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## UN Environment Management Group Nexus Dialogues

*COVID-19 and the Environment: A 3-Part Series of Nexus Dialogues*

**Pollution & Waste (14 July 2020)**

**Building Back Better – a Sustainable Future (15 July 2020)**

**System Resiliency & Health-Related Interdependencies (16 July 2020)**

Virtual Series

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### Outcome Document

COVID-19 has revealed widespread socioeconomic and environmental implications. The immediate priority across the UN-system focuses on protecting those affected by the pandemic, but in looking ahead, agencies will support Member States in rebuilding a more resilient society, in pursuit of the SDGs. As iterated by the UN Secretary-General, [we must reaffirm our common responsibility to “recover better”, with more inclusive and sustainable models of development.](#) This effort requires sound understanding of how COVID-19 is impacting the 2030 Agenda’s implementation and where opportunities lie for possible collaboration across nexus topics. For example, the pandemic has significantly postponed critical intergovernmental processes and shifted workstreams into other mediums (e.g. remote working, teleconferencing), resulting in short-term as well as systemic challenges.

In this regard, the UN Environment Management Group organized a series of three virtual Nexus Dialogues (14-16 July 2020). The Dialogues facilitated an exchange between UN agencies and other stakeholders to broaden their reach and share expert perspectives, innovative solutions, and collaborative opportunities in addressing environment and sustainable development issues in the context of the pandemic.

Under three umbrellas (Pollution & Waste, Building Back Better, and System Resiliency & Health-Related Interdependencies), twenty representatives of the international development community addressed specific issues including waste management, valuing and investing in nature, rebuilding the next generation of social, ecological and productive infrastructures, and modernizing environmental governance and multilateralism.



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Key messages noted during each of the two-hour Webinar Nexus Dialogues, include:

## Pollution & Waste (14 July 2020)

- **A climate of misinformation and ignorance** continue to challenge efforts to raise relevant and scientific awareness (within the international development community, and the general public) as well as capacity-building and knowledge-transferring initiatives.
- **Due to COVID-19 slowing national processes, decisions from member states are arriving slower**, delaying their implementation, and ultimately, certain pollution and waste issues, such as marine litter and wastewater are at risk of being minimized.
- In reacting to an influx of pollution and waste (hazardous, medical, etc.) during COVID-19, national agencies have realized a systemic challenge: **waste management does not have clear institutional implementation and traceability within government ministries.**
- **The inconsistent management of pollution and waste has set uncertain national priorities** with regard to 1. recycling/reuse circular economic models, 2. converting waste into resource, 3. technology advancement, 4. private sector involvement, and 5. regulatory environment for its production.

Expert representatives identified specific capacity gaps, directly influencing pollution and waste:

- **National institutional capacities must be prioritized and improved**, i.e. defining a national Ministry's scope relating to pollution, chemicals, and waste, overall coordination and communication, and collaborating with Basel and Stockholm Convention Regional and Coordinating Centres on capacity-building efforts.
- Aside from implementation capacity, **national financial flows earmarked for waste management must be clearly defined within National Development Plans.** For sustainable pollution and waste management, sustainable finance, is key.

Despite challenges and capacity gaps, continued science-policy discussions surrounding pollution and waste is resulting in solutions and initiatives, forging ahead the agenda.

- **The Plastic Waste Partnership**, established under the Basel Convention, had its first meeting (2-5 March 2020), seeking to mobilize businesses, governments, academic, and civil society to develop guidance intended to improve the environmentally sound management of plastic waste (including generation, and consumption).
- The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) serves as the strategic partner for **the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution (SMEP) Programme**, led by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The project has revealed two main solutions to reduce plastic waste: support the identification and development



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of material substitution, and to enhance biodegradable options to consumer products. Further efforts are underway to locate partner research institutions.

- **The WASH FIT (Water and Sanitation for Health Facility Improvement Tool)**, developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, provides technical guidance to facilitate waste management and monitoring at the national level, building WASH infrastructure, developing a healthy workforce, and engaging stakeholder communities.
- **UN-Habitat India** is working with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, supporting five pilot cities in India to strengthen basic urban service provision and delivery (e.g. disposal of domestic service waste), and creating an enabling climate for green investment and infrastructure.
- Through scientific assessments, circular economy principles, implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements, digitalization and sustainable finance, the **UN Environment Programme (UNEP) – Asia-Pacific Office** is supporting the understanding of COVID-19's impact on pollution and waste, with a particular focus on packaging and plastic waste, and medical waste.

Despite excellent initiatives, expert representatives delineate the following recommendations, as concrete next steps for the international development community:

- **In order to operationalize policy, there is a need for universal and concrete definitions** for: 1. a recyclable vs. biodegradable product, 2. wastewater.
- **There is a need for industry-specific policy roadmaps, at different levels (i.e. national, state, cities, etc.)** which can localize circular economy best practices and methodologies and attract both private and public investments in resource efficiency.
- **SMEs and economic actors must be actively involved** to reduce the ecological footprint of their products and services. To Build Back Better, green jobs need to be incentivized.
- **As a whole, circular economy materials need to raise awareness about the need to treat/manage exported plastic, and the reuse and redesigning of durable consumer products.** While recycling is critical, it is only one facet of a multidimensional problem.
- **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)** has to include material concerning urban metabolism, and affecting pollution and waste. ESD taught at younger ages would assist in encouraging lifetime sustainable consumption, and thereby – sustainable lifestyles.

**To keep momentum on the pollution and waste agendas, a central question posed** is how to improve the resilience of our international development work, including the procurement of staff/consultants, capacity-building, technical coordination, and implementing new agendas for sustainable development.



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## Building Back Better – a Sustainable Future (15 July 2020)

- **The agriculture and food sectors have been challenged** at a level not seen since The Great Depression in the 1930s. A combination of disrupted food supply chains and the economic downturn is increasing hunger, regressing development progress on SDG 2: Zero Hunger, and increasing the risk for the (re-) emergence of zoonotic diseases.
- **COVID-19 has also exposed and worsened inequality risks e.g. gender-based violence and the social security deficit**, particularly as millions of workers in the informal economy make the choice between earning a daily living vs. quarantining against COVID-19.
- **The international development community is struggling with the collective need for more, quality information**, particularly on 1) the impact of poverty and inequality on vulnerable groups (e.g. rights violations, gender-based violence, etc.), 2) the impact of poverty and inequality on nature and climate disasters, and 3) the scope and availability of public resources and political will to mitigate aforementioned systemic impacts.
- **Quality information can better mobilize scientific/evidence-based decision-making** in order to shift away from an approach of “doing no harm” to preemptively “doing good” in pursuit of building greater resilience within a post COVID-19 society.

Expert representatives identified specific capacity gaps, directly influencing building back better:

- In addressing the pandemic crisis, **member states have requested for capacity-building guidance and support** specifically in **1) obtaining timely and reliable statistical data** and information on which to develop cogent policies, and **2) direct humanitarian response** to alleviate the acute, immediate impacts such as food insecurity and lack of healthcare.
- In order to begin addressing inequalities worsened by COVID-19, **sustainable finance and the rechanneling of funds must be approached with great care** and backed by data.
- **Above all, efforts to mitigate capacity gaps must encourage integrated approaches**, accounting for multidimensional, participatory perspectives and nuanced understanding of development which bring social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

Despite challenges and capacity gaps, continued science-policy discussions surrounding building back better is resulting in solutions and initiatives, forging ahead the agenda.

- **Circumventing “business as usual” in favor of an integrated approach** towards natural resource management is critical to wealth generation, quality of life, and mobility.
- **The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) aims to green stimulus and finance packages** to accelerate sustainable consumption and production (SCP). Programs are upheld by five design principles: 1. improving the centrality of green and decent jobs, 2. stimulating



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public, social, and ecological infrastructure, 3. advancing SCP through circularity, 4. designing responsible public and private finance for climate stability and ecosystem integrity, and 5. encouraging nature-based solutions to achieve socially-inclusive outcomes.

- **The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)'s COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme** emphasizes seven priorities for action, including timely data for decision-making, sustaining trade and ensuring food safety standards, promote a One Health approach, boosting small-holders resilience, preventing the next zoonotic pandemic, and building back to transform food systems. Five major streams of action for the upcoming **Food System Summit in 2021** that could guide the design of nationally owned and catalytic COVID-19 recovery programs: (i) Food for All - End hunger around the world in line with the zero hunger target under SDG2; (ii) Healthy People–End Malnutrition and Stem the Increase in Obesity Rates; (iii) Nature Positive Agriculture–Ensure Agriculture is contributing positively to climate action; (iv) Environment and Biodiversity–Significant reductions in land degradation and biodiversity loss due to agriculture; and (v) Fair and economically efficient and resilient food systems - Providing healthy diets at stable, affordable prices while reducing the excessive waste in our current food systems.
- **The World Trade Organization (WTO)'s Committee on Trade and Environment** focuses on building back better through sustainable trade. The last meeting (July 2020) spoke on concrete efforts by WTO members to improve resilience by eliminating trade barriers on environmental goods and services, addressing plastic pollution, encouraging circular economy principles, and further greening of the Aid for Trade programme.
- **The International Labour Organization (ILO)'s COVID-19 Monitor** (now 5<sup>th</sup> ed.) yields insights on how COVID-19 is disrupting the world of work and features a time-sensitive response framework for member states, based on the four pillars: 1. stimulating the economy, 2. supporting enterprises, jobs, and incomes, 3. protecting occupational health and safety, and 4. making space for participatory social dialogue.
- As a strategic partner of the **Partnership for Action on the Green Economy (PAGE)**, ILO is supporting member states through collaborative, innovative, and resource-focused guidance.
- **In response to COVID-19, UNDP has reached out to 140+ countries to assess their short- and long-term recovery needs, identifying five solutions areas:** 1. integrate biodiversity-friendly low-emission approaches into short-term rescue policies, medium-term stimulus packages, and long-term green economy transition planning, 2. invest in and provide fiscal monitoring and incentives for public restoration schemes, 3. promote innovative sustainable finance mechanisms, 4. accelerate the energy transition and tackle fossil fuel/agriculture subsidies, and 5. mitigate the risk of zoonotic diseases by addressing root causes.



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The expert representatives delineated the following recommendations, as concrete next steps for the international development community:

- **There is a need for stronger, effective advocacy to rectify the false public perception that we have to choose between immediate response needs and longer-term goals to build back better a healthy environment and vibrant economies.** An economy designed with green circularity can benefit all three dimensions of sustainable development. COVID-19 crisis should not be wasted as an opportunity to integrate and build strong foundations for socially just, productive, and environmentally sustainable economies.
- **The science-policy interface must be upheld as the gold standard in policy decision-making and accountability,** so as to better integrate the recommendations of scientific panels (e.g. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, and International Resource Panel) into regional, national, and local COVID-19 recovery plans.
- **Policy packages which serve as long-term environmental and social safety nets** must emphasize resource-efficiency when striking new green deals regionally, nationally, and locally.
- **Programmes should also take place at both the sub-national and sub-regional levels,** with UN agencies leading capacity-building efforts to address the change of scale. These may include linking investors to global platforms, offering training to Ministries of Finance on green policy options, educating on the effect of migration on jobs, etc.
- **There is a growing need for dialogue between UN-system practitioners leading economic, social and environmental dimensions** of sustainable development and government beneficiaries, to better understand how trade can support efforts to build back better towards a green economy.

**Building back better is challenged by the crisis of multilateralism and a lack of participatory stakeholder engagement.** Building back better is a long-term endeavor which requires the UN agencies working together with governments, leading by example to uplift affected stakeholder voices and engage their meaningful participation.

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## System Resiliency & Health-Related Interdependencies (16 July 2020)

- The pandemic has exposed close interrelations between public health and occupational health, yielding the systems-thinking insight of the importance of **occupational safety and health (OSH) in building system resilience in global economies and labour markets.**
- The need for a systems-thinking approach extends beyond various development agendas, **the approach is also necessary in their implementation and execution.** A key challenge facing practitioners is endeavoring to build capacities (e.g. knowledge management, skills transfer, etc.) across different scales/levels and agencies, while ensuring everyone is well-equipped and willing to interact with one another to pursue a common goal.
- **Interdependencies and interconnections comprise the nature of the 2030 Agenda, but without holistic information about the drivers, leverages points, etc. there is a risk of omitting important nuances.** For example, COVID-19 has severely affected the tourism sector in Africa, which is problematic as the governments use tourism income to fund conservation, public health and education programs. This has resulted in cascading effects: loss of jobs, lack of food, etc.

Expert representatives identified specific capacity gaps, directly influencing health-related interdependencies and overall system resilience:

- **The lack of a comprehensive risk management system and a full-cost financial accounting system for the social costs of known zoonotic diseases constitutes a key capacity gap<sup>1</sup>.** This includes: monitoring, early-warning, disease surveillance, control measures, and contingencies. Data collection and harmonization is necessary to ensure that policy decision-making is based on complete, scientific information.
- **There is a need for cross-sectoral collaboration at the local level** which engages those at the frontlines of natural resource management, most vulnerable to healthcare system failure, and biodiversity change including zoonotic diseases. While national and global policies provide strategic direction, bottom-up or grassroots approaches are vital.
- COVID-19 has shown society's ability to mobilize the digital economy (e.g. remote work, e-commerce, etc.) **yet its full potential is not leveraged nor capitalized** to serve timely and reliable information.

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<sup>1</sup> WWF Global Science. (2020). Beyond Boundaries: Insights into emerging zoonotic diseases, nature, and human well-being. Internal science brief. Unpublished. [https://unemg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WWF-Science-Brief\\_Beyond-Boundaries\\_5.6.20\\_lowres.pdf](https://unemg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WWF-Science-Brief_Beyond-Boundaries_5.6.20_lowres.pdf)



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Despite challenges and capacity gaps, continued science-policy discussions surrounding system resiliency and health-related interdependencies is resulting in solutions and initiatives, forging ahead the agenda to understand and mitigate the effect of future pandemics.

- **The International Labour Organization (ILO)** continues to develop technical policy briefs (e.g. on COVID-19's impact on job losses) around four complementary pillars: 1. stimulating the economy, 2. supporting decent work, 3. protecting workers in the workplace, and 4. relying on social dialogue.
- **The World Health Organization (WHO)** consults and works with a liaison group comprising international stakeholders working at the nexus of biodiversity, health, climate change, food and agriculture, etc. As a result of the consultative meetings, WHO delivered a **Guidance on Mainstreaming Biodiversity for Nutrition and Health** and a **Manifesto for a Healthy Recovery from COVID-19**.
- **UN Environment Programme (UNEP)** is having a policy dialogue on how to harmonize policies and to incorporate nature-based solutions in building system resilience, especially in the tackling of climate and environmental issues.

The expert representatives delineated the following recommendations, as concrete next steps for the international development community:

- To best facilitate system resilience and accountability, **it is highly recommended to engage the fast-moving private sector** that often operates with different business models, imperatives, and access to alternative funding sources. UN agencies should broaden their scope and amplify their scale by working with businesses.
- **It is critical to engage and empower different stakeholder levels** (e.g. civil society, academia, etc.), in addition to the private sector, at the same forum to ensure that the developed solutions are localized, inclusive, valid, and representative.
- **Consider the integrated approach of “filling two needs with one deed,”** by remembering that system drivers and development agendas are interconnected. For example, science shows that deforestation affects climate change and vice versa; therefore, due to the interdependency, there may exist one solution which simultaneously addresses both problems.

**There is a false belief in a binary paradigm**, e.g. environment vs. economy, health and wellbeing vs. economic growth, etc. It is not necessary to prioritize one or the other. Economic benefit is derived from healthy people, a healthy environment, and nature-based solutions – and a myriad of other system factors which collectively improve system resilience. An approach which keeps systems-thinking in the forefront is likely to achieve the most effective solution.



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*We would like to thank the following expert panellists for their valuable contributions to the COVID-19 & the Environment Nexus Dialogue Series.*

**Pollution & Waste (14 July 2020)**

- Mr. Kaveh Madani, Henry Hart Rice Senior Fellow, Yale University (moderator)
- Ms. María Cristina Cardenas-Fischer, Senior Policy and Strategy Advisor, BRS Secretariat
- Ms. Swati Singh Sambyal, Waste Management Specialist, UN-HABITAT INDIA
- Mr. Mushtaq Memon, Regional Coordinator for Resource Efficiency, Asia & the Pacific Office, UNEP
- Ms. Ute Pieper, Expert Consultant on Waste from Health Care Settings, WHO
- Mr. Mario Jales, Economic Affairs Officer, Trade, Environment, Climate Change and Sustainable Development Branch, UNCTAD

**Building Back Better: A Sustainable Future (15 July 2020)**

- Mr. Kaveh Madani, Henry Hart Rice Senior Fellow, Yale University (moderator)
- Ms. Izabella Teixeira, Co-Chair, International Resource Panel
- Ms. Cornelia Pretorius, Deputy Director of UNEP-WCMC
- Mr. Lev Neretin, Team Leader for Safeguards and Climate Risks, FAO
- Mr. Aik Hoe Lim, Director, Trade and Environment Division, WTO
- Mr. Tim Scott, Senior Policy Advisor, Environment, Nature, Climate, Energy, UNDP
- Ms. Verona Collantes, Intergovernmental Specialist, UN Women
- Mr. Moustapha Kamal Gueye, Coordinator of Green Jobs Programme, ILO

**System Resiliency & Health-Related Interdependencies (16 July 2020)**

- Mr. Kaveh Madani, Henry Hart Rice Senior Fellow, Yale University (moderator)
- Ms. Manal Azzi, Senior Specialist on Occupational Safety and Health, ILO
- Ms. Cristina Romanelli, Interagency Liaison on Biodiversity, Climate Change and Health, WHO
- Ms. Monika MacDevette, Chief, Chemicals and Health Branch, UNEP
- Ms. Alice Ruhweza, Africa Region Director, WWF
- Mr. Robert Steele, Team Lead, Protection and Sustainable Use of Forest Ecosystems and Biodiversity (ProFEBII), GIZ