



United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)

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Purview:

The [United Nations Environment Assembly](#) (UNEA) creates and coordinates UN environmental activities and policies and develops international environmental law. With universal membership, UNEA is also the primary international body when it comes to discussing environmental issues, particularly those that require collective global action. UNEA was established in 2012 as part of the “strengthening and upgrading” of the United Nations Environment Programme after the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. While the UN Member States are the only voting members, the UNEA meetings, which occur every other year, include the voices of thousands of representatives of governments, international organizations and civil society groups.

Topics:

Innovative pathways to achieve sustainable consumption and production

Over the last few decades, millions of people around the globe have moved out of poverty and a number of countries have reached the status of middle income, but the patterns of development that have lifted them out of poverty have also resulted in damage to the environment. Meeting the increased demand for resources such as food, water and energy has strained available resources, increased pollution and worsened climate change, thus pushing the Earth toward the [limits of what it can sustain](#). With this in mind, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has emphasized a model of [sustainable consumption and production \(SCP\)](#), which is a model by which pollution and natural resource use are minimized while providing an acceptable quality of life. SCP encompasses both the decisions surrounding what goods to provide a population to ensure its quality of life and the processes by which resources are extracted to manufacture those goods. Material and energy efficiency are critical, though planners must guard against a [rebound effect](#) where increased efficiency leads to an increase in consumption. As the resources that must be conserved are global in scope, it is critical that the entire [supply chain of a product](#) be considered, as well as the [fate of the product](#) once it is consumed or discarded. With these principles in mind, the goal is to ultimately create an economic system that sees continued growth while safeguarding the environment. This model must

not only support the current population, but accommodate population growth, [as the global population is estimated to grow to over 9.7 billion by 2050](#). This increase will cause a strain on food production, water and other important resources. Without a plan in place, this strain will be passed on to the environment, with devastating effects on global health and wellbeing.

The 1972 [United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm](#) brought the status of the environment to the fore of the international community. This Conference proposed 26 principles and 109 action items through the [Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan for the Human Environment](#), including human rights, ocean pollution and weapons of mass destruction. Recognizing the importance of international cooperation on these issues, the Conference established the UNEP to coordinate the United Nations' environmental efforts. This conference was successful in laying out a structure for addressing environmental issues and establishing them as a necessary topic for international cooperation, but also revealed Cold War-related tensions about membership and conflicts between developed and developing countries about the [balance between development and environmental protection](#).

Guided by this framework, the international community was able to come to several agreements on minimizing environmentally destructive practices, including the [Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer](#) in 1985. This convention balanced the need to phase out production and use of ozone-depleting gases with the need to promote innovation regarding alternatives to these gases and international sharing of new technologies. Still, larger challenges remained as global economic growth led to a sharp increase in [consumption of natural resources](#) over the second half of the 20th century. With the groundwork set, [the Oslo Symposium of 1994](#) brought the international focus on how to best address production and consumption of goods, noting the necessary balance between the increased quality of life that these goods provide and the pollution and resource depletion they entail. The Symposium defined sustainable consumption in terms of the entire life cycle of a product, including its supply chain, and suggested that substitution of resource-intensive and otherwise unsustainable products with sustainable alternatives was more practical than reducing the volumes consumed. Accordingly, the recommendations for action from this symposium focused on developing and promoting more sustainable products. The process for attaining sustainable consumption and production was later elaborated in the [Johannesburg Plan of](#)

[Implementation](#) (JPI), adopted at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). This solidified consumption and production as essential parts of any plan for sustainability along with poverty eradication and natural resource management. The JPI identified efficiency across the entire life cycle of a product as key for sustainability, and furthermore called for the internalization of environmental costs via the “polluter pays” principle. It also identified energy technologies as a crucial area for innovation, including both renewable energy and more efficient fossil fuel-based energy. While these changes mean that each unit of energy produced [1.5 times as much economic output in 2015](#) as compared to 1990, 2013 patterns of energy consumption and production were still expected to result in an [increase in global land temperatures of six degrees Celsius above 1900 levels and a 70 cm increase in sea level](#) by 2100 if continued throughout the century.

In 2012, the General Assembly passed a broad resolution entitled [The Future We Want](#). This resolution covered topics ranging from governance to education, but the bulk of the resolution focused on sustainable development. The resolution identifies promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production as one of the three dimensions of sustainable development, along with poverty eradication and natural resource management. These previous efforts to achieve SCP have since been reinforced through their inclusion in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). Goal 12, Responsible Consumption and Production, promotes resource and energy efficiency, sustainable infrastructure and providing access to basic services and jobs that will help provide a better quality of life. This goal aimed to assist development plans, reduce future economic, environmental and social costs of development, strengthen economic growth, and reduce poverty worldwide. In 2019, UNEP passed the [Innovative Pathways to Achieve Sustainable Consumption and Production](#), which elaborates on Goal 12. This resolution promotes involvement of the private sector and re-emphasizes the need for life-cycle analysis of products, from their supply chain to their fate in waste management. UNEP complemented that resolution with several others focusing on specific aspects of production and consumption, including [marine litter and microplastics](#), [single-use plastics pollution](#), [innovative methods for reducing land degradation](#) and [sustainable management of the nitrogen cycle](#).

UNEA did not meet in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and [deferred substantive issues to 2022 in its 2021 online meeting](#). In that online meeting,

UNEA also noted that the situation remains concerning, with the resources of 1.6 Earths required to sustainably meet current living standards. Furthermore, several resolutions from the 2019 session [request the current session discuss their impact](#). [Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic](#) and the blockage of the [Suez Canal on the 23rd of March 2021](#) show that challenges to the international supply chain can have lasting effects. On the other hand, they provide great opportunities to build a more sustainable future. The President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) noted this in the closing session of the 2021 UNEA meeting, [identifying financing, sustainable infrastructure and science and technology](#) as three areas recovery efforts should focus on. The challenges of sustainable development are multifaceted and somewhat recalcitrant, but international cooperation is key to finding solutions.

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

1. What can states do to implement sustainable practices into the rebuilding process following COVID-19?
2. How can existing infrastructure be improved to reduce resource consumption while providing an acceptable quality of life?
3. Are there ways that partnerships can be improved to ensure sustainable practices up and down the international supply chain?

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[Top ↑](#)

Poverty-Environment Nexus

Poverty is a very harmful and degrading experience, and many countries have therefore chosen to pursue development regardless of the cost to the natural environment. While it is often easier and cheaper in the near-term to pursue development programs that unsustainably exploit the local environment, such programs harm long-term economic stability. Air and water pollution, scarcity of resources and desertification are some of the risks associated with mismanaged environmental resources. These negative effects on the environment due to mismanagement have a [severe effect on people living in poverty and can even exacerbate this poverty](#); rural populations in particular often depend upon the availability of surrounding natural resources to sustain themselves and are forced into poverty when resources dry up. An extreme example in recent decades has been the drying of the Aral Sea [due to the diversion of its water sources](#) for cotton cultivation. The majority of the diversion was due to a plan pursued by the Soviet Union to reduce poverty in its Central Asian republics, but these regions now suffer from pesticide-laden dust storms originating from the former sea floor.

These economic impacts are exacerbated by worsened health effects from pollution and disease, especially among children and the elderly. Poverty and environmental degradation form a self-reinforcing nexus such that both must be addressed simultaneously.

The effects of global climate change have only exacerbated the threat environmental degradation poses to long term development and the need for Member States to take an active role in adopting a developmental approach that proves sustainable. While developed countries currently account for a large portion of carbon emissions, the contribution from developing countries [is large and increasing](#). Failure to act decisively could result in an uncontrollable expansion of poverty and environmental destruction as natural disasters grow increasingly more common and powerful. These disasters drive [mass migration from regions that are heavily affected](#), increasing resource strain on their host regions. Even developing States that would benefit in the short term from the overexploitation of their natural resources see a large potential increase in long-term poverty as a result of the disruption of global climate patterns and the [subsequent effects on agriculture, labor production and health outcomes](#). No Member State stands to benefit from leaving the issue unaddressed.

The call to address the poverty-environment nexus was first introduced through United Nations efforts on sustainable development. Originally, development initiatives were independent of environmental initiatives, but this nexus became an area of focus for the United Nations in the 1990s, particularly because the [threat of global warming](#) became increasingly clear at that time. The [1990 Human Development Report](#) drew clear connections between the protection of the environment and human development, demonstrating the two-way relationship between poverty and environmental degradation. Two years later, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) produced the [Rio Declaration](#) which formally called for the eradication of poverty as a necessary component of sustainable development. This was followed by the 2000 Millennium Summit's [Development Goal 7](#), ensuring environmental sustainability, which identified specific targets at the intersection of environmental protection and economic development, in particular prioritizing the wide adoption of sustainable development principles.

Efforts to address the nexus in the following years were hampered by insufficient coordination between environmental and poverty-related initiatives. In 2005, the

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNEP sought to remedy this situation by establishing the [Poverty-Environment Initiative](#), which promoted mainstreaming of the connection between poverty and environmental damage. Despite this recognition of the poverty-environment nexus and individual State- and NGO-led projects concerning the nexus, many development projects continued to lack an environmental component. While UNDP funding for anti-poverty projects came from its core budget, environmental projects were funded by external funds, [which were often earmarked for specific projects](#). The absence of an active monitoring process further discouraged focus on the nexus and reduced recognition of successfully implemented projects. Despite this, an independent review of the Poverty-Environment Initiative's implementation from 2008–2013 rated it "[highly satisfactory](#)" in its strategic relevance, and highlighted that the Initiative was especially relevant to addressing rural poverty.

Member States have since recommitted themselves to addressing the poverty-environment nexus with the passage of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) as well as the parallel [Addis Ababa Action Plan](#). The 2030 Agenda posed several benchmarks for assessing if global efforts are succeeding at the intersection of poverty reduction and environmental protection, such as halving the proportion of untreated wastewater by 2030 to reduce biological contamination of ecosystems and water supplies. The Addis Ababa Action Plan poses several more concrete directions for development initiatives to follow, including recognition of the importance of avoiding environmentally harmful activities, a commitment to restructure subsidies that directly increase fossil fuel consumption and devotion of infrastructure funding to the subnational levels in areas that have experienced particularly severe harm from environmental degradation and climate change.

In 2019, the United Nations Environmental Assembly (UNEA) of the United Nations Environmental Programme called for Member States to institute reforms to enhance the environmental sustainability of several sectors of their economy, particularly agriculture, forestry, energy and the extractive industry. UNEA followed up with [an assessment of these reforms](#) in 2020, which drew focus to certain successful national and subnational initiatives that have increased the sustainability of various economic sectors, such as the education of artisanal miners regarding the dangers of mercury-based gold extraction.

One of the biggest impacts of external factors on the UNEP is the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the establishment of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) in 2015, there has been a decline in the rate of people living in [poverty](#); however, COVID-19 [risks reversing decades of progress](#) to the eradication of poverty in all its forms. Studies done by the [UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research](#) estimate that the economic impact of COVID-19 could increase global poverty, which has not happened since 1990, and that in some regions of the world the impacts could result in poverty levels returning to those of 30 years ago. Developing countries are most at risk from the health and socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19. According to the [UNDP](#), developing countries could lose at least 220 billion USD in income because of the pandemic. There is a danger that countries that are desperate to stem reversals in their development will neglect environmental protection to allow a short-term boost to their economies. In April 2020, the United Nations issued a [Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19](#) in response to the [Secretary-General's Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity report](#) in March 2020. The building of relief packages on the nexus of poverty and natural capital [will be important](#) in supporting countries and people in need of assistance because of COVID-19. Nature and environmental goals must occupy a central place in recovery strategies and in development policy in order to create a more sustainable future.

Questions to Consider from Your Government's Perspective:

1. How can the international community take the environment-poverty nexus into account while planning recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How can UNEA ensure proper coordination between development and environmental initiatives in the future?
3. In what ways can the international community promote development models that prioritize reducing net carbon emissions?

[Top ↑](#)

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