

**UNEA-6 Highlights:
Wednesday, 28 February 2024**

In the mid-week point of the sixth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-6), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) campus again contended with contrasting atmospheres just steps apart. The morning was marked by a well-attended and celebratory opening of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) Day, where heads of the MEA Secretariats, along with other high-level dignitaries drew attention to the robust mandates and interlinkages between MEAs. In parallel, conference rooms scattered with overtired negotiators debated what exactly is meant by synergies between MEAs, and other draft resolutions – many of which remained highly bracketed in their final hours of discussions. In her opening remarks, Inger Andersen, Executive Director, UNEP, evoked William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 98 saying, “From you I’ve been absent in the spring.” She went on to concede, “we have indeed been absent, but must be present now.” With this, delegates mobilized a final effort to conclude work on UNEA-6 resolutions.

MEAs Day

Heads of MEA Secretariats, ministers, representatives of international organizations, and other stakeholders took part in the “MEAs Day,” which was organized following UNEA-5 decision 5/4 calling for placing cooperation of MEAs on the UNEA agenda for the first time. Speakers highlighted the importance of the dialogue and value of MEAs, and environmental diplomacy in addressing the triple planetary crisis and renewing multilateralism and mutual respect. The value of stakeholder engagement, the need to identify synergies among MEAs, and importance of platforms for information exchange and cooperation were also highlighted.

Opening session: Leila Benali, UNEA-6 President and Minister of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development, Morocco, stressed the role of MEAs in supporting Member States to translate agreements into action plans and review progress. Inger Andersen, UNEP Executive Director, said UNEP could provide a platform for bringing coherence to MEAs.

Huang Runqiu, Minister of Ecology and Environment, China, and President of the 15th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, called for strengthening links between MEAs and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and broadening stakeholder engagement within MEAs. Cheikh Ndiaye Sylla, Senegal, COP 12 President of the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, expressed hope that eligibility and access criteria for funding would not become impediments as a result of activities to promote MEA synergies.

Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary, UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), recalled COPs for the three Rio Conventions will meet at the end of 2024 and suggested we must ensure that the work of each MEA amplifies others. Rolph Payet, Executive Secretary, Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm (BRS) Conventions, said multilateralism needs the engagement of all stakeholders. Donald Cooper, Director, Transparency Division, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), said the Covid-19 pandemic taught us that the world has the capacity to evolve and change when there is social, economic, and political will, and added that it is our job to generate it. Susan Gardner, Director, Ecosystems Division, UNEP, called attention to the

regional seas agreements, which she noted have been longstanding and powerful tools of cooperation.

Strengthening the science policy interface for effective implementation of environmental commitments: Many speakers during this dialogue discussed the negotiations to establish a science-policy panel to contribute further to the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution (SPP). The possibilities for such a panel to address gaps in governance was highlighted, as well as to propose interdisciplinary solutions to address chemicals and waste pollution. Speakers also noted the need for linking scientific bodies with each other as well as with UNEP and other MEAs.

Speakers emphasized that science-policy interfaces play a role in increasing the visibility of solutions. A speaker stressed the need to recognize the difference between science that defines the problem and science that identifies policy options for action.

The importance of trust was highlighted, with speakers stating that scientific advice is not sufficient on its own. Many speakers emphasized challenges when communicating scientific findings, and pointed out that different levels of scientific communication are needed for different audiences. Two-way conversations between scientists and policy makers were highlighted as important for developing tailored advice for policy makers. Speakers also emphasized the need to integrate traditional knowledge into decision making, and said citizen science, including through data collection and interpretation, ensures the public has ownership of scientific recommendations.

Strengthening cooperation between UNEA, UNEP, and MEAs to enhance effective implementation at the national level including through means of implementation: National action and stakeholder engagement were stressed as important drivers for integrated implementation. Speakers said challenges to implementation of MEAs at the national level include the lack of communication and coordination among ministries at the national level, including due to their different visions for the same ecological challenges.

National reporting and strategies under MEAs were highlighted as a process that could drive synergies. As an example, speakers noted that countries are updating their National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans and Nationally determined contributions.

Funding and financing challenges for implementing global agreements were highlighted. Some proposed convening discussions on the role of the private sector and non-traditional sources of funding. Another speaker noted the MEAs are competing for the same resources.

Many speakers emphasized the opportunities for integrated action to implement the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and the Global Framework on Chemicals with other MEAs. The synergies approach of the BRS Conventions was held up as an example to learn from. Collaboration among UN agencies, including through the Resident Coordinator system, was highlighted, as was the need for a systems approach in identifying interactions among MEAs. The Bern process, which seeks to strengthen cooperation and collaboration to contribute to effective implementation of the GBF, was also highlighted.

Contact Groups

Contact Group I: Cluster A: Delegates convened in the afternoon to work on Cluster A draft resolutions. Co-Chair Nana Ama Owusuaa Afriyie Kankam (Ghana) opened discussions on

the draft resolution on combating sand and dust storms. Delegates moved swiftly through the preambular paragraphs with some agreed *ad ref* promptly. Other paragraphs were burdened with lengthy textual additions, but were also agreed *ad ref* fairly quickly. Regarding operative paragraphs, delegates debated whether to insert or delete the term “synergies” related to relevant UN entities and other partners. On mobilizing resources from multilateral programmes and funds, as well as regional and multilateral development banks, the all-inclusive term “from all” sources created challenges and the insertion of the term “developed” regarding country donors remained highly contentious.

On the draft resolution on air pollution, the operationalization of an international cooperation network on air quality dominated the negotiations until the Secretariat arrived to announce that the time had passed for finalizing this draft resolution, and any further discussions would be regarded as informal and will be forwarded to the Committee of the Whole (CoW) bracketed. Co-Chair Yume Yorita (Japan) then reopened the draft resolution on solar radiation modification (SRM) without delegates reaching consensus in the allocated time.

Cluster B: In Cluster B, morning discussions focused on two draft resolutions: water policies and land degradation. On water policies, delegates managed to clear the operative paragraphs, and only a few brackets remained in preambular ones. The main debates revolved around provisions on coherence between UNEP’s medium-term strategy and the UN system-wide strategy, in activities on water and sanitation, as well as general coherence between UNEP’s activities and other UN entities.

In the draft resolution on land degradation, negotiations stalled on operative paragraphs regarding mobilization of resources and Co-Chair Gudi Alkemade (the Netherlands) had to defer negotiations to informal discussions due to the lack of progress by noon. The operative paragraph on the terms of reference (ToR) of the Special Programme proved to be challenging for some delegations to accept. Informal negotiations continued until the closing plenary session of the CoW.

Contact Group II: Discussions under Cluster C were co-chaired by Karin Snellman (Sweden) and Alejandro Montero (Chile). Cluster C: Delegates then considered the non-paper representing the outcome of informal informals on 28 February, focusing on the first operative paragraphs. After long discussions delegates almost agreed to request UNEP to conduct an analysis of best practices, complementarities, and opportunities for collaboration between MEAs in the implementation of an integrated approach of the environmental dimension of sustainable development at the national level. While references to synergies remain bracketed in other resolutions, delegates agreed to just refer to cooperation in implementing reporting processes under MEAs.

The contact group shifted focus to discussion of the draft resolution on synergies. Substantive debate ensued on both the preambular and operative paragraphs, and majority of the text remained bracketed for the greater part of the discussion despite delegates’ repeated stance that they were working in the spirit of compromise. Delegates could not advance on any text without agreement on how the word synergies in addition to cooperation and collaboration can be defined throughout the document. With little time remaining, delegates agreed to significantly compromise text, which one delegate conceded lost elements of the original language.

Cluster D was opened by Co-Chair Robert Bunbury who directed delegates to have bilateral discussions rather than detract time from the group discussion in seeking questions and clarifications. The contact group then proceeded to review the Co-Chair version of the non-paper, but a stalemate persisted with language in operative paragraphs including lack of understanding on the definition of a knowledge hub for good practices, standards, guidelines, and technical tools on the environmental aspects of minerals and metals for sharing among Member States. The Co-Chair closed the session and delegates continued to debate in informal informal sessions.

Delegates then considered the final Co-Chairs’ non paper for the draft resolution on the circular economy. The proponent asked to reintroduce to shortened operative paragraphs on used vehicle and textiles and sustainability. Delegates debated whether to refer to circular economies or circular approaches and one delegation, opposed by many, asked to introduce a reference to the circular carbon economy. The Co-Chair urged delegates to try to

informally clear text, but no agreement was reached by the closing plenary.

The draft resolution on behavioral changes towards sustainable lifestyles was next deliberated upon by delegates. There was broad agreement to the operative provisions, with one delegation asking to replace all references to sustainable lifestyles with the term “living” and to add a special reference to drastic increase in consumption patterns and behaviour in the post-industrial era. Co-Chair Felista Rugambwa (Tanzania) pointed to references to sustainable lifestyles in the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the Global Biodiversity Framework, and offered referring to sustainable lifestyles and living as a compromise.

In the final Cluster D discussion, delegates considered the final Co-Chairs’ non paper for the draft resolution on environmental assistance and recovery in areas affected by armed conflict. Co-Chair Felista Rugambwa (Tanzania) presented their proposal explaining that they try to keep the text succinct. Regarding a request to UNEP to provide assistance, one delegation wanted to limit it to international armed conflict and despite additions to make it subject to requests of states, the delegation maintained a reservation.

Delegates then debated preambular paragraphs at length, agreeing to just refer to the Rio Declaration and relevant principles, rather than singling out Principle 23; and to list relevant UNEA resolutions without their title.

They could not agree whether to just refer to people in vulnerable situations, or whether to include a list and add people under occupation and other people.

Another extensive debate that ensued related to divided opinions how to reference the UN General Assembly resolution referenced in the paper; whether to remain faithful to the language of the UNGA resolution but contextualize it in the UNEA resolution. One delegation argued that the current text in the resolution is politicizing UNEA while others agreed to compromise in numerous paragraphs at the behest of the Co-Chair. One particular concession was the willingness to lift text referencing “people under occupation” and replace with “other groups.” Despite this effort, the resolution text could not be finalized before the CoW plenary commenced.

Committee of the Whole

The CoW convened in two evening plenary sessions led by CoW Chair Norbert Kurilla (Slovakia). In both sessions resolutions were presented *ad ref*, while Co-Chairs reported on some draft resolutions that remained bracketed. In the first session, the CoW adopted six resolutions, and during the second plenary a further two resolutions. The Co-Chairs requested more time to finalize resolutions and Chair Kurilla proposed negotiations continue on Thursday in informal informals.

The draft report of the CoW was presented by Rapporteur Silvio Alabaquerque (Brazil), and the Committee adopted the draft report on condition that outstanding items will be added.

Chair Kurilla thanked all for their commitment and closed the CoW at 00:45.

In the Breezeways

Following Tuesday’s deluge, the sudden change to sweltering heat on Wednesday seemed to have had an impact on negotiations in the contact groups, with intermittent flashes of temper revealing the toll that the long days and nights and contentious issues have been taking. In contrast, the first Multilateral Environmental Agreements Day’s events brightened the mood intermittently and did much to restore the “spirit of Nairobi,” a term which had been elevated almost to a mantra by exasperated Co-Chairs who revoked it *ad nauseum*, mostly to no avail. What appeared to be a bogged down process stuck in the muddy remnants of the rains, delivered small gains towards the end of the afternoon, with regular but restrained applause erupting whenever a paragraph is agreed *ad ref*.

The evening broke too quickly for some resolutions, and when the Secretariat announced in one contact group that the time for formal meetings had come and gone, and whatever further negotiations take place are regarded as informal with such draft resolutions forwarded directly to the CoW, the message was met with alarm. Still in the end that is what it took, a whole series of informal informals to break stalemates and make trade-offs to get as many draft resolutions over the finish line. The Committee of the Whole was first delayed and then suspended to make room for these ongoing negotiations which will ultimately and almost inevitably carry on into Thursday 29 February.