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**International environmental policy and
governance issues: coordination across the
United Nations system on environmental issues**

**Potential contributions of the United Nations Environment
Assembly to the review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for
Sustainable Development at the global level**

Note by the Executive Director

Summary

The present note examines the potential contributions of the United Nations Environment Assembly to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the light of its own mandate and role within the institutional framework for sustainable development.

Special attention is given to the institutional relationship between the Environment Assembly and the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development, taking into account their mandated links to both the General Assembly and the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

The note offers options and recommendations for ensuring relevant and timely contributions from the Environment Assembly to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda while taking into account indications from ongoing intergovernmental deliberations that may further frame such contributions over time.

* UNEP/EA.2/1/Rev.1.

I. Introduction

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a systematic framework for following up and reviewing its implementation over a 15-year period at the national, regional and global levels, helping countries to track and maximize progress.
2. The present note focuses on the potential contributions of the United Nations Environment Assembly to the follow-up and review framework, and in particular to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development as the central institutional convener and overseer of the global review architecture, taking into account inputs of regional ministerial environment forums and support for voluntary national reviews.
3. While various intergovernmental processes will further define the follow-up and review framework, the Environment Assembly has the opportunity and institutional space to consider how it can contribute to the High-level Political Forum in a manner consistent with general intergovernmental expectations and guidelines and taking into account its overarching environmental mandate.
4. The gaps that could result from the Environment Assembly's biennial cycle and the High-level Political Forum's annual reviews of the 2030 Agenda, when its sessions are held under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, emphasize the importance of the Environment Assembly anticipating and reflecting on options to ensure that the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals are integrated into all review sessions of the Forum.
5. The purpose of the present note, therefore, is to describe briefly the available institutional avenues for ensuring and maximizing the Environment Assembly's contributions to the High-level Political Forum in such a context. The note addresses the question in four main sections: section I, providing an overview of relevant follow-up and review mandates; section II, discussing existing institutional linkages between the Environment Assembly and the High-level Political Forum, taking into account their relationships to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council; section III, on prospects; and section IV, recommendations.

II. Overarching follow-up and review mandates

6. At the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20), Member States committed to strengthening the Economic and Social Council as a principal organ in the integrated and coordinated follow-up of the outcomes of all major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social, environmental and related fields and recognized its key role in achieving a balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. World leaders also decided to establish the universal High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development as a subsidiary organ of the Council under the latter's rules of procedure.
7. The Rio+20 outcome document "The future we want", endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 66/288, identifies some of the functions and activities that the High-level Political Forum could undertake. Subsequently, the General Assembly adopted resolution 67/290, on the format and organizational aspects of the High-level Political Forum, through which it decided that the Forum would be convened every four years at the level of Heads of State and Governments under the auspices of the General Assembly and annually at the ministerial level under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council.
8. The High-level Political Forum was established as a hybrid and innovative arrangement through which United Nations members — at the Heads of State and ministerial level — could provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development, follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments, enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels and provide for a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges. Under the General Assembly, the High-level Political Forum provides for a more permanent structure for world leaders to review progress on sustainable development rather than depending on international conferences such as the Stockholm Human Environment in 1972, the Earth Summit in 1992, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, and Rio +20 in 2012.
9. Paragraphs 82–90 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outline the general objectives, requirements and institutional components of the follow-up and review framework at the global level. This section of the Agenda establishes that the High-level Political Forum "will have a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level, working

coherently with the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and other relevant organs and forums, in accordance with existing mandates".¹

10. The 2030 Agenda also establishes that thematic reviews of progress on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals will take place in the High-level Political Forum and "will be supported by reviews by the functional commissions of ECOSOC and other intergovernmental bodies and forums which should reflect the integrated nature of the SDGs as well as the interlinkages between them". In this regard, the 2030 Agenda reflects the expectation that where possible reviews by other intergovernmental bodies should feed into and align with the cycle of the Forum. This is in line with the Economic and Social Council's resolution 2012/30 of 27 July 2012, through which the Council called upon its functional commissions, regional commissions and other subsidiary bodies, within their respective mandates, to provide it with coherent support in the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of all major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social, environmental and related fields.

11. Furthermore, the High-level Political Forum will be informed by an annual report of the Secretary-General on the Sustainable Development Goals, integrating inputs of the United Nations system and based on the global indicator framework and data produced by national statistical offices as well as information collected at the regional level and in the Global Sustainable Development Report, which is to strengthen the science-policy interface.²

12. The aforementioned section of the 2030 Agenda, together with the Environment Assembly's overarching mandate as the universal governing body of the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment, set the stage for the Environment Assembly's contributions to the follow-up and review activities.

13. The Environment Assembly's primary responsibility, to keep under review the world environmental situation,³ is of particular relevance in this context. The Environment Assembly is also mandated to perform essential follow-up and review functions such as undertaking policy review, dialogue and exchange of experiences, providing overarching policy guidance and defining policy responses to address emerging environmental challenges.⁴

14. The Environment Assembly's prospective contributions to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda by the High-level Political Forum are further underpinned by the Assembly's existing linkages with the Forum, taking into account their relationships with the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, as described in the following section.

¹ Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1), para. 82.

² *Ibid.*, para. 83.

³ In accordance with General Assembly resolution 2997 (XXVII), the main functions and responsibilities of the governing body of the United Nations Environment Programme include "(a) To promote international cooperation in the field of the environment and to recommend, as appropriate, policies to this end; (b) To provide general policy guidance for the direction and co-ordination of environmental programmes within the United Nations system; (c) To receive and review the periodic reports of the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, referred to in section II, paragraph 2, below, on the implementation of environmental programmes within the United Nations system; (d) To keep under review the world environmental situation in order to ensure that emerging environmental problems of wide international significance receive appropriate and adequate consideration by Governments; (e) To promote the contribution of the relevant international scientific and other professional communities to the acquisition, assessment and exchange of environmental knowledge and information and, as appropriate, to the technical aspects of the formulation and implementation of environmental programmes within the United Nations system; (f) To maintain under continuing review the impact of national and international environmental policies and measures on developing countries, as well as the problem of additional costs that may be incurred by developing countries in the implementation of environmental programmes and projects, and to ensure that such programmes and projects shall be compatible with the development plans and priorities of those countries; (g) To review and approve annually the programme of utilization of resources of the Environment Fund.

⁴ UNEP/GC.27/17, annex I, decision 27/2 (February 2013).

III. Existing linkages between the United Nations Environment Assembly and the High-level Political Forum on sustainable Development

(a) Relevant legislation

15. Both the establishment of the High-level Political Forum on sustainable Development and the universal membership of the Environment Assembly are provided for in section IV of the "The future we want", as building blocks of the enhanced institutional framework for sustainable development. This common origin also indicates that the distinctive mandates and roles of the Forum and the Assembly share purposes related to the objectives of the institutional umbrella that they represent, namely, the balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development as well as its implementation, review and follow-up in an integrated, coherent, coordinated, effective, inclusive and transparent manner.

16. Reforms and new arrangements related to the institutional framework for sustainable development recognize preexisting relationships such as the subsidiarity of the Environment Assembly to the General Assembly and its obligation to report through the Economic and Social Council in accordance with General Assembly resolution 2997 (XXVII). By virtue of its mandate, which has not been superseded by any subsequent resolution of the General Assembly, including resolutions 66/288, 67/213 and 67/251, the Economic and Social Council also has the legal prerogative to "transmit to the Assembly such comments on the report as it may deem necessary, particularly with regard to questions of co-ordination and to the relationship of environmental policies and programmes within the United Nations system to overall economic and social policies and priorities".

17. General Assembly resolution 67/290, on the format and organizational aspects of the High-level Political Forum, reaffirms the relevance of mutual support and collaboration between the High-level Political Forum and other intergovernmental bodies such as the Environment Assembly and allows for the contributions such bodies to the work of the Panel. In paragraph 17, for example, the General Assembly invited organizations of the United Nations system within their respective mandates to contribute to the discussions of the Forum. In paragraph 19, the General Assembly invited the Forum to take into account the contributions and work of relevant United Nations intergovernmental bodies in the social, economic and environmental fields. In paragraph 20 the General Assembly decided, among other measures, that the Forum should strengthen the science-policy interface by examining documentation and bringing together dispersed information and assessments, including in the form of a global sustainable development report. In relation to this it should be noted that in accordance with "The future we want", General Assembly resolution 67/213 and UNEP Governing Council decision 27/2, UNEP has a mandate to "promote a strong science-policy interface, building on existing international instruments, assessments, panels and information networks, including the Global Environment Outlook, as one of the processes aimed at bringing together information and assessment to support informed decision-making".

18. Resolution 67/290 also outlined substantive objectives for the Forum, which emphasize the need for an appropriate integration of considerations and outcomes related to the environmental dimension of sustainable development and, more specifically, to the Environment Assembly's mandates in that regard.

19. Paragraph 7 of the resolution states that the meetings of the Forum under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council "shall have a thematic focus reflecting the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, in line with the thematic focus of the activities of the Council and consistent with the post-2015 development agenda".

20. Furthermore, the same paragraph establishes that the High-level Political Forum on sustainable Development must "follow up and review progress in the implementation of all the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and environmental fields".

21. In a more specific thematic link to UNEP and the Environment Assembly, the General Assembly indicated in resolution 67/290 and subsequently, including in resolution 70/201, on implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, that the High-level Political Forum should give

consideration to sustainable consumption and production at the meetings held under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, taking into account the reports to the Council from the board and secretariat of the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns. It should be noted in that regard that not only is UNEP responsible for the 10-year framework of programmes secretariat, but also that related matters constitute an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development both as a standalone goal (Goal 12) and as a cross-cutting issue. The Environment Assembly receives regular reports on those issues as part of the UNEP programme of work and medium-term strategy.

22. General Assembly resolution 68/215, on the report of the UNEP Governing Council on its first universal session and implementation of section IV.C, entitled "Environmental pillar in the context of sustainable development", also provided for UNEP to contribute inputs, as the leading global environmental authority, on the environmental dimension of sustainable development, including in the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda, as well as in discussions on the scope and modalities of a global sustainable development report.

23. Resolution 1/1 of the Environment Assembly, on the ministerial outcome document of the the Assembly's first session, calls on "the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, within their respective mandates, to give appropriate consideration to the present outcome document and to take its messages further with a view to the balance integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations and its Member States".

(b) Relevant practice

24. In accordance with the above legislative background, some practical institutional linkages in respect of the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda have already been developed, over the past three years, between the Environment Assembly on one the one hand and the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the High-level Political Forum on the other. The Secretary-General as well as the President of the General Assembly both participated in the first session of the Environment Assembly in June 2014 in Nairobi, while the president of the Environment Assembly participated in the 2014 and 2015 sessions of the Forum under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council at the invitation of the Council's president. The President of the Environment Assembly made a presentation to the Forum on the outcomes of the Assembly's first session, including an overview of the resolutions and the ministerial outcome document adopted. Similar participation, including a presentation, is expected for the 2016 session of the Forum.

25. In the recent past, UNEP has also taken part in United Nations system inter-agency activities to support previous and forthcoming sessions of the Forum, including, for example, in the preparation of the 2016 edition of the Global Sustainable Development Report.

26. In addition, a set of inputs specific to the 2030 follow-up and review has been provided for the Forum's 2016 session, at the request of the President of the Economic and Social Council to the leadership of all relevant intergovernmental bodies, including the President of the Environment Assembly. The scope of that request is discussed in the following section.

IV. Prospects

27. Beyond these existing channels for the provision of inputs from the Environment Assembly to the High-level Political Forum, the General Assembly is currently engaged in informal consultations on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the global level in response to paragraph 90 of Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1). The process is expected to result in general guidelines for the contributions of various intergovernmental bodies to the work of the High-level Political Forum. In particular, it is expected to lead to a decision on the possibility of annual themes, a sequence of thematic reviews and other options for the High-level Political Forum's periodic reviews.

28. In terms of timing, the General Assembly process on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda is not expected to conclude before the end of May 2016 making it difficult to influence the preparation and conduct of the High-level Political Forum's 2016 session. Its outcomes will therefore be implemented only from the 2017 session onwards.

29. A report of the Secretary-General on critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level is one of the main substantive inputs for this General Assembly informal consultation process. According to the report, the Environment Assembly, like

other intergovernmental bodies and forums, should support the High-level Political Forum thematic reviews of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, including cross-cutting issues, in a coherent and cohesive way through three main steps:

- (a) Reflecting on the implications of the 2030 Agenda for its areas of work, bearing in mind the integrated nature of the Agenda;
- (b) Examining its agendas and methods of work to ensure that it is able to respond to requests for voluntary inputs by the Forum as needed and within the scope of its regular meetings;
- (c) Reflecting on its ability to convene and engage critical actors relevant to their contributions to the 2030 Agenda, including scientists, academicians, parliamentarians, local governments, business, and representatives of the most vulnerable people.

30. While the report is clear contributions may take different forms and that each actor is free to choose the format of its inputs to the Forum, some proposed formats are specifically mentioned, including negotiated outcomes, summaries of discussions and databases. More concretely, the report contains a proposed template that, subject to the deliberations by Member States, could guide the contributions of relevant intergovernmental bodies to the Forum. The template covers an assessment of areas of progress and setbacks at the global level; the identification of areas requiring urgent attention; valuable lessons learned; emerging issues; (v) areas where political guidance by the Forum is required; and policy recommendations and tools for accelerating progress.

31. The report also emphasizes the importance of supporting the Forum in respect of voluntary national reviews through, among other things, the development of common reporting guidelines. The need for support for subregional and regional follow-up efforts and reviews is also highlighted in the report, together with their unique potential to provide key inputs for both the countries of the regions and the Forum.

32. On 14 April 2016, the President of the Economic and Social Council invited the leadership of various intergovernmental bodies, including the presidents of the Environment Assembly and the leaders of multilateral environmental agreements, to provide substantive inputs for the 2016 session of the Forum by 16 May 2016, showcasing their respective contributions to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals from the perspective of their mandates. The invitation also requested the submission of inputs in accordance with the template proposed in the aforementioned report of the Secretary-General, taking into account the theme chosen for the Forum's 2016 session, "Ensuring that no one is left behind".

33. It should be noted that the timing of this invitation and the deadline for the submission of the requested inputs does not allow the Environment Assembly to consider at its second session the substantive elements involved in the provision of inputs to the Forum, including on the environmental dimension of the chosen theme for the 2016 session. Furthermore, the invitation did not come in time for the Open-Ended Committee of Permanent Representatives to recommend, in its capacity of intersessional subsidiary body of the Environment Assembly, options for the Assembly's consideration of the issue.

34. In that regard, the submission of inputs by the President of the Environment Assembly for the Forum's 2016 session took place in May 2016, on the basis of existing general mandates, the most up-to-date assessments of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda and all relevant UNEP reports already presented to the Environment Assembly.

35. While the outcomes of the ongoing General Assembly process on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda may resolve some of these timing challenges by anticipating the themes of future sessions of the High-level Political Forum and formalizing the template for contributions from intergovernmental bodies, some gaps are likely to remain. In particular, the Environment Assembly's biennial cycle would prevent it from making contributions for each review session of the Forum, which take place annually, unless some adjustments or specific provisions to the current timeline are considered. The following section includes several options in that regard.

36. The United Nations Development Group Sustainable Development Working Group also organized a discussion on the follow-up and review system in May 2016, during which some reflections directly focused on the role that governing bodies such as the Environment Assembly could play in the review process and in particular how they could feed into the work of the High-level Political Forum. In the discussion, various agencies spoke about the crucial importance of engaging and drawing on the expertise of specialized intergovernmental bodies in the Forum's review process while fostering ownership of the process across the system. It was, however, highlighted that while the new agenda was horizontal and integrated in nature, the international agenda was still very

compartmentalized, with most governing bodies aligned around specific areas of work and dominated by sectorial ministries not always representing full integration across whole governments. The discussion stressed the crucial role of secretariats of intergovernmental forums in helping to ensure that their governing bodies did not focus on individual Sustainable Development Goals but rather looked across the agenda and used the goals as integrators.

37. The consultation process on the scope, methodology and frequency of the Global Sustainable Development Report and its relationship to the Sustainable Development Goals progress report was mandated in paragraph 83 of the 2030 Agenda, and its outcome is to be reflected in the ministerial declaration of the High-level Political Forum. In April 2016, the General Assembly reached an agreement on the future of the Global Sustainable Development Report envisaging a prominent role for UNEP, which is reflected in a draft resolution to be adopted by the General Assembly. Among other things, the draft text on the subject provides that:

- (a) A comprehensive, in-depth, report will be produced every four years to inform the High-level Political Forum, which will be convened under the auspices of the General Assembly;
- (b) Each year, in order to strengthen the science-policy interface at the Forum when convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, scientists working on the report will be invited to provide inputs, including on the theme of the current session of the Forum. The form of those inputs is yet to be determined;
- (c) An independent group of scientists will be established to draft the quadrennial Global Sustainable Development Report supported by a task team co-chaired by one representative of a United Nations Secretariat agency. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the World Bank will coordinate inputs from existing networks, representing the United Nations, the private sector, civil society and academia. Inputs will be posted on the High-level Political Forum's online platform annually.

38. In the meantime, the last pilot version of the Global Sustainable Development Report is being prepared and will address the theme of the High-level Political Forum's 2016 session: "Ensuring that no one is left behind".

IV. Recommendations

39. In the light of the considerations discussed in the previous sections, the United Nations Environment Assembly and its bureau may wish to consider the following options for ensuring relevant and timely contributions by the Environment Assembly to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which will be led, at the global level, by the High-level Political Forum on sustainable Development under the auspices of both the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council:

- (a) The President of the Environment Assembly may wish to formalize the current practice of participating in the sessions of the High-level Political Forum on sustainable Development in order to inform the Forum of the most relevant outcomes of each session of the Assembly, in particular those related to the follow-up and review of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda;
- (b) The President of UNEA may wish continue the current practice of formally submitting the relevant outcomes of sessions of the Environment Assembly, including ministerial declarations and relevant resolutions, to the Forum. This could continue to be done through the President of the Economic and Social Council, prior to the Forum's sessions convened annually under the auspices of the Council, and through the President of the General Assembly, prior to the Forum's sessions convened every four years under the auspices of the General Assembly;
- (c) The Environment Assembly may wish to invite the High-level Political Forum to take note of relevant outcomes and inputs related to the review of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda, including through relevant resolutions or ministerial declarations of the Environment Assembly;
- (d) The Environment Assembly and its intersessional subsidiary body, the Open-Ended Committee of Permanent Representatives, may wish to consider the inclusion of a standing item on their agendas on the review and follow-up of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to deliberate on the item during their main sessions;

(e) The Environment Assembly may wish to take advantage of its sessions being the largest gatherings of ministers of the environment to discuss and analyse the role of environment ministers in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. The Environment Assembly represents a unique opportunity to strengthen the environmental component of the national voluntary reviews submitted to the Forum and to adopt decisions on how UNEP might best support the review process at the country level;

(f) The Environment Assembly may wish to consult other intergovernmental bodies dealing with very specific environmental issues (e.g., chemicals conventions) with the aim of providing common and consolidated inputs to the High-level Political Forum;

(g) The Environment Assembly may also wish to consider the formal integration of the relevant outcomes of regional ministerial environmental forums – such as the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment and the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean – into the global follow-up and review of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda;

(h) In the light of ongoing consideration of potential cycle adjustments, the Environment Assembly may wish to take into account the impact of a biennial cycle and future scheduling alternatives on its ability to thoroughly prepare inputs on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for the annual reviews of the High-level Political Forum in line with their respective themes, as well as on the essential substantive elements for submission in those years in which the Assembly does not hold sessions. For those years when it does not hold regular sessions, the Environment Assembly may wish to consider having a standing agenda item on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, taking into account the theme and expectations for the respective session of the High-level Political Forum or delegating such function to the open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives.⁵

⁵ During its first universal session the UNEP Governing Council decided that “*an open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives will be the intersessional subsidiary body of UNEP governing body and, in addition to its mandate and in open and transparent manner, will perform the following functions: (a) Contributing to the preparation of the agenda of its governing body; (b) Providing advice to its governing body on policy matters; (c) Preparing decisions for adoption by its governing body and overseeing their implementation; (d) Convening thematic and/or programmatic debates (e) Promoting effective ways and means to facilitate participation of the non-resident members of the Committee, particularly from developing countries (f) Performing any other functions delegated to it by its governing body;*” (paragraph 9 of decision 27/2).