

## Contributions of the UN Environment Assembly to the 2020 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Responses to the questions raised by the President of the Economic and Social Council

**This paper provides contributions of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), in response to the request made on 26 January 2020 by H.E. Ms Mona Juul, President of the Economic and Social Council and Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN in New York, to the President of the Environment Assembly and Minister for the Environment of Norway**

The HLPF will take place from 7 to 16 July 2020, with a ministerial segment from 14 to 16 July 2020, under the theme “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”.

This input should highlight the views on how best to accelerate action and achieve transformative pathways so as to realize the decade of action and delivery for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The input should focus on the area of responsibility of the Assembly but also reflect the interrelations with other SDGs and targets. It could also highlight how the Assembly is contributing to accelerating SDG progress. It would be very useful if this input could identify four or five action points that the HLPF could address in its ministerial declaration.

### Summary of inputs

2020 will be a crucial year for the environment and sustainable development. The international community will have many opportunities to deliver solutions to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. This is the year in which the international community need to match ambition with action, action with momentum, and political will with science. This is the year in which when we must ensure that we back nature as the imperative for many of the challenges facing humanity. The UN Environment Assembly therefore advocates strong political will to put the environment at the center of sustainable development, including through integrated approaches in which economic, social and environmental objectives are addressed in a balanced manner. Nature-based solutions, sustainable consumption and production, enabling economic policies and incentives, accelerate the transition to economies that are low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive, strengthening environment rule of law and good governance and its mainstreaming in sectoral laws are examples of such integrated approaches which need to be scaled-up.

### 1. Key policies and measures to ensure “accelerated action and transformative pathways” for realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

The findings of relevant global environmental assessments are clear: despite the availability of solutions to the common environmental challenges, the planet is increasingly polluted, affected by the adverse effects of climate change, quickly losing its biodiversity, and experiencing widespread environmental degradation. Overall, the world is not on track to achieve the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and internationally agreed environmental goals by 2050.

Urgent action is therefore needed to reverse those trends and restore both environmental and human health to the planet<sup>1</sup>. The United Nations Environment Assembly has reaffirmed 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 and essential requirements for sustainable development, and recognised that innovative approaches and solutions are necessary to move our world closer to the vision set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the Global Environment Outlook underscores that a healthy planet is a pre-requisite for healthy people and that is in turn the foundation for any healthy economy. Effective action in any of the sustainable development goals requires acknowledging and addressing the links among them – the close ties between climate change and human health, for instance, or the ways in which biodiversity loss and deterioration of ecosystem services exacerbate inequalities. To have a full implementation of Agenda 2030, we therefore need a strong and efficient environmental pillar.

Ministers of Environment express their determination to ambitiously scale up our efforts to overcome common environmental challenges, including health-related challenges, in a balanced and integrated manner through identifying and developing innovative solutions by fostering sustainable and efficient resource management; promoting the use and sharing of environmental data; and engaging civil society, citizens, indigenous peoples and local communities, the private sector, academia and all other relevant stakeholders as appropriate.

The following key policies and measures can be identified to ensure “accelerated action and for realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development:

**a) Enabling and increasing coordination and mainstreaming:** The coordination between ministries, agencies and organizations for cross-sector and cross-SDG action, at the local, national and regional level as well as sharing and leveraging of national and regional research initiatives to address knowledge gaps, strengthening regional research networks and harmonization could be considered some of the critical gaps in implementing the 2030 Agenda. As underlined by the GSDR, decision makers need to act based on current knowledge and understanding of the linked human social-environmental systems at all levels. That knowledge also needs to be more widely available to all countries and actors, motivating innovative coalitions and partnerships for success. The full mainstreaming of integrated approaches such as marine Spatial Planning, nature based solutions, Blue and green economy plan enable and encourage cross-sectoral communication and collaboration between ministries, member States, agencies as well as private and public sector and academia e.g. through inter-ministerial SDG coordination groups, as reflected in SDG 17.

Examples of integrated policies for achieving sustainability goals include:

- **Nature Based Solutions:** Nature-based Solutions are actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits. Nature based solutions broadly comprise forests and land use, food and agriculture, freshwater, marine and oceans. Delivering nature-based solutions at scale can lift a billion people out of poverty, creating 80 million jobs and adding an additional US\$2.3 trillion in productive growth to the global

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<sup>1</sup> [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27652/GEO6SPM\\_EN.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27652/GEO6SPM_EN.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

economy. At the same time, nature-based solutions can provide co-benefits by enhancing biodiversity and supporting vital biodiversity and ecosystem services including access to fresh water, and improved livelihoods and healthy diets from sustainable food.

- **Sustainable Production and Consumption:** SDG12 on sustainable consumption and production is key to the attainment of other goals. Yet, it remains the SDG with the least data availability, least funding (Dalberg 2017) and appears to be awarded low priority from Member States in their voluntary national reviews and SDG prioritization process. Efforts towards the achievement of the targets on sustainable consumption and production should therefore be upscaled at all level from the transition towards a green economy to the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. Sustainable consumption and production, including circular economy, can play a fundamental role in the implementation of the SDG by designing products, processes and services to optimize the use of resources, so that when something reaches the end of its useful life, they are re-used, repaired, or remanufactured for another use. It presents the opportunity to fundamentally address how value is created in the global economy and minimize the liabilities that they create, hallmarks of a green and inclusive economy. It needs the cooperation and collaboration from all: consumers, urban communities, businesses, finance, government, scientific and technological communities, etc.
- **Enabling economic policies and incentives:** Economic incentives can play a major role in correcting misaligned prices and mobilizing resources to meet investment needs. By reflecting externalities in prices, generating revenues, creating fiscal space for green investment and broader fiscal reform, green fiscal policies can support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and countries' commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement. For example, in climate change, fiscal policies such as carbon pricing and fossil fuel subsidy reform can mobilize revenues for climate finance and provide a cost-effective approach to reducing GHG emissions. These revenues can be used for different purposes, for example supporting broader fiscal reform by reducing taxes on labour or capital, thus creating incentives for employment (SDG 8); supporting green investments in sustainable energy, clean technologies and adaptation capacities (SDG 13); or supporting investments in other priority areas such as health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4). The role of such instruments in supporting climate action is increasingly recognized and over 90 countries included some form of fiscal policies in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).
- **Sustainable infrastructure:** Infrastructure is central to ensuring 'accelerated action and transformable pathways' and achieving the 2030 Agenda as it underpins the socio-economic goals and has impacts on the environmental goals by having a direct influence on more than 80% of the 169 individual SDG targets. Diverse forms of infrastructure make up the basic physical and organizational structures essential for development: systems for energy, transport, buildings, food, water and sanitation, waste management, industrial facilities, and telecommunications, as well as 'natural infrastructure'. Hence an average of US\$6.9 trillion of infrastructure investment is required per year until 2030 to achieve the SDGs. Addressing this gap will unleash widespread transformation as developed sustainably, infrastructure can be a central vehicle for accelerated action in achieving the 2030 Agenda.
- **Sustainable Finance and Business Practices:** Mobilizing financial resources for sustainable development is necessary to resolve environmental problems and ensure environmental protection, especially in developing countries. Sustainability-related considerations and SDGs are increasingly factored into investment decision-making and product development in a growing number of financial institutions including pension funds, banks and insurance companies. Related products, such as green bonds and other sustainability linked investment products and tools are growing at a rapid rate. Through the development of collective initiatives such as the

Sustainable Banking Network (SBN) and the UNEP Finance initiative (UNEP FI), private and public finance institutions have worked to integrate environmental and social risks and opportunities into their business lines and approaches. At the Climate Action Summit, 130 banks signed up to the Principles of Responsible Banking, which UNEP created with leading banks. These banks, collectively holding 47 trillion US dollars in assets, are promising to align their businesses with the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. Institutional investors also promised to transition their portfolios – worth 2 trillion US dollars – to net-zero emissions by 2050, under the Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance.

- **Sustainable, green jobs, just transition and equality:** Creation of green jobs, provision of living wages, ensuring just transition for workers who lose jobs, elimination of hazardous and child labor as well as elimination of inequalities at work can solve environmental and sustainable development challenges.

**b) Address the lack of environmental data:** Only 23% of the 93 environment-related SDG indicators are on track to meet the target if current trends continue. For 68%, there is not enough data to assess progress and for 9% there is not progress toward achieving the target. More than 30 per cent of the environment related SDGs indicators still do not have an agreed methodology. Achieving the 2030 Agenda requires an integrated approach that considers linkage across different environmental and non-environmental components, building upon disaggregated data generation and incorporating traditional knowledge and citizen science. Accurate information on the environment is crucial to build public awareness, help policy makers to make evidence-based decisions and develop and monitor integrated policies. Harmonized monitoring methodologies and indicators for data comparability, fragmented and at times duplicative reporting on the regional and global level are some of the crucial elements that should be improved and that will in turn increase the understanding and monitoring of effective performance of area-based management plans. Mapping existing national and regional data, sources, methodologies and responsible entities (e.g. national statistics offices, local authorities) and developing of overarching national inventories or accounting systems to access existing data and address gaps would contribute to the above.

**c) Address the lack of enforcement, implementation & compliance of environmental law:** Ecosystem deterioration, natural resource deprivation, environmental catastrophes and attendant displacement of populations not only reverse years of development gain, but also endanger the maintenance of peace and security at national, regional and global levels. Core elements that hamper progress, particularly toward SDG 16– such as pervasive corruption, unaccountable institutions, lack of transparency and situations of conflict and instability – greatly impair inclusive and effective environmental governance, which in turn can instigate a downward spiral into illicit exploitation of resources and unaddressed pollution, with a stronger impact on the most vulnerable communities. Since the adoption of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment, environmental laws and institutions have expanded dramatically across the globe. In many instances, these laws and institutions have helped to slow or reverse environmental degradation. Since the 1970s, 88 countries have adopted a constitutional right to a healthy environment and 62 countries enshrined environmental protection in their constitutions in some form. All 193 UN member States are also a party to at least one of over 1,300 multilateral environmental agreements and 2,200 bilateral environmental agreements in existence today. This progress is accompanied, however, by a considerable implementation gap– in developed and developing countries alike – between the requirements of environmental laws and their implementation and enforcement. Too often environmental laws exist mostly on paper because government implementation and enforcement

remain irregular, incomplete and ineffective. Weak implementation and enforcement of law are manifested in unfettered spikes in environmental crimes. Many environmental crimes – from illegal logging and poaching and trafficking of animals to illegal mining and dumping of toxic waste – have become part of a larger global network of transnational organized crimes.<sup>2</sup> Rising environmental crimes stemming from weak environmental rule of law provide a conduit through which violence against environmental defenders is perpetrated, particularly in marginalized communities. Each week, 4 people are killed on average defending the environment and empowering local populations; and for everyone person killed, 20 to 100 others are harassed, sued or arrested. Environmental rule of law – which describes the state in which laws are widely understood, respected, and enforced, with the benefits of environmental protection enjoyed by people and the planet – is key to addressing this implementation gap and need to be strengthened.

## 2. Contribution of the intergovernmental body to accelerated action and transformative pathways and realizing the decade of action and delivery for achieving the 2030 Agenda within its area of responsibility (including its cooperation with ECOSOC and other intergovernmental bodies)

The United Nations Environment Assembly contributes to the effective implementation of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in an integrated manner, through setting the global environmental agenda, providing overarching policy guidance and defining policy responses to address emerging environmental challenges, undertaking policy review, dialogue and exchange of experiences, and fostering partnerships for achieving environmental goals and resource mobilization<sup>3</sup>.

The fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly took place in Nairobi from 11 to 15 March 2019 under the theme “Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production”. 173 Member States were represented, as well as a significant number of bodies, entities and specialized agencies of the United Nations system, secretariats of various environmental conventions, international and regional organizations, civil society, major groups, academia, and the business and scientific communities.

The UN Environment Assembly adopted twenty-three resolutions<sup>4</sup> calling for accelerated action and transformative pathways on key areas, such as: marine litter and microplastics; innovative pathways to achieve sustainable consumption and production, food loss and waste, sustainable mobility, addressing single-use plastic product pollution, promoting gender equality and the human rights and empowerment of women and girls in environmental governance, the poverty-environment nexus, an implementation plan to address pollution, etc. UNEA also adopted the fifth Montevideo Programme for the Development and Periodic Review of Environmental Law (Montevideo Programme V), which supports countries to develop

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<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the monetary value of environmental crimes was estimated to be around 91-258 billion USD annually (up 26% from the 2014 estimate), with illegal trade in wildlife estimated at 7-23 billion USD per year. The value makes environmental crimes the fourth largest crime in the world after drug trafficking (344 billion USD), counterfeit crimes (288 billion USD) and human trafficking (157 billion USD).

<sup>3</sup>[http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/11180/K1607143\\_UNEPEA2\\_RES5E.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/11180/K1607143_UNEPEA2_RES5E.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>4</sup> <https://web.unep.org/environmentassembly/proceedings-report-ministerial-declaration-resolutions-and-decisions>

and implement environmental rule of law, strengthen related capacities in countries, and contribute to the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The UN Environment Assembly further adopted a Ministerial Declaration<sup>5</sup> entitled “Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production”, through which Member States expressed their determination “to ambitiously scale up efforts to overcome common environmental challenges” by taking several actions relevant to accelerated action and transformative pathways and realizing the decade of action and delivery for achieving the 2030 Agenda, including:

- To undertake measures to invest in integrated, innovative and coherent approaches in policy development and implementation;
- To ambitiously scale up efforts to overcome common environmental challenges in a balanced and integrated manner through the identification and development of innovative solutions by fostering sustainable and efficient resource management;
- To advance sustainable consumption and production patterns;
- To undertake action to restore and protect marine and coastal ecosystems;
- To work towards comparable international environmental data and to support UNEP in developing a global environmental data strategy by 2025 in cooperation with other relevant United Nations bodies;
- To promote the use of data analysis models to develop environment foresight reports, support evidence-based decision-making, and improve national and local preparedness and responses to mitigate environmental degradation and risks from disasters and conflicts in line with the 2030 Agenda;
- To address the damage to ecosystems caused by the unsustainable use and disposal of plastic products, including by significantly reducing the manufacture and use of single-use plastic products by 2030;
- To invest in environmental research, education and awareness-raising in the framework of sustainable development, with a strong focus on women and youth, and to promote wider use of innovative approaches, such as inclusive citizen science.

### 3. Selected recommendations for accelerating progress and moving on transformative pathways for realizing the decade of action, for possible use in drafting the HLPF declaration.

Moving on transformative pathways for realizing the decade of action will require actions at all level.

2020 provides the chance for a more joined-up response where the post-2020 frameworks for biodiversity as well as chemicals and waste will be negotiated and adopted, while nations will strengthen their nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement. All these efforts work towards linked goals, under the wider umbrella of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, at the same time. The HLPF should call for ambition in these decisive negotiations which success will be crucial for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

The role of regional level coordination should also be emphasized as key to address transboundary issues and facilitate regionally coherent approaches e.g. by establishing collaborative frameworks or enhancing existing frameworks (e.g. the Regional Seas Programme). Regional organizations play an

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<sup>5</sup> <http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/28463/K1901029.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y>

essential role in guiding regionally coherent national action for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems. Building on existing regional mechanisms and frameworks can address SDG interlinkages and accelerate implementation. Focus on identifying and addressing barriers to progress (e.g. failure to achieve targets in 2020), identifying accelerators for action that leverage SDG interlinkages, strengthening national and regional capacity for data collection and application for global level follow up and reporting.

Setting the word on a transformative pathway for realizing the decade of action, will also require prioritizing policies that can have multiplier effects and allow progress in not one but several SDGs, if not all. The following transformative policies can be highlighted:

- **Strengthening environment rule of law and good governance and its mainstreaming in sectoral laws:** Environmental rule of law and good governance provide a powerful pathway to achieving a broad spectrum of the SDGs. Through the Montevideo Programme for the Development and Periodic Review of Environment Law, UNEP supports member States and relevant stakeholders strengthen environmental laws and their implementation and enforcement, including in the fight against environmental crimes and the protection of environmental defenders across the globe. In particular, the fight against illegal trade in wildlife requires active engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities. Community-based approaches are frequently written off as ineffective, even before the necessary effort has been made to put in place the conditions that will make them effective. Building robust opportunities for indigenous peoples and local communities to be heard and to exercise their rights at all levels is critical in promoting effective wildlife conservation strategies and ensuring environmental rule of law.
- **Accelerate the transition to economies that are low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive:** This transition entails decoupling of economic activity from unsustainable resource use and negative environmental impacts while improving human well-being. A systemic change is necessary to evolve from the dominant linear “take-make-dispose” economic model based on fueling consumer demand and unsustainable resource use. While the current model has increased incomes in many countries and helped to reduce global poverty, it still leaves too many behind and can erode natural and overall wealth, exposing current and future generations to severe risks and impacts such as climate change, degrading of ecosystems, natural resource depletion and widespread pollution. Resource efficiency promotes circular economic models, where the value of products and materials is maintained for as long as possible, waste and resource use are minimized and resources are kept within the economy when a product has reached the end of its life, to be used again and again to create further value. Ultimately, a green economy is founded on resource efficiency (decoupling) that reduces wastage, pollution (detoxification) and carbon emissions (decarbonization).
- **Placing nature at the heart of sustainable development:** The WEF’s Nature Risk Rising Report says that about US\$ 44 trillion dollars, over half the world’s GDP, depends on nature and its services. Nature-based solutions – such as large-scale afforestation – can deliver one-third of the cuts needed to meet the 1.5 degree C target of the Paris Agreement. They can restore biodiversity, boost livelihoods and health, and create climate resilience. To give just one example, restoring 350 million hectares of degraded landscapes by 2030 could generate 9 trillion US dollars in ecosystem services, and put significant amounts of carbon back in the ground. 2021 will launch the UN Decade on ecosystem restoration with the aim of supporting and scaling up efforts to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide and raise awareness of the importance of successful ecosystem restoration. The HLPF should call for strengthened action to

protect and restore nature and the nature-based solutions to achieve the sustainable development goals in its three complementary dimensions (social, economic and environmental).

- **Promoting sustainable infrastructure to meet development needs while ensuring the preservation of biodiversity and mitigating climate change:** In order to maximize the contribution of sustainable infrastructure for realizing the decade of Action, it will be important to support the development and communication of internationally recognized good practice guidance on sustainable infrastructure, promote capacity building and the sharing of related knowledge and to increase cooperation between the development partners in applying sustainable approaches to infrastructure development, focusing on integration across all of the 17 SDGs.
- **Access to information and engagement of all relevant stakeholders is also a key condition for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the promotion of integrated approaches.** Significant effort has been made to ensure that citizens, civil society, local governments and the private sector are consulted but further efforts are needed. Recent successful negotiations such as the adoption of the Escazu Agreement on the “Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in the Latin and American Countries” are inspiring and need to be upscaled and replicated.
- **Strengthen environmental monitoring systems and technologies, and the development of environmental data management capacities.** The world needs openly accessible data, information, analysis, knowledge and science to better inform and guide what needs to be done to achieve sustainability across all environmental dimensions. Achieving the 2030 Agenda requires an integrated approach that considers linkage across different environmental and non-environmental components, building upon disaggregated data generation and incorporating traditional knowledge and citizen science. Advances in collecting official statistics and other evidence that feed into geographic information systems for environmental monitoring and accounting have expanded knowledge, while highlighting data gaps in every environmental domain. Disaggregated data that captures information by gender, ethnicity, race, income, age and geographic region identify critical differences and promote effective policy design. In addition to filling knowledge gaps with new data, enormous gains can be made from consolidating, curating, harmonizing and increasing open access to existing data which are widely dispersed and cannot be easily combined or compared.