

UNEP workshop on “Achieving environmental sustainability for sustainable development”

New York, 21-22 July 2016

The workshop brought together leading experts and practitioners in the field of international environmental governance to discuss how UNEP and its governing body, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), can play an effective role in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals, taking into account the UNEP’s strengthened mandate from Rio+20 as the leading global environmental authority. The following major points emerged for further consideration and action by Member States and the UNEP secretariat. Participants shared the view that more dialogues such as that offered by the present workshop should be convened with representatives from a wider range of UN bodies. Participants attended the workshop in their individual capacity and the Chatham House Rule was applied to facilitate open and honest dialogue.

I. Role of Member States in making UNEP work for sustainable development

1. Member States need to make concerted efforts to preserve the voice of UNEA as the highest political environmental authority, one that is greater than the governing body of UNEP in its scope and influence. They should take ownership of UNEA outcomes and articulate them at relevant international, regional and national meetings and processes.

2. The joint ministerial declaration of the 2016 sessions of ECOSOC and HLPF did not include reference to UNEA outcomes, which showed that the link between these bodies needs improvement.

3. Member States can take the lead in embedding the environmental dimension to HLPF by referring to UNEA outcomes in their national statements in a way that is relevant to the given theme of each HLPF session.

Adopting too many resolutions at UNEA risks diluting messages that emanate from UNEA. Member States would contribute to making UNEA’s voice heard better if they adopted a lesser number of, but more impactful, resolutions and come up with specific action-oriented messages.

4. The failure of the Commission of Sustainable Development (CSD) is attributable not to its institutional shortcomings but to all Member States who, among others, assigned only one lead Ministry without considering the integrated nature of sustainable development. This case demonstrates that the extent of success by HLPF depends on the strategic commitment and contribution of Member States, involving ministries other than those dealing with the environment, such as ministries of finance and planning.

5. Some Member States have a different set of views internally on certain environmental issues depending on the respective priorities of their institutions. This domestic and sometimes regional fragmentation makes it difficult to effectively address

environmental challenges. Promoting environmental policy coherence at the national level would therefore help pave the way for more effective environmental policymaking at the intergovernmental level.

II. UNEP in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

6. The environment is at the center of sustainable development and UNEA provides an important platform for addressing the environmental dimension of the Agenda 2030, which is integral to achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Whereas some UN agencies claim “ownership” of specific SDGs, UNEP is committed to the principles of integration and universality as key to their implementation.

7. UNEP has already been strengthened through Rio+20 and subsequent expansion of its governing body from the 58-member Governing Council to UNEA with universal membership (all 193 UN Member States). The focus should now be on more effective implementation of UNEP activities (as contained in the biennial programme of work and the resolutions adopted at UNEA), going beyond the primarily normative work that it has been doing.

8. For some countries whose national agenda does not prioritize the environment, UNEP needs to identify nexus areas between the environment and other pillars of sustainable development, and strive to maintain its presence and relevance in these countries that would otherwise relegate environmental issues to the bottom of political attention. Partnerships with other UN agencies resident in these countries could offer one way of ensuring UNEP’s presence and contribution.

9. UNEP should also play an active role in assisting regional ministerial environmental forums, some of which UNEP supports, take integrated approaches to the implementation of the Agenda 2030, while promoting policy integration at the national level. UNEP may wish to reach out to the secretariats of the regional environmental forums and explore the possibility of having these forums report directly to UNEA, with a view to having UNEP’s pioneering work on science-policy interface feed into these forums.

10. The current modality of having the UN economic commissions host the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development has the potential to sideline other UN agencies. UNEP should therefore make efforts through its regional offices as well as UNEA Bureau members to work closely with the regional economic commissions and ensure that the priorities of UNEA are reflected in the agendas and outcomes of the regional forums. It would also be useful to explore the possibility of having these regional commissions report directly to UNEA on environmental aspects.

11. The outcomes of UNEA should also contribute meaningfully to the relevant high-level processes in New York, including HLPF. One avenue for UNEP and UNEA to impact ECOSOC and HLPF deliberations may be through generating substantial environmental inputs to the Global Sustainable Development Report.

12. Further, UNEP should provide a normative framework for UN-wide environmental activities with a view to fostering their convergence and consistency while respecting the prerogatives and priorities of other UN bodies, especially in the context of

the implementation of the UN System-wide Framework of Strategies on the Environment (SWFS).

13. The UN Environment Management Group (EMG), which the UNEP Executive Director currently chairs, can offer a viable venue for UNEP to provide policy guidance and leadership to other UN bodies as they try to mainstream environmental concerns into their activities. For EMG to gain greater traction and bring in more diverse participants, it may wish to consider convening in the sidelines of other governing body meetings, particularly at UNEA.

III. Cooperation with multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).

14. One of the most important functions that the international community expects from UNEA is for it to bring strategic coherence to the global environmental agenda and the various activities that are being undertaken under that umbrella. In particular, enhancing the coherence and synergies among UNEP and various MEAs, especially at the national level, is prioritized because it would lessen the burden placed on Member States on their implementation and reporting requirements.

15. Currently, decisions are sometimes taken by the conferences of the parties to MEAs that contradict or duplicate those taken by UNEA due to lack of prior coordination and communication. Building trust between the secretariats of UNEP and MEAs through regular communication is critical to promoting their coherence. The existing quarterly meetings of UNEP and MEAs secretariats signal a positive step forward in this regard, and need to be reinforced with greater commitment from senior managers.

16. The meetings of the EMG, which has several MEAs as its members, could serve as another venue for enhanced coordination between UNEP and MEAs. EMG may wish to consider utilizing its convening power to bring together different MEAs and help address their fragmentation and duplication.

17. For UNEA, its status as the highest global environmental authority would be further elevated if Member States required all MEAs, in due respect for their respective mandates, to collaborate more actively with UNEP and report to HLPF through UNEA. At the minimum, the Presidents and Chairs of MEAs governing bodies should be encouraged to participate at each session of UNEA and to pave the way for more regular meetings among these bodies.

18. UNEP can also play a proactive role in advising Governments on major issues to be discussed at the conferences of the parties to MEAs. The MEAs Management Team meetings convened by UNEP can discuss modalities for such advisory role.

19. To promote programmatic collaboration, UNEP can engage with MEAs in the development and implementation of the latter's programme of work, particularly in the context of SDGs. It should be noted that some SDGs did not properly reflect MEAs obligations – therefore resulting in lower targets – because MEA secretariats were not present in the SDGs negotiations to provide pertinent information to Member States. This could have been avoided through more coordinated cooperation between UNEP, MEAs and Member States.

20. It may also be timely to assess the comparative advantages of UNEP, such as its competitiveness in identifying emerging issues, and focus on these advantages rather than going into areas that MEAs are already handling.

21. The Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP – the intersessional subsidiary body of UNEA – may wish to initiate such assessment and invite MEAs to present their work at the annual meetings of the CPR, with the aim to streamline the work of UNEP and MEAs.

IV. Making the UNEP governing bodies more effective

22. UNEP governing bodies consist of UNEA, which meets biennially, and the CPR, which meets: 1) biennially as an open-ended meeting prior to UNEA, 2) annually as a subcommittee meeting to discuss the UNEP programme of work and budget, 3) quarterly as regular meetings to exchange views with the secretariat on a wide range of issues, including on the status of implementation of UNEA resolutions; and 4) throughout the year as necessary as subcommittee meetings and informal working groups to discuss any topic of interest.

23. In order to ensure that these bodies more effectively guide and monitor the work of UNEP, it is important to link the processes undertaken by CPR to the UNEA itself. In particular, the memberships of UNEA and CPR need to be aligned to include the same constituents, which currently remain different – i.e. UNEA has all 193 UN Member States as its members, while CPR has 118 Member States as its members, limited only to those who have been formally accredited to UNEP. It would also be helpful for Member States to try to understand the “life of the organization” to ensure its proper functioning. There are sometimes incongruities between what the governing bodies want an organization to do versus what that organization is capable of doing given its political, management and/or resource realities.

24. Member States are invited to consider organizing the future sessions of UNEA on a rotating basis around the world, with each session followed by a comprehensive survey by the secretariat to determine its overall success in terms of logistics, substance and overall impact. To preserve its relevance and visibility in the calendar of international events, it may be necessary to convene UNEA annually, with special sessions hosted outside Nairobi on matters such as the medium-term strategy and the programme of work and budget, and regular sessions hosted in Nairobi on global environmental issues. (Special sessions can convene as meetings of the open-ended CPR.)

25. UNEA would benefit from a rigorous public outreach and marketing activities to increase its visibility and influence, and it may be strategic to keep UNEA as a standalone event, without diluting it with other events that UNEP organizes immediately before UNEA, such as the Global Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum and the Science-Policy Forum.

V. Towards “the future we want:”

26. For sustainable development to be fully achieved, the capacities of all relevant actors and institutions should be enhanced and mobilized through mutual learning, information sharing and awareness raising, which UNEP can facilitate at national, regional and global levels. Partnerships and resource mobilization are also critical to fully harnessing the potential of UNEP to achieve sustainable development.

27. In line with the views expressed in relation to MEAs, it would be cost-effective for UNEP to build up on its strengths and existing products, such as the Global Environment Outlook, and undertake focused interventions for sustainable development, using, where applicable, the goals and targets set by other conventions.

28. The current status of UNEP as one of the programmes under the UN Secretariat may need to be examined in favor of a specialized agency.

29. In conclusion, there is a unanimous call for UNEA to establish itself as the ultimate global authority on the environment, shifting away from its former self, the Governing Council, both in magnitude and actual impact. The success of UNEA as a formidable catalyst for sustainable development will depend not only on fostering stronger links with HLPF and ECOSOC but also on its ability to reach out and influence other agencies and forums by articulating major global environmental issues and charting the way forward to address them through multi-stakeholder partnership.