

Joint statement of environmental NGOs for the 9th Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in Nicosia

No sustainability without peace – No peace without sustainability

We, the representatives of 88 international, European and national environmental citizens organisations (ECOs) from 31 countries have agreed to the following statement for the governments convening at the 9th UNECE “Environment for Europe” (EfE) Ministerial Conference, taking place in Nicosia, 5 – 7 October, 2022.

Thirty one years ago, on June 21, 1991 the environment ministers from the UNECE region came together in Dobříš Castle (Czechoslovakia) for their first “Environment for Europe” conference. Initiated by Josef Vavroušek (then the Minister of the Federal Committee for the Environment) it became the process focussing on protecting and improving the quality of the environment at the pan-European level. That was the time when Central and Eastern Europe went through deep democratic changes and growing environmental awareness not only of the general public but also on the political level. Totalitarian regimes in these countries had left a heritage of environmental degradation which needed urgent solutions. Therefore, the agreements for a strong future cooperation between the West and East, regular evaluation of Europe's State of Environment and to develop, implement and periodically revise the Environmental Programme for Europe among other efforts were of great importance. Despite having 30+ years behind the EfE process and many good decisions taken at eight previous conferences, grave problems in terms of implementation remain. With biodiversity declining, energy prices skyrocketing and living standards for ordinary citizens in many countries decreasing, there is an urgent need for long-lasting solutions. We truly hope that this conference in Nicosia, like the one in Dobříš, will be the turning point on the way to a sustainable Europe.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine must be stopped immediately and Russia must be held accountable for the damage it has caused to the environment. The full scale reconstruction should start immediately. We should stop this conflict, and the other 61 military conflicts currently ongoing on our Planet. The aggressor should be punished by the special court, created on the basis of International law, and pay for all destruction. The green infrastructure and new green touristic facilities should be developed instead of destroyed by conflict in Ukraine.

On the Pan-European Agenda for the Nicosia Environmental Ministers Conference

1. Greening the economy in the pan-European region: working towards sustainable infrastructure

Our region needs to accelerate to achieve the **energy transition to 100% renewables by 2040**. It is the only economically, socially and ecologically reasonable pathway. Even in the face of the current energy crisis, we **cannot go back to energy production from coal**, we need to phase out **nuclear energy**. All investment and subsidies need to be focused on long-term sustainable energy solutions. 100% renewables can and must ensure **energy independence** and **sufficiency** in the region.

Above all, in moving forward, we must avoid **false solutions**. So-called “waste to energy” being one such example of a false solution.. Incineration leads to more emissions and toxic waste. Incinerators are nothing else than burning transformed fossil fuels – plastic waste. At the same time, there are **innovative solutions** that have not yet been fully explored.

While we need to be fast, we **cannot compromise on environmental protections, public participation and the rights ensured under the Aarhus Convention**. Policy makers have suggested bypassing **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIAs)** and are taking short cuts on public participation. EIAs are often slow due to a lack of experts in competent authorities or a lack of digitalisation. These shortcomings must be addressed rather than bypassing EIAs. The energy transition also needs meaningful and transparent **Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs)** that assess development plans, funding schemes and the implementation of concrete projects.

There is already a lot of **resistance against large scale infrastructure projects** for the energy transition such as hydropower dams or wind farms. Cutting down on public participation will only trigger **more resistance and slow down the process**. Taking short cuts on public participation can become a detriment for investors in renewables as it may trigger more court cases and therefore delays. We need a **people-centred energy transition based on inclusive public participation**.

The energy transition must go hand in hand with our **targets for biodiversity protection and nature restoration**. **100% renewables must be nature-positive**, and they can be. To name but one example, we are deeply concerned and stress the importance of ensuring that offshore renewables should not be developed at the cost of marine biodiversity. To do so would have significant negative impacts on both climate and atmospheric regulation, given the complex role of marine biodiversity on both of these matters.

Energy poverty most often concerns women, in particular elderly women, but also other groups marginalised in our societies such as minorities and low-income groups. Those must be at the heart of the energy transition and must be supported in public participation processes.

100% nature-positive and people-centred renewables can also be achieved through **support for community-led and owned energy production**.

The energy and mobility transition comes with a **need for raw materials** and has sparked a new boost for extractive activities in our region. If we remain at our **high level of energy consumption** and **unsustainable levels of mobility**, a new level of extractivism will put societal peace and our nature protection targets at risk. We need **national energy saving targets** and move to **sustainable modes of transport** such as shared and active mobility.

2. Applying principles of circular economy to sustainable tourism

We welcome the focus on integrating the principles of the circular economy in the tourism sector to stimulate economic activity, improve people's well-being and address environmental issues in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the UNECE region.

Particular emphasis should be placed on work on plastic pollution associated with the tourism sector. Such work will also contribute to the early implementation of the new international treaty to end plastic pollution which is currently being negotiated), Particular attention should be paid to mountainous regions, such as in Central Asia, where mountain tourism is actively developing and which causes plastic pollution.

NGOs, civil society and community organisations play a major role ensuring the circularity of local material and waste flows, monitoring and caring for the local ecosystem and neighbourhoods, especially watchful of pollution threats and leaks in the system. They should be welcomed and included in sustainable tourism initiatives, partnerships and decisions with governments and tourism-related businesses. A critical dimension of this is access to information and decision-making, across sectors including tourism. Civil society participation is essential if tourism is to become sustainable.

The work on tourism and a sustainable economy should be combined and complementary in the UNECE region with other international initiatives carried out in the region, in particular by UNEP. Particular emphasis should be placed on the introduction of the principles of circular tourism on national and local levels.

3. Education for Sustainable Development

Education is the basic tool to shape the social environment and change a way of living to secure a durable future for next generations. Even if Education for Sustainable Development has been a UNECE focus already from 2005, we are not sure that all efforts in the UNECE region brought satisfactory results. We see that emissions of greenhouse gases and environmental degradation are still rising in many UNECE countries, air is still polluted and even very dangerous military operations in our region are seriously damaging the environment.

We welcome the Framework for the implementation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development from 2021 to 2030 and we are happy that many important topics are now included in the frame of ESD even if we do not always see the correct balance of importance of those topics. Especially, biodiversity loss is especially underestimated.

We therefore call all delegates to understand correctly what the term ESD means: that the educational policies in every country must advance at least all the commitments and prospects for the future that the Berlin Declaration expressed. This usually means that educational systems and teaching practices at all levels of education have to be transformed substantially and meet SDG 4 .

UNESCO research from year 2021 shows that the results of ESD are not very optimistic worldwide, for example climate change is included only in half of the curricula and most teachers do not feel to be able to sufficiently explain the effects of climate change in their local environment. We propose to make the evaluation process of the ESD in the UNECE region much more result oriented. We welcome the significant improvement in the cooperation between UNECE and UNESCO in the preparation of the 2021-2030 strategy

document and hope that this cooperation will also lead to improved results of the evaluation process. Sharing of good practices of successful transformation might help a lot as well.

The tremendous commitment of various individual schools at all levels, NGOs, young people and other individuals in promoting ESD is certainly to be appreciated, but on the other hand we still feel that in many countries these efforts are not supported by the administration and still depend very much on the personal enthusiasm of individuals. This can also be seen even here in the UNECE ESD Steering Committee, where some states are very active, while some others virtually ignore the whole process.

Non-formal education is a key avenue of delivery of ESD, through reaching young people at a formative time for the development of values, character and habits. Hence, the need for strong recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal is inextricably linked to the delivery of the vision within this framework in reaching the true potential that ESD may have on the world around us. Non-formal education provides foundational and transferable skills that are relevant in all walks of life, while supporting learners to become global citizens through value-based learning. In a transitioning green economy, which we now live in, the green soft skills and sustainable innovative thinking stemming from non-formal education are essential. Therefore, we need to increase funding to learning programmes and organizations centred around non-formal education at a global, regional, national and local level.

Additionally, infrastructure in communities is necessary to have meaningful impact through ESD-orientated non-formal education. Education for Sustainable Development has the potential to shape our people and our planet in a undeniably positive manner, and non-formal education is the catalyst for this shift.

4. Green Action in EECCA

GREEN Action Task Force for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) has shown its effectiveness as a mechanism for advancing environmental policy, institutional reforms, green investments, so its mandate should be continued. The activity of GREEN Action Task Force should be based on the UN ECE rules. Further active actions are needed to promote green growth, sustainable development, and improve environmental policy with focus on climate change, pollution (including plastic and biodiversity protection). To be more effective, GREEN Action TF needs more cooperation with non-governmental organisations from all EECCA countries, and NGOs should be considered not only as beneficiaries, but as partners.

Implementation of Batumi outcomes

1. Green Economy

At the 7th EfE Conference, European ECO Forum called on transformative measures for a “green economy” aiming to change unsustainable consumption and production patterns and stressed the need for a Pan-European Framework on Sustainable Production and Consumption. Governments have now approved a Pan-European Strategic Framework for

Greening the Economy and the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy (BIG-E), which we see as an important tool for countries to move forward toward sustainable economies.

We are convinced that this “greening the economy” initiative, even with the voluntary adoption of circularity principles, will not fully meet the environmental, social and economic needs of the region. For that we need a regional legally binding framework ensuring the necessary transition to green, inclusive and just economies.

Guided by international agreements like 10YFP on SCP, 2030 SD agenda and the Paris agreement, the green economy generates sustainable food systems, ecosystem services, management of natural resources and social innovation. Environmental and social safeguards and standards for investors are needed. In short, we need a fundamental transition to sustainable production and consumption systems and practices across all sectors. Circularity can help build a strong sustainable economy.

We ask UNECE Member States to initiate a process through which environmental and social standards already agreed within UNECE will be consistently used in all countries of the region when developing large investment strategies and projects (e.g. Silk Road Economic Belt).

We urge **implementation of green economy transition policies, recognizing the limits of earth’s carrying capacity**, and ensuring a fair share for all countries, in cooperation among governments, business and civil society.

2. Air Pollution

Indoor and outdoor air pollution remains one of the main causes of public health risk in the EECCA region. We welcome the Batumi Action Cleaner Air Initiative and the implementation of the commitments made by twenty-seven countries and four organisations under this voluntary initiative.

But only ten countries made the commitments to establish or improve systematic, comparable and transparent monitoring activities and emissions inventories in the Batumi Action for Cleaner Air framework. The increase in the number of surveillance networks should concern not only air quality, but also emissions monitoring. This requires the direct participation of industry. The results of monitoring air quality, the volume and quality of emissions as well as emissions inventories should be openly available online.

Establishment of national action programmes that reduce air pollution, including measures to reduce emissions in key sectors such as transport, agriculture, energy and heating remain relevant for most countries.

We call not only to invest in the development of air quality monitoring networks, but above all we also call on more specification of problematic sources of outdoor and indoor air pollution in the region.

The increase of cooperation and experience exchange within the framework of the Batumi Action for Cleaner Air will contribute to more effective implementation of activities at national levels.

We also express concern about the recent trend of increasing attention to coal burning technologies and nuclear energy.

General

1. Civil society participation

The civil society is playing an essential role in enhancing decision-making to improve the environment and promote sustainable development. And there is a need to create the necessary conditions for their operation, including effective access to environmental information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters. As representatives of civil society we note with concern that the opportunity for the free and open expression of opinions in many countries in the UNECE region is reducing in a disturbing way. Environmental and Human Right defenders are more and more threatened. We welcome the appointment for the first Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders and ask all governments to support him in his work.

We call upon governments to **protect environmental defenders**. Those calling out unsustainable fossil fuel or nuclear energy solutions and oppose infrastructure development in that area are often at risk of intimidation, harassment, persecution and SLAPPS (lawsuits brought for the strategic purpose of silencing opposition and dissent). We welcome the appointment for the first Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the newly created Rapid Response Mechanism under the Aarhus Convention and call upon all governments to support this critically important work.

2. Future of the EfE process

Environment for Europe as a unique process of international multis-stakeholder cooperation must adapt to new realities emerging from Russia's aggressive policy in the region and continue to solve environmental problems, achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, develop democratic processes, achieve peace and prosperity in the UNECE region.

3. We need peace to achieve sustainability

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in damaging or destroying up to 30 percent of Ukraine's infrastructure. This includes bridges, roads, ports, railroads, and airports. 320,000 Ukrainians lost their homes. Entire cities have been wiped off the face of the earth. The damage from the destruction of the infrastructure in Ukraine has already reached 95 billion. And every day brings new destruction.

According to UNEP and partner data, this aggression in Ukraine has seen damage across many regions of the country, with incidents at nuclear power plants and facilities, energy infrastructure, including oil storage tankers, oil refineries, drilling platforms, and gas facilities, and distribution pipelines, mines, and industrial sites and agro-processing facilities.

The results have been multiple air pollution incidents and potentially serious contamination of ground and surface waters. Water infrastructure, including pumping stations, purification plants, and sewage facilities, has also suffered significant damage, and multiple industrial facilities, warehouses, and factories have been damaged, some storing a range of hazardous substances ranging from solvents to ammonia and plastics.

Hazardous substances have also been released from explosions in agro-industrial storage facilities, including fertiliser and nitric acid plants. There are also reports of the targeting of several large livestock farms, where livestock carcasses pose a further public health risk.

Tourism is out of the question. Instead of cruise ships, there are mines floating in the Black Sea. There are more than 4,000 of them in the Black Sea. There is no sustainability without peace, there is no peace without sustainability. Russia must cease its aggression. We stand in solidarity with Ukraine and our Ukrainian colleagues. We urge all partners to support green, sustainable and resilient post-war reconstruction of Ukraine.

Conclusions

The European ECO Forum and NGOs will actively contribute to the continued implementation of the outcomes of the Nicosia EfE Ministerial Conference but also previous EfE conferences.

Gratitude

We thank the government of Cyprus for their support of the European ECO Forum and NGO delegation. We are grateful to Present Actually Foundation and BIOM for the help in translating the ECO Forum Strategy meeting. We also thank the secretariat of the UNECE for their continuous support and cooperation throughout the whole EfE process.