



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Building better after COVID-19 and acting where we will have the greatest impact on the SDGs:

Protecting the planet and building resilience

(Most closely related SDGs: SDG 12, SDG 13, SDG 14, SDG 15 and SDG 17)

Wednesday, 8 July 2020, 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM

Secretariat Background Note

Introduction (executive summary)

The 2030 Agenda is rooted in the idea that human development and wellbeing cannot be achieved without simultaneously safeguarding and investing in nature and managing disaster risk in a systemic manner—otherwise development gains will be short lived and unequally distributed. Biodiversity loss, land and forest degradation, climate change, and disasters are threatening progress toward sustainable development. Actions to advance economic and social development need to address these threats and build resilience including through nature-based solutions, sustainable consumption and production practices and accounting for the true value of nature.

The past decade—in particular the COVID-19 crisis—has revealed the systemic nature of risk and the cascading impact of disasters across all three dimensions of sustainable development. The natural environment is humanity's first line of defense against many hazards, and nature-based solutions must be scaled up to manage disaster risks, build resilience and leave no one behind. These issues are addressed directly in SDGs 12, 13, 14, and 15, but they are foundational to the entire 2030 Agenda, including poverty eradication, health, food security and inclusive economic growth and sustainable livelihoods. The current session will highlight opportunities and innovations that can build resilience and manage risk while securing livelihoods and safeguarding the planet.

Successes and challenges

Natural resources are being used more quickly than they can regenerate, in part because current systems fail to incorporate an appropriate value or cost on the environmental externalities of economic activities. There is limited understanding of the return on investment from biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, and despite concrete evidence that investment in risk reduction pays off, risk is not yet fully integrated in the



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implementation of the SDGs. As a result of the current reactive approach, each year disasters cause loss of lives and livelihoods and erase hard-earned development progress.

Recent assessments find that the world is not on track to meet the SDG targets related to ecosystems and biodiversity. Currently, 25% of animals and plants are threatened with extinction (nearly 1 million species) and 75% of crops are at risk due to loss of pollinators. Nearly 20% of the Earth's vegetated land surface showed declining productivity from 1998 to 2013, and millions of hectares of natural forests converted per year into farmland. In the ocean, a third of fish stocks are overfished. Environmental degradation has a direct impact on human health and wellbeing: air pollution kills approximately 8 million people annually, and zoonotic diseases like Covid 19 can emerge when the buffer between human and animal habitats is lost. Poor people, in particular women and children, are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, and growing inequalities further exasperate existing vulnerabilities and limiting coping capacities.

There are some bright spots. Delivering nature-based solutions has the potential to lift a billion people out of poverty, create 80 million jobs and add US\$2.3 trillion in productive growth to the global economy while supporting vital biodiversity and ecosystem services. The restoration and sustainable management of ecosystems have proven to be a cost-effective, safe and immediately available means of sequestering carbon and preventing the emission of greenhouse gases.¹ Climate smart and sustainable agricultural practices are increasing in every region of the world and have a positive impact on poverty eradication, rural livelihoods, biodiversity conservation and land restoration.² These approaches complement meaningful gains made in securing marine protected areas and terrestrial conservation efforts as well as measures against unsustainable fishing.

Interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs

A healthy planet is a pre-requisite for healthy people and that in turn is the foundation of a healthy economy—addressing these synergies and tradeoffs will be critical for building resilience and minimizing risks. The ocean provides 50% of the world's oxygen and absorbs approximately 25% of the carbon dioxide, affecting the climate and the frequency and intensity of natural hazards. Sixty million fishers depend on ocean resources for their livelihoods and roughly 2 billion people, more than a quarter of the world population, make a living off

¹ (Epple et al., 2016).

² FAO State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture



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agriculture. And in fact all business depends on natural capital assets and ecosystem services, either directly or through their supply chains.³

Although the health and survival of human beings in the long term depends on a healthy environment, short-term tradeoffs may arise, and these must be identified and minimized, and the risks stemming from them managed and mitigated. Actions will also need to consider environmental justice, because as noted above, environmental degradation and disasters, whether particulate air pollution or contaminated water or the impacts of climate change, disproportionately affects poor and marginalized communities in both developed and developing countries. The role of women and indigenous and local communities will also be instrumental.

Recommendations for action: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress

The necessary transformations in the nature-human relationship will occur only through collaborative and coordinated action by governments, businesses, finance, consumers, civil society and scientific and technological communities. Governments should enact enforceable regulations, taxes including carbon taxes, and other financial incentives to ensure that public and private sectors adopt sustainable practices and manage disaster risk. Accurately valuing natural resources, periodically assessing systemic disaster risk, risk-testing policies before adoption, defining clear obligations across stakeholders, and identifying financing instruments, will be critical. Policymakers need to take an integrated, multi-stakeholder, whole-of-government approach to managing risk and rebuilding a societal value and respect for nature. Preliminary lessons from the response to COVID point to levels of government intervention and social and behavioral changes that may have been previously unthinkable.

Sustainable consumption and production can help to change how value is created, minimizing the liabilities and promoting a green and inclusive economy. Any lasting progress will be built also on nature-based solutions, with system transformations in sectors dependent on nature.

At the global level, multilateral platforms like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the Biodiversity Liaison Group of Conventions, and the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management, represent cooperative governance structures informed by science. Together with international agreements including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, these platforms, each supported by a formal scientific

³³ WEF Nature of Risks Report 2020 (industries that are highly dependent on nature generate 15% of global GDP (\$13 trillion), while moderately dependent industries generate 37% (\$31 trillion).



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advisory body, promote coordinated and coherent action to address environmental challenges and manage risk.⁴ And while global efforts will be critical—acknowledging the transboundary nature of the challenges— they will be successful only when complemented by regional, national, sub-national and local solutions.

Guiding questions

- What are the fundamental systems transformations needed to halt nature degradation, reverse loss and manage risk, while eradicating poverty, ensuring food security for a growing population, including women and girls, securing livelihoods and promoting resilience? How can we scale up the use of nature-based solutions to achieve these transformations? How can we promote sustainable consumption and production?
- How can the public and the private sector work better together to manage disaster risk across systems, in line with the Sendai Framework, and to protect the global environmental commons? What tools are instrumental towards this aim?
- What does the COVID-19 crisis reveal about the human-nature relationship and systemic risk creation? How can nature-based solutions contribute to a post-COVID-19 economic and social recovery that is more sustainable, equitable and resilient?
- How can we redirect financial flows and direct recovery efforts to create better outcomes for people, prosperity and planet? Which nature-related investments should the international community prioritize in the next 1-2 years?
- How can we increase efforts to combat climate change as we respond to COVID-19?

⁴ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services and the Committee on Science and Technology of the Convention