

Concept note for the Leadership Dialogue at the virtual session of UNEA-5

Contribution of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world

“Making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century. It must be the top, top priority for everyone, everywhere. In this context, the recovery from the pandemic is an opportunity.”

Quote from UN Secretary-General António Guterres "State of the Planet" address at Columbia University on 2 December 2020

A. INTRODUCTION

This concept note seeks to assist Member States and Stakeholders in their preparations for the Leadership dialogue planned for the virtual meeting of the [Fifth Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly](#) (UNEA-5), to be held in Nairobi 22-23 February 2021.

In line with the decision of the joint meeting of the Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly and of the Committee of Permanent Representatives [at its meeting on 1 December 2020](#), a Leadership Dialogue will be organized during the virtual session of UNEA-5, with the aim to promote an interactive high level debate on the contribution of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world. With a view to facilitate participation of Ministers and other high-level representatives from different time zones, the same Leadership Dialogue will take place on two occasions; on Monday 22 February 2021 at 16.00 – 19.00 and on Tuesday 23 February 2021 at 11.00 – 14.00, Nairobi time (GMT+3).

B. MODALITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

- Interested Member States and Stakeholders will be invited to inscribe their high level representatives for a list of participants, indicating the name, title, level of representation, and preferred timing for the Leadership Dialogue, on Monday 8 February 2021 at the latest. The list of participants will be opened on Monday 25 of January 2021. Inscriptions will be considered as binding.
- To allow for an interactive dialogue, the number of participants at each of the Leadership Dialogue sessions will be limited to around 40 high-level participants, based on a first come, first serve basis, as well as taking into account the aim to ensure equitable regional representation.
- Each Leadership Dialogue will be facilitated by a professional moderator with the task of facilitating an interactive exchange of views among participants. When giving the floor, the moderator will be giving priority to Ministers, Heads of Non-Governmental Organizations, Chief Executive Officers, and Heads of International Organizations.

- Each Leadership Dialogue will be introduced by a short video developed by the UN Environment Programme on the topic outline above, followed by short introductory statements from one or more Vice President(s) of the Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly and one representative from Major Groups and Stakeholders. After these kick-off remarks, the moderator will open the floor for interventions from participants, which should be no longer than 2 minutes and should address one or more of the guiding questions outlined at the end of this concept note.
- Each Leadership Dialogue will be interpreted in all six official UN languages, using the platform “Interprefy”. Participants or their aides will be required to ensure connection to the platform prior to the Leadership Dialogue and familiarize themselves with the platform in advance, through participating in a dedicated training session offered by the Secretariat.
- The Secretariat will prepare a factual Summary of the main messages emanating from the discussions, and present it orally at the adjournment plenary of the Assembly scheduled for 16.00-19.00 on Tuesday 23 February 2021. The Summary will be made available in writing after the meeting.
- Participation in the UNEA-5 Leadership Dialogue is voluntary. Member States may, as an alternative or as a complement to “live” attendance, also send in a recorded or a written statement. Such submissions should be sent to the Secretariat by 1 February at the latest and will be uploaded on the UNEA website. Recorded speeches will not be played at the Leadership Dialogue itself.

C. BACKGROUND: BUILDING A RESILIENT AND INCLUSIVE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Human beings are the center of the concerns for sustainable development and the Corona virus pandemic has exposed the fragility of many economies and deepened existing inequalities, imperiling decades of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.¹ A recent report from the United Nations Secretary General² noted that in addition to the tragic loss of lives across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic “has exacerbated poverty and inequality and will likely cause an estimated 34.3 million people to fall below the extreme poverty line in 2020, with an additional 130 million people possibly joining the ranks of those living in extreme poverty by 2030, dealing a huge blow to global efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.” On some dimensions of human development, conditions today are equivalent to levels of deprivation last seen in the mid-1980s. The pandemic is affecting education (at its peak 9 in 10 students were out of school), livelihoods (gross national incomes fell 4 per cent world-wide) and, of course, human health (in excess of 1 million people have lost their lives to COVID-19).³ Regrettably, the impacts of this planetary-scale pandemic are severely compounded by three planetary-scale crises: climate change; the loss of biodiversity; and pollution and waste.

Many governments are missing an opportunity for constructive change – a catalytic path forward could reject unsustainable habits of the past and transition to sustainable consumption and production, with a view to stopping the draw-down on nature and halting the loss of biodiversity, while also investing in targeted ecosystem restoration and pollution reduction activities, such as reducing discarded plastics in the environment. Member States have understandably focused on containing the current health crisis and limiting the economic fall-out of lockdowns. An initial analysis of stimulus measures by selected major economies reveals a notable lack of investment in sustainability.⁴ The temptation to revert to investing in polluting or nature-depleting technologies, rather than investing in emerging technologies that can support the shift to a low-carbon economy, should be avoided. As leaders design and implement recovery plans, it is important for them to remember that nature, in all its diversity and complexity, underpins our economies and our societies. Managed well, biodiversity and ecosystem services can drive economic growth, safeguard vulnerable populations,

provide nutritious food at affordable prices, support sustainable jobs and help humanity transition to a more sustainable future. Realizing such benefits, however, will require an unprecedented re-direction of funds and new investments, including investments that build on an understanding of natural capital. Furthermore, when designing labour policies, multi-stakeholder dialogues between all segments of society should take place in order to include groups who are frequently left out, especially women and youth. Potential areas to incentivize nature positive recoveries include conditionalities on lending and debt forgiveness, specific spending targets within stimulus packages, and shifting from harmful subsidies to nature positive ones.

The destruction of the natural world is a major driver behind the increasing emergence and spread of zoonotic diseases.⁵ As natural areas are destroyed and fragmented to meet human needs for agriculture, infrastructure and materials, pathogens are more easily transmitted between humans and animals.⁶ Deforestation, particularly in the tropics, has been associated with an increase in infectious diseases, such as dengue fever, malaria and yellow fever.⁷ Furthermore, the illegal trade in wildlife brings animals face to face with humans. In unregulated sectors, the chance is high that a potentially catastrophic disease will jump species.⁸

Sixty percent of known infectious diseases, and 75 percent of emerging infectious diseases, are zoonotic,⁹ meaning they can jump between animals and humans. These contagions take a heavy toll on humanity as millions of people die each year from undiagnosed or neglected zoonotic diseases. The pathogens also weigh on the world economy. Over the past 20 years, these diseases have caused approximately US\$ 100 billion in economic damage,¹⁰ a tally that does not include COVID-19.

Addressing habitat loss and illegal wildlife trade is critical for limiting future pandemics and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. To mitigate risks, efforts to scale up protection and restoration of intact ecosystems is essential to reduce novel interactions between wildlife, animals and humans. Wildlife, both fauna and flora, is often a major driver of tourism, which contributes significantly to GDP and is a foreign exchange earner in many countries.¹¹ The legal wildlife trade provides sustainable jobs, livelihoods and incomes for many people, in developing and developed countries alike, whereas the illegal wildlife trade undermines these legitimate means of development while also exposing people to potentially catastrophic zoonotic diseases. Regrettably, illegal wildlife trade, worth an estimated US\$7-\$23 billion annually, continues to rise.¹² Seizures of pangolins, the most known trafficked animal in the world, have increased 10-fold in the past six years.¹³ The number of rhinos in the wild has dropped 95 percent since the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁴ And illegal fishing is threatening everything from whales to sturgeon with extinction.¹⁵ This nefarious practice not only drives species to extinction, but also robs countries of valuable assets that are essential for their development.

Communities that live closest to undisturbed habitat and wildlife play a critical role in protecting biodiversity, often acting as the first line of defence for animals. But many have been exploited by organized criminal groups, who encourage communities to engage in poaching. This erodes social cohesion and introduces criminal behaviour, which can have far-reaching consequences for vulnerable people in remote and rural areas. Strengthening existing coordination mechanisms to curb illegal wildlife trade and ensuring effective implementation is necessary. Support for sustainable and legal use of wildlife and its products that is accompanied by equitable sharing of benefits and reinvestment into nature contribute to multiple sustainable development outcomes. Evidence-based policies that are matched with support for education and behaviour change, demand better implementation and enforcement.

Climate change and inefficient food systems have also been linked to increased risks from zoonotic diseases.¹⁶ For some contagions, increases in temperatures or rainfall can dramatically affect the life

cycles of either the pathogen itself or its vector – the intermediate species that spreads the disease from the original host to humans.¹⁷ For many insects and rodents, for example, higher temperatures lead to population explosions and the expansion of their ranges, which can ultimately propel the disease into humans. In other cases, rising sea levels or coastal flooding can increase risks of water-borne zoonoses.¹⁸ Inefficient food systems, including unsustainable production, transportation and rampant food waste, is eroding planetary health and increasing the risk of future pandemics. For example, rising demand for livestock production, bringing animals and people closer together, with not nearly enough attention paid to hygiene and preventing the spread of disease.

Unsustainable consumption and production, leading to persistent environmental degradation, erodes the ability of humans to cope with zoonotic diseases and associated pandemics, while increasing their prevalence. Air pollution, for example, makes humans more vulnerable to respiratory zoonoses, such as coronaviruses.¹⁹ Due to severe negative effects on the economy in the wake of contagions, the poor often turn to exploiting natural resources to make ends meet, exacerbating a cycle of degradation and increasing the long-term risk of future crises. In contrast, a healthy natural environment can be good for public health. There is a growing body of epidemiological evidence suggesting that greater exposure to, or ‘contact with’, natural environments (such as parks, woodlands and beaches) is associated with better health and well-being.²⁰

Human, animal and planetary health are inextricably linked.²¹ Reducing the risk of future pandemics requires the protection of functioning ecosystems and the restoration of natural barriers to the spread of zoonotic diseases.²² Attention must be given to factors that increase the probability of viruses leaping from non-human species to humans. Such factors include habitat loss and the illegal or unregulated trade of wildlife. Governments are encouraged to embrace the One Health approach – a system of preventing disease outbreaks that focuses holistically on the health of humans, animals and the environment. This strategy can be extremely cost-effective. The World Bank says economic losses from six fatal zoonoses average US\$6.7 billion per year, while investments in One Health that would prevent those outbreaks ranged between US\$1.9 billion and US\$3.4 billion annually.²³ A One Health approach requires, among other things, strengthening environmental contributions, including ecology and wildlife expertise, as part of effective risk profiling and prevention measures. Multidisciplinary capacity building for risk assessment, information sharing approaches, and awareness raising in the public and private sectors at national levels, is particularly important for high risk countries.

Government policies can reinforce the linkages between human well-being and the health of ecosystems, thus strengthening the environmental dimension of sustainable development. The costs associated with those policies would be substantial. One study estimates annual global conservation needs to be in the range of USD 300-400 billion, and that investable cash flows from conservation projects need to be at least 20-30 times greater than they are today, reaching USD 200-300 billion per year, assuming current governmental and philanthropic conservation efforts were to roughly double to USD 100 billion per year. This corresponds to around 1% of total private sector annual investments globally.²⁴ Conversely, the collapse of ecosystems would be much more costly, if not deadly to humanity over the long run.

D. GUIDING QUESTIONS AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Ministers and other high-level representatives are invited to address the following guiding questions:

1. Which concrete measures will you take or have you already taken as a leader to ensure that the environmental dimension of sustainable development is taken into full consideration in a balanced and holistic manner when building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world?

2. How can the global community best work together to build a stronger political momentum towards this aim?
3. What should be the role of UNEP and the UN to support this aim, in light of the new UNEP Medium Term Strategy and Programme of Work and Budget?

Ministers and other high-level representatives are also invited to announce new or existing concrete actions by their respective governments or organizations that will promote the environmental dimension of sustainable development in building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world.

The Leadership Dialogue will be recorded and result in a factual Summary prepared by the Secretariat that will be made available online, to facilitate further access for interested stakeholders worldwide after the session.

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- ¹ [United Nations Development Programme. \(2020\). *COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery*. New York: UNDP](http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid)
<http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>
- ² United Nations General Assembly. (2020). *Towards the achievement of sustainable development: implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including through sustainable consumption and production, building on Agenda 2. A/75/269*. See <https://undocs.org/en/A/75/269>
- ³ *COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University* <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
- ⁴ See Vivid Economics, Greenness of Stimulus Index: <https://www.vivideconomics.com/casestudy/greenness-for-stimulus-index/>
- ⁵ Zohdy, S., Schwartz, T.S. and Oaks, J.R. (2019). The Coevolution Effect as a Driver of Spillover. *Trends in Parasitology*, 35(6), 399–408. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pt.2019.03.010>; Preventing the Next Pandemic Zoonotic Diseases and How to Break the Chain of Transmission <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/32316/ZP.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- ⁶ Keesing, F., Belden, L.K., Daszak, P., Dobson, A., Harvell, C. D., Holt, R.D. et al. (2010). Impacts of biodiversity on the emergence and transmission of infectious diseases. *Nature*, 468, 647–652. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature09575>
- ⁷ Wilcox, B.A. and Ellis, B. (2006). Forests and emerging infectious diseases of humans. *Unasylva*, 224(57), 11–19. <http://www.fao.org/tempref/docrep/fao/009/a0789e/a0789e03.pdf>
- ⁸ Johnson, C.K., Hitchens, P.L., Evans, T.S., Goldstein, T., Thomas, K., Clements, A. et al. (2015). Spillover and pandemic properties of zoonotic viruses with high host plasticity. *Scientific Reports*, 5, 14830. <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep14830>; Johnson, C.K. et al. Global shifts in mammalian population trends reveal key predictors of virus spillover risk. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 2020; 287 (1924): 20192736 DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2019.2736
- ⁹ Taylor, L.H., Latham, S.M. and Woolhouse, M.E.J. (2001). Risk factors for human disease emergence. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 356(1411), 983–989. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2001.0888>
- ¹⁰ World Bank (2012). *People, pathogens and our planet: The economics of one health*. Washington DC: The World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/11892>
- ¹¹ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-1-4020-6799-0_8
- ¹² <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/press-release/illegal-trade-wildlife-and-timber-products-finances-criminal-and>
- ¹³ https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/2020/World_Wildlife_Report_2020_9July.pdf
- ¹⁴ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/black-rhino>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.iucn.org/content/whales-dolphins-and-porpoises-threatened-over-fishing>
- ¹⁶ Chan, K.H., Peiris, J.S., Lam, S.Y., Poon, L.L., Yuen, K.Y. and Seto, W.H. (2011). The Effects of Temperature and Relative Humidity on the Viability of the SARS Coronavirus. *Advances in Virology*, 2011, 734690. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2011/734690>
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- ¹⁸ Nava, A., Shimabukuro, J.S., Chmura, A. A. and Luz, S.L.B. (2017). The Impact of Global Environmental Changes on Infectious Disease Emergence with a Focus on Risks for Brazil. *ILAR journal*, 58(3), 393–400. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ilar/ilx034>
- ¹⁹ <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>
- ²⁰ See <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3>
<https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health>
<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/07/180706102842.htm>
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- ²² World Health Organization (WHO) and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). (2015). *Connecting global priorities: Biodiversity and human health – A state of knowledge review*. WHO and CBD: Geneva and Montreal. <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/connecting-global-priorities-biodiversity-and-human-health>
- ²³ <https://docplayer.net/82400-People-pathogens-and-our-planet-volume-2-the-economics-of-one-health-public-disclosure-authorized.html>
- ²⁴ Credit Suisse, WWF & McKinsey & Company. 2014. *Conservation Finance. Moving beyond donor funding toward an investor-driven approach*. See <https://www.cbd.int/financial/privatesector/g-private-wwf.pdf>