Information note on the main outcomes of the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (Batumi, 8-10 June 2016)

I. Introduction

1. The Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference was held in Batumi, Georgia, from 8 to 10 June 2016. The Conference had two main themes—"Greening the economy in the pan-European region" and "Improving air quality for a better environment and human health."

2. At the opening of the Conference, delegates highlighted the linkages of the Environment for Europe (EfE) process with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, both adopted in 2015. Delegates also commented on the central role of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which requires addressing challenges across sectors, and in providing platforms for cooperation.

II. Towards a new society: 10 years of education for sustainable development

3. One of the sessions organized during the Ministerial Conference was devoted to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The High-level Meeting of Education and Environment Ministries was moderated by the two co-Chairs, the Minister of Education and Science and the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia.

4. The Meeting was invited to consider the progress made by the member States in implementing the first ten years of the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (UNECE Strategy for ESD or Strategy) and reaffirm the commitment of the participating member States to the future implementation of the Strategy by the adoption of the future implementation Framework and the joint Ministerial Statement.

5. Ministers and Heads of Delegations adopted the Framework for the future implementation of the UNECE Strategy for ESD and the Batumi Ministerial Statement on Education for Sustainable Development by acclamation giving a way forward for further implementation of the Strategy in the ECE region.

III. Greening the economy in the pan-European region

6. Opening the session on Green Economy, the session’s Chair emphasized the role of a green economy transition towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the implementation of the Paris Agreement.
7. Member States concurred with him and in the Ministerial Declaration agreed the following: “We reiterate our commitment to take the lead in the transition to a green economy, as a key path to sustainable development and poverty eradication and to direct investments and trade to support a green and inclusive economy. We are committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

8. The Conference endorsed by acclamation the Strategic Framework on Greening the Economy in the pan-European region and the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy (BIG-E). The Strategic Framework aims to guide the region in its transition to an inclusive green economy by 2030.

9. The BIG-E, which operationalizes the Strategic Framework during the period 2016–2030, comprises voluntary commitments by interested countries and organizations, both public and private, in the form of green economy actions. At the time of writing, it included 101 voluntary actions from 34 countries and organizations.

10. Additionally, in the text of the Ministerial Declaration member States committed to “encourage countries and other stakeholders to implement commitments under the BIG-E in order to facilitate the transition to a green economy (…)”

11. In welcoming these two outputs on green economy, delegates commended the good cooperation between ECE and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

12. Some of the statements relevant for THE PEP from delegates participating in two parallel roundtables are summarized below.

   a) Green economy is a key path towards sustainable development;

   b) Countries should integrate environmental considerations into legal and regulatory frameworks and into institutional mechanisms that allow for inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination. This should help to harmonize and balance conflicting interests of different stakeholders;

   c) A green economy has to be inclusive and create new green jobs and consider aspects as sustainable transport and energy to meet the commitments under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

IV. Improving air quality for a better environment and human health

13. In opening the session on clean air, the session Chair highlighted that, despite the progress in the ECE region to reduce air pollution, there was still reason for concern and it was important to keep working on reducing the threats of air pollution to the health, environment and economies.

14. Member States, also in the Ministerial Declaration, concurred with the statement and declared: “We therefore commit to improving air quality for a better environment and human health, including by integrating air pollution reduction measures into financial and development policies, as well as other sectoral policies (…) and enhanced policy coordination and coherence at the national and regional levels.”

15. The Conference endorsed by acclamation the Batumi Action for Cleaner Air (BACA), an initiative containing a number of actions for improving air quality within the ECE region. The objective of the Batumi Action for Cleaner Air is to encourage and
support Governments and other actors in their work to improve air quality during the period 2016–2021. It was expected that the actions by ECE member States and interested stakeholders would inspire action on air pollution issues not yet addressed.

16. Member States also recognized in the Ministerial Declaration the importance of synergies with other partners and, in particular, with the World Health Organization on improving air quality.

17. Some of the statements relevant for THE PEP from delegates participating in two parallel roundtables are summarized below.

(a) Environment Ministers should defend expenditure on measures to reduce emissions of air pollutants by drawing attention to the vast economic costs of air pollution. It was proven that benefits of improved air quality exceeded by far the cost of pollution reduction measures;

(b) Swift actions to address emissions from key sources, including transport, were needed;

(c) Coherently addressing climate change and air pollution should be seen also in the context of achievement of Sustainable Development Goals;

(d) Introducing newer and greener technologies and regulatory measures addressing air pollution would bring environmental and health benefits, but also would contribute to greening the economy.

V Conclusions

18. Member States were invited to continue to provide commitments to the BIG-E and to BACA until 2018, when it was foreseen that a mid-term review would assess the progress in the implementation of the main outcomes of the Conference.

VI. Side event: Riding towards green economy: cycling and green job

19. The side event “Riding towards green economy: cycling and green jobs” was organised by UNECE, UNEP, WHO Regional Office for Europe and the European Environment and Health Youth Coalition (EEHYC). It took place on the first day of the Conference and was opened and chaired by Ms. Ivonne Higuero, Chief of Section, UNECE.

20. Mr. Graeme Maxton, Secretary General of the Club of Rome delivered an inspiring keynote speech on how to move towards a green economy. He emphasized that thinking on economic progress needed to shift towards increasing employment through greater efficiency, use of renewable energy sources and reduction of carbon emissions and he stressed that cycling was part of this transition.

21. Mr. Jan Dusik, Director and Regional Representative, of UNEP Regional Office for Europe presented early findings from a research undertaken by UNEP, the UNECE and WHO/Europe on jobs in green and healthy transport. The full version of the study was to be published in autumn 2016 at the 14th meeting of the Steering Committee of the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP).
22. According to the early findings, an estimated 435,000 cycling-related jobs could be created if 56 major cities across the pan European region were to replicate Copenhagen’s share of cycling as a mode of transport. Mr. Dusik’s intervention was followed by a panel discussion chaired by Mr. Fulai Sheng, Head of the Economic Research Unit in the Economic and Trade Branch Division of Technology, Industry and Economics UNEP. The panelists, Mr. Guenter Liebel, Director General Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, Austria; Mr. Francois Andre, Attaché senior, Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment, Belgium; Ms. Elfriede-Anna More, Director International Environmental Affairs, Austria; Mr. Manuel Marsilio, General Manager, Confederation of the European Bicycle Industry (CONEBI); Mr. Holger Haubold, Fiscal and Economic Policy Officer, European Cyclists' Federation (ECF) and Ms. Jovana Dodos, Vice-president and co-founder, European Environment and Health Youth Coalition (EEHYC) that highlighted the following aspects:

(a) Cycling needed promotion to allow an increase in the cycling modal share and to bring benefits above mentioned to the environment and the economy. For this, it was essential that international organisations and national authorities recognize it as a means of transport;

(b) Cycling, especially its infrastructure, needed investment. Looking at cost benefit analysis it was clear that investments in cycling were very productive and that more investment brings more safety for cyclists;

(c) THE PEP was recognized as one of the best products of the member States and an important example of how environment, health and transport could create tools to engage partners and stakeholders to work together on sustainable mobility;

(d) Mr. Guenter Liebel, presented the activities undertaken in Austria towards sustainable mobility and invited the participants to continue the interesting discussion during the Fifth High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment, to be hosted in Vienna, Austria in 2019.

(d) Mr. Srdan Matic, Coordinator, Environment and Health World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, closed the meeting with consideration on how THE PEP is an excellent example of how three different sectors look at shared issues of today and tomorrow and create tools to engage partners and stakeholders to work together to achieve goals across the entire society.