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HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON TRANSPORT, ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH
THE PEP Steering Committee
(Fourth session, 11-12 April 2006
agenda item 4 A. (a))

CLEARING HOUSE ON TRANSPORT, ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH
(THE PEP Clearing House)

Report on the pilot operation phase¹

Note by the secretariat

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The Clearing House of the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP) is a web portal designed to facilitate exchange of information and knowledge across the transport, environment and health sectors in the pan-European region. THE PEP and its work plan provide the policy framework and the mandate for developing THE PEP Clearing House.

¹ Previous reports of the secretariats on the development of the Clearing House are contained in the following documents that are available on THE PEP corporate web site (under Steering Committee session documents) <http://www.thepep.org/en/committee/committee.htm>:

ECE/AC.21/2003/2-EUR/03/5040828/2

ECE/AC.21/2004/3-EUR/04/5045236/3 and Add.1

ECE/AC.21/2005/3-EUR/05/5046203/3, Add.1 and background reports No.1-10.

2. The Clearing House serves to collect, disseminate and exchange information on sustainable transport policies, legislation, research and good practices with a particular focus on the 12 countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) and of South-Eastern Europe (SEE). Its present information content covers 110 topics relevant to the transport, environment and health sectors, including as priorities: health and environmental effects of transport, policy integration, urban transport and transport demand management. These topics reflect the priority areas identified by UNECE and WHO/Europe member States as being of central importance for the promotion and implementation of sustainable transport in the pan-European region.

3. The Clearing House is primarily targeted at policy and decision makers. It aims at addressing, in particular, the needs of national and local authorities as well as transport planners in the design, communication and implementation of sustainable transport policies. It has a practical organization and an intuitive method to access the available information by using a dedicated search engine and an information tree that allows for intuitive search by topic areas.

4. The information collected, validated, structured and disseminated by the Clearing House mainly stems from national THE PEP focal points and other information providers in UNECE and WHO/Europe Member States and are, to a large extent, kept and maintained by the original sources. Information providers need to be registered by the Clearing House and include, at present, Governments, inter-governmental, regional and local authorities, non-governmental organizations and scientific and research institutions.

5. The Clearing House was developed by the secretariat in three phases:

- (a) Development of the conceptual design (April 2003-March 2004)
- (b) Implementation phase (April-December 2004)
- (c) Pilot operation phase (January-December 2005).

6. The Clearing House operates in English and Russian and was officially launched on 6 December 2005. It can be accessed at <http://www.thepep.org/CHWebSite>.

B. RESULTS OF THE CLEARING HOUSE PILOT OPERATION PHASE (January-December 2005)

7. The activities to be undertaken during the pilot operation phase had been agreed by the Steering Committee at its fourth session (11-12 April 2005).² In March 2005, access to the Clearing House portal, including the credentials that allow authorized uploading of information, was given to all THE PEP national focal points. Thereafter, a survey was undertaken to obtain user feedback.

² ECE/AC.21/2005/13-EUR/05/5046206/13, paragraphs 12-15.

8. Taking account of the numerous comments received during the session of the Steering Committee, a special ad hoc session on the Clearing House on 13 April 2005 and feedback received from users, the secretariat has made various modifications to the Clearing House site, its underlying mechanisms and has developed new features.

I. Redesign of the Clearing House Interface

9. The secretariat has redesigned parts of the Clearing House website, such as the home page, particularly the left side menu, the pages on legal considerations and on the use of the Clearing House and the layout of the information tree. Specialized menus for different parts of the Clearing House were developed to facilitate the search for information. A directory of websites of national ministries dealing with environmental, transport and health was incorporated and is accessible under the “links” menu. In addition, so-called printer-friendly version of the various web pages of the Clearing House are now available.

II. Clearing House key messages

10. The preparation of short descriptions, so-called ‘key messages’, of the 110 topic areas covered by the Clearing House was one of the most resource intensive activities undertaken by the secretariat in 2005. These key messages provide succinct information on each of the topic areas available and inform the user on the type of information that is available on the Clearing House database under each topic. The key messages are subject to comments, updates and completion by the Steering Committee and the secretariat. Furthermore, relevant links leading to closely related information have been incorporated.

III. Submission mechanism

11. The dedicated form to allow submission or uploading of information onto the database of the Clearing House has been restructured and more detailed information fields allowing unambiguous identification of the authors of submitted information have been developed. In addition, a special registration form was developed, now available on the login page, that allows registration of other users than THE PEP focal points. The secretariat oversees the processing and validation of such registration requests and, in case of doubts, transmits these applications to the Clearing House Advisory Board for guidance.

IV. User support

12. The secretariat has prepared two comprehensive user guides to assist in the use of some of the more complex automated Clearing House features: (a) User Guide: Submit a Document; and (b) User Guide: My Clearing House. These guides contain detailed information and provide a step-by-step description of the automated submission/uploading procedures for documents, and of the management of such submissions by the user himself,

respectively. Both guides can be downloaded from the Clearing House or can be obtained directly from the secretariat. In the future, additional user guides could be developed should new mechanisms be developed. In addition, the secretariat provides support to users by e-mail upon request.

V. Translation

13. At present, the Clearing House operates in English and Russian. The secretariat has translated the entire portal (some 300 A4 pages) from English into Russian ready for the official launch of the Clearing House on 6 December 2005. While most translations have been made by UNECE staff, the translation of the 110 key messages was outsourced to a company in the Russian Federation and required extra-budgetary resources.

14. The secretariat also carried out a study on the possible use of automated translation services to be utilized by the Clearing House. A summary of this study³ was presented to the Bureau of the Steering Committee (Rome, 2 December 2005). The study showed that the installation of fully automated translation services in the Clearing House is, at present, not possible, as the quality standards of affordable translation software products were not acceptable and required extensive manual corrections and proofreading.

15. A French version of the Clearing House is under development using UNECE in-house resources.

VI. People database and mailing list

16. While the information provided by the Clearing House can be freely accessed, the uploading of information required the development of a special registration form for persons to request authorization to upload information. This step is necessary to ensure the quality and security of information provided to and contained in the Clearing House database. Authorized users are given a user name and a password to access also the restricted areas of the site. In addition, the Clearing House stores e-mail addresses of all of its users to allow for automatic notification, for example, about the status of uploaded documents.

17. The secretariat also maintains a database of addresses to facilitate electronic and postal mailing to all THE PEP focal points. This database is technically hosted by the UNECE SQL database and allows the development of any further applications for the Clearing House, if required.

³ The study 'Evaluation of the performance and installation of translation engines for the Clearing House' may be obtained from the secretariat upon request.

18. Such additional services to be provided by the Clearing House are under development, such as an electronic forum or bulletin board that will allow interactive exchange of information.

VII. Feedback mechanisms

19. The Clearing House web portal is expected to have a central role in disseminating information on all THE PEP activities and to provide access to tools developed under THE PEP framework (e.g. tool-box for action on transport, health and environment). Therefore, the contribution and feedback of THE PEP national focal points is of utmost importance. The Clearing House will be constantly improved on the basis of user feedback and the secretariat places high importance on interactions with users to ensure that all information and services provided by the Clearing House are in line with user needs, can easily be obtained and worked with.

20. Two user surveys were undertaken to enquire about the graphical interface and the technical features provided by the Clearing House. These surveys, as well as other comments received from THE PEP focal points, were very useful to fine-tune the applications.

VIII. “My Clearing House” mechanism

21. One of the main design elements of the Clearing House was to minimize operational costs, both at the secretariat and at national levels. In order to facilitate the work of information providers at national level, a tool was developed to allow these users to self-maintain their contact details. “My Clearing House” is a mechanism that also allows users to self-administrate the documents which they have submitted to the Clearing House. They can, for example, edit documents which they have submitted in the past. The Clearing House managers can oversee this mechanism on-line and intervene in case of need.

IX. Electronic forum

22. The bulletin board is an important additional service that is currently being developed as a basic version of a future full-featured electronic forum. The bulletin board will allow users (registered or not) to ask questions related to the topics covered and information provided by the Clearing House. The Clearing House manager(s) will either answer directly or identify experts that are able to provide answers to more complex enquiries. This may entail circulating questions or information of general interest to all THE PEP focal points or to specific persons only. Questions and answers could then be published on the web site in a dedicated area accessible to all users.

X.

Operation and administration of the Clearing House

23. The operation and administration of the Clearing House is ensured by the secretariat relying considerably on the technical services of the UNECE. Also, the Clearing House web portal as well as THE PEP corporate website are hosted on a server provided by the UNECE. The technical architecture of the Clearing House is, however, designed in such a way so as to allow migration to any other server should the need arise.

24. The Clearing House Advisory Board established by the Steering Committee in 2004 has provided valuable guidance and consultation to the secretariat during 2005 and is expected to continue its work in 2006.

25. During the pilot operation phase in 2005, most of the work for the Clearing House was undertaken by two part-time experts supported by regular UNECE and WHO/Europe staff. They were responsible for the description, organization, uploading and verification of information and data, for communications with the Advisory Board and Clearing House users, for the development and maintenance of the technical features of the Clearing House and its database, for the preparation of user guides and for the fine-tuning of all operations.

XI. Resources utilized

26. Detailed information on the financial resources received and utilized during the pilot operation phase of the Clearing House in 2005 are contained in document ECE/AC.21/2006/8-EUR/06/THEPEPST/8.

C. OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE CLEARING HOUSE

27. At its third session (2 December 2005), the Bureau of the Steering Committee welcomed the successful conclusion of the development work for the Clearing House within the estimated time and costs plans and agreed to officially launch the Clearing House for use by the general public on 6 December 2005.

28. For that purpose, information material was prepared by the secretariat to ensure good visibility and promotion of the launch. This included a flyer and a UNECE press release (English, French and Russian) issued on 6 December 2005, articles in two recurrent UNECE publications that have been transmitted to all Permanent Missions to the United Office in Geneva (UNECE Weekly and 'UN Special). Furthermore, news on the official launch of the Clearing House was placed on relevant websites (UNECE, WHO/Europe, etc.).

29. In addition, the secretariat has prepared a so-called "Clearing House dissemination package" that has been transmitted to all THE PEP Focal Points for national communication and distribution. The package included informational material developed for the launch and

specific information for Clearing House users. All of this material can be downloaded from the Clearing House and may also be obtained from the secretariat in hard copy format.

30. At its third session (Rome, 2 December 2005), the Bureau of the Steering Committee endorsed a number of measures to disseminate information about the Clearing House at national and international levels, stressing that it was a national responsibility to advertise the Clearing House at the national level and to report on what has been done. (ECE/AC.21/2006/2 – EUR/06/THEPEPST/2 paragraph 10).

31. Since the official launch of the Clearing House, the number of persons that have visited the web portal has increased considerable. In December 2005, there were around 200 visitors, viewing 900 pages within the Clearing House. In January 2006, this number has increased to around 300 visitors, who viewed 1400 pages. EECCA and SEE countries accounted respectively for around 10% and 3% of all visitors in January 2006.

Visitors to THE PEP Clearing House *					
Country	December 2005		Country	January 2006	
Germany	125	14%	Germany	240	18%
United Kingdom	106	12%	United Kingdom	162	12%
Belgium	70	8%	Hungary	133	10%
Australia	68	8%	Ukraine	85	6%
Netherlands	61	7%	Belgium	81	6%
Switzerland	47	5%	Denmark	68	5%
Denmark	45	5%	Turkey	50	4%
Canada	38	4%	Slovenia	46	3%
Italy	32	4%	United States	46	3%
Sweden	31	4%	France	43	3%
Romania	31	3%	Finland	41	3%
Hungary	28	3%	Australia	29	2%
France	28	3%	Netherlands	27	2%

* Due to methodological problems, these figures should be taken as representing only orders of magnitudes.

32. While the quickly increasing number of visitors to the Clearing House could be an indicator to measure performance, it does not evaluate and take account of the quality of information and services provided. The Clearing House provides at present around 500 documents and data references, particularly relating to international sources and around 1500 resources are indexed in the search engine (in addition to THE PEP Clearing House, its search engine automatically indexes THE PEP corporate web site and the EST goes EAST Clearing House). Its database contains, however, still very little information on national or governmental records, that can be of particular use for EECCA and SEE countries.

D. SUSTAINED OPERATION OF THE CLEARING HOUSE IN 2006 AND BEYOND

33. With the official launch of the Clearing House on 6 December 2006, the design, the technical development and the implementation of the main features of the Clearing House has been completed successfully. The challenge is now to enlist the necessary resources to guarantee its continued operation in 2006 and beyond and to advertise the facilities and services of the Clearing House to policy and decision makers in WHO/Europe and UNECE Member States. If this can be achieved, then the Clearing House could become a powerful tool to promote sustainable transport in the pan-European region and to integrate environmental and health concerns into transport policies, particularly in EECCA and SEE countries.

34. In order to make this happen, further efforts need to be made, however, in the following areas:

- (a) Visibility: The Clearing House must be able to reach its target users, particularly in EECCA and SEE countries (i.e. policy and decision makers). Apart from THE PEP secretariat, THE PEP national focal points as well as delegations at WHO/Europe and UNECE conferences and expert groups in transport, health and environment play a key role in this undertaking.
- (b) Comprehensive and up-to-date information: A web portal, such as THE PEP Clearing House, will only be regularly used if it can provide value-added services compared to other traditional information and service providers. Again, THE PEP national contact points play a crucial role in this respect, as they are the main information and data provider for the Clearing House. They are also well placed to provide the well-targeted and high-quality information, including best practices that could make a difference. The simple and automatic information uploading mechanisms of the Clearing House should facilitate their task. Further expansion of the Russian language facilities in the Clearing House could certainly also contribute to the impact of the Clearing House in EECCA and SEE countries.
- (c) Continued operation: In spite of its highly automated features, the Clearing House requires a minimum of technical and substantive supervision and maintenance to ensure permanent and up-to-date information and data flows. Any, even temporary, disruption of such services could bring its operation to a standstill and might jeopardize its role, as dissatisfied users will not be easily convinced to come back. The Steering Committee, at its third session, had already underlined this problem stressing that the sustained and efficient operation of the Clearing House as of 2006 has to be ensured, using, to the extent possible, regular budget funds.

In addition, particular emphasis needs to be given to well-functioning and active communication and cooperation lines between the Clearing House and its information providers, THE PEP Focal Points in the more than 50 WHO/Europe and UNECE Member States.

- (d) Additional services: The currently available basic features of the Clearing House may need to be complemented through additional services, if required and if appropriate resources are available not only for their development, but also for their continued operation. Based on comments and user surveys, a number of such additional services have already been identified, such as electronic forums, additional databases and statistics, translation services, capacity building and training programmes and information about sources of funding.

35. Progress in the above areas thus requires a strong political commitment at the country level, active participation by all national THE PEP Focal Points and a minimum level of operational services provided by the international community, i.e. UNECE and/or WHO/Europe.

36. Given the present uncertainties about available resources for the sustained operation of the Clearing House⁴ and about the amount of additional services it should provide, it is suggested to extend the pilot operation phase of the Clearing House and to utilize the remaining extra-budgetary resources earmarked for that purpose. This would also allow for further fine-tuning of the technical features of the Clearing House operating, since December 2005, under “real world conditions” and the installation and testing of some additional services, such as the bulletin board.

E. ACNOWLEDGMENTS

37. The timely development of THE PEP Clearing House and its successful launch on 6 December 2005 would not have been possible without the generous financial and in-kind support made available to the secretariat by Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

F. DECISIONS TO BE TAKEN BY THE STEERING COMMITTEE

38. Following approval of the overall project, the conceptual design and the implementation and pilot operation phases of the Clearing House at its first, second and third sessions, the Steering Committee, at its present session, may wish to endorse the work carried

⁴ In early 2005, the secretariat had estimated the annual cost for personnel for the operation of the Clearing House, if administered by the UNECE, to be in the order of US\$ 168,000 to US\$ 240,000 depending on the qualifications and experiences of recruited staff. These estimates were based on cost figures for two professional staff (ECE/AC.21/2005/10-EUR/05/5046203/10).

out by the secretariat in 2005 that has led to the official launch of the Clearing House for the general public on 6 December 2005.

39. The Steering Committee may also wish to consider measures to ensure the sustained operation of the Clearing House in 2006 and beyond on the basis of the above considerations and the areas of action described in paragraphs 33-35. Attention should be given to the risk that neither UNECE nor WHO/Europe may be in a position to ensure the continued operation of the Clearing House beyond mid-2006 unless the necessary resources can be allocated for this purpose within existing regular and/or through additional extra-budgetary funds.
