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ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT GROUP



Mid-Term Technical Segment of the 25th Senior Officials Meeting

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By video-audio conference (connection details in logistics note)

Distribution: EMG members

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Issue Note: Sustainable Infrastructure

1) Introduction

Sustainable infrastructure is central to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development – it is relevant to all the SDGs. Research by UNOPS and the University of Oxford shows that infrastructure influences 72% of the 169 individual SDG targets. Quality, resilient, and sustainable infrastructure is essential for achieving inclusive growth, eradicating poverty, promoting societal well-being, and the realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. At the same time, however, infrastructure development can place enormous pressures on ecosystems and natural resources, and the long lifespan of infrastructure assets compounds this by then locking-in environmentally unsustainable choices for both our own and future generations.

In terms of opportunities, the interconnections between infrastructure and the SDGs means that if the right decisions are made, sustainable infrastructure can achieve positive impacts across each of the SDGs. Yet doing so will require the adoption of integrated, systems-level approaches which holistically consider the economic, social, and environmental implications of infrastructure planning and development. Such approaches engage the interconnections between different infrastructure systems and sectors (including natural infrastructure, such as landscapes and ecosystems), aspects of sustainability, spatial scales (national, regional, and local), and governance frameworks (inter-ministerial coordination).

2) Role and contribution of the Environment Management Group

In view of the role of sustainable infrastructure in implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, momentum has been building in this area including in the UN system. On 26th February 2019, UN Environment and the Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership co-convened an EMG Nexus Dialogue on ‘Sustainable Infrastructure for the SDGs,’ in Geneva. The Dialogue produced an Outcome Statement which called on stakeholders to promote integrated approaches to infrastructure development; both as a means of increasing the safety, sustainability, and resilience of infrastructure, and in support of the 2030 Agenda.

The Statement invited the Environment Management Group to follow up on this issue and engage the UN system and other relevant partners through a network to promote integrated approaches to

sustainable infrastructure. The Statement recognized the need to collectively work to raise the international visibility of sustainable infrastructure as a central and crosscutting component of the 2030 Agenda; work to streamline and adapt existing safeguards, tools, guidelines, norms, and standards for use in support of integrated approaches; and help countries to build the technical and institutional capacity required to adopt integrated approaches to the planning and development of sustainable infrastructure.

Following the Nexus Dialogue, in March 2019, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) passed a resolution on sustainable infrastructure which highlights infrastructure's centrality to the 2030 Agenda and the cross-cutting interlinkages between infrastructure development and the broader SDG framework. In this respect, the resolution urges the international community to 'develop and strengthen national and regional systems-level strategic approaches' to infrastructure planning and development, and requests UN Environment to, among other things, foster multi-stakeholder dialogue and capacity-building efforts to ensure that stakeholders and policymakers are well-equipped to apply a holistic approach to infrastructure development at the national level.

The resolution now provides UN Environment and other agencies with a strong mandate to scale up efforts and work in these areas. Achieving the necessary impact will require collaboration and coordinated efforts with other UN entities, and the UN EMG is well-positioned to lead potential developments in this respect.

To date, several UN entities have developed sectoral and thematic specializations in the context of sustainable infrastructure based on their respective mandates. However, these have also resulted in a differentiation of approaches, and significant, impactful gains could therefore be made through the development of programmes which draw on this expertise in a more coordinated manner. As a first step, the EMG would be well-placed to help take stock of existing work on sustainable infrastructure within the UN System and help to facilitate more coordinated, integrated approaches. In addition, the EMG could be instrumental in facilitating a shared understanding of integrated approaches amongst the UN System. And finally, under a GEF-funded project UN Environment is convening an expert working group to develop consolidated, internationally applicable normative guidance for policymakers on adopting integrated approaches to infrastructure development. There may be potential for the EMG to help facilitate endorsement of the normative guidance by EMG members.