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**Joint Task Force on Environmental
Statistics and Indicators**

Fifteenth session
Geneva, 25–26 October 2018

Report of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators on its fifteenth session

Contents

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I. Introduction

A. Background

1.   The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators was established by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy and the Conference of European Statisticians to support the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia[1] in improving their environmental statistics and indicators. The work being carried out by the Joint Task Force aims at strengthening environmental reporting and making environmental statistics available and comparable throughout the pan-European region in the long term. The terms of reference for the Joint Task Force (ECE/CEP/2017/12) were approved by the ECE Executive Committee on 4 July 2018 (ECE/EX/2018/L.7).

2.   The fifteenth session of the Joint Task Force was held in Geneva, Switzerland, on 25–26 October 2018.

B. Attendance

3.   Environmental experts and statisticians from the following countries attended the meeting: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

4.   Representatives of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), European Environment Agency (EEA), Turkmenistan Aarhus Centre, Zoï Environment Network and Cadaster Institute also attended the meeting. The meeting was serviced by the ECE secretariat.

C. Organizational matters

5.   The meeting was chaired by Ms. Aigul Yepbayeva (Kazakhstan).

6.   The Joint Task Force adopted the agenda for its fifteenth session, as contained in document ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2018/1.

7.   The following substantive topics were discussed at the meeting:

        (a)   Implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force;

        (b)   Progress in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System to support a regular process of environmental assessment;

        (c)   Amendment of the ECE *Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators*;

        (d)   Progress of the Task Force on Waste Statistics;

        (e)   Ongoing and planned capacity-development activities;

        (f)   Progress in production of environmental indicators and statistics at the national level.

8.   A training session on the status of production, sharing and use of the regional set of environmental indicators and environmental statistics was organized within the framework of the meeting.

9.   The Joint Task Force decided that a new chair and vice-chair would be elected during its next session. Members of the Joint Task Force were invited to submit nominations for the posts of chair and vice-chair to the secretariat.

II.   Implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force

10.   The secretariat presented the status of implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the fourteenth session (Rome, 2–3 October 2017) of the Joint Task Force (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/6).

11.   The topic of establishing a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks had been presented in a background document to the Committee on Environmental Policy at its twenty-third session (ECE/CEP/2017/14). The Committee had taken note of it.

12.   The request to consider establishing a web-based portal through which users could seek guidance and information on environmental statistics and indicators had been discussed at the twentieth session of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment. The Working Group had invited the secretariat to explore further possibilities and to report back at the next session of the Working Group.

13.   The secretariat informed the Joint Task Force about the main outcomes of the fifth Expert Forum for Producers and Users of Climate Change-related Statistics, which was held on 2–4 October 2018 in Geneva. More information about reporting requirements for the Paris Agreement on climate change was expected to be available after the twenty-fourth session of the Conference of Parties to UNFCCC, which was to be held in Katowice (Poland) in December 2018. The secretariat would continue to inform the Joint Task Force about developments related to climate change-related statistics and indicators and related international reporting requirements.

14.   The renewed terms of reference of the Joint Task Force had been submitted to the Committee on Environmental Policy, which had adopted the mandate of the Joint Task Force for the working period 2018–2021.

15.   As requested, proposals for further amendments of the ECE *Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators* had been prepared by the secretariat and were to be discussed by the Joint Task Force at its fifteenth session. The recommended review of the current practice in using Excel-based templates in the data production and sharing process was also on the agenda of the fifteenth session of the Joint Task Force.

16.   Regarding the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework, the secretariat had implemented all recommendations and decisions of the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force, which included a consultation process, the selection of indicators and feedback on several open questions. The secretariat had prepared a background document for the twentieth session of the Working Group (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/5), which set out the assessment framework for conducting the mid-term review on establishing the Shared Environmental Information System in the pan-European region.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

17. The Joint Task Force took note of information provided by the secretariat on the implementation of decisions and recommendations of the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force. Members of the Joint Task Force expressed their appreciation that all recommendations and decisions of the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force had been addressed by the secretariat.

18. The report of the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/6) was adopted.

III. Progress in establishing a Shared Environmental Information System to support a regular process of environmental assessment

19. At its fourteenth session, the Joint Task Force had followed up on the progress made on the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework and requested the secretariat to solicit feedback on a limited number of themes and indicators (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2017/6). This was part of the process leading up to the mid-term review of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/6) at the twenty-fourth session of the Committee on Environmental Policy (29–31 January 2019).

20. The secretariat presented the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/5). The presentation highlighted steps taken to develop the self-assessment questionnaire since the fourteenth session of the Joint Task Force, covering decisions on the modalities and data flows that were included in the assessment. It also covered decisions and recommendations made on further revising the self-assessment questionnaire during the twentieth session of the Working Group (ECE/CEP/AC.10/2018/2), including preparatory steps for the final report of progress in the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System at the pan-European level for the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference.

21. The secretariat presented the mid-term review of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System. The secretariat noted that significant improvements had been made since the progress report in 2016 (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/8), demonstrating considerable advances in addressing all three pillars of the Shared Environmental Information System (content, infrastructure and cooperation), and identified category-specific areas (e.g., institutional and organizational arrangements, timeliness and punctuality, accuracy and relevance) needing further improvement.

22. A representative of the Russian Federation shared experiences in using the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals. The Russian Federation noted that some questions of the self-assessment questionnaire remain unclear and that it is sometimes not possible to answer the questions (e.g., D16) due to legal restrictions at the national level.

23. Representatives of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, Ukraine and the European Environment Agency recognized the relevance of the self-assessment questionnaire and the mid-term review but noted that:

(a) The clarity of certain questions in the self-assessment questionnaire requires improvements, particularly as this would help ensure that the quality of the responses is also improved;

(b)   Some questions in the self-assessment questionnaire should be asked at the thematic rather than the indicator level as this will help to reduce the amount of time needed to respond to the questionnaire;

(c)   the online reporting tool would require further improvements and training in its use before a final decision is made on abandoning the use of the Excel-based template as part of the self-assessment questionnaire;

(d)   The final review of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System should cover more indicators.

24.   The secretariat informed the Joint Task Force about the ECE Statistical Database[1], its data flows and primary products. The presentation provided an overview of the database and how data is collected, organized and disseminated, as well as samples of the database products and applications. Currently the ECE Statistical Database does not contain environment statistics, but this gap could be filled by harvesting data from the national data platforms established using the Shared Environmental Information System principles.

25.   A representative of the ECE Statistical Division presented activities in developing national reporting platforms for Sustainable Development Goals. ECE is the secretariat of the Conference of European Statisticians Steering Group on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals, which prepared a first regional Road Map on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals in 2017. A second edition is being drafted and will provide guidance on national reporting platforms, data flows, communication and statistical capacity development for Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The environmental indicators that are used by countries to report on progress in establishing Shared Environmental Information System are closely entwined with the Suitable Development Goals. The presenter noted some initial ideas on how the ECE set of environmental indicators and the Shared Environmental Information System could be better aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The Joint Task Force was invited to participate actively in the work of the Steering Group and its task teams.

26.   Representatives of Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation and the European Environment Agency:

(a)   Observed that the ECE Statistical Database is an excellent example of statistics online;

(b)   Supported the idea of publishing environmental information in the ECE Statistical Database but noted that the mechanisms and methodology of information collection need to be clarified.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

27.   The Joint Task Force took note of information provided by the secretariat on the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework and the mid-term review of the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System.

28.   The Joint Task Force requested the secretariat to share a draft of the forthcoming ECE publication on the Shared Environmental Information System for commenting prior to its publication.

29.   The Joint Task Force requested the secretariat to make relevant environmental information available in the database of the ECE Statistical Division.

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[1] ECE Statistical Database: https://w3.unece.org/PXWeb/en.

30.   The secretariat should explore how the Shared Environmental Information System could be considered in the recommendations for the establishment of national reporting platforms for Sustainable Development Goals.

IV.   Amendment of the Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators

31.   At its fourteenth session, the Joint Task Force had expressed satisfaction with the progress made on revising the ECE energy and biodiversity indicator production templates but decided to take more time to consider how the *ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators*[2] could be further revised and improved.

32.   The secretariat opened the session by recalling the format and content of the existing guidelines (paper version of 2007 and subsequently published online)[3] and the need to review them to inform better the recent global policies (such as 2030 Agenda, Paris Agreement and Sendai Framework for Disaster-risk Reduction), link them with statistical frameworks, such as the United Nations Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics and the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, and increase user-friendliness of the metadata.

33.   A representative of Belarus shared the country's experiences in using the guidelines. The guidelines were very useful in developing new statistics and indicators, but some indicators needed improvement of their glossaries and references. The representative of Belarus recommended to add further explanations when similar indicators are used by other international organizations (such as the Water Exploitation Index). She also mentioned that some of the metadata templates contain too much information.

34.   The secretariat presented the results of an initial review of the online version of the guidelines. The presentation concluded with some recommendations for possible improvements of the existing online guidelines, such as to (i) re-arrange and clean-up the content of the description files, (ii) add references to the Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics, System of Environmental-Economic Accounting and global policy frameworks, and (iii) reduce and align the glossaries. It was also suggested to convert the existing static (PDF format) files into a searchable database.

35.   The secretariat provided the results of a pilot testing of using the ECE environmental indicators for producing three selected Sustainable Development Goal indicators (6.4.1 – Change in water-use efficiency over time (tier 2); 6.4.2 – Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources (tier 1); and 7.2.1 – Renewable energy share in the total final energy consumption (tier 1)). The pilot testing showed that currently none of the selected Sustainable Development Goal indicators can be calculated solely on the basis of the ECE ones, as some methodological questions concerning the calculation of Sustainable Development Goal indicators remain open, non-environmental statistics are needed in addition to compile the indicators (e.g., Gross Value Added), sometimes a further disaggregation of the used industry classification is needed and, in the case of energy-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators, better data sources exist to calculate the indicator (e.g., energy balances). However, the presentation concluded that there is value in fully aligning the ECE indicator production sheets with the Sustainable Development Goal indicators as, in many countries, the guidelines provide the only source for official environment statistics and the indicator production sheets have been designed

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[2]   See http://www.unece.org/env/indicators.html.

[3]   See https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/europe/monitoring/Belgrade/ CRP1.Indicators.En%20edited.MK..pdf and https://www.unece.org/env/indicators.html

for multi-purpose use. Furthermore, the pan-European Shared Environmental Information System ensures that the ECE environmental indicators are readily available and accessible for various users and reporting purposes.

36. A representative of the ECE Sustainable Transport Division presented the Division's work on transport statistics and made some suggestions for improving the transport indicators of the guidelines. He recommended making reference to the *Glossary for Transport Statistics* and to review terms and definitions used by the guidelines (e.g., the definition of "trucks" and whether the term "lorries" should be used instead). He also recommended revision of the name of the indicators (e.g., the term "demand" is considered as misleading when the actual transport of passengers and goods is measured).

37. The Russian Federation thanked all the presenters and noted the importance of showing the connection between the ECE environmental indicators and Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

38. The representative of the European Environment Agency pointed out that, for the review of the set of ECE environmental indicators, it is essential to consult experts in the different domains.

39. Kazakhstan highlighted that the countries should use the opportunity to review the guidelines in line with current information requirements. This may result in several changes, for example a revision of the transport indicators and better harmonization of the water ones.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

40. The Joint Task Force requested the secretariat to address the comments made when amending the guidelines and to report on the progress made at the next meeting.

V. Progress of the Task Force on Waste Statistics

41. As requested by members of the Joint Task Force in earlier sessions, the secretariat provided information about the progress of work by the Task Force on Waste Statistics under the Conference of European Statisticians. A final draft report by the Task Force would be ready for wider consultation and presentation to the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians at its meeting in February 2019. Key elements of the report were a re-definition of the scope of waste statistics, which now also includes informal and illegal activities, and the alignment with newer policy initiatives such as the circular economy and 2030 Agenda.

42. The United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) presented the finalized chapter of waste statistics of the *Manual on the Basic Set of Environment Statistics*. This chapter provides practical guidance on the implementation of topics "3.3.1 Generation of waste" and "3.3.2 Management of waste" of the United Nations Framework for Environment Statistics 2013. The document is fully aligned with the draft report of the Task Force on Waste Statistics.

43. Furthermore, UNSD informed the Joint Task Force about the most recent version of the UNSD/UNEP Questionnaire on Environment Statistics, which had been sent out to national statistical offices and ministries of environment with a deadline in September 2018. The questionnaire covers the waste and water domains. The questionnaire is slightly different from previous versions as it is now better aligned with demands for Sustainable Development Goal indicator reporting. It also covers new emerging issues such as electronic waste generation and collection.

44.   UNSD also reported the main outcomes of the Fifth Expert Group Meeting on Environment Statistics, which was held in May 2018 in New York. The main items addressed by the meeting were the review and release of new chapters of the *Manual on the Basic Set of Environment Statistics*[4] and an in-depth discussion of the work of UNSD on developing a global set of climate change indicators.

45.   Ukraine stressed the importance of considering more thoroughly mineral wastes in international waste statistics and providing the necessary guidelines and recommendations.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

46.   The Joint Task Force recommended specifically the consideration of mineral wastes in further work of international organizations related to waste statistics.

VI.   Ongoing and planned capacity-development activities

47.   Representatives of ECE and UNEP gave a joint presentation on their most recent and upcoming capacity-development activities related to environmental statistics and indicators. Strengthening capacity for data sharing to support state-of-the-environment reporting and other assessment and reporting processes, including on the Sustainable Development Goals, were being supported by the EU-funded Shared Environmental Information System Capacity Building project in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Activities within this project include the development of an online interactive version of the National State of the Environment Report of Kazakhstan and support to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the production of new indicators from the *ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators*. The United Nations Development Account tenth tranche project on strengthening statistical capacity was entering its final year 2019, with planned activities including a national workshop in the Russian Federation, a regional workshop on energy statistics and accounts, in cooperation with the International Energy Agency, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UNSD, and several advisory missions to countries regarding the implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting.

48.   Kyrgyzstan stressed the importance of support to national events that help to raise awareness on the availability of official environment statistics and indicators. The representative of the Turkmenistan Aarhus Centre suggested to also coordinate capacity building with the national Aarhus Centres.

49.   A representative of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) presented its work on environmental and green growth indicators, including links between OECD indicator sets and other statistical work. The present focus was on measuring material flows and resource productivity, data on economic instruments for the environment and environmental accounts and the use of new data sources, such as earth observation and geospatial data.

50.   A representative of the European Environment Agency provided an update on all the capacity-building activities being carried out through the European Union-funded project on "Implementation of the Shared Environmental Information System principles and practices in the European Neighbourhood Programme East region" (also known as ENI SEIS II East). The representative presented relevant activities carried out during 2018,

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[4] All completed chapters are available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/envstats/fdes/manual_bses.cshtml

including the "EEAcademy Summer School on Integrated Environmental Assessments" and vocational training on environmental accounting.

51.   A representative of OECD proposed the organization of a regional conference, similar to the regional workshop for the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia on the Shared Environmental Information System and green growth held in 2015, to take stock of the progress made since the earlier event.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

52.   The Joint Task Force welcomed the capacity-building activities of ECE, UNEP, the European Environment Agency and OECD, and expressed its support for continued efforts to strengthen capacity-building activities in the ECE region.

53.   The Joint Task Force suggested that national capacity-building activities should consider the involvement of the Aarhus Centres.

VII.   Progress in production of environmental indicators and statistics at the national level

54.   The secretariat recalled that the renewed mandate of the Joint Task Force included a call to consider progress made in the production and online sharing of selected environmental indicators (ECE/CEP/2017/12). The mandate furthermore includes a call to streamline the production of indicator-based assessments, which is considered integral to the compilation and integration of environmental data in support of measuring sustainable development and green economy initiatives. In an effort to address these aspects of the renewed mandate of the Joint Task Force, the topic of streamlining and continued harmonization of environmental was considered.

55.   The secretariat presented an update on the project "Support production and regular update of the regional set of indicators and strengthening environmental statistics and accounting in the six Eastern Partnership countries" funded by the European Environment Agency within its wider "ENI SEIS II East" project mentioned above. The ECE project will soon be finalized and an extended analytical report, revised based on feedback from countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, would be made available to the members of the Joint Task Force.

56.   A representative of the European Environment Agency informed the Joint Task Force about ongoing activities to streamline environmental reporting at the European Union level. For the 2018 to 2020 period, the European Commission had set out 10 actions to streamline environmental reporting. These include the modernization of its reporting system, the development and testing of new tools for data harvesting, the promotion of citizen science and streamlining of international reporting obligations.

57.   The secretariat informed the Joint Task Force about the upcoming Joint OECD/ECE Seminars on implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, to be held in Geneva on 20–21 February 2019.

58.   A representative of Armenia provided information on national experiences gained through the "ENI SEIS II East" project.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

59.   The Joint Task Force welcomed the presentations made and invited its members to continue their efforts in producing environmental indicators and statistics at the national level.

VIII. Training session on the status of production, sharing and use of the regional set of environmental indicators and environmental statistics

60.   The Joint Task Force members took part in a focused training session to provide views on the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework and to consider amendments to the *ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators*.

61.   The training session was carried out in two groups:

(a)   Group I considered the necessary steps to review the *ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators*;

(b)   Group II discussed possible improvements of the self-assessment questionnaire as part of the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework.

62.   Group I concluded that only minor adjustments to the metadata of the indicators are needed. The updates to the metadata should include addition of references to recent policy and statistical frameworks, generation of an electronic version that can be converted to a database and/or an e-book, and screening for any duplication. Some additional indicators are needed; for example, environmental expenditures were considered as very important. The secretariat was asked to draft a work plan for the review procedure. Members of the Joint Task Force and other expert communities (as needed) would be invited to contribute to the review process. Progress should be presented at the next meeting of the Joint Task Force.

63.   Group II concluded that the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework should focus more on the Shared Environmental Information System pillars (content, infrastructure and cooperation), and that certain questions should be moved up to the thematic rather than data flow level. There was a strong need to rearrange and/or to reduce the number of questions; use scaled answers (not just "yes" or "no"), improve the accompanying guidelines, glossary and instructions, and review the scoring associated with the performance scores. It was suggested that a reduced version of the self-assessment questionnaire could be made available to minimize the reporting burden and increase the participation of countries in the next review of progress in establishing the Shared Environmental Information System.

64.   A representative of the European Environment Agency took note of the decisions made by the Joint Task Force and indicated that the Agency would provide feedback to the secretariat.

65.   The inputs and comments provided by members of the Joint Task Force would be presented during a planned meeting between ECE, UNEP and the European Environment Agency in December 2018.

Decisions and recommendations by the Joint Task Force

66.	The Joint Task Force requested the secretariat to draft a work plan for the review of the *ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators* and invite experts from the Joint Task Force and other expert communities to participate in the review. Progress should be reported at the next meeting of the Joint Task Force.

67.	The Joint Task Force also requested the secretariat to continue to review the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework and agreed on the following steps:

	(a)	Members of the Joint Task Force could submit written comments to the secretariat by Friday 30 November 2018;

	(b)	A revised self-assessment questionnaire should be shared for commenting with a small group including Armenia, Georgia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, UNEP and the European Environment Agency in January 2019;

	(c)	A further revised version of the self-assessment questionnaire should be shared with all members of the Joint Task Force for final commenting in late January 2019;

	(d)	The updated Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework should be completed by 11 February 2019 to allow its processing as an official document for consideration by the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment;

	(e)	The self-assessment questionnaire would then be presented during the next meeting of the Working Group in May 2019.

68.	The Joint Task Force further agreed that the online reporting tool would be piloted again once the Shared Environmental Information System assessment framework had been revised. Progress should be reported at the next meeting of the Joint Task Force.

## IX.	Closure of the meeting

69.	The Joint Task Force thanked donors – Austria, the European Environment Agency and the United Nations Development Account – for the financial support provided to organize the fifteenth session.

70.	The next meeting of the Joint Task Force will be held from 28 to 29 October 2019 in Geneva.