

Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production

Concept note on the theme of the fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly

(20 July 2018)

Background

1. In developing the theme for the fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, the secretariat has been guided by the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Conference), entitled “The future we want”, in which Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives recognized that “poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are the overarching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable development” (para. 4).

2. The present concept note takes into account the interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals as set out in General Assembly resolution A/RES/70/1, entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

Conceptual framework

3. Innovative solutions are not goals, but rather means of addressing environmental challenges. Innovative solutions can be considered “business unusual” approaches and creative ways to promote sustainable production and consumption and accelerate sustainable development in general. An innovative solution is not restricted to an invention or a technological innovation but instead encompasses the creation of enabling environments for creative approaches in policy, financing, partnerships, processes and the use of data to understand environmental issues and improve sustainability. Innovative solutions also increases technical capacities, attracts new investments, opens new markets and enhances productivity and sustainability. The United Nations Environment Assembly at its fourth session will identify innovative solutions for national Governments, the private sector and civil society with a view to tackling environmental challenges that have an impact on society, the economy and the environment.

4. Sustainable consumption and production addresses the full life-cycles of economic activities: the extraction of resources, their processing into materials and products, and the subsequent use and discarding of those products. It can also be broken down into specific economic activities to identify priorities according to their environmental impacts and resource demands.

5. Innovative solutions and systemic changes towards sustainability at various stages of the life-cycle would lead to sustainable consumption and production and address environmental challenges directly. In developing the theme for the fourth session, the secretariat is promoting a systems approach that connects the flow of resources at each stage of the life-cycle with their use and impact on the environment, economies and societies. The approach includes the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns and its six thematic programmes adopted at the Rio+20 Conference.

6. To identify recommendations and suggested interventions relevant to the theme of the fourth session, the secretariat took into account the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its relevant Sustainable Development Goals aimed at achieving sustainable development through improving global resource efficiency and decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. In addition, the secretariat took into account Environment Assembly resolution 3/5, entitled “Investing in innovative environmental solutions for accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals”, other relevant resolutions and the third ministerial outcome document (UNEP/EA.3/HLS.1) of the Environment Assembly, entitled “Towards a pollution-free planet”.

7. In that context, and building on resolution 3/5, the secretariat used the following categories to organize and highlight existing and proposed innovative solutions: policy interventions; environmentally sound technologies; sustainable financing schemes; education, research and development and capacity-building; and private and public partnerships. Social innovations and new business models that foster sustainable development have also been considered. Based on those

categories, opportunities for synergistic implementation of actions to address environmental, social and economic challenges have been identified.

Focus areas

8. To enable the Environment Assembly to deliver on concrete outcomes and make efficient use of the time available prior to and during the fourth session of the Assembly, member States have expressed an interest in focusing on a limited number of environmental challenges that can be addressed in whole or in part by promoting sustainable consumption and production and innovative solutions and interventions, as described under the section on conceptual framework.

9. The following proposed focus areas, were set out for the consideration by member States based on the criteria of global relevance, and will contribute to poverty eradication and can be addressed by sustainable consumption and production patterns and innovative solutions. The focus areas have been presented without prejudice to issues and solutions that member States may wish to raise, but will help the secretariat to develop background documentation and prepare solutions-oriented ministerial dialogues:

- (a) Sustainable food systems, including food security and biodiversity;
- (b) Life-cycle approaches to resource, energy, chemicals and waste management;
- (c) Innovative sustainable business development at a time of rapid technological change.

10. The secretariat will further develop each focus area, considering the proposed conceptual framework set out in paragraphs 3–7 above, and identify strategic partnerships, initiatives and innovative solutions for each area. In further developing the focus areas, the secretariat will also consider contributions that member States will provide to the President of the Environment Assembly during consultations on the outcomes of the high-level segment.

11. The secretariat, in developing further the proposed focus areas set out in the present section, cross-cutting issues will be taken into account, such as biodiversity mainstreaming, use of big data, information management, indigenous knowledge solutions, promotion of sustainable lifestyles and efficient use of resources.

12. The proposed focus areas will also contribute towards the implementation plan to tackle pollution.

Elements for an implementation plan to tackle pollution

13. In paragraph 14 of the Ministerial Declaration of the Environment Assembly at its third session, the world's ministers for the environment requested the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, building on the outcomes of the third session, to prepare an implementation plan on pollution, in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, for submission to and consideration by the Assembly at its fourth session.

14. The secretariat continues to consult on the implementation plan, drawing on the above mandate. The proposed plan will be the main vehicle for organizing and presenting the follow-up to the theme on pollution. The plan will build on the outcomes of the third session of the Environment Assembly and seek to address the gaps in addressing pollution, and the challenges involved in doing so, that were identified in the report of the Executive Director to the Environment Assembly at its third session.