UNEP's Input to the Secretary-General's Report on Implementation of the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027)

Progress made in implementing the inter-agency, system-wide plan of action for eradicating poverty during 2020

General Assembly Resolution A/Res/75/230 of 30 December 2020 requested the Secretary-General to report at its seventy-sixth session on the gaps, challenges and progress made by the UN System-wide plan of action on the implementation of the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027). Third Decade is built on the momentum generated by the Second Decade towards poverty eradication which aimed at creating markets that work better for people living in poverty.

This United Nations Environment Programme's contribution to the SG's report includes the impact of COVID-19, its effects and responses during 2020. It makes significant policy recommendations and illustrates how UNEP responded to the pandemic and how environment and poverty eradication are inter-inked. It also demonstrates how improving environmental sustainability can significantly reduce poverty. The input highlights cooperation within the UN System-wide and partner organizations in mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-covid recovery strategy.

Gaps and Challenges

According to UN reports, the regional per capita gross domestic product growth in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean are below the rates needed to eradicate poverty. Human health, safety and well-being – particularly for women and children – have become an ever-present threat. The COVID-19 pandemic has paralyzed economic activities and increased vulnerabilities, especially in low-income households.

The fall of global GDP by 8% in 2020 (US$ 8.5 trillion) erased nearly all output gains of the previous years under the SDGs (2015-2019). The UN estimates that before the COVID-19 pandemic, up to 1.3 billion people lived under multidimensional poverty conditions, of which 174 million were unemployed (UN Statistics, 2020). Associated with these poverty conditions are lack of policy coherence; uncoordinated approaches to project design, development and implementation; and the absence of multi-stakeholder partnerships.

When WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, the UN estimated an additional 115 million will be pulled back into poverty during 2020. This was in addition to the 88 million already living under extreme poverty conditions of hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity. Further estimates showed hungry people will rise from 687.8 million (2019) in their millions during the pandemic. Therefore, programmatic adjustments in response to the crisis had to be made to maintain the momentum of project implementation.

COVID-19 crisis revealed stark realities of social, economic and environmental inequalities in the world, especially in developing countries. It also exposed how investment and innovation in the social sector was inadequate – particularly for quality education and universal health – both of which have a bearing on poverty. The imperative to develop and enhance human resources as a contribution to poverty alleviation has become clear.

The Covid-19 crisis exacerbated ongoing gaps and challenges in eradicating poverty. From the environmental perspective, these include the need for clearer recognition of how unsustainable management of the environment is a major driver of poverty in many developing countries and how more sustainable management can significantly contribute to poverty reduction. A pre-covid study in Malawi demonstrated how environmental unsustainability costs 5.3% of GDP and is a major cause of poverty[1]. In Rwanda a cost-benefit analysis had demonstrated how constructing 30 sustainable villages would reduce the extreme poverty rate of 16.3% by 0.71%, with an 8.9% internal rate of return[2.]. Poverty analysis in Mozambique demonstrated that extreme weather events can lead to a decline of up to 24-30% in per capita food consumption[3].

Response and Key Activities

UNEP joined global efforts to alleviate suffering of billions of people from the effects of the pandemic and help Member States build back better and increase resilience to future crises. Its scientific community established that indeed the COVID-19 is of zoonotic origins from human interactions with wildlife. This provided the impetus to revisit our relationship with nature, to restore biodiversity, address challenges of climate change, and pollution.

UNEP partnered with Member States to build back functioning economies that will work in harmony with nature. It jointly designed sustainable and inclusive recovery strategies to mitigate current and future shocks and rolled out interventions through processes captured in the www.unep.org/covid-19-updates, and described below.

- UNEP generated knowledge, shared relevant information and created awareness on medical waste management under the medical and humanitarian emergency phase. It supported countries to develop new policies and legal frameworks to manage COVID-19 contaminated waste, and where feasible, its associated infrastructure.

- UNEP provided improved science and policy options to better understand and respond to zoonotic threats under its phase on transformational change for nature and people. The science-policy nexus emphasized the imperative to invest in nature for improved human health, sustainable economic growth, poverty reduction and livelihood recovery. UNEP also provided technical support on advocacy to ensure progress on environmental issues within global processes.

- UNEP in partnership with FAO established a multi-partner Trust Fund for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Launched in 2021, the ecosystem decade provides a platform

1 Yaron, G., R. Mangani, J. Mlava, P. Kambewa, S. Makungwa, A. Mtethiwa, S. Munthali, W. Mgoola, and J. Kazembe (2011). Economic Study: Economic Analysis of Sustainable Natural Resource Use in Malawi. United Nations Development Programme – Malawi and United Nations Environment Programme.
2 Maradan, D., Ecosys SA).; (2017). Assessment of The Economic, Social and Environment Benefits of The Rubaya Green Village in Gicumbi District, Rwanda, And Benefits of Project Replication. REMA, UNDP Rwanda and UNEP.
3 World Bank (2018) Extreme Weather and Household Well-being: Evidence from Multiple Shocks in Mozambique. Baez et al.

and strategy to restore global biodiversity. It is expected to transform agriculture and global food systems. Other funds that have joined in this initiative include: Euro Seed Capital Assistance Facility for Forest and Landscape Restoration; Community Based Resilience Fund; Climate Funders Alliance; and Corporates for Nature Initiatives.

- UNEP enhanced its engagement in the 10-Year Framework of Programme on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns as part of its goal to invest in building back better in terms of the next generation of social, ecological and productive infrastructure, including creation of new green jobs. This strategy links recovery efforts with clean energy transition, nature-based solutions - targeting high-carbon and resource-intensive sectors in a bid to deliver on the climate promise.

- UNEP continued to capture the economic value of nature through standardized accounting systems as agreed by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) through the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) for Experimental Ecosystem Accounting (SEEA EEA) and reinforce the role of national statistical offices.

- UNEP embraced poverty reduction and mainstreamed it in Medium-Term Strategy (2022-2025). Through the MTS, UNEP will focus on providing inclusive wealth statistics to better inform the links between natural assets, poverty, and inequality and enhance the capacity of Member States to deliver the 2030 Agenda.

- UNEP worked with member states to modernize global environmental governance. Its advisory shifted investments and subsidies towards nature-based and climate-neutral strategies in ministries of finance. It also led by example, by migrating its activities onto e-platforms, and successfully hosted major meetings virtually. The fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) was held virtually in February 2021 to adopt the UNEP Medium-Term Strategy (2022-2025) and its Programme of Work and Budget.

- The ongoing joint UNEP and UNDP Poverty-Environment Action for Sustainable Development Goals (PEA) programme is specifically designed to address the poverty-environment nexus, based on substantive evidence of how unsustainable management of the environment is a driver of poverty in many countries. The project supports governments in five countries in Africa and five in the Asia Pacific region to mainstream environmental sustainability into national, sector and subnational development plans, budgets and other investments in a manner that contributes to poverty reduction. It also supports South-South cooperation to do so. (www.pea4sdgs.org).

- For example, the UNDP-UNEP organized South-South Cooperation events for the Poverty-Environment Action countries, including a High-Level Forum in Bangladesh in May 2021 on knowledge exchange for SDGs, consultation on resource mobilization with private sector, and civil society engagement to promote a 'whole of the society' approach

Key Observations

1. The COVID-19 crisis stagnated global economy, triggered economic slowdown of emerging nations, and increased vulnerabilities of least developed countries. The social

protection fabrics on health services, food security, education, and infrastructure were disrupted and torn apart. For example, up to 1.5 billion children and young people were out of school during 2020 owing to closure of educational institutions.

2. The COVID-19 crisis exposed gender disparities and vulnerabilities in communities, including dimension of feminized poverty in societies of the global south. Therefore, promotion of gender equality and mobilization of financial and non-financial resources is critical in keeping small enterprises afloat amidst the pandemic. UNEP worked with Member States to address this challenge under the Poverty-Environment Action project.

3. The eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is an indispensable requirement for women's economic empowerment and sustainable development. In least developed countries, the link between women's empowerment, climate resilience and increasing agricultural productivity is strongly evidenced by the UNDP-UNEP-UN Women work on measuring the cost of the gender gap in agricultural productivity.

4. The COVID-19 experience has demonstrated that knowledge sharing, continuous policy dialogue, facilitated synergies, resource mobilization, and access to technical assistance through cooperation can provide lasting solutions to avert similar crisis, and enable the global community to recover from the effects of COVID-19 as economies rebound.

5. Reinvigorating the global partnership for sustainable development in support of the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, in particular the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, can be promoted through furthering the UNEP and UNDP collaboration on Poverty-Environment nexus and policy coherence.

Recommendations and Key Policy Messages

It is recommended that governments and the UN System substantively increase efforts to improve environmental sustainability and resilience in a manner that will substantially contribute to poverty reduction by:

1. Assessing the linkages between poverty, environment and resilience at national, sector and sub-national levels as an integral part of policy planning and implementation processes targeting at reducing poverty.

2. Substantively increasing appropriate investments in environmental sustainability, resilience building, targeting eradication of multi-dimensional poverty.

3. Being consistent with UN Reform, increasing joint programming by UN agencies to reflect the inter-linkages between the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development and thereby effectively contribute to poverty eradication. The UNDP-UNEP PEA is a model to be emulated for such joint programming.