

**Comments by Malawi following request from Secretariat regarding on Assessment and lessons learned from the online session of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly**

1. While Malawi has taken note of the successes and positive outcomes that have been cited regarding an online modality of UNEA 5.1, such as commitment to the environmental agenda, achieving business continuity for UNEP, attendance in large numbers as well reaching out to 9.6 million online viewers and 2.1million views of videos on social media, Malawi reiterates that the digital divide is real. This reality cannot be wished away.
2. As such Malawi, in principle remains unconvinced that the conduct of multilateral diplomacy should be conducted in a virtual format. If anything, online engagement regarding governance activities of the UNEP must remain an exception rather than the norm. Experiences of holding online or virtual sessions and meetings of the governing bodies during the pandemic should not be used a basis for creating a comfort zone for ourselves regarding the conduct of business in the future or post-pandemic world. In-person meetings remain, in our considered view, the ideal for substantive negotiation and formal decision-making.
3. Malawi also wants to reiterate that there still exist pertinent challenges that emanate from online virtual meetings, mainly;
  - i. Issues of access to and reliability of technology thus negatively affecting inclusivity and participation;
  - ii. Unavailability of negotiation enablers that are present during in-person meetings such as informal exchanges, networking opportunities, spontaneity and trust and confidence building; and
  - iii. Time zone differences affecting inclusive participation;
4. These challenges, once again, militate against impactful outcomes of multilateral diplomacy as they generally affect participation, inclusivity, and effectiveness.
5. Malawi recalls that the online engagement during the 5<sup>th</sup> OECP and the UNEA 5.1, required us to focus on a limited set of urgent administrative and budgetary matters, prepared as an exception to show our commitment to the business continuity of UNEP. We did not have the chance to deal with substantive, policy issues. These experiences are also important to keep at the back of our minds.
6. It is also notable that several UN entities have issued communication to the effect that they will be returning to in person meetings. in this regard, we would be grateful for an update from UNEP regarding the return to in-person meetings.