

Joint meeting of the Bureaux of UN Environment Assembly and
Committee of Permanent Representatives
Tuesday 27 February 2018
4:00 p.m. to 6:15 p.m.
Executive Office Boardroom
United Nations Office at Nairobi, Gigiri

Revised note on Selection criteria and possible themes for the Fourth Session of the UN Environment Assembly

Following the guidance from Member States at the Committee of Permanent Representatives meeting on 20 February and its subcommittee meeting 6 February, the Secretariat has the pleasure to share the following revised note on selection criteria and thematic areas for further consideration by the Bureaux of the Environment Assembly Bureau and the Committee of Permanent Representatives.

In accordance with Assembly decision 2017/3 on the on the provisional agenda, date and venue of the fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, the Bureau of the Environment Assembly, in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, is requested to define a theme for the Environment Assembly no later than 31 March 2018.

1. Criteria for the selection of the theme

On 30 January 2018, the Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly considered a proposal for selection criteria put forward by the President of the Assembly to assist in the identification of an over-arching theme for the next Assembly. The draft criteria was discussed by Member States at the Committee of Permanent Representatives meeting on 20 February and its subcommittee meeting 6 February and has enjoyed general support as a useful guidance in the deliberations on identifying a theme.

Subsequently, the theme for the fourth session of the Assembly should (in no order of priority):

- Provide a targeted yet sufficiently interdisciplinary environmental policy focus that engages the economic and social spheres and has a significant scope for progress at global, regional and local levels;
- Address issues of acute importance that builds on momentum of on-going global initiatives and processes to help amplify the results;
- Result in an actionable and solution-oriented outcome that is meaningful and inspiring to the world, to foster effective political will, mobilize cooperation and provide momentum to drive change on the ground;
- Inspire citizens and generate partnerships between governments, the private sector, media and civil society to facilitate effective implementation of the outcome;
- Ensure consistency between the themes of earlier Sessions of the Environment Assembly, to promote synergy and avoid duplication of work;
- Support the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, and resonate with the annual themes of the High Level Political Forum;
- Be aligned with UN Environment's mandate and capacity, while at the same time being relevant to the broader UN family and avoiding duplications with established intergovernmental processes;
- Promote the visibility and profile of the UN Environment Assembly;
- Be easily understandable and communicable to all.

2. Proposed thematic areas

Following consultations with Member States to date, the following three thematic areas have emerged as areas that enjoy general support as a basis for selecting an over-arching theme for the fourth Session of the UN Environment Assembly.

Thematic area 1: sustainable consumption and production

Rationale

Following the successful UN Environment Assembly in 2017 focusing on "Towards a Pollution Free Planet," this theme provides an opportunity to discuss and zero in on systemic solutions for a cleaner and more sustainable planet through consuming and producing with care. Working with technical, policy, and social innovations to advance the economy of tomorrow with policy leaders, businesses and civil society with a focus on ways of living sustainably and using resources in an efficient, sustainable and equitable manner could provide entry points for various sub-themes such as sustainable food systems, biodiversity conservation, sustainable habitats, resilient cities, pollution and crisis prevention, as examples.

A transformation of today's 'take-make-dispose' linear economic model is central to accelerate actions toward sustainable economic growth and the creation for decent jobs. while preserving and restoring ecosystems and acceleration the transition to a clean planet

Drawing on innovation and advances in big data, block chain and environmental technology, this thematic area would draw together the scientific, policy advocacy and convening capacities of the UN Environment Programme. Additionally, it would provide a platform for champions to demonstrate innovations and progress in implementation and raise global ambition, following up on the High Level Political Forum in 2018 which is reviewing the progress on Sustainable Development Goals 12 (Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns), Sustainable Development Goal 12 has been identified as one of the most critical but also most underfunded Sustainable Development Goals.

In addition, there will be ample space for advocacy and outreach, engaging public and private sector, celebrities, media and youth in an active debate about our future and our role in shaping it. Using natural resources sustainably and consuming and producing with care is considered an approach which creates interlinkages and synergies across the Sustainable Development Goals, and which enables achievement of targets simultaneously in many other goals.

Those linkages place Sustainable Development Goal 12 at the core of Agenda 2030. UN Environment Programme, as custodian of many of the indicators of Goal 12 and as host of the 10 Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production (One Planet Network), with its 500 institutional members and wide country engagement, is very well positioned to deliver on this agenda. The work of the International Resource Panel strengthens the evidence base for greater resource efficiency in support of development

Sustainable consumption and production is also closely linked to efforts to create a circular economy and behavioral approaches to change practices in waste, food, buildings, agriculture, tourism, energy etc., and UN Environment's successful partnership with the private sector on this theme is demonstrated by the recently signed MoU with the Ellen Macarthur Foundation and the World Economic Forum

Growing interest of the private sector in circular economy creates a strong momentum for engagement in both the 10 Year Framework of Programmes and the fourth session of the Assembly. This is reinforced by the focus by the G7 and G20 on resource efficiency and the circular economy – drawing also on the solid science generated by UN Environment Programme through the International Resource Panel. The theme of consuming and producing sustainably provides a platform for connecting work across different work-streams, from science, to law, to food and ecosystems and back to finance and economy. It presents a world of opportunities – for individuals, investors, entrepreneurs, policy makers and societies at large.

Thematic area 2: Food and Nature

Rationale

“It is time to rethink how we grow, share and consume our food... Right now, our soils, freshwater, oceans, forests and biodiversity are being rapidly degraded. Climate change is putting even more pressure on the resources we depend on, increasing risks associated with disasters such as droughts and floods.”¹

Whilst underpinning the growth of societies and economies around the world, agriculture is the main cause of tropical deforestation and currently consumes roughly 70% of all freshwater use globally leading to depletion of aquifers and salinization of soils in some locations. Food systems more generally are a leading source of biodiversity loss, climate change and environmental degradation. They currently contribute 24% of greenhouse gas emissions, are responsible for 33% of soil degradation and have resulted in overfishing of 29

¹ [<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/>]

% commercial fish populations and over-exploitation of 20 % of the world's aquifers. The inappropriate use of pesticides and fertilizers in the production chain leads to soil contamination and pollution of our freshwaters and to the loss of pollinators, whereas the packaging and distribution of food contributes significantly to our carbon footprint, air pollution and to waste management issues, including the problem of plastic ending up in our oceans.

Over 800 million people in developing countries go to bed hungry every day. At the same time, close to one-third of all food produced goes to waste, putting additional strains on nature and our natural resources as well as on our waste management systems. In industrialised countries and emerging economies, the increased demand for meat and imported food products significantly affect the demand for, and the environmental impacts of, food production.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that food production needs to increase by 60% by 2050, compared to a 2005/2007 baseline, if we are to meet the demands of an increasing population and projected changes in food consumption patterns. How do we achieve that, and at the same time safeguard the environment and the biodiversity underpinning not only our food production systems and livelihoods, but life on Earth?

“If done right, agriculture, forestry and fisheries can provide nutritious food for all and generate decent incomes, while supporting people-centred rural development and protecting the environment”¹

The main reason why many food systems today contribute negatively to climate change, conflicts over water and access rights, biodiversity loss, human health issues and pollution is the “silo approach” that has been adopted - a failure to consider inter-connections between food and nature across the value chains, from farm to fork and beyond.

“A profound change of the global food and agriculture system is needed if we are to nourish today’s 815 million hungry and the additional 2 billion people expected by 2050.”¹

Applying a circular economy approach highlights these inter-connections within and across all food systems and reveals opportunities for where individuals, communities, and private companies can be encouraged to apply innovative technologies and approaches and make transformative changes towards sustainable food production and consumption practices. Such an approach also helps define the shape and form of policies that can reward pro-nature outcomes that sustain life on Earth.

The United Nations Environment Assembly can take advantage of the mandate and expertise of UN Environment to address the environmental dimensions of the sustainable development goals and its broad convening power to make the case to producers, consumers, businesses and governments that a reform of our food systems can provide win-win outcomes, with wealth creation and decent jobs coupled with improvements in ecosystem functioning and the conservation and sustainable use of nature and its resources. This is a proposal to rally world governments behind a shared view for how we use nature and our agricultural landscapes and seascapes in the 21st century to meet the sustainable development goals with a focus on the links between nature and food.

Thematic Area 3: Promoting innovative solutions to environmental challenges

Rationale

As global trends are revealing, environmental challenges provide a multitude of opportunities for innovation at all scales of development. Indeed, often communities are in the best

position to introduce new solutions or to reintroduce, based on indigenous knowledge former practices that make more sense today. Moreover, when innovation is grounded in the communities it serves it has the transformative power needed to build sustainable economies that alleviate poverty while protecting human health and the planet.

A theme on innovative solutions would focus the UN Environment Assembly on local solutions to attain internationally-agreed environmental and sustainable development goals. Being cross-cutting, an Innovation theme would also relate to other issues of interest to Member States. Therefore, a focus on Innovation would allow the Assembly simultaneously to address these issues while engaging innovators, including local entrepreneurs, the financial institutions and stakeholders to promote concrete results at scale.

Innovation is all around us, happening all the time. The next great transformative idea may already have occurred. But unless an innovation achieves a critical mass of adoption, it will not provide transformative solutions. The adoption of an innovation requires sufficiently widespread knowledge of and confidence in the innovation. The public sector can advance these elements by financing assessments of new solutions, by raising awareness and sharing best practices and by working directly with local innovators and entrepreneurs to undertake the pre-financing work necessary to secure the requisite funding to bring their solutions forward. These actions, if undertaken by trusted entities, can overcome obstacles to the widespread uptake of technically efficient innovative solutions to environmental challenges. We have to bear in critical view the new and emerging environmental challenges

An Environmental Assembly on innovative solutions, therefore, would be fundamentally an Assembly about how to more strategically deploy public sector resources to foster innovation, particularly local innovation, for sustainability. As has been recognized over and over again, public sector finance alone is grossly insufficient for achieving internationally agreed environmental and sustainable development goals. However, if public sector resources catalyze the upscaling of the most promising new solutions to environmental problems, the impact of public sector financing will be amplified exponentially.

By exploring new opportunities, sharing knowledge and exchanging Best Practices, this Assembly would engage and inspire a full range of stakeholders at an unprecedented level. A key outcome would be to build dynamic, multi-stakeholder partnerships to harness private-sector ingenuity and the finance community for sustainable development. The Assembly would afford Ministers a platform to explore with businesses and multi-stakeholders and communities, particularly at the local level to overcome barriers to adopting innovative solutions, such as how to:

- rapidly identify and disseminate knowledge about the myriad of new solutions;
- build south-south knowledge exchanges in which local solutions can inspire and inform;
- establish the requisite confidence in the market, in governments and in the public that specific solutions are desirable from an environmental and social perspective;
- undertake the pre-financing work necessary to persuade the financial sector to invest in unproven technologies;
- build partnerships to promote promising innovative ideas in a way that fosters local economies and builds the capacity of local entrepreneurs and communities, while achieving internationally-agreed environmental and sustainable development goals.

A focus on innovative solutions would create a momentum similar to but greater than that generated through the Science-Policy-Business Forum held just prior to the Third Environment Assembly. It would also ensure a strong focus on fostering local innovation. This kind of dynamic energy would heighten the visibility and relevance of the Environment Assembly and of UN Environment, as participants would envision and even start to formulate partnerships that harness the strategic role of the public sector and the commitment private sector resource flows into innovative means for developing sustainably.