

# Delivering on the vision of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

A UN System Contribution to Stockholm+50

Summary for Policymakers



UNITED NATIONS

ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT GROUP

**EMG**

# Delivering on the vision of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

## A UN System Contribution to Stockholm + 50 – Policy Brief\*

### I. Reflections on Achievements and Challenges in Delivering on Stockholm 1972

On 24 May 2021, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted Resolution 75/280 to convene an international meeting entitled “Stockholm+50: a healthy planet for the prosperity of all – our responsibility, our opportunity”, in Stockholm on 2 and 3 June 2022 to commemorate the 50 years since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued an urgent call last year for global solidarity to address “the greatest cascade of crises in our lifetimes.” His 2021 report “Our Common Agenda” made clear that the economic security, social welfare, and political stability of countries, as well as the human rights of peoples, are intricately bound up with the health of the national and global ecosystems on land and sea, and that challenges in these should be addressed together. He called for enhanced multilateral cooperation driven by global solidarity and framed by a more inclusive and networked multilateralism to navigate this complex landscape and deliver effective solutions.

The principles, commitments, and plans of action and implementation agreed upon by UN Member States in the multilateral policy areas of environment, economics, disaster risk reduction and sustainable development since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (Stockholm 1972) provide the global community with invaluable perspectives, frameworks, and guidance as it reflects at Stockholm+50 on the achievements and challenges in creating a better relationship between humanity and our natural world. By recognizing the importance of multilateralism in tackling the Earth’s triple planetary crisis – climate, nature, and pollution – Stockholm+50 could serve as the springboard to accelerate the implementation of the UN Decade of Action for delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Stockholm 1972 was the first world conference to address the environment as a major issue. The conference marked the start of a dialogue among UN Member States on the link between economic growth, the pollution of the air, water, and oceans, and the well-being of people around the world. It agreed on an Action Plan and the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). It spurred multilateral environmental diplomacy and triggered the active participation of civil society and the recognition of the role of science in policymaking. Stockholm 1972 was the first acknowledgment by the international community of “new principles of behaviour and responsibility which must govern their relationship in the environmental era,” providing a normative framework for both the UN and national governments to comprehensively consider environmental issues and the urgency of addressing them. The Stockholm Declaration put on a par the three basic goals of humanity: protection of the human environment, peace, and global economic and social development.

The conference highlighted the interaction between human rights and wellbeing, development, and the state of the world’s environment and set the stage for subsequent reiterations of this recognition in Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and UN declarations. It articulated for the first time a key aspect of international cooperation on environment and development issues – i.e. that common efforts to defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations must be shared equitably, with international cooperation needed to raise resources to support developing countries. It also made a clear connection between the quality of the environment and the enjoyment of human rights by present and future generations.

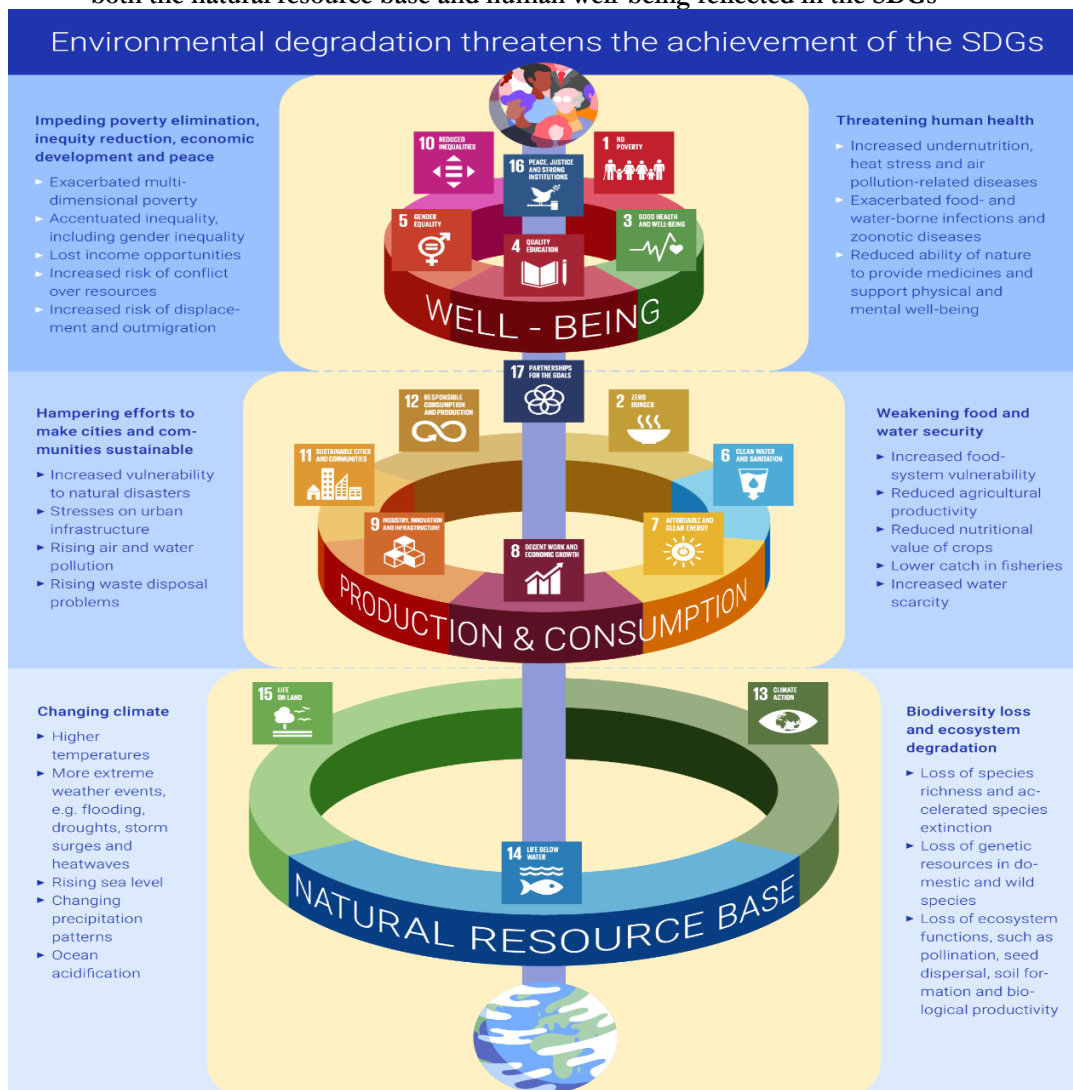
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\* This Summary for Policymakers is the abridged version of the full report prepared by the UN Environment Management Group as a contribution to Stockholm+50. The report provides a UN system-wide perspective on delivering on the vision of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The full report, including references, can be found at <https://www.stockholm50.global/resources/documents>.

Stockholm 1972 led to the growth of national and international environmental laws, resulting in the “modern era” of environmental law composed of over 500 MEAs, the 1972 Stockholm Declaration, the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, a broader understanding of environmental rights including the linking of a healthy environment to human rights, and it laid the groundwork for significant achievements in various areas, such as progress in rebuilding the ozone layer, the adoption of policies and actions to reduce air pollution, as well as in the development of other environment-related international instruments such as the UN water conventions. In short, Stockholm 1972 has had a legacy of multilateral environmental norm-making, science-policy integration, and institution-building over the past fifty years.

Despite some progress, efforts to meet the commitments to limit environmental damage have largely failed. Today’s increasingly unequal and resource-intensive development model degrades and surpasses Earth’s finite capacity to sustain human well-being. Environmental changes are undermining hard-won development gains by causing economic costs and millions of premature deaths annually. They are impeding progress towards ending poverty and hunger, reducing inequalities, promoting sustainable economic growth, work for all, and peaceful and inclusive societies. The world still faces a complex of global challenges that threaten human health, prosperity, equality, and peace as well as the timely achievement of the SDGs (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Environmental changes impact adversely both the natural resource base and human well-being reflected in the SDGs**



Source: UNEP (2021b), Making Peace with Nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies (2021), Figure 4.1

These challenges which are global in origin and magnitude include:

- **A triple planetary crisis** -- The overall environmental situation globally is deteriorating and the window for effective remedial action is closing, with the world on track for warming of at least 3°C above pre-industrial levels by 2100. The health of the atmosphere and marine and terrestrial ecosystems on which humanity and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever, eroding the very foundations of economies, livelihoods, food security and nutrition, health, and quality of life worldwide. This in turn is creating a new risk landscape for humanity in which multiple environmental, economic, political, health, humanitarian, and other crises interact with and exacerbate each other. In short, the world is facing a triple planetary crisis consisting of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. These emergencies are inextricably interrelated and consequently, they must be addressed together to “maximise the benefits and minimise trade-offs”.
- **Deepening inequality** – Driven by powerful economic, social and environmental forces, income inequality has been persistent and has increased in most developed countries and some middle-income countries, despite declines in most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and several African and Asian countries over the last two decades. Income and wealth are increasingly concentrated at the top, increasing income and digital disparities among and within countries, with significant impacts on gender, inter-generational equity and exposure and vulnerability to hazards.
- **SDGs achievement is off-track** -- From various reports prepared by UN system agencies, the world is not on track towards meeting the SDGs, with the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts exacerbating challenges in doing so.
- **Institutional siloes** -- Humanity’s ability to manage cooperatively our complex and interlinked global economic, human rights, health, environmental, and humanitarian crises have not kept pace with the deepening of these crises due to an international system that has become fragmented and outgrown its original design and national decision-making processes that are done in siloes. While the approach of breaking down siloes and fostering collaborative action on the SDGs is a hallmark of the 2030 Agenda, much remains to be done to make this approach effective at both the international and national levels.
- **Weakening multilateralism and the need for global solidarity** – The need for an integrated and well-functioning multilateral system to address interlinked global challenges has been expressed since the 1972 Stockholm Conference and subsequently reiterated in other UN declarations. The complex of global interlinked crises requires a shared global response founded on a deep sense of international cooperation and collaboration based on equity and a renewed determination to fulfil long-standing commitments. However, multilateralism, including the agreement on and the pursuit of multilateral solutions to address global problems, is facing severe challenges with the rise of nationalism in many countries and the increasing tendency of countries to rely on unilateral or plurilateral approaches.

**Table 1:**  
**Achievements and Challenges since Stockholm 1972**

Achievements	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of “Only One Earth”</li> <li>• New era of multilateral cooperation and diplomacy on environment and development</li> <li>• Inspired new norms and principles that fostered the growth of international and national environmental law</li> <li>• Recognition of linkage between poverty and environment</li> <li>• Opened space for participation of non-state actors</li> <li>• Recognition of connection between humans and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Today’s increasingly unequal and resource-intensive development model degrades and surpasses Earth’s finite capacity to sustain human well-being</li> <li>• Planetary resilience is at its weakest – the triple planetary crisis</li> <li>• Rising socio-economic inequalities</li> <li>• SDG achievement is off track</li> <li>• Fragmentation and siloed approaches among international institutions to multilateral and national environment and development</li> </ul>

<p>nature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launched an “environmental rights revolution”, including the human right to a healthy environment</li> <li>• Elevated importance of science with state of environmental assessment and reporting</li> <li>• New paradigm integrating economic growth, human rights, social equality, and environment</li> <li>• Establishment of UNEP</li> <li>• Enhanced understanding of interlinked risks threatening the stability of ecological, social and economic systems</li> </ul>	<p>decision making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakening multilateralism</li> <li>• Lack of global oversight over non-state actors while strengthening the participation of civil society</li> <li>• Monitoring implementation on the ground</li> <li>• Weak science-policy interface</li> <li>• Challenge of environmental coordination in the UN system due to institutional and resource constraints</li> <li>• Weak risk governance</li> </ul>
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## II. Connecting Recent UN Global Processes to Stockholm+50

The well-being of present and future generations depends on an urgent and clear break with current trends of environmental decline through an integrated approach and whole-of-system thinking. The coming decade is crucial.

**Figure 2: The well-being of present and future generations depends on an urgent and clear break with the current trends of environmental decline. Time is of the essence.**



Source: UNEP (2021b), Making Peace with Nature:

A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies (2021), Figure KM1

Stockholm+50 is not taking place in isolation. It is inspired by transformative agendas and commitments from recent UN global processes. This Chapter presents a brief overview of key messages from the recent UN-supported intergovernmental science-policy processes, on the themes of Stockholm+50. It highlights the interconnected challenges and opportunities that need to be addressed for a healthy planet towards the prosperity of all.

### A. Human actions are driving adverse changes in climate, biodiversity, and ecosystems

Human activities have transformed the Earth's natural systems, exceeding their carrying capacity and disrupting their self-regulatory mechanisms, with likely irreversible consequences for humanity. Sectoral analyses such as those on oceans, land, and biological diversity all highlight the adverse impact that human activities have had on the state of the natural environment. Biodiversity is declining faster than at any time in human history due to multiple human drivers, including current production and consumption patterns.

Analyses from UN and other international organizations have shown that even as current patterns of economic development and globalization contributed to significant and unprecedented reductions in global poverty levels, unsustainable development approaches and policies have produced stark and growing inequalities, direct and indirect impacts on the effective enjoyment of human rights and destabilizing and dangerous planetary change, such as climate change, water shortage, more frequent disease outbreaks, biodiversity loss, threats to key ecosystems, and more frequent disasters. At the same time, multilateral action can effectively address a global environmental issue, as can be seen in the success in recent decades in healing the ozone layer.

## **B. Adverse climate, biodiversity, and ecosystem changes are hurting humanity**

The triple planetary crisis has placed the ecological foundations of human society and the natural systems that support other species and provide invaluable ecosystem services in great danger, and their linkages and feedback loops result in cascading risks to all the 17 SDGs. These planetary changes are undermining hard-won development gains by causing economic loss, increased poverty and hunger, and millions of premature deaths annually. Various reports highlight the interconnections and fault lines between global economic recovery, the widening of inequalities between countries, and economic, social, and environmental risks. These adversely affect the ability of countries to pursue sustainable development objectives such as sustainable industrialization, sustainable food production, productive and decent full employment, and the full enjoyment of all human rights, including the right to a healthy environment, food, and the right to development, particularly for women, children and other marginalized groups.

## **C. People, planet and prosperity should be addressed in a balanced manner through systemic and structural transformation**

The underlying causes of the current complex of environmental crises facing the global community -- including climate change, biodiversity loss, water shortage, land degradation, and pollution -- demonstrate the interdependence and interlinkages among the various dimensions of sustainability -- from health, well-being, and social and economic prosperity to climate and ecosystems. Earth's environmental emergencies and human well-being need to be addressed together to achieve sustainability, thus viewing people and planet as interconnected socioecological (human-nature) systems.

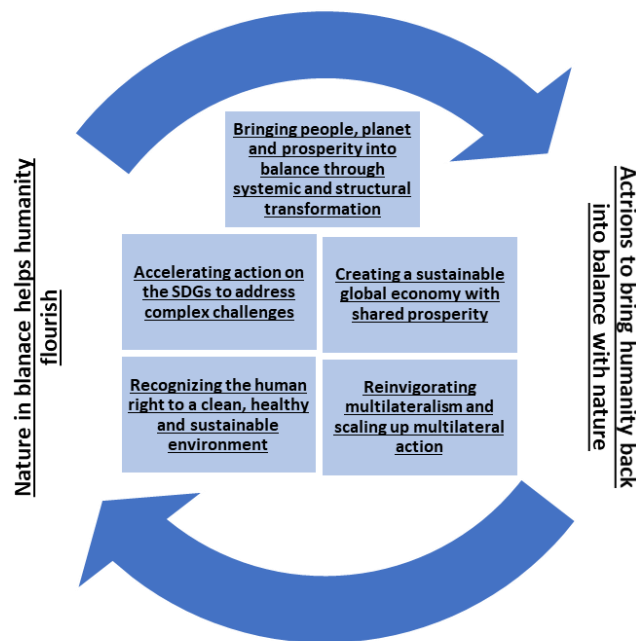
To meet this challenge, economic, financial, and productive systems can and should be transformed to lead and power the shift to sustainability, invest in the transition to a sustainable future, and ensure that knowledge, technology, and cooperation are redeployed from transforming nature to transforming humanity's relationship with nature. Society needs to include natural capital in decision-making, eliminate environmentally harmful subsidies and invest in the transition to a sustainable future. Biodiversity, climate, and other environmental finance could be ramped up by redirecting some of the values and costs associated with subsidies to fossil fuels, agriculture, fisheries, and transport which exceed \$5 trillion per year.

The structural transformations needed will require significantly strengthening social protection systems and public services (including health systems, education, water, sanitation, digital access, and other basic services); increasing investments in science, technology, and innovation; creating fiscal space in developing countries; taking a green economy approach; investing in clean and renewable energy and sustainable industry; strengthening risk governance; transitioning to sustainable food systems; reducing barriers to trade in green goods and services; and mainstreaming environmental sustainability into trade agreements to boost opportunities of a green economy through technological transfer, skill enhancement, and fresh market opportunities. In addition, the implementation of human rights, including the rights of public access to environmental information, meaningful participation in environmental decision-making, and access to justice and remedy helps protect the planet and promote sustainable development. The objective for all countries should be to build a diversified and inclusive green economic system that integrates the human right to public participation, that is powered by renewable energy sources and green technologies, and where economic activities within and across sectors are interconnected through resource-efficient linkages managed based on nexus thinking.

Enhanced global and regional cooperation, including support for developing countries, is needed and is critical to promoting green, risk-informed, resilient, human rights-based, and inclusive development, as well as to strengthening the coherence and consistency of the international financial, monetary, and trading systems and addressing the integrated nature of the challenges facing the global community. All countries now face the challenge of transitioning to economic structures that keep emissions and resource consumption within ecological limits. This requires a fundamental structural transformation in a hyper globalized economy and institutional ability to mobilize domestic resources. Furthermore, such structural transformation should ensure that all peoples can live a life of dignity and well-being in which apartheid, racial segregation, discrimination, colonial and other forms of oppression, and foreign domination are eliminated.

The implementation of the groundbreaking multilateral commitments made by governments and the UN system from 2013 to 2015, which laid the foundations for the post-2015 multilateral framework of action, now needs to be enhanced. The outcomes of recent multilateral processes have highlighted the need for a systemic and structural transformation to address the interconnected challenges facing people, the planet, and prosperity. They have called for accelerating action on the SDGs to address complex challenges; pushed for a transformed, resilient, and inclusive sustainable global economy with shared prosperity; recognized the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment; and recognized the need to reinvigorate multilateralism and scale-up multilateral action on environmental and climate issues.

**Figure 3:**  
**Connecting transformative agendas and multilateral commitments to Stockholm+50**





### III. Looking forward: Accelerating Actions for a Healthy Planet and Prosperity for All

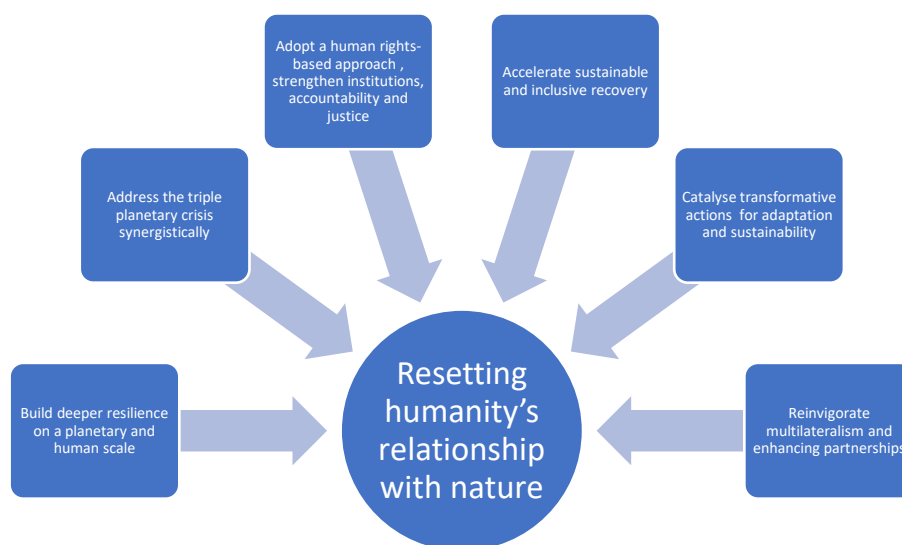
The 2020s will be a decisive decade when humanity risks crossing certain biophysical thresholds that are necessary for its survival. The year 2022 will be pivotal for people, the planet, and prosperity, with major intergovernmental decisions on the table for climate, nature, and pollution. The agreements reached through these political processes should strengthen the work being undertaken in this Decade of Action for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Stockholm+50 is an opportunity to renew inclusive, networked multilateral cooperation among all stakeholders. Discussions can be framed along an interconnected pathway of regeneration, recovery, rebalance, renewal, and reimagination of humanity’s relationship with the planet and with itself.

Building on the commitments and actions set out by the 2030 Agenda, the suggested areas of focus and accelerated action including by the UN system towards a healthy planet for the prosperity of all could include:

- 1) Resetting humanity’s relationship with nature
- 2) Creating resilience on a planetary and human scale
- 3) Addressing the triple planetary crisis synergistically
- 4) Adopting and implementing a human rights-based approach to ensure that no one is left behind
- 5) Promoting a sustainable and inclusive recovery
- 6) Catalyzing transformative actions for adaptation and sustainability

Reinvigorating multilateralism and enhancing partnerships

**Figure 4:**  
**Accelerating actions for a healthy planet and prosperity for all**



**Table 2: Focus areas and key actions**

Areas of focus for accelerated actions	Key actions
<b>Resetting humanity’s relationship with nature</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing the intrinsic value of nature</li> <li>• Promoting the vision of living in harmony with nature</li> <li>• Recognizing the interdependence between humans and nature</li> <li>• Transforming institutions to reset humanity’s relationship with nature</li> <li>• Drawing wisdom from Indigenous Peoples and local communities</li> </ul>
<b>Building resilience and reducing risks on a</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing interdependencies between people and ecosystems</li> <li>• Addressing inequality</li> <li>• Addressing threats to human health and welfare</li> </ul>

Areas of focus for accelerated actions	Key actions
planetary and human scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using a whole of society approach</li> <li>• Using ecosystem-based approaches or nature-based solutions</li> </ul>
Addressing the triple planetary crisis synergistically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing how we value nature</li> <li>• Addressing common drivers</li> <li>• Transforming and greening economic, trade and financial systems to power the shift</li> <li>• Ensuring that institutions are fit for purpose</li> <li>• Scaling up sustainable and inclusive recovery from COVID-19</li> <li>• Strengthening the science-policy interface</li> <li>• Leveraging the digital transformation</li> <li>• Leaving no one and no state behind</li> </ul>
Adopting and implementing a human rights-based approach to ensure no one is left behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhancing participatory mechanisms to include all of society</li> <li>• Regulatory reform to promote the environment/sustainable development/human rights interface</li> <li>• Promoting and recognizing the role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities</li> <li>• Ensuring actions are based on human rights law and standards</li> <li>• Strengthening criminal justice and anti-corruption measures in relation to environment-related crimes</li> </ul>
Promoting a sustainable and inclusive recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring a just transition</li> <li>• Scaling up green job creation and empower small businesses</li> <li>• Improving and mainstreaming early warning systems, anticipatory action, and integrated preparedness actions</li> <li>• Scaling up SDG-oriented approaches</li> <li>• Transforming consumption, production and supply chains</li> <li>• Developing new metrics for measuring progress and growth</li> </ul>
Catalysing transformative actions for adaptation and sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embarking on a transformative change pathway for the SDGs</li> <li>• Transforming economic and financial systems to power the shift to sustainability</li> <li>• Undertaking transformative change that is just</li> <li>• Effecting transformative change in governance systems</li> <li>• Using the five main levers that can generate transformative change</li> <li>• Establishing longer-term goals for adaptation and strengthening community resilience</li> </ul>
Reinvigorating multilateralism and enhancing partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopting a solidarity-based approach to multilateralism</li> <li>• Enhancing partnerships towards international cooperation</li> <li>• Strengthening the United Nations system as the lodestar of multilateralism</li> </ul>

The UN system with its unparalleled capacity can play an important role to leverage and facilitating an inclusive green recovery for sustainable development. At the same time, implementing the transformative sustainability agenda can reinvigorate the UN system and make it fit for purpose. UNEP's original coordination role for the environment across the UN system should be strengthened to facilitate and orchestrate a coherent, integrated, and solidarity-based approach in the UN system in response to the planetary crisis.

The transformation to a sustainable future necessitates unprecedented cooperation across intergovernmental structures in the UN system in ways that echo but go beyond the original system-wide design of UNEP. Interagency cooperation mechanisms such as, but not limited to, the UN Environment Management Group (EMG) can play a key role in mobilizing knowledge and know-how across multiple sectors and inform their respective multilateral governing structures accordingly. The UNEA could invite the EMG to present for its consideration an approach such as an interagency rolling plan for cooperation to support transforming the economic, financial, energy, food, health, industry, infrastructure, humanitarian affairs, peace keeping, and human settlement sectors within the context of the 2030 Agenda. The implementation of such an approach could involve the provision of policy guidance by Member States

based on regular progress reports to UNEA and the respective governing bodies of the EMG member institutions.

*“The best way to advance the interests of one’s own citizens is by advancing the interests of our common future. Interdependence is the logic of the twenty-first century. And it is the lodestar of the United Nations ... This is our time. A moment for transformation. An era to reignite multilateralism. An age of possibilities. Let us restore trust. Let us inspire hope. And let us start now.” Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General, United Nations*

