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Youth Environment Assembly 2022: 19-20 February 2022

“We come with more than hope.” These sentiments were shared by Tova Lindqvist, Swedish Youth Council, as she applauded the power of youth during the opening session of the 2022 Youth Environment Assembly (YEA). She went on to assert that the input of young people is crucial to influence stronger policy actions and commitments, and urged participants to continue striving to make a difference and engage in the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA).

This passion underpinned much of the discussions over the course of two days, where participants gathered with enthusiasm, eager to prepare for the resumed session of the fifth UNEA (UNEA-5.2). Convened under the theme, “The Power in YOUth,” more than 150 youth from around the globe gathered online and in person for robust discussions.

Participants heard opening statements from dignitaries and discussed issues ranging from marine litter and plastic pollution to the proposed resolutions related to chemicals. They also engaged with Member States on how best to increase meaningful participation, during UNEA-5.2 and beyond, to ensure their voices are heard. Several parallel working sessions also convened to coordinate the Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY) position ahead of UNEA-5.2.

YEA 2022 met from 19-20 February 2022, virtually and in person in Nairobi, Kenya. It was organized by the MGCY to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

Brief History

Over 400 youth-led or youth-serving organizations make up the UN MGCY, a dedicated space for children and youth in the UN to address issues ranging from the environment and human rights to peace and security. Those MGCY organizations that share a focus on the environment and sustainable development can receive UNEP accreditation and engage through the MGCY to UNEP.

UNEP began its work with young people in 1985, the International Year of Youth. However, it was not until 1992 and the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, that engagement became more concrete. Agenda 21, which was adopted in Rio, identified nine sectors and rightsholder groups, including children and youth. The involvement of these nine constituencies would be facilitated in

UN activities related to sustainable development. Accordingly, youth is a constituency in several treaty bodies and other organizations related to sustainable development.

Within UNEP, the Governing Council furthered its engagement with youth through a long-term strategy from 2003 to 2013. The programme was called “Tunza,” meaning “to treat with care or affection” in Kiswahili. It aimed to create a global movement for the involvement of children and youth in sustainable development. An annual Tunza International Children and Youth Conference, a Tunza Youth Advisory Council, a Tunza Junior Board, and a quarterly magazine advanced the programme’s objectives. During its ten years, the programme also organized the International Children and Youth Conference in Daejeon, Republic of Korea (2009), the International Children’s Conference just prior to the tenth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya, Japan (2010), and the International Children and Youth Conference in Bandung, Indonesia (2011).

The Rio+20 Conference in 2012 led to the nine Major Groups becoming more formalized in their engagement with UNEP processes.

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The UNEP MGCY was established in mid-2012 and currently has seven working groups, which focus on:

- chemicals and waste;
- ecosystem restoration;
- environmental law;
- human rights and environmental defenders;
- marine litter and microplastics;
- Stockholm+50 processes; and
- UNEA and the Committee of Permanent Representatives.

The first YEA took place virtually from 3-6 June 2020, with over 2,000 youth participants from more than 150 countries. The second YEA, which also convened virtually from 12-20 February 2021, provided an opportunity for youth to discuss and identify their broader priorities for environmental action, including on chemicals and waste, youth and faith-based engagement, and education and the environment.

Summary of YEA 2022

Opening Ceremony

On Saturday, Dalia Márquez, MGCY, opened YEA 2022, emphasizing the theme, “the power in YOUth.” She encouraged everyone to participate and work together to build capacity and forge partnerships to make the world a better place.

Moderator John Aggrey, MGCY, welcomed the speakers, noting youth want to be involved at all levels, from the drafting of concept notes to critical decision making for a sustainable future.

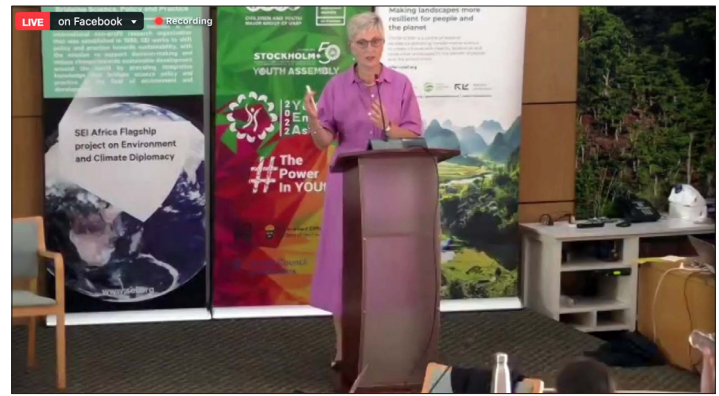
Raymond Ochieng, Secretary, Youth Affairs, Kenya, recognized YEA 2022 as a “convergence of changemakers,” embracing the strength of young people to shape the future by being part of the change and initiating actions. He affirmed the Kenyan government’s full support for all commitments that come out of YEA 2022.

Gunnar Andreas Holm, Norwegian Ambassador to Kenya, shared that collaborating with global youth constituencies for UNEA-5.2 has been both impressive and inspiring. He expressed hope for progress on a global legally-binding agreement on plastic pollution.

Caroline Vicini, Swedish Ambassador to Kenya, said “your (young people’s) voices are influential, make them heard when and where decisions are made.” She looked forward to



Gunnar Andreas Holm, Norwegian Ambassador to Kenya



Caroline Vicini, Swedish Ambassador to Kenya

Stockholm+50 as an important time to further the transformation to sustainable societies, encouraging young people to continue to bring ideas and solutions.

Alphonse Muia, youth representative, Kenya, applauded the participation of so many young people as a testament to their capacity to realize the aspirations of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm Conference), encouraging all to “dream big” and demand change that will build a better future.

Tova Lindqvist, Swedish Youth Council, applauded the power in youth. She underscored that the input of young people is crucial to influence stronger policy actions and commitments, saying that “we come with more than hope.”

Alexander Juras, Chief, Civil Society Unit, UNEP, welcomed the audience on behalf of Inger Andersen, UNEP Executive Director, and reiterated that UNEP fully supports the active participation and engagement of youth in environmental fora. He underscored the crucial role of youth as future voters and as consumers to influence decision makers and business leaders.

Ingrid Rostad, Co-Chair, Major Groups Facilitating Committee (MGFC), remarked that youth are usually the group best prepared and most dedicated and, therefore, an important MGFC constituent. She encouraged youth to continue thinking outside the box and challenging the establishment to change policies.

Moses Mwenda, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kenya, highlighted that youth are important agents of change and underscored that youth engagement in policymaking and implementation is crucial. He encouraged youth to take an active role in environmental conservation and governance.

Ahmed Ouda, Stockholm+50 Youth Task Force, Palestine, said youth must demand from world leaders a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. He stressed youth should not be excluded from any UN or international process as youth are a source of power for any nation.

Pamela Gitobu, Bamboo Association of Kenya, emphasized the potential of bamboo to replace plastics and make a significant positive change in everyday life. She encouraged youth to champion lifestyle changes.

Philip Osano, Africa Centre Director, Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), highlighted research projects underway involving youth, noting that the science report for Stockholm+50 that SEI is co-leading includes a youth science report as a key component.

Wanjira Mathai, World Resources Institute, underscored that Africa is a youthful society that needs capacity and tools to make progress going forward. She urged reviewing youth engagement with UNEP over the last 50 years to consider how to evolve over the next 50 years. She called for the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), among others, be youth’s guiding light.

Delegates then heard interventions from youth participants from around the world. Key issues highlighted included: the importance of partnerships to encourage sustainable mindsets; collaborating with other youth present at YEA 2022, including on waste management; the role of technology; and partnerships for conservation, particularly at the grassroots level.

UNEA-5.2, UNEP@50, and Stockholm+50: What Is at Stake?

On Saturday, Ulf Björnholm, Acting Director, Governance Affairs Office, UNEP, engaged with young people on the topic of the “triple helix,” a concept that represents the Open-Ended Committee of Permanent Representatives (OECPR), UNEA-5.2, and the Stockholm+50 meeting. He described the upcoming OECPR’s aim “to clear the field for adoption” by pre-negotiating the 17 proposed resolutions for consideration at UNEA-5.2. He outlined the range of topics addressed by these proposals, including, *inter alia*: a legally-binding instrument on plastic pollution; resolutions on sustainable lake management; nature-based solutions (NBS), including a proposed definition; animal welfare and the nexus with sustainable development; sustainable nitrogen management; green recovery; sound management of chemicals and waste; circular economy; and the future of the Global Biodiversity Outlook report.

Considering the focus for Stockholm+50 on strengthening existing decisions and resolutions through accelerated implementation, Björnholm foresaw UNEA-5.2 outcomes as valuable inputs to move towards a larger impact in favor of the global environment.

In the ensuing discussion, youth participants raised issues related to, *inter alia*: opportunities for youth participation, mobilization, and action during UNEA-5.2; the need for tools to measure global and local impact; and the availability of mechanisms to influence the negotiations. Delegates discussed

potential pathways for youth to raise awareness and encourage action to reduce climate change.

In response, Björnholm discussed ways in which youth can have an impact during UNEA-5.2 and play an active role, emphasizing the imperative for youth groups to be organized and have clear goals. He highlighted the importance of using the SDG indicators as tools to measure global and local impact. Recognizing the role of youth activism, he stated that any idea for youth action, including demonstrations, requires prior approval. He said UNEP’s Civil Society Unit was available to answer further questions in this regard.

In closing, Björnholm recognized the disparity between the opportunities for youth activism in the Global North versus the Global South. As such, he highlighted the need to adapt to the local political context and advocate for democratic and inclusive societies to promote durable environmental and climate action.

Demystifying Chemicals and Waste at UNEA-5.2

On Saturday, Shannon Lisa, youth representative, US, presented three globally significant case studies from the US, Ghana, and India, that illustrate both the human and environmental costs related to adverse chemicals and waste processes. She highlighted the need to address “legacy pollution,” which she defined as inadequate monitoring and remediation of chemical and waste pollution released in the past. She remarked that the effects of legacy pollution continue to harm human health, hinder dignified livelihoods, and threaten ecosystem balance across the globe.

In the ensuing discussion, participants raised issues related to, *inter alia*, incentives for youth advocacy in the chemicals and waste management sectors, and opportunities to engage in international fora. Participants discussed how waste-related issues impact their own communities and lives, and the need to identify additional platforms for youth to help solve the problem.

In response, Lisa drew attention to the existing disparities in regulations between the Global North and Global South. She emphasized the need to engage with local and national governments to promote enforcement of existing legislation and encourage new legislation. She acknowledged chemicals and waste management is an issue of global magnitude, and, as such, global youth should play a leading role in tackling this issue.



Ulf Björnholm, Acting Director, Governance Affairs Office, UNEP

Questions for YOUTH:

- How does the chemicals and waste issue impact you or your local community?
- What do you think we (the global youth) can do to help solve the issue?
- (Other than finance) What do you think the global youth need to solve the problem?

UNEP MGCY Chemicals and Waste Platform

Online and in-person engagement during the parallel session on Demystifying Chemicals and Waste at UNEA5.2.



Leselle Vincent, youth representative, Trinidad and Tobago

Leselle Vincent, youth representative, Trinidad and Tobago, framed UNEP's action on chemicals and waste by providing an overview of existing chemicals and waste-related multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs)—the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions, as well as the Minamata Convention. She also discussed the role of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM), noting that while it is not an MEA, it is an overarching framework to address specific environmental issues on chemicals management. On youth engagement with the four MEAs and SAICM, she said youth can play a role by supporting public consultation efforts by national and regional offices, and support awareness-raising activities promoted by the MEA Secretariats.

Lovish Raheja, youth representative, India, focused on the chemicals and waste-related resolutions for UNEA-5.2. On the draft resolution on sustainable nitrogen management, he said the MGCY is calling for: recognition of and collaboration with all stakeholders, including youth, for the sustainable management of nitrogen; adoption of a ground-level approach for better citizen involvement; and an emphasis on nitrogen-neutrality.

Regarding the draft resolution on the sound management of chemicals and waste, Raheja said the MGCY is calling for, among others: a human-rights based perspective; and development of a special scientific task force to comprehensively list hazardous substances, which would work continuously to identify and characterize these substances and publish results to bring uniformity to chemicals management.

With respect to a draft resolution on a science-policy panel on chemicals, waste, and pollution, Raheja said the MGCY is advocating for: the use of intergenerational perspectives; a focus on behavioral and habitual aspects; and improvement in the exchange of technical resources among governments to achieve optimum solutions.

Discussion on these resolutions included which policies are most effective for nitrogen management and a call to value the contribution of Indigenous knowledge.

Standpoint on Sustainability: How to Effectively Expression Your Opinions

On Saturday, Rifa Nanziba, youth representative, Bangladesh, invited participants to join a brief breathing energizer before engaging in an exercise designed to demonstrate ways to effectively express one's opinions in negotiations. She invited



Alejandro Luque, youth representative, Ecuador

reflections from participants on whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "Every stakeholder, even the local community and Indigenous peoples, needs to be involved in decision-making processes." Participants provided feedback, largely supporting the engagement of communities whose lives are most affected by the outcomes of decisions, and shared examples from different regions. One participant highlighted that while "everyone has a voice," the effort to include every stakeholder in every decision could become cumbersome, suggesting dedicated fora to collect and share opinions to inform leaders in decision-making processes. As participants shared their views, Nanziba summarized that the expression of varied opinions, and sharing with respect, helps to broaden perspectives in a manner that is helpful to successful negotiations.

Climate and Environmental Justice in the Global South

On Sunday, 20 February, Eric Njuguna, Climate Justice Organizer, Kenya, introduced the session on climate justice, organized by Fridays for Future International, Kenya. He invited participants to share personal accounts of the current impacts of climate change, illustrating the ripple effect of climate on local communities. He confirmed that the climate crisis is not in the future, it is present. Njuguna discussed procedural climate injustices such as low representation of youth, women and Indigenous peoples in climate decision making. Participants offered views on why impacts of climate change fall disproportionately in the Global South and on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.

In the search for the root causes of climate injustice, Njuguna introduced theories of neocolonialism and the historic power dynamics between the Global North and Global South that perpetuate poverty and the inability to implement just adaptation programmes in the Global South. He challenged participants to consider that "all justice works are climate works, but not all climate works are climate justice works. In fact, some climate works could be contributing to climate injustices."

Njuguna highlighted the multiple layers of climate justice and the ripple effects of the climate crisis, recognizing that climate works can lead to climate injustice if local communities are not engaged. He presented examples from Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo that illustrate climate gentrification and the need to bring attention to climate refugee policies. Njuguna stressed that climate justice is about racial and economic justice.

He remarked that climate finance should not lead to debt but rather be understood as reparations and cited the [Bali Principles of Climate Justice](#) as a guiding framework.

During discussions, participants raised concerns about climate catastrophes and the need to advocate for policies that address the needs of climate refugees and migrants with particular attention to women and children. Participants also discussed climate justice in the context of equitable access to climate technology, knowledge, and patents in the Global South.

Plastic Pollution: World’s Way Forward

On Sunday, Heidi Savelli, UNEP, provided an overview of UNEA decisions on marine litter, noting this issue has been discussed since UNEA-1. She introduced the three resolutions tabled for discussion at UNEA-5.2, explaining that proposals from Japan and Rwanda call for establishing an international negotiating committee (INC) to develop and negotiate a legally-binding agreement. She said the third proposal from India calls for a voluntary approach.

During the discussion, participants queried the relevance of the proposed resolutions to children and youth. Savelli said children and youth will bear the brunt of any action or inaction taken now. She explained that while bold and decisive action is important, governments must decide what actions to take. She reported that the current situation with respect to marine plastics is unsustainable. She stressed ambition is key and youth should make their voices heard during UNEA. Savelli also called for support around the world for decisive action to make a visible impact, noting that while more information is still needed, we know enough to take bold action.

Savelli elucidated further differences between the proposals and clarified the steps on how these will be negotiated to inform an agreed resolution for adoption at UNEA-5.2. She suggested the MGCY influence the decisions taken by providing statements. She recommended the MGCY join with the voices of other major groups to collectively deliver a statement to UNEA that demands action.

Savelli responded to questions on, among others, integration of the SDGs, specifically SDG 12 (responsible production and consumption), in current proposals regarding marine litter. She said pointed to a “great willingness” to establish a legally-binding agreement on plastic pollution. Savelli expressed hope that OECPR’s upcoming discussions on the three marine litter



Jessica Mshama, East African Community Youth Ambassador

proposed resolutions, along with the Co-Facilitators’ draft, could result in a consolidated approach that can be adopted during UNEA-5.2. She further noted that current negotiations will determine if an INC is established.

On the topic of meaningful youth engagement, Savelli highlighted the value of participation in digital platforms, such as the [Global Partnership for Marine Litter](#), to continue to build capacity, as well as promote coordination and collaboration. She referenced the Nairobi Convention for the Protection, Management and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Eastern African Region, with its regional action plans, as an example of specific regional spaces for continued engagement of young people.

From Climate Anxiety to Climate Action

Devindree Pillay, Brahma Kumaris Youth Wing, presented alternative approaches to move from climate anxiety into climate action, acknowledging that climate change is believed to be causing distress and anger in children and youth globally. Pillay explained that “eco-anxiety” affects a person’s sense of purpose and hope for the future, remarking that in the context of youth, it hinders the potential of future leaders. She proposed a five-step approach to transition from anxiety into climate action, involving acceptance, disengagement and detachment, realization, decision-making, and implementation.

Pillay defined acceptance as a first step, allowing space to name and embrace what is happening and understand anxiety as a basic survival instinct that can be managed. She said the second step of disengagement establishes an opportunity to step back



Heidi Savelli, UNEP



A slide from the presentation by Devindree Pillay, Brahma Kumaris Youth Wing

and observe without judgment, and a chance to steer thoughts towards those that bring benefits. She identified the third step as realization to identify “innate personal qualities” and the fourth step dedicated to decision making. She concluded that the final step of implementation is focused on taking action with the original intent in mind.

Youth participants shared their perceptions on what anxiety means to them in the context of youth action for climate change. To demonstrate the benefits of meditation to support a transition toward climate action, Pillay led a guided meditation for the audience on constructive implementation and decision making in response to environmental challenges.

Youth Dialogue with Member States

On Sunday, in a dialogue between youth participants with Member States, a panel of delegates shared their views on supporting meaningful youth engagement and responded to questions.

During opening remarks, Rasa Ščeponavičiūtė, Deputy Permanent Representative of the EU to UNEP, reiterated the importance of UNEA-5.2 as a venue to take decisions related to pressing global environmental matters with the engagement of stakeholders. She cited, as an example, the proposed legally-binding agreement on plastics. She remarked that UNEP is at the crossroads of 50 years of work, and is tasked with stepping up its efforts. She recognized that UNEP needs to increase its visibility as a global authority that sets the environmental agenda.

Ana Elena Campos Jiménez, Deputy Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to UNEP and UN-Habitat, said Costa Rica values the involvement of youth in global environmental negotiations. She noted the Member States are responsible for supporting youth efforts and listening to new ideas.

Mapopa Kaunda, Deputy Permanent Representative of Malawi to UNEP, stressed that multilateral environmental diplomacy has a crucial role to play in creating win-win opportunities within the context of global negotiations. He emphasized the potential of youth to influence negotiations.

Sebastián Nicolino, Deputy Permanent Representative of Argentina to UNEP and UN-Habitat, characterized UNEA-5.2 as a very important space in which Member States and stakeholders



The dais during the Youth Dialogue with Member States

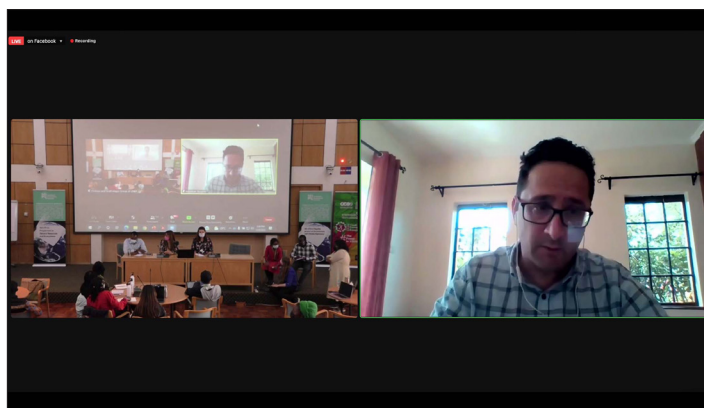
bring their voices and realities and seek UNEP’s help in implementing their ideas.

Marek Rohr-Garztecki, Permanent Representative of Poland to UNEP and UN-Habitat, encouraged youth to present their ideas in a creative and positive way and find receptive national delegates to represent their ideas in the negotiation process.

During a question-and-answer session, youth participants articulated demands for increased urgency, saying “our lives depend on the solutions we find here.” They raised questions related to, *inter alia*: the status of the political declaration that will be the UNEA-5.2 outcome document; and supporting communities in developing countries and the role of governments to provide alternatives, such as education on renewables and incentives for climate solutions.

Campos Jiménez agreed on the need to move beyond “endless meetings and paper commitments.” She cited the proposal tabled by the EU and supported by Costa Rica on NbS, expressing hope that the adoption of the proposed resolutions will demonstrate real action. On youth’s passionate demands for governments to act, Kaunda explained how each adopted resolution includes a set of follow-up actions that bind governments to contribute concrete actions.

Campos Jiménez noted the power of change through personal choices, encouraging everyone to “every day, re-think what you are buying, eating, and doing.” Some participants said that calling for individual action creates a “shift in blame” and encouraged leaders to be responsible for creating accessible options for everyone to make sustainable choices.



Sebastián Nicolino, Deputy Permanent Representative of Argentina to UNEP and UN-Habitat



Ana Elena Campos Jiménez, Deputy Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to UNEP and UN-Habitat



Participants during one of Sunday's sessions

Ščeponavičiūtė encouraged youth to aim to influence local and national governments prior to global fora, explaining that during global meetings, government representatives are often bound by instructions from capital. She lauded the EU as a model for other regions in successful youth engagement, explaining that all laws undergo public consultation. Rohr-Garztecki stressed the importance of young people finding ways to share ideas with country representatives that may be sympathetic to their demands to make sure these ideas are “put into the machinery, evaluated, and checked.”

Responding to requests for advice on securing longer-term capacity building, Campos Jiménez highlighted opportunities to collaborate with non-governmental organizations. Ščeponavičiūtė stated that the EU aims to continue to capacitate youth to become more involved in these processes, noting the inclusion of youth in the EU delegation.

In closing, Kaunda expressed hope that by UNEA-6, delegates will look back and see progress in implementing the resolutions adopted at UNEA-5.2. He assured participants that government delegates are working hard to resolve the environmental crises facing the planet.

Campos Jiménez urged participants to focus on what they can do, as opposed to looking at what others need to do. She said many people calling for action can have a greater impact than just one person, saying there is still hope and a lot can still be done.

Ščeponavičiūtė stated “each of us has to do our part,” and encouraged youth to, among others, use their voting power to choose governments that will take action and advocate for change at the global level.

Rohr-Garztecki said youth should maintain the urgency to act, urging that “hope should never die.” YEA 2022 then adjourned.

Upcoming Meetings

UNEA-5.2: This resumed session of UNEA-5 will take place under the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the SDGs.” Its aim will be to connect and consolidate environmental actions within the context of sustainable development and motivate the sharing and implementation of successful approaches. UNEA will also discuss whether to establish an INC towards a new agreement on marine litter and plastic pollution, and a science-policy panel on chemicals and waste. UNEA-5.2 will be followed by a Special Session of UNEA

on 3-4 March 2022, to commemorate UNEP’s 50th anniversary. **dates:** 28 February - 4 March 2022 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** www.unep.org/environmentassembly/unea5

Stockholm+50 Preparatory Meeting: This meeting will discuss: the urgent need for actions to achieve a healthy planet and prosperity for all; achieving a sustainable and inclusive recovery from COVID-19; and accelerating implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development during the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs. **dates:** 28 March 2022 **location:** New York, US **www:** www.un.org/pga/76/2022/02/07/ [https://www.un.org/pga-76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022-02-letter-from-the-pga-stockholm-prep-meeting-pdf/](https://www.un.org/pga-76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022/02/letter-from-the-pga-stockholm-prep-meeting-pdf/)

Stockholm+50: Sweden will host an international event marking the 50th anniversary of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment and the creation of UNEP. **dates:** 2-3 June 2022 **location:** Stockholm, Sweden **www:** government.se/government-policy/stockholm50/

Second UN Ocean Conference: This meeting will meet under the theme “2022 UN Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.” **dates:** 27 June - 1 July 2022 **location:** Lisbon, Portugal **www:** www.un.org/en/conferences/ocean2022

High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) 2022: The 10th session of the HLPF will take place over eight days in July 2022 to review implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. **dates:** July 2022 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf

Glossary

MEA	Multilateral environmental agreement
MGCY	Major Group of Children and Youth
NbS	Nature-based solutions
OECPR	Open-Ended Committee of Permanent Representatives
SAICM	Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCED	UN Conference on Environment and Development
UNEA	UN Environment Assembly
UNEA-5.2	Resumed session of the fifth UN Environment Assembly
UNEP	UN Environment Programme
YEA	Youth Environment Assembly