

Future and value of the bilateral consultations between Member States and the Secretariat of UN Environment – Guidance Note

The objective of bilateral consultations with member states is to strengthen the member states' commitment to UN Environment and joint efforts to tackle global, regional and national environmental challenges. The consultations are a forum for building trust and confidence in the current and future direction of UN Environment through open, frank and interactive dialogue. Continued and increased political and financial support through member states' positive feedback and action is a main measure of success. Equally important is the engagement to do more together at the policy and practical levels, on specific initiatives or campaigns, and with the aim to advance the environment agenda at the global, regional and country levels.

1. SCOPE

Bilateral consultation with a member state or a group of like-minded member states in this paper refer to policy discussions that

- are regular and structured with a minimum half-day to two-day agenda that covers multiple topics and areas of UN Environment's work;
- are expected to result in both political and financial support and plans to do more together;
- are led at the level of the Deputy Executive-Director, with support of senior staff and the participation of the Executive Director as may be appropriate in the case of a high-level/ministerial segment.

The consultations taking place at the regional level with the lead of the Regional Director as the representative of the Executive Director should be aligned with the principles of this paper.

2. PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

Regular annual consultations have been held for some years with a few member states (e.g. China, Japan, Nordic Countries and Switzerland) while others engage with slightly more infrequent intervals (e.g. Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands). Some other member states have expressed their interest in having consultations (e.g. France and South Korea) and others have been proposed for engagement from within the Secretariat (e.g. Canada). Most of these member states are among the top 15 donors to the Environment Fund and also contribute large amounts of earmarked funding. China is the first emerging economy engaged in annual consultations that is steadily increasing its political and financial interest and support for UN Environment.

There are three main considerations to determine whether bilateral consultations would be justified in the future:

- Need to maintain and strengthen relationships with major existing /long term partners, including continued identification of mutual priorities and areas for further strengthening, as well as assessment of the effect of their support to UN Environment;
- Need to engage with emerging major partners at early stages of their deeper engagement and financial support to UN Environment to build their knowledge, understanding and/or confidence in UN Environment and to explain the mutual benefits for their political and financial investment (e.g. some middle-income countries);

- To respond to interest expressed by member states themselves in having deeper bilateral relationship with the organisation that will also support their efforts to promote the uptake and visibility of the environment agenda domestically.

3. PARTICIPATION AND FORMAT

The value of the consultations is in having the decision makers themselves and/or people that have a strong influence on the decision-making from the member states and the relevant ministries at the table. The inter-ministerial nature of the member states' delegation is important as is the engagement of UN Environment senior management. The parties also need to meet in an appropriate format (e.g. level/type of discussion), which is also influenced by the specific needs and expectations by the member state. Whilst there is no one formula that fits all situations, the following three levels may be kept in mind when planning for consultations

1. High level political dialogue led by the Executive Director at ministerial level. It focuses on current and new global issues, UN Environment's role in these issues and the support needed for UN Environment to play that role, both political and financial;
2. Policy and strategy dialogue conversations led by the Deputy Executive-Director with support from a selected number of senior management and subject experts from UN Environment side and at senior government level with support from the desk officers/ subject experts from the capital and missions based in Nairobi. They concentrate on strategic priority issues and governance and programme matters of specific concern to member states and to UN Environment;
3. Technical and knowledge sharing discussions occur at all levels of civil service from the member states whose responsibilities involve working with UN Environment and who need introduction to of further information about the organisation's work. From UN Environment side they are led by a combination of Division Directors, Sub-programme Coordinators, Programme/Project Managers. The main purpose is to increase learning and understanding as well as to explore potential areas for further collaboration.

Respective regional offices are always involved in the consultations to provide policy guidance, contribute to the dialogue and to the follow-up.

One or several of these three approaches can be applied to any consultation depending on the needs identified. For example, the consultations with Switzerland have been a combination of high-level and policy and strategy dialogues and the recent consultations with Spain comprised technical sessions followed by policy & strategy dialogue. In terms of timing, the different sessions can take place back-to-back or follow one after the other with a longer time gap in between. Based on experience, however, the most logical and productive format is to have the highest level dialogue first to inform and guide the more detailed discussions.

4. AGENDA

The agenda development for the bilateral consultations has, so far, been mainly member state-driven to ensure that their priorities and interests are addressed. Whilst this should still remain a priority, the Secretariat can be more proactive in proposing topics that address UN Environment priorities and its vision.

In order to ensure that the discussions during the consultations are focused and results-oriented, the Secretariat works closely with the member states at the development stage of the agenda to make sure that (1) the agenda is not overloaded with too many items and leaves adequate time for discussing each topic and (2) specific questions under each topic

are identified early on, as much as possible, to enable both parties to better prepare themselves for the discussion.

The content of the agenda is influenced by but also affects the more detailed decisions made on participation, format, timing and location.

5. SCHEDULE AND LOCATION

The timing and the location of the consultations are often determined ahead of the agenda to secure the participation of the relevant, especially the most senior people, early on. This is based on the recognised importance of the consultations for the building and maintenance of strong relationships between the member states and UN Environment. In the past, a “traditional” annual schedule has been used (e.g. Switzerland in September and the Nordics in November), which may be changing now. In terms of location, some prefer to meet at their capitals (e.g. Japan), some at the various locations of the UN Environment (Headquarters/ other larger duty stations (Paris, Geneva etc.)/ regional offices). Some alternate between the two. Possibilities to organise consultations back-to-back with major events (COPs, Environment Assembly etc.) have been often considered but equally often dropped because of shortage of human resources available for preparing both at the same time. However, these events are conducive for bilateral discussions between the ministers and the Executive Director.

With the increased interest in the bilateral consultations from member states and the need to be as efficient and effective in time management for all sides, a more proactive and long-term thinking to determine timing and location is necessary including:

- Budget cycle of the member states to talk to them at the time their budgets and contributions to the UN Environment can be influenced;
- Timely discussions in support of preparation of major events (e.g., if we need to seek guidance and support for upcoming meetings, such as UN Environment Assembly);
- Effective synchronisation of consultations with UN Environment leadership travel schedule to maximise their time and availability and enable high-level dialogues to precede policy and technical follow-up dialogues as relevant;
- Possibility for organising joint consultations with several like-minded member states (as currently in place with the Nordics) could be considered following the principle analysis explained above.

6. PREPARATIONS, FOLLOW-UP AND INFORMATION FLOW

The Corporate Services Division, together with the respective Regional Offices, have been in charge of preparing and coordinating the bilateral consultations¹. They have been working closely with the member states, Executive Office, Division Directors, Sub programme Coordinators and other colleagues to ensure that

- the most important and relevant topics are covered
- briefings are provided for better advance preparation
- the right people are present at the discussions
- minutes/notes are prepared for records and follow-up
- follow-up of agreed actions is taken
- relevant publicity is given to the event (often limited as consultations are informal and bilateral)

¹ In principle, the leading office has been determined based on the location of the consultations (Nairobi - Corporate Services; region – Regional office)

This arrangement has worked quite well in the past but can benefit from stronger planning for timing and linkages between events with the Executive Office as explained above. It is also recognised that organising bilateral consultations is very labour intensive, not only for the organisers but others contributing to the preparations and conduct of the sessions.

7. WAY FORWARD

Corporate Services Division has worked with the Regional Offices to identify the first tier of member states with which UN Environment should have bilateral consultations at political, policy and strategy levels in 2017 or early 2018 with the lead of the Executive Director or Deputy Executive-Director. These are:

- Canada (new, Government to be introduced to the idea)
- China (established, annual)
- European Commission (established, annual)
- France (at the request of the Government, new)
- Germany (Government indicated after the first consultations held late 2015 that they would like to continue with regular consultations and indicated preference for 2017)
- Netherlands (at the request of Government, new)
- Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) (established, annual)
- South-Korea (at the request of the Government, new)
- Switzerland (established, annual)

Going forward, Corporate Services and relevant regional/country offices will:

- work together and approach the selected member states (from the list above) to discuss their preferred approach, location and timing for the consultations;
- consult senior managers for any proposals for agenda items; and
- present a proposal to the Executive Office for each consultation for decision on the way forward in light of feedback from member states and identified needs from the Secretariat perspective. This will contain more detailed discussions on the aspects presented in this paper based on the objective and needs identified:
 - participation (matching the expected representation from the member states)
 - format (high-level, policy & strategy level, technical & knowledge sharing)
 - agenda (political, programmatic, financial etc. issues)
 - schedule and location (starting with Executive Director's and Deputy Executive Director's schedule and suggestions from the member state)
- manage the detailed preparation and conduct of the consultations with involvement of the Executive Office and relevant divisions and other offices.

Following further discussions on the global and middle-income country resource mobilisation strategies, Corporate Services Division and the Regional Offices may also recommend a second tier of member states for bilateral consultations for 2017 and onwards.