

Lessons learned from the third United Nations Environment Assembly and the way forward towards the fourth session

Compiled by the Secretariat as requested by the Committee Bureau

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United Nations Environment Assembly (4-6 December 2017)

The third session of the UN Environment Assembly took place from the 4th to the 6th of December, 2017, under the theme “Towards a Pollution-free Planet”. It concluded with the adoption of a universal Ministerial Declaration on the same theme. In addition, the Assembly adopted, by universal consensus, 11 resolutions and three decisions. Pollution, the visibility of the Environment Assembly and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Rio+20 outcome document were the overarching foci of these resolutions. In addition, the Assembly inspired governments, civil society and businesses to submit in total 405 concrete voluntary commitments to abate pollution as part of the Assembly outcome. Also, over 2.3 million pledges from individual citizens worldwide were recorded as contributions to the Assembly’s #BeatPollution campaign.

According to preliminary findings, and if successfully implemented, these commitments will have a multiplying effect, entailing that more than 1.4 billion people worldwide will breathe cleaner air; 30% of the world’s coastlines will be clean; lead in paint and fuels will be eliminated worldwide and exposure to lead in other forms of waste will be substantially reduced; food systems worldwide will be significantly less dependent on chemical inputs and 18.6 billion USD will have been invested in research and innovation.

The Assembly also manifested as an event of global significance. Up to 4,921 delegates registered from 157 countries of which 65 of the participants were at the ministerial level. 35 UN agencies were represented as well as other 21 intergovernmental organizations. This Assembly also engaged the private sector as never before with over 300 business representatives. Nearly 1,900 participants attended the Science-Policy-Business Forum, 800 of which were drawn from the academia, technology centers, foundations and the private sector. The 2017 Sustainable Innovation Expo attracted more than 45 innovative companies. In terms of media impact, the theme of the Assembly was covered by 3,800 media outlets enlisting 11,160 articles in 23 languages spread across 125 countries. In addition, almost 500 representatives from Major Groups and Stakeholders participated.

Lessons Learned of Strategic and Political Significance

The Committee of Permanent Representatives’ Bureau has agreed that the Secretariat, under the coordination of the Chair, should produce a document on the evaluation of the Assembly and recommendations to improve planning, focus and layout of activities, taking into account inputs from Member States and stakeholders. The evaluation should look into the challenges faced before, during and after the third session of the UN Environment Assembly. The recommendations should be presented for the consideration of the Bureau of the Environment Assembly and subsequently presented for consideration at the 141st Committee meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives. In general, lessons learned from UNEA-3 should form the basis for planning and organizing for a very robust and successful fourth session of the Assembly, scheduled for 11-15 March 2019.

The following initial lessons learned can serve as a base for the above mentioned in-depth evaluation.

Building on the lessons learned from its previous session, the organization of the third session of the Assembly was overseen by the Committee of Permanent Representatives and Bureau of the Assembly applying a transparent and inclusive approach. This approach generated stronger confidence in the process and joint ownership of its outcomes.

The focus on a theme that had been globally agreed as being relevant contributed to galvanize global attention on the work of the Assembly. However, sustained efforts are required to increase the visibility and global impact of the Environment Assembly, particularly amongst other environmental fora and in the context of the follow-up and review framework of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The adoption of a ministerial outcome represented a major step forward to ensure the Environment Assembly lived up to its mandate to be the foremost authority on the environment. Nevertheless, to make this vision a reality, increased attention should be given to the integrated and coordinated implementation of the ministerial declaration and to sustained advocacy efforts by Member States in major international fora. **While Member States seem to be in general agreement that the third session of the Assembly was an overall success, further efforts need to be undertaken to ensure that the next session of the Assembly, to be held in March 2019, lives up to the expectations set out for this institution.** Some highlights of this initial assessment of the Assembly include:

- ✓ Effective transparency, ownership and inclusiveness during the inter-sessional period;
- ✓ Early consensus amongst Member States on strategic issues such as the theme of the Assembly and the structure of the high-level segment;
- ✓ Regional ministerial meetings organized early enough and with stakeholder participation to allow for timely input to the outcomes of the Assembly preparatory process;
- ✓ An inclusive and transparent approach with respect to non-resident States through remote connectivity and timely circulation of documentation;
- ✓ Timely and adequate financial resources for the Assembly: there was broad cooperation amongst Member States for resource mobilization; however, funding for the participation of Major Groups was challenging;
- ✓ Relevant background documentation and focused updates on implementation of previous resolutions;
- ✓ Effective work under the Open-Ended Meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the UN Environment Assembly (held back-to-back), which finalized most resolutions and the ministerial declaration prior to the Assembly;
- ✓ Strengthened procedures and governance structure of the Assembly through transparent agreement on chairs and co-chairs of sessional bodies and regular briefings on rules of procedure;
- ✓ Ministers well prepared to deliver national statements and interactive Leadership and Multi-stakeholder dialogues;
- ✓ A single online and interactive resolutions platform for reviewing and updating documents to ensure timely submission/circulation of documents, and an effective event application (Mobile App - this will be further improved for future UNEA sessions);
- ✓ Innovative one-stop online registration system (Indico) – many participants chose to register early;
- ✓ Effective protocol, immigration and logistics with political support and commitment from the Government of Kenya in collaboration with the UN Office at Nairobi;
- ✓ Informal deadlines and guidelines on submission of reports, resolutions and decisions that contribute to deeper consideration of proposals.
- ✓ Effective wifi connectivity and distribution and improved conferencing facilities, hospitality and other logistics including travel coordination;

But there were also a number of **challenges** raised by Member States that will need to be overcome in the run-up to UNEA-4, including:

- ✓ There is a need to improve planning to avoid conflicting parallel working groups and informal meetings adversely affecting small delegations;
- ✓ Increased efforts should be invested to enhance the visibility of the Assembly in the High-Level Political Forum and other fora;

- ✓ The reports of the Executive Director on the status of implementation of the status of implementation of resolutions are insufficiently considered, thus increasing expectation on the role of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to enhance its role in reviewing the implementation of resolutions and the Programme of Work;
- ✓ The Assembly remains insufficiently funded, thus requiring increased efficiencies and mobilization of resources from extra-budgetary sources;
- ✓ The capacity of the conferencing facilities of Nairobi duty station should be upgraded to meet the expectations set out on environmental and urban issues;
- ✓ Limited number of informal – formal sessions to facilitate fast tracking of negotiations;
- ✓ Some Major Groups representatives question whether they had any impact on the decisions, and their statements were usually at the end of sessions, with limited time to reflect the diversity of the nine Major Groups.
- ✓ Ensuring a smoother transition from the Open-Ended Meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to the United Nations Environment Assembly with role clarity between the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Bureau of the United Nations Environment Assembly

Conclusion and key recommendations on the organization of UNEA-4

Management of the inter-sessional period

- ✓ The Committee of Permanent Representatives should continue to work in partnership with the Bureau of the Assembly to support the implementation of several of the key recommendations highlighted in this paper and in decision UNEP/EA.3/L.16/Rev.1 on the Provisional agenda, date and venue of the next assembly; and should increase the time and resources devoted to review implementation and prepare the next Programme of Work;
- ✓ The Committee of Permanent Representatives, in consultation with the bureau of the Environment Assembly, should decide, no later than at its 142nd meeting, on the format and date of the next meeting of the open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives; ways should be considered to allow for Major Groups to contribute to this process;
- ✓ The Committee, in consultation with the bureau of the Environment Assembly, should contribute to the preparation of elaborated elements of the provisional agenda, which may include the review of the implementation of resolutions; the contribution of the Assembly to the high-level political forum; the review of the report to support the theme of the high-level segment and the contribution to the Assembly of the Global Environmental Outlook, among others;
- ✓ The Bureau of the Environment Assembly, in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, should define a theme for the Environment Assembly no later than 31 March 2018;
- ✓ Member States should submit to the Committee of Permanent Representatives draft proposals for consideration by the Environment Assembly desirably five weeks in advance of the fourth meeting of the open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives, without prejudice to the rules of procedure,
- ✓ There is a need for extended informal – formal sessions to facilitate comprehensive and conclusive negotiations of resolutions in the lead up to the Assembly;
- ✓ There is a need for further consultations on informal agreement in line with the Rules of Procedure for early deadlines in submitting resolutions so as to reduce the backlog and pressure during the negotiations;
- ✓ Continue the innovative practice of engaging the participation of Member States who do not have resident missions in Nairobi through electronic media platform;

Resourcing for the meetings of the Assembly

- ✓ Finance remains an issue and there is a need to consider how to mobilize additional resources from the UN regular budget and extra-budgetary resources to finance a universal United Nations Environment Assembly as set out in Assembly resolution 2/22 (paragraph 5), including adequate financing of the participation of Major Groups and Stakeholders;
- ✓ There is a need to encourage the timely regular financial contributions of Member States, especially the Environment Fund.

Strengthen the procedures and governance of the Assembly

- ✓ The timely distribution and translation of background documents is critical for the preparations of all meeting and for the interactive engagement of high-level participants;
- ✓ There needs to be a review of the Rules of Procedure and clear legal advice on the rules for Member States so as to avoid misinterpretations;
- ✓ The Rules of Procedure should be part of the package received by new Permanent Representatives as part of their orientation;
- ✓ The Assembly Bureau should continue to exercise ownership in the preparation of the Assembly and continue to strengthen the cooperation between Assembly and the Committee Bureau;
- ✓ The Committee of the Whole structure should be consistent with the one used during the inter-sessional period to facilitate the transition from the CPR to Assembly and continuity for delegations.

Transparency, ownership and inclusiveness

- ✓ Regional coordination meetings, with the participation from Major Groups and Stakeholders should be encouraged to take place early enough to allow for timely input to the outcomes of the UNEA preparatory process;
- ✓ The selection of the theme of the High-Level Segment should be done as early as possible, on the basis of strong criteria;
- ✓ In the coming months, the current UNEA President should continue the efforts of his predecessor to ensure the active and inclusive participation of all relevant stakeholders in line with the Rio + 20 outcome document “The Future We Want”;
- ✓ There needs to be transparency and regular consultations with the regional and political groups in negotiations and decision making during the intersessional period and UNEA sessions to help build consensus and ensure a successful UNEA. Consultations should not be a last resort in times of crisis;
- ✓ A potential Outcome Document should be linked with the theme of the High-Level Segment and be pre-negotiated during the inter-sessional period.

A more effective high-level segment and a stronger Assembly as the voice for the environment

- ✓ UNEA should continue to aim at identifying global solutions to global environmental issues that can have regional or country-specific elements;
- ✓ Regional ministerial environmental fora and other international processes should continue to communicate to and provide inputs to the High-Level Segment;
- ✓ Future UNEAs should focus on coordinating and evaluating the integrated implementation of resolutions, lessons learned and outcomes to build on in improving global environmental policies;
- ✓ The Science-Policy-Business Forum and the Sustainable Innovation Expo and thematic side events should continue to be held during UNEA in future sessions so as to attract as many more policymakers as possible.
- ✓ National statements and interactive leadership dialogues and the multi-stakeholder dialogue should be maintained in the structure of the high-level segment. While time limits were effective in allowing all Member States to speak, refinements should be made in the management of the time.

Global visibility of the Assembly

- ✓ There should be increased commitment towards raising the profile of the Assembly in the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development building on the Assembly resolution on the issue;
- ✓ There is a need for a long-term partnership to address pollution. To this end, as set out in the Declaration the Executive Director should advance a plan for implementation in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives in time for the next United Nations Environment Assembly;