

UNEP Statement for Agenda Item 8.2

Seventy-third Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia

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The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) stands in solidarity with the billions of people around the world that are suffering the impact of the global pandemic of COVID-19.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to millions of healthcare professionals and members of the UN family including the World Health Organization (WHO) who are working around the clock to protect us as we face humanity's biggest crisis since World War II.

At the occasion of the 73rd Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia, we extend our support and also congratulate on the united efforts by the WHO and member states Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste.

With over 3.1 million cases and over 61,000 deaths, the South-East Asia Region has been hit hard by Covid-19, both directly and indirectly. As caseloads particularly in India continue to rise, the immediate priority is to strengthen health facilities and limit the spread of COVID-19. The individual situation of each country in the South-East Asian region also means a continued need for a strong regional link between response and recovery – a “development emergency” approach, which should then contribute to a green recovery and building back better, as advocated by the UN Secretary General.

Goal 3 of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target to “substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination”. This target becomes attainable when we achieve other SDG targets associated with climate change, air quality, chemicals and waste management, nutrient pollution and marine debris.

Under this approach, it is clear that human health and environmental conditions are intrinsically linked. For example, evidence suggests that loss of biodiversity and ecosystem degradation are key factors in zoonosis disease risk. As seventy-five percent of all emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, the current pandemic is an opportune time to consider “nature for health”.

Following the Resolutions of the United Nations Environment Assembly and commitments made under Multilateral Environment Agreements, the United Nations Environment Programme has prioritised commitment to Covid-19 response and recovery in an environmental context. For example, to combat this pandemic and to prevent future ones, the “One Health” approach – which

means integrating human, animal and environmental health expertise and policy – is being used by countries and UN agencies including UNEP. Under this approach, conservation and wildlife experts, livestock experts and veterinarians, healthcare and public health professionals, and policy makers all work together to detect and limit zoonotic risks.

Under the initiative titled “Towards a Pollution-Free Planet”, UNEP are re-emphasising that air pollution, already responsible for more than 4.5 million deaths in the Asia Pacific Region annually¹, exacerbates vulnerability to Covid-19, with one study showing that very small increases in long term exposure to pollutants of PM2.5 are associated with a 15 percent increase in the Covid-19 death rate². UNEP has also pivoted towards providing technical expertise and advice on more sustainable management of infectious and hazardous waste, and the management of increased disposable PPE and single use plastic use as they pollute our land, waterways and oceans in our current context.

UNEP are also accelerating innovation under our global environmental governance mandate, by adopting virtual channels for facilitation. This is particularly important as some countries are “relaxing” environmental laws and regulations at this time without fully considering the potential long-term impacts of this. Finally, UNEP is working closely with partners building scientific knowledge on the links between ecosystem, land and water health, climate change, and human health with a focus on zoonotic disease risk.

Political, institutional and individual commitments to environment and health are called for at the regional, national and local levels if we are to achieve a Covid-19 recovery in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement. One example of this commitment is the Asia Pacific Regional Forum on Health and Environment. This forum increases synergy and cooperation between 51 countries around health and environmental links. The strong leadership demonstrated by the Government of the Philippines as the recent Forum chair and by The Government of Indonesia as the new chair, has resulted in the Manila Declaration on Health and Environment, the global resolution on Environment and Health that was adopted at the third UN Environment Assembly, and calls for “strategic health and environment action on national development to achieve the SDGs”.

As an example, UNEP and WHO ‘Environment and Health Initiative’ in India has been endorsed by their Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). The initiative has four broad pillars: (1) leveraging scientific

¹ UNEP - <https://www.unenvironment.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/restoring-clean-air>

² <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>

evidence to guide policy and decision making (2) building government and civil society capacity (3) advocating for change through effective communication strategies and (4) promoting leadership and governance on environmental health in India. In addition, as countries in South-east Asia complete National Action Plans on antimicrobial resistance (AMR), UNEP continues to build the science base that can help to minimize environmental factors of AMR risk.

In summary, human activity has altered virtually every corner of our planet. And as we continue to relentlessly encroach on nature and degrade ecosystems, it is clear that we are endangering human health. UNEP thanks the Ministers of the South-East Asian Region who are contributing to forums such as this and leading the way on a Covid-19 response and recovery pathway that will ensure fewer human health risks in the future.

And that, of course, remains the future we all want.

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