



## **Inputs and Ideas provided by HEART International towards the Ministerial Declaration for the Fifth United Nations Environment Assembly**

**Theme: *Strengthening actions for nature to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals***

### **Question 1: What are the most important elements and/or key messages from the Declaration to address the theme in an impactful manner**

It is important and sensible to address this question in the light of the coronavirus (Covid-19) global pandemic and the unprecedented impact of the crisis and its response on public policy in the domains of science, finance, social welfare, etc. and on decision-making in the world of business at national, regional and international levels.

On the global stage, or the international development agenda, the Covid-19 crisis has certainly diverted all attention away from the climate crisis. Furthermore, the economic response to the corona crisis is placing a huge burden on state budgets in both rich and poor countries, which might lead to harsher fiscal austerity afterwards to the detriment of financial commitments and overall economic response necessary to address the climate crisis. These concerns prompted the UN Secretary-General to rightly point out that, ambiguous and devastating as it is, Covid-19 is a temporary event, whereas threats to the environment from heatwaves, droughts flash foods, bush fires, etc., which epitomise the climate crisis will certainly outlast 2020 and 2021.

Immediate actions taken by governments throughout the world to respond to the humanitarian impact of the coronavirus crisis have had unanticipated positive consequences for the climate crisis. The sudden halt of production activities and country-wide 'lockdowns' in all regions of the world have led to an unprecedented and significant decline in CO<sub>2</sub> and nitrogen dioxide emissions and falling outdoor air pollution overall. For instance, it is estimated that China's emissions dropped by 25 per cent in February. Significant emission reductions have been observed in major cities in Europe as well as in India, Thailand, Indonesia, Nigeria, and South Africa among other developing countries and emerging economies. The combination of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and plummeting of oil price has resulted in delays, and hopefully abandonment, of sample drillings and further discovery projects. It was also reported that the shutdown of economies and closing of access to forests have contributed to suspension of illegal logging activities in West Africa (e.g. illicit export of CITES-protected rose wood from Sierra Leone and The Gambia to China).

***What we see and can conclude from the reactions and responses to the coronavirus crisis is that it is eminently possible to solve the climate crisis.*** Consider the bold decisions including lockdowns taken by authorities to protect public interest and save lives; the broad fiscal space

that states suddenly put to work to compensate businesses and individual workers affected by the economic impact of Covid-19; and the reliance on science more than markets to dictate policy response to the corona crisis. *Is it not possible to adopt and apply similar responses to the climate crisis, as a priority concern of international development for saving the planet?* The lessons from unprecedented emergency and even draconian measures adopted by governments to deal with the coronavirus crisis could provide an opportunity for a green transformation.

The challenge is how will governments of corona-torn countries like the USA, UK, France, Italy, Germany, the UK, China, faced with austerity respond to climate change as a priority – in the face of high unemployment, business failures and increasing impoverishment in their economies and societies. There will be the temptation, under pro-business lobby, to revisit climate protection laws with a view to increase emission levels or even to forget about the ‘Green Deal’. Yet, governments could use the lessons from the Covid-19 response and low oil price to support climate action towards a green transformation. For example, low oil prices could represent a good opportunity to reform subsidies for fossil fuels: subsidies of the oil industry should be deemed as unnecessary and funds could be shifted instead into promoting and subsidising low-carbon sectors. This ought not to be punitive and disruptive in terms of impact on the economy, investors and employees, as careful and specific measures could be introduced to enhance a smooth and orderly phase-out of fossil fuels. Indeed, the recovery from the economic recession following the Covid-19 crisis could offer a great opportunity to secure the necessary incentive and investments to combat the climate crisis through a green transformation style of economic development.

This window of opportunity will not remain open for long, and strong action on climate will be required fast and in the context of short-term post Covid-19 economic recovery measures. It will be necessary to systematically evaluate the environmental implications of support and recovery measures to businesses and industries and their alignment with longer-term decarbonisation plans and environmental objectives. For example, consider linking improvements in environmental performance to approval of bailout packages in the aviation and cruise ship sectors. A socio-ecological transformation in the post-Covid-19 era is possible, and this would allow for the building of a green economy alongside inclusive development and equitable social progress, with growth opportunities for clean energy businesses and green jobs.

### **Question 2: How can the UN Environment Assembly make a significant contribution to the realisation of its theme at a global scale**

Looking and thinking beyond Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement, and even the role of (powerful) social movements, and in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath, more attention should be given to the role and responsibility of **private actors** in efforts to create and take advantage of opportunities for green transformation. The involvement of major industry players (e.g. in the energy sector) in the responsibility discourse surrounding international climate deals and laws - implying a less ‘state-centric’ formula for reaching

agreements – should be seriously considered. The expectation is that key industry players with the greatest impact on climate change will come to realise and understand better the diminishing value of their output in a world beset by the climate crisis (agonizing heat waves and rapidly declining biodiversity). The direct and active involvement of private sector industries that are responsible for the larger share of all greenhouse gas emissions in the discourse surrounding international climate deals and laws could trigger action by them, as responsible partners in the decision-making process, towards finding alternative and more climate-friendly investments and practices ( in energy production and end-use consumption sectors ). As already mentioned, the Covid-19 pandemic economic recovery process presents an unprecedented opportunity for the global community (including UNEP) to tap the influential capacity of the private sector for achieving an inclusive international climate law. We should not let present arrangements of the UN system and multilateralism dominated by state-centrism prevent private actors from assuming their share of global responsibility for resolving the climate crisis. ***The private sector must therefore be engaged and actively involved both in the preparation for the UNEA and the conduct of the meeting itself.***

Next, as a member of the Scientific Advisory Panel (SAP) for the Sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO 6) report – representing HEART and the African constituency – I came to value the importance of scientific evidence, based on a wide network of knowledge and empirical data and information, for supporting and making informed decisions on climate change and the environment. Preparation of the GEO 6 report involved the participation and inputs from scientists and research institutes from around the world and inter-generational. ***The UNEA should conduct its business and follow-up action based on activities and programmes that promote and enhance science-based policies and practice, rather than politics and ideology.***

Lastly, UNEA should be planned and executed in a manner that present climate change as a ‘*global public good*’ in which all nations of the world community have an equal and vested interest, irrespective of geopolitical division and level of economic development. Additionally, there must be a ‘moral imperative’ (beyond enlightened self-interest) on the part of the part of the richer and more developed nations to provide technical assistance to less developed countries to support implementation of environmental policies. ***The preparation, conduct and follow-up of UNEA should therefore serve as a forum as well as a fulcrum for raising awareness and leveraging capacity-building competences on critical environmental issues in developing countries (e.g. anti-poaching and forest conservation capacities)***

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