



UNITED NATIONS

ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT GROUP

**EMG**

**Mid-Term Technical Segment of the 27<sup>th</sup> Senior Officials Meeting**

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GoToMeeting

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**EMG SOM27/mid-term/04x**

Distribution: EMG members

### Proposal by UNEP

## Nexus Dialogue: Rethinking the UN Approach on Strategic Foresight for Environmental Action

### Objective

To set the pathway towards a system-wide approach on scientific foresight and environmental early warning across the strategic and operational decisions of the United Nations Environment Management Group (EMG) and its constituent organizations.

### Background

Strategic foresight in the context of the United Nations can be understood as an organizational capacity to gather and process information about its future operating environment, including emerging issues, allowing for the creation of various scenarios of alternative, planned and desired futures.<sup>1</sup> While they do not predict the future, foresight tools, methodologies and design processes, including horizon scanning and early warning systems, are able to mine the external political, economic, social, technological and legal environments for trends and developments and leverage those insights to inform decision-making, improve anticipatory action and preparedness both within the United Nations and in support of Member States action within the context of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>2</sup>

Recent years have seen an emerging interest in developing system-wide strategic foresight capacities within the United Nations, which has reached the workings of the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP).<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the considerable benefits of bringing anticipatory, adaptive and future-aware

<sup>1</sup> <https://unsceb.org/topics/foresight>

<sup>2</sup> For further references, see UNDP (2018), Foresight Manual - Empowered Futures for the 2030 Agenda, available at <https://www.undp.org/publications/foresight-manual-empowered-futures>

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, at its thirty-sixth session, the HLCP initiated an exploratory discussion on strategic foresight and the promotion of foresight capacities and collaboration across the UN system, which resulted in the establishment, at its thirty-eight session, of an informal Strategic Foresight Network, led and coordinated by UNESCO. The Network functions as an open, informal platform among HLCP member entities experienced or interested in strategic foresight to apply strategic foresight to the Committee's system-wide analytical and policy coherence work,

perspectives to the complex, rapidly changing and unforeseen challenges of today's world, it has become increasingly evident that the United Nations must play a stronger, more coordinated anticipatory function to increase preparedness for the multi-dimensional, interconnected risks that we face.<sup>4</sup> The Secretary General himself, moreover, has recognized the value of investing in system-wide strategic foresight and anticipatory action as one of the top five priorities that will drive forward an adaptive evolution of the United Nations system.<sup>5</sup>

While the United Nations possesses the specialized expertise, global reach, data and intelligence needed to build anticipatory capabilities and increase preparedness at the country and global level, the Organization is not yet systematically including strategic foresight into its planning and operational preparedness processes.

This is particularly evident in the environment field, where the science-policy interface has long played a key role in identifying emerging issues,<sup>6</sup> conceptualizing and modelling various scenarios, models and early warning systems providing the evidence base needed to address them, but these have not necessarily been integrated coherently and consistently across anticipatory strategic planning and operational decision-making, be that at the global, regional or country level. COVID-19 is only the latest example showing that the existence of predictive, globally shared scientific knowledge,<sup>7</sup> on an environmental and human crisis, was unable to determine coordinated, strategic and operational decisions leading to better preparedness in the response, both within the United Nations and at country-level.

In this context, and in line with the vision of the Secretary General for the future of the UN system, it is clear that investing in strategic foresight and the development of a systematic and coordinated approach to emerging issues, is critical for the future of environmental multilateralism. This is also required if we are to help Member States tackle the three interconnected and mutually reinforcing planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and related emerging risks, and achieve the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>8</sup> As such, there is ample opportunity for the EMG to support system-wide efforts to bring about more coherence and coordinated action on this topic.

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fostering, *inter alia*, system-wide collaboration, the sharing of best practices, tools, lessons learned, mutual learning and perspectives to “future-proof” the work of the HLCP and the Chief Executives Board (CEB) and contribute to a culture of “futures-orientation” within the UN system. For reference:

[https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported\\_files/CEB\\_2019\\_6%20%28HLCP%2038%29\\_0.pdf](https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported_files/CEB_2019_6%20%28HLCP%2038%29_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported\\_files/CEB-2018-6-HLCP36\\_0.pdf](https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported_files/CEB-2018-6-HLCP36_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Secretary General's Vision Statement “Restoring trust and inspiring hope” - The next five years for the United Nations (2021), where system-wide strategic foresight is listed as one element of the “quintet of change” necessary to accelerate a transformation towards an adaptive, nimble and dynamic UN system, capable of guiding anticipatory action and preparedness based on the joined-up efforts of its entities. For reference:

<https://www.un.org/pga/75/wp-content/uploads/sites/100/2021/03/Letter-PGA-VS.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> UNEP (2021), Making Peace with Nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies, available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/making-peace-nature>

<sup>7</sup> Most notably UNEP's Frontiers Report (2016): Emerging Issues of Environmental Concern, available at [https://environmentlive.unep.org/media/docs/assessments/UNEP\\_Frontiers\\_2016\\_report\\_emerging\\_issues\\_of\\_environmental\\_concern.pdf](https://environmentlive.unep.org/media/docs/assessments/UNEP_Frontiers_2016_report_emerging_issues_of_environmental_concern.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> For people and planet: the UNEP strategy for 2022–2025 (2021), available at <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/35162/Doc3%20Reve1%20EnglishK2100501.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

## Activities and scope

It is proposed to launch a nexus dialogue (or series of dialogues) in 2022 that will examine ongoing processes for promoting and supporting strategic foresight capacities across the UN system and recommend ways to foster stronger cross-agency and system-wide collaboration in the environmental field, including in the work of UN country teams and the multilateral environmental agreements.

The nexus dialogue(s) could revolve around the following three broad themes:

- 1) Scientific foresight and the capacity to anticipate future scenarios and their implications;
- 2) Horizon scanning and early warning systems for emerging environmental issues of global concern; and
- 3) System-wide anticipatory action and preparedness for environmental risks and global responses.

It is envisaged that these discussions will shed light on the relevance of scientific foresight and environmental early warning to the mandates, activities and programmes of EMG members, whilst encouraging the exchange of lessons learned and good practices in the context of the implementation of the environmental dimension of the SDGs, and the identification of key roles to support of Member States in better preparing for and addressing future environmental crises. Such work would be complementary to the efforts already undertaken on system-wide foresight engagement under the auspices of the HLCP, whilst being able to leverage related existing institutional relationships, networks and joint endeavors, as relevant.

In terms of subsequent outcomes, under the continued guidance of the EMG, these dialogues could set the pathway towards the future development of a coherent approach and common UN-wide narrative on environmental foresighting, horizon scanning, anticipatory action and preparedness. The outcomes of the dialogues (TBD), in particular, could be reflected in the development of a report compiling implementation tools, case studies and policy engagement opportunities, as well as in the preparation of joint policy recommendations, to be delivered at future EMG Senior Officials Meetings and/or the Governing Bodies of EMG members, or the initiation of a consultative process that could further formalize a system-wide engagement in these issues.