

**Written Statement of UNEP for the Thematic Session on Promoting the
Principles of the Aarhus Convention in International Fora**

**24th meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention
(29 October 2020)**

Prepared by UNEP, October 6, 2020

1. Status of UNEP's Access-to-Information Policy

The Governing Council of UNEP, at its twenty-seventh and first universal session held in February 2013, decided in Paragraph 17 of decision 27/2 to enhance transparency and openness in its work, and in this regard requested the UNEP Executive Director to establish a written Access-to-Information Policy. On January 28, 2016, the Executive Director of UNEP established the new policy (see: <https://bit.ly/2HRS7Zi>).

Also in the period under review, the number of formal information requests received remains to be rather modest. A reason for this is that most information held by UNEP is accessible during the organization's website.

2. Stakeholder Engagement Policy

In response to "The Future We Want" (Paragraph 88h) and decision 27/2 of UNEP's Governing Council at its first universal session in February 2013, UNEP had put in place a process of developing a new Stakeholder Engagement Policy, for endorsement by the 2 United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). No conclusion was reached by member states so far, neither during the 2014, nor the 2016 session of the Environment Assembly. During the third and fourth sessions of the Assembly, held in 2017 and 2019, no new text of the policy was tabled. It is also not envisaged that the policy will be discussed during UNEA 5.

While a new Stakeholder Engagement Policy was not formally agreed upon by Member States or adopted by the Executive Director, the United Nations Environment Programme has made significant efforts to reflect in its day to day relationships with Major Groups the spirit of the Rio +20 outcome document and those elements of the draft stakeholder engagement policy that Member States agreed upon during the discussions on a new Stakeholder Engagement Policy.

A revised version of UNEP's Stakeholder Engagement Handbook that describes the latest practices of Stakeholder Engagement at UNEP is available here: <https://bit.ly/3iAGM00>



Furthermore, the United Nations Environment Programme continues to have a dedicated unit (Civil Society Unit) within its Governance Affairs Office to facilitate the engagement of Major Groups and Stakeholders, including by providing financial support to participate in meetings and events (see <https://bit.ly/3lu5v8v>).

The United Nations Environment Programme continues to have a Private Sector Unit to enhance the relationship of the organization with the private sector. Information about UNEP's new Private Sector Engagement Strategy is available here: <https://bit.ly/3jBjNmW>. Currently a new UNEP Partnership Policy is in its pilot phase.

In the daily application of the current rules and practices for stakeholder engagement, UNEP still faces the problem that existing opportunities for participation and engagement are not fully utilized by civil society actors, who seem to mainly focus on major meetings such as the Environment Assembly. For instance, draft working documents of UNEP's Committee of Permanent Representatives are shared with Major Groups for input, at the same time when Member States receive these documents. Still, response and input from Major Groups on these documents remains limited.

Overall it can be stated that the United Nations Environment Programme continues to have all mechanisms in place that represent a modern, open, transparent and participatory approach towards engagement of Major Groups and Stakeholders, reflecting best practices in multi-lateral institutions.

3. Participation of Major Groups and Stakeholders in the United Nations Environment Assembly

Participation of Major Groups and Stakeholders on the United Nations Environment Assembly is governed by Rule 70 of the Rules of Procedures of the United Nations Environment Assembly which is operationalized by UNEP's Stakeholder Engagement Handbook (see above).

The fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, to be held in February 2021 and possibly adjourning in February 2022, will be open to all accredited civil society organization

(currently approx. 600) to participate in all meetings and to provide written and oral input, independent of the form of the meetings (online or physical). In case UNEA 5 is held (partly) as a physical meeting, UNEP will provide travel support for key representatives from civil society to participate in the event.

A multi-stakeholder dialogue during the high-level segment of the agenda provided a unique opportunity for dialogue between Major Groups and high-level decision makers.

Asked, how they would you rate their experience at UNEA-4, survey participants from civil society answered:

In addition to the official sessions of UNEA 5, it is envisaged to hold the following events that provided opportunities for non-governmental stakeholders to engage with decision makers:

- Global Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum, which facilitates the participation of civil society in the Environment Assembly and associated meetings
- Green tent, an open space for civil society and their events
- Faith for Earth Dialogue
- The open-ended meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives
- Global Science-Policy-Business Forum on the Environment
- The Sustainable Innovation Expo
- Global Environmental Youth Assembly

The format of these meetings depends on the COVID 19 situation. Some of them might be held as online meetings, prior to UNEA 5 sessions, but not necessarily back to back.

4. COVID 19 Response

In response to COVID 19, from March 2020 all UNEP intergovernmental and other meetings were held as online events. This is still the case to date.

In moving to online events, UNEP ensured that all planned meetings took place and that MGS did have full access to these meetings.

In June 2020, UNEP, in close cooperation with the Norwegian UNEA Presidency and ForUM Norway, organized one of the first *online* Fora “Act #ForNature” that brought together citizens, government and non-governmental organizations, businesses and scientific institutions from around the globe to engage in a series of open and inclusive discussions across a diverse range of topics from healthy ecosystems and marine plastics to global food systems, youth and more. All discussed topics were related to UNEA 5, which has the theme “Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goal” (see <https://bit.ly/3iBs7lg>).

This Forum confirmed that it is possible to hold effective online meetings that are participatory and at the same time have a smaller environmental footprint than physical meetings.

UNEP plans to continue the practice of organizing online events instead of physical meetings also after the end of the COVID pandemic.

While a final decision is not taken to date, it is likely that due to COVID 19, UNEA 5 will be held in 2 sessions:

- Online session in February 2021 where a few key decisions will be taken, e.g. UNEP’s

budget, Program of Work, Medium Term Strategy

- Physical session later in 2021 or early 2022, where important decisions and resolutions in relation the theme of the Assembly will be adopted.

Accredited Major Groups and Stakeholders will have full access to these sessions.

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