

Finding the right theme for the 2021 UN Environment Assembly

Thought-starter for discussion, following the first meeting of the Environment Assembly Bureau held in Trondheim, Norway on 3 July 2019. [The summary of the meeting is accessible here.](#)

I. Introduction

1. The UN Environment Assembly - the leading global authority on the environment - is the largest international gathering of Ministers responsible for the Environment, with the authority to take decisions on important issues that impact policies and actions by Governments and other key stakeholders. Within the context of the three dimensions of sustainable development, the Assembly can contribute to highlighting the relevance of the environment dimension as a prerequisite for making progress within the social and economic dimensions.

2. The world needs urgent action that can effectively address current environmental challenges. 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 ecological thresholds mapped by science.¹ Not only are there risks from inaction, but also from insufficient action.

3. There are great opportunities to invest in a healthy and clean environment. 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 earth's vegetated surface have shown persistent declining trends in productivity owing to climate change, biodiversity loss and poor management practices, thereby decreasing resilience to environmental stresses, accruing competition for scarce natural resources and degrading in an irreversible and continuing manner species genetic diversity. Loss of coastal habitats such as mangroves and coral reefs reduces coastal protection, which increases the risk from floods and hurricanes to life and property for the 100 million-300 million people². At the same time in 2015 one third of fish stocks were overfished and there are now approximately 400 hypoxic – low oxygen – dead zones worldwide in coastal ecosystems, caused by fertilizers – affecting more than 245 000 km.³ These are only some of many examples which underscore the need to address environmental challenges in a systemic manner.

4. The UN Environment Assembly can identify strategic and necessary decisions and actions. It is a unique international platform where trade-offs and opportunities are discussed based on the most credible science available, and where important decisions on further steps are made. However, to be a truly transformational platform, countries need to build an ambitious and clear framework for the discussions around which they can build a strong momentum to act.

5. The next session of the Assembly will take place at a unique moment in time, when the Paris Agreement is expected to have entered into force with new and more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions. Furthermore, the international community would by then have considered new and

¹ United Nations Environment Programme, (2019) Sixth Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-6)

² IPBES, (2019) Summary for policy makers – Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

³ IPBES, (2019) Summary for policy makers – Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

revitalized global frameworks and agreements for long-term action on biodiversity, chemicals and waste. In this context, the Environment Assembly can provide a unique opportunity to take stock of progress made and identify effective cross-sectoral policy initiatives to help implement these agreements.

6. In 2019, the theme of the Assembly was “Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production”. In its [Ministerial Declaration](#) countries decided by consensus to “ambitiously scale up efforts to overcome common environmental challenges” by taking important actions such as:

- Advancing sustainable consumption and production patterns, including through circular economy and other sustainable economic models and through 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;

7. The [Assembly also adopted 23 resolutions](#) calling for accelerated action and strengthened partnerships in 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, a pollution implementation plan, and others.

8. The [Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly](#), comprised by ten ministers or high-level decision-makers representing all UN regions, has been requested to define a theme for the next Environment Assembly no later than 31 December 2019, in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives.⁴

9. The choice of theme is important, as it contributes to the framing, authority, relevance and effectiveness of the Environment Assembly. It is suggested that the following three basic principles should be applied when deciding the theme.

10. **First, by identifying a theme that contributes to the implementation of commitments included in the 2030 Agenda, the Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEAs), and relevant resolutions and declarations adopted by previous sessions of the Assembly.** Member States have agreed ambitious international environmental goals and commitments enshrined in hundreds of Multilateral Environmental Agreements and other international legal instruments. The key challenge, however, is implementation. Without effective implementation, the world will not achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This conclusion was recently highlighted by the ad-hoc open-ended working group established by the UN General Assembly under its Resolution 72/277 ‘Towards a Global Pact for the Environment’. To this end, a review of implementation of relevant Assembly resolutions will be part of the theme and its preparations.

⁴ Paragraph 9 of Decision UNEP/EA.4/2 entitled “Provisional agenda, date and venue of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly”.

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

12. **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 to prioritize their actions.

II. Basic criteria for defining a theme

13. Lessons learned from past Assemblies point to the importance of timely identification of politically appealing and strategic themes. To facilitate the process, a basic set of criteria to guide the choice have proven useful.

14. Based on criteria applied for identifying previous themes for the Environment Assembly, the theme should:

- Be based on a sound knowledge basis.⁵
- Provide a clear focus and common thread while being broad and inclusive (since pollution was a common thread at the third United Nations Environment Assembly).
- Contribute to addressing 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 with the themes of previous sessions of the Assembly, particularly in respect of facilitating implementation of actions agreed.
- Be easily communicable and understood by a broader audience and contribute to the integration of environmental protection into social and economic considerations.

III. Key messages from recent global environmental assessments of relevance for the selection of a theme

15. This section highlights relevant key messages to decision-makers as identified by the high-level group of the GEO-6 assessment which may provide additional guidance for identifying a theme for UNEA-5.

16. Recent major studies relevant to environmental governance has concluded that implementation of existing environmental agreements remains a fundamental challenge. These include The Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-6), the 2nd Chemicals Outlook, the Global Resources Outlook, the Emissions Gap Report and the IPBES findings of the International Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services on the state of biodiversity. 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

⁵ 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).

greatest challenges to mitigating climate change, reducing pollution and preventing widespread species and habitat loss.

17. More specifically, 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".

18. Some of the key messages from GEO-6 of relevance for the choice of theme for the forthcoming Assembly 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

19. The selection of previous UNEA themes have been based on initial overarching broad thematic areas which were subsequently captured in a more focused theme title which provided guidance to resolutions, leadership dialogues, side events and panels, as well as to the ministerial declaration. Based on a first proposal from the UN Environment Programme Secretariat and initial discussions within the Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly, three overarching and tentative thematic areas are hereby proposed for further consideration and refinement.

Tentative thematic area 1: Scaling-up/Implementing Nature-based Solutions for a clean Environment and Sustainable Development

20. Without clean water, healthy oceans, unpolluted air, fertile soil and rich biodiversity human well-being is impossible. There is an urgent need to redress this balance and for the economy and society at large to reconnect with nature.

21. 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.⁶ As a concept, nature-based solutions has been used in biodiversity and climate intergovernmental processes. The goal of Nature-based Solutions is to support the achievement of society's development goals and safeguard human well-being in ways that reflect cultural and societal values and enhance the resilience of ecosystems, their capacity for renewal and the provision of services.⁷

22. To provide focus, this thematic area may concentrate in highlighting successful experiences and providing political momentum to scale-up actions for infrastructure-related and ecosystem-related approaches for forests and land use including sustainable food systems; integrated water resources management and integrated management of marine and coastal ecosystems.

23. 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.⁸ 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, climate regulation and overall improved livelihoods - for those that are less reliant on human made infrastructure. Many intact ecosystems store large amounts of carbon, like natural forests and wetlands. Protecting these are key to reach the goals of the Paris agreement. Restoring ecosystems is also an important solution to further strengthen the capacity of nature to provide the range of goods and services.

24. If we shift towards nature-based solutions, we can ensure the health and welfare/well-being for current and coming generations. Governance instruments, economic incentives and education for sustainable development are of importance in this regard. Nature Based Solutions are highly 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. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate management of land, freshwater, oceans and air – and integrate eco-system management across economic sectors to encompass cumulative impacts on the environment.

⁶ Decision 0069 of the World Conservation Congress held in 2016 under the auspices of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

⁷ Decision 0069 of the World Conservation Congress held in 2016 under the auspices of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme, (2019) [Secretariat Briefing on Preparations for the UN Climate Summit](#)

25. 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 our freshwater and oceans

26. 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 cross-sectoral, multi-benefit policymaking that ensures implementation and protects the vulnerable. Focusing on clean oceans and freshwater would also require addressing related interactions with polluted air and atmosphere, highlighting the need for effective responses at multiple levels.

27. A blue planet encompasses clean and healthy oceans and freshwater. 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.

28. Marine and freshwater ecosystems are intrinsically interlinked. Nevertheless, the importance of marine ecosystems to millions of livelihoods and access to clean drinking water 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 and poverty eradication. 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. The Environment Assembly is uniquely placed to promote the coherent implementation of action within the UN system, and stimulate co-operation with other actors to move us towards a clean, blue planet.

29. This theme should focus on innovative and transformative actions which will take the world towards a pollution-free blue planet, to enhance the conservation and sustainable use of ocean and freshwater resources. Furthermore, building on decisions from previous Assemblies, the theme could promote further steps to address plastic pollution and improved waste management, including through resource efficiency, circular economy, sustainable materials management and the "three Rs" (reduce, reuse and recycle), in line with the Assembly's resolution 4/1.

Tentative thematic area 3: Addressing the water–energy–food interlinkages for sustainability

30. Human needs for water, energy and food all rely on natural resources that are under stress from biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, climate change and pollution. It is increasingly recognized that we need to apply an integrated systems approach to find the solutions to these pressures. The interlinked nature of

the various environmental challenges and economic activities motivates us to develop more effective, integrated approaches and solutions, addressing them together.

31. As part of such an integrated approach, we need to identify and implement innovative green solutions, science-based policies and feasible policy options to governments and stakeholders, share best-practices, to allow all actors to take part in transformational change towards sustainable development for people and planet. Therefore, we must consider the inter-relatedness and interdependencies between environmental resources and challenges as a complex system, rather than addressing individual components. The world faces interlinked environmental crises of biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, climate change and pollution. A systems approach would allow us to tackle these crises in an integrated and timely manner that is successful and impactful.

32. Due to the rapid urbanization of the world, the alarming rate at which the global climate is changing, the increasing demand for water, marine resources 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.

33. This thematic area attempts to apply an interdisciplinary environmental policy focus that addresses the strategic water-food-energy nexus in relation to climate, land, oceans, 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.

34. Addressing the water–energy–food interlinkages for sustainability synergies and co-benefits would contribute to better understanding the science behind the interlinkages, 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.