

## **Inputs of the United Nations Environment Assembly to the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>**

*FINAL VERSION – 17 March 2021*

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The inputs build on submissions in writing from several Member States submitted to the secretariat in February and March 2021, as well as the report from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) entitled "Working with the environment to protect people: COVID-19 Response"<sup>2</sup> and other relevant documents issued by the UNEP secretariat, including the Medium Term Strategy for UNEP 2022-2025 entitled "For people and planet: the United Nations Environment Programme strategy for 2022–2025 to tackle climate change, loss of nature and pollution" (UNEP/EA.5/3/Rev.1)<sup>3</sup>.

### ***(a) Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 HLPF from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs;***

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is instrumental in providing guidance to promote that the environmental dimension of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is incorporated into recovery efforts, bearing in mind the integrated nature of the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis: it is also a humanitarian and socioeconomic crisis. It has exposed and aggravated vulnerabilities and inequalities and it is exacerbating already existing challenges in meeting the SDGs worldwide. COVID-19 is also a reminder of the inextricable relationship between humans and the environment. The transmission pathways of zoonotic diseases highlight the extent of pressures humans have placed on the natural world. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic is a compelling reminder that addressing the environmental crises should be fully compatible with efforts to eradicating poverty and creating adequate incentives for sustainable livelihoods in line with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Information on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) from the vantage point of the environmental dimension of Sustainable Development, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other Sustainable Development Goals, is presented in Annex 1.

### ***(b) Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body;***

A healthy planet is an essential requirement and key enabler for sustainable development in which economic, social and environmental objectives are addressed in a balanced manner through an integrated approach. A vision for planetary sustainability for people, prosperity and equity requires addressing our common environmental challenges – climate change, pollution and nature loss – through action in three interlinked and mutually reinforcing strategic objectives: climate stability, living in harmony with nature and achieving a pollution-free planet. These objectives should be pursued within the overall objective of sustainable development and in accordance with the Rio Principles and can be achieved by working towards the following outcomes:

1. By significantly accelerating efforts by all Parties to achieve greenhouse gas emission reductions, adopt resilient pathways, and by significantly increasing capacity, finance and access to technologies in particular for developing countries, to deliver on the adaptations and mitigation goals of the United

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<sup>1</sup> While the content of this document represents broad general support among all Member States, it has not been subject to formal multilateral negotiation, and any references to formulations or concepts that have not been previously multilaterally agreed does not indicate that they are accepted by all Member States.

<sup>2</sup> Available here: <https://www.unep.org/covid-19>

<sup>3</sup> Available here: <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/pre-session-documents-unea-5>

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement and by implementing the enhanced transparency framework arrangements under the Paris Agreement;

2. By establishing an economically and socially sustainable pathway for halting and reversing the loss of biodiversity and enhancing ecosystem integrity, promoting the sustainable use of natural resources through ecosystem-based approaches, including nature-based solutions, and increasing the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources;
3. By enhancing the capacity and leadership in achieving sound management of chemicals and waste; by improving waste management through sustainable consumption and production including but not limited to circular economy and other sustainable economic models; and by reducing the release of pollutants into air, water, soil and the ocean.
4. By stressing the United Nations Environment Assembly's role in promoting the implementation of internationally agreed environmental goals and commitments, in the context of the 2030 Agenda and in accordance with the Rio Principles, as well as in promoting an effective global governance system informed by an open and inclusive environmental multilateralism.
5. By reiterating that the availability and accessibility of adequate, predictable and sustainable resource mobilization from all sources, technology development, dissemination, diffusion and transfer on mutually agreed terms and capacity-building are important for unlocking practical, affordable and innovative environmental solutions, as recognized in paragraph 7 of UNEA resolution 3/5 entitled "Investing in innovative environmental solutions for accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals"<sup>4</sup>.
6. By supporting the "One Health" approach, as recognized in paragraphs 24 and 33 of UNEA resolution 3/4 entitled "Environment and Health"<sup>5</sup>.
7. By supporting an ambitious and realistic post-2020 global biodiversity framework for adoption at the 15th Conference of Parties of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity as a key element in achieving the SDGs.

***(c) An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" at the global, regional and national levels against of background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, within the respective area addressed by your intergovernmental bodies;***

All over the world, the poor and marginalized (e.g. women, children, indigenous peoples, racial and ethnic minorities) continue to be those most vulnerable to the impacts of environmental risks. Protecting those most at risk needs to be central to COVID-19 response and recovery measures. This means putting inclusion and the eradication of poverty at the top of our agenda and embedding intra-generational and intergenerational equity and gender equality more systematically across all planning and response measures. To effectively meet the needs of vulnerable people and communities, we must address the multiple, intersecting exclusions that they face. An inclusive, intra-generational and intergenerational approach to data, analysis and policy making should be science-based, and engage every part of our societies. It is also paramount to recognize the cross-cutting nature of SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

***(d) Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic;***

COVID-19 has placed a significant financial burden on national governments, especially in developing countries, and has highlighted the urgent need for enhanced international cooperation and solidarity to

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<sup>4</sup> Available here: <https://papersmart.unon.org/resolution/unea3>

<sup>5</sup> Available here: <https://papersmart.unon.org/resolution/unea3>

strengthen national efforts and policies, and for innovative solutions to address the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

In particular, environmental challenges, just like the challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic worldwide, require global action and the creation of partnerships. In this process, it will be important to engage governments, business and the private sector, the scientific community and civil society to work together and outline forward-thinking strategies to respond to the pandemic, as well as to identify novel and transformative solutions to the global environmental crises.

Among other initiatives that can leverage the opportunities for enhanced cooperation are the following:

1. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), as mandated by the UN General Assembly in Resolution 73/284 of 1 March 2019<sup>6</sup>, with the aim to prevent, halt and reverse ecosystem degradation and accelerate existing restoration efforts across ecosystems;
2. Policy proposals for delivering an environmentally sustainable and inclusive recovery from the working Group on “Recovering Better for Sustainability”, under the 2020 Financing for the Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond Initiative<sup>7</sup>;
3. The Online Platform for Sustainable and Resilient Recovery from COVID-19<sup>8</sup>, which showcase policies and actions taken by national governments toward a sustainable and resilient recovery from COVID-19;
4. The Green Recovery Support Programme under the Partnership for Action on Green Economy<sup>9</sup>, which supports a number of countries to promote sustainable agriculture and sustainable food systems for creating jobs and income for small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples and family farmers;
5. The 10-year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production and One Planet Network can be leveraged to support multilateral collaboration to scale up SDG 12 which is key to addressing the global environmental crises and COVID 19 recovery.

***(e) Various measures and policy recommendations on building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development;***

1. Policy options that would help reduce and address pandemic risk:
  - Consider the “One Health” approach, as recognized in paragraph 24 and 33 of UNEA resolution 3/4 entitled “Environment and Health”, to build zoonosis preparedness, enhance zoonosis prevention programs, and to investigate and control outbreaks across sectors, taking into account developing countries’ capacity gaps and their specific social, economic and environmental challenges.
  - Promote the conservation of biological diversity, sustainable use and conservation of ecosystems, and the sustainable management of natural resources.
  - Leverage sustainable consumption and production, including but not limited to circular economy and other sustainable economic models, to steer recovery packages and investments towards sustainable economies, as well as to address global supply chain disruptions in times of crisis that can help create economic and social resilience.

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<sup>6</sup> Available here: <https://undocs.org/A/RES/73/284>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/financing-development>

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://platform2020redesign.org/>

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.un-page.org/>

- Improve the capacity to programme and perform actions to achieve the long-term vision inspired by the 2030 Agenda; strengthening policy coherence for sustainable development will be crucial to ensure the fulfilment of these objectives.
2. Policy options to promote sustainable consumption and production:
    - Promote the development, effectiveness and uptake of innovative sustainable business models, in line with paragraph 4 of UNEA Resolution 4/1<sup>10</sup>;
    - Develop sustainable public procurement policies in accordance with their commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal target 12.7, in line with paragraph 8 of UNEA Resolution 4/1;
    - Support education and raise awareness of the importance of sustainable consumption, sustainable lifestyles and sustainable consumer behavior, and those that develop related skills for academia and the private sector, including the financial sector, in line with paragraph 10 of UNEA Resolution 4/1.
  3. An action agenda to harness the potential of innovative financing opportunities:
    - Developing enabling macroeconomic and sectoral policies that contribute to sustainable development, in line with paragraph 1 of UNEA Resolution 4/4,<sup>11</sup> as well as promote sustainable production and innovative sustainable business models;
    - Developing and strengthening sustainable financing mechanisms, such as green bonds, to promote the inclusion of sustainability in business for the uptake and upscaling of sustainable business approaches, in line with paragraph 2 of UNEA Resolution 4/4<sup>12</sup>.
  4. Recommendations to scale-up climate action:
    - The 26th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP-26) will be an opportunity to bring leaders together to demonstrate enhanced climate ambition and deliver commitments on climate change policy related to mitigation, adaptation, technology and finance;
    - Reconvening of the “Global Conference on Strengthening Synergies between the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (informally the “Climate & SDGs Synergy Conference”), could be an opportunity to align processes of climate action and the SDGs in order to stimulate action of stakeholders at the global, regional and national levels and to maximize co-benefits.

***(f) Key messages for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2021 HLPF.***

Building on the elements outlined in prior sections of this document, the following key messages may be considered as part of the 2021 HLPF Ministerial Declaration:

1. Welcome the convening of the online segment of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) and its outcomes;
2. Welcome the online UNEA-5 Leadership Dialogue addressing the contribution of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world, which

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<sup>10</sup> Available here: <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/proceedings-report-ministerial-declaration-resolutions-and-decisions-unea-4>

<sup>11</sup> Available here: <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/proceedings-report-ministerial-declaration-resolutions-and-decisions-unea-4>

<sup>12</sup> Available here: <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/proceedings-report-ministerial-declaration-resolutions-and-decisions-unea-4>

recognized the centrality of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to build a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world as well as the crucial role played by the United Nations Environment Programme as the leading global environmental authority;

3. Welcome the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030 and encourage Member States to accelerate action for support;
4. Reiterate the need for action on biodiversity protection, conservation and sustainable use, climate change, sustainable consumption and production and sound management of chemicals and waste, including by improving waste management as part of the sustainable recovery efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic;
5. Reiterate that the availability and accessibility of adequate, predictable and sustainable resource mobilization from all sources, technology development, dissemination, diffusion and transfer on mutually agreed terms and capacity-building are important for unlocking practical, affordable and innovative environmental solutions, as recognized in paragraph 7 of UNEA resolution 3/5 entitled “Investing in innovative environmental solutions for accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
6. Invite Member States to support frameworks and networks to achieve the targets of SDG 12, as a strategic approach to promote sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19;
7. Invite Member States to promote sustainable and innovative financing opportunities and mechanisms to unlock new capital for sustainable investment and to upscale sustainable business models, with a special focus on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises;
8. Invite Member States to scale up global climate action through global solidarity and collaboration;
9. Invite Member States to support the development of metrics to foster the mainstreaming of environmental sustainability across economic sectors and include better conservation and sustainable use of natural resources into economic and social development planning, in accordance with national circumstances and priorities.

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*Annex: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 High Level Political Forum from the vantage point of environmental dimension of sustainable development, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs*

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Considering the theme and the set of SDGs to be reviewed in-depth by the HLPF in 2021<sup>13</sup>, the following impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are highlighted from the vantage point of environmental dimension of sustainable development, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs.

1. Biodiversity, ecosystem conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources are core to achieving SDG 1 - No Poverty- and SDG 2 –Zero Hunger. The effects on extreme poverty, particularly in countries that already have high poverty rates, have risen markedly due to severe COVID-19 related global economic contractions around the globe. In many countries, the indirect health, humanitarian and economic impacts of the pandemic are being felt more strongly than the direct health impacts, particularly as they are exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and reversing years of development gains. With COVID-19 pushing more people in poverty, increased hunger and reduced work opportunities may increase unsustainable land use pressures and practices which may undermine biodiversity and ecosystem integrity which in turn may negatively impact food security. The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency of developing adequate incentives to foster the sustainable use of biodiversity and strengthening the benefit sharing framework under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the Nagoya Protocol which is a fundamental tool to support sustainable livelihoods.
2. Environment and health, including health inequalities, impact on SDG 3 -Good Health and Well-being<sup>14</sup>. Healthy ecosystems help to mitigate air, water pollution and soil erosion, as well as being the source of both modern and traditional medicines and support sustainable food systems. The immediate and underlying pressures of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation are considered as drivers of zoonoses and must be addressed in an integrated, effective, targeted and sustainable manner, alongside efforts to strengthen sustainable consumption and production, ensure food and nutritional security and promote inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities.
3. Recession and job losses are impacting on SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth. COVID-19 and efforts to contain it have led to one of the most serious recessions in recent history, characterized by, among others, a decline in economic growth, decreased trade, low business revenues and massive layoffs<sup>15</sup>. One of the most affected is the tourism sector, which places jobs at risk and has already led to a rise in poaching, looting and in consumption of bushmeat, partly due to the decreased presence of tourists and staff<sup>16</sup>. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, more than 25 million jobs across the infrastructure sector have been lost or were at risk of being lost in the short term. A focus on environmentally sustainable renovation of buildings has a job creation potential of 9-30 jobs per 1 million USD invested (greater than most other sectors) and helps improve living conditions<sup>17</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the risk of illegal deforestation and heightened the urgency of action to prevent it. It has also worsened capacity gaps across national governments and placed

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<sup>13</sup> The HLPF in 2021 will discuss Sustainable Development Goals 1 on no poverty, 2 on zero hunger, 3 on good health and well-being, 8 on decent work and economic growth, 10 on reduced inequalities, 12 on responsible consumption and production, 13 on climate action, 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and 17 on partnerships in depth-

<sup>14</sup> UNEA Resolution 3/4. Environment and Health. Para, 2,

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/policy/wesp-mid-2020-report.html>

<sup>16</sup> UNWTO. Tourism and COVID-19 Unprecedented Impacts. Available at: <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-and-covid-19-unprecedented-economic-impacts>

<sup>17</sup> See, United Nations Environment Programme (2020). 2020 Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction: Towards a Zero-emission, Efficient and Resilient Buildings and Construction Sector. Nairobi. Available here: [https://globalabc.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/2020%20Buildings%20GSR\\_FULL%20REPORT.pdf](https://globalabc.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/2020%20Buildings%20GSR_FULL%20REPORT.pdf)

additional burden on financial and human resources. Lockdowns have led to disruptions in supply chains and caused job losses, triggering reverse migration into rural areas and increased pressure on forests to provide for subsistence livelihoods. Nonetheless, the current pandemic also gives us an opportunity to strengthen and consolidate sustainable consumption and production within our economic systems. Innovative financial mechanisms, such as payments for environmental services, could support local communities that contribute to biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, thus strengthening sustainable forest management and fostering the forestry sector.

4. On the implementation of SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities, the socio-economic distress resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic is now exacerbating and deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political, economic, and biodiversity systems, which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic. The degradation of ecosystems has different impacts at the macro and micro level. At the micro level, it leads to the erosion of the resource base and environmental services. Viewed from an “equity” perspective, the poverty of their beneficiaries makes these ecosystem service losses even more significant as a proportion of their incomes and livelihoods<sup>18</sup>. Poverty, where it leads to degradation of natural capital to support needs, reduces the services generated by ecosystems which, with lack of investment resources, leads to more poverty, thus creating a vicious circle.
5. Regarding SDG 12 - Sustainable consumption and production, many zoonotic diseases are linked to unsustainable consumption and production patterns. The pandemic is also causing a spike in hazardous waste, such as personal protective equipment, electronics and pharmaceuticals; masses of wastewater and massive use of detergents, disinfectants and antimicrobial solutions<sup>19</sup>. UNEA resolution 4/1 called to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation and primary resource consumption<sup>20</sup> and, in the context of post COVID-19 recovery as countries are looking to ‘build back better’, measuring capital stocks through wealth accounts will be imperative, with particular focus on reducing the degradation of ecosystem health which underpins natural capital.
6. Regarding the implementation of SDG 13 – Climate action, the measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus have slowed economic activities and therefore led to a transitory reduction in GHG emissions worldwide. However, this is not caused by structural transformations and economic recovery might prompt emissions to pre-pandemic levels or even worse. This is why we need to recover better, making sure to mainstream environmental and sustainability criteria throughout all recovery policy measures, in accordance with national circumstances and capacities. The COVID-19 crisis can only contribute to greenhouse gas emission reductions if the economic recovery incorporates ambitious climate action. The impacts of climate change are right before us and COVID-19 has exacerbated these challenges particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable countries such as Least Developed Countries and Small Developing Island States: Cyclical changes in the climate require farmers and fishers to adjust in facing the uncertainties; rising sea levels require coastal and small island populations to persevere; increasing frequency of natural disasters, including floods and droughts, require people to stay alert, among other challenges. Decisive and ambitious action to combat climate change and biodiversity loss remain an urgent necessity.

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<sup>18</sup> Ten Brink, P (Editor). The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity in National and International Policy Making. UNEP (2011).

<sup>19</sup> UNEP (2020). Working with the Environment to Protect People: UNEP’s COVID-19 response.

<sup>20</sup> Operative paragraph 1. UNEA resolution 4/1, “Innovative pathways to achieve sustainable consumption and production”.