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Environmental monitoring, assessment and reporting

Extension of the mandate and terms of reference of the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators was set up by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Committee on Environmental Policy and the Conference of European Statisticians in 2009.

Its current mandate expires in June 2023.

The Committee on Environmental Policy is invited to endorse an extension of the existing mandate and terms of reference until the end of 2023.

The Committee is also invited to decide to allow for further consultations on the possible establishment of a standing body on environmental statistics under the Committee and the Conference of European Statisticians.



I. Introduction

1. The Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators, previously named the “Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators”, was set up in 2009¹ jointly by the Conference of European Statisticians and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy 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 sessions in the period 2009–2021. During that period, it revised the indicators covered by the ECE Guidelines for the Application of Environmental Indicators³ (Indicator Guidelines) prepared by the ECE Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment and endorsed at the Sixth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Belgrade, 10–12 October 2007).⁴ The Joint Task Force updated the Indicator Guidelines, adding further important indicators to better address emerging issues such as climate change, the circular economy and biodiversity loss.
2. Since their launch, the Indicator Guidelines have provided an important foundation for developing capacities in the target countries for producing and sharing environmental statistics and indicators. The revised Indicator Guidelines will support the production of official, comparable and reliable information and statistics in support of environmental assessments and decision-making.
3. The current focus of the work of the Joint Task Force is the production and online sharing of data, as well as the continuous review of the indicators to address emerging needs. Its aim is to establish regular, high-quality data flows for effective reporting according to national and international monitoring and assessment requirements, including the obligations under the relevant multilateral environmental agreements. This work will support the continued expansion of the Shared Environmental Information System in the pan-European region beyond the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Nicosia, 5–7 October 2022).
4. The Joint Task Force is faced with an increasing number of thematic areas of growing complexity and the resulting need for integrated information and statistics. It is not currently defined as a standing body and its mandate and terms of reference need to be renewed every four to five years; its current term expires on 30 June 2023 (ECE/CEP-CES/GE.1/2021/3, annex, and ECE/EX/2021/L.18). The Joint Task Force’s ad hoc nature, limited resources and lower priority for regular conference services limit its scope for action to support the provision of statistics that can inform policies holistically.
5. It is therefore proposed, in a first and immediate step, to extend the existing mandate of the Joint Task Force until the end of 2023, to enable it to continue with its work, and to allow for consultations on its possible conversion to a standing body open to all member States of ECE and of the Conference of European Statisticians.
6. The Joint Task Force continues to work closely with the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment.

II. Rationale of the proposed actions

7. Since the establishment of the Joint Task Force, countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have made significant progress in developing environmental statistics and indicators following international standards and guidelines.

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 ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/8, para. 7; and ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/11/Add.1, para. 4.

However, the area of environmental statistics remains one of the weakest statistical domains in all countries.

8. The Joint Task Force is a unique intergovernmental body in the ECE region, being open to experts from national statistical offices and ministries of environment (or similar governmental bodies). Over time, members of the Joint Task Force have formed a community of practice that benefits from the regular exchange of experience and information between policymakers and producers of statistics.

9. At his speech on 11 October 2021 to the Leaders' Summit of the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (Kunming, China (online), 11–15 October 2021), the United Nations Secretary-General said that humankind was losing a “suicidal war against nature” and that “the two-century-long experiment with burning fossil fuels, destroying forests, wilderness and oceans and degrading the land has caused a biosphere catastrophe”.⁵

10. Considering the urgent need to address the triple planetary crisis consisting of climate change, pollution and biodiversity – the three main interlinked environmental issues that humanity faces – climate change and sustainable management of environmental resources have gained momentum at the national, regional and global levels. Protection of the environment and the climate has become one of the highest priorities on the global policy agenda, to ensure the well-being of future generations. However, this prioritization is often not matched by adequate action and resources for the production of the required information to inform these important policy areas with sound and reliable data. There is a lack of resources in the areas of environmental monitoring, statistics and policy implementation at both the national and international levels. Moreover, there are capacity gaps in national statistical offices, ministries of environment and other relevant agencies regarding production of the required data and information.

11. 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 member States of the Conference of European Statisticians and the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy, resulting in the insufficient quality of these statistics and data gaps. For example, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021*⁶ 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 large data gaps regarding 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 report *Measuring Progress – Environment and the SDGs*.⁷ Relatively new policy initiatives, such as measuring circular economy and sustainable infrastructure, provide challenges for national statistical offices, ministries of environment and other related governmental agencies of all member States of the Conference of European Statisticians and the Committee on Environmental Policy.

12. 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, leaving the Joint Task Force with a growing number of areas that must be addressed urgently.

13. 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.

⁵ United Nations, “‘We Are Losing Our Suicidal War against Nature’, Secretary-General Tells Biodiversity Summit, Urging Bold Actions towards Sustainable Future”, press release, Secretary-General, statements and messages, SG/SM/20959, 11 October 2021. Available at <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm20959.doc.htm>.

⁶ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.I.3. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/>.

⁷ United Nations Environment Programme, *Measuring Progress: Environment and the SDGs* (Nairobi, 2021).

14. The Joint Task Force follows the principles of the Shared Environmental Information System that is implemented in the pan-European region and beyond. Therefore, there are common issues to discuss. Some countries 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.

15. At a joint session of the Conference of European Statisticians and the Europe 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 for all member States of the Conference of European Statisticians and the Committee on Environmental Policy.

16. Task forces are usually convened to resolve concrete short-term issues and, once that is done, they are dissolved. However, the work on environmental statistics and indicators is not restricted or limited to specific short-term issues or to a particular period in time. On the contrary, the work of the Joint Task Force has been continuing and expanding since 2009; it also has a global relevance in common with much of the work of the Conference of European Statisticians. Furthermore, as the complexity of compiling environmental statistics and indicators and the importance of issues related to informing important and integrated policy areas increase, there is a need to continue and enhance the substantive work carried out by the Task Force. Lastly, many indicators for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development rely heavily on environmental statistics.

III. Proposal

A. Extension of the existing mandate of the Joint Task Force

17. It is therefore proposed, in a first and immediate step, to extend the existing mandate of the Joint Task Force until the end of 2023, to enable it to continue with its work and to allow for consultations to convert it to a standing body.

B. Conversion into an open-ended standing body on environment statistics and indicators

18. The work of the Joint Task Force since 2009 has highlighted a continuous need for a platform for countries to support improvement of environmental statistics in support of integrated policies. Therefore, the Conference of European Statisticians and the Committee on Environmental Policy may wish to consider converting the Joint Task Force into a standing body with a broadened mandate and geographical coverage to work on environmental statistics and indicators.

19. A new mandate and terms of reference would then be developed for a standing body, in view of the common challenges in environmental statistics, for all countries of the ECE region and members of the Conference of European Statisticians. This would ensure that a useful platform for experts from national statistical offices and ministries of environment (or responsible government agencies) would be provided to all member States of the two bodies and for all relevant environmental themes. This platform could be used to support the production of relevant information and statistics and to share knowledge and experience on:

(a) Production of environmental and related integrated statistics to inform new policy areas such as the circular economy, sustainable infrastructure and tourism or biodiversity;

(b) Production of environmental and health-related statistics to derive actions that serve both the health of the environment and humanity;

- (c) Continuous improvement of data quality and how to overcome data gaps;
- (d) Use of new or alternative data sources (for example, remote sensing, “big data” and citizen science);
- (e) Data sharing;
- (f) Dissemination of policy-relevant information products.

20. Tangible outcomes of the work of the Joint Task Force would include practical guidelines, capacity development activities and other joint activities to facilitate the production and sharing of environmental statistics and indicators in the region.

21. The standing body would become a unique regional intergovernmental body within which experts from both national statistical offices and ministries of environment could discuss environmental statistics. It would support priorities and issues identified as relevant by the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment and the Committee with technical discussions and practical solutions on how to produce the required data. The standing body would allow for the coordination of various related work streams of the ECE environment and statistical subprogrammes with the work of other international organizations and their working groups in the region (e.g., Eurostat, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations Environment Programme).

22. At its online meeting held from 17 to 18 February 2021, the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians expressed support for the extension of the work of the Task Force to other interested countries, when the new terms of reference were prepared in 2023, and for setting it up as a standing body under the Conference.⁸

23. The proposed standing body would be serviced jointly by the ECE Environment and Statistical Divisions.

IV. Proposed decisions by the Committee on Environmental Policy

24. The Committee on Environmental Policy is invited to endorse an extension of the existing mandate and terms of reference until the end of 2023 to allow the Joint Task Force to present a new draft mandate and terms of reference after the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference to the Committee and the Conference of European Statisticians. The Committee is also invited to request the secretariat to submit this decision on extension to the ECE Executive Committee for approval.

25. It is further invited to decide to allow for additional consultations on the possible establishment of a standing body on environmental statistics and indicators under the Committee and the Conference of European Statisticians to cover a wider geographical scope and emerging policy themes. The same proposal will be made to the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians at its meeting in October 2022 (Cork, Ireland, 12–13 October 2022).

26. Taking into account the discussions in the Committee and the Conference of European Statisticians Bureau, terms of reference for a new standing body on environmental statistics and indicators will be submitted to the Committee in November 2023 and to the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians in October 2023.

V. Scope and impact of the proposed changes

27. The extension of the existing mandate of the Joint Task Force until the end of 2023 will allow for: the Joint Task Force to continue with its work; consultations on the Joint Task Force’s conversion to a standing body; the development by the Joint Task Force of a new

⁸ ECE/CES/2021/14/Add.12, para. 26.

mandate and terms of reference starting from 2024 for a possible standing body with a broader scope; and the assessment of resource needs.

28. Currently, one staff member of the ECE Statistical Division and one staff member of the ECE Environmental Division can each dedicate only about one quarter of their work time to servicing the Joint Task Force. The limited staff resources mean that the extensive member State needs in the areas of environmental statistics and environmental indicators cannot be fully met.

29. A larger and standing body, covering a wider geographical scope and a broader range of relevant themes, including global developments such as circular economy, sustainable infrastructure and tourism, climate change and biodiversity, would be able to inform assessments and policies, including those related to emerging themes, more holistically.

30. The proposed change would have a positive impact on the work, better reflecting the status, history and mode of work of the Joint Task Force. The change would also allow the ECE secretariat to continue to provide quality services to its member States, including suitable meeting facilities, translation and interpretation, which are necessary for successful meetings.
