

Asia Pacific Regional CSOs Engagement Mechanism (APRCM) submission in response to the UNEA 5 President's letter

Dear Mr. Rotevatn
President of the Fifth Session of the UNEA
Greetings from the Asia Pacific Regional CSOs Engagement Mechanism (APRCM)

The global pandemic has seriously challenged human ingenuity, intellect and arrogance. An organism of the width of 1/1000th of an eyelash has brought world to a standstill. This underlines the danger of breaching boundaries of nature. The pandemic poses a highly imminent possibility of reversing whatever gains we have made on sustainable development in last few years.

The economic costs of the pandemic have already threatened to bring us to the worst recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s. Developing and poor countries that are hit hard have asked the IMF for financial assistance to the tune of USD 2.5 trillion, to which the IMF has expressed its inability. The social costs are still unfathomable as the number of people dying due to lack of appropriate health care rising in thousands, number of people falling back in poverty, number of people losing jobs and livelihoods and the number of people in the brink of starvation, are rising by millions every week. In developing and poor countries, only the privileged could afford all the essential measures to protect our wellbeing and prevent the spread of infection like handwashing, lockdown, stocking essentials and social distancing. The daily wage workers, urban poor, the peasants, the migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, women and the poorest suffer the most in these circumstances.

While the pandemic should have been seen as fervent call for increased environmental action, among the cruel choices that pandemic presents is that the environment always lags behind economic and social priorities. With the countries gradually reopening and salvaging their economies; many of them have rolled back human rights, social and environmental regulations and standards. The UN special rapporteur on human rights and the environment, David Boyd, recently condemned such steps as “irrational, irresponsible, and jeopardizing the rights of vulnerable people”, emphasising that COVID-19 must not be used as an excuse to weaken environmental protection. Similar economic imperatives have also caused suspension of labour laws (viz. extending working hours from 8-12 without any overtime) and essential protection in many countries. It is unfortunate that many governments hinge their actions on the outdated assumption that there is an inherent trade-off between environmental protection and robust economies.

With regard to sustainable development goals, reports after reports have shown that progress towards achieving the goals is awfully inadequate and there are huge regional variations; and we are also regressing on several goals such as SDG8, SDG9, SDG10, and all SDGs related to climate change (SDG12,13, 14, 15, and 16). It is extremely disappointing that even developed economies which could have inspired meaningful action by providing leadership, finance and technology to emerging economies and developing countries (EMDEs) are performing equally poorly in many goals. Equally worrisome is that, there is no progress on SDG 16, which anchors human rights in the Agenda 2030. On the contrary, evidences point to the fact that spaces for democratic debate, freedom of ex-

pression and press freedom have declined as CSOs, environmental defenders and human rights defenders face increasing clamp down and repression. Here it is also important to remind all of us that even though environmental footprint seems to be reduced during the COVID pandemic as more than 100 countries have responded, and rightly so, with containment and lockdown measures; the impending economic crisis and financial constraints heavily weigh on the countries' capacity, ability and ambitions to take action against climate change in particular, and on moving towards the transformational Agenda 2030, in general.

Our expectations with regard to essential elements/key messages in the Ministerial Declaration from the UNEA 5

UNEA 5 was slated to come after a "super year" for environment following the UN Conference on Ocean (June 2020) aiming to start a new chapter on global ocean action, CBD COP 15 (October 2020) which would have adopted post 2020 biodiversity framework, and UNFCCC COP 26 (in Dec. 2020) flagging off the Paris Agreement implementation. All these conferences have been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic with no certainty on new dates. If at all UNEA 5 will push through as planned in March 2021, it will still miss the opportunity of building on the momentum of a super year of environment. UNEA 5 will have the unenviable task of putting centrality of nature and environment in the development discourse at a time when restoring economic growth involves trade-off with environmental protection. There is enough evidence for making many of us apprehensive that the pandemic is being used for political opportunism and being redefined as a global "security threat" rather than a global health emergency. This might give strong sharp blow to already increasing jingoistic nationalism, isolationism, trade protectionism, anti-immigrant policies and institutionalised racism. The first and foremost task of the UNEA will be to prevent it and strongly push environmental action in the centre and back on track.

However, there are a number of other concerns that UNEA 5 must respond to besides making progress on the environmental imperatives that it has already taken since the start of UNEA.

1. *Reiterating faith in multilateralism:* UN Environment with its universal membership and UNEA as "world Parliament of Environment" also face the task of reinforcing global community's faith in multilateralism which is at its lowest ebb now. UNEA must prevail upon the member states to enhance investment in environment, human capital and health. It must have strongest message to repose peoples' faith through a narrative which evidence that economic prosperity and environmental protection can go together. It must prevent short term actions for immediate economic gains posing a threat to long term ecological integrity.
2. *Addressing systemic issues and barriers of development;* The foremost concern of the world for now is to get over the pandemic with the minimal human and economic costs. However, even the end of the pandemic will not resolve issues which are at the heart of global crises. Inequality and increasing concentration of wealth and power, unjust trade and investment agreements, land and resource grabbing, injustice, patriarchy, discrimination and violence against women, illicit financial flow from countries rich in genetic resources, biodiversity and natural wealth, geopolitics, conflict and wars etc. are not going to be resolved unless specifically targeted. Environmental justice can only be buttressed by making its linkages stronger with economic, social and gender justice, and redistributive justice and accountability for the people, a normative

framework which APRCEM thinks is essential for achieving sustainable development addressing systemic barriers. While UNEA might not be the best platform to decisively address many of these, it can certainly create robust evidence on the linkages of many systematic issues to environmental degradation and poverty to enhance its own understanding and action around these. One concrete example can be more focus on real nature-based people's solutions in the Declaration Measures for strengthened action to protect and restore nature, and the nature-based solutions to achieve the sustainable development goals, should put people's rights at their core. These include the support for agroecology that considers the best practices and people's movements; the protection of indigenous people's territories as they are the rainforests protectors; the safe working environments for workers, renewable energy, elimination of single use plastics, and support for people's right to organize and voice their demands.

3. *Seizing opportunity for galvanising urgent action on climate change:* We already know that more than 70% of the deadly viruses since 1940s have zoonotic origin. Climate change has the potential of bringing several such scourge back to our living systems. In 2014, some scientists in lab revived a virus frozen for more than 30,000 years in Siberian permafrost, and found that to be potent. The possibility that more of these ancient viruses trapped in permafrost for thousands of years could be released and reawakened with global warming is real and underlines the urgency to prevent runaway climate change which is the biggest impediment in achieving sustainable development. The COVID-19 pandemic has given us a sense of how could an emergency of global scale look like. Not paying heed to unmistakable reports from the cutting-edge science (including that from the UNEP Reports), we cannot prevent similar pandemics from taking place in future. 2019 was the second warmest year on record in last 140 years since temperature records began to be maintained. January and February 2020 were the warmest January and February on record. WMO tells us that given the trends, the warmest year on record, 2016 could be topped soon. The fall in GHG emissions caused by the lockdowns can be temporary and would not be enough to halt climate change if stimulus packages are still granted towards extractive fossil-fuel industries. As world attention shifts to the agenda of rebuilding the global economy after COVID-19, we need to stay vigilant that post-COVID-19 recovery plans do not lock us in to the current unsustainable and profit-driven development model, which would result in overshooting our warming threshold and more environmental destruction. The declaration will be timely in making sure that the warning of climate science is not lost among leaders, and that the urgent agenda of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial era levels remains front and center of government efforts to achieve the SDGs. While we are faced with the tremendous public health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, we are also facing another calamity of climate crisis. Poor communities are suffering the brunt of droughts, floods, typhoons, and crop losses, etc, that are decimating their lives and livelihoods.
4. *Focus on emerging issues in global environmental governance:* Gene editing, synthetic biology, geoengineering and other emerging technologies that include artificial intelligence which are owned and controlled by few giant corporations have far-reaching implications to the environment and human wellbeing. Monoculture, genetic uniformity and heavy reliance on chemical inputs have destroyed agro-biodiversity and devastated human health and the environment as well as created core problems in food, agriculture and nutrition, and also the environment. Heavy use of antibiotics in poultry and livestock has resulted to increasing antimicrobial/antibiotic resistance, while decades of dependence on synthetic fertilizers have rendered vast areas of agricultural lands infertile, reduced the nutrient quality of crops and have resulted to eutrophication of

bodies of water. The use of pesticide contaminates the environment and poisons people and certain pesticides can persist in the environment for decades posing a threat to wildlife, biodiversity and human health. Industrial farming of poultry and livestock have produced a host of devastating zoonotic diseases such as avian flu, SARS and now Covid-19 that have claimed countless human lives and economic misery to already marginalized populations over the past two decades. All these issues need to be dealt with not only in the agriculture and food sphere but also in environmental platforms like UNEA. UN Environment has identified some of these as “emerging issues” in recent years as they wreak havoc on the environment, human health and the environment, and UNEA has deliberated on some in different degrees but more urgent, stronger, proactive commitment-oriented and decisive resolutions are required to drive concerted actions. UNEA should establish a permanent mechanism for technology horizon-scanning and evaluation to provide information on new and emerging technologies to member-states, independent advice on potential impacts and alternatives, and build the capacity of developing countries to assess the potential impacts of these technologies on the environment, economy and human wellbeing. We thus urge stronger regulations and/or standards for the reduction of the reliance on antibiotics, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, genetic engineering in food and agriculture, and a more humane system of food production.

5. *Stronger Ministerial Declaration*: UNEA4 declaration was significantly watered down in its final iteration. UNEA must strive to achieve a well-negotiated and emphatic Ministerial Declaration that sends a louder message of trust among member-states, foster stronger multilateralism and sincere intent for action and follow up. Conduct of regional ministerial conferences that provide for effective processes for meaningful participation of more CSOs and grassroots organizations could contribute to the adoption of a ministerial declaration at UNEA that captures the experiences and realities of member-states and stakeholders. Likewise, the declaration must come out strongly in opposing censorship, criminalization, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of rights and environmental defenders, a trend that has been steadily increasing over the years.

Preparation, conduct and follow up

APRCM has been following and participating in many UN Environment processes and of late in UNEA. APRCEM was also invited to organise the GMGSF at the third session of UNEA in 2018. We have following recommendations on how UNEA should organise the preparation, conduct and follow up as well its relations with other UN agencies, treaty bodies and processes.

1. *Stronger Resolutions*: Most UNEA Resolutions are framed to “encourage,” “Invite” and request to “consider” actions for member-states. Many of them are content with approving modest voluntary actions. Almost all of them are framed in weak language, ambiguous phrasing and vague actions that get further weakened in the negotiations process. Stronger resolutions supported by science-based evidence and research-based actions will inspire more confidence on their value and usefulness in delivering concrete actions. UNEA may consider focusing on fewer resolutions that can withstand global scrutiny on scientific rigour, content, language and ambition.
2. *Concrete follow up and implementation of Resolution*: UNEA 4 adopted a Resolution to allow UNEP to develop a mechanism to follow up implementation of the UNEA Resolutions. The resolution has good intent but has severe limitation in that UN Envi-

ronment can only follow up its own implementation of resolutions and not how member states implement those which effectively curtails the objective of ensuring progress in implementation. Despite so much talks in controlling single-use plastic, a UNEP and WRI Report (2018) showed that 127 out of 192 countries surveyed did not have legislations on single-use plastic and only 8 had ban on microbeads. In the absence of a strong follow up mechanism at the global level, no rapid and sustained change can be expected in member countries. Our suggestion is to improve the follow up by making it an integral part of Regional and sub regional Consultations as well as linking it with the APFSD, which can have added advantage of enhancing peer learning and interacting with the MGOs. Regional Ministerial Meeting though helpful, does not allow enough time or space to have quality and meaningful deliberations.

3. *Galvanising greater voluntary action through the major groups/CSOs:* UNEA is better placed in terms of its interaction with the major groups and stakeholders as it has a dedicated GMGSF prior to the official session. However, the GMGSF does not play a role in agenda setting, does not shape the conduct of UNEA and its follow up. The GMGSF is often dominated by northern CSOs and a very small number of CSOs from the south are supported to participate, with virtually no grassroots participation from the south. CSO participation further becomes almost invisible in the intersessional and preparatory meetings of the CPR which plays a crucial role in agenda setting and follow up. UNEA must ensure greater integration of concerns of CSOs, more effective participation and explore galvanising greater voluntary action by CSOs. During the last UNEA there were experiences where CSOs were asked to go out from the negotiation room because of objection from some member-states. While these ultimately resolved, meaningful engagement by CSOs will only be possible when there is no fear of being left out or marginalized.

APRCM believes that the private sector and business have been given too much space at UNEA. The Science Policy Business Forum was given prominent space, importance and elevated status and graced by high-level officials of the UN. APRCEM believes that the GMGSF be given equal status and treatment as a MGoS-led process that complements the UNEA. APRCEM also demands that discussions in the Science-Policy-Business Forum must include indigenous and local knowledge and wisdom into the framework, and acknowledge and respect peoples' science.

4. *Increasing political weight behind UNEA:* In the age when environment is in the centerstage (even for optics), UNEA must reach beyond environment Ministers. The presence of only five heads of the state at UNEA 4 (including the Kenyan President as the host) does not speak well of the power and influence of UNEA. The incumbent UNEA President must take it upon himself to mobilise greater political support and importance for UNEA. Going beyond pursuing higher ups in politics, UNEA must ensure that UN Environment has financial and human resources commensurate to the gigantic tasks and challenges ahead.

Despite unique positioning of UN Environment in the UN system, UNEA must fulfil its mandate as the "World Parliament of Environment."

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