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Women's Major Group - Comments on the proposed thematic areas for UNEA-5

The Women's Major Group (WMG) would like to thank the President of UNEA-5, as well as the members of the Bureau and the Secretariat, for the "Revised final "thought starter": Finding the right theme for the 2021 UN Environment Assembly".

We welcome the constructive and inclusive participatory process that was established to consult on the UNEA-5's theme. Please find below our comments and suggestions on the proposed thematic areas:

On the Basic Principles and Criteria:

We would like to support the ongoing work to enhance the achievements of previous UNEAs. Future outcomes of UNEA-5 can reverberate and inspire other forums to follow ambitious actions to protect the environment and human health. Human rights and sustainability should remain at the core of the theme.

The inclusion of a **gender analysis** would be key to any transformative action. We remain concerned about the assassination of women human rights defenders (WHRD), as well as about the Indigenous Peoples' safety when asserting rights as WHRDs and Indigenous Peoples significantly advance UNEA principles while bearing a disproportionate share of risk and liability. Their perspectives and progress transformatively benefit future generations, connecting local environmental issues with macrosystems. Inclusion of the knowledge of WHRDs and Indigenous Peoples can redress the limitations of the current economic models and cost/benefit analyses, which remain short-sighted. Financial and ecological economic solutions of **Indigenous Peoples and local communities** should be valued in accordance with scientific principles assessing sustainability successes, as is done with business, by measuring ecosystem functionality and human prosperity. Ecological economic institutions manage a community's access to goods and services in an ecological economy. We need more integrated decision-making to address the intersecting complexities of environment, economics and climate change: **Longer-term broader-based principles** are crucial.

- The theme should acknowledge **planetary boundaries**. In order to integrate the social and economic dimensions, UNEA-5 would need to address economic growth models, which are one of the major drives for environmental destruction.
- We would like to highlight the importance of the decisions already taken by the previous UNEA meetings, especially concerning the development of adverse effects of pesticides and fertilizers on the environment and health requested by UNEA-3, which would echo the latest report released by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Toxics. Women and unborn children remain among the more vulnerable to toxic chemicals.
- ‘Key features of effective environmental policies for sustainable development are integrated objectives, science-based targets, economic instruments, regulations and robust international cooperation’ according to GEO-6. Sustainability requires production and production to promote life for all, not just to be responsible to select segments of society. Rules-based trade (SDG 17) examined at UNEA-5 can promote the certainty that regulations, including human rights instruments, will be integrated into methods to realize global environmental ambitions. Because immediate full implementation of human rights instruments expedites achievement of global environmental goals, **human rights** should be central to UNEA-5 theme.
- Because of the urgent need to transform governance mechanisms, UNEA-5 should discuss protocols for operationalizing UNEA Agreements with a level playing field, benefiting those who put regulated ecosystem health and resident prosperity before vagrant profit in order to fulfill UNEA Ministerial Declarations.

On Thematic area 1: "Scaling-up/Implementing Nature-based Solutions for a Clean Environment and Sustainable Development"

- While we welcome the attempts to clarify the term "**nature-based**", we remain concerned about this expression. A reference to nature does not imply that environmental or health impacts would be taken into account. This could lead to greenwashing and false solutions. For instance, the theme could be misused to promote problematic “bio-based” plastics as a substitute for “conventional” fossil fuels-based plastics, without any significant reduction of plastic production and consumption. This would not only be contrary to UNEA-4 Ministerial Declaration but also to the SDGs underpinning it. Ecological economic factors should be included in economic factors measuring SDG progress to avoid such false solutions. Systematic inclusion of diverse decision-makers can expose such misdirection.
- Additionally, there is no clear alignment and definition of this expression. We already witnessed a lack of clarity on this concept at the latest CPR subcommittee meeting, where several Member States were raising clarification questions. Such

ambiguity and the possibility of multiple interpretations defeats the purpose of an easily communicable and understood theme. Confusion can be avoided by prioritizing functionality of ecosystems supporting global environmental systems, including climate.

There is also the problematic connotation of "**solutions**" that could fix any problems after they occur, rather than tackling the root causes and drivers, as deemed necessary in the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report. For instance, preventing deforestation at source and retaining rich and diverse ecosystems is crucial, as opposed to replacing them with monoculture plantations. **Prevention** at source means tackling root causes, such as excessive meat consumption (and commodification, for export markets, etc.) that destroys ecological institutions. Diversity in decision-makers promotes diversity in ecosystems as it promotes both SCP and human rights.

Again, decision-making bodies including all segments of society can protect ecological economic institutions enabling trade in rich and diverse ecosystems. Irreparable damage is done when ecosystems are monetized to the point that ecological economic institutions fail and entire ecological economies collapse. Too often the economic need of censored decision-makers is then monetized and funds are sought to meet needs that did not exist prior to the monetization of the now-failed ecological institutions. These monetization cycles prevent prosperity and demand that ecological economic institutions fail to support financial economic growth. Protecting, for example, forests, as valued ecological economic institutions prevents the collapse of the ecological economy in an area that will displace and make poor and vulnerable WHRD, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and children, and the disabled. When marginalized groups participating in ecosystems are able to lead in decision-making, efforts to protect the environment are less likely to destroy the environment. To get the world back on track to achieve environmental ambitions, Ministers should declare their support for WHRD and Indigenous Peoples showing the value of protecting collectively-developed ecological economic institutions rather than being led by for-profit developers who weaken governments with endless demands for reduced risk, reduced liability, and increased financial subsidies that are secreted away from governments.

As highlighted in GEO-6 and in themes' Thought Starter, the implementation of existing agreements remains a fundamental challenge. Therefore, we would like to see a framing that reflects this urgency, such as the inclusion of the word "**delivering**" to scale up/implement solutions.

Additionally, we suggest the wording "*clean* environment" be replaced by "**sustainable and healthy environment**". Cleanliness does not imply sustainability. More than 100 States already include the right to a healthy and

sustainable environment in their constitutions, national legislation or regional agreements.

On Thematic area 2 "Blue Planet: Transformative actions to protect our freshwater and oceans"

· The protection of freshwater and oceans is crucial, especially in support of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). We appreciate this theme as the only one referring to the **transformative** changes we must put in place to achieve environmental protection. This is a powerful word that might also be easily communicable and understood by a broader audience, in line with the basic criteria that should define a theme.

· The concept of "Blue Planet" should not be misinterpreted as "blue economy", but rather include an emphasis on *protection* and enhanced *well-being*. It would be crucial to get back on track toward **sustainability**.

· This theme would be in line with the recent reports such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), IPCC and GEO-6 report. This opens the space for coordination with current processes such as the treaty on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ) and the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA Pathway).

On Thematic area 3: "Addressing the water–energy–food interlinkages for sustainability"

· We suggest this nexus to be broadened and include also **ecosystems** and/or biodiversity. Failure to do so would pose the risk of misinterpretation: the theme could be seen as a reference to the mere utilization and exploitation of natural resources, with no natural protection.

· Additionally, this nexus should be analyzed in relation to (de)militarization and the environment and the global need for environmental peacebuilding within planetary boundaries to ensure sustainable development is even possible.

The Women's Major Group remains available to continue further discussing our views and be an active part of transparent and inclusive consultations.