



**XXII Meeting of the Forum of Ministers
of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean**
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**The Environmental Dimension of COVID-19 Sustainable
Development Recovery**

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I. Context of the session

1.The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis; it is an economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a human rights crisis. This crisis has highlighted severe fragilities and inequalities within and among nations. Coming out of this crisis will require a whole-of-society, whole-of-government and whole-of-the-world approach driven by compassion and solidarity.¹

2.The pandemic is a warning from nature that we must act on climate change, nature loss, resource efficiency and pollution. Healthy and functional ecosystems are critical to a post-COVID world, as is continuing progress in strengthening policy frameworks. Achieving ambitious agreements at UNFCCC COP26, CBD COP15, the adoption of a 2020 chemical and waste management framework as well as adopting sustainable patterns of consumption and production is more important than ever because the better we manage the health of our ecosystems, the better we manage human health and wellbeing.

3.The continuous degradation of natural spaces, primary forests, and ecosystems driven by the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production generally, has brought us closer to animals and plants that carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans. Our vulnerability to extreme climatic events and systemic risks has increased. Therefore, we need to recover ecosystems, stop deforestation, invest in the management of protected areas, in better management of productive lands and confront illegal trade in wildlife. The post-COVID-19 recovery also requires an ambitious line of research on zoonotic diseases and the health of ecosystems. At the centre of this recovery model must be the welfare and well-being of humans linked to ecosystem health and climate impacts.

4.If the world has seen a terrifying future through the lens of COVID-19, the future of our planet in a scenario of three to four degrees Celsius warmer in average temperature, leads us to a higher level of uncertainty and collapse than that we face now. However, despite the deep sadness over the loss of human life and social impacts, perhaps COVID-19 opens an opportunity for us to review our development model and the need to move from a linear to a circular economic model, which could be more inclusive, more just and could restore human relationship with nature. This unforeseen challenge makes it imperative for us to take decisive action towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and ,as included in its title, “transforming our world”.

5.The global health emergency requires a robust environmental response. Considering the inter-linked nature of issues such as innovation and resource efficiency, waste management, water and sanitation, chemicals management and air pollution and their impact on human health, it is important that investment by countries and international organisations integrate environmental dimensions. In this context, sustainable economic recovery and ecosystem-based approaches (including nature-based solutions) can generate a triple benefit: supporting economic reactivation, generating new and better jobs, increasing resilience and enhancing climate action (both in mitigation as adaptation).

6.Beyond direct health responses, fiscal stimulus packages provide an opportunity to initiate a transformative and sustainable recovery. For a sustainable and transformative recovery, it will be essential a long-term early action, with a clear agenda to address climate change, prevent habitat loss and fragmentation, reverse biodiversity loss, reduce pollution, and improve waste management and infrastructure resilience. The point has to be made that investments in recovery initiatives should integrate environmental dimensions.

¹ United Nations Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 Saving Lives, Protecting Societies, Recovering Better September 2020

7. Therefore, an important part of the change must come through pandemic recovery stimulus packages that align our economies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and international processes that target healthy biodiversity. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted unprecedented economic stimulus worldwide, with multilateral organizations and governments inject trillions into pandemic recovery, on top of money already spent protecting people and jobs.

8. Post COVID 19 recovery packages, if deployed wisely can help change course in 2021 and put the world on a more sustainable path. However, one of the key messages of the UNEP Emissions Gaps report is that “to date, the opening for using recovery measures to accelerate a green transition has largely been missed. Unless this is reversed, the Paris Agreement goals will slip further out of reach. There nonetheless remains a significant opportunity for countries to implement low-carbon policies and programmes. Governments must take this opportunity in the next stage of COVID-19 fiscal interventions.

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9. COVID-19 is causing the region’s worst health, economic, social and humanitarian crisis in a century. Latin America and the Caribbean has become a hotspot of the pandemic. COVID-19 will result in the worst recession in the region in a century, causing a 9.1% contraction in regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2020. This could push the number of poor up by 45 million (to a total of 230 million) and the number of extremely poor by 28 million (to 96 million in total), putting them at risk of undernutrition. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have social and economic specificities that amplify the crisis, including the region’s distinctively high and persistent inequality. Emissions per capita are, on average, lower than in other regions, but emissions associated with land-use change and deforestation have been on the rise. The region is also highly vulnerable to natural disasters, caused or aggravated by climate change, particularly in the Caribbean ² These stark figures underpin the social and economic reality of the pandemic and should drive actions in which the environment is a major contributing factor in a recovery plan.

10. The environmental challenge remains a pressing issue in Latin America and the Caribbean. The region is one of the most megadiverse regions of the world and possesses a vast natural heritage. In addition to being home to 8 of the world’s 17 megadiverse countries, located in the Andes-Amazon basin and in Mesoamerica, it has unique ecosystems, marine biodiversity and two primary regions of crop diversity. The Living Planet Index for Latin America and the Caribbean shows a decrease of 89% in the abundance of species populations since 1970, the most dramatic loss in any biogeographical world area. Deforestation is a key source of the region’s carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions; Unsustainable deforestation, mining, and overfishing is depriving dependent and vulnerable communities of their livelihoods. The costs of insufficient climate action are on the rise, especially for small island developing states. Definitely, the focus on the pandemic should not result in the environment being neglected. Towards that end cooperation at all levels and support to countries of the region continues to be critical.

11. Building back better requires transforming the development model of Latin America and the Caribbean. It has never been more important that recovery strategies and plans differ from traditional economic recovery plans. We need to consider bold and imaginative thinking which require innovation, circular economy and integrated approaches, linking various aspects and which changes structural elements and allows a transition to a new model. It must continue to integrate the environmental, social and economic dimensions. This new development model must respond to COVID-19 and systemic risks, with a long-

² UN Policy Brief: The impact of the COVID 19 Latin America and the Caribbean (9 July 2020)

term perspective. Simultaneously, the region must continue to advance more forcefully the decarbonisation of the economy and increase resource efficiency, while creating resilience and generation green and decent jobs.

12. Within this context, the preparations of the XXII Meeting of the Forum of Ministers of Environment have been driven by the need to reflect on the environmental dimensions of the crisis and to make a call of action for the environment to be at the core of the recovery.

II. Questions for the session

13. With the above framework in mind, some suggested questions to be addressed by speakers of this High-Level Session of the Forum include:

- a. What tools are needed to strengthen sustainable recovery at the local, national and regional levels? In what aspects should the Environment Ministries be strengthened?
- b. What are the benefits of a sustainable recovery in LAC for the Paris Agreement and the ongoing negotiations on a biodiversity post 2020 framework ?
- c. What good practices have been carried out in the countries of the region for the inclusion of the environmental component in post-COVID recovery plans? Which results are being achieved, or are expected to be achieved?
- d. What financial mechanisms and incentives should be implemented in the region to ensure a sustainable recovery?
- e. Should an Inter-Agency Task Force of UN agencies and development partners be established to determine methods for the integration of environmental dimensions into recovery plans for COVID-19?
- f. How should the relationship of the Environment Ministries with other Ministries and sectors be to ensure a sustainable recovery post-COVID19?
- g. How to strengthen political messages and signals for the private sector and stakeholders in the region, in order to allow greater inclusion of the environmental dimension and resource efficiency/circular approaches in post-COVID19 recovery plans?
- h. How to take the opportunity of post-COVID19 recovery strategies to increase the resilience of societies in the region against future pandemics and climate change?
