

## **United Nations Environment Programme Asia and the Pacific Office**

Fourth Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia Pacific  
5-7 October 2021, Suwon City, Republic of Korea

Discussion Document for Agenda Item 6  
**Leadership Dialogue on Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable  
Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific**

## **Dialogue on Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific**

***Discussion Document -- Not for quotation or citation.*** The purpose of this document is to facilitate discussions during the Fourth Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia Pacific, 5-7 October 2021, Suwon City, Republic of Korea. Comments are welcome and should be sent to [uneproap@un.org](mailto:uneproap@un.org).

## 1.0 Background<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 The status and trends of nature in Asia and the Pacific in continued decline, threatening the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss are at critical thresholds in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> The region has seen significant loss of wilderness, natural forests, mangroves, and other natural ecosystems. For example, from 1990 to 2015, South-East Asia showed a 12.9% reduction in forest cover, largely due to an increase in timber extraction, large-scale biofuel plantations, and the expansion of intensive agriculture and shrimp farms. Marine ecosystems in the region are also being depleted; there has been a decline in biodiversity from the loss of over 40% of coral reefs in the region, while mangrove forests have declined by 60%.<sup>3</sup> Land use change, infrastructure development, the climate crisis, changing lifestyles and consumption patterns, and other key drivers have had significant impacts on ecosystems and the services they provide. Habitat degradation and fragmentation, especially in forests and grasslands, has also contributed to a decline in wild mammals and birds across the region.<sup>4</sup> The number of threatened mammal and plant species in the region increased by more than 10 and 18 respectively in the last decade.<sup>5</sup> Further, the region is a major contributor to climate change, producing more than half of global GHG emissions.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the region is increasingly impacted by climate change, facing increasing risks of floods, droughts, storms, sea level rise, salinization, pandemics and livestock diseases, and agricultural shocks. Furthermore, rapid economic growth coupled with intensified industrialization has led to a sharp increase in natural resource use. As a result of unsustainable production and consumption levels, the region also faces a major pollution crisis. It is projected that by 2030, Asia and the Pacific could be generating 1.4 billion tons of municipal solid waste per year, most of which will end up in landfill, or leak into the environment.<sup>7</sup> These rapid declines in nature, compounded by the climate and pollution crises, are significantly undermining the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>8</sup> In particular, the region shows negative trends for SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production and SDG 13: Climate Action, as well as very little progress for SDG 11: Reduced inequalities and SDG 14: Life below water.<sup>9</sup> Without increased efforts, the region will fail to meet the 2030 targets across all SDGs.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A full background document on “Strengthening Nature Actions to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific” is available on the Forum’s website at:

<https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/36603/AN.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>

<sup>2</sup> IPBES (2018) *Regional Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services for Asia and the Pacific* <https://ipbes.net/assessment-reports/asia-pacific>

<sup>3</sup> UNEP (2016) *State of Biodiversity in Asia and the Pacific: A Mid-Term Review of Progress Towards the Aichi Biodiversity Targets*, <https://wedocs.unep.org/xmlui/handle/20.500.11822/32106>

<sup>4</sup> IPBES (2018) *Regional Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services for Asia and the Pacific*, <https://ipbes.net/assessment-reports/asia-pacific>

<sup>5</sup> UNEP (2018) *GEO-6: Global Environment Outlook: Regional assessment for Asia and the Pacific – Factsheet*, [http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/7548/asia\\_and\\_the\\_pacific\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y](http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/7548/asia_and_the_pacific_fact_sheet.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y)

<sup>6</sup> ESCAP (2017) *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2017: Governance and Fiscal Management*, <https://www.unescap.org/publications/economic-and-social-survey-asia-and-pacific-2017>

<sup>7</sup> UNEP (2017) *Asia Waste Management Outlook* [http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27289/Asia\\_WMO.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27289/Asia_WMO.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>8</sup> IPBES (2018) *Regional Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services for Asia and the Pacific*, <https://ipbes.net/assessment-reports/asia-pacific>

<sup>9</sup> UN ESCAP (2020) *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*, <https://www.unescap.org/publications/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2020>

<sup>10</sup> UN ESCAP (2020) *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*, <https://www.unescap.org/publications/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2020>

## **1.2 Concrete actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals can be focused in four key areas**

There has never been a greater opportunity to Act #ForNature. Government policies in response to COVID-19 can reinforce the linkages between human well-being and the health of ecosystems, thus strengthening the environmental dimension of sustainable development. At the 1<sup>st</sup> session of the Fifth United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.1) held virtually on 22-23 February 2021 in Nairobi, Member States acknowledged the urgency to continue efforts to protect our planet in this time of crisis. Member States expressed concerns on the continuing loss of biodiversity, especially through the degradation and fragmentation of ecosystems and habitats for wildlife, the threats to lives and livelihoods from climate change, and the impacts from pollution and poorly managed waste and chemicals, jeopardizing our environment and our overarching objective of sustainable development. Member States agreed on the need to scale up efforts towards a sustainable and inclusive recovery that protects the planet, stimulates sustainable consumption and production, revitalizes our economies to create decent and sustainable jobs, and makes real progress in eradicating poverty, while enhancing our future resilience to similar crises. Building on these discussions and leveraging other strategic 'nature-focused' objectives, commitments and action plans that underpin the UN Decade of Action to deliver the Global Goals (2020-2030), Member States may consider scaling up their actions on nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the four action areas outlined below.

### **1.2.1 Action area 1 - Nature for Poverty Eradication, Jobs and Economic Prosperity**

The economic fallout from COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific was estimated to be between USD 1.4 trillion (6.0% of regional GDP) and USD 2.2 trillion (9.5% of regional GDP) in 2020, and between USD 0.8 trillion (3.6% of regional GDP) and USD 1.5 trillion (6.3% of regional GDP) in 2021, with the region accounting for about 27-30% of the overall decline in global economic output.<sup>11</sup> It is estimated that in 2020, 8.8% of global working hours were lost relative to the fourth quarter of 2019, equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs.<sup>12</sup> The effect on informal economy workers is especially severe, and COVID-19 lockdowns and containment measures may increase relative poverty levels by as much as 56% in low-income countries.<sup>13</sup> Protecting vulnerable members of society will be an ongoing priority for Member States, with all countries in the region being impacted by the emerging global economic recession, increasing unemployment, and other socio-economic effects of COVID-19. It is increasingly recognized that COVID-19 recovery efforts should not come at the expense of tackling other existing planetary-scale crises: climate change; the loss of biodiversity; and pollution and waste. The COVID-19 recovery needs to be fair, green, and inclusive, and policymakers should not lose sight of this unique opportunity to accelerate structural transformations for sustainable development. In this regard, green and blue stimulus packages to 'build back better', with focus on investing directly in nature and restoring ecosystems will be crucial to the regional COVID-19 recovery. Options include mobilizing green and blue finance, including by reforming and repurposing environmentally harmful subsidies to redirect funding towards nature-positive practices, and fiscal policy options such as environmental taxation and aligning increased budget allocation with climate and biodiversity goals. Public and private finance need to be significantly scaled up and redirected to achieve transformative change and support on-the-ground efforts towards sustainable development. Member States can also internalize natural capital values by changing economic metrics and moving beyond GDP, for example through

---

<sup>11</sup> ADB (2021) *Macroeconomic impact of COVID-19 in developing Asia*, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/696296/adb-wp1251.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> ILO (2021) *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition Updated estimates and analysis*, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_767028.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> ILO (2020) *COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy: Immediate responses and policy challenges*, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_743623.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743623.pdf)

the use of Inclusive Wealth<sup>14</sup> as a better measure of sustainable economic growth and the transition to a green and blue economy.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.2.2 Action area 2 - Nature for Climate

The climate crisis cannot be neglected in the response to and recovery from COVID-19. Pandemics and climate risks are similar, as both are systemic in their direct impacts and knock-on effects. The Asia and the Pacific region is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and these will become more severe in the coming decades. Regional emission rates were not significantly reduced during pandemic conditions in 2020, and emissions may even increase with the influence of non-sustainable economic recovery plans in the region. Annual global emissions need to fall by 15 GtCO<sub>2</sub>e by 2030, compared to 2020 commitments, to meet the goal of keeping global warming to 2 degrees Celsius.<sup>16</sup> The new estimates released by the IPCC in 2021 suggest that unless there are rapid and large-scale reductions in GHG emissions, limiting global warming to close to 1.5°C or even 2°C will be beyond reach.<sup>17</sup> COVID-19 recovery provides opportunities to maximize solutions that both utilize and protect nature through climate-smart recovery and building back better and greener for the future. Both climate adaptation and mitigation opportunities can be harnessed, often in synergy. Recent research suggests that nature-positive solutions could provide around 30% of the cost-effective mitigation that is needed to stabilize warming to below 2 degrees Celsius. Nature-positive solutions can provide a range of environmental social and economic benefits that help to build long-term resilience to climate change and hydrometeorological hazards. Strategic solutions focused on ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction (Eco-DRR) and ecosystem-based adaptation (EbA) include integrated water resource management, integrated flood risk management, and green, blue and hybrid resilience infrastructure. In terms of opportunities and future actions, Member States may consider the large-scale deployment of nature-positive solutions in urban and rural contexts, and strengthening the role of private sector and financial institutions, for example through enhancing the climate resilience of their assets, operations and supply chains, as well as through applying innovative financial mechanisms such as resilience bonds. Member States may also increase their ambition on climate change through Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), by including more concrete, evidence-based targets for nature-positive solutions.

### 1.2.3 Action area 3 - Nature for Human and Ecosystem Health

The current COVID-19 pandemic is a critical reminder that there are close connections between the health of people and the health of our planet. Some 60% of known infectious diseases and up to 75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic (with the transmission of disease vectors such as viruses from host animals to humans).<sup>18</sup> Better mapping of the complex links between zoonoses, wildlife changes, food systems and health will be key to preventing future pandemics. Early indications show that where native biodiversity is high, zoonotic infection rates are lower. Conversely, high levels of habitat destruction can increase transmission and fragmented habitats may trigger more rapid evolutionary processes and diversification of diseases.<sup>19</sup> Live animal markets, the illegal and unsustainable trading of wild animals, and unhealthy livestock management also contribute to human-animal crossover risks.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, a pollution crisis has been impacting human health across the region,

<sup>14</sup> Information about UNEP's Inclusive Wealth Report initiative is available at:

<https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/report/inclusive-wealth-report-2018>

<sup>15</sup> UNEP (2021) *Making Peace with Nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies*,

<https://www.unep.org/resources/making-peace-nature>

<sup>16</sup> UNEP(2020) *Emissions Gap Report 2020: Executive Summary*, <https://www.unep.org/emissions-gap-report-2020>

<sup>17</sup> IPCC (2021) *Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying – IPCC*, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>

<sup>18</sup> UNEP & ILRI (2020) *Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission*,

<https://www.unep.org/resources/report/preventing-future-zoonotic-disease-outbreaks-protecting-environment-animals-and>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/srep14830>; <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspb.2019.2736>

<sup>20</sup> <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rspb.2019.2736>

with air pollution responsible for more than 4.55 million deaths in Asia and the Pacific annually.<sup>21</sup> Air pollution also reduces human resilience to disease, with recent research showing that an increase of only 1 µg/m<sup>3</sup> in long term exposure to pollutants of PM<sub>2.5</sub> is associated with a 15% increase in the COVID-19 death rate.<sup>22</sup> Marine pollution including plastic is another significant challenge faced in the region. An estimated 4.8 to 12.7 metric tons of plastic annually enters the world's oceans from land-based sources, and plastic comprises three-quarters of marine litter.<sup>23</sup> Marine litter is directly linked to public health as humans are physically vulnerable to fragments of plastic materials as well as to chemical substances from plastic litter.<sup>24</sup> In terms of opportunities and future actions, Member States can minimize the risks of future outbreaks of zoonotic diseases through increased research and cross-sector collaboration between health, animal and environment sectors under a One Health approach, with an increased focus on biosecurity, and by protecting and restoring nature. Member States can also utilize existing chemicals and waste-related multilateral environmental agreements as frameworks to guide the preparation of comprehensive national policy and legal instruments to achieve sound management of chemicals and waste, and to protect biodiversity and human health from pollution. As prerequisites for human health and resilience, Member States should adopt policy measures which respect, protect and fulfil human rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, including rights to a safe climate, water, clean air, healthy and sustainably produced food, non-toxic environments, and healthy ecosystems and biodiversity.

#### **1.2.4 Action area 4 - Nature for Sustainable Food Systems**

Food systems are directly dependent on biodiversity, natural resources (including land, soil, water, minerals, and fossil fuels) and a healthy environment. At the same time, food systems activities often negatively impact the environment through changes in land cover, soil fertility decline, GHG emissions, unsustainable water use and water pollution, biodiversity loss, among other factors. In Asia and the Pacific, population growth and new food demand from a growing middle class, as well as rapid urbanization and the effects of climate change, have driven unsustainable agricultural development and land use intensification in recent decades. The 'high input-high output' model of industrial agriculture has resulted in dramatic loss of crop genetic diversity, and a steady decline of up to 70% in native varieties of plants and crop genetic resources has been observed in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>25</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the underlying risks, fragilities and inequities in global food systems. Restrictions, constrained movement, and lockdowns have impacted local, regional, and global supply chains in most of the countries in the region and highlighted the precariousness of global food supplies. People who are living close to the poverty line are severely impacted and experiencing food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the importance of reforming and transforming food systems to refocus on: protecting nature and building resilience by slowing and reversing habitat destruction; reducing vulnerability to future supply shocks and trade disruptions; reconnecting people with food production; making fresh, nutritious food accessible and affordable to all; and providing fair wages and secure conditions to food and farm-workers. Sustainable food systems are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Building on the outcomes of the UN Food Systems Summit, held during the UN General Assembly in September 2021, Member States should scale up their efforts towards sustainable food systems. Specific measures to be applied include repurposing agriculture subsidies that are potentially harmful to the environment, nutrition, and health towards supporting sustainable, nature-positive, resilient, and inclusive food systems. Another important approach is to reinvest in nature and shift economic

---

<sup>21</sup> UNEP - <https://www.unenvironment.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/restoring-clean-air>

<sup>22</sup> <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>

<sup>23</sup> Jambeck, J.R. et al (2015) *Plastic Waste Inputs from Land into the Ocean*, Science 347, no. 6223: 768–71.

<sup>24</sup> UNEP, COBSEA and SEI (2019) *Marine plastic litter in East Asian Seas: Gender, human rights and economic dimensions*, Bangkok, Thailand.

<sup>25</sup> IPBES (2018) *Regional Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services for Asia and the Pacific*, <https://ipbes.net/assessment-reports/asia-pacific>

priorities, by recognizing and valuing in economic terms the contributions that nature makes to food systems and the hidden environmental costs of current food production. Promoting healthy dietary diversification and shifting away from resource-intensive, inefficient, and out-of-season foods is another key element for sustainable food systems.

## **2.0 Guiding Questions**

Ministers and other high-level representatives are invited to address the following guiding questions:

1. What efforts will you initiate, or have you already initiated, as a leader in strengthening actions on nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in your country?
2. What strategies and measures have been effective in promoting green, resilient, and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic? What additional efforts are still needed?
3. How can countries in the region best work together to build a stronger political momentum towards scaling up actions on nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and other international commitments?
4. What role should UNEP and the UN play in supporting Member States' efforts towards scaling up actions on nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?

Ministers and other high-level representatives are also invited to announce new or existing concrete actions by their respective Governments or organizations that will promote the environmental dimension of sustainable development in building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world.