



Online meeting of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.1) Written submission for the Leadership Dialogue

February 19, 2021

Your excellencies, on behalf of the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), Health and Environment Justice Support (HEJSupport), the Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research, and Education (COARE), the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF), OceanCare, accredited organizations member of the Break Free From Plastic movement, and together with United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth, we have the pleasure to submit this written submission to the leadership dialogue of the UNEA 5.1 under the topic: *“Contribution of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world.”*

We fully endorse the joint global statement from the Major Groups entitled “Building Forward Better: Action is Urgently Needed.”

We welcome the Political Message, slated to be approved during UNEA-5.1, “Looking ahead to the resumed UN Environment Assembly in 2022,” in particular the compromise to make further progress on marine litter and micro plastics.

However, there are some key messages that are missing on this urgent topic, for instance:

- 1) Emphasize the critical importance of informed and meaningful public participation in international fora, and commit to adapting these and other processes to ensure that all affected stake- and rightsholders have real and meaningful opportunities to participate effectively in decisions that affect their planet, their communities and our common future;
- 2) Recognize that Children and Youth are agents of change and, in addition to a legal obligation, there is a need to empower constituencies of young people in the multilateral fora for the environment, including for future environmental agreements negotiations, as well as to underscore the role of education on the environment and sustainable development in strengthening actions to achieve SDGs. Education can foster the shift from “throwaway habits” to more responsible production and consumption models.

- 3) Acknowledge that the disparate impacts of the COVID pandemic have been felt by individuals, including women, groups, and peoples in vulnerable situations and worldwide. Furthermore, the use of disposable materials of masks, gloves and take-out containers to contain the spread of the virus has led to a 40% increase of all plastic made globally. The pandemic has exacerbated the marine plastic litter problem, however this can also represent an opportunity to steer our economies from linear to circular models

As leaders design and implement recovery plans, it is essential that these plans include ways to navigate the silent pandemics of our time, including our daily exposure to toxic chemicals, waste, and plastic.

Even during COVID, the oil, gas, and plastic industries are exploiting the crisis by aggressively lobbying for massive bailouts and special privileges. According to the G20 Energy Policy Tracker on Recovery Packages, investment destined to support harmful forms of energy far outweighs that destined to support beneficial forms. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the G20 has committed at least USD 486 billion to supporting different energy types. More than half of this (USD 242,32 billion) is directed to fossil fuels.

Is this the way to address three planetary-scale crises: climate change; loss of biodiversity; and pollution, including exposure to hazardous chemicals and waste? We do not think so.

Can UNEA and the multilateral system be at the pinnacle of the situation? For instance, it is the first time in the history of UNEA that you Member States can grant, at UNEA 5.2 a mandate for an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to start working toward a new legally binding global agreement on plastics.

The intersessional work between UNEA-5.1 and UNEA-5.2 will be crucial to continue the momentum of support toward a potential legally-binding agreement covering the full lifecycle of plastics. We strongly hope that these efforts by UNEP will support and complement a Member State-led process to build consensus for an urgent and comprehensive global solution to the plastic pollution crisis.

In that regard, we expect from some reaffirmation of existing commitments Member States, including the need to have inclusive processes meaningfully involving Civil Society Organisations, Indigenous peoples and other relevant stakeholders, including women, youth and children, and workers and trade unions from the start. This intersessional work will ideally result in a resolution submitted to UNEA-5.2 giving the mandate to create an intergovernmental negotiating committee with inclusive stakeholder participation.

With the commemoration of Stockholm +50, we also see a further significant opportunity to support a legally binding agreement to tackle plastic pollution, in alignment with the principles of the Stockholm Declaration.

Can UNEA and the multilateral system be at the pinnacle of the situation?