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Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan  
National Environmental Protection Agency

رياست روابط بين المثلې

International Environmental Relations Division  
International Relations Department

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Mr. Sveinung Rotevatn

Minister of Climate and Environment – Norway

Postal address: Postboks 8013 Dep 0030 Oslo

Office address: Kongens gate 20

Telephone: +47 22 24 90 90

Org nr: 972 417 882

Oslo, Norway

Re: Afghanistan's initial input to UNEA-5

Dear Mr. Rotevatn,

The National Environment Protection Agency of Afghanistan appreciates your invitation to provide inputs to the theme of United Nation Environment Assembly-5 "Strengthening actions for nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals" (dated April 24, 2020 and referenced 19/1039). We are pleased to offer the following views corresponding to the questions presented in the letter.

#### 1. Afghanistan's key messages for UNEA 5

In common with many Member States of UNEA, Afghanistan's rich biodiversity and ecosystems are threatened by a range of urgent, highly complex and interconnected issues, making it imperative that the Afghanistan Sustainable Development Goals (A-SDGs) are implemented in a systematic and integrated way. However, because of the high level of competing humanitarian, peace and development needs in the country, the 'planet' A-SDGs are not being adequately addressed, integrated and anchored in daily action<sup>1</sup>.

The Government of Afghanistan is demonstrating the relevance of 'strengthening actions for nature' in the context of a green economy as follows: renewal of its commitments to the 'planet' A-SDGs for the

<sup>1</sup> UNDP undertook a rapid integrated assessment of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework and five National Priority Programs in 2018, concluding that "Planet-related goals" on water (SDG-6), sustainable production and consumption (SDG-12), climate change (SDG-13), and life on land (SDG-15) are under-represented.

benefit of the humanitarian, peace and development spheres through improved management of Afghanistan's unique ecosystems and increasingly threatened natural resources; combating climate change; reducing pollution; and building resilience to conflicts and disasters. This will require improved environmental governance, comprising policy coherence and strong legal and institutional frameworks to enhance environmental management for improved environmental, social, peace and economic benefits and outcomes for all Afghans.

For example:

#### ***Equitable natural resource management***

Unsustainable exploitation has led to the degradation of Afghanistan's wealth of natural and mineral resources. In many cases, unregulated and illegal resource use also economically supports armed group activity thereby fuelling conflict, and also aggravates the impacts of climate change. Climate change is also exacerbating water insecurity and increasing flood, compounding challenges in the distribution of water and localised conflicts over water resources and loss of human life, damage to property and infrastructure, and destruction of crops and livestock. Mineral extraction using environmentally unsound techniques impacts on human as well as environmental health through unregulated pollution and emissions. More inclusive, regulated and sustainable management of natural resources is thus required to promote peace and equitable growth that is environmentally sustainable.

#### ***Support a green economy***

Afghanistan's future development must be environmentally as well as economically sustainable to reduce long term impacts on the health and wellbeing of people as well as the environment. Decarbonisation, nature-based solutions to enhance waste management and pollution control, and more sustainable consumption and production patterns anchored to sustainable value chains are key opportunities. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit at a critical point in Afghanistan's peace process in the context of protracted conflict, further exacerbating the socio-economic and environmental crises. Recovering from COVID-19 must not come at the expense of tackling these other crises, but should rather be used as an opportunity to green the economy through integrating sustainable approaches into response plans, recovery plans and stimulus packages. Aligning the economy with enhanced health of the public and the environment would result in multiple benefits to economies, societies and nature, and build resilience to future risks.

#### ***Climate change, environment and conflict***

In common with various other member states, Afghanistan faces protracted conflict that has devastating impacts on people. Environmental degradation and climate change are acting as threat multipliers that compound conflict impacts and can even give rise to new conflicts, e.g. displacement of disaster-affected communities that may join armed groups or add to tensions in overcrowded urban slums. Key to the success of any peace process is improving ecosystem health and reducing the impacts of climate change, thereby decreasing the risks posed by these factors as well as conflict to vulnerable communities. In addition, food, agriculture, and land use are the second largest (25%) greenhouse gas emitter in the planet's atmosphere after electricity production (25%), which requires work to stop the greenhouse gas

sources and supporting the sinks through shifting the diets and addressing food waste, afforestation, forest and rangeland management and improve sustainable agriculture practices.

#### ***Recognising broader impacts of environmental issues***

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how human impacts on the environment can have devastating health, social and economic implications. Around 75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, transmitted to humans when actions such as habitat destruction and poor biosafety in animal production systems lead to animal, environmental and human changes that increase the diversification and transmission of such diseases. Understanding the links between disease, nature and ecosystem health as well as reducing habitat destruction and trading of wild animals would reduce the risk of future outbreaks. Similarly, improved biosafety in livestock production would also reduce the threat of such pandemics.

Addressing other environmental factors would also improve human resilience to zoonotic diseases. For example, exposure to air pollutants leads to a large increase in COVID-19 death rates. Reducing environmental drivers of health risks will reduce strain of health systems in the future under a changing climate.

## **2. Strengthening actions for nature to achieve the SDGs at a global scale**

UNEA represents the highest forum at which environment crises can receive the same level of global prominence and attention as issues such as poverty, health and security, particularly given the interlinkages between these issues. Accordingly, UNEA can support the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the following ways.

*Firstly*, by developing consensus and increasing focus on actions for cooperative efforts between the SDGs, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and other key Multilateral Environmental Agreements as the only, truly global road map for a sustainable future.

*Secondly*, increased availability of financial resources for the environmental dimension of the SDGs is critical to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda as a whole. Most developed countries still do not meet the target to allocate 0.7% of Gross National Income to international aid. If the SDGs are to be achieved in countries like Afghanistan, global accountability needs to be strengthened. UNEA is an appropriate forum for supporting Afghanistan and other developing countries in resource mobilisation for biodiversity conservation and other environmental priorities.

*Thirdly*, the call of the UN Secretary General to use COVID-19 as an impetus for peace is significant in our times. UNEA could recognise that conflict leads not only to human suffering but also to environmental crises. For Afghanistan and other countries in protracted conflict, UNEA can serve as the convening forum to advocate for the role of environmental peacebuilding, environmental security, equitable management of natural resources and ecosystem-based resilience building to support conflict prevention, increased stability and the better achievement of the SDGs.

*Finally*, COVID-19 will impact progress towards the SDGs, perhaps especially the environment-related goals. UNEA could note the pressures and impacts that COVID-19 will have on ecosystems and the environment, especially in conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan that will face great difficulty in

prioritising environmental challenges and proposing nature-based solutions amid addressing the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 that compound the on-going conflict. In this way, UNEA can lay the basis for: supporting long-term recovery, especially for innovative financial mechanisms such as Islamic finance; strengthening, not weakening, environmental governance and national policy in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts; and building back greener to mitigate new waves of COVID-19 and prevent future outbreaks of zoonotic diseases.

With good wishes from Kabul.

Sincerely,

Schah-Zaman Maiwandi

*Director General*

*National Environmental Protection Agency*

*Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*

*Member of the Ministers Cabinet*

