

Annex XV

SOFIA MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

We, the Ministers of the Environment and the European Union Commissioner for the Environment, gathered in Sofia, Bulgaria, from 26 to 27 February 2001 on the occasion of the second meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention),

1. Celebrate the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Espoo Convention;
2. Pay tribute to the efforts of all countries and stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Convention;
3. Note with great satisfaction that the Convention was the first significant international legally binding instrument dedicated to environmental impact assessment;
4. Note with satisfaction the valuable work carried out under the work-plan adopted at the first meeting of the Parties;
5. Recognize with appreciation the significant achievements of the Convention. Its considerable impact on international environmental law and its promotion of environmental impact assessment within the UN/ECE region and at the global level have led to:
 - (a) The promotion of environmental impact assessment as an effective international instrument for environmental protection in support of sustainable development;
 - (b) Closer international cooperation, which has prevented and mitigated adverse environmental impacts at both transboundary and national levels;
 - (c) The widespread introduction of the requirement that there should be full consideration of environmental factors at an early stage in decision-making processes relating to particular projects;
 - (d) The introduction of effective laws, at the level of the UN/ECE member States and the European Community, implementing the requirements of the Convention;
 - (e) The recognition by the international community of the importance of environmental impact assessment, as witnessed by principle 17 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, adopted in 1992, the year following the adoption of the Convention;
 - (f) Its international recognition at a global level, inter alia by the International Law Commission, as a pioneering Convention enshrining the principles of environmental impact assessment;

(g) Its use as a precedent for other environmental instruments, both at the regional and the global level;

6. Recognize that the Convention has been practically applied to a number of activities, including some that are not included in its Appendix I;

7. Welcome the contribution that the Convention has made to promoting public participation pursuant to principle 10 of the Rio Declaration and greater transparency in decision-making;

8. Invite civil society and all stakeholders to contribute further to the development of the Convention, in particular by taking full advantage of its rules of procedure, which provide for national and international non-governmental bodies and agencies qualified in fields relating to environmental impact assessment to participate in meetings of its Parties and its subsidiary bodies;

9. Encourage international financing institutions, such as the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank, to introduce and apply fully environmental impact assessment procedures that are consistent with the Convention to investment projects with national and transboundary effects and also encourage these institutions to assist authorities in the country of origin to carry out EIA according to those principles and procedures;

10. Urge the Parties to hold national coordination meetings between national focal points of the UN/ECE environmental conventions to discuss how they could best work together to strengthen the implementation of these conventions and thus contribute to a better protection of the environment;

11. Encourage the continuing process promoting the exchange of information between the various bodies of the different conventions adopted under the aegis of UN/ECE;

12. Call upon States that are entitled to become Parties to the Convention but that have not yet done so to take all appropriate steps to ratify the Convention and to become part of the Espoo family of nations;

13. Welcome closer cooperation with States outside the UN/ECE region in an effort to extend the area of application of the principles of the Convention;

14. Emphasize that, in order to reap the full benefit of the Convention, the Parties must not only ratify it, but also introduce all the necessary national measures, both practical and legal, to meet their obligations fully;

15. Encourage Parties and non-Parties to enter into appropriate bilateral or multilateral agreements or other arrangements in order to facilitate the effective application of the Convention, if they have not yet done so;

16. Acclaim the establishment of a mechanism to improve the implementation of the Convention, and trust that all Parties, especially those that are having difficulties meeting their obligations under the Convention, will welcome the efforts of the new Implementation Committee to support States in their efforts to improve their performance in that respect;

17. Welcome the establishment of a subsidiary body, called the open-ended ad hoc Working Group on the Protocol, with a mandate to prepare a legally binding instrument, in the form of a protocol on strategic environmental assessment to the Convention with the objective of finalizing it so that it can possibly be adopted at an extraordinary meeting of the Parties to the Convention to be convened on the occasion of the fifth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" to be held in Kiev, Ukraine;

18. Note with appreciation the important step forward made by the recent work on the EC directive on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment;

19. Look forward to the results of the work to develop further the Convention in the light of the experience gained during the past 10 years;

20. Encourage the Parties to carry out the activities under the new work-plan efficiently and constructively;

21. Recognize that the successful implementation of the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context depends on adequate administrative and financial resources being made available to support and maintain the initiatives necessary to achieve its goals and, in that respect and bearing in mind the special situation of the countries in transition, call upon Parties, Signatories and international financing institutions to ensure that the resources necessary to carry out the programme of activities are provided.