

Outcomes and Significance of the Fourth United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA4)

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April 2019

1. Introduction

This briefing note provides a concise overview of the main outcomes of the Fourth United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA4), held 11-15 March 2019 as well as an early discussion of its potential significance. The theme of this year's meeting was "innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production". UNEA, which meets every two years, is the global forum for the world's national environment leaders to consider various resolutions to address environmental issues and oversee the activities of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which is the UN body responsible for the environmental dimension of sustainable development.

The Fourth Assembly was UNEA's largest meeting ever. It "attracted a record number of participants, with five Heads of State and Government, 157 ministers and deputy ministers, and almost 5,000 participants from 179 countries attending the Assembly and related events" (IISD Reporting Services 2019).

The large participation shows that UNEA is not just for governments and international negotiations. Many side events were also held at UNEA4 involving various stakeholders such as NGOs, businesses, cities, and research institutes, often presenting the results of initiatives in partnership with UNEP. The "One Planet Summit" organized by France, Kenya, and the World Bank to "showcase concrete achievements and breakthrough initiatives" was attended by President Macron of France and President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya. The Global Partnership on Marine Litter and Clean Seas held over 20 events, and the Major Groups and Stakeholders held over 30 events during the week. The Sustainable Innovations Expo organized 9 panel discussions plus various other events, and it hosted over 30 exhibitors. There was also a Cities Summit.

2. Major Environmental Reports

Several major reports were launched documenting not only severe pollution and environmental damage threatening the health of the environment, but also worrisome consequences for human health. The most important of these reports was the Sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6), which is UNEP's wide-ranging flagship report. GEO-6 concluded that environmental damage and degradation has reached the point where it is threatening the earth's life support system and therefore economic prosperity (UNEP 2019b). The report's first "key message", as agreed by the Member States of the bureau of the January 2019 meeting that adopted the separate "Summary for Policymakers", was that "the overall environmental situation is deteriorating globally and the window for action is closing". The Second Global Chemicals Outlook (UNEP 2019a) concluded that "the global goal to minimize adverse impacts of chemicals and waste will not be achieved by 2020" and that "ambitious worldwide action by all stakeholders is urgently required". A report entitled Plastic and Health: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet warned that "even with the limited data available, the health impacts of plastic throughout its lifecycle are overwhelming" (CIEL et al. 2019). According to the Global Resources Outlook, "in the absence of urgent and concerted action, rapid growth and inefficient use of natural resources will continue to create unsustainable pressures on the environment" (International Resource Panel 2019).

3. Resolutions, Decisions, Ministerial Declaration

UNEA4 considered 29 resolutions and adopted 23, both record numbers, in addition to 3 decisions and the Ministerial Declaration (IISD Reporting Services 2019). These resolutions covered a wide range of topics. The resolution addressing marine plastics received considerable attention. Many resolutions related to the meeting's themes of innovation and sustainable consumption and production. The resolutions focused on a variety of issues related to the circular economy, including chemicals, waste, sustainable mobility, sustainable infrastructure, and food loss and waste, as well as environmental assessment. Others were related to issues such as deforestation, biodiversity and land degradation, coral reefs, and nitrogen. However, air pollution, which was highlighted at previous meetings, was dealt with only broadly in a few resolutions at UNEA4. Member states also approved UNEP's budget and programme of work, and they asked UNEP to help implement the Assembly's resolutions.

The large number and variety of resolutions could indicate some increasing enthusiasm for action on the environment. However, their contents were not very ambitious and the language was very weak, vague, general, and non-quantitative. Many resolutions supported the continuation of existing modest voluntary initiatives, including assessment reports, often coordinated by UNEP and in cooperation with various partners and stakeholders. In some cases, Member States were "encouraged" or "invited" to develop various policies to take action or support particular initiatives, but sometimes the language was further weakened to "consider" them. There was a continued emphasis on exchange of knowledge and good practices as well as calls for more research rather than concrete targets, deadlines, and policies. Member States requested UNEP to conduct various activities including capacity building, raising awareness, researching knowledge gaps, taking stock of existing activities, and developing options to take action. There was even some turning away from the already agreed SDGs. One commentary observed, "on many resolutions, some countries preferred not to refer explicitly to SDG targets, while others warned against backsliding from commitments to achieve the SDGs" (Paul 2019). It is not clear why some countries were trying to weaken language that they had already agreed to in the past.

Overall, these resolutions were significant in that they placed or maintained the related issues on the global agenda, and some countries, as well as other stakeholders, may be motivated to work on them voluntarily, motivated in part by the discussions and resolutions at UNEA4. Moreover, the resolutions and decisions play a crucial role in authorizing UNEP's budget, work plan, and development of future proposals. UNEP undertakes a wide variety of initiatives across a range of areas, which is very important in encouraging and enabling voluntary actions. These actions are unlikely to be sufficient to make substantial progress in solving the wide range of environmental problems. The EU also questioned whether the budget and resources provided to UNEP would be sufficient to fully implement its work program, suggesting that it may be overstretched. Nevertheless, UNEP is the global leader coordinating information and efforts on many environmental issues, so it is vital to support its activities to at least maintain their current level.

The longer term effectiveness of the implementation of UNEA resolutions is difficult to assess. UNEA's agenda tends to focus on discussing new resolutions rather than discussing implementation of previous ones. In response to this, UNEA adopted a resolution calling for UNEP "to develop a monitoring mechanism ... to track and assess UNEP's implementation of the resolutions in the framework of the Programme of Work and Budget". Note that UNEP will track and assess only its own implementation, not that of Member States, who will be provided an opportunity for voluntary reporting¹.

¹ The text of the resolution, UNEP/EA.4/L.26, is available at <https://papersmart.unon.org/resolution/uploads/k1900705.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2019).

4. UNEP's Budget and Staffing

Regarding UNEP's overall budget, the good news is that it is planned to increase by USD 121 million from 2018-19 to 2020-21, an increase of 15.3 percent, as shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** Since UNEP has a 2-year budget cycle, this implies an annual increase of 60.5 million per year. Moreover, UNEP's staff is also planned to increase from 875 to 963 in the same 2-year period, an increase of about 10 percent². However, it should be noted that the approved budget of the Environment Fund will significantly decrease between 2018-19 and 2020-21, by over 26 percent. Therefore, the overall increase in UNEP's budget is mainly due to the expected increase in earmarked funds.

Table 1: UNEP Budget Funding Sources 2018-2021

	2018-2019	Share*	2020-2021	Share*	Increase/ Decrease**
Regular budget	39.6	5.0%	39.6	4.4%	0.0%
Environment fund	271	34.4%	200	22.0%	-26.2%
Program support costs	33	4.2%	38	4.2%	15.2%
Global funds	140	17.8%	250	27.5%	78.6%
Earmarked funds	305	38.7%	382	42.0%	24.6%
Total	788.6		909.6		15.3%

Unit: USD million

Source: see footnote 5.

* Note: shares do not add up to exactly 100 percent due to rounding.

** Refers to the absolute budget amount, not the share of the total budget.

These increased financial and human resources from earmarked funds from specific member countries and global funds (for example from the Global Environment Fund) were not approved or disapproved in the Budget resolution. The final resolution only states, "Requests the Executive Director to ensure that all earmarked contributions to the United Nations Environment Programme are used to fund activities that contribute to the effective implementation of the programme of work"³. Individual Member States who donate these earmarked funds generally restrict them to be used for specific purposes or projects, as agreed by UNEP. In principle, core funds from the regular budget and the Environment Fund seem preferable to maintain the integrity of the UNEP overall activities, but it is possible that earmarked and global funds might be the only way to increase the total budget.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the scale of UNEP's financial and human resources is not commensurate with the scale of the problems identified in various global environment reports mentioned above. They also do not match the scale of the potentially available resources considering that global GDP is about USD 80 trillion (2017), and global financial assets were estimated at USD 294 trillion (2014) (Elder, Shigemoto, and King 2018). For example, total expenditures on lobbying by oil and gas companies in 2018 totalled over USD 124 million, including over USD 11 million by just one company, Exxon Mobil⁴, according to the Center for Responsive Politics⁵.

Many countries presented new or existing policies they are using to address various environmental problems, especially related to plastics, at side events, ministerial roundtables, or plenary sessions at

² Source: Programme of work and budget, and other administrative and budgetary issues: Proposed programme of work and budget for the biennium 2020–2021, Report of the Executive Director, UNEP/EA.4/4, 11 October 2018.

³ The text of the resolution, UNEP/EA.4/L.28, "Programme of work and budget for 2020-2021," is available at <https://papersmart.unon.org/resolution/uploads/k1900830.pdf#overlay-context=unea4res-pow> (accessed April 8, 2019).

⁴ Note: This amount is infinitesimal in comparison with Exxon Mobil's earnings of USD 20.8 billion and revenues of 290 billion. See https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/news/newsroom/news-releases/2019/0201_exxonmobil-earns-20-billion-in-2018-6-billion-in-fourth-quarter (accessed April 1, 2019).

⁵ Information is available at <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/lobbying.php?cycle=2018&ind=E01> (accessed April 1, 2019).

UNEA4⁶. The EU presented its new rules on single-use plastics, which address a range of types of plastic waste with a variety of policy measures. Kenya explained its law which bans two types of plastic bags. The law has various exceptions, but it also requires companies to develop Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) plans to address various other types of plastic waste. Chile described its policies on plastic waste, including an EPR law. Canada highlighted its “Strategy on Zero Plastic Waste”. Indonesia is implementing a pilot program to disallow free plastic bags in 20 cities, conducting modelling research to study the issue, and participating in a variety of local, bilateral, regional, and global initiatives. Information on sustainable mobility strategies, including some existing and some under development, was presented by the EU, Norway, Argentina, and Seychelles. Sri Lanka noted its Sustainable Consumption and Production strategy developed through the SWITCH-Asia program. Iceland reported that it aims to increase amount of protected land to 35-40% of the country’s area and establish park in central Iceland. Poland mentioned its tree planting program, and Israel noted its plan to expand ecological corridors. Sweden made a statement about its new tax cut on repairs, noting that currently it is usually cheaper to buy new products rather than repair them. Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire explained their new policies to address short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs), which notably featured successful cooperation between ministries.

5. Presentations of Policies, Activities, and Initiatives by Member States and Non-governmental Stakeholders

Various individual companies made presentations on their initiatives at side events and other meetings, and some had booths to exhibit their products and services⁷. A notable example was Apple, which explained its goal to make products out of 100 percent recycled or recyclable material and powered by renewable energy, with 4 gigawatts already built or committed. Apple’s iPhone disassembly robot can recover tungsten and rare earths which are usually lost in traditional recycling. Apple noted that policy support is necessary, since it is often easier to mine virgin bauxite than to recycle aluminium back into the supply chain. SABIC, a global chemical company, reported that it is developing technologies to extract carbon dioxide from the chemical production process and to recycle mixed plastics instead of separating them into different types. Tokyo Steel exhibited a process to use its electric furnace technology to recycle automobile battery components. Several companies exhibited air pollution monitoring technology, including the use of drones.

Information on many new and existing networks and partnerships was presented at UNEA4⁸. Many of these addressed the theme of ocean plastic. The Global Partnership on Marine Litter, a UNEP initiative, sponsored a tent and group of side events, including one on UNEP’s Clean Seas Program. Canada highlighted the G7 Ocean Plastics Charter. The UK is promoting several initiatives such as the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, the Commonwealth Blue Charter, the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance (with Vanuatu), and the Commonwealth Marine Litter Programme. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation presented the Global Plastic Action Partnership and highlighted a related report on the New Plastics Economy, which was launched at the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, Ellen MacArthur Foundation, and McKinsey and Company 2016). Other initiatives include the Alliance to End Plastic Waste with 30 large member companies, and Circular Economy 100, a multistakeholder partnership. The One Planet Network held its Third One Planet Summit which featured presentations by various political leaders, companies, organizations, and initiatives explaining their actions, activities, and plans/pledges.

⁶ The information in this briefing note is based on country’s presentations made at UNEA4 and not on official documents or written explanations. Readers are advised to consult official websites for more specific information. This list of policies is selective; it is not a comprehensive list of policies mentioned at UNEA4.

⁷ The information in this briefing note is based on the companies’ presentations made at UNEA4 and not on official documents or written explanations. Readers are advised to consult companies’ websites for more specific information. This list of company actions is selective; it is not a comprehensive list of companies which presented their activities at UNEA4.

⁸ The information in this briefing note is based on presentations made at UNEA4 and not on official documents or explanations. Readers are advised to consult the appropriate related websites for more specific information. This list of networks and initiatives is selective; it is not a comprehensive list of those mentioned at UNEA4.

Taken together, the various policies, initiatives, activities, etc. presented at the side events, ministerial roundtables, exhibition booths, and other forums indicate a considerable willingness of many stakeholders, as well as governments, to undertake voluntary actions, even if the Member States cannot agree on legally binding resolutions. This display of enthusiasm and effort is encouraging.

However, it is difficult to assess the significance of the actions and initiatives presented at UNEA by governments and other stakeholders. On one hand, the initiatives presented at UNEA are only a sample of global efforts. On the other hand, some of these efforts may be among the more advanced ones. Still, these voluntary efforts may not be sufficient to address the scale of the problems highlighted in the various environmental assessment reports. These problems generally do not seem to be improving overall, although the efforts presented at UNEA may still be making important contributions. For example, a report surveying the global status of laws and regulations on single-use plastics and microplastics written by UNEP and the World Resources Institute was presented at a side event (UNEP 2018). The report found that although many countries have some legislation addressing plastic bags, many still do not (127 out of 192 countries surveyed), and only 8 countries have established bans on microbeads. The regulations are very uneven and fragmented, and do not address entire lifecycles. Anyway, it is very important to encourage these efforts to continue. Voluntary efforts by many stakeholders and willing governments are the only way to make progress in the absence of stronger UNEA resolutions or regulations by Member State governments.

6. Conclusion and Way Forward

Much more progress could be made if stronger measures were adopted. The delegate from Costa Rica argued that countries should make much more ambitious efforts compared to the measures in the resolutions discussed at UNEA4. At the ministerial roundtable on the topic of biodiversity, the delegate from Costa Rica highlighted a number of much stronger measures that should be taken including stopping wildlife trade as soon as possible, an international system to regulate the high seas, an end to large scale irrational fishing, a ban on deforestation, a global carbon tax to pay owners of forests (much more than USD 5 per ton), a financial target to spend 1 percent of global GDP on conservation, expand protected areas, phasing out single use plastics, and use of green accounting.

One delegate noted that the contents of the resolutions often do not reflect what ministers say in public. There was a sense at UNEA4 that many countries highlight their positive actions in public, but then in the negotiations behind closed doors, they work to weaken the language of the resolutions. It is not clear why some countries do not support resolutions calling for actions which they are taking anyway. A delegate from Germany commented that for years, we have heard the same statements, and that voluntary action will not solve the problem, so it is necessary to change incentives and regulations. A delegate from the EU noted that it is necessary to stop funding unsustainable activities.

In conclusion, the results of UNEA4 at least provided a basis for the continuation and possibly modest strengthening of current voluntary efforts on the environment, even if the overall level of ambition and achievement is not as much as hoped. UNEA4 also approved UNEP's budget and Program of Work. The messages from the various global assessments have become progressively stronger and more difficult to ignore. UNEA4 enabled work on these reports to continue, and the next versions might possibly be strengthened. More countries, both developing and developed, are taking increasingly stronger actions on their own initiative, while the number of countries opposing a consensus on stronger resolutions is not large. Non-governmental stakeholders, especially businesses, are also becoming increasingly engaged and taking stronger measures themselves.

In the future, think tanks and NGOs involved in the UNEA process should devote more attention to assessing progress on past UNEA resolutions and presenting the results in side events, not just presenting new proposals. UNEP will take two years to develop the new monitoring framework, and UNEA 5 might delay further by asking for the proposed framework to be revised instead of adopting it. Therefore, the role of think tanks and NGOs will be very important to conduct early monitoring and encourage the development of a robust monitoring process. It is particularly important to

monitor the actions of national governments. However, in addition to monitoring implementation of past commitments, it is still important to continue striving to raise the overall level of ambition through new resolutions.

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