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Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators (former Joint Task Force)

Prepared by the Secretariat (Statistical and Environment Divisions)

Summary

The Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators, set up in 2009, is a joint body of two UNECE Sectoral Committees, the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) and the Conference of European Statisticians, targeting the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In February 2023, the CES Bureau supported setting up a Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators (the former Joint Task Force) as a standing body under the CES and CEP, and extending its work to other interested countries.

The Secretariat was requested to submit the Terms of Reference for the Joint Working Group on Environment Statistics and Indicators to the Committee on Environmental Policy and the Conference of European Statisticians for their approval.



1. The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators was set up by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) and the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in 2009.
2. The Joint Task Force is a unique intergovernmental body in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region, being open to experts from national statistical offices and ministries of environment (or similar governmental bodies). It benefits from the regular exchange of experience and information between policymakers and producers of statistics.
3. The main objective of the Joint Task Force has been to assist countries in their efforts to produce, share and use environmental information following international standards and guidelines, including the United Nations Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics and System of Environmental-Economic Accounting. The Joint Task Force also supports the UNECE Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment (WGEMA) under the UNECE environment sub-programme. Specifically, it assists target countries with methodological challenges related to the environmental indicators used for assessment, including the UNECE environmental indicators.
4. To help address the triple planetary crisis (climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss), and considering the urgent need for integrated data and statistics due to the growing scope and complexity of global processes, the activities covered by the Joint Task Force are steadily increasing in number and scope. However, the ad hoc mandate of the Joint Task Force since its establishment and the limited resources dedicated to its work have left important environmental themes unaddressed in the past.
5. To ensure a continuous platform for countries to improve environmental statistics in support of integrated policies and new policy developments, it is proposed to convert the Joint Task Force into a standing body with a broader thematic and geographical coverage and to rename it the “Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators”.
6. In February 2022, the CES Bureau supported extending the work of the Task Force to other interested countries and setting it up as a standing body under the Conference following the preparation of the new mandate and terms of reference in 2023.
7. In October 2022, the Committee on Environmental Policy extended the mandate and terms of reference of the Joint Task Force until the end of 2023, to allow the Joint Task Force to develop a new mandate and terms of reference for the period beyond 2023. CEP also requested for its next session further details on the proposed new standing body including a work plan. The ECE Executive Committee approved the extension of the Joint Task Force at its 126th meeting on 13 January 2023.
8. The Joint Task Force supported its conversion into a standing body with a broadened mandate, scope and geographical coverage at its nineteenth session (Geneva, 2-3 November 2022). As an indication of interest of a wider group of countries, eleven countries from outside Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia participated in the meeting.
9. In February 2023 the CES Bureau approved the terms of reference for a Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators as a standing body under the Conference of European Statisticians and the Committee on Environmental Policy.
10. The meeting requested the Secretariat to submit a relevant proposal to the Committee on Environmental Policy and the Conference of European Statisticians.
11. The draft mandate and terms of reference of the Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators are presented in the annex to the present document. They will be also submitted to the Committee on Environmental Policy for approval at its next regular session in November 2023.
12. The Conference of European Statisticians is invited to endorse the terms of reference for a Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators as a standing body under the Conference of European Statisticians and the Committee on Environmental Policy pending approval also by the Committee.

Annex

Draft mandate and terms of reference of the Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators

I. Background

1. The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators was set up in 2009¹ jointly by the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) with the aim of improving environmental statistics and strengthening environmental reporting in the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.² The Joint Task Force held 18 meetings in the period 2009–2021. During that period, it gradually revised the indicators covered by the Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators³ (Indicator Guidelines) prepared by the ECE Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment (WGEMA) and endorsed at the Sixth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Belgrade, 10–12 October 2007).⁴ The Joint Task Force updated the Indicator Guidelines and started to add important indicators to better address emerging issues such as climate change, the circular economy and biodiversity loss. The Task Force continues to work closely with WGEMA, a subsidiary body of the Committee on Environmental Policy, and the Environment for Europe Process.

2. Since its establishment, the Joint Task Force has been faced with an increasing number of thematic areas, growing complexity and the resulting need for integrated information and statistics. Its terms of reference need to be renewed every few years; its current term expires at the end of 2023. The Joint Task Force's limited resources and ad hoc nature, and the resulting lower priority for regular conference services restrict its scope for action to support the provision of statistics that can inform policies holistically.

3. The lack of resources and knowledge for producing environmental information and statistics, including environmental-economic accounts and related indicators, has become a challenge for many countries that are members of the Conference of European Statisticians and the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy, resulting in insufficient quality of these statistics and data gaps. For example, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021⁵ refers to significant country-level data gaps in areas related to sustainable consumption and production (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13). The issue of major data gaps in managing and monitoring environment-related Sustainable Development Goals, and the important role of the United Nations in advancing environmental statistics, is discussed in detail in the UNEP report Measuring Progress: Environment and the SDGs.⁶ The measurement of relatively new policy initiatives, such as circular economy and sustainable infrastructure, provides challenges for national statistical offices, ministries of environment and other related governmental agencies of all CES and CEP member States.

4. In addition, the seventh pan-European environmental assessment and various other thematic environmental reports produced in the region have revealed many knowledge gaps that need to be closed urgently, which leaves the Joint Task Force with a growing number of areas that need to be addressed quickly.

¹ ECE/CEP/S/152, para. 19.

² Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

³ Available at <https://unece.org/guidelines-application-environmental-indicators>.

⁴ Ministerial Declaration (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/8, para. 7) and monitoring and assessment recommendations (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/11/Add.1, para. 4), respectively available at <https://unece.org/belgrade-conference> and <https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/documents/2007/ece/ece.belgrade.conf.2007.11.add.1.e.pdf>.

⁵ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.I.3.

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme (Nairobi, 2021).

5. Given the increasing scope and complexity of the activities to be covered by the Joint Task Force and the limited human resources at the ECE secretariat, currently the secretariat can offer support in only a few environmental areas. This leaves unaddressed various important environmental themes, the needs for data integration and capacity development, the development of methodologies and the provision of platforms for exchange of knowledge and experiences.

6. The Joint Task Force follows the principles of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) that is implemented in the pan-European region and beyond. Therefore, there are common issues to be discussed. Some countries that are not members of the Joint Task Force are already participating in its sessions, highlighting its added value, but information about the meetings could be distributed more widely and the exchange of experience could take place over a wider geographical area to support environmental decision-making more holistically.

7. At a recent joint session of the CES and the European Regional Committee of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (Geneva, 21 June 2022), climate change and protection of the environment were identified as the most important policy areas in the region that could benefit greatly from better integration of geospatial information with traditional statistics. The new standing body on environmental statistics and indicators could provide the needed platform for sharing related knowledge and experience between all CES and CEP member States.

8. The CES Bureau, at its February 2021 meeting supported extending the work of the Task Force to other interested countries and setting it up as a standing body under the Conference following the preparation of the new mandate and terms of reference in 2023.⁷

9. The Committee on Environmental Policy at its second special session in 2022 (Nicosia, 3-4 October 2022) approved the extension of the existing mandate and terms of reference of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators until the end of 2023. It also discussed the conversion of the Joint Task Force into an open-ended standing body and requested the Secretariat to develop a new mandate and terms of reference for this proposed body for further discussion. The ECE Executive Committee at its 126th meeting on 13 January 2023 approved the extension of the mandate and the terms of reference of the Joint Task Force until 31 December 2023.

10. The new open-ended standing body will continue the work of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators, including the further revision of indicators to reflect the outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Nicosia, 5–7 October 2022) and other relevant policy developments. The focus of work will also be on the production and online sharing of data to establish regular data flows for effective reporting according to international monitoring and assessment requirements, including the obligations under the relevant multilateral environmental agreements. This work will furthermore support the continued implementation of the Shared Environmental Information System and open data initiatives in the pan-European region beyond the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

II. Mandate

11. The Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators shall serve as the UNECE platform for experts from national statistical offices and ministries of environment (or responsible government agencies) for improving environmental and integrated statistics to strengthen environmental reporting and inform emerging policy themes under the oversight and guidance of the CEP and CES. It shall report to both the CEP and CES. Its geographical coverage shall include all CEP and CES member States.

12. These terms of reference shall enter into force upon their endorsement by the UNECE Executive Committee. The terms of reference shall be reviewed every five years and results of this review shall be presented to the CEP and CES.

⁷ ECE/CES/2021/14/Add.12, para. 26.

III. Objective

13. The aim of the Joint Working Group on Environmental Statistics and Indicators is to assist CEP and CES member States in their efforts to produce relevant information and statistics and to share knowledge and experience. This platform shall be used to provide support to countries to:

- (a) Enhance their capacities for production of high-quality environmental statistics and indicators, in particular in countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern- and South-Eastern Europe
- (b) Correctly apply the Shared Environmental Information System and open data methodologies in line with statistical standards and guidelines, and the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in the area of environment;
- (c) Analyse and communicate environmental data;
- (d) Implement the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting and the United Nations Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics;
- (e) Apply environmental indicators in the context of sustainable development, green and circular economy initiatives, the outcomes of the Environment for Europe Ministerial Conferences and emerging policy themes;
- (f) Produce environmental and related integrated statistics to inform new or challenging policy areas such as the circular economy, sustainable infrastructure and sustainable tourism, and to link financial instruments to the measurement of a transition to a low-carbon economy;
- (g) Produce environmental and health-related statistics to derive actions that serve both the health of the environment and humanity;
- (h) Continuously improve data quality and advise how to overcome data gaps;
- (i) Use new or alternative data sources (e.g., remote sensing, “big data” and citizen science);
- (j) Share data;
- (k) Disseminate policy-relevant information products.

14. Tangible outcomes of the work of the Group shall include practical guidelines, capacity development activities, including on the revised environmental indicators and on gaps identified related to the pillars and principles of the Shared Environmental Information System in particular in countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, and other joint activities to facilitate the production and sharing of environmental statistics and indicators in the region.

15. The Working Group shall continue to assist the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment in evaluating the application of the internationally accepted methodologies and statistical standards in data production to support regular assessments and reporting and according to the principles of the Shared Environmental Information System and open data initiatives.

IV. Planned activities and outputs

16. The Working Group shall:

- (a) Provide advice to the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment under the Environment sub-programme, the Committee on Environmental Policy and the Conference of European Statisticians on the application of data and indicator production methodologies for the ECE environmental indicators, including for regular reviews of the Shared Environmental Information System and other relevant indicator frameworks such as environmental and health-related data and indicators;

(b) Address specific challenges related to methodology and data quality in producing environmental data and indicators in line with the ECE revised Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators, international statistical standards and guidelines, the Shared Environmental Information System principles and the recommendations made by the Working Group;

(c) Develop capacity in countries, including in countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, for the compilation and production of integrated statistics and of environmental data in support of measuring sustainable development, to inform circular and green economy initiatives, to link financial instruments to the measurement of a transition to a low-carbon economy and policy outcomes of the Environment for Europe process, including on sustainable infrastructure and tourism, and to support the development of regular environmental assessments;

(d) Provide a forum for sharing experience on the communication of environmental information to users, in line with the ECE recommendations on statistical communication and the recommendations made by the Working Group;

(e) Assist countries in developing capacity for the implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting;

(f) Assist countries in producing environmental and health-related statistics to derive actions that serve both the health of the environment and humanity;

(g) Regularly revise the Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators to take into account recent policy developments and new guidelines for production of environmental statistics and indicators;

(h) Assist countries in continuously improving data quality and overcoming data gaps;

(i) Strengthen capacities of countries in using new or alternative data sources (e.g., remote sensing, “big data” and citizen science);

(j) Assist the WGEMA and countries in further developing capacity for data sharing and dissemination of policy-relevant information products;

(k) Establish thematic expert groups or task forces, or recommend the establishment of such groups under the umbrella of CEP and CES;

(l) Report to the ordinary sessions of the Committee on Environmental Policy and the Conference of European Statisticians.

17. The following outputs shall be achieved:

(a) Advice on the application of the ECE Guidelines on Environmental Indicators and data production methodologies in support of a Shared Environmental Information System is provided;

(b) Capacity in countries is gradually strengthened for applying the data production methodologies and statistical standards for ECE environmental indicators and other relevant indicator frameworks in support of a Shared Environmental Information system and regular assessments;

(c) Capacity in countries is gradually strengthened for the compilation and integration of high-quality environmental data in support of measuring sustainable development, circular and green economy initiatives, environmental and health-related information, to link financial instruments to the measurement of a transition to a low-carbon economy, policy relevant statistics, such as on taxes and goods and services, and policy outcomes of the Environment for Europe process, including on sustainable infrastructure and tourism and, to support the development of regular environmental assessments;

(d) Capacities of countries are strengthened in using new or alternative data sources (e.g., remote sensing, “big data” and citizen science);

(e) Capacity in countries is strengthened for communicating environmental information;

- (f) Capacity in countries is strengthened to improve gradually the implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting;
- (g) Revised Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators are made available;
- (h) A regular overview of the progress achieved in improving data quality and filling identified data gaps in line with the SEIS principles is produced;
- (i) Capacity in countries is strengthened to follow up on the recommendations and outcomes from the Environment for Europe Ministerial Conferences and emerging policies.

V. Methods of work

18. The Joint Working Group shall continue to meet at least once annually. The Joint Working Group shall also communicate through email and other electronic collaboration platforms, such as wikis, during the periods between meetings. The terms of reference shall be reviewed every five years and the results of the review shall be presented to the CEP and CES.

19. The working languages of the Joint Working Group will be English, French and Russian.

VI. Membership

20. The Joint Working Group shall be composed of experts representing national statistical offices and ministries or agencies dealing with environmental statistics and assessments from the CES and CEP member countries. Representatives of ministries and agencies dealing with economic and health issues may be invited to participate in the meetings.

21. The Joint Working Group shall elect its Chair and up to two Vice-Chairs for a term of two years, and these officers shall be eligible for re-election for one additional term.

22. The work shall be supported by the European Environment Agency, the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Health Organization. The work of the Joint Working Group will be coordinated with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

VII. Secretariat support and resources

23. The ECE Environment and Statistical Divisions shall provide the joint secretariat for the activities of the Joint Working Group.

24. Donors shall be requested to provide support for the activities of the Joint Working Group.
