

Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production

Concept note on the theme of the fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly

(Updated 7 September 2018)

Background

1. In developing the theme for the fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, the secretariat has been guided by the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Conference), entitled “The future we want”, in which Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives recognized that “poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are the overarching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable development” (para. 4).
2. The present concept note takes into account the interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals as set out in General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1, entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

Conceptual framework

3. Innovative solutions are not goals, but rather means of addressing environmental challenges. Innovative solutions should be considered “business unusual” approaches to addressing environmental challenges, reducing poverty and promoting sustainable consumption and production.
4. An innovative solution is not restricted to an invention or a technological innovation but instead encompasses the creation of enabling environments for creative approaches in policy, financing, partnerships, processes and the use of data to understand environmental issues and improve sustainability. Innovative solutions also increase technical capacities, attracts new investments, opens new markets and enhances productivity and sustainability. The Environment Assembly at its fourth session will identify innovative solutions for national Governments, the private sector and civil society with a view to tackling environmental challenges that have an impact on society, the economy and the environment.
5. There are numerous such environmental challenges affecting society, the economy and the environment itself, and they lead to food insecurity, poverty, energy insecurity, loss of biodiversity, pollution, land mismanagement and desertification, among other problems. Some of these challenges are long-standing; therefore, the Environment Assembly at its fourth session will capitalize on the growing momentum in the international community, national governments, the business sector and civil society to tackle these challenges by embracing innovative approaches.
6. Sustainable consumption and production address the full life cycles of economic activities: the extraction of resources, their processing into materials and products, and the subsequent use and discarding of those products. They can also be broken down into specific economic activities in order to do more and better with less and identify priorities according to their environmental impacts and resource demands.
7. Innovative solutions and systemic changes towards sustainability at various stages of the life cycle would lead to sustainable consumption and production and address environmental challenges directly. In developing the theme for the fourth session, the

secretariat is promoting a systems approach that connects the flow of resources at each stage of the life cycle with their use and their impact on the environment, economies and societies. The approach includes, but is not limited to, the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns and its six thematic programmes, adopted at the Rio+20 Conference.

8. To identify recommendations and suggested interventions relevant to the theme of the fourth session, the secretariat took into account the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its relevant Sustainable Development Goals aimed at achieving sustainable development through improving global resource efficiency and decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. In addition, the secretariat took into account Environment Assembly resolution 3/5, entitled “Investing in innovative environmental solutions for accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals”, along with other relevant resolutions and the third ministerial outcome document (UNEP/EA.3/HLS.1) of the Environment Assembly, entitled “Towards a pollution-free planet”.

9. In that context, and building on resolution 3/5, the secretariat used the following categories to organize and highlight existing and proposed innovative solutions: policy interventions; environmentally sound technologies; sustainable financing schemes; education, research and development; sharing of best practices; capacity-building and awareness-raising; and private and public partnerships. Social innovations and new business models that foster sustainable development, taking into account gender considerations, have also been considered. On the basis of those categories, opportunities for synergistic implementation of actions to address environmental, social and economic challenges have been identified.

Focus areas

10. To enable the Environment Assembly to deliver on concrete outcomes and make efficient use of the time available prior to and during its fourth session, member States have expressed an interest in focusing on a limited number of environmental challenges that can be wholly or partly addressed by promoting innovative solutions and sustainable consumption and production, as described in the above description of the theme’s proposed conceptual framework.

11. The following proposed focus areas were set out for consideration by member States based on the criterion of their global relevance. Each can be addressed through innovative solutions and a transition to sustainable consumption and production patterns.

- (a) Environmental challenges related to poverty and natural resources management, including sustainable food systems, food security and halting biodiversity loss;
- (b) Life-cycle approaches to resource efficiency, energy, chemicals and waste management;
- (c) Innovative sustainable business development at a time of rapid technological change.

12. The focus areas have been presented without prejudice to issues and solutions that member States may wish to raise. They will help the secretariat to develop background documentation and prepare solutions-oriented ministerial dialogues.

13. The secretariat will further develop each focus area, considering the proposed conceptual framework, and will identify potential strategic partnerships, initiatives and innovative solutions for each area. In further developing the focus areas, the secretariat will also consider contributions that member States will provide to the President of the Environment Assembly during consultations on the outcomes of the high-level segment.

14. The Secretariat, in further developing the proposed focus areas listed in the present section, will take into account cross-cutting issues such as the mainstreaming of biodiversity and the sound management of chemicals and waste, the use of big data, information

management, indigenous knowledge solutions, the promotion of sustainable lifestyles and the efficient use of resources.

15. The proposed focus areas will also contribute towards the implementation plan for tackling pollution.

Elements of an implementation plan for tackling pollution

16. In paragraph 14 of the Ministerial Declaration adopted by the Environment Assembly at its third session, the world's ministers for the environment requested the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, building on the outcomes of the third session, to prepare an implementation plan on pollution, in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, for submission to and consideration by the Assembly at its fourth session.

17. The secretariat continues to consult on the implementation plan, drawing on the above mandate. The proposed plan will be the main vehicle for organizing and presenting the follow-up to the theme on pollution. Building on the outcomes of the previous sessions of the Environment Assembly, the plan will seek to address the gaps in addressing pollution, and the challenges involved in doing so, that were identified in the report of the Executive Director to the Environment Assembly at its third session.