



## **Key Messages from North American Major Groups and Stakeholders Regional Consultation**

### ***Towards the UN Environment Assembly: Combatting Global Pollution*** *9 February, 2017*

*This document reflects areas of general consensus that emerged from the consultation. However, the individuals and organizations present at the meeting do not necessarily endorse every conclusion.*

The UN Environment North America Office convened a half-day consultation with U.S. based Major Groups and Stakeholder representatives and government officials in Washington, D.C. on 9 February, 2017 at the offices of the United Nations Foundation. The objective of the meeting was to provide a forum for U.S. civil society stakeholders to provide input into the upcoming United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-3) to be held in Nairobi, Kenya from 4 – 6 December, 2017. The consultation consisted of high-level panel presentations and focused on the issue that will be central to the UNEA-3 agenda - combatting global pollution.

Elizabeth Cousens, Deputy CEO, UN Foundation, and Patricia Beneke, Regional Director, UN Environment North America Office, delivered the welcoming remarks and provided an introduction to UN Environment’s global work and regional priorities in North America. The keynote speaker at the consultation was Ibrahim Thiaw, Deputy Executive Director, UN Environment. Mr. Thiaw remarks focused on the complexity of the issue of global pollution, including its implications for human health, the environment, and the global economy. Mr. Thiaw also clarified that the theme for UNEA was not only air quality, but that it also encompassed water pollution and solid waste contamination. Mr. Thiaw anticipates that UNEA-3 will serve as a wakeup call and instill a sense of urgency to address the global pollution threat.

Participants then engaged in two lively panel discussions. The first panel focused on “The Impact of Pollution on Human Health and the Environment.” Moderated by Hilary French, Programme Officer at the UN Environment North America Office, panelists included Tommy Wells, Director of Washington, D.C.’s Department of Energy & Environment; Radha Muthiah, CEO of the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves; and Terry Yosie, President and CEO of the World Environment Center.

Key messages emerging from the dialogue:

- Pollution is a global issue present in rural, peri-urban and urban areas. We need to recognize and communicate that it is a global challenge with personal consequences.
- In order to remediate water pollution in rivers, there needs to be a long-term effort dealing not only with the quality of water itself, but also with legacy and social justice issues. This was the case of the Anacostia River, which served as a boundary between high- and low-income neighborhoods in Washington, DC.
- Around 30% of ambient air pollution is caused by indoor air pollution and there are nearly 6 million deaths per year attributable to indoor air pollution.
- In order to address indoor air pollution in terms of cleaner cook stoves, there needs to be a market-based approach in place where meeting the needs of the customer is central. Biomass and other cleaner fuels must become affordable and innovative options for cook stoves to burn more sustainably.
- We need to be able to clearly measure the contributions of indoor-to-ambient air pollution. This can be achieved through technical capacity-building and underscoring the impact of pollution on livelihoods.
- The idea of reducing pollution is at the very core of the foundations of the sustainability agenda and we should build an approach to bring more stakeholders onboard.
- We need to recognize that the private sector is a key stakeholder in addressing pollution issues. A new model of an environmentally sustainable economy should be developed but not at the expense of social justice. In addition, the private sector is now recruiting people with social sciences background who know how to work in teams.
- The increased use of data analytics is another significant factor to take into account when addressing pollution. For instance, local air quality monitoring systems are on the rise in developing countries.

The second panel focused on “Addressing Pollution at the International, Federal, State and Local Levels.” Moderated by Jason Jabbour, Regional Coordinator, Science Division, UN Environment North America Office, the panelists included John Matuszak, Senior Policy Advisor, U.S. Department of State; Alexandra Dapolito Dunn, Executive Director, Environmental Council of States; and Elgie Holstein, Senior Director for Strategic Planning, Environmental Defense Fund.

Key messages emerging from the dialogue:

- Pollution is an interesting and unique topic as it draws together the global environmental community. In fact, pollution was analyzed in every single Global Environmental Outlook-6 (GEO-6) Regional Assessment.
- There are still some critical data gaps on global air and water pollution.
- Pollution has been taken out of the lexicon of sustainability. We need to bring it back explicitly to clearly communicate that pollution does not jeopardize economic growth nor does it undermine U.S. economic leadership.
- In combatting pollution in the U.S., both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the states play key roles. The EPA sets the baseline or minimum federal compliance abatement levels so that states compete equitably for opportunities.

Following the panels, participants engaged in an open discussion of the topics to be discussed at UNEA-3. The moderator was Fatou Ndoye, Deputy Director, UN Environment North America Office. During this session, panelists and participants shared their views of how UNEA-3 could best contribute to furthering their areas of work and the global environmental agenda more broadly. The following points were emphasized:

**Connecting Pollution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):**

- Air pollution should be integrated into every SDG, and there should be efforts to analyze how pollution can affect meeting the targets on each SDG.
- Companies have embraced the SDG language to set their own business goals because of its legitimacy. The SDG framework would allow connecting several policy options to market-based solutions.

**Market-based Approach:**

- We should focus on adaptive management, where markets are favorable, irrespective of the political context.
- Market-based alternatives, such as carbon pricing, can significantly enhance value chains and contribute to the zero waste solution to global pollution.

**Holistic Approach:**

- The effects of pollution on security, the environment and public health should be analyzed, so engaging with each one of these sectors is necessary. Interrelated topics such as hazardous waste management and military waste dumping in the ocean, should be brought to the table for discussion with relevant stakeholders.
- We should consider the impacts of pollution on ecosystems and biodiversity, tourism, ocean acidification, and food security in the context of climate change and sea level rise.
- Oceans' pollution, in particular the one from plastics, requires more research and attention. At the current waste disposal rates, there will be more plastic than biomass in the oceans by 2025.
- More data and research are also needed on antimicrobial resistance and antibiotics.

**Stakeholder Involvement:**

- Entrepreneurs and small-scale business owners should be included in the discussion.
- The private sector should be involved. Different industries across sectors should be encouraged to engage with the issue by highlighting the impacts on labor and bottom line effects. For example, there is proof that absenteeism is linked to pollution and its impacts on human health.
- UNEA could help to forge partnerships that make economic sense among different stakeholders.
- "Citizens are the eyes" - civil society needs to be engaged as problem solvers, since they are certainly part of the solution.
- Youth engagement is key as today's young people will be the ones dealing with the consequences of pollution in the future.
- We need to engage in conversations with stakeholders that will not only set the agenda but that will also deliver concrete implementation results.

**Consumption:**

- We need to address the issue of food justice, the impact of food production on the environment, and how our daily choices affect the industry. We must be aware of and clearly communicate the linkages between animal food production and its methane emissions.
- Reduce the use of disposables and single-use plastics during the conference.
- Standards and labeling of cleaner products should be encouraged.
- The false notion that recycling is preferable to waste reduction should be demystified.
- The price of commodities should reflect the environmental externalities of extracting and transforming them. Better aligned prices would send a powerful signal to consumers.

**Innovation:**

- We should encourage the creation of products that will enhance quality of life (i.e. clean cook stoves)

- Tools for measuring air pollution are needed and their cost should become affordable.
- We should improve product design with the use of data analytics to find ways to reduce the waste stream.
- The process of innovation is costly; governments should work on mechanisms to bring down costs.

**Information Availability:**

- There needs to be a focus on transparency and accessibility of data in order to address pollution issues at the local and national levels.
- Clear communication strategies are needed to highlight the relationship between health and the environment.

**Environmental Refugees:**

- There is currently very little solid data available regarding environmental refugees linked with climate change.

**Education:**

- Educational efforts should be focused on building the soft skills and broader capacity needed to effectively tackle pollution.

**Election of the U.S. Regional Major Groups and Stakeholder Representative to the UN Environment North America Office.**

During the last session of the event, participants were invited to nominate and vote for an individual to assume the role of U.S. Regional Major Groups and Stakeholder Representative to the North America Office. Michelle Wyman of the National Council for Science and the Environment (NCSE) was elected. Kristan Uhlenbrock of the US Climate Variability and Predictability Program (US CLIVAR) will serve as alternative.

The Regional Representatives, from Canada and the United States, will actively work with UN Environment's North America Office to engage with civil society and to share their perspectives in the lead up to and at UNEA-3.