

Concept note for the leadership dialogue at the online meeting of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly

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.”

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, in his “State of the Planet” address at Columbia University on 2 December 2020

A. INTRODUCTION

This concept note is intended to assist Member States and stakeholders in their preparations for the leadership dialogue planned for the online meeting of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme, to be held in Nairobi on 22 and 23 February 2021.

In line with the decision of the joint meeting of the bureaux of the United Nations Environment Assembly and of the Committee of Permanent Representatives at their meeting of 1 December 2020, a leadership dialogue will be convened during the online meeting of the fifth session, with the aim of promoting an interactive high-level discussion on the contribution of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world. With a view to facilitating the participation of ministers and other high-level representatives from different time zones, the leadership dialogue will be held twice: from 4 to 7 p.m. (Nairobi time (UTC+3)) on Monday, 22 February 2021, and from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. (Nairobi time (UTC+3)) on Tuesday, 23 February 2021.

B. MODALITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

- Interested Member States and stakeholders will be invited to inscribe, by Monday 8 February 2021 at the latest, the details of their high-level representatives on the list of participants for the fifth session, indicating the name, title and level of representation of the representative, and their preferred timing for the leadership dialogue. The list of participants will be opened on Monday, 25 January 2021. Inscriptions will be considered as binding.
- To allow for an interactive dialogue, the number of participants at each of the substantially identical leadership dialogue sessions will be limited to around 40 high-level participants. Participation will be on a first-come, first-served basis, as well as taking into account the aim to ensure equitable regional representation at each of the sessions.

- Each session of the leadership dialogue will be facilitated by a professional moderator with the task of enabling an interactive exchange of views among participants. When giving the floor to participants, the moderator will accord priority to ministers, heads of non-governmental organizations, chief executive officers and heads of international organizations.
- Each session of the leadership dialogue will be introduced by means of a short video developed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on the theme of the dialogue, namely “Contribution of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world”, followed by short introductory statements by one or more vice-president(s) of the Environment Assembly and one representative from among the major groups and stakeholders. Thereafter, 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.
- Interpretation will be available in the six official languages of the United Nations at both sessions of the leadership dialogue through the online meeting platform “Interprefy”. Participants will be required to ensure that they are able to connect to the platform prior to the leadership dialogue sessions and familiarize themselves with the operation of the platform by 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 session of the online meeting of the fifth session of the Assembly, which is scheduled to take place from 4 to 6 p.m. (Nairobi time (UTC+3)) on Tuesday, 23 February 2021. The summary will be made available in writing after the meeting.
- Representatives of Member States may also, as an alternative or as a complement to “live” attendance in the leadership dialogue, send in a recorded or written statement. Such submissions should be sent to the secretariat by 1 February 2021 at the latest and will be uploaded on the official website for the fifth session of the Environment Assembly. Recorded speeches will not be played during the leadership dialogue sessions.

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

We recognize that people are at the centre of sustainable development. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exposed the fragility of many economies and deepened existing inequalities, imperilling decades of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. A recent report by the Secretary-General¹ highlighted that, in addition to the tragic loss of lives across the globe caused by COVID-19, the 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, livelihoods and, of course, human health (in excess of 1.9 million people have lost their lives to COVID-19). 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.

¹ A/75/269.

Many Governments are missing an opportunity for constructive change – a catalytic path forward could reject the unsustainable habits of the past and make the 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. 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 make the transition to a more sustainable future. Realizing such benefits, however, will require an unprecedented redirection of funds and new investments, including investments that build on an understanding of natural capital. Furthermore, when designing labour policies, multi-stakeholder dialogues should take place between all segments of society in order to include groups that 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. 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. Deforestation, particularly in the tropics, has been associated with an increase in infectious diseases, such as dengue fever, malaria and yellow fever. 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 between species.

Some 60 per cent of known infectious diseases, and 75 per cent of emerging infectious diseases, are zoonotic, 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 \$100 billion of economic damage, a tally that does not include the effects of 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 the 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. 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 exposing people to potentially catastrophic zoonotic diseases. Regrettably, the illegal wildlife trade, worth an estimated \$7 billion–\$23 billion annually, continues to rise. Seizures of pangolins, the most trafficked animal in the world, have increased tenfold in the past six years; the number of rhinos in the wild has dropped by 95 per cent since the beginning of the twentieth century; and illegal fishing is threatening aquatic species from whales to sturgeon with extinction. 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 habitats and wildlife play a critical role in protecting biodiversity, often acting as the first line of defence for animals and ecosystems. However, many such communities have been exploited by organized criminal groups that encourage them 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 the illegal wildlife trade and ensuring effective implementation is crucial. Support for the sustainable and legal use of wildlife and its products that is accompanied by equitable sharing of benefits and reinvestment into nature contributes to multiple sustainable development outcomes. Evidence-based policies that are matched with support for education and behaviour change are key and require better implementation and enforcement.

Climate change and inefficient food systems have also been linked to increased risks from zoonotic diseases. 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. For many insects and rodents, for example, higher temperatures lead to population explosions and the expansion of their ranges, which can ultimately propel a disease into humans. In other cases, rising sea levels or coastal flooding can increase the risk of water-borne zoonoses. Inefficient food systems, including unsustainable production, transportation and rampant food waste, is eroding planetary health and increasing the risk of future pandemics. The rising demand for livestock production, for example, brings 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. Due to the severe negative economic effects of contagions, the poor often turn to exploiting natural resources to make ends meet, exacerbating the cycle of degradation and increasing the long-term risk of future crises. In contrast, a healthy natural environment can have a positive effect on 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.

Human, animal and planetary health are inextricably linked. Reducing the risk of future pandemics requires the protection of functioning ecosystems and the restoration of natural barriers to the spread of zoonotic diseases. Attention must be paid 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 in 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 – which can be extremely cost-effective. Current World Bank estimates indicate that economic losses from six fatal zoonoses average \$6.7 billion per year, while investments in the One Health approach, which could prevent such outbreaks, range between \$1.9 billion and \$3.4 billion in the same period. The One Health approach requires, among other things, the strengthening of 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 the national level are particularly important for high risk countries.

There has never been a greater opportunity to Act #ForNature. Government policies can reinforce the linkages between human well-being and the health of ecosystems, thus strengthening the environmental dimension of sustainable development. With the commencement of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) running in parallel with the decade of action on the Sustainable Development Goals, the time to conserve nature and restore lost ecosystems is now. Nature, in all its diversity and complexity, underpins economies, societies and the very existence of humanity. It is a life support system – vital to health and well-being – providing humanity with raw materials, shelter, medicine, food and water. It recycles nutrients, cleans the air and regulates our climate. Nature supports billions of jobs and is a source of spiritual inspiration for many. In a world with a rapidly-growing population that is facing multiple social and economic challenges, it is essential to appreciate the benefits that nature – particularly the diversity of ecosystems, species and genetic material – accords to humanity and to pursue a development path that recognizes the value of the services that intact ecosystems provide. One study estimates annual global conservation needs to be in the range of \$300 billion–\$400 billion, and that investable cash flows from conservation projects need to be at least 20–30 times greater than they are today, reaching \$200 billion–\$300 billion per year, assuming that current governmental and philanthropic conservation efforts were to roughly double to \$100 billion per year, which corresponds to around 1 per cent of total private sector annual investments globally. In the long run, the collapse of ecosystems would undoubtedly be much more costly, if not deadly, to humanity.

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 fully taken into 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 achieving this aim?
3. What role should UNEP and the United Nations play in supporting this aim in the 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 a factual summary of the dialogue will be prepared by the secretariat and made available online to facilitate access by interested stakeholders worldwide after the session.