
Meeting of the Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly

Wednesday 3 July 2019,

09:00a.m. – 12:30p.m.,

Trondheim, Norway

Finding the right theme for the 2020 UN Environment Assembly

This document serves as a thought-starter for discussions on theme of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly. This is a background document for Agenda Item 3: Defining the theme for the fifth Environment Assembly.

Finding the right theme for the 2020 UN Environment Assembly

I. Introduction

1. The UN Environment Assembly, as the leading global authority on the Environment, can make a difference in people's lives. It is the largest international gathering of ministers that are responsible for the Environment and has the authority to take decisions on important issues that impact policies and actions by governments and other stakeholders.

2. The world needs urgent actions. The scientific evidence from the latest global assessments, tells us that we live on a rapidly warming, increasingly polluted planet that is irrevocably and continuously losing its biodiversity. We also know that the world continues to use a growing amount of resources to such an extent that we have now surpassed several of the ecological thresholds mapped by science.

3. The opportunities to invest in healthy and clean environment exist. For example, the global health benefits of reducing air pollution and achieving target of the Paris Agreement, to keep the increase of global average temperature to well below 2°C, could be as high as \$54.1 trillion dollars, at a global cost of \$22.1 trillion. Likewise, global ecosystem services have been valued at \$125 trillion per year. Nevertheless, over the last two decades, approximately 20 per cent of the Earth's vegetated surface have shown persistent declining trends in productivity owing to climate change, biodiversity loss and poor land management practices, thus decreasing resilience to environmental stresses, accruing competition for scarce natural resources and degrading in an irreversible way the number of species and their genetic diversity. These are only two, of many examples, of the need to address environmental challenges in a systemic manner.

4. The UN Environment Assembly can help agree on what are the decisions and actions that must be taken. It is a unique international platform where trade-offs and opportunities are discussed based on the most credible science, and decisions about further steps are made. However, to be a truly transformational platform, countries must have the ambition to set for themselves a bold cause around which they can build the momentum to act.

5. In 2019, the Assembly considered the theme "Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production". In its [Ministerial Declaration](#), countries expressed their determination "to ambitiously scale up efforts to overcome common environmental challenges" by taking actions such as:

- Advancing sustainable consumption and production patterns, including through circular economy and other sustainable economic models and the implementation of the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable and Production patterns;
- Undertaking action to restore and protect marine and coastal ecosystems;
- Working towards comparable international environmental data and supporting the UN Environment Programme in developing a global environmental data strategy by 2025 in collaboration with other relevant United Nations bodies;
- Addressing the damage to ecosystem caused by the unsustainable use and disposal of plastic products, including by significantly reducing the manufacture and use of single-use plastic products by 2030;

6. In addition, the [Assembly adopted a significant number of resolutions](#) (twenty-three) calling for accelerated action and strengthened partnerships on key areas, such as: marine litter and microplastics; innovative pathways to achieve sustainable consumption and production, food loss and waste, sustainable mobility, addressing single-use plastic product pollution, promoting gender equality and the human rights and empowerment of women and girls in environmental governance, the poverty-environment nexus, an implementation plan to address pollution, and others.

7. The [Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly](#), comprised by ten ministers or high-level decision-makers representing all regions, has the unique responsibilities of keeping their peers attention on decisions and commitments previously made; of taking stock of the lessons learnt from past Assemblies; and deciding on the main theme or cause that will be advanced in 2021 by the Environment Assembly.¹

8. The choice of the theme matters as it should contribute to reinforce the authority, relevance and effectiveness of the Environment Assembly. Therefore, in making their decision, the leaders guiding the Assembly should consider three basic principles:

9. **First, by agreeing on identifying a theme that takes implementation of commitments included in the 2030 Agenda, the Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEAs), and relevant resolutions and declarations adopted by the Assembly fully into account.** Member States have agreed ambitious international environmental goals and commitments, enshrined in over 500 MEAs and hundreds of other international legal instruments. The key challenge, however, is implementation. Without effective implementation, the world will not come close to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This reality was recently highlighted by the ad-hoc open-ended working group established by the UN General Assembly in line with General Assembly Resolution 72/277 ‘Towards a Global Pact for the Environment’.

10. **Secondly, by undertaking broad, inclusive and transparent consultations with all relevant stakeholders,** with the Committee of Permanent Representatives and with representatives of civil society and other Major Groups such as the scientific and academic community and the private sector.

11. **Thirdly, by closely linking the theme to an ambitious ministerial outcome document and to a limited number of draft resolutions which contribute to a balanced and mutually reinforcing set of agreements** that helps Member States and all relevant stakeholders prioritize their actions.

II. Basic criteria for defining a theme

12. Lessons learnt from past Assemblies point to the importance of timely identification of politically appealing and strategic themes. To facilitate the process, members of the bureau can use as a starting point a basic set of criteria to guide the choice. The relevant key messages extracted by the Bureau of the high-level panel of the Sixth Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-6) are included for further guidance.

13. The following criteria have been useful when defining the theme for the Environment Assembly. The theme should:

- Be based on a sound knowledge basis.²
- Provide a clear focus and common thread while being broad and inclusive (as pollution was a common thread at the third United Nations Environment Assembly).
- Contributes to address the interlinkages between different environmental questions, such as biological diversity on the one hand, and pollution on the other, but which the science is increasingly emphasizing have interactions which can reinforce negative (and positive) impacts.
- Result in science-based, actionable and solution-oriented outcomes that promote integrated solutions and addresses more than one Sustainable Development Goal.
- Ensure alignment with the UN Environment Assembly’s mandate and capacity, as well as consistency and complementarity between the themes of previous sessions of the Assembly.
- Be easily communicable and understood also by a broader audience, thus contributing to the urgency of integrating environmental protection with social and economic considerations.

¹ Paragraph 9 of Decision UNEP/EA.4/2 (L.29) entitled “Provisional agenda, date and venue of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly”, requests the Bureau of the United Nations Environment Assembly, in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, to decide on a theme for the next Environment Assembly no later than 31 December 2019.

² Sources include the findings of relevant environmental assessments such as the sixth Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-6), the 2nd Chemicals Outlook, the Global Resources Outlook, the Emission Gap report and the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem services, the Summary for Policymakers was agreed recently by the International Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

III. Key messages from recent global environmental assessments which are relevant for the selection of a theme

14. GEO 6 demonstrates that a healthy environment is a prerequisite and foundation for economic prosperity, human health and well-being. GEO-6 sought to "provide a sound, evidence-based source of environmental information to help policymakers and all of society to achieve the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and internationally agreed environmental goals, and to implement the multilateral environmental agreements".

15. Every major study relevant to environmental governance has concluded that implementation remains a central challenge. Global environmental assessments, such as GEO-6, the 2nd Chemicals Outlook, the Global Resources Outlook, the Emissions Gap Report or the IPBES findings on the state of biodiversity point to challenges in the implementation of agreed environmental goals and targets – at all levels. The UN Environment Programme's First Global Report on Environmental Rule of Law published in January 2019 found that despite a 38-fold increase in environmental laws put in place since 1972, failure to fully implement and enforce these laws is one of the greatest challenges to mitigating climate change, reducing pollution and preventing widespread species and habitat loss.

16. This section highlights [a few of the key messages from GEO-6](#), which contextualizes the opportunities for innovative, effective and integrated international action are:

- Unsustainable production and consumption patterns and trends as well as inequality, combined with population growth-driven increase in resource use, put at risk the healthy planet needed to attain sustainable development. These trends are deteriorating planetary health at unprecedented rates with increasingly serious consequences especially for poorer people and regions.
- The world is not on track to achieve the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals, and other internationally agreed environmental goals, by 2030, and is not on track to deliver long-term sustainability by 2050. Urgent action and strengthened international cooperation are therefore needed to reverse those negative trends and restore the planet and human health.
- The social and economic costs of inaction often exceed the costs of action and are inequitably distributed, often being borne by the poorest and most vulnerable in society, including indigenous and local communities, particularly in developing countries.
- Current environmental policy alone is not enough to address these challenges. Urgent cross-sectoral policy actions, through a whole-of-society approach, are needed to address the challenges of sustainable development.
- Key features of effective environmental policies for sustainable development are integrated objectives, science-based targets, economic instruments, regulations and robust international cooperation.
- Agreement on desired pathways for transformative change under conditions of uncertainty can be fostered by coalitions between governments, businesses, researchers and civil society.
- Sustainable development will be more likely to be achieved through new modes of governance and adaptive management that give greater priority to the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals, while promoting gender equality and education for sustainable production and consumption.

ANNEX Ideas for further discussion and consideration

Previous UNEA themes have been overarching broad thematic areas which were subsequently captured in a title which provided guidance to resolutions, leadership dialogues, side events and panels, and of course to the ministerial declaration. Pollution was such the thematic area for UNEA-3 which became the theme: "Towards a pollution-free planet". Innovative solutions and sustainable production and consumption functioned a cornerstone for the theme for UNEA-4. Three overarching and tentative thematic areas are proposed for further consideration and refinement, with a view to form a basis for initial consideration by the Bureau of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly. They are based on an internal consultative process within the Secretariat. Following the discussion in the Bureau, the UNEA President will reach out to member States and stakeholders for further consultations.

Tentative thematic area 1:

Investing in Nature-based Solutions

Nature-based Solutions are actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits. To provide focus, this proposed thematic area may concentrate in addressing forests and land use, food and agriculture, freshwater, marine and oceans.

Delivering nature-based solutions at scale can lift a billion people out of poverty, creating 80 million jobs and adding an additional US\$2.3 trillion in productive growth to the global economy. At the same time, nature-based solutions provide co-benefits by supporting vital biodiversity and ecosystem services (which are estimated to be worth US\$ 140-365 billion a year annually for the forest sector alone) including access to clean air, fresh water, healthier diets, resilience to disasters, and overall improved livelihoods - for those that are less reliant on human made infrastructure.

However, the economy considers nature as a commodity without recognizing its multiple values. Ecosystems are often overexploited, taken for granted and seen as unfathomable providers of natural resources that exist for the sake of our wealth and not as an inherently valuable entity that we need to actively protect. Aside from providing us with countless commodities, our well-being and health through our social and cultural constructs are intrinsically reliant on nature at all levels. Without clean water, unpolluted air, fertile soil and rich biodiversity we are deprived – physically, mentally and spiritually. There is an urgent need to redress this balance and for society to reconnect with nature.

If we shift towards nature-based values and solutions, we can ensure the health and welfare/well-being for current and coming generations. Governance instruments, economic incentives and education for sustainable development (ESD) are equally important in this regard. Nature Based Solutions are considered equally relevant for achieving the land, water, oceans, food, poverty and climate Sustainable Development Goals. For example, achieving the land-related Sustainable Development Goals requires adequate land and water resource management.

Several key international processes would contribute to defining the scope of the outcomes under a nature-based solutions theme at UNEA-5. These include, for example, the outcomes of the Secretary-General's Climate Summit in September 2019 as well as the World Conservation Congress to be held from 11 to 20 June 2020 on Marseille, France, and the post-2020 global biodiversity framework to be considered at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biodiversity, to be held in Beijing, China in 2020. The launching of the UN Decade on Ecosystems Restoration in 2021 can also play a key role in defining the potential outcomes of this thematic area.

Tentative thematic area 2:

Blue Planet: Transformative actions to protect the planet and enhance well being

The world urgently needs system-wide transformations based on innovation, circularity and sustainable consumption and production, as well as green investments to reduce waste and pollution. Delivering impact often involves system-wide, multi-benefit policymaking that ensures implementation and protects the very poor and vulnerable. Focusing on oceans and freshwater, and the related interactions with clean air can provide a useful means of highlighting effective responses.

A blue planet encompasses healthy oceans, freshwater and clean air. These are prerequisites for global well-being and sustainable development, and our ability to achieve Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. GEO-6 confirms that mega trends such as urbanization and economic activities such as those associated with coastal development and resource use, as well as pollution and climate change, are significant drivers of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation in both marine and freshwater ecosystems. These findings were confirmed by the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystems of the IPBES.

The importance of marine ecosystems to millions of livelihoods and the role that freshwater plays in increasing risks to human health and the environment, underscore usefulness of considering the interlinkages between drivers of degradation. This would benefit from the broad range of actors which the UN Environment Assembly can bring together. Some of the sub-themes of this could include identifying good practices that can strengthen a science- and ecosystem-based integrated management of the marine and freshwater environments, including as a means of enhancing the contribution of these to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Where multiple drivers contribute to negative trends, actions which have multiple co-benefits, such as nature-based solutions, should be able to more effectively neutralize these. Technological innovations which can be harnessed to the cause of stepping up our actions to stem the current negative environmental trajectories should also be identified. Improved waste management would play a role in protecting ecosystems and biological diversity, in addition to better safeguarding human health.

Tentative thematic area 3:

Addressing the water–energy–food nexus for sustainability

We need to provide innovative green solutions, science-based policies and feasible response options to governments and stakeholders to allow them to drive transformational change towards sustainable development for people and planet. Therefore, we must apply an integrated nexus approach to the urgent multiple and interlinked crises that the world faces: biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, climate change and pollution. Only in this way we can ensure that institutions and people tackle these crises in an integrated and timely manner that is successful and impactful. Because we cannot afford to lose more time, in respect for the current and coming generations.

Due to the rapid urbanization of the world, the alarming rate at which the global climate is changing, the increasing demand for water and land to ensure food and energy security, the nexus between water, food, and energy, and its interlinkages with climate change, are receiving growing attention from governments, policy makers, scientists, practitioners, businesses and civil society.

The thematic area has a targeted interdisciplinary environmental policy focus that addresses the strategic water–food–energy nexus in relation to climate, land, air and other resources for planet and people. It promotes an integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda as it directly relates to the Sustainable Development Goals and their interlinkages.

Addressing the water–energy–food nexus for sustainability synergies and co-benefits would contribute to better understanding the science behind the nexus-dynamics, assessing and managing scarcity, synergies, and trade-offs; increasing resource management efficiency, and bridging across fragmented food, water and energy policies and institutions. It would also require enhanced intergovernmental approaches that the UN Environment Assembly is uniquely positioned to address. This would allow for a more effective integration across silos, sectors, scales, and stakeholders and help policy and decision makers to identify core entry points to tap into sustainability synergies and co-benefits.