

Introduction: The science clearly identifies the urgent need for strengthened actions for nature to achieve sustainable development as called upon by the Rio+20 Outcome Document and Agenda 2030. COVID-19 has exposed how vulnerable our societies are and how connected we all are to each other and to nature. Healthy ecosystems are an important foundation to ensure healthy people, and loss of biodiversity undermines our individual and joint resilience. **Indeed, the degradation of our environment including our ecosystems and biodiversity constitute some of the most pressing and serious threats to the ability of present and future generations to enjoy the right to life.** ¹By protecting nature, we protect ourselves. Fully implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, including eradicating poverty **and conflict** is dependent on taking these challenges seriously. The UN Environmental Assembly is our platform for joint action and to respond to the urgency and scale of the challenge, moving beyond statements to gather forces around concrete actions.

We are experiencing an alarming loss of biodiversity and ecosystems on land, in freshwater and in the oceans. Land use change, over-exploitation, climate change, pollution and invasive species are all undermining our ability to ensure a safe and healthy life for our own and generations to come. The individual threats to nature are interconnected and exacerbate each other. These complex interlinkages, and the global scale of the challenges, require holistic and transformative approaches from the world. That requires efforts by governments, all relevant stakeholders, including **non-governmental organizations, academia**, the private sector and other economic actors all over the world.

Green recovery

Now is the time to build back better. We recognize the vulnerability of our society and our economy and the urgency of efforts for a post COVID-19 recovery that puts society on track for the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals through strengthened action for nature. Leadership, science-based decision-making, involvement of stakeholders, and global cooperation **will be crucial** in the time to come. Ministers can **implement** regulations, incentives, financial instruments that respond to the COVID-19 situation while at the same time contributing to a low GHG emission economy based on sustainable production and consumption, circular economy, and a pollution-free world with vital **and robust** ecosystem services and biodiversity. It **is** to our benefit **to** reduce our environmental footprint and place people and nature at the heart **of both inclusive and appropriate policymaking which ensures sustainable use of natural resources, develops and implements substantive environmental standards, conduct environmental impact assessments and preserve the environment as well as protect it against harm, pollution and climate change caused by public and private actors.** ²

¹ UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), *General comment no. 36, Article 6 (Right to Life)*, 3 September 2019, CCPR/C/GC/35, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e5e75e04.html> [accessed 7 July 2020] Paragraphs 62 and 26

² UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), *General comment no. 36, Article 6 (Right to Life)*, 3 September 2019, CCPR/C/GC/35, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e5e75e04.html> [accessed 7 July 2020] Paragraphs 62 and 26

States dedicated to protecting the health of both humans and the ecosystems on which the well-being of humans depends must also move expeditiously to incorporate the right to a healthy environment into their constitutional, legal and policy frameworks.

The measures we take should work with nature and not against it and support nature-based solutions. The UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration and the 2018-2030 strategic framework of the UNCCD are timely opportunities. Land degradation and loss of ecosystem services represent a 10% loss in global annual gross product and negatively impact on the well-being of at least 3.2 billion people³. **To remedy this, Ministers can build the capacity of the public to respect the natural environment and the close relationship between humans and nature and help them appreciate and enjoy the benefits of biodiversity, climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as the benefits to the economy, their welfare and potential for jobs through ecosystem restoration. Ministers can also strengthen the public's capacity to understand the specific environmental risks on the health and well-being of both the environment and humanity and how they may protect the environment and humanity from those risks. As part of increasing public awareness, Ministers could also build the capacity of the public to understand environmental challenges and policies, so that they may fully exercise their rights to express their views on environmental issues, understand environmental information, including assessments of environmental impacts, participate in decision-making and, where appropriate, seek remedies for violations of their rights. Ministers could also tailor environmental education and public awareness programmes to the culture, language and environmental situation of particular populations.**

Ministers can ensure that their governments comply with the relevant environmental standards, including those relating to biodiversity and ecosystems, in their own operations, and also monitor and effectively enforce compliance with the standards by preventing, investigating, punishing and redressing violations of the standards by private actors as well as governmental authorities. In accomplishing this, they can implement training programmes for law enforcement and judicial officers to enable them to understand and enforce environmental laws, and take effective steps to provide for access to effective remedies for violations of human rights and domestic laws relating to the environment as well as prevent corruption from undermining the implementation and enforcement of environmental laws.

Ministers can also work with private business enterprises in building their capacity to be responsible for respecting the rights of both the environment and humanity by not causing or contributing to environmental harm and to immediately address such impacts when they occur. This would include preventing or mitigating environmental harm that is directly linked to their operations, products or services by their business relationships. Ministers should also work with private businesses in ensuring that businesses comply with all applicable environmental laws, issue clear policy commitments to meet their responsibility regarding environmental protection and identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address

³ IPBES (2018) The assessment report on land degradation and restoration.

any negative environmental impacts as well as how they enable the remediation of any adverse environmental human rights impacts they cause or to which they contribute.

Ministers **should focus** attention **on** the importance of safe, clean, healthy and sustainable ecosystems as being **necessary** for the full enjoyment of life and human rights such as that of health and **the fact that** the considerable loss of biodiversity is undermining our joint resilience. It is the poorest among us who are most vulnerable. Zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 expose the close relationship between nature and people. We increase our vulnerability to such diseases through environmental degradation. This pandemic reveals **the significant cost which is associated with this disease as well as** the need for strengthened action **in all spheres of development** to avoid **the** future emergence of zoonotic diseases. Recognizing the rapid loss of nature, the piece by piece loss of natural habitat and the associated increasing risk **to** our societies, ministers **must** commit to measures **which strengthen** cross-sectoral efforts **in order** to protect biodiversity, reverse the degradation of ecosystems, enhance ecosystem resilience **and** urgently adapt **to** and mitigate climate change.

Ministers **should ensure right of everyone to participate** in the development and scaling up of effective actions including **members of marginalized communities**, indigenous peoples, women and local communities, local and sub-national authorities and youth groups. **Ministers should provide everyone with the opportunity to express their views directly or through representative bodies and take additional steps to facilitate the participation of women and of members of marginalized communities. With respect to proposals for specific projects or activities, Ministers should also ensure that the affected public is informed of their opportunities to participate at an early stage of the decision-making process and provide them with affordable, timely and relevant information, including information about: the proposed project or activity and its possible impacts on human rights and the environment; the range of possible decisions; and the decision-making procedure to be followed, including the time schedule for comments and questions and the time and place of any public hearings. In making any decisions, Ministers should ensure that the relevant authorities take into account the expressed views of the public in making their final decisions, that they explain the justifications for the decisions and that the decisions and explanations are made public.** Building on this and given the developments around the order of environment-related international meetings in 2021, the ministers can commit to the development and effective implementation of an ambitious post-2020 global biodiversity framework to be adopted at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, to be held in China. Ministers can also emphasise the importance for enhancing synergies at all levels between the biodiversity related conventions and other multilateral environmental agreements in order to efficiently contribute to the implementation of the post 2020 global biodiversity framework and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ministers should also consider ways to support the work of the UNFCCC and the Paris agreement, thus contributing to the 26th Conference of the Parties in 2021 and the negotiations of the beyond 2020 instrument for the sound management of chemicals and waste. **In focusing on all of these goals, the Ministers should also cooperate with each other in order to establish, maintain and enforce effective**

international legal frameworks in order to prevent, reduce and remedy transboundary and global environmental harm that interferes with our environment including our ecosystems or biodiversity. In the case of transboundary environmental harm, States should also provide for equal access to information, participation and remedies without discriminating on the basis of nationality or domicile.

Ministers should also be inclusive in the application of their programs or policies and ensure equal and effective protection against discrimination in relation to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. For example, the Ministers must also respect, protect and fulfil human rights including those of marginalized communities in the actions they take to address environmental challenges and pursue sustainable development. Such measures should include taking additional action to protect the rights of those who are most vulnerable to, or at particular risk from environmental harm, taking into account their needs, risks and capacities.

Ministers should also provide a safe and enabling environment in which individuals, groups and representatives of organizations which work on human rights or environmental issues can operate free from threats, harassment, intimidation and violence. This would also include the obligation to both respect and protect the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in relation to environmental matters.

Sustainable food systems – a part of the solution

Meeting the world's increasing demand for food while still reducing agriculture's environmental impacts is one of the defining challenges of our time, as stated in the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) 2019 Global Assessment Report. Addressing solutions to the food system is an important opportunity for ministers at the environment assembly, as well as for the private sector, farmers and other stakeholders. Among the findings of the IPBES report is that feeding humanity and enhancing the conservation and sustainable use of nature are complementary and closely interdependent goals. They can be advanced through sustainable agriculture, aquaculture and livestock systems, the safeguarding of native species, varieties, breeds and habitats, and ecological restoration. The ministerial declaration can contribute to the growing understanding and attention to the environmental dimension of sustainable food systems, including how improvements in the different parts of the food systems are important for both people's livelihood and health, the environment and the economy, and its significance to be able to provide a healthy and affordable diet to the global population in decades to come. This is critical to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Ministers can **also** highlight important approaches and solutions that are available and contribute to further measures to strengthen action at the UN Food Summit in 2021.