

Summary of the work of the UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen

The present summary¹ was prepared by UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen. It details the work done by the Working Group in accordance with the mandates contained in United Nations Environment Assembly resolutions 4/14 and 5/2 on sustainable nitrogen management. The summary was finalized at the fifth meeting of the Working Group (9–10 January 2024) in the understanding that such consultations were not to be seen as formal negotiations.

The summary includes among other things, potential options for continued work for the consideration of Member States.

Introduction

1. **The UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen was established pursuant to UNEA resolution 4/14 to follow up on the tasks set out in the resolution.** Following UNEA resolution 5/2 the scope of the Working Group was expanded to facilitate the implementation of both resolutions and strengthen the engagement and ownership of their implementation by Member States and stakeholders.
2. **On 30 August 2022, the Executive Director of UNEP invited Member States to nominate focal points and Co-Chairs to the Working Group.** The appointment of the two Co-Chairs, Ms. Purvaja Ramachandran, Director, National Center for Sustainable Coastal Management, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of India, and Mr. Mihai Constantinescu, Director of the Management Unit for the Integrated Nutrient Pollution Control, Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests of Romania, was coordinated by the Committee of Permanent Representatives under the leadership of the President of UNEA-6.
3. The growing number of focal point nominations reflects the increased interest from Member States in the topic. A total 87 focal points were nominated by Member States to the Working Group as of 10 January 2024. Figure 1 reflects the regional breakdown of focal points.

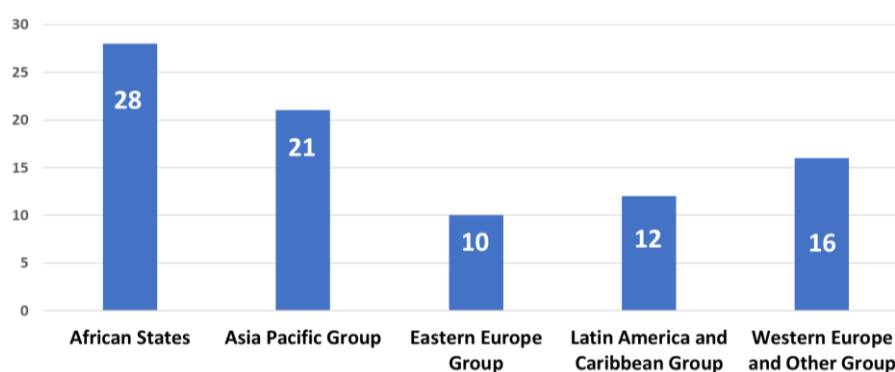


Figure 1. Regional breakdown of focal points

4. **The Working Group held five meetings prior to UNEA-6.** The first meeting was held online on 8 to 9 June 2020 and established an ad hoc Task Team which would report back to the second meeting of the Working Group. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic the Task Team met seven times and reflected on both UNEA resolutions 4/14 and 5/2 ; the second was held online on 17 January 2023 to resume the work of the Working Group, the third meeting was held in a hybrid format in Bucharest on 27 April 2023, followed by an informal expert meeting on 28 April; the fourth meeting was held in a hybrid format in Nairobi, on 28 September 2023, followed by an informal expert meeting on 29 September; and the fifth meeting was held in a hybrid format in Nairobi on 9 to 10 January 2024, followed by an half day informal expert meeting on 10 January.
5. **A dedicated webpage for the Working Group** was created to assist with access to information pertinent to the work of the Working Group, including meeting documents, a focal point directory, related documents and intersessional webinars.

¹ The present document has not been formally edited.

The Working Group focused its work on the following main areas:

I. Voluntary National Action Plans

6. Since its second meeting, the Working Group has made significant progress on identifying action areas for the consideration of Member States on the development of national action plans for sustainable nitrogen management. Under the leadership of the Co-Chairs and based on the provisions in the Terms of Reference of the Working Group to “share information on national action plans, as available, according to national circumstances”, a baseline screening of existing actions and action plans was conducted towards the preparation of a [voluntary national action plan](#). Thus, by the analysis of more than 20 received baseline screening documents, the findings and recommendations were processed for being included in a voluntary national action plan template with ten action areas which was further consulted within the working group.

Action area 1: Ensure leadership and coordination at government level through the Ministry for Environment and the relevant Ministries (depending on their importance at national level in relation to nitrogen emissions, such as the Ministry for Agriculture, the Ministry for Transportation, Ministry for Industry, or other Ministries, as relevant).

Action area 2: Set-up and operate a viable water and air quality monitoring network.

Action area 3: Preparing voluntary applied Guidelines / Codes of good practices on sustainable nitrogen management.

Action area 4: Action programmes.

Action area 5: Norms on wastewater treatment and discharge.

Action area 6: Emissions norms on combustion.

Action area 7: Awareness campaigns on reducing reactive nitrogen losses.

Action area 8: Capacity building and training for relevant stakeholders on sustainable use of fertilizers.

Action area 9: Programmes for public investments on reducing nitrogen losses.

Action area 10: Scientific/technological advancements on reducing nitrogen losses.

7. **Member States have started to request UNEP for support in the development of national action plans for sustainable nitrogen management.** Recognizing that Member States are at different stages of action plan development/implementation, UNEP invited Member States who wish to develop national action plans to contact the secretariat², subject to the availability of resources (technical and financial), as requested by UNEA resolution 5/2. By the fifth meeting of the Working Group, UNEP received formal requests for support from an initial three countries, however, several countries have expressed their interest in requesting support.
8. **The Global Partnership on Nutrient Management (GPNM) has provided technical support to the Working Group.** As an outcome of the third meeting of the Working Group, the [GPNM](#) agreed to provide technical support to the Working Group. The GPNM has delivered on this through: a) information-sharing, including organizing technical webinars between Working Group meetings, b) informal expert meetings organized back-to-back with the 3rd, 4th, and 5th meeting of the Working Group, to allow for focal point discussions on technical issues in an informal setting, and c) direct support to Member States by sharing existing information and knowledge in the development of an evidence-based and inter-sectoral coherent approach to domestic decision-making to promote sustainable nitrogen management, where appropriate. The GPNM provided a platform for more in-depth technical and multi-stakeholder discussions on the main topics from the Working Group agenda.

II. Facilitating improved coordination of policies across the global nitrogen cycle

9. At the first meeting of the UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen, it was agreed to establish an ad hoc Task Team to examine, among others, the possible Terms of Reference for an Interconvention Nitrogen Coordination Mechanism (INCOM). An overview of the submissions from focal points are compiled in the background [document](#) entitled “Compilation of substantive comments received from focal points after the

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second meeting of the UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen on the Task Team report and the template for baseline screening on nitrogen actions” which was prepared for the third meeting of the Working Group. All the interventions from the focal points during the meetings of the Working Group have been recorded in its meeting reports.

10. **The Working Group considered several options and modalities for improved coordination of policies** across the global nitrogen cycle at the national, regional, and global levels, including an intergovernmental coordination mechanism for nitrogen policies (annex 1). It was recognized at fourth meeting of the Working Group, that the Working Group itself also served as a coordination mechanism.
11. **Options for better management of the global nitrogen cycle were explored in close collaboration with relevant United Nations entities, including FAO and CBD.** At the initiative of UNEP and FAO, the Environmental Management Group (EMG) held a **nexus dialogue on sustainable nitrogen management** in April 2023 to look at the role of nitrogen in the context of the work of the UN in helping to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. In the outcome of the nexus dialogue it was recommended, amongst other things, that a mapping of mandates and activities to address nitrogen waste within the United Nations be done to ensure coherence and coordination of programs and related activities. Considering the input received from this dialogue, UNEP is mapping out mandates across activities of UN organizations on sustainable nitrogen management to enhance coherence in planning and implementing UN related initiatives on sustainable nitrogen management.
12. **UNEP is developing guidance on Legal, Policy, and Regulatory Frameworks for an Integrated Approach to Reduce Nitrogen Footprint from Sectors.** The purpose of developing the guide is to support countries with information that can assist them to strengthen, develop, and implement laws, policies, and regulations to accelerate actions to significantly reduce nitrogen waste. This guide, which is being prepared in pursuance of resolution 5/2 and the Montevideo Programme V, recommends an integrated approach to address fragmentation in this area. The guidance on legal, policy, and regulatory changes required to reduce the nitrogen footprint from sectors to lead to the establishment of integrated regulatory and policy changes to reduce nitrogen waste globally is currently being completed.

Potential options identified for consideration by Member States in preparation for UNEA-6

Various options to improve coordination of policies across the global nitrogen cycle were provided through interventions from focal points during the fifth meeting of the Working Group. These options are building upon previous discussions within the Working Group and are not exhaustive.

13. Current governance strategies and approaches are fragmented and do not adequately address the global issue of nitrogen pollution. Annex 1 of this summary outlines options and modalities for enhanced policy coordination noting that the identified response options are not mutually exclusive and that additional discussions are needed to further progress on modalities.
14. The Working Group identified the need for coordination of activities and action under multiple agreements, including the recently agreed Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework and the Global Framework on Chemicals, and invited UNEP to provide guidance on how to address fragmentation of policies on nitrogen management, such as through improvement of inter-agency coordination and guidance/examples on how to formulate policies and legislation.
15. The Working Group also suggested to enhance collaboration between UNEP and sector-specific international UN entities to increase access by countries to tailored expertise.
16. The Working Group stressed the need for further support and guidance related to technical and policy preparation and implementation to further accelerate actions aimed at significantly reducing nitrogen waste globally by 2030 and beyond through the improvement of sustainable nitrogen management.
17. The Working Group is currently the most important forum for Member States to work together on sustainable nutrient management with a focus on nitrogen, including the reduction of nitrogen waste at national level. Still, for actions to be set in place, more time is needed to allow for further progress to be made, particularly on awareness raising, development and sharing of training materials, and involvement of relevant stakeholders in voluntary actions to be prepared and implemented according to national circumstances.
18. The Working Group recommended that going forward additional National Action Plan areas may include monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. Provision of timelines may also add value to monitoring and evaluation. It also recommended that additional guidance be developed on preparing a National Action Plan, the different aspects of National Action Plan development, templates/ models, guidelines, sample terms of

references for inter-ministerial committees, etc. that could also contribute towards harmonization of National Action Plans. A harmonized monitoring framework on nitrogen could be developed including procedures and indicators.

19. The Working Group considered various barriers to sustainable nitrogen management, including challenges related to administrative and financial resources, and the need for capacity development and technology transfer in developing countries. Looking ahead, it is also important to recognize that many countries have not initiated work in relation to National Action Plans. In this regard, the following is recommended:
 - Increase access to resources to be able to move towards sustainable nitrogen management.
 - Availability of technical assistance delivered to countries addressing their specific needs is increased.
 - Financial support for action and implementation of sustainable nitrogen management including National Action Plans is made available.
 - Further knowledge sharing including experience exchange, is carried out to promote a common understanding of nitrogen-related issues.
 - Awareness raising campaigns and materials are developed to assist countries to engage different stakeholders on nutrient-related matters, specifically nitrogen, and other relevant related topics such as wastewater management.
 - Nitrogen is included as a topic in high-level education programmes at country level, including at academic institutions, and strengthen scientific research on sustainable nutrient management, especially on nitrogen.
20. Consideration could be given to a knowledge management platform to facilitate the sharing of experiences and best practices amongst countries as well as between similar countries, access to knowledge resources such as relevant publications, guidance, tools, and capacity development opportunities including examples of how to prepare and deliver capacity development/trainings to different stakeholders, awareness and outreach materials and guidance on workshops.
21. The Working Group recognized the value that the GPNM has provided to date and called on the GPNM to continue providing further support, for example, on capacity development, guidance on standard operating procedures, best practices, and other guidance materials that could be used by countries.
22. Further work should be undertaken to address unresolved matters, such as terms and definitions, and increase a common understanding of the issues related to the nitrogen cycle and possibly other nutrients, and their connections with biodiversity, climate change and pollution, as well as approaches to addressing it.

Annex 1 Options /elements and modalities for enhanced policy coordination

Elements of options and modalities for enhanced policy coordination on nitrogen	Source of proposals	Comments
Inter-ministerial or interdepartmental coordination mechanisms (committee or working group).	Working Group.	Policy coordination within countries.
Partnerships for exchanging best practices and lessons learned, twinning arrangements between countries, and technical assistance on action planning.	Working Group.	Exchange between countries and regions on approaches to improve policy coordination, with focus on national action plans.
Continuation with the status quo, essentially a fragmented approach with nitrogen issues being dealt with between multiple MEAs, organisations and processes.	Task Team report.	Task Team report - option i.
One (existing) MEA taking the lead in addressing interactions across the nitrogen cycle between water, air, climate, ecosystems and biodiversity, soils, stratospheric ozone etc.	Task Team report.	Task Team report - option ii.
Negotiation of a new nitrogen treaty.	Task Team report.	Task Team report – option iii.
Establishment of an intergovernmental mechanism for coordination of nitrogen policies, based primarily on existing networks and platforms.	Task Team report.	Task Team report – option iv.
Existing institutions, such as UNEP, FAO, GEF and development banks, to lead on securing funds to step-up existing efforts on nitrogen and implement projects.	Working Group feedback.	Potentially linked to changing ‘status quo’ by addressing the barriers.
Promoting and sharing of national action plans to reduce nitrogen waste. In the proposed option, the GPNM could facilitate encouragement and sharing of draft national action plans.	Working Group feedback.	A focus on coordination of efforts to develop national action plans as emphasized in UNEA resolution 5/2.
Consolidate policy coordination under new global targets under the	Outcome of the Post-2020 process under CBD and the fifth	Contributing to Target 7 of the GBF and relevant targets under the

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and the Global Framework on Chemicals (GFC).	International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM-5)	new Global Chemicals Framework (GBF).
Enhance policy coordination through the EMG and benefit from the UN Common Approach on Pollution and the UN Common Approach on Biodiversity.	EMG consultative processes and nexus dialogue.	Possible Issue Management Group under the UN Common Approach to Biodiversity or Pollution to include/focus on nitrogen waste.
Consideration of nitrogen under the science-policy panel on chemicals waste and the prevention of pollution (once established).	UNEA 5.2	Strengthening the science-policy interface to further the sound management of chemicals and waste and prevent pollution
Elevate the status of the UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen.	UNEA 6?	Pending further guidance from UNEA

(Original Annex to the document entitled: Options and Modalities for Improved Coordination of Policies across the Global Nitrogen Cycle, which was prepared for the fourth meeting of the Working Group)