



Transforming Our World

Landmark UNEP report lighting the path to a sustainable future
to be released in December

COVID-19 has exposed how the degradation of ecosystems is not only undermining Earth's life-supporting systems, including the regulation of disease, but also leaving our societies and economies tremendously vulnerable to sudden shocks.

Even before the pandemic, UNEP had commissioned the broadest synthesis yet of scientific insights into the huge environmental challenges facing humanity so that policymakers can see clearly what must be done. More than 40 authors and advisors from around the world are working on the report, which will be released in early 2021.

Heads of state will grapple with these issues at the UN Summit on Biodiversity, due to take place on September 30 during the UN General Assembly in New York. Before the summit, lead authors Bob Watson and Ivar Baste discuss how to fix the climate, prevent a mass extinction and set a course for a sustainable future – all at the same time.

Q1: Why should governments facing a public health emergency and nose-diving economies pay attention to another UN environmental report?

It is essential that the world learns from COVID-19. The pandemic is demonstrating for all to see how the destruction of Earth's natural systems can lead to sudden shocks with massive impacts around the world. Our report will explain how putting our relationship with nature on a sustainable footing will not only reduce the risks of climate change, biodiversity loss and the outbreak of disease, but also make our societies and economies more resilient in the face of the environmental changes, including future pandemics, that we cannot prevent.

We need to learn our lesson quickly, because economic recovery packages that many governments are preparing are an unmissable opportunity to accelerate some of the changes we need. Investing in things like green energy, sustainable cities and agriculture, and resource-efficient manufacturing can create millions of jobs and equip societies for the future.

Q2: The causes and mechanisms of climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation are complex. Why consider all of these problems together?

Because the underlying causes of each of these issues are the same, and all are related to the unsustainable production and consumption of natural resources by a wealthier and growing human population. These issues impact and reinforce each other. Climate change not only adversely affects biodiversity, land degradation and air and water quality, it is in turn affected by them. While climate change has not been the most important driver of biodiversity loss to date, it is projected to become as or more important than the other drivers in the coming decades. So it is critical that these issues are addressed simultaneously through policies and technologies that work together to maximize the benefits while minimizing any trade-offs or unintended consequences.

For example, it is well established that, with careful planning and management, halting deforestation and restoring degraded ecosystems in developing countries can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, protect biodiversity, prevent soil erosion, and safeguard supplies of water and fuel for local communities all at the same time. But even this kind of broad policy initiative will have limited success unless we tackle the drivers of deforestation, which include issues as diverse as insecure tenure in developing countries, lack of universal access to clean energy, and high demand for meat and dairy products in wealthier societies. The report will help us to appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the environmental problem we are dealing with so that we can design smart responses that can really solve them.

Q3: Experts are increasingly calling for “transformative change” in order to put the world on a sustainable path. What does that really mean, and what are the urgent actions that policymakers should take to bring about real change?

Transformative change is broad-based and far-reaching change on a scale that matches the big environmental issues we face. It requires changes in thinking and behaviour, in structures and systems. It is daunting, there is no blueprint, and it won't happen overnight. But it can take us a long way toward the more sustainable and fairer world we need and is surely achievable with the wealth of resources and knowledge that humanity has at its disposal.

Perhaps the most important aspects of this change is the transformation of our economic and financial systems. We need to align production, consumption, infrastructure and human settlements with ecological realities. We need to be able to raise living standards and well-being without using more resources or producing more waste than the planet can supply or absorb. This transformation will likely involve, for instance, incorporating natural capital accounting in decision-making, eliminating harmful subsidies, internalizing environmental costs and benefits, and embracing a circular economy.

Transformation also will require changing the way we organize our societies and activities. We need to embrace cross-sectoral planning and management. We need to change aspects of our behaviour, culture, values and norms - individually, collectively and in organizations. Changes in national and international governance structures, policies, business models, technologies, education, and knowledge systems will be needed.

**Q4: The investments required to transform our economies and societies seem massive.
How can we afford it?**

The real question is: how can we afford not to? We have no chance of achieving our economic and social goals unless we can reach our environmental goals at the same time, for instance by transitioning to a low-carbon economy while preserving and restoring our ecosystems. Issues such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, land degradation, and air and water pollution should not be viewed only as environmental issues, but rather as economic, development, social, security, moral and ethical issues. This is the logic of the Sustainable Development Goals: they are indivisible, interdependent and can only be achieved together.

While the full costs of addressing all of these issues are hard to assess, it seems clear that the cost of inaction could be far greater than the cost of action, i.e., the costs of adapting to climate change are likely to be much higher than the costs of limiting/mitigating climate change. While some may argue that financial resources are in short supply, especially after the economic hit from the COVID-19 pandemic, trillions of dollars are spent annually on economic subsidies that cause environmental damage, such as those for agriculture, fossil fuel energy, and transportation. These subsidies could be eliminated and the money saved invested in a sustainable and resilient economy.

Another reason to turn this argument on its head is that investing in a green economy is investing in the economy of the future. It will create jobs and prosperity for the businesses, investors and governments that recognize this an opportunity. Ultimately, these are critical investments that will take us closer to our goal of securing sustainable development for all while living in harmony with nature.

