

**UNECE**

# Sharing our vision for the pan-European region

## Setting strategic goals and objectives

Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment



2030



**UNITED NATIONS**

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

# Sharing our vision for the pan-European region

Setting strategic goals and objectives for the  
Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment



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# Introduction

The Environment for Europe process has – since 1991 – provided a framework for countries in the pan-European region to work together to improve environmental protection and to promote sustainable development throughout the region. In this context, Ministers of the Environment have continuously highlighted the importance of environmental information for policymaking and public awareness.

At the Astana Environment for Europe Conference in 2011, Ministers requested that a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) be developed to underpin a regular environment assessment process across the pan-European region. More recently, at the Batumi Environment for Europe Conference in 2016, Ministers welcomed progress in developing SEIS, but reiterated the need for countries to continue their efforts and to develop further their national information systems to have SEIS in place in the countries of Europe and Central Asia by 2021.

As an integral part of this process, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment has been engaged in efforts to make environmental monitoring an effective instrument in policymaking and, in particular, to assist countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. In doing so, the Working Group has cooperated closely with the European Environment Agency and the United Nations Environment Programme – as the three organizations have agreed on a common approach to support national and regional reporting on the state of the environment – and other relevant partners.

ECE member States, with the support of the secretariat, have made significant progress in establishing SEIS, and there is a renewed and strengthened momentum for environmental monitoring and assessment following the Batumi Environment for Europe Conference. As a next step, the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment at its eighteenth session in June 2016 launched a collaborative and forward-looking discussion to define a vision for its work leading up to 2021 and beyond.

Thinking about the future challenges in the pan-European region is an important step to ensure that the Working Group and secretariat make substantive contributions to, among others, the establishment of a pan-European Shared Environmental Information System, while also assisting in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals.

We are grateful to all of those involved in this effort to shape a new pathway for the Working Group and extend an invitation to all countries in the region to engage with the Working Group in its continued efforts to transform the strategic goals and objectives for the Working Group into reality.

# Acknowledgements

The present vision document is the result of a consultation organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment during its eighteenth session (Geneva, 28–29 June 2016).

This publication would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of the countries participating in the Working Group. The ECE secretariat wishes to acknowledge the contributions by representatives of the following countries: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. In addition, representatives of the European Environment Agency and the United Nations Environment Programme supported the production of this publication.

The following ECE secretariat staff contributed to the production of this publication: Filip Aggestam, Nicholas Bonvoisin, Yulia Bunina (intern), Ivonne Higuero, Caroline Jeunet, Marco Keiner, Tiina Luige and Michael Nagy.

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Sharing a vision for  
the pan-European region

## Sharing a vision for the pan-European region

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We are living in a time of growing unpredictability, accelerated change and unprecedented global societal challenges ranging from biodiversity loss to energy and food security to natural resources scarcity. These challenges require not only that societies adapt and consider innovative solutions, but they also offer new opportunities and possibilities for the future.

It is crucial to ask how these changes could be anticipated and to turn present and future challenges into drivers that encourage social, economic and environmental progress. These questions matter more and more as societies and economies increasingly embrace technological changes that may have unpredictable effects on the natural environment. There is consequently an ever-increasing demand for accessible, available and high-quality environmental information as a basis for data-driven policymaking in the environmental sector.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment was established in 2000 by the Committee on Environmental Policy, in part to address this demand for environmental information and data. More specifically, it serves as an instrument for ECE member States that could provide recommendations, propose action plans and improve coordination of international initiatives concerning environmental monitoring, assessment and reporting related to global challenges.

Thanks to donors such as Austria, Norway, the Russian Federation, Switzerland and the European Union, ECE, in collaboration with the European Environment Agency (EEA), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has been working directly

with countries in the pan-European region. This work has entailed assisting in the production and sharing of environmental data in areas such as air, climate change, water, biodiversity and waste. In working with environmental data and information, the Working Group has contributed to improving the timely flow of relevant environmental data, including its assessment. This has in turn helped to facilitate improved decision-making processes, both nationally and internationally, in the environmental sector.

Since the launch of the Working Group, and particularly throughout 2015 and 2016, there was significant political progress and change, both nationally and internationally. High-level developments, such as the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit and commitments made at the twenty-first Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, characterize some of these changes. There was also a renewed call by Ministers of the Environment, at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, Georgia, 8–10 June 2016), for countries to continue their efforts and to further develop their national information systems to have a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) in place throughout Europe and Central Asia by 2021.

The outcomes of these developments have had both direct and indirect implications for several areas of work of the Working Group. To capture these changes and consider future options, the Working Group launched a forward-thinking process to undertake long-term reflection and analysis. The intent was to address key priorities for the Working Group in the coming years and to create a guiding vision, leading up to 2030.



## Preparing for a Changing World

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The Committee on Environmental Policy made a request to the Working Group at its twentieth session (Geneva, 28–31 October 2014) to submit a proposal on streamlining the work of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators. Following the review of the proposal for the two bodies, it was decided to wait until after the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference to consider a new mandate for the Working Group.

Taking this opportunity to consider the future of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force, and to prepare new terms of reference for the twenty-second session of the Committee (Geneva, 25–27 January 2017), the Working Group carried out national consultations and a workshop taking a foresight-oriented approach at its eighteenth session (Geneva, 28–29 June 2016).

The purpose of engaging the members of the Working Group and partners in this process was to consider how the Working Group could contribute more effectively to enhancing environmental monitoring and assessment in the pan-European region. The workshop was also set in motion to take into consideration new and future challenges, in particular, to consider recent developments, such as:

- **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, which was adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 (see A/RES/70/1)
- **Paris Agreement** within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was adopted on 12 December 2015 (see FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev.1)
- **Batumi Declaration** “Greener, cleaner, smarter”, which was adopted at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference on 10 June 2016 (see ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1)

- **Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy**, including the Batumi Initiative on the Green Economy (BIG-E), adopted by the Committee on Environmental Policy and endorsed during the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (see ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/6).

These commitments, coupled with the request for new terms of reference, provided a timely occasion for the Working Group to reflect on past achievements and lessons learned, and to discuss where the Working Group would like to be in 2030.

The consultation and workshop moreover allowed the Working Group to reflect on how it should carry on with its activities and mandate, taking into account the renewed call for establishing SEIS in the countries of Europe and Central Asia by 2021. This also implied considering the request from the Committee to serve as a regional environmental information and assessment “network of networks”. The network of networks implies bringing together the UNEP Global Environment Outlook expert team and the EEA European Environment Information and Observation Network, and other interested partners, to consider and oversee the publication of the next regular pan-European environmental assessment.

If the Working Group was to succeed in fulfilling these expectations, it was essential that it discuss its ongoing work and mandate together with the new targets and commitments set for 2021 and 2030. These targets and commitments consequently provided the baseline from which to build a vision that would allow the Working Group to make better decisions. Even more importantly, the vision would help the Working Group to have a positive impact on the environmental challenges facing the pan-European region.

## Challenges to constructing a vision for the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

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This publication is based on foresight work, underpinned and strengthened by a consultative process that was carried out with all members of the Working Group. It sets out recommendations made by its members for immediate action.

The vision corresponds to a synthesis of past and current activities of the Working Group, as associated with its mandate and terms of reference (see ECE/EX/2016/L.11), taking into account recent developments, such as those noted in the preceding section.

The activities carried out through the Working Group have evolved over time. The figure (see page 4) outlines the general timeline of the Working Group (in blue), from its establishment by the Committee in 1990, leading up to the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in 2016. Major accomplishments and/or events that the Working Group has contributed towards are also outlined (in pink) in the figure. These points in time have shaped past and current objectives of the Working Group.

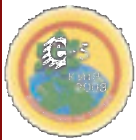



The development of the vision document involved the use of a questionnaire, through which all

members of the Working Group, as part of the regular process of consultation on environmental assessments, were requested to identify and clarify major institutional drivers and environmental priorities for national institutions concerned with environmental monitoring and assessment for the coming five-year period. The questionnaire also considered a longer timeframe so that it would be able to take into account the longer time perspective of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.


Inputs received from members of the Working Group, via the questionnaire, allowed the secretariat to define strategic and thematic priorities for round-table discussions around three specific topics. Inputs provided during the eighteenth session of the Working Group were in turn utilized by the secretariat to prepare a draft vision document that was circulated to the Working Group. This provided a final opportunity for members of the Working Group to provide feedback.

The next section presents the steps taken and results from the questionnaire and round-table discussion in more detail.

## Timeline of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment

	2000	Committee on Environmental Policy established the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment
First session of the Working Group, held in Makkum (Netherlands) on 21 and 22 September 2001	2001	<b>Declaration of the 5th Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference: Paragraph 31.</b> We support the UNECE Working Group on Environmental Monitoring in its activities, particularly on strengthening environmental information and observation capacity ... (ECE/CEP/94/Rev.1). 
Second and third sessions of the Working Group	2002	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kiev Assessment;</li> <li>Recommendations on Strengthening National Environmental Monitoring and Information Systems;</li> <li>Guidelines for the Preparation of Governmental Reports on the State and Protection of the Environment.</li> </ul>	2003	
	2004	Fifth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in Kiev and the fourth session of the Working Group.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belgrade Assessment;</li> <li>Report on the adaptation of air-quality monitoring networks in Eastern Europe, etc.;</li> <li>Guidelines for the application of environmental indicators.</li> </ul>	2005	Fifth session of the Working Group
Sixth and seventh sessions of the Working Group	2006	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Release of European Commission Communication "Towards a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS)"</li> </ul>	2007	Sixth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in Belgrade and eighth session of the Working Group
Ninth session of the Working Group	2008	<b>Declaration of the 6th Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference: Paragraph 7.</b> We stress the need to further improve the indicator-based environmental assessments and reporting in the region. To this end, we, the Ministers and Heads of delegation of States ... (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/8). 
Tenth session of the Working Group	2009	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidelines for developing national strategies to use air quality monitoring as an environmental policy tool.</li> </ul>	2010	Eleventh session of the Working Group
	2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidelines for developing national strategies to use water quality monitoring as an environmental policy tool</li> </ul>
Seventh Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in Astana and twelfth session of the Working Group	2011	
<b>Declaration of the 7th Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference: Paragraph 14.</b> To keep the pan-European environment under review, we decide to establish a regular process of environmental assessment and to develop the SEIS across the region ... (ECE/ASTANA.CONF/2011/2/Add.1). 	2012	Launch of the SEIS Cookbook Thirteenth session of the Working Group
	2013	CEP established the Group of Friends of SEIS Fourteenth session of the Working Group
Fifteenth session of the Working Group First meeting of Friends of SEIS	2014	<b>Declaration of the 8th Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference: Paragraph 10.</b> While welcoming progress in developing the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) to support a regular process of environmental assessment ... (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1). 
Sixteenth and seventeenth sessions of the Working Group Second meeting of Friends of SEIS	2015	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report on performance in establishing and operating SEIS</li> <li>Data and information of SEIS in the pan-European region</li> <li>Guidelines for developing national strategies to use biodiversity monitoring as an environmental policy tool.</li> </ul>	2016	Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in Batumi, Georgia, and eighteenth session of the Working Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report on progress in establishing SEIS in the pan-European region</li> </ul>



A close-up photograph of a pair of hands, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, gently cupping a small, young tree sapling. The sapling has a thin, brown trunk and several green leaves, some of which are slightly yellowed. The roots are visible, and the plant is growing out of a mound of dark, rich soil. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The lighting is natural, highlighting the texture of the soil and the skin of the hands.

Setting strategic  
goals and objectives

## Setting strategic goals and objectives

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Why should we think about the future? Thinking in new ways about the future is an essential part of finding new opportunities, addressing emerging challenges and building capacities to respond to change more proactively. It is for this reason that the Working Group, in looking to the future, adopted a priority-setting approach to develop a vision for itself and its continued work.

Forward-thinking, futures-thinking or foresight methodologies essentially provide ways to consider options for the years to come. The application of a foresight-oriented approach in the planning process was meant to help the

Working Group identify the right questions and problems when considering its future. This document is consequently an implicit effort by the Working Group to consider its ongoing work and to find an appropriate framework to catalyse action and change.

Furthermore, engaging in a participatory foresight-oriented approach helped members of the Working Group to align their efforts and jointly decide on a way forward, not only to guide decision-making but also to concentrate resources on priority areas that are of concern.



**The Working Group on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment at its eighteenth session, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva**

## Outlining the collaborative and consultative process

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The foresight-oriented approach was structured into four main steps to ensure that all members of the Working Group had the opportunity to be involved and provide substantive contributions to the vision.

### **Step 1: Scoping exercise**

Data was collected through a questionnaire that asked all members of the Working Group to specify key priorities to fulfil regular

environmental reporting obligations in the coming five years. It also asked about main obstacles and barriers that might prevent each key priority from being resolved; and what type of solutions, knowledge or capabilities were needed to address these obstacles and barriers. The replies allowed the secretariat to specify regional priorities, focusing on institutional drivers and environmental priorities for national institutions concerned with environmental monitoring and assessment.

## Step 2: Round-table discussions

The results from the scoping exercise provided the background content for round-table discussions. These aimed to characterize and define what the regional priorities meant in more detail for the members of the Working Group and how they could be addressed in the future. More specifically, the round-table discussions were conducted by dividing the participants at the eighteenth session into three groups, each covering one of three thematic topics that had been identified:

- Reporting and assessments
- Sustainable Development Goals and green economy
- Environmental statistics.

Each group was asked to define priority issues under each thematic topic and to break down these into drivers that underlie the priority issue, including obstacles that prevent the priority issue from being resolved. The participants were also asked to provide recommendations in a short-term perspective (covering the next five years) and in the long-term (up until 2030) with regards to how the Working Group could address each issue.

This activity was done on a rotating basis, meaning that each group moved on to the next thematic topic after a set time. Each group was

consequently able to provide inputs to all three thematic topics as well as to comment on the inputs provided by the other groups.

The round-table discussion was concluded with a discussion in plenary, including all three groups. This allowed the Working Group to consider and comment on all the inputs provided under the respective thematic topics.

## Step 3: Drafting

The draft vision was prepared by the secretariat, based on inputs from the preceding steps. The documents were shared with the Working Group for additional contributions and comments.

## Step 4: Finalization

The vision document was finalized by the secretariat, integrating all final contributions provided by the Working Group members.

National experts from Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan participated in the preparation of this document, together with experts from EEA, UNEP, the United Nations Statistics Division, the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the National Biodiversity and Biosafety Centre of Tajikistan and the international non-profit organizations Covalence EthicalQuote, the International Center for Environmental Research and Zoï Environment Network.

The questionnaire and a more detailed outline of the steps taken during the round-table discussion may be found online in the background documentation of the eighteenth session of the Working Group (see under agenda item 3).

## Results from the questionnaire

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Replies from the scoping exercise were translated and grouped according to the most commonly noted priority issues. These were as follows:

### **Sustainable Development Goals and green economy**

Measuring and reporting on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and green economy were noted as crucial, in particular, given commitments, strategic policy developments and priority areas expressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy (BIG-E).

Most members of the Working Group indicated the SDGs and green economy as priority issues in various forms. Some examples included the need to map SDG indicators at national level, based on SDG indicators identified globally. Member States also noted the need to develop SDG indicators, which are often not available at national level as well as the need to look at synergies between SDG indicators and the OECD green growth indicators.

### **Environmental statistics**

Environmental statistics was noted as a key priority issue by most members of the Working Group, for example, identifying the need to improve statistics on land use, water use and biodiversity. Some member States noted the need for assistance to elaborate national programmes for national monitoring systems (e.g., covering air, water, soil, biodiversity and noise) to enable the collection of environmental statistics while others stated that the development and introduction of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) would be a priority as part of the process to monitor progress towards the SDGs.

### **Air quality**

Air quality was highlighted as a distinct thematic topic as it was mentioned by most members of the Working Group as a priority issue. Points ranged from noting the need to install automatic stationary stations to improving national monitoring systems to enable the monitoring of additional pollutants requested for reporting under different multilateral environmental agreements.

### **Capacity-building**

Building institutional capacities was mentioned as another key priority issue, emphasizing the importance of capacity-building as part of the core activities that the Working Group should expand on in the future.

### **Quality, availability and accessibility of environmental information**

Improving the quality, availability and accessibility of environmental information and data was another issue that was commonly highlighted by the members of the Working Group, covering the collection, processing and dissemination of statistical environmental information and the harmonization of environmental data across sectors.

### **Information dissemination**

The members of the Working Group moreover emphasized the need for increased efforts to actively disseminate environmental information, such as the publication of materials on environmental protection, dissemination of environmental information through thematic and inter-thematic reports and regular reporting on environmental trends and policies through national state-of-the-environment reporting.





Environmental statistics was added as a final thematic topic, principally as it was a recurring priority issue stressed by the respondents. However, the Working Group's primary focus is on environmental monitoring and assessment while the topic of environmental statistics is handled by the Joint Task Force on Environmental Statistics and Indicators. The Joint Task Force is managed jointly by the ECE Programme on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment and the Statistical Division. There are significant links between the two bodies. The two bodies also provide a forum for both environmental and statistical agencies to meet and discuss.

## Results from the round-table discussions

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During the round-table discussions, participants were asked to identify priority issues within each thematic topic. They were also asked to: rank the priority issues in terms of importance; characterize drivers and obstacles that underlie the priority issues; and brainstorm how the Working Group could address these priority issues.

Below, each thematic topic is presented separately together with the main inputs provided by members of the Working Group. These are divided according to the priority issues discussed and associated barriers and solutions presented during the session.

### Topic I. Sustainable Development Goals and green economy

#### Priority Issue I. Institutional and legal issues

The SDGs were highlighted as being fundamentally important. However, it was also noted that they are not always reflected in strategic national documents, including those on environmental monitoring. There was consequently a need to either adopt new policy

It was decided to highlight environmental statistics as a separate thematic topic and to use the Working Group discussion and the formulation of a joint vision as an opportunity to further discuss how these two bodies could address earlier calls for streamlining their work programmes. This would also provide the opportunity to consider how the significant body of work on SDG indicators under SEEA, by various statistical agencies, could be considered within the broader framework of the Working Group and the reporting on progress under the 2030 Agenda.

documents or to revise existing ones. The coordination and responsibilities related to SDG monitoring were not clearly defined at the national level. The legislation to address monitoring of SDGs also needed to be improved in many countries.

#### Barriers

- Lack of political will.
- Absence of SDGs in strategic documents.
- Coordination and responsibilities on SDG monitoring not clearly defined at the national level.
- Inadequate (or complete absence) of legislation related to SDG monitoring and reporting.

#### Solutions

- Integrate SDGs into national strategic documents, through the adoption of new documents or revision of existing ones, including those on monitoring.
- Clearly define who coordinates, or acts as a focal point, for SDG monitoring on the national level.
- Improve legislation to reflect reporting requirements concerning SDGs.

## Priority Issue II. Indicators and methodologies

To measure progress towards the SDGs, indicators and methodologies must be developed. The work on developing SDG indicators was in progress. However, there was a lack of clarity. Working Group members moreover noted that not all OECD green growth indicators were developed at the national level. The issue of transboundary pollution was also emphasized and concerns were raised as to how this topic could be addressed using environmental indicators.



Preparing for the round-table discussions

### Barriers

- Some SDG indicators not yet fully defined, nor associated methodologies fully developed. Problematic indicators include land, soil, desertification, biodiversity, groundwater and social issues.
- Methodological obstacles.
- Procedural obstacles as regards to how information on indicators could be collected.
- Data not compatible and/or comparable.
- Lack of knowledge about international methodologies and standards.
- Lack of available data.

### Solutions

- Workshops and capacity-building focusing on SDG indicator-related methodologies and data collection for national use of SDG indicators.
- Increased engagement of international experts involved in the development of SEEA, SDG indicators and SEIS.
- Continued collaborative work between ECE (environmental indicators), OECD (green growth indicators), Joint Task Force and member States, carried out to avoid duplication of work and to ensure that already-existing indicators are utilized.
- Increased information exchange between environmental and statistical agencies, as facilitated through the Working Group and its role as a network of networks.

## Priority Issue III. Capacity-building

Education and cooperation are key to address gaps concerning SDG monitoring. Working Group members noted that both human and technical (equipment) capacities need to be enhanced. Development of SDG indicators would benefit from a regional approach, not only on the national level. Moreover, Working Group members mentioned the need to enhance the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

### Barriers

- Lack of skills and experience in the development of SEEA and SDG indicators at the national level.
- Lack of knowledge in the use of GIS.

### Solutions

- Increase capacity-building activities to enhance both human and technical capacities.
- Facilitate increased expert assistance, or twinning, between countries.
- Encourage enhanced application of GIS and training in their use.

## Topic II. Reporting and assessment

### Priority Issue I. Monitoring and data collection

Reliable and up-to-date monitoring systems require state-of-the-art monitoring equipment that is structured in a rational and comprehensive way. The lack of national operational expertise and capacities remained a significant impediment to monitor the environment. Infrastructure and human capacities are a prerequisite to enabling informed and evidence-based policymaking.

#### Barriers

- Lack of integrated national monitoring programmes.
- Lack of sustainable funding.
- Lack of experience and expertise in monitoring.

#### Solutions

- Improve the financial viability and sustainability of national monitoring systems.
- Define and implement capacity-building strategies at the regional and national level.



Members of the Working Group during the round-table discussions

### Priority Issue II. Modernized, harmonized and updated environmental information and data

High-quality and reliable data requires that data is up to date and that data collection is harmonized across the international, national and local level.

#### Barriers

- Lack of cross-national and inter-agency mechanisms to exchange experiences and know-how on the collection of environmental information and data.
- Lack of coordination on collection methods, data characteristics and data flows.

#### Solutions

- Resolve organizational competencies for national agencies and institutions involved in the collection, processing and dissemination of environmental information and data.
- Encourage harmonized national policies on monitoring and enforcement.
- Encourage increased information exchange between environmental and statistical agencies at the national level.

### Priority Issue III. Quality assurance

Data users need to be assured that the environmental data and information they are using is reliable and of high quality. Scientific principles should be applied to methods and procedures concerned with the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data. Improved indicator-related methodologies and quality assurance are needed for this.

#### Barriers

- Lack of adequate methodologies.
- Lack of skills and expertise.

## Solutions

- Continuously train personnel at the national and regional level.
- Introduce environmental registers and databases.
- Develop and implement approaches to verify data quality.
- Increase exchange of experiences and joint workshops between national agencies and institutions.

## Priority Issue IV. Industrial emissions control

Industrial emissions control is a key priority issue for most countries, in particular regarding the production of greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutant emission inventories related to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution.

### Barriers

- Lack of experience in air monitoring.
- Improvement of air monitoring systems require significant financial resources.

### Solutions

- Increase capacity-building with the support of convention secretariats.
- Adopt international standards.
- Encourage increased financial support at the national level.
- Increase engagement of international donors.

## Priority Issue V. Mapping international reporting obligations

National agencies and institutions need to increase the uptake of international concepts, classifications and methods to ensure consistent and efficient monitoring, at all levels.

### Barriers

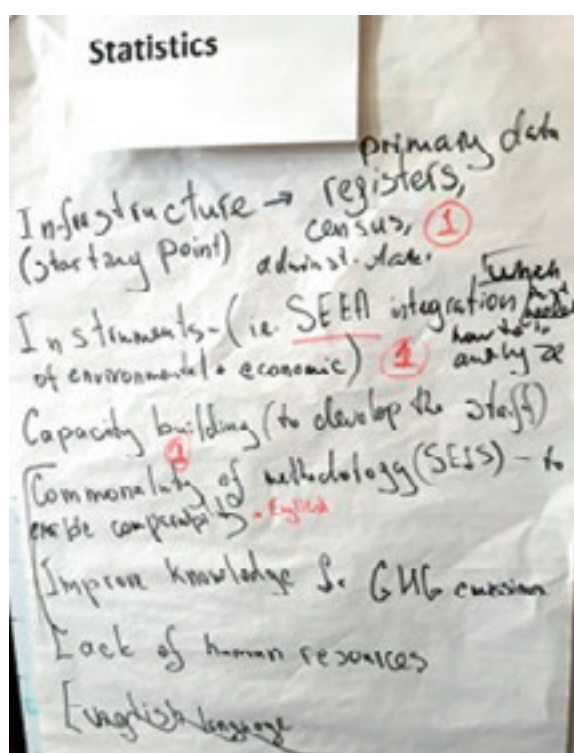
- Lack of knowledge of EU and international standards in the field of environmental

statistics and experience in their practical application.

- Discrepancies between national, EU and international legislation.

### Solutions

- Increased capacity-building to improve knowledge and understanding of international and EU standards in the field of environment statistics.
- Encourage the development and adoption of regulations that would meet EU and international standards.



Results from the discussion on environmental statistics

## Topic III. Environmental statistics

### Priority Issue I. Statistical infrastructure

The starting point for environmental statistics is the collection of primary data. High-quality and reliable primary data requires good infrastructure (e.g., registers and census and administrative data) and knowledge on how to collect the data.

## Barriers

- Lack of adequate methodologies.
- Lack of skills and expertise.
- Legislative barriers.
- Lack of human and financial resources.

## Solutions

- Increase involvement of development partners in the context of regional and national programmes to improve environmental accounting and statistics.
- Increase capacity-building.
- Encourage legislative improvements.
- Engage in more active information dissemination campaigns.

## Priority Issue II. Coordination of relevant institutions concerned with environmental statistics

Statistical agencies are, most often, responsible for the coordination and presentation of statistical information. These agencies also have varying competence, mandates and budgets across the pan-European region. Improved coordination between different statistical activities and holders of environmental statistics is needed to ensure reliable and accurate data. It is also necessary to make data accessible for all stakeholders concerned with environmental statistics.

## Barriers

- Lack of methods and/or processes to ensure the validation of statistical data.
- Lack of cross-national and inter-agency mechanisms to exchange experiences and know-how concerning the production of environmental statistics.
- Methodologies in the field of environment statistics vary significantly, which limits the ability to compare environmental indicators and statistics across the pan-European region.

## Solutions

- Facilitate increased coordination and communication between countries, institutions and research centres through the Working Group and the Joint Task Force.
- Strengthen methodological support through the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on data collection standards and the production of environmental statistics.
- Promote the sharing and increased accessibility of all environmental statistics coherent with the principles of SEIS.
- Explore the integration of economic, social and environmental statistics using SEEA.

## Priority Issue III. Regular identification of national thematic priorities

There is a demand for regular revision and identification of new thematic priorities and policy developments and to proactively consider what tools would be needed to address new commitments. The Working Group and the Joint Task Force need to be regularly informed about the state-of-the-art concerning new information technology and associated tools affecting data collection.

## Barriers

- Lack of understanding of national thematic priorities.
- Insufficient knowledge amongst professionals in statistical agencies on how to identify national thematic priorities and the state-of-the-art in their respective field of work.

## Solutions

- Facilitate the identification of national thematic priorities using foresight-oriented activities.
- Increase capacity-building and training of statisticians.

- Share information through the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on the state-of-the-art concerning new information technology and associated tools affecting the collection of environmental statistics.

#### Priority Issue IV. Instruments and methodology

The production of high-quality information requires knowledge of how to analyse data and which instruments and tools to use. Using standard methodologies, guidelines and/or good practices is also important to make data comparable.

The establishment of SEIS would be a prerequisite to achieve this objective. It would also be important to consider SEEA as part of this effort. It was emphasized that SEEA was an instrument that has the potential to integrate environmental, social and economic statistics and that work done in this area could be taken up by jointly by the Working Group and the Joint Task Force.

It was also noted that there was a demand for having more English-speaking professionals within statistical agencies throughout the region, to ensure that new guidelines were taken up. This was coupled with the need to produce data in national languages and English.

##### Barriers

- Inadequate statistical base for the development of some SEEA modules and groups of SDG indicators.
- Lack of skills and experience in the development of SEEA and SDG indicators at the regional and national level.
- Lack of knowledge of English.

##### Solutions

- Engage international experts in the field of development of SEEA and SDG indicators.
- Approve the full set of the ECE indicators for SEIS.
- Organize national, regional or international discussions in the Working Group on the choice of the best instruments for data analysis.
- Increase training to build national capacities to work in English.

#### Priority Issue V. Capacity-building

The quality of environmental statistics is dependent on the degree of expertise and motivation of the people in charge of data collection. Assisting national statistical agencies in building their capacity to carry out data collection, analysis and management would be crucial to ensure that statistical agencies could improve their performance.

##### Barriers

- Lack of human resources.
- Lack of knowledge on greenhouse gas emissions.
- Lack of knowledge of English.
- Lack of guidance in national languages.

##### Solutions

- Increase capacity-building activities to enhance both human and technical capacities, including training in English.
- Involve development partners in the context of regional and national programmes, as well as the Working Group and the Joint Task Force, to improve environmental accounting and statistics.
- Facilitate the translation of appropriate guidance documents into national languages.







Changing to  
meet the future

## Changing to meet the future

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The foresight-oriented work set out in this document was organized to consider the interests of the Working Group and to envisage how these interests could be operationalized in the future. Throughout this exercise and continued dialogue, it was encouraging to hear stories about the real and enduring impact that the Working Group has had on its members and to understand that there is true value and strength in the work that is being carried out.

The Working Group has, since its inception in 2001, provided a joint and collaborative platform through which its members have been able to learn, find new opportunities and bring home new capacities and experiences. It has created interconnections, spanning different policy areas and institutions, through the organization of regular sessions and capacity-building, and it has created a common space through which its members have been able to operationalize joint activities and set targets for the region.

To lead the way for the continued work of the Working Group, this document is meant as an informal framework for long-term strategic goals

and objectives. It serves to define where the Working Group wants to be by 2030, including the type of activities that the members of the Working Group want to focus on in the coming years. The question has therefore been how the Working Group could build on its strengths and address new common challenges.

To answer this question also requires the Working Group to consider its original aim, namely, the collection, production, analysis, sharing and dissemination of high-quality and robust environmental data and information. This represents the main function and driver behind the activities of the Working Group, regardless of whether these activities concern support towards improving national SDG indicators to ensure successful progress reporting on the 2030 Agenda, or the continued streamlining of activities under the Working Group and the Joint Task Force on Environmental Indicators and Statistics, or the integration of environmental, social and economic data under SEEA. It is the provision of environmental data and information for monitoring and assessment that takes centre stage for the 2030 vision.

## From vision to practice: recommendations for the Working Group

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2030 may not seem to be far into the future, but the world is experiencing rapid and far-reaching changes that will continue to have significant effects on the natural environment. The next years will most certainly see these trends continue. Thinking long-term, but acting now, is therefore one of the key messages for the Working Group and this report.

The Working Group will need to pursue an ambitious agenda in the coming years. It will need to reach out to bring in new members and expertise, engage other sectors and countries to ensure continued integration and cooperation. It will need to nurture ongoing collaborations and

define a clear pathway that can help its members reach the ambitious targets set out in the 2030 Agenda.

The vision set out in this document needs to strike the right balance between what is attainable and what could be considered as a best-case scenario. It also needs to ensure that the activities of the Working Group contribute to the priority issues set out by its members and are based upon the mandate provided to it by the Committee on Environmental Policy.

Finding this balance requires a shared understanding of what the strategic goals of the

Working Group should be and to acknowledge common objectives, such as the establishment of SEIS by 2021, streamlining of regular reporting by 2020 and building capacities for assessing progress towards the SDGs, as well as other reporting obligations under multilateral environmental agreements.

As made clear in the preceding sections, several

## Cross-cutting goals and objectives

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### Capacity-building

The need for continued and enhanced capacity-building is a reoccurring concern that spanned all the thematic topics and priority issues, ranging from organizational fragmentation, low institutional capacity and weak interlinkages between data providers. There is a lack of capacities, both in terms of human and financial resources, to ensure that countries can reliably carry out all monitoring and assessment activities under relevant multilateral environmental agreements and other reporting obligations.

The Working Group recognized the significant gap with reference to the availability of state-of-the-art infrastructure, such as for air quality monitoring, but that it would not be able to provide direct support to resolve this specific challenge, other than facilitating the increased engagement of international donors. This objective would be addressed as part of the Working Groups outreach activities.

The goal for the Working Group would be to focus on strengthening human capacities needed to address key challenges about specific regional and national capacity gaps, including guidance on the production of regionally and internationally agreed environmental data flows and indicators in a manner coherent with the principles of SEIS for indicator-based assessments and reporting obligations, such as the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and the SDGs. For example,

priority issues have been highlighted by members of the Working Group. From these it can be noted that there are some commonalities across the range of barriers and solutions that were emphasized during the round-table and plenary discussions.

The aim is to consider these cross-cutting issues before addressing the thematic topics.

sustainable development data issues must be dealt with, including the capacity to collect and analyse, taking into consideration new data demands.

The Working Group has already played an important role in establishing SEIS on many levels, for example, by building capacity, gathering and assessing data and advocating for the implementation of SEIS in the pan-European region. The range of actions for the future could build on this expertise when considering the type of capacity-building support that could be provided by the Working Group. To increase the capacity of its member countries to monitor and report on the environment it is thus foreseen that the Working Group would continue to produce guidelines and (scalable) methodologies that help explain and illustrate ways in which to address capacity-related challenges and gaps unique to the region.

The goal would also be to focus on scaling up technical assistance, in the form of training national stakeholders on how to improve the production of and access to environmental information and data for monitoring and assessment as part of building organizational capacity. This should entail continuous dialogue – as part of the regular consultation with the members of the Working Group – to characterize specific capacity gaps that could be prioritized. This would ensure that the Working Group addresses the most pressing challenges facing the pan-European region.

Capacity-building is not only about human resource development, as a central element in the approach to be taken in the future would be greater integration and the consideration of the sustainability of capacity-building efforts, national ownership and policy-level impacts.

Perhaps even more important would be to help create a systemic and enabling environment through the development of tools, guidelines and mechanisms. The long-term goal would be to focus not only on outputs but also to harness the processes that lead to these outputs, which is a key strength of the Working Group.

### **Communication and cooperation**

Increased communication and cooperation were highlighted consistently by members of the Working Group, referencing the need for new mechanisms that would allow the exchange of experiences and know-how, horizontally and vertically, across institutions, sectors and countries. The need for effective regional cooperation and communication is particularly important given the number of challenges the pan-European region is facing with regards to environmental monitoring and reporting.

The Working Group recognized the importance of cooperation as well as the strategic value in addressing the lack thereof, in particular as this may help to streamline activities and improve the efficiency of environmental monitoring and assessment. It would be important that the Working Group find new momentum to revitalize the forum as a first step to address this concern. This would be a prerequisite to having a clear vision and the Working Group is uniquely positioned to drive the formulation and realization of this vision.

The overarching goal would be to deepen the collective effort to promote the sharing of knowledge, experiences and technology to support capacity-building and human resource development in the pan-European region, leading up to 2021 and beyond. This would

require the Working Group to consolidate its regional profile and that establish a distinct position in which it could play a constructive and complementary role together with other international, regional and subregional forums.

The key element to reach this goal would be to enhance the Working Group's role as an active forum for dialogue and collective action on regional issues of common concern and to promote the Working Group's engagement with relevant stakeholders, including international organizations. Also, it would be important to consider how the Working Group could improve its continued cooperation with the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements. It would, in this regard, be crucial to enhance the Working Group's capacity to support cooperation through review and restructuring of existing areas of cooperation to promote focused, activity-driven and result-oriented cooperation.

In the short-term, this process would need to address how the Working Group could serve as a regional environmental information and assessment network of networks, as part of its present mandate, to engage relevant actors in a constructive dialogue that would allow the Working Group to turn a shared vision into concrete goals with a fixed timespan, as well as to foster ownership and commitment from all relevant actors and interested parties in the long term.

### **Mobilizing more and better resources in support of the Working Group**

All activities noted throughout this document would need to include improved access and deepening of financial resources to support the range of actions that could be carried out.

The mobilization of resources could, as a first step, focus on improving the efficiency of activities being carried out to investigate whether costs could be reduced (e.g., organizing sessions of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force back-to-back) to see whether the range

and type of activities could be expanded through improved resource use. As a second step, resource mobilization could entail steps to ensure that the Working Group mobilizes direct support from prospective contributors, leading to the establishment of SEIS by 2021 and monitoring and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals leading up to 2030.

It would be essential to enhance the long-term stability of the Working Group, to guarantee that it can carry out all the activities set out in this vision document – with all the costs this would imply – and to provide it with the capability to increase the scale and impact of its activities. This will be fundamental to enable the Working Group to translate this vision into reality.

## Sustainable Development Goals and green economy

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Monitoring and reporting mechanisms for tracking progress towards the SDGs provide an enormous opportunity for learning and to build on existing efforts carried out by the Working Group. Ongoing and planned reporting activities provide opportunities to identify shortcomings and find solutions and there is a clear call from the members of the Working Group for assistance on how to define, collect and analyse environmental information and data to measure progress towards the SDGs and green economy.

Results from the questionnaire and round-table and plenary discussion stress the complex set of challenges underlying the obligation to report on progress towards the SDGs. They further highlight that traditional approaches and tools may not be fit for this purpose. Given the often interdisciplinary nature of the SDGs, reporting will have to become increasingly integrative.

Challenges emphasized by the Working Group included the absence of SDGs in strategic national documents, methodological and procedural obstacles and a lack of available data and knowledge about international methodologies and standards. Among some of the key challenges amplified in the round-table and plenary discussion were the considerable data requirements and analysis needed to track progress and, for countries that have started integrating SDGs into their national development plans, the customization or “nationalization” of indicators.

A host of solutions were also noted by the members of the Working Group, ranging from efforts to promote legislative improvements, increased information exchange and engagement of international experts and capacity-building focusing on SDG and green economy indicator-related methodologies and data collection for national use.

The overarching goal regarding the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy would be to build on past achievements and lessons learned in connection with the establishment of SEIS and the sharing of environmental indicators, through both the Working Group and the Joint Task Force. As a starting point, the ambition would be to complement planned activities in developing a reporting mechanism for the member countries to self-monitor and self-evaluate progress on SEIS establishment. This would contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by ensuring that priority data flows for international exchange are properly managed as part of a regular reporting process on the SDGs and it would improve monitoring capabilities for the green economy. The intent would be to strengthen capacities of national environmental authorities and statistical agencies so that the members of the Working Group are able to prepare a regular and indicator-based report on progress towards the SDGs and green economy.

In the short-term, the production of an indicator-based report on progress towards the SDGs and green economy would require that the Working Group reviews the environmental data and information needed to cover the production of regional and international environmental indicators, such as the ECE set of environmental indicators, EEA core set of indicators, OECD green growth indicators and indicators for the SDGs. Collecting this information will enable the Working Group to design targeted capacity-building to improve the institutional knowledge base for data collection standards and the use of monitoring and assessment tools for regular

indicator-based assessments to measure progress towards the SDGs and green economy.

In the medium term, the Working Group would aim towards providing technical assistance to support the establishment of indicator frameworks to monitor the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy at the national level, and activities to support their implementation. This would include the establishment of reporting mechanisms and procedures for methodological review.

## Reporting and assessment

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Environmental reporting and assessments set the stage for the compilation of robust information or an evidence base as an essential component for better policymaking. Improved policymaking using environmental data and information represents a core objective for the Working Group, more specifically, to help improve national capacities to monitor and evaluate the environment. It is a central driver behind the activities of the Working Group and it is the umbrella under which all its members meet to discuss, through both the Working Group and the Joint Task Force. The Working Group has, since its inception, aimed to assist its members in working with environmental data and information to enable their timely flows and adequate assessment.

It is clear from the preceding section that the challenges in monitoring progress towards the SDGs and green economy are inherently related to the work being carried out by the Working Group, such as enabling informed decision-making processes, both nationally and regionally, in the environmental sector. However, the inputs provided by the members of the Working Group demonstrate the continued lack of general national operational expertise and capacities to monitor the environment, emphasizing the continued demand for having a

Working Group that focus on environmental monitoring and assessment.

Though much progress has been made, challenges emphasized by the Working Group include the lack of integrated national monitoring programmes and methodologies and the lack of cross-national and inter-agency mechanisms to exchange knowledge. The financial viability and sustainability of national monitoring systems also needed to be improved and there was a continuing demand for capacity-building strategies and activities, at both the regional and national levels.

Complimentary to the consultative process, the performance review on the establishment of SEIS in the pan-European region (see ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/8) and the more recent mid-term review report on the establishment of the Shared Environmental Information System (see ECE/CEP/2019/7) demonstrate national capacity gaps in several areas. These reports raise concerns about the reliability of existing environmental data and knowledge producing processes that support regular environmental reporting and accountability, particularly for meeting the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

This background implies that environmental

information and data are not being used consistently in policy-relevant and evidence-based assessments and, if they are used, they are not interconnected, integrated or made available for multiple uses. This would be a key concern for the Working Group to address in coming years.

The overarching goal in reporting and assessment would be to deliver guidance that helps make national monitoring programmes an efficient and practical tool for environmental policy. This would include increased and targeted efforts to provide capacity-building on how to use and harmonize indicator-related methodologies, data collection and quality assurance and quality control aspects of environmental data and indicators for national and international reporting obligations. It would

also consider the call for increased cooperation and communication. The ambition would be to facilitate the establishment of SEIS by 2021, as called for through the Batumi declaration, and to assist in the streamlining of regular reporting by 2020 (see ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/2/Add.1).

The intent would furthermore be to assist in common activities being carried out by ECE, EEA and UNEP – as characterized by the common approach laid out by the three organizations – to achieve these objectives and to support the countries in the pan-European region. These objectives should be operationalized in tandem with efforts to provide guidance on how to monitor progress towards the 2030 Agenda and green economy.

## Environmental statistics

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Even though the area of environmental statistics principally falls under the mandate of the Joint Task Force, it was picked as a thematic topic for several reasons. One important reason being earlier calls by the Committee on Environmental Policy to streamline the activities of the two bodies. It had, for instance, been suggested that the two bodies could be merged. The main conclusions from the discussion on merging the two bodies was that the Working Group and the Joint Task Force have different geographical coverage and target different agencies, one servicing environmental authorities and the other statistical agencies (see ECE/CEP/2015/12). It was concluded that merging the two bodies would not be desirable but that the Working Group and the Joint Task Force should ensure that activities were streamlined to reduce costs and increase the relevance of their work.

The consultative process was another opportunity to tackle this concern and to address the inherent and significant interlinkages between the Working Group and the Joint Task Force. More specifically, the Joint Task Force deals explicitly with the production of environmental statistics while the Working

Group focuses on systemic aspects concerned with access to environmental data and information, as well as regular environmental reporting and national assessments. The Working Group and the Joint Task Force address specific challenges, whether data production methodologies, data analysis or data communication. Attempts to merge the two bodies would risk making them less relevant for some ECE countries and would make it difficult to offer capacity-building assistance in the context of sustainable development, green economy or SEEA, as the demands for capacity-building vary significantly depending on the target country. For this reason, having dedicated platforms to address these issues separately made sense.

The overarching goal in environmental statistics would be to ensure that the Working Group and the Joint Task Force continue to work closely together in setting priority areas for action and that any activities carried out by the two bodies are done in a collaborative manner. This would entail continued cooperation between the ECE Environment and Statistical Divisions that service the two bodies.

The sessions of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force provide the perfect platform through which cross-national and inter-agency communication on experiences and know-how concerning the production of environmental statistics can be stimulated. Sessions of the Working Group and the Joint Task Force should therefore address concerns about methodologies in the field of environmental statistics and the ability to compare environmental indicators and statistics across the pan-European region.

The Working Group should address the demand for the integration of economic, social and environmental information and data and the call for capacity development in this regard. The

## Setting the stage for 2030

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This vision document provides a snapshot of possible or probable future pathways for the Working Group, providing the basis for recommended actions that could be taken by the Working Group. It also provides an impetus for more focused and results-oriented cooperation and reflects the shared aspirations of the members of the Working Group. It is also meant to ensure that the Working Group makes better use of its diverse strengths, considering different national priorities. The Working Group would, for these reasons, need to further review and consider the recommendations set out in this vision.

It is moreover important to stress that this document should not be a static vision but rather a living document that could be adapted to consider and address the demands of the future. What the Working Group presently prioritizes is ultimately a fixed perspective linked with the challenges facing the pan-European region today. That the vision should be revised and updated as the priorities of the Working Group evolve. There is a need for continuous revision and identification of new thematic priorities and

work being carried out through SEEA, and the relevance this will have for monitoring progress towards the SDGs, should be considered by the Working Group more extensively in the years to come.

The Working Group recognized that sustainable development will not be possible without considering information and data from economic, social and environmental sources, and the formidable challenge that underlies this task. It would be important to ensure that the sharing and increased accessibility of all environmental statistics is coherent with the SEIS principles and to build linkages that help to facilitate integration.

policy developments and to proactively consider what actions or tools would be needed to address new commitments.

Thus, the current recommendations are useful but they may not be enough to address emerging priorities in the future. Ensuring participation and adaptability to consider future goals and objectives will as such be the next challenge for the Working Group. For instance, what should the Working Group focus on after the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in 2021 when its present mandate has been fulfilled? Perhaps most importantly will be to create an environment through which all members of the Working Group can jointly contribute and play a role in its future success.

This informal vision represents only a first exploration of the needs of the Working Group, although it covers a great deal of recommended actions. Many of the ideas and recommendations discussed above have been imbedded into the new terms of reference and mandate of the Working Group (see ECE/CEP/2017/2).



# Sharing our vision for the pan-European region Setting strategic goals and objectives

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