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**150th meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives  
to the United Nations Environment Programme**

Nairobi, 30 April 2020

2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Online Meeting

**“Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”.  
Note on the preparations for the fifth session of the United Nations Environment  
Assembly**

This document serves as a background document for both agenda item 5, entitled “Implementation of paragraph 8 of UNEA decision 4/2” and agenda Item 6, entitled “Preparations for the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly”.

The concept note is on the preparations for the Fifth Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5), with the focus of UNEA5 being targeted actions for nature as key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, whilst also highlighting UNEA’s significant role in the Post-COVID-19 economic re-start and recovery.

The Committee is invited to provide guidance and feedback to the Secretariat on the concept note.

# **“Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”. Note on the preparations for the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly**

## **I. Introduction**

1. This concept note seeks to assist Member States in their preparations for the Fifth Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA5). It elaborates on the premise of UNEA5, namely that targeted actions for nature are key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It also highlights that such actions play a significant role in the Post-Covid-19 economic re-start and recovery.<sup>1</sup>

2. Member States are invited to consider the following elements addressed in this note:

- Continued relevance of the theme of UNEA;
- How to build on the theme of the Assembly to transform UNEP from “business as usual” to an organization capable of “shifting the needle” through an impact-driven Medium-Term Strategy;
- Proposed action areas where the Assembly can contribute to strengthen actions for Nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals;
- How to enhance the authority, impact and relevance of the Assembly through a limited set of impactful resolutions and decisions that explore new territory/does not duplicate with previous resolutions, or encroach on Convention decisions or on the mandate scope of other UN agencies;
- Adopting an innovative communication approach to help the messages of the Assembly reach citizens; and
- Launching the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of UNEP (1972) and contributing to the long-term strengthening of UNEP and of international environmental governance.

## **II. Continued relevance of the theme**

3. Environmental dimensions play a critical role in both understanding the origins of the COVID-19 crisis and successfully rebuilding a post-pandemic world. It also highlights the imperative of maintaining planetary sustainability in order to promote wellbeing while reducing risks to people.

4. Despite the COVID-19 crisis, the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change still constitute our best, and only, global road map for the future. However, the prospects for achieving this roadmap is dwindling, because nature’s life support system is being unraveled. As mentioned in the Secretary General’s report on the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19: “Had we been further advanced in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, we could better face this challenge - with stronger health systems, fewer people living in extreme poverty, less gender inequality, a healthier natural environment, and more resilient societies. We must seize the opportunity of this crisis to strengthen our commitment to implement the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. By making progress on our global roadmap for a more inclusive and sustainable future, we can better respond to future crises”.

5. Lessons learned from the management of the COVID-19 crisis provide an opportunity to both revisit our relationship with nature and rebuild a more environmentally responsible world. The crisis has brought about an unprecedented pause to many human activities, including some that have wreaked significant damage on the natural world; it has forced us to rethink how we work; it has also touched our values, including on the need to work together. As highlighted in the SG’s report “The irony that the current crisis is resulting in lower emissions and cleaner air is not lost on anyone – not least because deforestation, pollution, biodiversity loss are all contributory factors to the spread of the virus. Governments should not respond to the COVID-19 crisis by making policy and investment decisions that exacerbate existing crises such as air pollution and the climate emergency.”

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<sup>1</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has had widespread and unprecedented impacts, including tragic consequences for many across the globe resulting in grief and disruption. Similarly, the economic and social impacts of the pandemic have been significant and are expected to have severely disruptive effects in the coming months and years. The pandemic has illustrated that we are all vulnerable.

6. Humanity's fundamental dependency on nature was recognized in UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup> and has been since reinforced in numerous scientific assessments<sup>3</sup>. Over half of the world's GDP is moderately/highly dependent on nature, such as through pollination, water quality, and natural materials. This dependency is also increasingly recognized by the business community worldwide.<sup>4</sup> More than ever, the international community is recognizing that investment in environmental health is a central part of the 2030 Agenda and global response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Governments, the private sector and civil society must collaborate towards urgent, transformative and sustained actions that deliberately reshape humanity's interaction with nature. Reforms and investments over the next 10 years must simultaneously re-build our economies by addressing the systemic threats to nature, such as unsustainable consumption and production, rapid urbanization, as well as weaknesses in governance and accountability, which in turn feed the five direct drivers of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation (changes in land and sea use; direct exploitation of organisms; climate change; pollution; and invasion of alien species).<sup>5</sup>

### **III. Shifting the needle from “business as usual” -- designing an impact-driven Medium-Term Strategy**

7. *UNEA-5 will be the occasion for Member States to approve UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) for the period 2022-2025.* The MTS represents a critical opportunity for UNEP to draw a new global vision and reinforced narrative for the organization, based on the latest science and supported by a coherent, transformational focus that can serve as a pathway to 'shift the needle' on the environmental crises we face (climate change, nature loss, pollution), while taking into account the need for global recovery in a post-COVID-19 world.

8. *The inclusive process for developing the next MTS can impact the direction for the next years of the global environmental agenda.* The consultative process guiding the MTS development will allow UNEP to seek alignment between the systemic changes supported by the best scientific evidence with the views of the Member States, other UN Agencies, Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), Major Groups and Stakeholders and other key non-government players. This will help design a Strategy that is able to redefine the global paradigm of prosperity, equity and stability through an environmental message imbued with economic and social literacy. The next MTS will enable UNEP to outline its deeper aspirations as an organization – as the 2022-2025 MTS cycle marks the organization's fiftieth anniversary – while identifying where to play and what levers, tools and capabilities will be required to succeed.

9. *The Medium-Term Strategy can further support environmental leadership in the context of the UN Reform.* From a broader UN system perspective, the MTS will also outline UNEP's role of convener, incubator and coordinator of the global environmental agenda across actors and sectors and its environmental leadership in UN Reform.

### **IV. Transformative action areas for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals**

10. *There is a growing interest for a greater focus on a limited number of transformative action areas, building on existing commitments and feeding into Covid-19 economic recovery plans.* The forthcoming UN Environment Assembly will provide, an opportunity for the multilateral community to identify and agree on bold transformative actions for Nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, . The four areas identified below reflect topics where political commitments will be required to protect and conserve the ecosystem services that nature provides, targeting both the direct drivers of biodiversity loss as well as the indirect drivers, i.e. the structural and systemic challenges linked to underlying economic, demographic, governance, technological and cultural issues:

- Action area 1: Nature for Jobs and Economic Prosperity
- Action area 2: Nature for Health
- Action area 3: Nature for Climate

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<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution (A/RES/70/1) adopted on 25 September 2015

<sup>3</sup> For example, the 2019 Global Assessment Report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services stressed that nature plays a critical role in providing food and feed, energy, medicines and genetic resources and a variety of materials fundamental for people's physical well-being and for maintaining culture.

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report 2020: [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Global\\_Risk\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risk_Report_2020.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

- Action area 4: Nature for Sustainable Food Systems

11. **Proposed action area 1: Nature for Jobs and Economic Prosperity.** This action area addresses mainly SDGs 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 17 and emphasizes the imperative of a sustainable economic recovery in harmony with nature. Some elements to be considered within this area are listed in Box 1.

**Box 1: Nature for Jobs and Economic Prosperity (Examples of potential actions)**

*Building back from the pandemic by investing directly in Nature.* The restoration of ecosystems will make a meaningful contribution to economic recovery and achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, the restoration of degraded watersheds could greatly increase supplies of fresh water globally, and the restoration of tropical forests could sequester enough carbon to assist with the management of global atmospheric carbon dioxide. Similarly, restoration of the world’s savannas and grasslands could capture substantial quantities of carbon in soils while at the same time greatly increasing the carrying capacity for livestock and/or game. The economic stimulus of goods and services that emerge from restored ecosystem and the additional jobs has the potential to revitalise many impoverished rural areas.

*Building back from the pandemic in harmony with Nature.* Targeted stimulus packages and investments aimed at, *inter alia*, renewable energy supplies; energy efficient buildings and transportation systems; pollution and waste reduction technology; and the sound management of chemicals; and sustainable use and trade in nature’s products, will help to build sustainable and resilient green economies, building on the longstanding work on Sustainable Consumption and Production and the Partnership for Action on Green Economy. Improving the planning and construction of infrastructure to meet development needs while protecting nature and maintaining ecological resilience, will be key to long-term sustainability.

12. **Proposed action area 2: Nature for Health.** The Assembly will provide an opportunity for Member States to announce and/or commit to actions that recognize the contribution of nature to public health. Discussions under this topic would build on the adoption and implementation of the action plan “Towards a Pollution Free Planet” and would directly address SDG’s 3, 5, 6, 10, 12, 14, 17. This could include aspects listed in Box 2.

**Box 2: Nature for Health (Examples of potential actions)**

*Investing in nature will limit the impact and emergence of zoonotic diseases.* It is clear that enhanced, proactive and sound conservation practices, and sustainable use of ecosystems and their biodiversity will contribute to prevention of accelerated pathogen pathways amplified due to habitat encroachment and destruction; illegal wildlife trade; landscape fragmentation; deforestation, and similar anthropogenic activities. Additional investment in science for understanding the emergence of zoonotic diseases, including establishing scientific baselines and modelling and testing of potential controls will also be important.

*Developing a global collective structural response to address the threat of marine litter.* Such framework can build on the outcome of the ad-hoc working group on marine litter established by UNEA tasked with providing options for collective response.

*Improving the state of freshwater and ocean environments.* Investing in Nature for Health also includes ensuring freshwater and ocean environments remain healthy and productive by implementing effective, integrated ecosystem-based management solutions to reduce cumulative negative impacts from human activities on biodiversity and habitats, including intensifying resource use and coastal infrastructure development, along with accelerating climate change.

*Setting a new global chemicals management framework.* Pollution from chemicals and waste are a strong driver of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss, which have direct impacts on public health and through this, to jobs and inclusive prosperity. Transformational change to address unsustainable chemicals and waste management includes an ambitious new approach for safeguarding our environmental support systems, though the adoption of a global, holistic chemicals and management framework. Ensuring the adoption of a Post-2020 Chemicals and waste management framework matter more than ever.

13. **Proposed action area 3: Nature for Climate.** The Assembly will provide an opportunity for Member States to announce and/or commit to actions that recognize the solutions that nature can provide vis-à-vis mitigating and adapting to climate change in both terrestrial and marine environments. Discussions on this topic would support the implementation of SDGs 7, 9, 11, 13, 17. This could consider elements listed in Box 2.

**Box 3: Nature for Climate (Examples of potential actions)**

*Enhancing NDCs ambition with Nature and corresponding finance.* The revision of Nationally Determine Contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement presents a unique opportunity to clearly, comprehensively and quantitatively increase commitments to nature, with the aim of increasing countries' overall ambition to achieve the Paris goals, an area of fundamental importance for COP26. This plan puts nature at the heart of those enhancements in ways that can demonstrably deliver higher levels of emission reduction/avoidance.

14. **Proposed action area 4: Nature for Sustainable Food Systems.** The Assembly will be an opportunity for Member States to announce and/or commit to actions that enhance stewardship of habitat and natural resources while ensuring the provision of food and nutrition for a growing population. Work under this area would support SDGs 2, 12, 14, 15, 17. Elements which could be considered are listed in Box 4.

**Box 4 Nature for Sustainable Food Systems (examples of potential actions):**

*Promoting Food Systems for Nature.* Urgent action is required to transform agriculture and food systems, as a significant driver of biodiversity loss – this includes improving productivity through nature-friendly practices, taking full account of food systems, food and nutrition security and livelihoods. At the same time, these actions work towards conserving and enhancing the use of biodiversity in agricultural and other managed ecosystems; divesting from policies and practices that erode nature and emit pollutants; rehabilitating degraded lands and seas to halt incentives to convert more habitat; and working along the full supply chain of global commodities to eliminate environmentally harmful practices.

*Redirecting private capital towards sustainable production of food and commodities.* Fish are a global food commodity. It is imperative to eliminate harmful subsidies and identify positive incentives that help fish stocks conservation and recovery. Additionally, intensifying natural resource use, coastal development and pollution is compromising marine and coastal ecosystems services such as nursery and reproductive areas.

*Ending illegal wildlife trade.* Unsustainable and illegal trade in plants and animals undermines legitimate use of these resources and robs countries of their natural resources. Strengthened national policies and enforcement efforts require expanded transboundary cooperation to halt international flows of illicit wildlife and wildlife products, including those products that have the potential to transmit zoonotic diseases. Activities to change social behaviors and curb the demand for illegal wild products is essential.

**V. Enhancing the authority, impact and relevance of the Assembly through a limited set of ambitious resolutions and decisions**

15. *Four omnibus resolutions for enhanced impact and relevance.* In light of the ongoing challenges to organize extensive negotiating sessions and taking into account the broad consensus to limit the number of resolutions, it is proposed that Member States consider putting forward a smaller set of omnibus resolutions under each of the four proposed action areas. The resolutions would consider decisions previously adopted by the Assembly and the next Medium-Term Strategy and will focus on gaps and value addition in relation to existing commitments and those previously adopted.

16. At the request of member States, the Secretariat can present in advance of the Annual Subcommittee a compilation of suggested action points for a small set of new overarching resolutions under each of the four proposed action areas, for consideration.

## **VI. Communicating the messages of the Assembly to citizens**

17. *Responding to the COVID-19 crisis in the context of the biodiversity, pollution and climate crises.* At a time when world headlines are almost exclusively focused on the health and economic crises, we must ensure that biodiversity, climate and the broader environmental agenda remain prominent within the public discourse and a political priority. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic compels us to connect the dots for people on how biodiversity and our natural systems work -- an intricate & interconnected web that not only threatens life, through the outbreak of zoonotic diseases, but also provides the ecological foundation to sustain all life on earth.

18. *Addressing the inadequacy of the global response to the climate and biodiversity crises.* The Secretariat intends to reframe our overarching narrative on nature for the next year to one in which we push for understanding and appreciating the true value of nature; reevaluating our relationship with it and working with absolute urgency to halt and reverse the decline of nature through sustained reforms deliberately designed to address systemic threats. The better we work with nature, the better we manage human health, and the stronger and more sustainable we will build back our economies from this crisis. This is why the post-2020 biodiversity framework, the UNFCCC COP 26 and nature-focused UNEA-5 matter greatly.

19. *In the lead-up to UNEA5, the Secretariat intends to create synergies bet “Time #ForNature” campaign from World Environment Day to “Actions #ForNature” to align it with the assembly theme of ‘Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.’* Just like for World Environment Day, the campaign will include a series of multimedia stories on the topic, as well as a social media engagement plan. The stories would explore the proposed four action areas for the assembly:

## **VII. Launching the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of UNEP and contributing to the long-term strengthening of UNEP and of international environmental governance**

20. *Kick-off of the 50th anniversary of UNEP during UNEA.* It is recommended that the forthcoming Environment Assembly launches the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of UNEP, (UNEP @ 50), mandated in decision 4/2 of UNEA 4, at the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. The launching of the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of UNEP during UNEA would also provide the backdrop for the implementation of General Assembly Resolution 73/333.

21. The launching of the commemorations during UNEA will offer to Ministers of the Environment and leaders of the global environmental community a number of opportunities, as listed in Box 5.

### **Box 5: Opportunities provided by launching UNEP 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary during UNEA**

Reflect on how to promote a more systematic approach to many of the environmental challenges that the world is facing today;

Further strengthen UNEP with a long-term vision in the context of the Rio+20 Outcome Document,

Enhance and strengthen the environment in the UN-system;

Promote the science policy interface by using science to catalyze action at a global scale (science-policy interface);

Reflect on major milestones and achievements in the field of international environmental law and international environmental governance since the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 (Stockholm Conference);

Reflect on the impact and importance of international environmental law and international environmental governance, taking into account paragraph 88 of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, entitled “The future we want”, and the findings of the ad hoc open-ended working group established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 72/277; and

Re-examine how global environmental governance can be modernized and move with the times, including through the ongoing process of review of the effectiveness and efficiency of UNEP’s policy-making organs.

## Way forward

22. February 2021 will be a unique and timely opportunity to place nature at the centerstage of the economic recovery debate. Under the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”, the 5th Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) will position investments in nature and green jobs, sustainable finance, sound chemicals management, and sustainable production and consumption at the forefront of Covid-19 recovery plans. It will also provide an opportunity to leverage other strategic ‘nature-focused’ objectives, commitments and action plans that underpin the implementation of the UN Decade of Action to deliver the Global Goals, the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the post-2020 Framework on Biodiversity, the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021.

23. UNEA-5 – as the primary global platform for the world’s Environment Ministers, together with other sectors in their government and societies, including local communities and business leaders, can help identify and capture transformative actions and policies for nature.

24. The Environment Assembly can mobilize leadership and generate new broad political commitments to nature, underpinned by measurable and timebound targets captured in its political ministerial declaration, resolutions and partnerships designed to reverse the negative trends on biodiversity loss. It is recommended that the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Bureau of the UN Environment Assembly consider the following:

- Supporting the relevance of the Environment Assembly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- How the proposed four action-areas can help strengthen actions from all sectors of society including by conserving and sustainably using the planet’s marine, freshwater and terrestrial resources, reversing the trends of environmental degradation, promoting ecological resilience, and reducing zoonotic diseases and pandemic risks;
- Examining further how to reach a limited set of resolutions that address the drivers of the decline of nature and biodiversity loss by revisiting and amending sectoral and cross-sectoral policies, plans and programmes at all levels, to achieve the necessary transformational change across societies and economies;
- Supporting efforts to mobilize the private sector toward targeted investments in support of ecosystem-based approaches, including nature-based solutions that are cost-effective and involve multiple benefits to address climate change, reduce pollution and protect water resources, reduce erosion and coastal inundation, and mitigate disasters, while supporting nature conservation, restoration and sustainable use;
- Providing guidance on the proposed communication strategy, including by considering the overarching narrative on understanding and appreciating the true value of nature;
- Continue to promote a coherent response to global environmental challenges and implementation of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda. Provide guidance on how the United Nations Environment Assembly can serve as a platform where the international community discusses the interactions of environmental issues by benefitting from the universal leadership of the Assembly and in this context enhance cooperation among UNEP and the Multilateral Environmental Agreements, for example in the context of the post 2020 biodiversity framework and the strategic approach and the sound management chemicals and waste beyond 2020 as these provide good opportunities to improve policy coherence and effective implementation of the Multilateral Environmental Agreements; and
- Agree to the recommendation that the forthcoming Environment Assembly launches the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of UNEP.