

Introduction

The following suggested themes are presented to Member States in accordance with the joint decision of the Bureau of the United Nations Environment Assembly and the Bureau of the Committee of Permanent Representatives made on 27-28 of October 2016 in Nairobi during the 2017 Environment Assembly Preparatory Retreat. During this meeting, the bureaux of the Assembly and the Committee decided, inter alia, (1) that there will be only one theme for the 2017 Assembly; (2) that a consultation process on the theme will be launched with the Member states through the Committee of Permanent Representatives with the support of regional offices, and through UNEA Bureau members, as appropriate, in order to build consensus on the theme for the 2017 Environment Assembly, taking into account the suggestions and selection criteria received from the Secretariat; (3) that a decision will be made by Member States – through the Bureau of the Assembly—at its next meeting to be held on December 5th, 2016.

Methodology and criteria

Over 30 proposals were submitted for the theme for the Third Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly. Based on criteria outlined by the Member States in the lessons learned from the Second Session of the Assembly, and reinforced by the bureaux of the Assembly and the Committee of Permanent Representatives at the the 2017 Environment Assembly Preparatory Retreat, three themes have been developed further for discussion.

The three proposed themes outlined below comply with the following criteria:

1. Be **significant in both scope and substance** that delivers tangible and specific global solutions that have sufficient breadth that all members can engage in.
2. Result in an **actionable outcome** that is meaningful and inspiring to the world, so that in a declaration, the resolution delivers new and ambitious political will and energy on the selected theme.
3. Support the **implementation of the 2030 Agenda** and its Sustainable Development Goals, **and resonates with the themes of the High Level Political Forum**¹;
4. Be **framed and presented** so that the visibility and profile of the UN Environment Assembly is increased.
5. Be **viable** such that it can be implemented with UN Environment's own capacity;
6. **Inspire citizens and generate partnerships with** both with the private sector, media and civil society who are engaged to take the agenda forward.
7. **Contribute to unify the environmental agenda of the United Nations**

The three themes listed below and are linked to the 2030 Agenda and They will all require actions from 1) political leaders, 2) citizens, and 3) the private sector. They will also carry a potential for a tangible, concrete outcome from the assembly.

Proposed theme 1: Pollution free planet: delivering a deal to detoxify the world

Rationale: Pollution affects everyone. The impact of pollution on ecosystems and health has become increasingly global in scale and extent, the need to recognize and to address the health risks associated with environmental pollution has become even more urgent. Whether it is marine litter in the ocean, car emissions filling the skies or sand and dust-storms clouding the streets, the impact of pollution is significant affecting:

- People: Killing over 600,000 children and 100 million people annually and long-term social consequences.
- Prosperity: Threatening jobs at sea or on land with the health of our shared ecosystems scarred and an increasing burden on global health infrastructure.
- Planet: Killing more than 1 million seabirds and 100 million mammals every year.

While the severity and impacts vary across regions, pollution and environmental factors contributing to human health and well-being is a common theme in the regional assessments being undertaken in the Sixth Global Environment Outlook.

Mandate: The Second Session of the Environment Assembly addressed in its policy review session the underlying linkages between health and environment by documenting the chronic exposures to environmental pollutants in our water, air and soil. Coming 18 months after the last Assembly meeting, leaders and stakeholders will come together and commit on the basis of science to ambitious decisions that can improve the everyday life of the people in our planet.

Member States have already committed to act by implementing the Sustainable Development Goals that address these issues. In addition, given that pollution is primarily an outcome of an increasingly urban planet, building resilience for in cities, humans and the ecosystems to address the impacts of pollution is critical for both people, prosperity and the planet.

¹ The 2018 theme for the High Level Political Forum, "Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies."

Impact: Focussing on this theme would support member states as they try to cope with a rapid rate of modernization and change. Pollution is now a primary issue of public concern and while national legislation is starting to address the manifestation of pollution, it needs to rise higher on policy agendas and development decisions need to involve a thorough consideration of issues related to environment and health, ahead of major investments and infrastructure commitments.

In addition, this issue lends itself to increasing visibility and impact of the event as UN Environment is already collaborating with other UN agencies on this issue with substantive programmes of work which are now being combined with major global public campaigns such as #BreatheLife on the issue of air quality and another on marine litter set to be launched in 2017.

Outcome: This proposal would allow the United Nations Environment Assembly to layout a new pathway for the world to follow on this issue. Putting pollution in all of its manifestations at the centre of the global agenda would allow to build-up global consensus on addressing specific forms of pollution such as defining a global commitment to address the environmental impact of plastics and a commitment for clean air for all and be forward looking in proposing solutions to challenges that involve the private sector and civil society to showcase best practice and how industry and citizens are starting to address this issue. From this, a substantive and ambitious new global “Pollution Plan” that commits governments and invite non-state actors to specific actions on issues such as air quality, marine litter, sand and dust storms and black carbon could be agreed.

Proposed theme 2: Planet 2.0: how to prepare the planet for 3 degrees and 9 billion people

Rationale: The world is likely to experience more shocks and stresses in the future, on scarcity and on other fronts, with increasing intensity. At the same time as trying to capitalize on the windows of opportunities that such crises may offer, policy-makers also need to try to ensure that moments of system breakdown lead to renewal, rather than to collapse. Resilience is the quality that will determine the difference between these two outcomes and the Third sessions of the UN Environment Assembly would provide a substantive moment for government’s to assess where the world is now, and how shifts need to be made to be ready for what’s to come.

Global population growth to 9 billion people by 2050 and increasing urbanization will exacerbate pressures on ecosystems, agriculture, and water resources. At the same time, land degradation biodiversity loss, climate change, and ocean acidification, are decreasing the adaptive capacity of ecosystems on which people depend. Environmental hazards, which may be unseen and/or emerge slowly over time, also compete as policy priorities with social, political, economic and humanitarian crises - some of which may be related to long-neglected environmental problems (e.g. floods and epidemics or drought and famine).

Last year, the UN Environment Finance Initiative estimated that over the past decade, average economic losses from disasters stand at USD 190 billion per year, while average insured losses were USD 60 billion per year. The costs of recovering from natural disasters are borne by governments, business, NGOs, donors and communities. They consume scarce public and private resources, which could otherwise be used to develop social, economic and natural capital. By reducing disaster risk, many losses due to natural hazards such as cyclones, floods and earthquakes can be prevented or reduced.

Mandate: The Second Session of the Assembly made commitments in resolutions on climate, oceans and seas, drylands and pastoralism to address at-risk coastal areas, as well as those living in areas at risk of droughts and floods. The Assembly also addressed environmental issues as underlying and contributing factors to humanitarian crises. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UN Environment work with partners to promote the integration of environmental issues across all elements of humanitarian response.

UN Environment is working with partners on ecosystem-based solutions for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. For example, the Organization has partnered with twelve UN agencies on the Secretary General’s initiative to build climate resilience in the world’s most vulnerable countries — *Anticipate, Absorb, Reshape*. Green growth strategies are key to building resilience and moving towards a circular economy.

Impact: Today’s governments need to anticipate potential vulnerabilities and deliberately design for resilience by improving the diversity, adaptability, and cohesion of critical urban and industrial systems. Strengthening resilience today is a prerequisite for achieving long-term sustainability in the future. This will also require encouraging, cultivating, and scaling innovation outside government to tackle new issues with private sector players. The focus of this theme for this Assembly would be to future gaze and make recommendations that would address the challenges facing the world which will demand major systems change. By focussing on this theme, it would create the space for innovation, sharing best practice and allowing member states to future gaze and make recommendations that would address the challenges facing the world that will demand major systems change.

Outcome: This theme would see scientists sharing with members states likely scenarios and interventions required to

increase resilience to the shocks to come and through this engagement, design a Global Scenario Action Plan. This plan, which would be designed in consultation with member states, would outline how decision makers can make their societies and economies stronger and more resilient by 2050 and able to cope with the unpredictable shocks, whose disruptions are already rippling through economic, social, environmental, and political systems that are struggling to respond. Insurance industry, youth and private sector would play a key participatory role in laying out how they see the risks and recommendations for change. With this insight, an Action Plan would be conceived that would lay out specific recommendations for how government's effectively and dynamically reconfigure systems to become more productive in the face of scarcity and lay out a series of recommendations as to how the world avoids a science fiction future.

Proposed theme 3: #NatureForAll: how to create harmony for people and the planet

Rationale: Across the world, citizens feel a strong emotional and spiritual connection to nature because of the intrinsic value they place on our wildlife and nature as well as a moral conviction that we have a duty to pass on the plants and animals we have inherited to future generations. But at the same time, we have also come to understand that we have a dependency on the food, water, materials, flood defences forests that sustain our economies, livelihoods and together, are vital to current and future prosperity as economic and social capital. The continual decline in these services is a warning that we are living unsustainably. A world without functioning ecosystems would be an unhealthy and impoverished world. The pressures on our land and water are likely to continue to increase and there is need to enhance how we manage these resources in ways which deliver multiple benefits.

Mandate: The Second Session of the Assembly adopted three biodiversity-related resolutions designed to enhance cooperation and collaboration to achieve biodiversity related goals and targets such as the Aichi Targets and the Sustainable Development Goal combat. It also included a follow-up resolution to the resolution adopted on illegal trade in wildlife at the First Session of the Assembly. Illegal trade in wildlife is pushing wildlife species to the brink of extinction the resolution adopted contains a preambular language recognizing the important role that the conservation and sustainable use of wildlife can play in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and in addressing illegal trade and trafficking in wildlife through the development of sustainable and alternative livelihoods for affected communities. It is also recognized that current land use choices are threatening the future of biodiversity and wildlife. There is a growing body of evidence that wildlife is increasingly regarded as a less legitimate form of land use, given competing land use choices. As a result, wildlife and biodiversity territory is shrinking or increasingly fragmented.

Impact: We need to devise a new approach that ensures a more resilient natural environment for the benefit of wildlife and ourselves so there is a harmony created between both needs. This will require strong leadership from government, but it will require effective and positive engagement with the landowners and land managers and due consideration given to the call for 50% of the planet to be protected by 2050. To make this happen, it will need improved collaboration between local authorities, local communities, private sectors, farmers, other land-managers and individual citizens with new agreements struck around how ecosystems are utilised in the world.

Outcome: This theme would look at the application of techniques and ideas that are known to work in addressing the challenge of restoring our ecosystems. Three specific outcomes would be delivered which could include the following:

- **Scientific assessment:** What is the status of efforts to protected areas to date, how communities are being engaged and an outline of best practice so as new Aichi targets are considered ahead of 2020, wisdom is shared and understanding "what is working" on this front.
- **Engagement:** Bringing together landowners, youth, ecologists and private sector leaders from forestry, energy and water to participate in this discussion so grassroots experience on the struggle over space, habitat, land is shared.
- **Action:** New commitments stating the ethical principles on the relationship between Humanity and Nature with new proposals and incentives to create harmony between communities and nature that would support the world hitting 50% protected areas by 2050. This could be framed as a Priceless Planet Action Plan that would have specific recommendations and guidance for action on this issue, with new commitments.