental data and information and the generation of environmental assessments – whether covering the environment as a whole, or only certain themes – as well as expert teams.

20. The Working Group shall elect a chair and two vice-chairs for a term of up to two years, ensuring a regional balance in the nominations. The chair and vice-chairs shall be eligible for re-election for one additional term.

VIII. Secretariat support and resources

21. The Working Group shall be serviced by the ECE secretariat, supported by UNEP and the European Environment Agency, and guided by the relevant procedures established by the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy. The ECE secretariat will work closely with interested partners, such as the European Commission and OECD.
 22. Donors will be invited to provide support for the Working Group's activities.
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