

UNEP/EA.4/23



Distr.: General
18 December 2018

Original: English



**United Nations
Environment Assembly of the
United Nations Environment
Programme**

**United Nations Environment Assembly of the
United Nations Environment Programme**

Fourth session

Nairobi, 11–15 March 2019

Item 6 of the provisional agenda*

**Programme of work and budget, and other
administrative and budgetary issues**

**Progress in the implementation of resolution 2/12 on
sustainable coral reefs management**

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in its resolution 2/12,¹ on sustainable coral reefs management, requested the Executive Director of UNEP, in cooperation with the International Coral Reef Initiative, other relevant international organizations and other relevant partners, to prepare, by 2018, an analysis of global and regional policy instruments and governance mechanisms related to the protection and sustainable management of coral reefs.

The present report summarizes the main findings of the completed analysis (contained in document UNEP/EA.4/INF/6) and presents recommendations for action.

* UNEP/EA.4/1/Rev.1.

¹ UNEP/EA.2/Res.12.

I. Analysis of relevant policy instruments and governance mechanisms

1. The analysis of global and regional policy instruments and governance mechanisms related to the protection and sustainable management of coral reefs² was conducted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in collaboration with Duke University and the International Coral Reef Initiative and with the guidance and support of an advisory committee made up of 23 experts nominated by 14 member States. The committee met twice in 2018 to review the methodology for the analysis, review the draft report and prepare a list of recommended follow-up actions. The report was then reviewed by 15 reviewers nominated by member States, and by representatives of secretariats of relevant multilateral environmental agreements, relevant United Nations entities and academic institutions.

2. The analysis encompasses 232 international policy instruments directly or indirectly supporting the conservation and sustainable management of coral reef ecosystems and/or addressing anthropogenic drivers of change in these ecosystems. They include 150 global instruments, 29 of which are binding, and 82 regional instruments (including 32 regional seas instruments), 44 of which are binding. The body of international reef-related policy includes at least 591 discrete commitments to address the wide range of anthropogenic drivers of change in coral reef ecosystems. The instruments include many time-bound and measurable targets designed to achieve specific outcomes relevant to coral reef ecosystems or the anthropogenic drivers of change affecting them – 79 targets (11 of which have expired) and 59 regional targets. More than 85 per cent of coral-reef-related policy commitments are planning- and process-oriented, with States having the primary responsibility for 75 per cent of the commitments. This reflects the fact that international law places most of the world's coral reefs under the jurisdiction of a relatively small number of States. (For example, an estimated 85 per cent of warm-water coral reefs are under the jurisdiction of 25 States.)

3. While the breadth of international coral-reef-related policy is vast, the depth is less so: policy commitments are quite general and largely voluntary. Many are focused on “marine and coastal ecosystems” or on the human activities that may drive changes in coral reef ecosystems, rather than on the coral reef ecosystem itself.

4. The efficiency of the international policy instruments depends in part on the mechanisms through which they function, including mechanisms for coordination, enforcement and financing. Coordination across the 232 international reef-related policy instruments presents a particular challenge. The transboundary nature of coral reefs and the pressures on them require coherence and coordination between national, regional and global efforts in order to be effective, in line with the ecosystem approach. Few mechanisms have been established or designated by the instruments to explicitly promote coordination. Most policy instruments are not linked to financial mechanisms to help fund the associated costs, which presents a challenge for the many low-income States with responsibility for delivering reef-related commitments. Only some 25 per cent of instruments – most of them related to climate change – mention financing provisions or mechanisms, and few of these references describe the establishment or enhancement of financial mechanisms; most references can be characterized as general calls for additional financing. References to enforcement mechanisms appear in only 13 per cent of reef-related policy commitments. Limited capacity is recognized as a key obstacle to meeting international reef-related commitments in many countries, including in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and other developing countries.

II. Other progress in the implementation of resolution 2/12

5. UNEP and the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) jointly led a working group for the development of an implementation and governance plan for the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network. This establishes the processes and data quality standards needed for the Network to function as a full-fledged ocean observation network. The plan was provisionally adopted at the thirty-third General Meeting of ICRI, in December 2018,³ along with a road map for the preparation of a global

² UNEP/EA.4/INF/6.

³ <https://www.icriforum.org/ICRIGM33>.

report on the status of coral reefs to be launched in 2020. A report on the status of and trends for Pacific coral reefs had already been launched in September 2018.⁴

6. An analysis of the international funding landscape for coral reefs prepared in 2018 by UNEP and the World Conservation Monitoring Centre identifies gaps in current funding of coral reef management through overseas development assistance and philanthropy.⁵ A report on the coral reef economy prepared by UNEP and the Prince of Wales's International Sustainability Unit in collaboration with ICRI analyses how investing in specific measures to improve reef health can yield significant return on investment in both the public and private sectors, with positive impacts on communities and society more broadly.⁶ Drawing on these efforts, UNEP has supported consultation to explore enhancing and diversifying funding for coral reefs, including through a workshop convened in Monaco in September 2018 as well as high-level side events at the "Our Ocean" conference, held in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2018, and at the fourteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Egypt in November 2018.

7. The International Year of the Reef 2018 was launched with an event in Fiji,⁷ and a campaign to raise public awareness of the importance and fragility of coral reefs, developed jointly with ICRI and other partners, is being launched in early 2019.

8. Support for activities carried out to implement resolution 2/12 is provided through extrabudgetary contributions from France, Monaco, Norway, Sweden and the United States of America.

III. Recommendations and suggested actions

A. Possible policy pathways

9. The analysis of global and regional policy instruments and governance mechanisms related to the protection and sustainable management of coral reefs identifies four potential pathways by which international policy responses could help States address locally generated drivers of reef loss (such as overfishing and pollution) and thereby enhance coral reef resilience in the face of climate change. These potential pathways are distinct but not mutually exclusive. All entail accelerating national fulfilment of existing international commitments, which could be further augmented by strengthening the existing policy and governance framework and/or establishing new instruments or mechanisms to support States with jurisdiction over coral reefs.

(i) *Maintain the status quo for international reef-related policy, with accelerated implementation.* This would be based on a renewed commitment from States to address drivers of coral reef ecosystem degradation and could include national-level policy assessments, identification of gaps, and development of integrated plans for implementing international commitments, with the allocation of adequate resources.

(ii) *Strengthen the existing international policy framework and governance mechanisms.* The current policy framework could be revised to strengthen commitments and enhance mechanisms and incentives for implementing these commitments. The mandate of relevant international organizations could also be strengthened to enable them to effectively assist States in this regard. This could include encouraging the ratification of relevant binding policy instruments and the amendment of regional policy instruments such as regional seas conventions and action plans to strengthen coral reef-related policies. Tracking and reporting could be strengthened through the Environment Assembly, and entities participating in the International Coral Reef Initiative could give it an expanded role in this respect. In addition, development finance institutions could adopt coral reef safeguards, which could be appended to the existing environmental safeguard frameworks.

(iii) *Introduce new international policy instruments and/or governance mechanisms.* Existing commitments are largely considered "weak" in terms of the requirements placed on States, and mechanisms to support implementation are often missing. States could agree to develop a new policy instrument specific to coral reefs, with, for example, targets for different locally generated drivers affecting coral reefs (potentially nested under an existing or emerging instrument, such as a target and an associated plan specifically on coral reefs in the post-2020 biodiversity framework, specific instruments in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and/or the

⁴ <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/26824/status-coral-reefs-pacific.pdf>.

⁵ https://www.icriforum.org/sites/default/files/ICRI_Funding_landscape_coral_reef.pdf.

⁶ <https://www.icriforum.org/icri-documents/icri-publications-reports-and-posters/coral-reef-economy>.

⁷ <https://www.iyor2018.org/news/fijis-great-sea-reef-nominated-ramsar-site-start-international-year-reef/>.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). States could also agree to create a new mechanism (such as a United Nations commission or forum) with a mandate for coordination, facilitation, monitoring and reporting to support work on existing commitments.

(iv) *Provide rapid support for policy implementation targeting a subset of countries.* A significant proportion of the world's coral reefs, including a large proportion of coral reef climate refugia, is held by a small number of countries. Emphasis could be placed on supporting these States, particularly low-income, lower-middle-income and small island developing States among them, in implementing existing international commitments to address locally generated drivers of change in coral reef ecosystems. Such support could include elements identified in the potential pathways above, including, for example, self-auditing of national policies in order to develop implementation plans and identify any human or financial capacity needs; creation of an international monitoring group (for example, a "coral reef policy observatory") or the tasking the International Coral Reef Initiative with monitoring progress towards commitments; and creating a new financing mechanism to support sustainable coral reef management targeting these countries.

Business as usual, which could be considered a fifth distinct pathway, is not a viable option for sustainable coral reef management.

10. Addressing human and financial capacity challenges in order to implement international commitments at the national level is crucial, irrespective of which policy pathway is pursued. Stronger efforts are needed to build capacity that supports effective coral reef policy development and implementation at the international and national levels. The urgent need to increase and diversify funding for coral reefs has been widely recognized. A new or expanded financing mechanism to support national implementation of existing international commitments with regard to coral reefs is recommended.

B. Suggested actions

11. Member states may wish to establish, through the Environment Assembly, a process for identifying and analysing policy and governance options. This could be done through a working group composed of representatives of member States and major groups and stakeholders, with a mandate to identify possible barriers and options and consider the feasibility and effectiveness of the latter. Member States are also encouraged to address the issues identified in the analysis through relevant international processes (such as the post-2020 biodiversity framework) and action at the national level.

12. Development of a new financing mechanism specifically for coral reef ecosystems, such as a global fund providing grant, concessional and/or investment financing to accelerate progress towards international targets and commitments, could deliver significant socioeconomic, marine biodiversity and climate adaptation benefits.

13. Participation in the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network and the application of indicators and best practices identified through that process should lead to strengthened monitoring and reporting in the context of coral-reef-related policy instruments and governance mechanisms as well as efforts to enhance and diversify funding for coral reefs. This could include monitoring of the status of coral reefs in the context of tracking progress on the 2030 Agenda, and the preparation of a global report on the issues in 2020 could be followed up with further reports in 2025 and 2030.
