



UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations
System

**Common
Approach
Towards a
Pollution-Free
Planet**

Overview

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Revised edition: April 2024

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Acknowledgements

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Layout, illustrations and graphics: International Training Centre of the ILO
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Brief overview of the United Nations System – Common Approach Towards a Pollution-Free Planet

Pollution¹ is one of the triple planetary crises, together with climate change and biodiversity loss. It hinders Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) progress, particularly those related to poverty, food insecurity and hunger, health, inequality, peace, and justice. It is an insidious and pervasive problem that poses significant impacts on human health and well-being, the environment, and the overall well-being of our planet. Its deleterious effects are staggering in both scope and scale.

Recognizing this, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) prioritized pollution in the global agenda, issuing a Ministerial Declaration - “Towards a Pollution-Free Planet”, in 2017. In response, an Implementation Plan, “Towards a Pollution-Free Planet”, was developed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and welcomed in the following year at the fourth session of the UNEA.

In this context, the UN Environment Management Group (EMG) Prepared a UN System Common Approach to transitioning towards a pollution-free planet (hereafter referred to as the Common Approach to Pollution) endorsed by its Senior officials on 10 October 2023.

Through the Common Approach to Pollution, the UN System expresses a shared recognition of the urgency of acting and a commitment to mainstreaming pollution prevention and reduction. With adequate resources and the integration of this approach into the UN entities’ strategies and work programmes, the UN Systems shall pave the way for a stronger, more coordinated global response towards a pollution-free planet. It provides a framework to leverage and advance existing interagency arrangements that address pollution-related issues.

Following the endorsement of the Common Approach to Pollution, the EMG Senior Officials decided to create an Issue Management Group (IMG) to prepare an implementation plan of the Common Approach to Pollution and report on progress achieved. This plan will guide UN entities in integrating the Common Approach to Pollution within their respective programmes and inform the design and delivery of their assistance strategies to Member States.²

The Common Approach to Pollution is guided by 10 principles and approaches. It presents a strategic goal and three key areas of influence where long-term systemic change is expected to be achieved. The Common Approach to Pollution concludes with 11 medium-term objectives and 30 outcomes. Objectives are to be pursued by the UN System in partnership with all stakeholders. The outcomes are the intended results of efforts made by the UN System. These outcomes will emerge from the System’s internal activities and through the support it extends to States and other stakeholders (See Figure 1).

¹ For the purposes of this Common Approach, pollution is understood as the presence or introduction into the environment of substances or energy that cause adverse effects on human health, the environment or living organisms; or exceed the quality or quantity criteria established for certain environmental media.

² The implementation plan will be informed of the outcomes of the 2023 SDG Summit, the recently adopted Global Framework on Chemicals, the Science-Policy Panel (whose negotiations are to be concluded in 2024), and other relevant instruments.

Framework of the Common Approach to Pollution

Goal

A pollution-free planet for the health and well-being of people and the environment, where the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment for all is ensured.

Impact Areas



Objectives Outcome

Objective 1
Human rights
3 Outcomes

Objective 2
Knowledge and information
3 Outcomes

Objective 3
Legislation
3 Outcomes

Objective 4
Cross and Multisectoral Approaches
2 Outcomes

Objective 5
Ecosystems
3 Outcomes

Objective 6
High impact sectors
3 Outcomes

Objective 7
Safer alternatives & infrastructure
3 Outcomes

Objective 8
Financial resources
3 Outcomes

Objective 9
Awareness & SCP
2 Outcomes

Objective 10
Man-made & natural hazards
3 Outcomes

Objective 11
Lead by example
2 Outcomes

Principles

Sustainability & Environmental justice

- Intergenerational equity
- Polluter pays principle
- Precautionary principle
- Circular economy

Inclusivity and Equity

- Leave no one behind
- Human rights-based approach

Governance and Public Engagement

- Participation
- Access to information
- Access to justice

Decision-Making Foresight

- Prevention
- Science and evidence-based decision making
- One Health approach



Summary of Objectives and Outcomes

Objective 1: Respect, protect and fulfil human rights, including the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

This involves promoting access to accurate information on pollution, enhancing meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and increasing accountability and access to effective remedies for harm caused by pollution, with a focus on inclusivity, justice, and protection of environmental human rights defenders.

- **Outcome 1.1.** *The right of access to information about pollution and pollutants for all is promoted and supported.*
- **Outcome 1.2.** *The meaningful and informed participation of all in decision-making processes addressing pollution is enhanced.*
- **Outcome 1.3.** *Accountability and access to effective remedies for harm caused by pollution are increased.*

Objective 2. Generate and make available to all knowledge, data and information on pollution to enable risk-informed decisions and actions.

Enhance data availability through comprehensive systems and global partnerships, promoting science-based decision-making to assess policy effectiveness and identify gaps, and harnessing digital transformation opportunities. These efforts empower individuals, organizations, policymakers, and businesses to make informed decisions and take effective actions against pollution, with particular attention to protecting vulnerable populations. Overall, the objective emphasizes affordability, social justice, and environmental sustainability in advocating for pollution solutions.

- **Outcome 2.1.** *Data and knowledge generation, availability and accessibility are enhanced, while progress towards a pollution-free planet is measured.*
- **Outcome 2.2.** *Science-based, evidence-based, risk-informed decision-making is promoted.*
- **Outcome 2.3.** *Opportunities provided by digital transformation are harnessed.*

Objective 3. Develop and implement policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks, strategies, plans and actions, addressing all types and sources of pollution, including promoting circular economy opportunities at the international, regional, national, subnational and local level.

The need for a multidisciplinary approach to shift from minimizing harm to proactive support for circular and green economies, decent jobs, ecosystem resilience, and disaster risk reduction. The outcomes underscore achieving sound and integrated management of chemicals and waste, ensuring compliance with human rights obligations, and implementing and enforcing pollution-related policies and legislation, with a focus on strengthening capacities for effective prevention and reduction measures.

- **Outcome 3.1.** *The sound and integrated management of chemicals and waste is achieved throughout their life cycle in an integrated manner, in accordance with international frameworks, and through the leveraging of the role of the public and private sectors and engagement of all sectors of development.*
- **Outcome 3.2.** *Policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks, including protocols and incentives, are compliant with human rights obligations and informed by health, environmental, and social standards.*
- **Outcome 3.3.** *Policies and legislations, including incentives addressing pollution are implemented, enforced, and complied with strengthening capacities.*

Objective 4. Increase systematic use of cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches to health, notably One Health approach, to address pollution.

Facilitate multi-stakeholder commitment across various sectors to accelerate progress in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other international agreements. The One Health approach addresses the full spectrum of health outcomes associated with environmental risk factors, contributing to global health security and upholding the human right to health.

- **Outcome 4.1.** *Linkages between pollution, health, human rights and other societal priorities, such as climate change, biodiversity, disaster risk reduction, food security and nutrition, and universal health coverage and primary health care, are understood and taken into account in policy and management.*
- **Outcome 4.2.** *The application of the One Health approach is expanded to encompass pollution prevention and reduction.*

Objective 5. Protect vulnerable ecosystems and restore ecosystems damaged by pollution, while adequately managing ecosystems for pollution prevention and reduction.

Implement sound science and practices, including circular economy policies and strict regulations. UN entities play a crucial role in establishing robust regulatory frameworks, promoting sustainability, and providing technical assistance. The integration of nature-based solutions is emphasized for effective pollution prevention. The source-to-sea approach is proposed to mainstream pollution prevention into landscape and watershed management, requiring multi-stakeholder interventions. UN entities are urged to advocate for holistic management, facilitate education and training, support research, and mobilize resources for improved landscape and watershed management, contributing to the overall health of ecosystems.

- **Outcome 5.1.** *Measures to protect, conserve, manage and restore ecosystems to prevent and reduce pollution and enhance ecosystem resilience are developed and implemented.*
- **Outcome 5.2.** *Nature-based solutions are widely recognized as effective means for pollution prevention and reduction.*
- **Outcome 5.3.** *Pollution prevention and reduction is mainstreamed into landscape and watershed management that considers the interconnectedness of resource uses and ecosystems and source-to-sea approach.*

Objective 6. Transform high-impact sectors for a pollution-free planet throughout value chains.

Focus on sectors like agrifood systems, extractives/mining, construction, transport, energy, manufacturing, services, and waste. Assessments and costing are crucial for understanding sector-specific pollution impacts, and the promotion of sustainable value chains from production to consumption is emphasized for fair economic distribution. Cost-effective interventions using modern technologies are encouraged, along with frameworks enhancing business transparency and accountability. A just transition for vulnerable groups is underscored, requiring actions beyond sectoral boundaries. The effort calls for multi-stakeholder collaboration among key players, including states, the private sector, Indigenous Peoples, civil society, the scientific community, and others. Additionally, international trade policies are urged to support environmental goals and sustainable production and consumption, with a focus on less polluting trade practices. Harmful subsidies should be removed, and incentives

redirected for pollution prevention, with UN entities playing a role in providing technical assistance to support these shifts toward sustainability.

- **Outcome 6.1.** *Multi-stakeholder action for pollution prevention and reduction is accelerated in high-impact sectors.*
- **Outcome 6.2.** *Less polluting trade is promoted.*
- **Outcome 6.3.** *Harmful subsidies are removed, subsidies are repurposed, and incentives provided for pollution prevention and reduction action.*

Objective 7. Identify, promote, and implement safer and cleaner alternatives and sustainable and resilient infrastructure development.

Recognize the role of poor maintenance, lack of resilience, and limited infrastructure in contributing to global pollution. It emphasizes circular approaches to waste minimization, technology development, and the need for effectively regulated public-private partnerships. The outcomes focus on increasing the availability and use of safer alternatives, promoting and strengthening infrastructure for pollution prevention, and enhancing infrastructure resilience to manage pollution risks. UN entities are expected to play a crucial role in advocating for sustainable economic development, supporting targeted interventions, and promoting the adoption of resilience considerations in infrastructure projects.

- **Outcome 7.1.** *Availability and use of safer alternatives are increased.*
- **Outcome 7.2.** *Infrastructure for pollution prevention and reduction is promoted and strengthened.*
- **Outcome 7.3.** *Infrastructure resilience is strengthened to prevent and manage pollution risks.*

Objective 8. Identify, incentivize, and mobilize predictable and sustainable financial resources for pollution-free action and risk reduction.

Underline the significant costs of pollution to society and emphasizes the need for a better understanding of economic and non-economic impacts. The objective suggests initiatives such as repurposing harmful subsidies, efficient tax policies, regulations, and incentives to increase private investment in green and blue economic strategies, leading to job opportunities and planetary stability. The outcomes include better accounting for pollution externalities through economic analysis, increased access to financing for pollution prevention and reduction, and the incentivization of industries to follow the polluter pays principle and internalize the costs of pollution. UN entities play a crucial role in shaping financial discourse, facilitating access to resources, and encouraging policies that promote sustainable practices and discourage pollution.

- **Outcome 8.1.** *Pollution externalities are better accounted for through economic analysis and tools to redirect investments to less-polluting economic activities.*
- **Outcome 8.2.** *Access to financing for pollution prevention and reduction is increased, including development aid in particular, by realizing co-benefits across environmental and development priorities.*
- **Outcome 8.3.** *Industries are incentivized to follow the polluter pays principle and to internalize the costs of pollution.*

Objective 9. Raise global awareness about adverse impacts of pollution and the role of consumers in driving sustainable consumption and production, so as to inform and inspire action.

Recognize three types of consumption—underconsumption, overconsumption, and aspirational consumption—and highlights the potential of steering policies and behaviours towards aspirational consumption for a positive shift towards a pollution-free planet. The objective emphasizes the need for changes in collective and individual mindsets, values, and behaviours, alongside policy and regulatory changes. Youth-led action is prioritized, as engaging the youth as agents of positive change can lead to long-term behavioural changes. The UN System is seen as a key player in mobilizing diverse stakeholders and resources to take ownership of pollution risks and promoting global awareness of resource efficiency and sustainable consumption. UN entities are envisioned to advocate for sustainable lifestyles, build consumer capabilities, and promote product sustainability information to drive sustainability through consumer demand.

- **Outcome 9.1.** *Awareness of the impact of pollution on human rights, health and a healthy environment, food security and nutrition, and the economy is raised through unified messaging and coordinated campaigns.*
- **Outcome 9.2.** *Increased demand for fair and just consumption resulting in adoption of sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods, and responsible consumerism.*

Objective 10. Prevent and reduce pollution risks and impacts associated with man-made and natural hazards, conflicts, and humanitarian response.

Acknowledge that hazards like storms, floods, wildfires, and conflicts can lead to widespread pollution, affecting air, land, and water. Pollution can also aggravate conflicts and contribute to resource competition and adverse health impacts. The objective emphasizes the need for the UN System to collaborate with various stakeholders to reduce pollution impacts resulting from and contributing to conflicts through prevention and peace-building. UN entities are envisioned to facilitate partnerships, conduct research, raise awareness, and integrate pollution-related measures systematically into humanitarian response efforts to promote sustainable actions that contribute positively to resilience building and conflict resolution.

- **Outcome 10.1.** *Knowledge generation and exchange on the impact of pollution in protracted crisis and fragile settings is increased among and across the environmental, development and humanitarian communities.*
- **Outcome 10.2.** *Pollution prevention and reduction through emergency preparedness and early warning systems is integrated in disaster response, conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies.*
- **Outcome 10.3.** *Pollution associated with humanitarian response is reduced.*

Objective 11. Mainstream pollution prevention and reduction and maximize resource use efficiency in UN System operations and programming: Lead by example.

Mainstream pollution prevention and reduction, as well as maximizing resource use efficiency in UN System operations and programming, with the aim to lead by example. The UN System should serve as a role model, inspiring various stakeholders worldwide to prioritize pollution prevention and reduction in line with international agreements. The objective emphasizes reviewing UN operations to integrate pollution prevention and reduction solutions and ensuring that programs do not exacerbate pollution and its related risks. Two key documents, the Sustainability Strategy I and the Model Approach, showcase the UN's system-wide commitments to these goals.

- **Outcome 11.1.** *Environmental sustainability enhanced in the management of UN facilities and operations and championed by each agency, funds and programmes.*
- **Outcome 11.2.** *Pollution prevention and reduction is effectively mainstreamed within the UN System and its entities in their programmatic work, as part of the system-wide effort for addressing environmental and social standards in programming.*





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