

Concept note for a resolution to establish a Science – Policy Panel to support action on chemicals, waste and pollution

Submitted by the African Group, Costa Rica, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Uruguay

Chemical pollution is a global threat that warrants global action. At the 5th United Nations Environment Assembly meeting (UNEA5) in 2021, governments prioritized pollution for UNEP's work in 2022–2025, along side climate change and biodiversity. Science is central to achieving successful action on chemicals, waste and pollution. Based on resolution submitted by the African Group and Switzerland, UNEA 4 recognised that science is needed to set priorities, for policymaking and to monitor progress: science-based decision-making should be promoted at all levels, and that the science-policy interface (SPI) needs to be strengthened.¹

Since then, there has been growing recognition of the case for action. It was for example confirmed by stakeholders during the process of preparing the forthcoming meeting of the International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM 5) and many stakeholders from the science community have supported a call for UNEA to take action². Most recently, the Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights has drawn attention to the importance of an effective SPI so that the policy and regulatory framework can be grounded in the best available evidence.³ Effective use of science will help achieve the goal of sound management of chemicals and waste.

UNEP has prepared a report, as requested by UNEA 4, “An assessment of options for strengthening the science-policy interface at the international level for the sound management of chemicals and waste”.⁴ This helpfully examined three options for an SPI, and set out a number of key considerations for the design of a platform.

Case for establishing an intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel

A science-policy panel will support United Nations agencies, global Multilateral Agreements and other international instruments, such as the beyond 2020 instrument, countries and the private sector in their work to manage chemicals and waste soundly to reduce pollution. It will provide authoritative, independent, credible, inclusive, policy-relevant scientific advice on chemicals, waste and pollution issues. The availability of advice will not only enable more timely action to minimise and prevent the adverse effects of pollution and human exposure to harmful substances, but also assess potential solutions – for example sustainable chemistry approaches. It will enable improved prioritisation of resource, guiding scientists to conduct timely research to support policymaking.

¹ UNEA 4/8.

² [Sign-on Campaign: Developing a global science-policy body on chemicals and waste | IPCP](#) or [rsc-spi-chemicals-brief-2020.pdf](#)

³ A/HRC/48/61

⁴ Available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/chemicals-and-waste-reports-unea-5>

Of the three highly inter-connected pillars set out in the UNEP medium term strategy⁵ – action on climate, nature (biodiversity), and chemicals and pollution – there are already intergovernmental panels in place for the first two which have proved successful in improving the scientific support to policy-making, and in raising awareness. There is no such science-policy panel, however, to support the third pillar. The IPCC and IPBES have initiated the joint work to establish better connection between climate and biodiversity. The lack of a panel on chemicals, waste and pollution impedes our ability to address the three planetary crises and meet our Sustainable Development Goals.

Main elements of the proposal

The draft resolution will invite UNEA to agree that a new panel is needed. There are three key functions which should be central to its work:

- (i) to undertake horizon scanning, that is a systematic examination of information to identify potential threats, risks, emerging issues and opportunities; and identify potential issues of concern and provide evidence-based options for solutions to address them;
- (ii) to undertake assessments on the nature and scale of particular issues, how they may evolve in future, and to generate outputs that inform all actors, to support them in developing specific instruments or policies;
- (iii) to provide up-to-date and relevant information, catalyse scientific research, ensure communication between scientists and policymakers, to translate and disseminate findings for different audiences and raise public awareness.

UNEA should agree that the panel should be autonomous, and intergovernmental in nature, providing policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive advice to policy making bodies. This model is best designed to provide authoritative, consensus-based advice that will carry full weight within international forums, drawing on the full range of expertise available in a fully transparent manner. An inter-governmental panel will achieve the greatest impact in raising awareness of the issues and providing for greater engagement between the science and policy-making communities.

The resolution will establish an open-ended working group (OEWG), the terms of which would be to prepare proposals on: the institutional design, how the work programme should be established, working methods, arrangements for the secretariat, and financial arrangements amongst other issues.

The resolution will also make clear the importance of a panel that can be policy-relevant without being policy-prescriptive; is interdisciplinary in nature, with geographical, regional and gender balance; must have authority, credibility, legitimacy, and be transparent; must complement and not duplicate the work of other agencies or scientific bodies, and work closely with them; and must be able to address conflicts of interest.

⁵ UNEP/EA.5/3/Rev.1, as adopted by Decision 5/2

The IPCC and IPBES provide two models of how this can be done, but a panel to support chemicals, waste and pollution action will need to be tailored to meet the specific needs of this community. It should have a streamlined and cost-effective structure, which can be flexible in responding to the needs of policy-making customers and could be on a more modest scale.

Links with other UN agencies and international organisations

It is right that UNEA, as the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, should initiate action to establish an SPI to support chemicals, waste and pollution action. There are many international organisations and agencies which play important roles in addressing chemicals, waste and pollution - including those dealing with health, agriculture and labour for example, as well as the chemicals and waste cluster. It is important the new panel should be responsive to the needs of those agencies and instruments, and the draft resolution will invite them to take part in the work of the OEWG. It may be appropriate of the governing bodies of those agencies to adopt their own resolutions in relation to the new panel.

The unsound management of chemicals and waste can pose significant risks for human health, and the resolution will therefore invite the World Health Organization to share with UNEP in preparing and supporting the work of the OEWG.

Next steps

Should your country have questions or be interested in joining Switzerland as co-sponsor, please contact the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (Michel Tschirren, michel.tschirren@bafu.admin.ch, Tel +41 58 462 01 64). The co-sponsors will be preparing a draft text for a resolution in due time.

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