

Joint meeting of the Bureaux of UN Environment Assembly  
and of the Committee of Permanent Representatives  
11 January 2022  
16:00 – 18:00 (GMT +3 – Nairobi time)  
Online meeting

**Agenda Item 2: Consideration of the timing and format of UNEA-5 in view of COVID-19.**

This document, entitled “Update and possible options on format and timing for the resumed session of UNEA-5 and the special session on UNEP@50” serves as a background document for agenda item 2: Consideration of the timing and format of UNEA-5 in view of COVID-19.

Taking into account the recent evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, the note refers to relevant decisions and guidance from Member States to date and the recent [Secretariat Notification by the Executive Director on the resumed fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly and the special session of the United Nations Environment Assembly on UNEP@50](#), and outlines possible options to adjust the current approach.

The note concludes with a recommendation to postpone the resumed session of UNEA-5, the special session on UNEP@50 and its preparatory meetings to April 2022.

The Bureau will be invited to consider the note with and to provide further guidance with a view to decide on the timing and format of the meetings referred to above.

## **Update and possible options on format and timing for the resumed session of UNEA-5 and the special session on UNEP@50**

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### **1. Background**

At its meeting on [8 October 2020](#), the UNEA bureau decided to support a proposal by the UNEA President to adopt a “two-step” approach by which UNEA-5 would meet online on 22-23 February 2021 with a revised and streamlined agenda, and that the session would be complemented by a second component in the form of a resumed UNEA-5 to be held in-person in Nairobi in February / March 2022. The decision was based on an options paper from the Secretariat which was discussed at a joint meeting of the UNEA and CPR Bureaux held on [11 September 2020](#), and guidance provided by Member States at a sub-committee meeting of the CPR on [1 October 2020](#).

At the online meeting of UNEA-5, which took place on 22-23 February 2021, Member States decided by [UNEA decision 5/3](#) and pursuant to the UNEA rules of procedure to adjourn temporarily and to resume the session by convening in Nairobi from 28 February to 2 March 2022. In addition, UNEA decided by the same decision to convene a special session to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of UNEP from 3 and 4 March 2022 in Nairobi, in conjunction with the resumed fifth session under the leadership of the Presidency and Bureau of the sixth session of the Environment Assembly.

Building on guidance provided by the host country, the UN Office in Nairobi, the UNEA and Member States, the Secretariat has developed a [Secretariat Notification by the Executive Director on the resumed fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly and the special session of the United Nations Environment Assembly on UNEP@50](#). A draft version was considered at the joint [meeting of the UNEA and CPR Bureaux on 8 December 2021](#), whereby the meeting took note of the draft and requested the Secretariat to revise and finalize the notification taking into account the guidance provided by Members of the two Bureaux at the meeting.

Subsequently, the Secretariat made the Notification available to all Member States on 13 December 2021. Paragraphs 11-14 in the notification outline general and specific guidance and meeting restrictions related to the COVID pandemic, referred to as “COVID-19 minimum requirements”, including clarification on what is meant by “hybrid format”, mandatory requirements of COVID-19 vaccination, restrictions and recommendations regarding physical distancing in meeting rooms, recommended size of delegations, and other minimum requirements relating to for example face coverings, and directives to participants or testing positive or showing symptoms of COVID-19.

Paragraph 14 in the Notification states that “The above-mentioned guidance will be regularly reviewed in the light of the future evolution and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and may be relaxed or tightened or complemented by additional specific guidance based on information provided by the host country, Kenya, and in view of evolving medical advice and scientific findings, under the guidance of the Bureaux of the Environment Assembly and the Committee of Permanent Representatives.”

### **2. Update on the latest developments relating to COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been subject to significant developments since the issuance of the notification in mid-December. In the past weeks, the Omicron variant has surged, and the global tally of new COVID cases has for the first time passed one million per day on average, breaking the previous daily average global case record set in April 2021. At the same time, there are indications from preliminary evidence from South Africa that infections, especially among the vaccinated or those previously infected, may be milder than other with other previous variants, and South Africa has announced that its Omicron wave now appear to have passed without a large spike in fatalities. This offers cautious hope for other countries grappling with the fast spreading variant.

The following information is extracted from the [WHO press conference 29 December 2021](#):

- Delta and Omicron are twin threats that are driving up cases to record numbers, which again is leading to spikes in hospitalisations and deaths.
- Omicron being more transmissible, circulating at the same time as Delta - is leading to a tsunami of cases. This puts immense pressure on exhausted health workers and health systems on the brink of collapse and again disrupting lives and livelihoods.
- The pressure on health systems is not only because of new COVID-19 patients requiring hospitalisation but also a large number of health workers are getting sick themselves.
- The unvaccinated are many times more at risk of dying from either variant.

Further, the recent surge of COVID cases has led to thousands of cancelled flights in the past few weeks, as airlines are unable to adequately staff their flights and some airlines have canceled destinations that have been considered high-risk areas, which puts into question the objective of ensuring universal in-person participation at the meetings.

Furthermore, as of 4 January, and in view of the rapid increase in the positivity rate in Kenya, as elsewhere, and increased pressure on hospital beds, and in view of an unprecedented wave of cases within the UN family resulting in more than 350 active UN cases of COVID infections, the UN Office in Nairobi has decided to take additional precautions to protect staff and their families, contractors and all other visitors to the UN Complex. Accordingly, the UN in Nairobi will temporarily return to the previous phase of our Back to Office plan and encourage the majority of staff to work from home. UNON will also initiate the provision of booster shots for eligible UN staff in January 2022.

In view of these developments, the UNEA Presidency and the Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives have requested the Secretariat to consider contingency plans for the resumed session of UNEA 5 and the special session on UNEP@50.

### **3. Options regarding the format and timing for UNEA 5.2 and UNEP@50**

**Option 1:** Continue to plan and organize UNEA 5.2 and UNEP@50 and its preparatory meetings in a hybrid format for the planned dates with the aim of universal in-person participation, while respecting the COVID-19 minimum requirements outlined in the Secretariat Notification - as possibly adjusted in line with paragraph 14 in the Secretariat Notification above.

**Pros:** This approach is fully aligned with existing decisions made at UNEA-5.1 and relevant Bureau meetings, it minimizes disruption in terms of current planning and organization of the meetings (provided that they can go ahead as planned), and it maintains the political momentum.

**Cons:** Option 1 would rely on the assumption that the pandemic will recede worldwide or that it is manageable from a health, practical, political and financial perspective. While the Omicron wave is currently sweeping through Africa, Europe and North America, it has yet to take deep hold in other geographical locations and peaks and travel disruptions will therefore in all likelihood roll across the world for the coming months. Based on current information, there are considerable uncertainties and risks related to for example the spread of infections at the Nairobi UN compound, possible global travel restrictions or disruptions, limited willingness or capacity to attend at ministerial and heads of state level, and financial consequences in the form of absence of UN staff, shortage of hospital beds, unused or perturbed flight ticketing and DSA, procurement of temporary facilities and other contractual arrangements, etc. This can lead to major disruptions at short notice, before or during the meetings, and may undermine the legitimacy of the political outcome of the meetings. As mentioned, while the new Omicron variant may have subsided in some regions of the world, it may yet have to peak in others.

UNEP also pays for the travel and daily subsistence allowance of a limited number of delegates from developing countries to attend UNEP meetings in Nairobi. Should delegates be delayed or be required to quarantine or require medical treatment or evacuation (MEDIVAC), this could result in a significant financial cost which UNEP will not be able to underwrite.

**Option 2:** Some or all of the meetings are postponed to later in 2022.

**Pros:** The additional time provided minimizes the uncertainties related to the impacts and consequences of the current wave of COVID-19 and increases the likelihood that all meetings can take place in person under safe circumstances from a health perspective. All negotiations may take place with universal in-person participation in a hybrid format. It would also give Member States and the Secretariat more time to prepare for substantive outcomes, through consultations under the auspices of the Committee of Permanent Representatives, and it significantly reduces the practical and financial risks from a Secretariat perspective.

**Cons:** A decision to postpone the meetings may be considered disruptive by some Member States. However, there are procedures in place in accordance with the rules of procedure of UNEA that would allow the membership to alter the dates of the resumed session of UNEA as well as its special session, should it wish to do so. In addition, there is of course no guarantee that the COVID-19 pandemic has receded to levels that are controllable or deemed acceptable by any given time, and new and more dangerous variants may still appear. In such cases, the situation will again have to be reassessed with similar options for reconsideration.

**Option 3:** All or some meetings will be organized online to minimize the risk of infections, with no or limited in-person participation.

**Pros:** The meetings can be organized in accordance to the planned dates.

**Cons:** Many Member States have clearly stated that they do not accept negotiations on substantive issues to take place online, and there is therefore a significant risk that it will not be possible to adopt substantive decisions at UNEA 5.2 and UNEP@50.

With regard to option 2, Member States may be guided by Annex I, which lists some of the key international environment-related meetings in 2022 from March onwards. The main window of opportunity to postpone the UNEA-related meetings during the first half of 2022 appears to be the period between Easter (13-17 April) and Eid al Fitr (3 May), taking into consideration the likely postponement of the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the conference of parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP 15), due to the recent decision to postpone the meetings of the twenty-fourth meeting of its Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA 24)<sup>1</sup>.

#### **4. Recommendation**

Any decision relating to the format and timing is to be taken by Member States, following political considerations, relevant best practices and rules of procedure.

The role of the Secretariat is to provide the best possible conditions to organize UNEA 5.2 and UNEP@50 and its preparatory meetings on the basis of relevant decisions (in this case UNEA decision 5/3 and subsequent guidance from the UNEA Bureau and the CPR), whether it takes place in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbd.int/doc/notifications/2021/ntf-2021-082-sbstta24-sbi3-wg20203-en.pdf>

person, as a hybrid meeting with a combination of in person and online presence, or fully online. To this end, the Secretariat has put forward a combination of recommendations, restrictions and directives as outlined in the Secretariat Notification. This document may be revised or complemented by additional specific guidance based on information provided by the host country and in view of evolving medical advice and scientific findings, under the guidance of the UNEA and CPR Bureaux.

**However, based on current available information, and taking into account the need to 1) ensure the best possible conditions for universal in-person meetings; 2) minimize current uncertainties relating to the pandemic and secure as far as possible the health and safety of personnel and delegates; 3) minimize the risk for travel and other logistical disruptions; 4) give Member States and the Secretariat more time to prepare for substantive political outcomes; and 5) significantly reduce the practical and financial risks from an organizational perspective; the Secretariat recommends that Member States decide to postpone the meetings in accordance with option 2.**

Taking into account the likely postponement of CBD COP 15 (see above), the Secretariat recommends that the new dates for the postponed meetings will be as follows:

- The third informal substantive consultation meeting on General Assembly resolution 73/333 to be held from 4 – 6 April 2022.
- The Open-Ended Committee of Permanent Representatives to resume its fifth session (OECPR-5.2) from 20 – 23 and 25 April 2022.
- The resumed fifth session of the Environment Assembly (“UNEA-5.2”) to convene in Nairobi from 26 – 28 April 2022.
- The special session of the Environment Assembly to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (“UNEP@50”) to be held from 29 - 30 April 2022.

Should Member States concur with this recommendation in principle, the Secretariat would call on Member States to formalize a decision on the postponement as soon as possible in January 2022, to avoid significant organizational challenges or financial losses related to the meetings.

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*Annex: Key international environment-related meetings in 2022 from March onwards*

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Meeting / event	Venue	Dates (2022)
<b>MARCH</b>		
<b>CITES</b> 74th meeting of the Standing Committee	France	7-11 March
<b>CBD</b> SBSTTA-24, SBI-3 and WG2020-3	Geneva	13-29 March
<b>Minamata Convention</b> 2nd Segment of COP-4	Indonesia	21-25 March
<b>APRIL</b>		
<b>Basel Convention</b> OEWG-12	Nairobi	4-6 April
<i>Easter: 13-17 April</i>		
<b>CBD</b> COP-15	Kunming, China	25 April - 6 May <i>To be postponed due to recent postponement of SBSTTA 24</i>
<b>MAY</b>		
<i>Eid al Fitr: 3 May</i>		
<b>UNCCD</b> COP-15	Côte d'Ivoire	9-20 May
<b>RAMSAR</b> 59th Meeting of the Standing Committee	Gland	23-27 May
<b>JUNE</b>		
<b>The Stockholm+50 international meeting</b> Co-organized by Sweden and Kenya	Stockholm	2-3 June
<b>Basel/Rotterdam/Stockholm conventions</b> COP meetings	Geneva	6-17 June
<b>2022 UN Oceans Conference</b> Co-organized by Kenya and Portugal	Lisbon	27-June – 1 July
<b>JULY</b>		
<b>High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development</b>	New York	5 – 15 July
<b>44th Montreal Protocol</b> Open-ended Working Group		11- 15 July
<b>SEPTEMBER</b>		
<b>International Whaling Commission</b> 68th Meeting	Portoroz, Slovenia	3 – 10 September
<b>77<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly</b>	New York	13 – 27 September
<b>OCTOBER</b>		
<b>Environment for Europe</b> Ministerial Conference	Cyprus	5-7 Oct
<b>NOVEMBER</b>		
<b>UNFCCC</b> COP27	Sharm El-Sheikh	7-18 November
<b>CITES</b> COP19	Panama	14-25 November