Europe's environment
An Assessment of Assessments

5 Recommendations

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Based on a cross-cutting overview of the results of EE-AoA, EEA in consultation with the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy has identified 14 key recommendations for improving how environmental assessments at the country, sub-regional, pan-European and global levels are organised.

The recommendations provide framework within which the pan-European environment can be kept under review in a more efficient and effective manner in support of relevant policy processes.

The recommendations are grouped into three blocks covering: I) Enhancing the knowledge base; II) Improving assessment tools and processes to underpin the knowledge base; and III) Europe's participation in global environmental knowledge and assessments.

I. Enhancing the knowledge base

Recommendation 1:
Improve the linkage and use of assessments in the policy process

Future assessments should be explicitly commissioned by policymakers, specifying the policy needs at different stages of the policy cycle. By translating these policy needs into relevant policy objectives, and relevant indicators, assessments can then be targeted to provide more pertinent input to the policy debate. For water and the green economy, more investment in policy performance and effectiveness indicators and analysis is needed. The exchange of established practice examples to demonstrate the cost-efficient use and benefits of different approaches for tackling key issues should be promoted.

Recommendation 2:
Develop a regular process of environmental assessment and a shared environmental information system across the pan-European region

Overall, the EE-AoA demonstrates the need for a system of assessments designed to address multiple needs and policy processes from national to pan-European levels,

as well as globally, and one which is closely interlinked with and served by a shared environmental information system for the whole of Europe.

Consequently, a Regular Process of environmental assessments should be established with countries, organisations and other stakeholders, to keep the pan-European environment under review, and promote the development of a shared environmental information system across the pan-European region. This should be supported by the necessary capacity-building and by further assessment of assessments as required in different fields.

Recommendation 3:
Commission new assessments as part of a new 'Regular Process'

In future, the commissioning of new environmental assessments should address multiple policy needs, in order to improve the balance between their efficiency of production and the effectiveness of their use. Thus, the Ministerial Conference in Astana is invited to consider putting in place a process of ongoing assessments that serve multiple purposes, underpinned by SEIS principles and practices, rather than to call for a new pan-European assessment report for the next 'Environment for Europe' conference.

Such a 'Regular Process' should be based on the development of a suite of coordinated products from sub-regional to pan-European levels, with a synchronicity and timing suitable to maximising their use in multiple policy processes. At country level a basic requirement of the Regular Process will be national 'state of the environment' reports in accordance with the Aarhus Convention.

Recommendation 4:
Promote national 'state of the environment' reports

SoE reports were shown by the EE-AoA to promote an integrated and comprehensive overview of environmental issues and sectors. As such, SoEs play a vital role in the policy process, by delivering a regular assessment of the overall environmental status at the national level as underlined by the Aarhus Convention, including the status of water and many aspects of the green economy.

To these ends, the further development by countries of regular with SoE reports with components covering the sub-topics of the green economy and of water and related ecosystems should be promoted. This should become a basic requirement for any Regular Process for keeping Europe's environment under continuous review, supported with relevant capacity building.

Recommendation 5:
Promote national/regional level green economy assessments

Water assessments are found at many geographical and institutional levels, reflecting the relatively well-balanced attention to policy implementation and developments in this area. In contrast, the green economy as a theme is still under conceptual debate and is mostly on the agenda of international organisations (the EU, OECD, UNECE, UNESCAP, UNEP, etc.), with international players at the forefront of publishing reports on the topic.

Consequently, to even this imbalance and support green economy decision-making down to the country level, there is a need to promote national-level integrated green economy assessments. These should combine international approaches to indicators for consistency and comparability, while at the same time recognising diversity in the focus of sectoral interests within and between countries. Such assessments should accommodate policy demands that focus on managing shared natural resources (international seas, rivers, mountain ranges, etc.).

II. Improving assessment tools and processes to underpin the knowledge base

Recommendation 6:
Strengthen integrated assessment

To support the policy process across the policy cycle, assessments of broad systemic issues, such as water and ecosystems and the green economy, require integrated assessments which cover the whole DPSIR framework and are more analytical in nature. To complement the many descriptive reports available, and in line with the tendency of water assessments over the past years to become more integrated, the development of integrated green economy assessments should be promoted as opposed to assessments of component parts of the green economy. A common conceptual understanding of the green economy is needed to support this (see Recommendation 8). Priority should be given to capacity building in the field of integrated assessment itself, with the aim of mainstreaming these practices into regular assessments and SoE reporting.

Recommendation 7:
Promote and strengthen forward-looking activities

There is inadequate use of scenario and modelling tools in the assessments, limiting the forward-looking component of reporting and policy support. This needs to be improved since forward-looking information is vital for dealing with the challenges of

global developments, multiple systemic challenges, crisis prevention, and robust and flexible environmental management responses to uncertainties and risks. A spectrum of possible tools and outputs is available ranging from the use of driving forces and megatrends and quantitative modelling to qualitative scenario building.

Work is required in all the following areas: capacity building, exchange of information and practices, training in the development and use of forward-looking techniques and understanding of their added-value for policymakers. The development of forward-looking components of SEIS should be a part of this to maximise the benefits and use of forward-looking components in environmental assessments, including regular 'state of environment' reports.

Recommendation 8:
Improve understanding of the underlying concepts

For consistent assessments across scales to function effectively, a clear understanding is needed of the policy objectives as well as and their translation into common indicators that allow assessment practitioners to operate coherently though not in a straitjacket.

For the green economy such agreed objectives and common indicators do not yet exist. There is a need to develop a common operational understanding of the concept of green economy and its critical elements. Based on this, key policy objectives should be identified from the different stakeholders and then translated into indicators to underpin the development of more consistent and relevant green economy assessments. A tool-kit and guidelines for capacity building and implementation should be developed.

Compared with green economy, water is a 'traditional' sector of environmental concern and management whose components are rather clearly defined and mostly agreed upon, often within well-established regulatory frameworks. For 'water' and 'water-related ecosystems', a clear categorisation of the scope of issues to be dealt with in the assessment process is needed because of the relatively new and complex ecosystem perspective. Future assessments could also usefully include assessing the contribution of water and related ecosystems to the green economy and vice-versa.

Recommendation 9:
Clarify roles of different organisations in green economy assessments

For the main part, water reporting is carried out by a relatively limited number of institutions including hydrological services, water, agriculture and environment ministries and statistical agencies. In contrast, a wide range of actors are involved in

reporting on the green economy and with it a diversity of institutions. For example, environment, economic, finance, energy, industry and trade ministries all have a legitimate interest in such assessments.

This reflects the breadth of interpretation of the green economy at the national and international levels, and the fact that the concept encompasses multiple sectors. Many different and possibly clashing priorities are involved. The multiple actors have different roles: some may be responsible for implementation within the individual sectors and others for the actual production and/or coordination of assessments. Other relevant players are international organisations and civil society, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector, and trade-related stakeholders, as well as research and think-tanks, and international organisations.

Consequently, the leadership roles and responsibilities at national and international levels for carrying out green economy assessments should be clarified with inter-institutional agreements to support their implementation.

Recommendation 10:
Close gaps in knowledge, reduce duplication of effort and increase the use of the rich diversity of environmental assessments in Europe

While there is a quantitative richness of reports, there remain gaps and duplications. Given the number of assessments being produced in the fields of water and related ecosystems and resource efficiency and the green economy, and being mindful of the resources being invested by organisations, countries, scientists and experts, it is important that requests for new assessments take into consideration existing and other relevant assessments. Consequently, those involved in these assessments should actively seek to coordinate, share and link their information and results with others.

The interconnectedness of assessments at different geographical levels as well as between themes needs to be improved, and the responsibilities of data and information providers better defined. Common indicators offer appropriate 'scaffolding' for achieving these goals.

The overarching objective of this recommendation is to improve the quality and consistency of results, to close gaps in knowledge, and to increase the multiple uses of assessments and of the underpinning information. To achieve this, there is a need to identify and map the demand for new assessments in the fields of water and the green economy in order to streamline the policy process and agree common indicators to support strategic planning.

Recommendation 11:
Address information shortcomings

There are some significant gaps in information concerning water and related ecosystems and the green economy such as defining and measuring natural capital and ecosystem services, resource efficiency, the economics of resources, including water pricing, the relationship between ecosystems, economic systems and social cohesion and, policy performance. Since the green economy is viewed differently by countries depending on specific political priorities, there are variations in information, needs and shortcomings, on for example economic sectors and themes e.g. mobility/access and social well-being.

The development of common indicators which are harmonised at a minimum across the pan-European region and which address the key policy objectives in the relevant fields, can help address gaps as well as prioritise the underpinning priority statistical information and data flows to support these indicators and the related institutional responsibilities. Moreover, there is a need to promote regular updating to improve timeliness of data flows and automate this where possible, identify common needs between geographical levels, and devise ways to interconnect assessment needs at different levels through common indicators.

Recommendation 12:
Improve the accessibility of environmental assessments and related data and information

By making reports available online, accessibility by the general public to assessments is currently satisfactory, although the production of paper only reports is still significant. With regard to water, environment ministries and other public authorities have websites that provide information on water resources, water pollution and the state of water, usually in the form of downloadable publications and increasingly in the form of access to (aggregated) data and near real-time monitoring information. For the green economy, even if the information is available online, there are very few, if any, points of convergence (websites or portals) where all related information can be reached and integrated.

Consequently, online publication of assessments and their underlying information and data should be promoted. Inter-institutional agreements should also be developed to share and connect relevant data, information and assessments to facilitate the development of integrated green economy assessments and to allow more timely access. Where available, the link with relevant near real-time information should be developed.

Recommendation 13:
Apply the Europe's environment — Assessment of Assessments findings to other environmental themes and issues

The water and green economy priorities covered by the EE-AoA do not cover all environmental issues. However the breadth of their scope and preliminary analysis of the virtual library lead to the conclusion that the often crowded and uneven landscape of disconnected environmental assessments observed is a common problem across all issues. Furthermore, the characteristics of the problems faced are not specific to the topics themselves but to the underlying institutional arrangements and approaches in countries and organisations across the reporting chain. There is therefore a significant opportunity for improving knowledge support to the policy process across the environmental domain, since improvements in one area, such as water, have the potential to spill over and affect others.

III. Europe's participation in global environmental knowledge and assessments

Recommendation 14:
Transfer findings to other areas, regions and globally through outreach and communication

The current diagnosis resonates with environmental assessment challenges in other geographical regions. Also globally, the results have a strong relevance to the international environmental governance debate coming up at Rio 2012 and as already discussed at the 2011 UNEP Governing Council on the world environment situation and on UNEP Live.

Consequently, there is a need to promote the translation and interpretation of these results into other geographical regions, and also globally. Targeting UNEP and Rio 2012 discussions on this diagnosis appear to be the most promising short-term opportunities.

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