



Contributions of the UN Environment Assembly to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Responses to the questions raised by the President of the Economic and Social Council

This paper provides contributions of the UN Environment Assembly (the Environment Assembly) to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (the Forum), in response to the request made by H.E. Ms. Marie Chatardová, President of the Economic and Social Council and Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic to the UN in New York, to H.E. Mr. Siim Kiisler, President of the Environment Assembly and Minister for the Environment of Estonia.

Summary of inputs

As the leading global environmental authority, the UN Environment Assembly considers a healthy environment key to delivering on the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A pollution-free, healthy environment is critical for healthy people, on which depend vibrant functioning of our economic and social systems. In 2012, approximately 12.6 million people died from environmental causes – nearly a quarter of all deaths worldwide, with low and middle income countries bearing the brunt of pollution-related diseases; the costs associated with low productivity from pollution-related diseases are between 1.3 and 1.9 per cent of gross domestic product in low-income countries.¹

A healthy environment underpinned by thriving ecosystems and biodiversity provides the natural infrastructure, such as pollution-capturing vegetation, that is essential to achieving the SDGs. The UN Environment Assembly therefore advocates strong political will to put the environment at the center of sustainable development, including through integrated approaches in which economic, social and environmental objectives are addressed in a balanced manner. Promoting resource efficiency to transition towards resilient societies in one example of such integrated approaches. The path towards a healthy environment also requires multi-stakeholder partnerships, knowledge-sharing and sound science that together enable rapid responses to emerging environmental challenges and meaningful transition towards sustainable consumption and production patterns.

¹ UN Environment (2017). *Towards a Pollution-free Planet: Background report for the third session of the UN Environment Assembly*.

(a) An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global level

The world continues to remain on the trajectory towards increasing inequity and inequality, both in terms of economic resources and vulnerability to environmental degradation. The third session of the UN Environment Assembly held in Nairobi on 4 - 6 December 2017 adopted a ministerial declaration that seeks to combat pollution, which has a disproportionately high impact on the poor.

The world’s richest 1% own more than half of the global wealth, while the world’s 3.5 billion poorest adults, accounting for 70% of the world’s entire working age population, together possess only 2.7% of global wealth.² On the other hand, the highest proportion of deaths attributable to the environment occurs in low- to middle-income countries, with lack of access to clean water and sanitation causing 58% of diarrheal diseases that kill approximately 1,000 children per day.³ These inequities and inequalities, coupled with an ever deteriorating environment across the globe, seriously hamper our prospects for a sustainable world where everyone has an opportunity to fulfil their potential and enjoy the benefits of thriving ecosystems.

As the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the UN system, and serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment, the UN Environment Assembly, which convenes biennially in Nairobi, focuses on safeguarding the environment in support for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The first session of the universal UN Environment Assembly, which replaced the 58-member Governing Council of the UN Environment Programme as a follow-up to the Rio+20 outcome document, *The future we want*, highlighted its contributions to the 2030 Agenda by dedicating a high-level discussion to the theme “SDGs and the Post-2015 Development Agenda, including sustainable consumption and production” (along with “Illegal trade in wildlife”).

This was followed by the second and third sessions, which convened in May 2016 and December 2017 (the latter on an exceptionally basis), focusing on the connections between the quality of environment and human wellbeing. Especially at the third session of the UN Environment Assembly, Member States acknowledged that pollution is one of the most serious environmental risks that endanger already vulnerable populations. They accordingly adopted a ministerial declaration entitled *Towards a pollution-free planet*, committing “to working towards a pollution-free planet for the health and well-being of our people and the environment” (text taken directly from the declaration):

1. Every day, 9 out of 10 of us breathe air in which concentrations of air pollution exceed the limits set out in the World Health Organization’s air quality guidelines and more than 17,000 people will die prematurely as a consequence. Hundreds of children below the age of five die from diseases caused by contaminated water and poor hygiene daily. Women and girls continue to be disproportionately affected, whether it be as a result of cooking with dirty fuel or walking long distances to find safe water. Every year we dump 4.8 to 12.7 million tonnes of plastic in our oceans and generate over 40 million tonnes of electronic waste – increasing every year by 4 to 5 per cent – causing severe damage to ecosystems, livelihoods and human health.

² Credit Suisse Research Institute. *Global Wealth Report 2017*. Retrieved 8 March 2018, from <https://www.credit-suisse.com/corporate/en/research/research-institute/global-wealth-report.html>.

³ UN Environment (2016). *Healthy environment, healthy people: Thematic report for ministerial policy review session of the second session of the UN Environment Assembly*.

2. We believe that it is both inexcusable and preventable that tens of thousands of chemicals are used in everyday objects and applied in the field without proper testing, labelling or tracking. Far too many communities either lack information about the chemicals and hazardous substances they use and are exposed to, or the capacity to manage them safely.
3. However, we also understand that knowledge and technological solutions to reduce pollution already exist, although many stakeholders have yet to explore and implement the many opportunities available. We are encouraged by the numerous success stories of countries, cities and businesses addressing air, soil, freshwater and marine pollution issues. Recent examples of such successes include the adoption of the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the entry into force of the Minamata Convention on Mercury.
4. As countries make efforts to combat pollution in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, relevant multilateral agreements and instruments, including the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, we acknowledge the links between pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. We further acknowledge that pollution disproportionately affects the poor and the vulnerable. Tackling pollution will contribute to sustainable development by fighting poverty, improving health, creating decent jobs, improving life below water and on land, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

As mentioned in paragraph 3 above, despite the knowledge and solutions available to reduce pollution, some people are left behind to suffer its deleterious effects because they have neither the “information” nor the “capacity” to manage pollution. In this context, the UN Environment Programme, under the guidance of the Environment Assembly, spearheads multiple partnerships and activities to disseminate knowledge and build capacities. For example, the UN Environment Programme offers a massive open online course on nutrient and wastewater management that explains the links between land-based activities and water pollution. It also supports over 800 higher education institutions from across the world in tackling pollution and integrating sustainability through its *Global Universities Partnership on Environment and Sustainability*. The UN Environment Programme cooperates with multiple multilateral environmental agreements to enhance global environmental governance leading to more effective international and national legal and regulatory frameworks. Comprehensive information on these agreements including open online course on pollution reduction efforts are provided through *InforMEA*, a UN information portal on multilateral environmental agreements.

(b) The identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges

The UN Environment Assembly has identified the nexus between the environment and human health as an area requiring urgent attention and coordinated action by the international community.

At the two previous sessions of the UN Environment Assembly, Ministers of Environment have shed light on the critical linkage between the environment and human health in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The ministerial segment of the second session of the Environment Assembly, held in Nairobi in May 2016, focused on the theme “Healthy environment, healthy people” to raise awareness about the extent of the environment’s impact on human health and to find appropriate solutions. The third session of the Environment Assembly delved into specific aspects of pollution and their implications for human health and wellbeing. Pollution is the world’s largest environmental cause of disease and premature death that disproportionately kills the poor and the vulnerable. In fact, nearly a quarter of all deaths

worldwide, amounting to 12.6 million people in 2012, are due to environmental causes, most of them occurring in low- and middle-income countries.⁴

At the third session of the Environment Assembly, Member States adopted a comprehensive resolution on *Environment and health* (EA.3/Res.4), which takes into account the outcomes of the meetings of the governing bodies of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm conventions, the Minamata Convention and the Convention on Migratory Species that took place in 2017. The resolution reaffirms the strong interlinkages between environment and health, including health inequalities, and stresses the importance of applying the precautionary approach as set forth in the principle 15 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, as well as of supporting and facilitating regular exchange of evidence and science-based knowledge. It is also notable that the interlinkages between biodiversity and human health⁵ have been recognized by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and will be further examined at the seventy-first World Health Assembly in May 2018.

Other resolutions adopted at the third session of the Environment Assembly that have significant implications for human health include *Preventing and reducing air pollution to improve air quality globally* (EA.3/Res.8) and *Eliminating exposure to lead paint and promoting environmentally sound management of waste lead-acid batteries* (EA.3/Res.9). It is estimated that in the absence of aggressive intervention, the number of premature deaths due to ambient air pollution are estimated to increase by more than 50% by 2050. In addition, lead exposure kills approximately 800,000 people each year in developing countries and costs low and middle-income countries an average of \$977 billion.⁶

Other areas identified by the previous sessions of the UN Environment Assembly that require proper management in order to minimize their negative impact on human health include chemicals and waste and marine plastic litter and micro-plastics. On yearly basis, it is estimated that excessive exposure to and inappropriate use of pesticides alone contribute to poisoning a minimum of 3 million people, especially impoverished rural workers.⁷ Our oceans and seas, which provide vital sources of food and income for a vast number of people, are also severely poisoned, with thousands of pieces of trash afloat on every square mile of ocean.⁸ While initiatives facilitated by the UN Environment Programme, such as the *Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management* and the *Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities* contribute to addressing these problems, greater political will and concerted action are needed to meaningfully protect the environment and human health.

⁴ UN Environment (2017). *Towards a Pollution-free Planet: Background report for the third session of the UN Environment Assembly*.

⁵ World Health Organization and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2015). *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health. Summary of the State of Knowledge Review*.

⁶ UN Environment "Why lead" infographic. Retrieved on 28 February 2018, from

http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/17269/FINAL_Lead_infog_en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

⁷ UN Environment (2016). *Healthy environment, healthy people: Thematic report for ministerial policy review session of the second session of the UN Environment Assembly*.

⁸ UN Environment "Marine Litter" page. Retrieved on 13 April 2018, from <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/oceans-seas/what-we-do/working-regional-seas/marine-litter>

(c) Valuable lessons learned on transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies

Inclusion of resource efficient approaches in the resilience conversation is important because the process of building resilience can offer opportunities to build resource efficiency and vice versa.

Recent major multilateral frameworks reflect the importance of local action and the shift of national governments' attitudes towards local action. The level of ambition demonstrated by cities and sub-national authorities has paved the way for or reinforced national commitments and actions, thus making them a powerful mechanism for positive change at all levels of governance. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the SDGs, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the New Urban Agenda all highlight the need to engage local governments and urban residents in developing solutions to global problems. Using different entry points, these agreements promote developing local adaptive capacity and building resilient infrastructure as priorities in achieving resilience. Both points resonate with the UN Environment Programme's advocacy of sustainable infrastructure transitions to build resilience and resource efficiency.

The UN Environment Programme conducted an assessment of the SDGs for Habitat III (2016), resulting in the diagram below. The diagram recognizes that an urban dimension of the SDGs is broader than one goal since cities are a microcosm where virtually all SDGs matter. The diagram also illustrates that resilience and environmental concerns are intertwined, referenced most clearly in Goals 12-15 but closely linked to other SDGs, especially on equity and equality.



Figure developed by UN Environment for Habitat III (2016):
Sustainable urbanisation is more than just SDG 11

The urban resilience and resource efficiency concepts have overlapping objectives, both aiming to address major challenges such as climate change and pressure on natural resources. Resource efficiency looks at the long-term stresses on essential resources – water, materials, energy, and food – that may not be immediately at risk but whose long-term security is threatened. A resource efficiency agenda can help cities become more resilient by reducing exposure to the risk of shortfalls in essential inputs.

Possible tensions between resource efficiency and resilience may exist: while redundancy and modularity may help cities to be more resilient to shocks and stresses, they could also be framed as representing inefficient use of resources. Overcoming these potential conflicts will require more integrated and responsive urban planning and governance.⁹

The resource efficiency gains being sought through the implementation of the *Ten-year Framework of Programmes (10 YFP) on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns* and through the UN Environment Programme's sub-programme on resource efficiency can make important contributions to sustainable and resilient societies. With its focus on decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and as a multi-stakeholder partnership for capacity building and international cooperation, the 10YFP is uniquely placed as a UN system-wide mechanism that can support the building of sustainable and resilient societies.

Moreover, there is an opportunity to achieve the resilience and resource efficiency agenda through sustainable infrastructure transitions. The Paris Agreement sets a financing goal of US\$100 billion for developing countries annually by 2020. However, current estimated losses from natural disasters alone amount to \$300 billion. On the other hand, experts believe that buildings sector¹⁰ floor area will double by 2060, adding more than 230 billion m² to the planet in new building construction, most of which will be funded by the private sector.¹¹ To ensure a coherent and sustainable urban infrastructure transition that builds resilience, the UN Environment Programme and its partners have convened the *Global Alliance for Building and Construction* that aims to contribute to the "global transition towards a low-carbon, energy efficient, and resilient buildings and construction sector."¹² The Alliance now has over a hundred members from around the world, including national governments, local governments, private sector, civil society, and think tanks.

(d) Emerging issues likely to affect building sustainable and resilient societies

A healthy environment that provides natural resources, moderates the climate and buffers against extreme weather events is critical in building sustainable and resilient societies. The emerging issues identified by UN Environment below merit careful consideration by Member States to prevent further environmental degradation.

Each year the UN Environment Programme collaborates with a global network of scientists and experts to identify emerging environmental issues with global implications. In 2017, the following issues of relevance to the SDGs under review have been identified in the report, "Frontiers: Emerging Issues of Environmental Concern," for their potential to derail efforts toward sustainable development if not addressed properly and in a timely manner.

⁹ UN Environment (2017). *Resilience and resource efficiency in cities*.

¹⁰ Buildings and construction together account for 36% of global final energy use and 39% of energy-related carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions when upstream power generation is included.

¹¹ Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction. *Global Status Report 2017*. Retrieved on 8 March 2018, from <https://globalabc.org/uploads/media/default/0001/01/35860b0b1bb31a8bcf2f6b0acd18841d8d00e1f6.pdf>

¹² Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction. Retrieved on 28 February 2018, from <https://globalabc.org/about-gabc/members>

Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation

Antimicrobial resistance has emerged on the international agenda as an issue threatening public health and sustainable development. During the UN General Assembly in September 2016, Heads of State recognized the urgency of the situation as the numbers of communicable diseases that are evolving resistance to existing drugs are increasing at accelerating rates. A less well known but significant factor is the role of environmental components in amplifying resistance. Domestic and agricultural solid waste and wastewater often end up in the natural environment. The natural environment thus becomes a reservoir of antibiotic residues, resistant pathogens and other molecules with antimicrobial properties that enhance the spread of resistant genes in microbial communities. Precautionary measures need to be taken to reduce the overall release of antibiotics, while improving sewage and wastewater management in critical hotspots such as hospitals, drug manufacturing sites and agricultural sources.

Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy

Nearly 1 billion people worldwide live without electricity. While significant progress has been made in recent years, it is projected that nearly 780 million people could still remain off-grid in 2030. Solar energy was among the first renewable energy technologies adopted globally to meet the basic electricity needs of off-grid populations. Recently there have been successful roll-outs of solar products with improved batteries, lower capital costs, affordable financing and easy access to pay-as-you-go schemes, targeting low-income customers in Africa and Asia, where at least 95% of the world's off-grid population reside. With enabling policies and regulations on renewable energy and a clear vision of future possibilities, off-grid solar could be key to achieving universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services.

Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Nanomaterials are ever present in what we regularly consume, ranging from food products, cosmetics, disinfectants, kitchenware, clothing, furniture and electronics. While nanotechnology has been emerging for some decades, ongoing research now allows production of conventional materials at a miniscule scale. However, questions have arisen—and remain only partially answered—about the health risks of these novel materials. Environmental exposure of engineered nanomaterials is inevitable and their adverse effects and persistence could have significant consequences on organisms, ecosystems and food chains. What we have learned with other hazardous substances that possess similar size, shape and chemistry may provide some lessons about the regulatory frameworks needed to assure safety and non-pollution outcomes from the use of nanomaterials.

Goal 15: Life on land

Increasing sand and dust storms are another environmental issue with global implications—causing chronic health problems, damage to agriculture and infrastructure, intensified soil erosion, and economic losses that reach millions of dollars every year. Sand and dust storms are connected to a range of environmental and development issues that extend across national boundaries. Integrated strategies that promote sustainable land and water management, ecosystem restoration and climate change adaptation can help reduce and mitigate the threats that originate from sand and dust storms over the long term. At the second session of the UN Environment Assembly held in Nairobi in May 2016, Member States adopted a resolution entitled “Sand and dust storms,” recognizing that unsustainable land management practices, among other factors, exacerbate the phenomena. The resolution mandated the UN Environment Programme to build on General

Assembly resolution 70/195 on combating sand and dust storms and support Member States in addressing the challenges of sand and dust storms and identifying relevant data and information gaps.¹³

(e) Areas where political guidance by the high-level political forum is required

The UN Environment Assembly promotes integrated approaches to sustainable development. Ensuring that the environment is considered and integrated into efforts to implement the SDGs, both by governments and major groups, is an area that requires political guidance by the High-level Political Forum.

The UN Environment Assembly promotes integrated approaches to sustainable development in which economic, environmental and social dimensions are considered in a balanced manner based on the following interlinked principles: 1) leave no one behind; 2) live within the Earth's safe operating space; and 3) leave assets behind for future generations.¹⁴ This is in line with the view that integration optimally provides "the basis for economic models that benefit people and the environment; for environmental solutions that contribute to progress; for social approaches that add to economic dynamism and allow for the preservation and sustainable use of the environmental commons; and for reinforcing human rights, equality, and sustainability."¹⁵ In this context, political guidance from the Forum would prove useful on following points:

1. How can the international community effectively promote integrated approaches to sustainable development, in which due recognition is given to the fact that restoring and maintaining the health of the natural resource base is a necessary condition for eradicating poverty and sustaining economic progress for all?¹⁶
2. What concrete incentives would help in ensuring that the environment is mainstreamed into national and subnational planning and budgeting processes? For example, would conducting an economic assessment on the real cost of unsustainability spur governments into action?
3. How can the public and private sectors – businesses and industries – be mobilized to internalize the environmental externalities of their activities and products and facilitate transition to sustainable consumption and production patterns?
4. How to manage the economic and social repercussions of environmental degradation and pollution, such as pressures on the public health sector, decline in ecotourism and population displacement.

¹³ The UN Environment Programme contributed substantially with other partners to the adoption of the "Policy framework for sand and dust storms" by the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in September 2017. Subsequently, the 77th session of the General Assembly adopted resolution 72/225 on combating sand and dust storms in December 2017, inviting the Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme to consider initiating an inter-agency process involving relevant entities of the UN system, within their respective mandates and existing resources, to prepare a global response to sand and dust storms, including a situation analysis, a strategy and an action plan, which could result in the development of a UN system-wide approach to addressing sand and dust storms.

¹⁴ UN Environment Programme (2014). *Environmental sustainability for human well-being in the post-2015 development agenda*.

¹⁵ UN (2014). *The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet: Synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda (A/69/700)*.

¹⁶ UN Environment Programme International Resource Panel (2015). *Policy coherence of the Sustainable Development Goals: A natural resources perspective*.

5. How to apply integrated approaches to build resilient and sustainable societies, particularly in support of SDG target 11.4: “Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning.”

(f) Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress in establishing sustainable and resilient societies

Accelerating progress towards sustainable and resilient societies requires concerted and integrated action to protect the environment.

Efforts to shift to a healthy planet contributes to achieving many of the SDGs and targets, including SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities. Adapting innovative policies and technologies for pollution minimization, for example, directly helps to fulfill target 11.6 to “reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management.”

The UN Environment Assembly shares the view that meaningful transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies is not possible without efforts to minimizing pollution and preserving the integrity of the environment, which provides the foundation for our economic and social wellbeing and buffers against natural disasters. In this context, the following recommendations are provided to the Forum for its consideration:

1. Increase research and encourage the development, collation and use of reliable and disaggregated data; this will include providing better multidisciplinary indicators; improving capacity for efficient gathering, verification and monitoring of data; and increasing transparency by making it easier to access such information more widely;
2. Promote science-based decision-making in the public and private sectors, effective standard-setting processes by all stakeholders and greater public participation;
3. Accelerate the implementation of and promote cooperation among existing multilateral agreements, regulations and programmes to prevent, control and reduce pollution, in a way that targets pollution through tailored actions;
4. Foster inclusive and sustainable economic productivity, innovation, job creation and environmentally sound technologies; also in line with UN Environment Assembly resolution EA.3/Res.5 on *Investing in innovative environmental solutions for accelerating the implementation of the SDGs*.
5. Encourage sustainable lifestyles and move forward in ensuring more sustainable consumption and production patterns, by providing reliable sustainability information to consumers, increasing education and awareness-raising, and making it easier to rethink, reuse, recycle, recover and remake any products, materials and/or services, and prevent and reduce waste generation;
6. Promote the adoption of policies and approaches such as those for the environmentally sound management of chemicals and waste, including the use of the integrated life cycle approach, value chains and sustainable chemistry;
7. Promote fiscal measures, such as incentives, to stimulate positive change, making every effort to invest in more sustainable, environmentally sound solutions;
8. Strengthen and enforce more integrated policies, laws, and regulations by supporting institutions and building their capacity; bolstering monitoring and accountability systems; sharing best practices, standards, policy instruments and tools; and enhancing environmental education and training;

9. Creating an enabling environment to create a healthy environment in the context of sustainable development and in the spirit of global partnership and solidarity, including through adequate and predictable means of implementation as agreed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda;
 10. Develop and expand multi-stakeholder partnerships, including between national and local governments, the private sector,¹⁷ and relevant UN entities and programmes; and promote North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation.
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¹⁷ The UN Environment Programme has been working with private sector representatives and associations in the following areas: *finance, oil and gas, waste, water, food and beverages, agriculture and fisheries, forestry, electric power, tire and transport, mining and metals, tourism, building and construction, chemicals including plastics and cosmetics, manufacturing including textile and leather, information and communication technology, and retail*. This cooperation has targeted progress towards more resilient supply chains, new green investment opportunities, and increased availability of environmentally sustainable goods and services in the global market, thereby advancing towards the realization of an inclusive green economy and more sustainable consumption and production patterns.