

Lessons learned from the third United Nations Environment Assembly and the way forward towards the fourth session

Compiled by the Secretariat as requested by the Committee Bureau

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United Nations Environment Assembly (4-6 December 2017)

The third session of the UN Environment Assembly took place from the 4th to the 6th of December, 2017, under the theme “Towards a Pollution-free Planet”. It concluded with the adoption of a Ministerial Declaration on the same theme. In addition, the Assembly adopted, by consensus, 11 resolutions and three decisions. Pollution, the visibility of the Environment Assembly and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Rio+20 outcome document were the overarching foci of these resolutions. In addition, the Assembly inspired governments, civil society and businesses to submit in total 405 concrete voluntary commitments to abate pollution as part of the Assembly outcome. Also, over 2.3 million pledges from individual citizens worldwide were recorded as contributions to the Assembly’s #BeatPollution campaign.

According to preliminary findings captured in a report entitled “Towards a Pollution-Free Planet: #BeatPollution Voluntary Commitments” , the commitments made during the Assembly will have a multiplying effect if successfully implemented, entailing that more than 1.4 billion people worldwide will breathe cleaner air; 30% of the world’s coastlines will be clean; lead in paint and fuels will be eliminated worldwide, and exposure to lead in other forms of waste will be substantially reduced; food systems worldwide will be significantly less dependent on chemical inputs, and 18.6 billion USD will have been invested in research and innovation to abate pollution.

The Assembly also manifested as an event of global significance. Over 4,900 delegates registered from 157 countries, including 65 at ministerial level. 35 UN agencies were represented, as well as other 21 intergovernmental organizations. This Assembly also engaged the private sector as never before with over 300 business representatives. Nearly 1,900 participants attended the Science-Policy-Business Forum, 800 of which represented academia, technology centers, foundations and the private sector. The 2017 Sustainable Innovation Expo attracted more than 45 innovative companies. In terms of media impact, the theme of the Assembly was covered by 3,800 media outlets, publishing 11,160 articles in 23 languages spread across 125 countries. In addition, almost 500 representatives from Major Groups and Stakeholders attended the session.

Lessons Learned of Strategic and Political Significance

The Committee of Permanent Representatives’ Bureau has agreed that the Secretariat, under the coordination of the Chair, should produce a document on the evaluation of the Assembly and recommendations, to improve planning, focus and layout of activities, taking into account inputs from Member States and stakeholders. The evaluation should look into the challenges faced before, during and after the third session of the UN Environment Assembly. The recommendations should be presented for the consideration of the Bureau of the Environment Assembly and subsequently presented for consideration at the 141st Committee meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives. In general, lessons learned from UNEA-3 should form the basis for planning and organizing for a successful fourth session of the Assembly, scheduled for 11-15 March 2019.

Building on the lessons learned from its previous session, the organization of the third session of the Assembly was overseen by the Committee of Permanent Representatives and Bureaux of the Assembly applying a transparent and inclusive approach. This approach generated stronger confidence in the process and joint ownership of its outcomes. The cooperative model between the UN Environment Assembly and Committee of Permanent Representatives should be maintained by establishing a clear respective role of the Assembly and the Committee.

The focus on a relevant and focused theme contributed to galvanize global attention on the work of the Assembly. However, sustained efforts are required to increase the visibility and global impact of the Environment Assembly, particularly amongst other environmental fora and in the context of the follow-up and review framework of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The adoption of a negotiated ministerial outcome document represented a major step forward to ensure that the Environment Assembly lived up to its mandate authority on the environment. Nevertheless, to fully make this vision a reality, increased attention should be given to an integrated and coordinated implementation of the ministerial declaration and resolutions and to sustained advocacy efforts by Member States in major international fora.

While Member States seem to be in general agreement that the third session of the Assembly was an overall success, further efforts need to be undertaken to ensure that the next session of the Assembly, to be held in March 2019, lives up to the expectations set out for this institution. Key observations are as follows:

- ✓ Timely translation of working documents (resolutions, decisions, ministerial declaration) for their consideration and adoption;
- ✓ Transparency, ownership and inclusiveness during inter-sessional period through extensive leadership of the President and the Chair of the Committee;
- ✓ Early consensus amongst Member States on an appealing and strategic theme and on key aspects of the structure of the high-level segment;
- ✓ Regional ministerial meetings organized, with stakeholder participation allowing for timely input to the Assembly;
- ✓ An inclusive and transparent approach with respect to Governments not permanently represented in Nairobi through remote connectivity and timely circulation of documentation;
- ✓ The Sustainable Innovation Expo and the Science, Policy and Business Forum added value to the Assembly;
- ✓ Adequate financial resources for the Assembly: there was broad cooperation amongst Member States for resource mobilization; however, funding for the participation of least developed countries and Major Groups remained a challenge;
- ✓ Relevant background documentation and progress updates on implementation of previous resolutions for the third session of the UN Environment Assembly;
- ✓ Effective results by the Open-Ended Meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (held back-to-back with the UN Environment Assembly), to finalize most resolutions and the ministerial declaration prior to the Assembly;
- ✓ Strengthened procedures and governance of the Assembly through transparent agreement on chairs and co-chairs and regular briefings on rules of procedure;
- ✓ Well prepared national statements and interactive Leadership and Multi-stakeholder dialogues;
- ✓ An effective resolutions platform and event application to facilitate submission/circulation of documents as well as the participation of non-resident Missions;
- ✓ A one-stop online registration system (Indico); there is a need to improve and simplify procedures and encourage early registration;
- ✓ Enhanced wifi connectivity and distribution and improved conferencing facilities, hospitality and other logistics including travel coordination.

In addition, a number of new **challenges** have been raised by Member States that will need to be overcome in the run-up to UNEA-4, including:

- ✓ There is a need to have full-time interpretation teams for all UN languages in UNON to ensure the stable quality of interpretation and the cost reduction for recruiting out-source contract interpreters;
- ✓ There is a need to improve meeting management protocols to avoid conflicting parallel working groups and informal meetings affecting small delegations;
- ✓ Non-working days should be avoided towards the negotiation of documents in lieu of the intersessional period;
- ✓ Increased efforts must be invested to improve coordination between the Assembly and the High-Level Political Forum and other fora;
- ✓ There is a need to develop a follow-up mechanism to the outcomes of the Assembly and to enhance the role of the Committee of Permanent Representatives in reviewing the implementation of resolutions and the Programme of Work;
- ✓ Informal deadlines and guidelines on early submission of draft resolutions and decisions contributed to deeper consideration of proposals, however late submission of some resolutions made the process challenging; greater commitment for early negotiations could have facilitated the task of OECPR;
- ✓ Insufficient resources were made available for the organization of the Assembly from the UN Regular Budget and the Environment Fund to cover the requirements of a governing body under universal membership.
- ✓ The facilities of Nairobi duty station have been adequate to meet basic needs of the Assembly yet consideration should be given on how to improve them;
- ✓ The number of informal – formal sessions to facilitate fast tracking of negotiations and participation of small delegations;
- ✓ The process for developing the Ministerial Declaration should be benefited from a bottom-up approach and consideration of issues addressed in resolutions;

- ✓ Although participation of Major Groups representatives was increased there is a need to make their contributions more visible by providing more opportunities for their suggestions/comments;
- ✓ A smoother transition from the Open-Ended Meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to the United Nations Environment Assembly should be ensured, including greater clarity of roles between the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Bureau of the United Nations of Environment Assembly.

Conclusion and key recommendations on the organization of UNEA-4

Management of the inter-sessional period

- ✓ The Committee of Permanent Representatives should continue to work in partnership with the Bureau of the Assembly to support the implementation of several of the key recommendations highlighted in this paper and in decision UNEP/EA.3/L.16/Rev.1 on the Provisional agenda, date and venue of the next assembly; and should increase the time and resources devoted to review implementation and prepare the next Programme of Work;
- ✓ The Committee of Permanent Representatives, in consultation with the bureau of the Environment Assembly, should decide, no later than at its 142nd meeting, on the format and date of the next meeting of the open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives (back-to-back with the Assembly to be considered); ways should be considered to allow for Major Groups to contribute to this process;
- ✓ The Committee, in consultation with the bureau of the Environment Assembly, should contribute to the preparation of elaborated elements of the provisional agenda, which may include the review of the implementation of resolutions; the contribution of the Assembly to the high-level political forum; the review of the report to support the theme of the high-level segment, and the contribution to the Assembly of the Global Environmental Outlook, among others;
- ✓ The Bureau of the Environment Assembly, in close consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, should define a theme for the Environment Assembly no later than 31 March 2018;
- ✓ Member States should submit to the Committee of Permanent Representatives draft proposals for consideration by the Environment Assembly preferably no later than five weeks in advance of the fourth meeting of the open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives, without prejudice to the rules of procedure,
- ✓ There is a need for extended formal and informal sessions of the Subcommittee to facilitate adequate, comprehensive and conclusive negotiations of resolutions in the lead up to the Open-ended meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Assembly;
- ✓ There may be a need for additional preparatory consultations on informal agreements;
- ✓ Continue the innovative practice of engaging the participation of Member States who do not have resident missions in Nairobi through electronic media platform;

Resourcing for the meetings of the Assembly

- ✓ Consider how to mobilize additional resources from the UN regular budget and extra-budgetary resources to finance a universal United Nations Environment Assembly as set out in Assembly resolution 2/22 (paragraph 5), including adequate financing of the participation of Major Groups and Stakeholders;
- ✓ Encourage timely and regular financial contributions from Member States, especially to the Environment Fund.

Strengthen the procedures and governance of the Assembly

- ✓ Timely distribution and translation of background documents and draft resolutions are critical for the preparations of all meeting and for the interactive engagement of high-level participants;
- ✓ Clear legal advice on the Rules of Procedure for Member States to avoid misinterpretations;
- ✓ The Rules of Procedure should be part of core information for new Permanent Representatives as part of their orientation;
- ✓ The Assembly Bureau should continue to exercise ownership in the preparation of the Assembly, and continue to strengthen the cooperation between Assembly and the Committee Bureau;
- ✓ The Committee of the Whole structure should be consistent with the one used during the inter-sessional period, to facilitate the transition from the Open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives to Assembly and ensure continuity for delegations.

Transparency, ownership and inclusiveness

- ✓ Regional coordination meetings, with the participation from Major Groups and Stakeholders should be encouraged to take place early enough to allow for timely input to the outcomes of the UNEA preparatory process;

- ✓ The selection of the theme of the High-Level Segment should be done as early as possible, on the basis of relevant criteria and as a result of consultations within the Committee of Permanent Representatives;
- ✓ In the coming months, the current UNEA President should continue the established practices to ensure the active and inclusive participation of all relevant stakeholders;
- ✓ There needs to be transparency and regular consultations with regional and political groups in negotiations during the intersessional period, to facilitate consensus;
- ✓ The Ministerial Outcome Document should be linked with the theme of the High-Level Segment and be pre-negotiated during the inter-sessional period.

A more effective high-level segment and a stronger Assembly as the voice for the environment

- ✓ The Assembly should continue to aim at identifying global solutions to global environmental issues that can have regional or country-specific elements;
- ✓ Regional ministerial environmental fora and other international processes should continue to provide inputs to the High-Level Segment;
- ✓ Future sessions should focus on coordinating and evaluating the integrated implementation of resolutions, lessons learned and outcomes;
- ✓ The Science-Policy-Business Forum and the Sustainable Innovation Expo and thematic side events should continue to inform the Assembly;
- ✓ National statements and interactive leadership dialogues and the multi-stakeholder dialogue should be maintained within the high-level segment.

Global visibility of the Assembly

- ✓ There should be increased commitment towards raising the profile of the Assembly in relevant fora, including the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development building on the Assembly resolution on the issue;
- ✓ There is a need for a long-term partnership to address pollution and to this end, as set out in the Ministerial Declaration, the Executive Director should advance a plan for implementation in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives in time for the next United Nations Environment Assembly;
- ✓ Timely and ample dissemination of the results of the Environment Assembly, in all six official languages of the UN, as necessary to increase and enhance effective communication with the international community, and especially with different stakeholders.