

Women's Major Group response to the Letter from the UN Environment Assembly President on the Ministerial Declaration *(sent on April 24)*

1. What would you welcome as the most important elements and/or key messages from the Ministers in the UNEA Ministerial Declaration to address the theme in an impactful manner?

Our key messages include the following:

- Support meaningful real solutions that address root causes of environmental degradation while respecting human rights
- Outline methods and enable support for initiatives that respect nature and restore natural ecosystems including women, indigenous peoples and local communities' initiatives
- Support People-responsive transformational change leading to sustainable agriculture and healthy food systems leading to healthier diets while exerting climate action
- Uphold People's rights and justice in genuine solutions for climate change while calling for reduced consumption and sustainable production
- Urge action to governments for the implementation of UNEP's environmental defenders' policy

As we are being ravaged by the current COVID-19 pandemic and in fear of more infectious diseases, our hope is that the Ministerial Declaration will be a clarion call for a reassessment of the ways in which humans have been interfering in natural systems to achieve the SDGs. The Ministerial Declaration should outline methods and enable support for initiatives **respecting nature and restoring ecosystems**, such as guiding development to **reduce habitat loss and fragmentation** that contributes to the evolution or spread of

infectious diseases, such as COVID-19. We ask Ministers to stress the danger of similar, potentially even more dangerous, pandemics in the future, if we do not urgently address humanity's fundamental responsibility to respect and uphold the natural ecosystems of which we are a part. This was recognized in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and since reinforced in numerous scientific assessments, including those discussing coronaviruses.

This should be followed by a call for the UN system and member states to place the **environmental dimension** firmly at the center of sustainable development, as it forms the core of both the social and economic pillars. Now is the time for governments to commit their support to **meaningful solutions addressing root causes** in order to achieve internationally agreed agendas such as the sustainable development goals – and not just end-of-pipe “band-aid” actions.

We would expect to see recognition that one of the major issues which needs addressing by urgent action and transformative pathways is our broken **food and agricultural system**, which has been captured by big agribusinesses for profit, at the expense of natural resources, biodiversity, livelihoods, human rights, health and local food security. Policies, incentives and support should move away from industrial agricultural models that cause hunger and violence, towards agroecology, and systems that conserve soil and increase long-term yield. Humane and sustainable local production and consumption, including community and school vegetable gardens, should replace the export model and help reduce meat consumption. We also ask Ministers to support the phasing out of perverse subsidies and incentives as well as highly-hazardous pesticides. Ministers should urge their governments to strengthen their commitments to the rule of law that values merit and promotes participatory decision-making. When participatory decision-making is supported, diets can move towards healthier, and more productive and environmentally-friendly predominantly plant-based foods while taking into consideration local and cultural contexts. **Women-led participatory decision-making** in systems of food production, transport, and consumption can also help **eliminate food waste** and address the 30% of produced food that is wasted every year.

We ask Ministers to **uphold people's rights and justice in solutions for climate change and sustainable consumption and production**. Climate science recommends deep and rapid cuts in greenhouse gas emissions to keep global warming as little as 1.5 degrees Celsius

of pre-industrial era levels, or it will turn into a full-blown climate catastrophe: it will put at risk the lives and livelihoods of even more people, threaten increased deforestation and biodiversity loss, weaken natural systems, and exacerbate the same ecological pressures that put us in contact with zoonotic diseases like the COVID-19. The climate crisis has crippled ecological and financial economies resulting in a [steady increase in hunger](#) since the agreement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (2015). We ask Ministers to follow the polluters' pay and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC) principles, and take action with ambitious targets, including the expedited phase out of fossil fuel extraction and dirty energy subsidies.

As world attention shifts to the agenda of rebuilding the global economy with COVID-19, adaptation plans should not lock us into the unsustainable and profit-driven development model that is "business as usual". The "global" financial economy relies on ecological economies cultivating biodiversity with cultural diversity in every region, supporting natural systems that can moderate climate changes and achieve SDGs and other international commitments. The Ministerial Declaration will be timely in making sure that we **live sustainably within planetary limits** of shared air, land, and water through actions that help us be good neighbors. The declaration should strengthen protections and capacities of women leading communities to contribute to indicators of ecosystem health for local and national responses in support of the **UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration**. It should also call for the highest level of ambition for the **CBD's post-2020** global biodiversity framework and the Strategic Approach and sound management of chemicals and waste beyond 2020 (**SAICM**).

The declaration should also **speak out against "false solutions"** and technological innovations that promise to reduce the resource use and pollution, at the expense of worsening inequality, poverty, and human rights violations. While technological innovations are welcome, these must be assessed for their **appropriateness and impacts on human rights**, following the **precautionary principle**, and capacity to addressing root causes. "Solutions" that address only the environmental pillar of sustainable development without considering their impacts on the rights of farmers, workers, women, indigenous peoples, urban poor, and other marginalized sectors are not real solutions. Financial measures should incentivize **technology sharing** so these will not result in monopolies and inaccessibility to these technologies. In accordance with science and equity, we must drastically increase action to reverse the current

trend of backsliding on climate and environmental goals. This will require fundamental societal and systems transformations, and stronger capacities for action of national and sub-national authorities, MSMEs (medium, small and micro enterprises), civil society, and local communities developing their economies. Transitioning to a **sustainable, just, and low-carbon future** should be grounded in justice, equity, democracy, transparency, accountability, and science, with recognition that women belong in positions of power, and that indigenous peoples and local communities' traditional knowledge have important contributions to make. We expect the declaration to reiterate these time-honored principles and norms, especially in this critical moment of crisis, emphasizing that **projects should listen to communities and strive for a common-determined good** and given the chance to be developed based on scientifically demonstrated sustainability.

The **role of the private sector**, particularly big corporations through public-private partnerships (PPPs) in promoting and implementing (often false) solutions for sustainable development and climate change, must be closely scrutinized according to the highest standard of **transparency and accountability** in recognition of their contribution to massive environmental, economic, and human destruction. In this regard, a legally binding instrument with third-party monitoring and robust enforcement mechanisms may begin to address both accountability and transparency of risks, footprint, impacts, liabilities, benefits, and returns on investment (see a.o. [Corporate Accountability](#)). Unfortunately, UNEP is heavily lobbied by unsustainable corporations whose core business are in conflict of interest with UNEP's aim of protecting the planet, in particular petrochemical industries and their affiliated pesticide and chemicals corporations. UNEA5 needs to agree on principles of non-cooperation with these corporations, and exclude any future partnerships.

Unfair **trade and investment agreements** have resulted in negative environmental, economic and social impacts. They facilitated the exploitation of natural resources by transnational extractive companies, as well as the dominance of the agro-chemical transnational corporations. By intervening in the national food sovereignty capability of countries, for instance, unsustainable livestock and feedstock production for exports have displaced local food production for commodities for exports increasing poverty and hunger as well as human rights violations. Because of their impacts, these agreements must be reviewed and assessed for alignment with sustainable development. Governments should rescind and not sign new agreements that are at odds with sustainable development,

including those that allow corporations to sue governments through ISDS or provide tax havens. Governments should instead shift to an alternative trade and investment framework that prioritizes human needs and development while protecting the environment.

Meanwhile, greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, environmental destruction, displacement and human rights violations caused by ongoing military attacks and occupations, exercises, and the building and operation of large military bases often go unaddressed. We also urge the UNEA to **address the negative impacts of unjust wars and militarism** on the environment and people's rights in its declaration. We also ask Ministers to strengthen the protection of **environmental and human rights defenders**, and the policies that should protect them. Environmental defenders are being murdered all around the world. What they are defending is vital to all of us.

2. How can the Environment Assembly make a significant contribution to *Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* at a global scale? In doing so, you may take into account the preparation for the meeting, its conduct and follow-up, as well as its relationship to other meetings and processes.

Our key suggestions include the following:

- Adopt a "nexus" approach that tackles interconnected issues in a systemic and holistic way thus re-thinking solutions that lead to systemic transformation for genuine 'harmony with nature'
- Ensure full and *inclusive and meaningful* stakeholder participation in the preparation for UNEA5, including through regional consultations and dialogue between Ministers and stakeholders
- Inform other intergovernmental meetings to ensure policy coherence, and strengthen multilateral systems
- Apply the principle of non-regression

UNEA should be firmly positioned in the current political context, in order to be impactful. It should **drill down into the root causes** of the COVID-19 pandemic and other diseases, and structure its proceedings in order to ensure that actions for nature are developed to not only prevent future recurrences, but also to “build back better”. UNEA should aim towards a **recovery** based on nature leading to systemic transformation and truly *‘living in harmony with nature’*. When REAL solutions that greatly benefit both climate & biodiversity and the people are identified, appropriate funding should also be allocated (while it is [estimated](#) that these solutions can provide 40% of the carbon emissions cuts needed by 2030 to give a decent chance of limiting warming below 2C, they receive less than 3% of climate funding). Solutions based on nature need to focus on biodiversity protection and human rights as an imperative. We insist that the term "nature-based solutions" can no longer be used as it has been diluted too much to serve commercial interests that go against nature.

UNEA should recognize the interconnectedness of the various human-driven crises (such as climate change, deforestation and biodiversity loss, animal extinctions, plastic pollution), and the need to tackle them **systemically and holistically** when designing actions for nature. This **“nexus” approach** is particularly valuable as UNEA will take place in the run up to a series of **global meetings** on associated issues - including biodiversity, agriculture and food systems, chemicals and waste, plastic, and climate – enabling clear messages to be developed which can be carried forward, including analysis of the **inter-relationships between issues**.

The **preparation process** for UNEA will need to be carefully considered, given that most (if not all) of it is likely to be virtual. Well-designed systems and processes need to be used to **ensure full stakeholder consultation and meaningful consultation**, such as accessible website portals where all background research, UNEA documentation, and comments are collated, translated, and made readily accessible. Online meetings must permit access to all member states and stakeholders (including farmers, fisherfolks, workers, indigenous peoples, and women), and not be too limited in the numbers of participants; for example, 150 participants is clearly not enough (e.g. the limit for the "Oslo Consultation" for Stakeholders, or the 150th CPR meeting where UNEP staff and several stakeholders were asked to leave). Ministers should support communication, outreach, capacity building and funding. Considering UNFCCC and UNEA recognition of indigenous peoples’ sustainability successes, we encourage Ministers to strengthen

language operationalizing the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that protects women and girls asserting their rights to advance nature's achievement of SDGs to the benefit of all.

The UNEA process must adhere to and apply the **principle of non-regression** so that all rules and practices regarding participation and transparency do not backslide with respect to their current formal and informal practices of internationally agreed principles and rights, such as the right to participate in decision-making and access to information.

In order to be effective, policies and actions at the global level should be informed and grounded by regional and national realities, such as through regional consultations amplifying solutions from women and marginalized sectors. We invite **Ministers to include stakeholders' views in national and regional preparatory processes for UNEA5**, as well as in the follow up and implementation of the adopted resolutions. Multilateral systems based in regional institutions with reporting and monitoring systems can help strengthen holding decision-makers accountable.

In order to **ensure policy coherence**, results of the UNEA process should **inform intergovernmental meetings** on financing, trade and investments, climate, chemicals and waste, and human rights, in addition to highlighting solutions for HLPF. Ministers should explore proposals that would be received at HLPF linking progress indicators to indicators of biodiversity and ecosystem wellbeing. UNEA should cooperate closely with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) anonymized data or reports on the protection of environmental defenders. We await the work of Ministers that gives the world a declaration outlining a true commitment to **strengthen multilateral systems** which are essential to our global cooperation to safeguard the planet's climate and biodiversity.