



## Submission on UNEA-5 draft themes Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)

### New UNEA-5 theme proposal: “Towards global environmental governance and regenerative solutions for healthy people and a healthy planet”

GAIA believes that the theme “Towards global environmental governance and regenerative solutions for healthy people and a healthy planet” would allow the Assembly to address the plastic pollution crisis and other urgent environmental issues more adequately than the three initially-proposed themes.

The proposed theme “Towards global environmental governance and regenerative solutions for healthy people and a healthy planet” has the advantage of having a **planetary framing rather than a single-ecosystem focus**, allowing UNEA discussions to consider regulating pollutants (such as plastics) across their whole lifecycle, and not just in a single type of ecosystem (for instance, in marine and coastal environments).

This theme also emphasizes the need for new modes of governance, as highlighted in the GEO-6 report. It provides adequate framing for UNEA-5 to discuss a coherent and effective governance framework for coordinated global action at different scales, as is needed to tackle the plastic pollution crisis. **An emphasis on global environmental governance is useful as it would allow for action tackling problems and elevating solutions, within a coherent governance framework.**

In addition, it is important for UNEA-5 to emphasize the notion of “regenerative” solutions, as highlighted in many recent international environmental reports focusing on how **regenerative agriculture provided through agroecology allows the agricultural sector to evolve to sequester carbon and meet the challenges of climate change, protect biodiversity instead of undermining it, and satisfy human nutritional needs.**<sup>1</sup>

### Risks associated with aspects of current theme proposals

#### 1. “Nature-based solutions”, a slippery concept

The proposed theme “Scaling-up/Implementing Nature-based Solutions for a Clean Environment and Sustainable Development” centers around the concept of “nature-based

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<sup>1</sup> HLPE (2019), [Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security](#), FAO; Mijatović, D., Sakalian, M. and Hodgkin T. (2018), [Mainstreaming Biodiversity in Production Landscapes](#), UNEP; IPCC (2019), [Climate Change and Land: An IPCC Special Report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystem - Summary for Policymakers](#); Prof Walter Willett et al. (2019), [Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems](#).

solutions”. The thought-starter refers to IUCN decisions to define “[nature-based solutions](#)” as “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” (para. 21).

However, in practice the term “nature-based solutions” is a slippery concept which has been used to promote techniques and materials causing net environmental harm. The term is problematic because its focus on the “natural” basis of solutions obscures their environmental impact, and because it is overly broad. It is also difficult to conceive of how UNEP could prevent this term from being subverted during UNEA5 discussions, given World Conservation Congress resolutions are not very well-known, nor are they binding text.

For instance, with respect to plastic, the substitution of single-use fossil-based plastics with bio-based plastics such as polylactic acid (PLA) could be presented as a “nature-based” solution - when in fact, it is unclear that the substitution of all single-use fossil-based plastics with single-use PLA would be a net environmental gain. Growing crops for bio-based plastics could involve deforestation for monocropping at scale. Furthermore, recent research has shown that [in vitro toxicity of PLA](#) is comparable to the most toxic plastics, notably PVC.

Even nature-based solutions consistent with the IUCN definition could have negative environmental and justice impacts, such as afforestation projects that take over indigenous territory, and replace forest with tree monocrops. Solutions discussed at UNEA should respect UN principles, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

## 2. The need to think beyond the “Blue Planet”

GAIA is dedicated to fighting plastic pollution, and is well-aware of the acute negative impacts that plastic pollution has inflicted on freshwater and marine ecosystem health. Many root causes of marine and freshwater plastic pollution originate on land. Tackling the plastic pollution crisis requires system-wide transformations that transcend interventions limited to any single ecosystem, since plastic pollution affects land, fresh water and marine ecosystems, and the atmosphere.

During discussions at UNEA4, GAIA already observed how difficult it was to discuss the root causes of marine and freshwater plastic pollution, and consider upstream action on these root causes, because the title of draft resolutions framed the problem as “marine” litter.

Even with the best of intentions, a “Blue Planet: Transformative actions to protect our freshwater and oceans” theme could make this problem worse, by imposing an ecosystem silo on an issue that by nature transcends various ecosystems. This framing on UNEA5 discussions would prevent the Assembly from considering land-based root causes and taking required upstream action.

Furthermore, the suggested focus on innovation under this theme ignores the substantial work carried out by UNEP and under the auspices of UNEA, to study the required responses to plastic pollution crisis.

Finally, the “Blue Planet” single-ecosystem focus could seem out of touch given the monumental deforestation currently taking place in the Amazon rainforest.

### 3. The issue with “scaling-up”

In addition, the emphasis on “scaling up” in proposed theme “Scaling-up/Implementing Nature-based Solutions for a Clean Environment and Sustainable Development” brings up several issues. Firstly, it assumes that adequate solutions to environmental crises already exist and merely need scaling-up, in scaling up, the vagueness of “nature-based solutions” is amplified. Secondly, the theme would allow for the haphazard scaling-up and implementation of different nature-based solutions which may not fit together, or, worse, undermine each other. Thirdly, it does not recognize what the GEO-6 report highlights, namely the need for new modes of governance, in order to provide a coherent and effective governance framework for coordinated global action at different scales.

### 4. The need to recognize the intrinsic value of ecosystem health

The “Addressing the water–energy–food interlinkages for sustainability” theme would frame environmental action only in terms of direct material benefits for human nutrition and energy needs, which falls short of the required framing at UNEA, namely, recognizing the intrinsic value of ecosystem health, while also considering human needs.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the theme is to build an “ambitious and clear framework for the discussions” at the fifth UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5), which, if they are fruitful, could lead to strategic and necessary decisions and action to address environmental crises (thought starter, para 4.). This includes the plastic pollution crisis, and its climate, chemicals, biodiversity, waste, human health, and socio-economic impacts. Of the many worthwhile topics to be discussed at UNEA, one topic has elicited by far the most energy, interest, and urgency: plastics. No other UN body is focused on plastics so this is an appropriate and important role for UNEA-5 to play. GAIA believes that the theme it has proposed, “**Towards global environmental governance and regenerative solutions for healthy people and a healthy planet**”, would allow the Assembly to best address the plastic pollution crisis and other urgent environmental issues.