

Contribution of the United Nations Environment Assembly to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Responses to the questions raised by the President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

1. The present note offers the contribution of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UN Environment Assembly) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment) to the 2017 session of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (the Forum), which takes place in New York from 10 to 19 July 2017 with the theme on “Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world”.
 2. This note responds to the request made by H.E. Mr. Frederick Musiiwa Makamure Shava, President of the Economic and Social Council, to H.E. Mr. Edgar Gutiérrez Espeleta, President of the UN Environment Assembly, to provide substantive inputs to the Forum, showcasing UN Environment’s “contribution towards the 2030 Agenda in general, and particularly for the Sustainable Development Goals and respective targets that are most relevant to [the UN Environment] mandate”.
 3. In this context, the contribution derives from UN Environment’s Medium-term Strategy for 2018-2021 and the resolutions adopted at the second session of the UN Environment Assembly that took place on 23-27 May 2016. The contribution focuses on the environmental dimension of sustainable development, while recognizing that economic and social pillars are equally important in eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity across the world.
- (a) An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global level**
4. The world continues to face serious environmental challenges, such as climate change, ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss, water scarcity and ocean pollution and acidification, which are compounded by growing demographic pressures and unsustainable patterns of consumption and production in some areas.
 5. Poor populations continue to be disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and consequent disasters, conflicts, illnesses and loss of livelihood. Over-reliance on firewood and charcoal use in remote rural areas, for example, exacerbates deforestation, which in turn increases the incidences of landslides, avalanches and floods in these areas, wiping out many development gains that would have been made. Indoor air pollution related to the use of open fires or traditional stoves for cooking and heating results in 4.3 million premature deaths annually. In coastal communities, increasing marine debris is taking a heavy toll on local fisheries.
 6. UN Environment advocates a healthy environment as the basis for long-term prosperity and takes integrated approaches to sustainable development, which demonstrate that improving the environment brings social and economic benefits. The seven sub-

programmes under which UN Environment’s core work is organized, namely, – 1) climate change; 2) resilience to disasters and conflicts; 3) healthy and productive ecosystems; 4) environmental governance; 5) chemicals, waste and air quality; 6) resource efficiency; and 7) environment under review – all aim to achieve full integration of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development, underpinned by rigorous science and diverse partnerships including with civil society and the private sector.

7. The joint UN Environment and UN Development Programme Poverty-Environment Initiative provides an example of an integrated approach, which brings together Ministries of Finance, Planning and Environment to eradicate poverty and preserve ecosystems that poor people rely on for subsistence. A green economy, which was recognized as one of the important tools for achieving sustainable development and poverty eradication at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), also demonstrates UN Environment’s integrated approach, which creates decent jobs and livelihoods, fosters sustainable consumption and production and contributes to the goal that no one is left behind.
8. Through regular reviews and assessments, including the periodic Global Environment Outlook, UN Environment continues to ensure that everyone, in particular marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, benefits from mainstreaming environmental considerations into development planning. This is in line with the UN Environment Assembly resolution 2/5 adopted in May 2016 on “Delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The resolution stresses “the importance of respecting, protecting and promoting human rights and gender equity and recognizing the role of indigenous peoples and local communities in delivering on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

Case study 1: Building green villages in Rwanda

To demonstrate how an integrated approach can address poverty-environment challenges, the Rubaya green village project was completed in 2011 through the collaboration of key Government agencies in Rwanda. The project constructed 43 houses with rainwater harvesting and an associated water storage and supply system plus ventilation improved latrines and a biogas system that provides clean fuel to the households and manure for farming – fueled by human and cow waste, with each household receiving a cow. Terraces were built to reduce soil erosion and improve agricultural productivity, and also reduce the vulnerability of villages to the impact natural disasters – a common threat on the steep terrain. A school was also constructed. A strongly participatory approach was taken to the management of the project, with the community choosing the beneficiaries, and managing it through a local women's co-operative. An ex-post cost-benefit analysis conducted by the joint UNDP–UN Environment Poverty-Environment Initiative found that green villages improve food security and monetary incomes, decrease deforestation, and save each household an average of 175 minutes per

day through not having to collect water and two hours per day through avoided firewood collection. This time is now available for farming, attending school and other activities. Women and children have particularly benefited from the supply of water and clean energy, and greater school attendance. Additional benefits include reduced downstream water pollution, and increased security and social cohesion. The success of the Rubaya village led the Government to require all districts in Rwanda to have at least one green village. Currently seven green villages have been built.

(b) The identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges

9. To achieve meaningful poverty eradication, it is vital that local communities and national authorities have a sense of ownership over their own future and take part in needs assessment, project/policy development and its actual implementation and enforcement. For this, capacity building at the level of individuals and institutions is critical. At the second session of the UN Environment Assembly, Member States adopted resolution 2/2 on “Investing in human capacity for sustainable development through environmental education and training”, noting that environmental education and training play a key role in achieving the 2030 Agenda. UN Environment further engages with many governments to enhance their capacities to deliver on the environmental dimension of sustainable development, including implementation of and compliance with multilateral environmental agreements.
10. To effectively address environmental priorities, especially in the context of poverty eradication, adequate governance structures supported by sound normative and policy foundations are essential. Aligning governance structures to the challenges of global sustainability and integrating social, environmental and economic objectives in sustainable development policies have been identified by scientists as number one issue for the 21st century. For example, illegal trade in wildlife, which amounts to a US \$23 billion business and the fourth most lucrative black market after drugs, people and arms smuggling, is symptomatic of effective governance necessity based on science-based information. The UN Environment Assembly, both at its first and second sessions, adopted a resolution to tackle the supply, transit and demand for wildlife and its products through enhanced legislation, monitoring and enforcement.
11. Another issue that needs to be addressed urgently through improved governance is oceans and seas, with their rich biodiversity and cultural significance threatened with worsening coastal and marine pollution. The approximately 5.2 trillion pieces of plastics floating around the world’s oceans, accompanied by oil spills and other land-based pollution, are rapidly destroying the marine ecosystem, including coral reefs, with dire consequences for local fisheries, tourism and community health. At its second session, the UN Environment Assembly adopted three resolutions focused on the marine environment, namely: 2/10 “Oceans and seas”, 2/11 “Marine plastic litter and

microplastics” and 2/12 “Sustainable coral reefs management”. Among others, resolution 2/10 “Oceans and seas” encourages UN Environment to continue to participate in the process initiated by the General Assembly on the development of an international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of the marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction.

12. UN Environment also plays a key role in promoting effective environmental governance within the UN system, especially in its capacity as the chair and secretariat to the UN Environment Management Group. Consisting of UN specialized agencies, funds, programmes and other organs, the Environment Management Group is mandated by the General Assembly to provide a coordinated UN system response to issues of environmental and human settlements concern. In 2016, the Environment Management Group endorsed the *System-wide Framework of Strategies on the Environment for the UN System* as an institutional tool to support Member States in the delivery of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda. Through annual reporting on the status of its implementation, the Framework is expected to evolve into an effective governance mechanism that fosters cooperation and mutual learning.
13. UN Environment has also been playing a leading role in strengthening the UN system-wide collaboration on technology to help implement the Sustainable Development Goals. It co-chairs, with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the UN Inter Agency Task Team (IATT), composed of 32 UN agencies and responsible for making the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) operational. The Task Team’s activities include organizing the Annual Science, Technology and Innovation Forum, convened by the President of the Economic and Social Council and whose outcomes are reported to the Forum.
14. UN Environment also seeks to engage with civil society to identify gaps and priority issues to related to poverty eradication and leaving no one behind. For example, UN Environment Asia and the Pacific office co-organized, with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the *Asia-Pacific Civil Society Forum on Sustainable Development* in Bangkok in March 2017. Held back-to-back with the Regional High-level Political Forum – Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable development – the Civil Society Forum issued a joint statement, which called on Member States to take concrete actions to address the root causes and consequences of poverty, inequality, discrimination, violence and injustice and to build regional cooperation to that end.

Case study 2: Good riddance to plastic bags

Antigua and Barbuda has increasingly faced a pernicious threat, both to its idyllic coastline and the health of its citizens: The plastic bag. The country’s supermarket chains were going through nearly 50 million plastic bags every year, many of which ended up on the beaches and in the ocean. The situation became so critical that, in early 2016, the government announced a blanket ban on plastic

bags. UN Environment responded quickly, offering technical support and connecting the government with experts from other countries. The ban has been an enormous success, with widespread public support from day one.

(c) Valuable lessons learned on eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity

15. The work of UN Environment demonstrates that sustained poverty eradication and prosperity are possible only if integrated and balanced approaches are taken to sustainable development in partnership with multiple stakeholders. In order to ensure that the voices of stakeholders are adequately heard at the highest level, Member States have mandated the inclusion of a “multi-stakeholder dialogue” in the high-level segment of the UN Environment Assembly sessions (Governing Council decision 27/2).
16. In resolution 2/5 “Delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” adopted at the second session of the UN Environment Assembly, Member States have reinforced their calls by requesting the Executive Director of UN Environment to initiate new multi-stakeholder partnerships, and strengthen existing ones, to promote activities that contribute to delivering on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In particular, emphasis was placed on promoting cooperation with financial institutions and the private sector, which is at the forefront of science, technology and innovation. While leveraging the capital and expertise of the private sector to protect and restore the environment, UN Environment cooperates directly with industries and enterprises to reduce adverse environmental impacts.
17. UN Environment’s efforts on making the global financial system work for sustainable development culminated with the launch of the report entitled “The financial system we need: From momentum to transformation” in 2015. The report uncovers more than 200 policy and regulatory measures underway to promote sustainable finance in nearly 60 countries, and provides concrete recommendations for finance ministries, central banks and financial regulators to build up on the momentum to further correct market and policy failures to deliver sufficient financing for sustainable development. In 2016, world leaders meeting at the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, recognized the importance of scaling up green finance and welcomed the options put forward by the G20 Green Finance Study Group, whose secretariat is hosted by UN Environment.
18. At the regional level, UN Environment regional offices have been actively engaged with the UN regional economic commissions to work towards sustainable development. For example, the UN Environment West Asia office has collaborated with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in the development of the first *Arab Sustainable Development report*, published in 2016. The report provides a baseline view of the situation in the region, assessing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and identifying critical gaps. In Europe, the UN Environment Europe office worked with the UN Economic Commission for Europe and other relevant international organizations

and stakeholders to develop a Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy for the period 2016–2030, and the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy (BIG-E) that will help operationalize the Strategic Framework. The Framework, which is intended to help countries in the development and implementation of policies, strategies and plans for greening the economy and achieving sustainable development, was adopted at the Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference held in Batumi, Georgia, in June 2016.

Case study 3: A triple win for business

Working with UN Environment and partners, Galco S.A.S., a Colombian metal-mechanical company, scored a triple win in 2016: Earning more profits, reducing its environmental impact, and delivering benefits to the local community. With support from our Eco-Innovation Project, which is working with companies and governments around the world, Galco examined its entire production process to identify “sustainability hotspots” – areas where small adjustments could deliver big gains in terms of sustainability. The resulting changes have seen the company develop a profitable new service line, reduce their hazardous discharges, and create jobs for members of the local community.

(d) Emerging issues likely to affect the realization of poverty eradication and achieving prosperity

19. UN Environment spearheads efforts to bring sound science to policy makers, enabling them to identify emerging environmental challenges and to provide the early warning that allows the international community to act. At the second session of the UN Environment Assembly in May 2016, 170 countries convened to discuss and take action on major environmental issues that constrain the prospect for achieving sustainable development. Ranging from the environment-health nexus to massive food waste and sand and dust storms, these issues on the agenda of the UN Environment Assembly already have a visible impact at local, regional and global levels, further deteriorating the environment and leaving people trapped in poverty. The resolutions adopted at the second session aim to raise political awareness and catalyse policy action on these and other specific environmental challenges.
20. In addition to the global-scale issues considered at the UN Environment Assembly, UN Environment’s 2016 Frontiers Report identifies six emerging issues that may have serious ramifications for sustainable development if not addressed early. These include:
 - 1) Significance of the financial sector in advancing environmental sustainability by investing in low carbon, resource efficient and environmentally sound assets;
 - 2) Zoonoses – diseases that can be passed on between animals and humans – and their linkage with ecosystem health;
 - 3) Micro-plastics, which threaten the marine environment and various organisms in it, with high risk to human health through consumption of contaminated food;

- 4) Loss and damage¹ to ecosystems due to climate change;
 - 5) Toxin accumulation in crops due to increased aridity; and
 - 6) Illegal trade in wildlife.
21. In particular, climate change is contributing to weather pattern shifts and adversely affecting agricultural productivity and food security in some regions. For example, the frequency, severity, and range of droughts in arid regions have increased significantly in the last few decades, causing desertification, water shortage, reduced crop production and loss of grazing land. These conditions exacerbate poverty and deepen existing tensions among affected communities. Furthermore, prolonged droughts cause nitrates to accumulate to toxic levels in common crop plants, such as barley, maize and millet, which, when consumed in large quantities, causes poisoning in cattle, sheep and goats as their ruminant digestive processes cannot break down the nitrate fast enough. Such plant toxicity can ruin the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and herders.
22. UN Environment continues to keep the environment under review in an effort to identify such emerging environmental challenges and provide early warning to the international community. This work is grounded in the call made by Member States to strengthen science-policy interface for evidence-based decision-making, supported by provision of adequate and accurate environmental information including its free access to stakeholder.

Case study 4: A line in the sand

Major sand and dust storms have increasingly been appearing in the news, calling international attention to their destructive impacts. In northern China alone, sand and dust storms caused economic losses of nearly \$1 billion between 2010 and 2013. In 2016, UN Environment and partners published the world's first global assessment of sand and dust storms. The report describes the sources of dust, key trends, and offers specific policy recommendations. "The first global assessment... gives us the scientific grounding we need to develop strong policies and take effective action," says UN Environment's Gemma Shepherd, lead author of the report.

(e) Areas where political guidance by the high-level political forum is required

23. Organized every year around a particular theme and its related set of Sustainable Development Goals, the High-level Political Forum will be expected to provide guidance,

¹ While there is no universally agreed definition to date, the term 'loss and damage' may be used to describe the adverse effects of climate change that cannot be avoided through mitigation measures or managed through adaptation efforts. Loss and damage can occur from a spectrum of climate change impacts, ranging from sudden onset events such as cyclones, hurricanes, flash floods, and landslides to slow-onset processes such as increasing average temperature, sea level rise, drought, soil salinization, and ocean acidification (UNEP Frontiers 2016 Report: Emerging Issues of Environmental Concern, 44-45).

trigger discussion, put into light and improve understanding on the diverse interlinkages that exist among the different goals as well as among the three dimensions of sustainable development.

24. According to UN Environment Assembly resolution 2/5, “Delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, the Forum should be the place where the work of scientific panels and bodies – such as the International Resource Panel, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services and other scientific and technical bodies under multilateral environmental agreements – are presented and discussed with a view to contributing to the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Forum is a unique place to review the findings of scientific assessments such as that of the Global Environment Outlook, which can help raise awareness about emerging issues which need to be tackled through global action.
25. The guidance of the Forum could also be valuable in the identification of policy options to support countries in the coherent implementation of international obligations in the social, environmental and economic fields. The Forum further provides an opportunity for Member States and other stakeholders to exchange lessons learned and to share and encourage the adoption of good practices on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, while addressing implementation challenges.
26. Policy and institutional integration has a great potential to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals, including in realizing the principle of ensuring that no one is left behind. The hope is that the Forum will trigger discussion on how to best foster integration for the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Discussions could focus on what more needs to be done for effectively applying the integrated approach in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. This could include, among others, developing a shared national vision at country level and a common corporate strategy for non-state actors, breaking down silos for delivery, building understanding, capacity and skills for changing the “business as usual” model as well as developing creative strategic partnerships across stakeholders.
27. The Forum could also become an important platform to share experiences regarding monitoring and reporting systems. It should provide space for countries and other stakeholders to share efforts and progresses made towards the improvement of statistical systems and databases at all levels in order to track contributions to the specific Sustainable Development Goals. Countries and non-state actors should also be able to discuss remaining challenges including institutional constraints linked to the reporting burden as well as data collection, management and processing. The Forum could provide guidance on the development of a global approach to support countries’ reporting requirements especially developing countries that are most in need of resources and technical support. Finally, the Forum discussions could be crucial to avoid

duplication and promote coherence, coordination and cooperation by providing an overview of existing databases, monitoring systems and reporting initiatives at all levels.

28. Being the United Nations central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda, the Forum is an important process in which the connection between the environment and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals could be highlighted and promoted. In this regard, the Forum could encourage the reviews to adopt approaches to data, statistics and monitoring that focus on the progressive reduction of inequalities. The elevation and embedding of environmental issues will be critical given the key role that a healthy environment plays in the achievement of sustainable development.”

Case study 5: Weathering the storm

Helping locals reduce their vulnerability to hurricanes and other disasters is a key focus of UN Environment’s work in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere and one that is frequently struck by storms, earthquakes and floods. That’s why UN Environment has integrated disaster risk reduction across all of its programming in the country, reforesting vulnerable land, restoring mangroves, and teaching locals about the value of a healthy environment. Fishermen and others who take part in UN Environment trainings learn how marine and coastal ecosystems can buffer the effects of extreme weather, such as Hurricane Matthew, a Category 4 storm that hit the country in October 2016.

(f) Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress in poverty eradication

29. The following policy recommendations aim at supporting the transition to low emissions economies articulated by ecosystem resilience, healthy environment and the enjoyment of human rights and wellbeing:
- a. Deliver more effectively and equitably on the 2030 Agenda by using the environment-health nexus as a crosscutting solution through international, regional, national and local cooperation.
 - b. Strengthen multi-level environmental governance through:
 - The development and implementation of integrated policies, international and national legislation and actions incorporating specific measures targeting the most vulnerable, including women and children, and through them future generations;
 - The involvement of the public and private sector, researchers, relevant stakeholders and citizens in creative strategic partnerships which can foster innovation and disseminate good practices;
 - The increased coherence in the implementation of different international agreements including the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, as well as major outcome documents such as the Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction, the Addis Ababa Agenda for Action on financing for sustainable development, and the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III);

- The enhancement of communication and cooperation between UN agencies dealing with environmental issues and their linkages to conflicts, humanitarian crisis, forced displacement, disasters, human rights and socio-economic development.

30. It is also important to identify strategies that address issues that cut across all three dimensions of sustainable development thus ensuring no one is left behind, such as the approach adopted at the UN Biodiversity Conference (13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2016) on mainstreaming biodiversity across all sectors, which was confirmed by the Cancun Ministerial Declaration.
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