

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Committee Overview

National Model United Nations

Introduction

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was created in 1972 at the UN Conference on Human Environment in Sweden. Six months later, it was then established by the General Assembly as the main authority on environmental issues, encouraging environmentally friendly policies and practices, as well as ensuring that other UN entities consider the environmental impact of their actions.¹ Twenty years after the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (1992) was adopted, the UN Convention on Sustainable Development called for a strengthened UN Environment Programme (UNEP). The governing Council of UNEP adopted the resolution 27/2 to expand the Governing Council, allowing universal membership. Through resolution 67/251, the General Assembly (GA) became the UN Environment Assembly. The UNEA is the governing body of the UNEP and has had four universal sessions, the most recent being in Nairobi, Kenya in 2019. UN Environment reports to the GA as well as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

UNEP served as the secretariat for and contributed to the planning and execution of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. The UNCED resulted in the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* and *Agenda 21*. These documents largely revolutionized the approach to environmental issues and provided guidance in UNEP's role in international cooperation. The UNCED was a major turning point for international cooperation to protect biodiversity and the climate. The *Convention on Biological Diversity* (1992) and the *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change* (1992) were both opened for signature at the conference.

Governance, Structure, and Membership

In 2013, the UNEA replaced the UNEP's former Governing Council of 58 members. The membership of UNEA is universal with 193 members, and all Member States and permanent observers may attend sessions. The UNEA meets every other year to discuss the agenda, challenges, and to provide guidance to the UNEP. The UNEP Secretariat supports the UNEA and has a rotating President, three Vice Presidents, and a Rapporteur. The Committee of Permanent Representatives is a subsidiary body of the UNEA that prepares for UNEA sessions, monitors how their decisions have been implemented, and meets at least three to four times annually. This committee is an important link between the UNEP and national governments.²

¹ UN Environment Programme, What UNEP Does.

² UN Environment Programme, United Nations Environment Programme Organization Profile, 2006.

The UN Regular Budget provides 5% of all UNEP funding; this supports internal operations and functions of the secretariat along with coordination and cooperation with other global operations. 16% of its funding comes from the Environment Fund, which is funded voluntarily by Member States. The majority of the funding comes from earmarked contributions which are tied to specific projects or themes and are also funded voluntarily by Member States.

UN Environment is headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, and also has six global offices that work on regional issues. Each office has annual Regional Consultation Meetings in which representatives of civil society organizations and stakeholders engage in dialogue surrounding environmental policy. Regional offices then take information from these meetings to the next UNEA meeting for further discussion.

Mandate, Functions, and Powers

The adoption of GA Resolution 2997 in 1972 established the UNEP. Its mandate is: to “promote international and regional environmental cooperation, develop environmental policy, highlight global and regional problems, facilitate the transfer of scientific knowledge, assist developing Member States in environmental matters, review reports of the Executive Director, and approve the annual program on the allocation of the Environmental Fund.”³ *Agenda 21* expanded the mandate by creating priority areas and called for the program to achieve greater expertise and funding. In October 1998, the General Assembly announced recommendations that would modify the mandate of the UNEA. Following this, the UN Environment Executive Director was placed in charge of a new committee: The Environment Management Group. This was created to coordinate access to relevant information as well as findings regarding the environment to ensure cost-effective and efficient allocation of resources. The *Nairobi Declaration* was adopted to reaffirm the UNEA’s authority in mandate. The *Nairobi Declaration* realigned UN Environment’s mandate to create a more modern and technological approach, resulting in a significant increase in the use of scientific methods and evidence in the UNEP.⁴

The UNEA sets the priorities of and makes strategic decisions for the UNEP, provides guidance for state and regional policies, and promotes science-based policies. The UNEP monitors the environment under the direction of the UNEA and shares information with stakeholders. The UNEP also works to develop international environmental laws. The UNEP often partners with other UN entities like the FAO and ECOSOC, as well as international organizations, national governments, non-governmental organizations, and the media.

³ UN Environment Programme, UNEP Governance Structure

⁴ UN Environment Programme, 1997-Nairobi Declaration redefines and strengthens UNEP’s role and mandate

Recent Sessions and Current Priorities

Recently, the Medium-Term Strategy 2018-2021 was adopted, which established seven thematic priorities: climate change; resilience to disasters and conflicts; healthy and productive ecosystems; environmental governance; chemicals, waste, and air quality; resource efficiency; and environment under review. The most recent session was guided by “Innovative Solutions for Environmental Challenges and Sustainable Consumption and Production” and focused on environmental challenges related to poverty and natural resource management, life-cycle approaches to environmental issues, and innovative sustainable business development.

During UNEA-4, Member States focused on devising innovative solutions to environmental issues as well as promoting sustainable consumption and production. Recent sessions have also developed strategies such as life-cycle approaches to resource efficiency to better support the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production. The Executive Director also recently published a report on innovative solutions. As a result of the 2030 Agenda, the responsibility of the UNEP has shifted to addressing environmental protection in a more integrated approach with sustainability. This has been reflected in Medium Term Strategy 2018-2021, which created five operating principles that guide actions and decisions. For 2030, the UNEP has the goal of building upon the benefits of sustainable natural resource use for sustainable development, reducing social and economic cost through improvements in sustainability, and increasing the well-being of marginalized populations.

As a result of the *2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development*, the UNEP’s responsibility shifted to addressing environmental protection with an integrated approach rather than addressing issues individually.⁵ The UNEP has assessed that 86 of the 169 targets of the Sustainable Development Goals have to do with environmental sustainability. The move towards an integrated approach has been illustrated by the *Medium-Term Strategy 2018-2021*.⁶ The UNEP envisions building upon benefits of sustainable natural resource use, reduction of social and economic cost, and increasing well-being of marginalized populations for 2030. To work towards this, five operating principles were created under the *Medium-Term Strategy 2018-2021* that guide decisions and actions. These principles are: adoption of a globally coherent and locally responsive approach, use of results-based management, development of synergy resulting from strategic partnerships between stakeholders, strengthening of regional presence to better match the efforts to the needs of regions, and the addition of environment-related frameworks in related UN entities’ thematic or functional areas.

Conclusion

The UNEP is the main body that has the purpose of establishing international standards for environmental policy, facilitating the transfer of scientific knowledge, and promoting international and regional environmental cooperation. The UNEP has recently shifted focus to an integrated approach on advancing the sustainable development goals and continues to address

⁵ UN General Assembly, Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1), 2015.

⁶ UN Environment Programme, Medium-Term Strategy 2018-2021

issues related to environmental protection. In future sessions, the UNEP will likely continue to focus on creating innovative solutions to environmental protection and promote a coherent global approach when addressing environmental issues.