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Programme of work of the Environment subprogramme: streamlining the work on environmental monitoring and assessment

Streamlining the work on environmental monitoring and assessment*

Note by the secretariat

Summary

At its twentieth session (Geneva, 28–31 October 2014), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) requested the secretariat to prepare for its next session a proposal for streamlining the work of the Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators. In addition, CEP asked the secretariat to propose incorporating the responsibilities of the Group of Friends of the Shared Environmental Information System under the Working Group, with a view to enhancing the coordination of activities and reinforcing the work on environmental monitoring and assessment (ECE/CEP/2014/2, paras. 26 and 98 (m)).

The present paper contains the secretariat's analysis of the pros and cons of the various options for streamlining the work on environmental monitoring and assessment, and presents a proposal with new terms of reference for two bodies — a working group and a task force. CEP will be invited to consider the secretariat's proposal with a view to deciding on the mandate of the intergovernmental body or bodies working in the area of environmental monitoring and assessment. If approved, the proposed terms of reference for the new Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators will be also submitted to the Conference of European Statisticians for its consideration.

* This document was submitted on the above date due to resource constraints, as well as the need to coordinate with partners on the text.



I. Background

1. At its twentieth session (Geneva, 28–31 October 2014), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) expressed great appreciation for the work on environmental monitoring and assessment carried out in 2014 by the two specialized bodies: the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators. CEP renewed the mandates of both bodies for one year, and added an important new task for the Working Group: to review progress in developing the Shared Environment Information System (SEIS) in the pan-European region (ECE/CEP/2014/2, paras. 25 and 98 (j) (ii)). Given the evolving mandates on environmental assessment and monitoring, CEP also requested the secretariat to prepare a proposal for possible ways to streamline the work of the two bodies, as well as potentially incorporating the responsibilities of the Group of Friends of SEIS under the Working Group, with a view to enhancing the coordination of activities and reinforcing the work on environmental monitoring and assessment (*ibid.*, paras. 26 and 98 (m)). The proposal was to take into account comments made by delegates at the twentieth session of CEP, including the request to consider the pros and cons of merging the Working Group and the Joint Task Force.

2. The present document was prepared in response to the above requests. It provides options for strengthening the work in the context of SEIS, environmental assessments and other developments in environmental monitoring and assessment and clarifies the functions of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force. The document also considers the pros and cons of a possible merger of the two bodies, and presents the secretariat's proposal for streamlining the work of the two bodies. The document was prepared in consultation with the ECE Statistical Division.

II. Past responsibilities of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force

3. The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment was originally established by CEP in 2000 as the Ad Hoc Working Group on Environmental Monitoring, which was to serve all the ECE member States as a platform to exchange good practice and information, develop action plans and strengthen initiatives in the area of environmental monitoring and related areas with a view to supporting environmental decision-making and assist in the preparation of the Fifth Environment for Europe (EfE) Ministerial Conference (Kyiv, 2003). The Working Group obtained its current name in 2003 when its mandate was expanded to cover environmental assessment and, in particular, helping to streamline international environmental reporting in the pan-European region.¹

4. In 2007, the Working Group was further mandated to assist countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and interested countries of South-Eastern Europe (target countries) to make monitoring and assessment an effective instrument in environmental policymaking, and to improve international environmental reporting. This assistance was further expanded, by later mandates, to supporting the efforts of the target countries in establishing SEIS to underpin regular reporting and assessments in accordance with international monitoring and assessment requirements and obligations under the

¹ The pan-European region under the EfE process covers the full membership of ECE, i.e., the 56 ECE member States.

relevant multilateral environmental agreements. In accordance with its mandates from 2007 to 2014, the Working Group was requested, in particular:

- (a) To help improve environmental data collection, where necessary, through modernization and upgrading of national monitoring networks;
- (b) To support the establishment of national environmental information systems for managing the data;
- (c) To help strengthen the coordination and cooperation between relevant institutions;
- (d) To enhance capacity to produce good quality, concise but informative state-of-the-environment reports and other assessments, where relevant, based on the effective use of environmental indicators and their analysis and the application of modelling;
- (e) To promote the use and implementation of recommendations and guidelines on, as well as other methodologies for, environmental monitoring and assessment.

5. While between 2007 and 2014 the Working Group focused on delivery of the mandated assistance to the target countries, it also continued to contribute to an appraisal of monitoring and assessment requirements within the framework of the EfE process, as well as other relevant processes.

6. In 2014, CEP specifically mandated the Working Group to support the establishment of the pan-European SEIS and added the task of reviewing SEIS progress (see para. 11 below).

7. From the very beginning, the Working Group was created mainly to serve the national institutions from all ECE member States dealing with environmental monitoring and assessment (environmental agencies or ministries), but was not limited to the participation of experts from these institutions only.

8. To support the work of the Working Group, and specifically to assist the target countries with methodological challenges related to the environmental indicators used for assessment, in 2009 CEP together with the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) created in the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators.

9. CEP and CES requested the Joint Task Force to assist national statistical agencies and institutions responsible for environmental data and information in the target countries to improve the collection, processing and validation of environmental data underpinning the environmental indicators, in line with internationally accepted methodologies and statistical classifications. The objective was to gradually improve environmental statistics and the production and sharing of the agreed indicators by the target countries. The Task Force focused on statistical methodologies and analysing the availability and quality of the data produced by the target countries.

10. The communication and cooperation between the Task Force and the Working Group was always exemplary. While the Joint Task Force was a platform to help the target countries with their understanding of the indicator methodologies and to support them in applying the methodologies to produce and share specific environmental indicators, the Working Group served as a platform to assist the countries in analysing and assessing their national environmental policies, using the indicators produced, as part of the work aimed at improving their capacity for producing good quality, indicator-based state-of-the-environment reports. The two bodies have thus been effectively helping the countries along the Monitoring-Data-Indicators-Assessment-Knowledge (MDIAK) reporting chain in a complementary manner.

III. New tasks and mandate for the Working Group

11. In 2014, CEP provided new SEIS-related mandates to the Working Group, i.e.:

(a) To support the establishment of the pan-European SEIS (see ECE/CEP/2014/11, annex, para. 2 (a));

(b) To review SEIS progress based on the targets and performance indicators (ECE/CEP/2014/8) adopted by CEP, and to prepare an evaluation report for submission to the Eighth EfE Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016) (ECE/CEP/2014/2, paras. 25 and 98 (j) (ii)).

The Working Group was further requested to report back to CEP in October 2015 on the progress achieved in that regard (*ibid.*, para. 98 (ff) (iii)).

12. To perform its task effectively with regard to supporting the establishment of the pan-European SEIS, and hence delivering the common environmental knowledge base that will serve as the basis for generating regular pan-European environmental assessments,² the Working Group's responsibilities should not be limited to SEIS only.

13. The Working Group could be in position to support the establishment of SEIS more effectively if it also takes responsibility for coordinating, or even better leading, the consultation process for the regular pan-European environmental assessment, by formulating the regional priorities and scope for the assessment. In this way, the Working Group would get a sense of changing circumstances and emerging needs for data to assess whether particular policies are fit-for-purpose, and so would be able to adapt SEIS to those needs in a medium term.

14. With regard to the evaluation of performance in establishing and operating SEIS, the Working Group will need to assess at regular intervals whether the SEIS data sets are effectively produced and shared online by ECE countries. For production, that will include evaluation of the application of internationally accepted methodologies and statistical classifications.

15. The existing mandate of the Working Group might be further strengthened by adding responsibilities for coordinating the regular pan-European environmental assessment process. A proposal along these lines has been made by the Group of Friends of SEIS in their note on the organization and shape of the regular environmental assessment process based on SEIS (see ECE/CEP/2015/10).

16. The Working Group, with the strengthened mandate to coordinate not only the establishment of SEIS but also the assessment process at the pan-European level, would respond to the needs of all the ECE countries and not to the target countries alone. In doing so, it would effectively integrate the function provided during the 2014–2015 period by the Group of Friends of SEIS.

IV. New tasks and mandate for the Joint Task Force

17. The Joint Task Force, building on its past work, is well placed to assist the Working Group in the task of evaluating the application of the internationally accepted methodologies and statistical standards used in the production of data for SEIS by the

² In Astana ministers decided to establish a regular process of environmental assessment and to develop the SEIS across the region to keep the pan-European environment under review (ECE/ASTANA.CONF/2011/2/Add.1, para. 14.)

countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. For other ECE countries this is done through a process led by the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet). To support the Working Group in carrying out its new responsibilities in its 2014 mandate, the work of the Joint Task Force could then include building capacity for overcoming possible shortcomings in the application of data production methodologies.

18. The Joint Task Force could also address with the same group of countries other issues that remain a challenge for them, such as strengthening their expert capacities for:

(a) Communication of environmental indicators and information to decision makers and the public, in particular preparation of the national environment assessment reports, by providing data analysis in support of policy development;

(b) Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA);

(c) Application of environmental indicators in the context of sustainable development and green economy initiatives.

19. The countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have strong interests in these other issues. At the tenth session of the Joint Task Force (Geneva, 11–13 May 2015) and in a recommendation from a workshop on SEIS and Green Growth (Paris, 10–11 March 2015),³ these countries requested the establishment of a platform at the international level for discussing the interlinkages between environmental and economic considerations and for analysing, interpreting and communicating data and relevant indicators in the context of sustainable development and green economy.

20. In the coming years, the Joint Task Force could assist the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in their efforts to address specific methodological challenges in producing data for SEIS, data analysis and communication in support of policy development in the fields of environment, sustainable development and green economy. The Joint Task Force could also support the implementation of SEEA.

21. The Joint Task Force would continue to be composed of experts representing ministries or agencies dealing with environmental assessment and national statistical offices from the original target countries. Representatives of ministries and agencies dealing with economic issues could be also invited to participate in the meetings.

22. The organizations that were involved in the preparations and organization of the Paris workshop could be invited to consider supporting the ECE joint secretariat in servicing the new platform dedicated to the target countries.

23. The Joint Task Force, due to the expansion of its functions, could be renamed the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators.

V. Pros and cons for merging the Working Group and the Joint Task Force

24. There are always good reasons for merging the work of two or more bodies if a merger would bring benefits, whether these are savings of funds or improving the

³ The workshop was organized jointly by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and ECE, with the support of UNEP and EEA, with the objective to, among others, present how SEIS data sets can be applied in calculating green growth indicators.

efficiency of delivery. Such benefits are, however, difficult to identify when considering a merger of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force.

25. Due to differences in geographical coverage and in the involvement of national agencies in the work of both bodies, as well as a lack of task overlap, the Working Group and the Joint Task Force are more efficient in delivering their outputs, and so more cost-effective, by operating separately. Any cost savings can be addressed by organizing meetings of the two bodies back to back, while preserving the flexibility in the attendance of participants.

26. There is also a governance issue. The Working Group operates under the auspices of CEP, while the Joint Task Force is operating under CEP and CES. By merging the bodies, the policy-related tasks of the Working Group (e.g., the environmental assessments) would also be placed under the guidance of CES. This is not in accordance with the impartial and independent nature of official statistics according to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

27. Furthermore, the merger would make it somewhat inefficient to address specific challenges faced by the target countries, whether with regard to data production methodologies, data analysis or data communication. In attempting to undertake such a task, the meetings of a merged Working Group could become less relevant for the other ECE countries, or the length of the meetings would have to be increased. On the other hand, if it did not address the challenges, it would not be able to deliver the expected outcomes.

28. A merger would also make it difficult to offer capacity-building assistance in the context of sustainable development and green economy and implementation of SEEA, which is in high demand among the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. This is because such activities would be of limited interest to the countries from Western Europe, which have their own dedicated platforms for addressing these issues.

29. A merger could potentially make sense if the Working Group could retain its SEIS management function and not provide the capacity-building in the context of sustainable development and green economy, as well as implementation of SEEA.

30. In this case, however, by not serving the regular environmental assessment process, the Working Group could be less effective in supporting the establishment of SEIS in support of the assessment process, and CEP would need to assign this function to another body. As argued in this document, with its tasks on SEIS and the regular assessment process, the Working Group could serve as a knowledge and assessment network for the ECE countries, which would include the SEIS and assessment coordination function provided during the period 2014–2015 by the Group of Friends of SEIS.

31. Furthermore, the additional tasks proposed for implementation by the Joint Task Force are closely linked to the core work on evaluation and capacity-building in application of SEIS data production methodologies, and so the target countries would not be helped effectively in related fields. It is evident that such assistance would be of great importance in the context of the post-2015 agenda and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

V. Recommendations

32. The SEIS-related mandate would best be addressed with a strengthened Working Group. This could be achieved by further expanding the SEIS-related mandate also to include the coordination of the regular pan-European assessment process, thereby

transforming the Working Group into an environmental knowledge and assessment network for the whole pan-European region and all the ECE countries.

33. At the same time, it would be important to support the work of the Working Group on SEIS by providing it with advice on the application of data production methodologies. In addition, activities related to capacity-building in the application of SEIS data production methodologies, data analysis and communication for policy development in the context of environment, sustainable development and green economy are in high demand among the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. That demand can be efficiently and effectively delivered by a separate body, such as the Joint Task Force, in cooperation with CES.

34. It seems therefore clear that, with the ongoing SEIS developments, and in view of the lack of benefits to be obtained from a merger of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force, there is a need for a strong Working Group to serve as an environmental knowledge and assessment network for the whole pan-European region. At the same time, there is a clear demand from a particular subregion to be provided with a platform through which its countries could address their specific challenges in establishing the necessary environmental knowledge, and to discuss interlinkages between environmental and economic considerations in the context of sustainable development and green economy.

35. Furthermore, by giving the Working Group a strengthened mandate, which includes a coordination function for SEIS and the process of regular pan-European environmental assessment, the Working Group would assume the tasks previously carried out by the Group of Friends of SEIS — in accordance with the request by CEP.

36. In line with these recommendations, proposals for new terms of reference for the Working Group and the Joint Task Force are provided in annexes I and II.

Annex I

Proposal for the terms of reference for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

I. Mandate

1. The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment shall serve as the environmental knowledge and assessment network for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region, under the political oversight of the Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP). It shall report to CEP regularly on the implementation of the tasks set out herein. These terms of reference are valid for the period 2016–2021. CEP will review these terms of reference at its first meeting in 2021.

II. Objectives

2. The aim of the Working Group is to oversee and manage the establishment and operation of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) in the ECE countries and, under the political oversight of CEP, to lead the regular process of consultation on environmental assessment to keep the pan-European environment under review.

III. Planned activities and outputs

3. The Working Group shall:

(a) Oversee and manage the establishment and operation of SEIS in the ECE countries, and in particular:

(i) Support the establishment of the pan-European SEIS with regard to its specific content and methodology, especially for data sets and the accompanying information necessary, so that SEIS can support the regular environmental assessment process and reporting;

(ii) Evaluate the performance of ECE countries in establishing and implementing SEIS against the SEIS targets and performance indicators adopted by CEP;

(iii) Prepare annual reports for CEP on the establishment and implementation of SEIS;

(iv) Draw conclusions and make recommendations on further strengthening SEIS in the ECE countries;

(b) Lead, under the political oversight of CEP, the regular process of consultation on environmental assessment to keep the pan-European environment under review, and in particular:

(i) Discuss and detail the regional priorities and scope for the pan-European assessments, which will constitute the European regional component of the Global Environmental Outlook (GEO);

(ii) Oversee the writing of the assessment and provide feedback;

(iii) Finalize the assessment and submit it to CEP.

4. The following outputs will be achieved:
 - (a) SEIS data content will be gradually extended;
 - (b) Performance of SEIS will be discussed and evaluated;
 - (c) Annual reports will be prepared on SEIS performance;
 - (d) Recommendations and advice will be provided to ECE countries to improve their SEIS performance;
 - (e) A process of assessment to keep the pan-European environment under review will be initiated and led, and a pan-European environmental assessment will be prepared at the specific request of CEP.

IV. Timetable

5. The Working Group will:
 - (a) Discuss the SEIS content to extend it annually until 2020 by additional data sets;
 - (b) Assess national SEIS performance annually;
 - (c) Generate annual SEIS performance reports for the meetings of CEP;
 - (d) Provide tailor-made recommendations to countries related to the assessment;
 - (e) Initiate the assessment process at the request of CEP.

V. Methods of work

6. The Working Group shall meet at least once annually. It will also communicate through e-mail and other electronic collaboration platforms, such as wikis during the period between the meetings.

VI. Membership

7. The Working Group shall be composed of members from all of the ECE member countries. They should represent the national institutions dealing with environmental knowledge and assessments.
8. The Working Group shall also involve representatives of 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.
9. The Working Group shall elect its Chair and two Vice-Chairs for a term of two years. The Chair and Vice-Chairs shall be eligible for re-election for one additional term.

VII. Secretariat support and resources

10. In its operation, the Working Group shall be serviced by the ECE secretariat, supported by the United Nations Environment Programme and the European Environment Agency, and guided by the relevant procedures established by CEP.
11. Donors will be invited to provide support for the Working Group's activities.

Annex II

Proposal for the terms of reference for the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators

I. Mandate

1. The Joint Task Force on Environment Statistics and Indicators shall serve under the oversight and guidance of the Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) and the Conference of the European Statisticians (CES). It will report regularly to both CEP and CES. These terms of reference are valid for the period 2016–2021. CEP and CES will review the terms of reference of the Joint Task Force at their first meetings in 2021.

II. Objectives

2. The aim of the Joint Task Force is to assist the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (target countries) in their efforts to: (a) correctly apply the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) data methodologies and in line with statistical standards; (b) analyse and communicate environmental data; (c) implement the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA); and (d) apply environmental indicators in the context of sustainable development and green economy initiatives. The Joint Task Force is also to assist the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment in evaluating the application of the internationally accepted methodologies and statistical standards in SEIS data production.

III. Planned activities and outputs

3. The Joint Task Force shall:

(a) Provide advice to the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment on the application of SEIS data production methodologies by the target countries;

(b) Address specific challenges related to methodology and data quality in producing environmental data and indicators in line with the ECE Online Indicator Guidelines, international statistical standards, SEIS requirements and the recommendations made by the Working Group;

(c) Build capacity in the target countries for the compilation and integration of environmental data in support of measuring sustainable development and green economy initiatives;

(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 the capacity for the implementation of SEEA.

4. The following outputs will be achieved:

(a) Advice on the application of SEIS data production methodologies is provided;

- (b) Capacity in the target countries is gradually strengthened in applying SEIS data production methodologies;
- (c) Capacity in the target countries is gradually strengthened for the compilation and integration of environmental data in support of measuring sustainable development and green economy initiatives;
- (d) Capacity in the target countries is strengthened for communicating environmental information;
- (e) Implementation of SEEA is gradually improved.

IV. Timetable

5. The Joint Task Force will prepare its annual time table of activities and regularly report to CEP and CES.
6. During 2016 the Joint Task Force will:
 - (a) Address challenges faced by the target countries in the application of data production methodologies related to any of the 67 initial data sets agreed to constitute SEIS. These data sets refer to the following environmental priorities: air pollution and ozone depletion; climate change; water; biodiversity; land and soil; and energy and waste. Specific challenges in two specific priority areas will be addressed;
 - (b) Inform the Working Group about the deficiencies in applying the data production methodologies by the target countries with regard to the SEIS data sets;
 - (c) Share experience and good practice between the target countries in the practical application of environmental indicators and SEIS for measuring progress in the transition to green economy gathered through pilot projects led by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD);
 - (d) Discuss the potential challenges facing target countries related to the production of indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals;
 - (e) Discuss and share good practice for data communication in at least one priority area;
 - (f) Formulate the specific support needed for the implementation of SEEA.

V. Methods of work

7. The Joint Task Force shall meet at least once annually. The Task Force will also communicate through e-mail and other electronic collaboration platforms, such as wikis, during the period between meetings.

VI. Membership

8. The Joint Task Force shall be composed of experts representing national statistical offices and ministries or agencies dealing with environment statistics and assessment from the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Representatives of ministries and agencies dealing with economic issues may be invited to participate in the meetings. Other ECE countries are welcome to participate in the work.
9. The Joint Task Force shall elect its Chair and Vice-Chair for a term of two years, and these officers shall be eligible for re-election for one additional term.

VII. Secretariat support and resources

10. The ECE Environment and Statistical Divisions will provide the joint secretariat for the activities of the Joint Task Force.
 11. The work will be supported by the European Environment Agency, OECD and the United Nations Environment Programme.
 12. Donors will be invited to provide support for the Joint Task Force's activities.
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