

Background Guide for The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)

Committee Overview and Mandate

Introduction

The United Nations Environment Assembly is the United Nations' highest decision-making body on the environment and aims to address the world's current critical environmental challenges.¹ UNEA was created in June 2012, during the *United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development*, known as *RIO+20*. At the conference, world leaders called for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to be strengthened on several fronts with action to be taken during the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).²

The establishment of the United Nations Environment Assembly was the outcome of collective Member States' efforts that were initiated at the *UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm* (1972) with the goal to create a coherent system of international environmental governance.³ UNEA gathers ministers of the environment in Nairobi, Kenya, every 2 years with the first session having been held in 2014.⁴ The sessions are governed by the *UNEA Rules of Procedure*.

Governance, Mandate, Membership, and Structure

UNEA has a universal membership of all 193 Member States.⁵ The Assembly is led by a bureau that is composed of a President and nine assisting entities, including eight Vice-Presidents and a Rapporteur at the Ministerial level. The Bureau is elected for two years. According to UNEA mandates, it is the responsibility of the President to organize all official plenary meetings and the Committee of a whole, as well as the working groups dedicated to resolution clusters.

The Assembly has an inter-sessional intergovernmental body, known as the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), established as a subsidiary organ of the Governing Council in May 1985. The Governing Council's decision 19/32 defines that the Committee consists of all Member States' representatives, members of its specialized agencies, and the European Union (EU). The Committee plays a role in formulating the agenda for the UNEA and offers guidance to the Assembly on policy issues, prepares decisions for adoption by the Assembly, and oversees the implementation of those decisions.

¹ United Nations Environment Programme. United Nations Environment Assembly

² United Nations Environment Assembly. Delivering on the 2030 Agenda.

³ UN Environment Assembly. About the United Nations Environment Assembly.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. United Nations Environment Assembly

UNEA holds Side Events, unofficial events at the United Nations Office in Nairobi (UNON), convened by Member States or UN entities. Civil society can hold side events only in collaboration with a Member State or the UN entity. UNEA also holds Associated Events, which are unofficial events, that take place out of the *UNON Gigiri Complex* and are convened by other UNEP stakeholders, including civil society. These events do not have to be held with either Member States or a UN entity.

Mobilizing Civil Society for the Achievement of SDG 6

Background

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6—Clean Water and Sanitation—seeks to guarantee access to safe drinking water and sanitation for everyone, with a particular emphasis on sustainable water resource management, wastewater, and ecosystems. It recognizes the significance of creating a supportive environment to achieve this objective.

In December 2017, Member States adopted UNGA resolution 71/222, *International Decade for Action on ‘Water for Sustainable Development’ 2018-2028*. The Water Action Decade puts efforts towards tackling the issues related to water, including limited access to safe water and sanitation, and an increased risk of droughts and floods.

Pollution

Globally, 44% of wastewater generated by households is not adequately treated. This means that it is not treated through secondary or higher-level processes, nor does it meet the necessary standards for effluent discharges.⁶ Target 6.3 states "by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally". Moreover, up to 400 million tons of heavy metals, solvents, toxic sludge, and other industrial wastes are released annually into the world's waters.⁷

The coexistence of on-site sanitation and groundwater supply poses a significant issue for shallow water sources. Approximately 30% of rural installations are estimated to suffer from ongoing contamination of their groundwater supplies by pathogens.⁸ This problem primarily affects marginalized communities, particularly women and girls, who are often at a higher risk of disease due to their increased exposure to wastewater containing pathogens and toxins.⁹

⁶ UN-Water. Summary Progress Update 2021: SDG 6 — water and sanitation for all. 2021.

⁷ The United Nations Environment Programme strategy for tackling climate change, biodiversity and nature loss, and pollution and waste from 2022—2025.

⁸ The United Nations World Water Development Report 2022: groundwater: making the invisible visible.

⁹ Ibid.

UNEP participates in the *UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-SDG6)*, a collaborative effort that assists countries in monitoring water and sanitation issues and gathering national data to track global progress towards SDG 6. The main objective of *IMI-SDG6* is to expedite attaining SDG 6 by enhancing the availability of reliable and comprehensive data. This data serves as a basis for evidence-based policymaking, regulations, planning, and investments at various levels.

In 2017, the UNEA decided to address water pollution to protect and restore water-related ecosystems. The Assembly started the *World Water Quality Alliance*, which represents a voluntary, adaptable, and worldwide collaboration of multiple stakeholders who advocate for the crucial importance of freshwater quality in attaining prosperity and sustainability. In 2018, UNEA adopted the resolution UNEP/CPR/144/7c, *Addressing water pollution to protect and restore water-related ecosystems*, which highlights the concerns about threats to water quantity and quality from pollution, and recognizes that water pollution has a disproportionate impact on women and children.¹⁰

Agriculture

Approximately 1.2 billion individuals reside in regions characterized by significant water scarcity and shortages, which pose challenges to agriculture. These areas experience frequent droughts in rainfed croplands and pasturelands, or face elevated water stress in irrigated regions.¹¹ In agriculture, water is used to grow fresh produce and sustain livestock, two main parts of our diet. Agricultural water is used for irrigation, pesticide and fertilizer applications, crop cooling, and frost control. Poor water management due to inadequate policies, major institutional under-performance, and financing limitations can result in poor harvesting and low-quality food, followed by famine.

Agriculture accounts for 92% of the global freshwater footprint.¹² By 2050 the global demand for water is expected to increase by 20–33% from 2010 levels.¹³ Poor water quality can impact crop quality and lead to illness in those who consume it. For example, water containing germs can cause disease or sickness in humans and animals. When crops are irrigated with polluted water, it can result in the contamination of food products, which, when consumed, can cause illness. Irrigation

¹⁰ United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme. UNEP/CPR/144/7c. "Addressing water pollution to protect and restore water-related ecosystems". 2018.

¹¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *The State of the World's Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture*. 2021

¹² United Nations Environment Programme. *Becoming #GenerationRestoration*. 2021.

¹³ *Ibid.*

as one of the limited options to expand cultivated land areas already accounts for 72% of all freshwater withdrawals.¹⁴

In 2002, UNEP adopted resolution UNEP/GC.22/INF/25 which recognizes that loss and degradation of land resources are to be seen in the context of policy, socio-economic conditions, and the environment, and recognizes their impact on agriculture and food production. The document defines UNEP's role in land use management and soil conservation.¹⁵

In 2020, together with the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), UNEP supported *The REXUS project*, which works on the dynamic interdependencies between the water, energy and food sectors aiming to improve Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), increase resilience to climate change, and tackle water management issues.

Climate Change

By 2050, the world population living in areas with at least one incident of water scarcity a month per year will increase to between 4.8 and 5.7 billion people, creating intense competition among water users, both within and across Member State boundaries.¹⁶ Disasters related to the hydrological cycle have already become one of the major drivers of forced displacement as people move out of water scarce regions. Lack of access or availability of water due to water scarcity or poor water management and policies also leads to migration.¹⁷ Sea-level rise is anticipated to accelerate, leading to a rise in the occurrence and intensity of coastal flooding in low-lying cities. Also, seawater intrusion is expected to increase groundwater salinity. By the year 2030, an estimated 108-116 million individuals in Africa are projected to be vulnerable to the risks associated with sea-level rise.¹⁸ 54% of the area within Landlocked Developing Countries' (LLDCs) is classified as drylands, making them especially affected by issues such as desertification, drought, and land degradation.¹⁹ Therefore, climate change and climate disasters can intensify water scarcity, especially in the countries where there is already an issue of water access. Flooding caused by climate change can facilitate the dispersion of water-borne pollutants and diseases, particularly in regions where open defecation is prevalent or sanitation infrastructure is compromised. Approximately 3.2 billion individuals, accounting for 40% of the global population, are already experiencing the negative impacts of land degradation on their well-being.²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. UNEP/GC.22/INF/25. Land Use Management and Soil Conservation Policy of UNEP: Strengthened Functional Approach.

¹⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The United Nations World Water Development Report 2018.

¹⁷ UN-Water. Climate Change and water. UN-Water Policy Brief. 2019

¹⁸ World Meteorological Organization. State of the Climate in Africa. 2021.

¹⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Progress on level of water stress. 2021

²⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. Becoming #GenerationRestoration. 2021.

SDG 13 - Climate Action, calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. In 2015, *The Paris Agreement* was adopted by 196 Parties at the *UN Climate Change Conference (COP21)*, with the goal of holding “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels,” and ideally “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.”²¹ Recognizing the importance of water-related issues, the Paris Agreement aims to mitigate sea-level rise.

In 1988, together with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), UNEP established *The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)* that aims to present policymakers with scientific evaluations regarding climate change, including its consequences and possible future hazards, while also offering suggestions for adaptation and mitigation measures.

Responding to three planetary crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste, UNEP intends to attain the *Climate Action 2022—2025* goal outlined in the *Medium-term Strategy* by employing a multifaceted agenda, which prioritizes the issues of water and sanitation.²²

Conclusion.

In conclusion, SDG6 is crucial for addressing pressing global challenges, including pollution, climate change, and agriculture. It is crucial for ensuring universal access to clean water and sanitation. Global challenges, including water pollution and climate change, increase freshwater scarcity and decrease the access to sources of water and sanitation. It imposes a threat to agricultural capacities, especially in areas with poor food-quality due to the inadequate water and agriculture management. By prioritizing SDG 6 and addressing the challenges related to clean water and sanitation, we can improve the health, well-being, and overall quality of life for all people, contributing to a more sustainable and equitable future.

Efforts to achieve SDG 6 require collaboration and commitment from governments, international organizations, civil society, and individuals. By prioritizing investment in infrastructure, implementing effective policies and regulations, and raising awareness about the importance of water and sanitation, we can create a sustainable future where everyone has access to clean water and improved sanitation facilities.

²¹ Paris Agreement. 2015.

²² United Nations Environment Programme. *Medium-Term Strategy 2022—2025: The United Nations Environment Programme strategy for tackling climate change, biodiversity and nature loss, and pollution and waste from 2022—2025.*

Questions to Consider

1. How does SDG 6, which focuses on clean water and sanitation, contribute to the overall well-being of communities? In what ways does access to clean water and sanitation impact individuals' health and quality of life?
2. How can SDG 6 be utilized to support economic growth and sustainable development in both urban and rural areas?
3. How can we resolve the challenges in achieving SDG 6, particularly in developing countries?
4. What are the potential consequences of climate change on water availability and quality, and how does SDG 6 address these challenges?
5. What are the main water-related challenges faced in agricultural practices, and how does SDG 6 address them?

Helpful Links

1. <https://maps.worldbank.org/projects>
2. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/waterandsanitation>
3. <https://www.unwater.org/>
4. <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/resolutions>
5. <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/proceedings-report-ministerial-declaration-resolutions-and-decisions-unea-4>
6. <https://www.unwater.org/>
7. <https://www.unwater.org/world-water-development-report/>
8. <https://www.unesco.org/en/water>