

Putting forward people’s rights at the center of innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production

Asia Pacific CSO Statement to the fourth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-4)

We, representatives of almost 200 civil society, grassroots and sectoral organizations from Asia and the Pacific, gather from March 25-27, 2018 in Bangkok, Thailand to reaffirm our commitments and pledges towards achieving sustainable development in the region. We consistently stand to bring in the voices of the marginalized and most vulnerable sectors of our societies—small farmers, fisherfolks, indigenous peoples, urban poor, people with disabilities, dalits, women, youth, elderly, workers, LGBTIQ, people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, migrant workers, among others, to the policy-makers and influential stakeholders in achieving the policies and recommendations that would impact our lives and societies.

We acknowledge the space for engagement that the UN Environment has continued to provide for civil society to raise our issues and concerns in relation to the environment. The theme of the Fourth Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-4) “Innovative solutions to environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production (SCP)” is a very timely issue given the urgent need to embrace alternative pathways to development. However, there needs to be agreement on what innovative solutions and SCP entail, and how these concepts should be interpreted and applied.

Also, it is very important for the theme of UNEA to be closely linked to the 2030 Agenda especially the focus SDGs for every period to ensure coherence and synergy. UNEA should strongly provide the environment lens on every discussion of the 2030 Agenda and across the SDGs. The 2018 cluster of SDGs should be linked to the theme of UNEA-4 in the same way that it should also be closely linked to the HLPF focus in 2019. In the same vein, the UNEA process must also deliberate the interlinkages between the environmental aspects and the social, economic and political dimensions, and understand these interconnections and how these causal linkages will impact environmental well-being.

We would also like to express that discussion of “innovative solutions” to environmental challenges should not be narrowly limited to technological innovations but should broadly include social innovations, local innovations, sacred and traditional knowledge, time-tested technologies and systems that matter most to people’s lives and contribute to the achievement of SDGs and for the adoption of SCP as a mode of operation.

The unsustainable practice of overproduction and overconsumption

SCP must bring to the forefront the fundamental transformation in our production, productivity and service delivery processes bearing in mind environmental sustainability as the core objective. The role of big businesses and corporations in promoting unsustainable production and consumption must be highlighted. Every stage of the production cycle should be guided by ecosystem and life cycle approaches in order to minimize wastes, increase efficient resource use and address basic needs of people.

To address the issue of sustainable production and consumption is to recognize the unsustainable practice of over-extraction and overproduction and the resulting wastes. Larger and more pristine swaths of land are mined, logged and turned into large-scale monocrop plantations to serve the interests of large corporations. Water is similarly extracted at increasing rates to serve the increasing demands of industrial production and agriculture, while the stocks of fish, water, mineral, and oil and gas from coasts and oceans are similarly exploited to serve industry. Big transnational corporations continue to enjoy access to what should be preserved natural resources for exploitation and resource extraction. Species of flora and fauna are being threatened with extinction as their habitats are transformed, genetic diversity artificially controlled, and their populations depleted.

Over-extraction and overproduction in the name of profit has leached chemicals to our land, water, soil, and air, and has poisoned ecosystems and causes impacts felt by human health. Petro-based chemicals and pesticides, even in their smallest doses, interfere with the hormone system of humans and animals, have adverse effects on reproductive health and cause irreversible, lifelong damage that can extend to the next generation.

The dominance of a profit-oriented economy is also shaping global consumption. We see the proliferation of disposable products, bottles, and small sachets of consumables. What used to be “durables” have become disposable like mobiles, laptops, and cars, creating mountains of poisonous e-waste. It is not the consumers who drive this unsustainable extraction and production, but the other way around: to sell products and prop up profits, a trillion-dollar industry thrives on creating demand and dictating on the tastes and patterns of consumption. Consumerism is a culture created out of a need to make profit out of overproduction without regard for sustainability and its impacts on the environment.

These patterns of production and consumption are not just wasteful but also proliferate inequalities. The world consumes more than half the world’s resources, but half the world’s wealth is in the hands of only 2% of the population. Despite millions of tons of

food produced each day, with 1.3 billion tons going to waste each year, 1 billion people worldwide suffer from acute hunger.

As defined by UN Environment, SCP must “respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life” to all, and it also has as an objective of contributing to the reduction of poverty and inequality. For these intentions to not just be rhetoric, it is important then that the needs of the poor, those being left behind take a central role in what is produced as much as how it is produced. There is also a need for a crucial shift in reorienting of production and consumption systems that cannot be left to chance and the prevailing trickle down system. This current pattern of production and consumption has to stop. The world’s fragile ecosystems are telling us extraction and production for super-profit has to end.

People’s Issues in Asia Pacific

Extractive industries undermining people’s rights

We emphasize the need for SCP to be applied to extractive industries, large chemical producing companies and large-scale agriculture and logging industries. Over-extraction of resources for profit are destroying people’s sources of livelihood and their access to natural resources that basically undermine people’s collective rights. Communities affected by mine disasters continue to suffer the impacts to their health and local ecosystems decades after the incidents. Workers are exposed to the physical and chemical hazards in these industries that compromise their safety and health. Women and children are most vulnerable to these changes in the environment.

Enacting SCP would require stronger environmental and social safeguard measures that must influence decision making at the onset and be embedded in production including rehabilitation and clean-up. Addressing those affected by these industries should also be a priority, as well as the need to put up protectionist measures against foreign and large-scale industries in resource-rich but poor countries in the region.

Dirty energy, the climate crisis and disasters

The “business-as-usual” trend in energy industries and fossil fuel subsidies by governments continues to worsen the climate crisis. Investments in coal is increasing contrary to the demand for divestment and the need to respond to the worsening climate conditions impacting island-states, low-lying countries and resulting to disasters in the global south. Dependency on coal is also resource-intensive, unsustainable and waste generating.

There is need to shift to safe, clean, sustainable, accessible, affordable and renewable sources of energy that will serve community and local needs. Just and equitable transition principles should be put forward, in particular, addressing the needs of workers that will be displaced or affected by the changes in environmental and climate policies.

Corporate agriculture and land grabbing

The current global economic framework facilitates large-scale resource and land acquisitions in the global south by big agribusinesses. Monocrop plantations have been destroying forests, impacting soil quality and replacing local and indigenous seeds. The introduction of chemical-intensive agriculture have also been impacting not just local ecosystems but also people's health. Unsustainable practices in agriculture have also created food wastes as well as land degradations.

Community and local knowledge in agriculture should be recognized and the urgent need to protect local indigenous seeds and local biodiversity, as well as restoration of community-based agro-ecological practices and heritage. National policies should be directed on implementing genuine agrarian reform, as well as developing sustainable agricultural systems.

Chemicals and waste

Production and use of chemicals is shifting to developing and transition countries, which is leading to increased use of pesticides, herbicides, products and processes containing hazardous chemicals, including those that disrupt reproduction, cause birth defects and persist in the environment and human bodies increasing the burden of disease and causing irreversible damage.

Many governments and communities in developing countries struggle with poor waste management and services creating dirty landfills and polluted environments. Poor national legislation, insufficient information on environmental and health impacts, lack of funding, and poor technological and human resources result in disproportionate impacts on developing and transition countries.

Unfair and liberalized trade

The global production and consumption chain is part of an unfair and liberalized trading system dominated by rich and developed countries undermining local producers, especially those from the south. Economies of developing state remain to be at the disadvantaged and has become a dumping ground of imports from rich and developed nations. This also reflects the crisis of overproduction, which results from the capitalist drive to accumulate profits.

Lifestyles and consumption patterns

Lifestyle and consumption patterns are continuously being shaped by disposable and fast-changing products being introduced by corporations. The increasing dependence on plastic and disposable materials is leading to unsustainable and waste-generating lifestyles. Changing consumption patterns is not just through improving individual lifestyles but the root causes should also be addressed.

The push towards more sustainable lifestyles must target consumers at the higher end, as their footprint is far greater and their resource use denies and discriminates some people. There is a need to address over consumption and must become a development priority.

People's Solutions and Community Innovations

At this point, we welcome the decision by UN environment to focus on “innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production” as the theme of UNEA-4 and thereby increasing the imperative to promote SCP and for bringing in the environmental angle in line with the SDGs. Civil society, social movements and communities should play central role in defining the environmental challenges that are intended to be addressed by innovative solutions, and should be central actors in defining the solutions to address these problems.

We also reiterate the need to be cautious to the use of “sustainable” and “innovative” by industries as this oftentimes greenwashes the destructive impacts of these players. The most important innovative solutions that make a difference in people's lives are not even technological but social innovations and linked with traditional practices. This is the case in sustainable consumption and production that is rooted to the way people lived and societies developed. Any technological solution, no matter how innovative, that does not address the values of people and communities vis-à-vis natural resources would not bring sustainability.

Innovative solutions do not happen in a vacuum. There are enablers and disablers of innovative solutions and of solutions to development challenges in general for them to become “innovative” and have impacts on people's lives. So-called innovative solutions pushed by the private sector get deployed massively because of incentives and enabling environment provided by governments. Many community innovations are not taken up widely because they are not promoted and supported beyond word of mouth across communities, or because they are too local to overcome regulatory barriers. Many social innovations are not diffused because they are not seen as “commercially

viable". UNEA-4 should tackle these enablers and disablers, including policies, trade agreements, standards and dominant mindset in education and media.

It is also important to recognise the contribution of local and community innovations and local and traditional knowledge as part of sustainable production systems. These have minimal dependence on chemicals and will not only address reduction in GHG emissions from agriculture, but will also revive the soil and increase its capacity for carbon sequestration. This contributes to attaining sustainable land use, healthy people and healthy environment.

Organizing and strengthening movements along with building capacity and tools is also key, as well as developing local and community innovations. The practice of social enterprises that uses fair trade principles have provided a good model for sustainable production. This along with local models such as agro-ecology, and recognition of indigenous and traditional knowledge have shown how community innovations can promote the concept of SCP.

In addition, we call to mind how some "Innovative Solutions to Environmental Challenges", can in turn have environmental impacts. For example "clean coal" and "green coal" to address pollution from the use of fossil fuels, "sustainable mining technologies" to address concerns on the environmental impacts of extractive industries, and "geoengineering" to address climate change, have proven environmental impacts that negate the claimed solution to environmental challenges need to be exposed and opposed.

Policy advocacy in national and regional level in supporting local and community innovations can also be strategic, as such in governance of natural resources and/or specific policies on community-based resource development. Participatory and community action researches on the issues that surrounds sustainable consumption and production could also provide evidence-based solutions. The practice of social enterprises have already provided a good model for sustainable production and should be promoted under goal 12.

Recommendations

With the above context, we urge governments, the UN Environment and all other the institutions in the Asia-Pacific to consider the following recommendations:

- Give priority and due consideration to the objectives of poverty alleviation and well-being for all that is embedded in the principles of SCP;

- Prioritize people’s issues and concerns at the center of crafting innovative solutions and recognize community-based, local and indigenous innovations;
- Support the promotion and development of traditional occupation that conserves and sustains biological diversity and also brings in livelihoods to communities;
- Encourage the shift towards the production of small-scale biofuels and community-based and managed sustainable energy resources;
- Establish participatory, anticipatory and transparent mechanisms for the evaluation of technological innovations that are presented as solutions to development challenges to avoid adverse impacts on the environment, biodiversity, livelihoods and cultures;
- Rethink markets and promote sustainable and resilient business models such as community and social enterprises that promotes decent livelihoods and sustainable resource use;
- Recognize people’s right to a healthy and sustainable lifestyle away from waste-generating patterns of consumption;
- Promote the just energy transition that looks into the concerns of millions of people working in the fossil fuel industry and their training for employment in other industries and social protection during the transition;
- Hold big transnational corporations accountable under the “polluter pays” principle for all their environmental crimes;
- Encourage and demand political commitments from national governments, as well as consider rethinking assembly themes that are long-term and has continuity;
- Recognize and acknowledge civil society, grassroots and people’s organizations, in particular, the youth, women, indigenous peoples, small fisherfolks and farmers’ space and collective engagement in the process;
- Respect and uphold communities’ right to access information and right to organize;
- Make the development process to be more inclusive and involve more sectors and grassroots constituencies.

We also reiterate the need to look at the SDGs in a holistic and integrated manner that consciously recognizes the interlinked nature of environmental sustainability, achieving equality, equity and inclusive and sustainable economic growth. As we unpack systemic barriers to attaining sustainable consumption and production, we look forward to recognizing the need for development justice with its five transformational shifts- redistributive, economic, environmental, social and gender justice, and accountability to the people.

Lastly, we recognize the important and timely review of the environmental SDGs this 2018 amidst the worsening environmental crisis. We also reiterate that means of implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda and the UNEA resolutions should put people and people's rights at the center of priorities. Most importantly, the need for governments to recognize and protect environment frontline defenders and their key role in achieving the SDGs.

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