

United Nations Environment Programme
First informal preparatory meeting
for the fourth meeting of the
ad hoc open-ended expert group
on marine litter and microplastics
Online, 28 September 2020

Meeting notes from the Secretariat: First informal preparatory meeting for the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics

I. Introduction

1. The first informal preparatory meeting for the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics was held online on Monday, 28 September 2020.

II. Opening of the meeting

2. The meeting was opened at 2 p.m. (Nairobi time (UTC+2)) by the Chair, Mr. Satoru Iino, Acting Chair of the Bureau of the ad hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics.

3. Welcoming participants to the first informal preparatory meeting for the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and plastics, which would be held online from 9 to 13 November 2020, he recalled that a second such preparatory meeting would take place from 20 to 22 October 2020. This meeting focused on discussions on the stocktaking of existing activities and action towards the long-term elimination of discharges into the oceans and on the inventory of technical and financial resources and mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics. At a second meeting, participants would have more time to consider potential response options pursuant to United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 3/7, subparagraph 10 (d) and the analysis of the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities.

III. Organizational matters

A. Agenda

4. The meeting followed the provisional agenda proposed by the Bureau in advance of the meeting:

1. Opening of the meeting.
2. Update on stocktaking of existing activities and action towards the long-term elimination of discharges into the oceans, to reduce marine plastic litter and microplastics.
3. Update on identification of technical and financial resources and mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics.
4. Update on submissions received on potential response options pursuant to United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 3/7, subparagraph 10 (d).
5. Update on comments received on analysis of the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities pursuant to United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 4/6, subparagraph 7 (d).
6. Preparations for the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly
7. Closure of the meeting.

IV. Update on stocktaking of existing activities and action towards the long-term elimination of discharges into the oceans, to reduce marine plastic litter and microplastics.

5. Ms. Julie Goodhew, School of Psychology, University of Plymouth, introduced the item, recalling that the stocktaking exercise had been undertaken in response to United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 4/6, subparagraph 7 (a). The submissions received covered actions happening globally between December 2019 and July 2020. The stocktaking exercise was intended to provide a snapshot of the period concerned and was non-exhaustive. A summary of the results was contained in document UNEP/AHEG/2020/4/2.

6. By 31 July 2020, information had been submitted via the online survey about 220 actions carried out by Governments (51), major stakeholder groups (32), intergovernmental organizations (21), United Nations entities (41) and other stakeholders (75), along with the frequency of those actions. The preliminary results had been grouped into four categories of action: working with people (44 per cent of the actions); legislation, standards and rules (24 per cent); monitoring and analysis (17 per cent); and technology and processes (15 per cent).

7. In addition to the online survey, there had been 63 narrative submissions: 26 from Governments; 24 from major groups and stakeholders; 11 from United Nations entities; and 2 from intergovernmental organizations. Those submissions showed that legislation, policies, standards, rules and strategies continued to be updated, that bans had been enacted and that fiscal incentives or disincentives had been put in place. The submissions also outlined the various other measures being undertaken, including some that related to waste management, extended producer responsibility schemes, the circular economy approach, biodegradable plastics and capacity-building.

8. A representative of the secretariat gave a short presentation on the online repository and interactive dashboard, which had been developed to enable access to the information submitted during the stocktaking exercise. The online repository platform¹ enabled the retrieval of information from the online survey and the narrative submissions through a variety of means, including a search bar, an interactive map and customized filters. The interactive dashboard² provided the possibility to generate visual representations of the results of the online survey at various levels and their download.

9. In the ensuing question and answer session, several representatives, including one speaking on behalf of a group of countries, mentioned the benefits of the stocktaking exercise to show not only what was being done, but also where there were gaps. Several representatives, including the one speaking on behalf of the group of countries, stressed the importance of prevention and upstream action. One representative noted the lack of global action and requested that in the breakdown of types of action, additional information be provided about the geographical level at which they were undertaken.

10. Two representatives mentioned the importance of related work by the Group of 20. One representative proposed that the ad hoc open-ended expert group draw on the stocktaking exercise by the Group of 20 in carrying out its own such exercise. One representative advocated the promotion of information-sharing and peer-learning to assist countries in implementing their plans, along with voluntary efforts by the private sector, such as those that took place within multi-stakeholder platforms like the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management.

11. One representative was of the view that the stocktaking exercise had not been as comprehensive as it could have been. She also expressed concern that the exercise had sometimes strayed beyond the scope of its initial mandate, suggesting that it should entail information collation only, not analysis or the formulation of recommendations or best practices.

12. Two representatives, including one speaking on behalf of a groups of countries, emphasized the importance of feeding the results of the stocktaking exercise into the deliberations on potential response options. The representative speaking on behalf of a group of countries requested more information on how the Bureau intended to do that.

13. One representative requested that the maps used in the online tools be official United Nations maps with a disclaimer stating that they were not intended to convey any legal or political position.

¹ Available at <https://environmentassembly.unenvironment.org/stocktaking-online-repository>.

² Available at <https://environmentassembly.unenvironment.org/stocktaking-dashboard>.

V. Update on identification of technical and financial resources and mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics.

14. Mr. Karl Vrancken, Flemish Institute of Technological Research, and Ms. Alice Merry, consultant on inclusive and sustainable finance, gave presentations on the key findings of the exercise to identify technical and financial resources and mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine litter and microplastics. The provisional summary of the inventory was contained in document UNEP/AHEG/2020/4/3.

15. Mr. Vrancken spoke of the key findings relating to technical resources and mechanisms. In total, 138 technical resources and mechanisms had been reviewed. They were labelled as follows: state of knowledge reports, including policy recommendations (25 per cent); application cases (17 per cent); monitoring methodologies (11 per cent); calculation tools to quantify marine litter (11 per cent), tool kits and guidance for policymakers (9 per cent), operational/technical guidelines (9 per cent); best practices (7 per cent); training materials (4 per cent); manuals (4 per cent); and inventory (3 per cent). The technical resources were then grouped into the following categories, according to the topic with which they dealt: (i) monitoring and review; (ii) waste management and recycling; and (iii) systemic perspective on responsible production, design and use.

16. He concluded that there was a need for more detailed data on the trajectory of plastic waste from generation to entry into the marine environment. Furthermore, the role of littering, uncontrolled dumping, release from disposal sites and the fate of plastics in lakes and rivers needed to be better understood.

17. Ms. Merry presented the key findings relating to financial resources and mechanisms. A non-exhaustive inventory of financial resources had been prepared on the basis of desk research and interviews. The inventory included 74 financial resources from 21 multilateral sources, 26 bilateral sources, 6 private for-profit sources and 15 private not-for-profit sources. The majority of the resources targeted more than one region and the most targeted region was Asia and the Pacific, which accounted for almost half of the financial resources targeting a specific region. The stocktaking survey had confirmed that trend, with 69 per cent of the funding mentioned therein being for initiatives implemented in Asia and the Pacific.

18. In terms of the phase in the plastic life cycle or value chain that was targeted by the resources, waste management was most frequently targeted (50 resources), followed by: production/manufacturing (26); litter capturing (22); prevention, minimization and reuse (15) and use (11).

19. Innovative financing opportunities had also been considered in the exercise. Mechanisms such as joint public-private initiatives, blended finance, impact investors and blue bonds were discussed in document UNEP/AHEG/2020/4/3.

20. In the ensuing question and answer session, it was clarified that the financial resources considered in the inventory were those available that were external to a country's own public national budget and outside any given organization's internal budget, including its research and development budget.

21. Given the lack of financing initiatives that took an explicit approach to gender in the context of plastic pollution, it was proposed that an additional example of one that did so be added to the document.

22. Several representatives suggested that the inventory also be presented in the form of a database, similar to that produced using the information from the stocktaking exercise, to make the information more easily extractable and useable.

23. One representative requested that the thread and linkages between the information in document UNEP/AHEG/2020/4/3 be made more explicit in the final version of the document, as it was not clear, for example, whether the new opportunities for innovative financing in section F had been taken into consideration in the formulation of the conclusions in section B and E.

24. Another representative expressed concern that some of the information in document UNEP/AHEG/2020/4/3 exceeded the initial mandate for the exercise and asked that the secretariat consider removing anything that went beyond a simple description of the range of resources and mechanisms available. There should be no policy-related comments or recommendations.

25. Several representatives, including one speaking on behalf of a group of countries, asked for clarification of the next steps in addressing the challenges identified in the inventory, how such work would be incorporated into the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group and how the group would produce a deliverable for the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly. A number of representatives requested the secretariat to prepare an information document to inform the discussions thereon at the fourth meeting.

VI. Update on submissions received on potential response options pursuant to United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 3/7, subparagraph 10(d).

26. The representative of the secretariat drew attention to the document on submissions on potential options for continued work for consideration by the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEP/AHEG/2020/4/INF/10).

27. One representative praised the secretariat for its compilation of the submissions, which had allowed all the participants' voices to be heard. Another representative, however, speaking on behalf of a group of countries, said that the compilation was too general, suggesting that for it to be useful it needed to take the form of a more granular and weighted summary. Noting that it was a provisional document, she requested a revised version in time for the second preparatory meeting.

28. One representative stressed the need to use the correct language and terminology from the mandates provided by the United Nations Environment Assembly in subparagraphs 10 (d) (ii) and (v) of resolution 3/7 to ensure clarity in the work streams and avoid confusion. She also requested clarification of whether the comments made by participants at the present meeting would be taken into account by the secretariat and relevant updates made to the documents concerned in time for the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group. The representative of the secretariat clarified that the working documents would not be subject to further changes owing to the time required for translation and issuance ahead of the fourth meeting. Given that the information documents were in English only, they could be worked on for longer.

VII. Update on comments received on analysis of the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities pursuant to United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 4/6, subparagraph 7 (d).

29. Ms. Karen Raubenheimer, Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security, University of Wollongong, Australia, made a presentation on the comments received on the analysis of the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities pursuant to United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 4/6, subparagraph 7 (d). Participants had before them a related note by the secretariat and document UNEP/AHEG/2020/4/4, setting out the draft revised methodology to analyse the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities on marine litter and microplastics at all levels to determine their contribution in solving the global problem.

30. She said that in response to the comments received the following elements had been incorporated into the methodology: the full life cycle; barriers and enabling conditions; assessment of response options within the context of what they aimed to achieve; the driver-pressure-state-impact-response model; and recognition of the multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral nature of the problem.

31. In response to comments on the three pilot studies, some of the terms had been clarified and further work had been done to standardize the terminology in line with that used in previous work and submissions. Furthermore, a diagram had been introduced to indicate the roles of harmonization at the international level, facilitation at the regional level and implementation at the national level. Other comments made on the pilot studies included the following: that response options could operate independently and did not necessarily rely on a hierarchy; that the relationship between the two methodologies (operational measures and management measures) should be explained more clearly; that the sources of the identified pressures and barriers should be clarified, along with whether activities were existing, new or strengthened; that references should be provided for quantitative evaluations; that the indicator summary table should be expanded; and that a final summary table should be provided.

32. It had been also said that microplastics was a cross-cutting issue and should not, therefore, be a response option on its own. Nevertheless, owing to the existence of a bill on the development of a

state-wide strategy to address microplastics in the marine environment of California, United States of America, (identified during the stocktaking survey) and the explicit listing of microplastics in United Nations Environment Assembly resolutions 3/7 and 4/6, it had been decided to maintain microplastics as an individual response option.

33. Existing and potential response-option archetypes had been identified. The existing archetypes included regional and national marine litter action plans and national solid waste management strategies, regulatory measures and market-based instruments. The latter three had then been merged into one response-option archetype to provide a holistic response to solid waste management. The potential response-option archetypes included strengthening international and regional frameworks; a new international framework; global design standards; and national microplastics strategies.

34. In the ensuing question and answer session, one representative, speaking on behalf of a group of countries, expressed support for the final summary table. Another representative emphasized that the outcome of the analysis needed to be simple so that readers could understand the results easily. The analysis should focus on the effectiveness of policy options, with the description of the policies being kept to a minimum. The sources of data should be clearly indicated and the analysis of co-benefits made clearer. He pointed out, however, that no policy measure could be evaluated as universally effective or ineffective unconditionally; the success related to the specific conditions under which it was employed, such as context, situation, region, and timing/stage. It was necessary, therefore, to compare several examples of such responses using a standard evaluation method.

35. Two representatives proposed mechanisms that should be subjected to the effectiveness analysis. One advocated consideration of the Ocean Plastics Charter, while the other proposed that the Group of 20 Implementation Framework for Actions on Marine Plastic Litter and the Marine Plastics Debris Cooperative Action Initiative of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three be analysed.

36. Another representative, speaking on behalf of a group of countries, said that that group considered the note by the secretariat to be preliminary as it appeared that not all the comments made had been incorporated. These included views expressed on the nature of any new international framework and whether it would be legal binding or voluntary. In addition, he proposed that there be more coherence between the approach to consideration of the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities and the approach to consideration of the potential response options pursuant to Environment Assembly resolution 3/7, subparagraph 10 (d), to show the interconnection between the two topics.

37. Another representative highlighted again inaccuracies in the use of terminology, noting conflation of the terminology in United Nations Environment Assembly resolutions 3/7 and 4/6, and expressed concern that the stocktaking exercise had not featured as a primary source for the determination of the response option archetypes.

VIII. Preparations for the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly

38. The Chair sought guidance from the participants on preparation of a summary document under item 6 of the provisional agenda of the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group, “Preparations for the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly”.

39. The Chair therefore proposed that he take responsibility for drafting the summary with the support of the secretariat and parties. He confirmed that it would not contain any endorsement of a specific direction and/or policies and that it should enjoy widest possible support and build on inputs from experts without being a negotiated document. He would treat each mandate equally and not prioritize some over others. The report would be succinct.

40. He sought support for the preparation of a draft such summary ahead of the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group, proposing that a first draft of the outline of the summary could be made available and considered at the second preparatory meeting in October. On the basis of feedback and inputs from participants in the second preparatory meeting, a revised version would then be shared with the ad hoc open-ended expert group in advance of its fourth meeting for final consideration at that meeting. Subject to its approval, the summary would be annexed to the formal report of the fourth meeting of the ad hoc open-ended expert group and to the report by the Executive Director of UNEP to the United Nations Environment Assembly at its fifth session.

41. In the ensuing discussion, one representative said that she was not convinced of the need for such a document and could find no mandate or justification for preparing one. Although she preferred not to have one, she was adamant that, if one were to be prepared, it should be a short summary that factually recounted AHEG action without providing recommendations, did not prejudge outcomes and was not negotiated. Another representative was in favour of such a summary, although he agreed that it should be as neutral as possible.

42. Another representative, speaking on behalf of a group of countries, also supported an outcome document, but said that it would have value only with a certain level of analysis. He recalled that, according to rule 36 of the rules of procedure of the United Nations Environment Assembly, any expert group was permitted to make recommendations. He noted that he was in favour of annexing such an outcome document to the report of the Executive Director.

43. One representative questioned whether it was possible to prepare such a document when the work of the group was as yet incomplete. In future meetings, sufficient time needed to be allocated to ensure that the group could accomplish its work. The group had yet to have any meaningful discussion on the potential response options, an important part of its mandate, which should also be the subject of an outcome document. Her comment received support from a number of other representatives, including one speaking on behalf of a group of countries.

44. Given the time constraints, the Chair proposed that participants convey any further views to their Bureau representative, and that the Bureau discuss the matter further at its meeting on 6 October 2020.

IX Closure of the meeting

45. Following the customary exchange of courtesies, the chair declared the meeting closed at 5 p.m. (Nairobi time (UTC+2)) on 28 September 2020.
