

Committee of the Permanent Representatives
Subcommittee meeting
Nairobi, 15 May 2025
09:00 – 12:00 and 13:00-16:00 (GMT+3)
Hybrid meeting
Conference Room 4 (in person)
and Microsoft Teams (online)

Agenda Item 4. Briefing on the environment and health nexus: promoting environmental and health outcomes.

This background document has been developed by the Secretariat to inform the Committee about the linkages between environment and health, including the recent and upcoming developments in One Health and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). It also highlights the opportunities that the Fourth High-level Meeting on NCDs and Mental Health presents for advocating and advancing government and development partners action on environmental determinants and risks.

Following the presentation, the Committee is invited to take note of the briefing and engage in an exchange of views with Committee members and the Secretariat.

Briefing to the Committee of Permanent Representatives of UNEP

Environment and Health Nexus: Promoting environmental and health outcomes

15 May 2025

This briefing aims to describe the linkages between environment and health, ongoing action, and recent and upcoming developments, including the Wastewater Surveillance for Africa and the [Fourth High-level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases and Mental Health](#). The briefing is not exhaustive given the breadth of work being implemented by UNEP in support of the environment and health linkages through its project portfolio.

The briefing will be presented by UNEP, Jacqueline Alvarez, Chief, Chemicals and Health Branch, of Industry and Economy Division, complemented by the Head of the WHO-led secretariat of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases, Dr. Nick Banatvala.

[PART I – Environment and health linkages and ongoing work](#)

[1. Environment and health linkages](#)

The environment is a major determinant of health, and the overall disease burden from environmental risk factors and associated economic costs, remains unacceptably high, posing a threat for sustainable development. Human health is directly affected by the nexus elements of **biodiversity**, water, food and climate change, with worsening outcomes from several communicable and non-communicable diseases linked to biodiversity loss, unhealthy diets, lack of clean water, **pollution and climate change**, among other causes (IPBES, 2024).

Biodiversity loss reduces natural barriers that prevent the transmission of pathogens from animals to humans, reduces ecosystem resilience, and increases the vulnerability of remaining species, including humans, to a wide range of diseases, notably zoonoses. **Climate change** places a significant burden on human health and health systems, leading to extreme heat, extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and exacerbates global biodiversity loss, all of which increase the risk of vector-borne and zoonotic diseases. **Pollution, harmful chemicals and unsound waste management** impose a heavy human health burden, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities and driving up healthcare and other costs associated with adverse impacts.

There is **ample evidence** of the impacts of environmental degradation in terms of death and disability and economic losses, including from **air pollution, harmful chemicals** and **antimicrobial resistance**, for which the environment, and certain forms of pollution, play a key role (UNEP, 2023a). Impacts from chemical pollution are likely to be underestimated, as a comprehensive burden of disease would need to consider all exposure pathways. **Extreme weather events and extreme heat** also have a huge toll in terms of deaths, which will be exacerbated if climate change is not abated. In addition, over 1.7 billion people still **lack access to sanitation services**, leading to exposure to diseases and premature deaths (UNEP, 2023b).

Children and women are among the most affected; children are vulnerable to air pollution and environmental toxins, which impair lung development and cause neurological damage. The increasing concentrations of nitrates in groundwater, caused by the leaching of fertilizers and industrial, animal, and human waste, pose significant health risks when present in drinking water, particularly for children under five years old. Women, especially pregnant women, are at heightened risk from pollution and extreme climate events. For example, air pollution increases the risks of low

birthweight, preterm births, and maternal mortality. In many countries, women and children are also exposed to untreated wastewater with the risk of diseases coming from the contact with polluted water and food grown with the same (UNEP, 2023b). Economic loss from environmental risks is also significant; as an example, air pollution exposure alone costed the world between US\$4.5 trillion and US\$6.1, or 4.7 percent and 6.5 percent of global GDP (World Bank, 2025).

The interlinkages between environmental risks and health have been increasingly recognized in various global policy processes, including the **United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)**. UNEA Resolutions 3/4 on Environment and Health and 5/6 on Biodiversity and Health stress the links between environmental challenges and action and health, encouraging action to address the links between human, animal and ecosystem health. Resolution 3/10 also stressed how essential water from terrestrial, coastal and marine sources is for human health, well-being and livelihoods, and ecosystem functioning and related services.

UNEP's **Medium-Term Strategy 2022–2025** recognizes the environment-health nexus and promotes action to achieve positive environment and health outcomes, including through the One Health approach. **Multilateral environmental agreements**, including the Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm, and Minamata Conventions address chemicals and issues that are critical to health. The **Global Framework on Chemicals** with its vision for “a planet free of harm from chemicals and waste for a safe, healthy and sustainable future” and its multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach, will play a key role in this direction. These, together with the expected outcomes of ongoing negotiations mandated by UNEA Resolution 5/14 “End Plastic Pollution: Towards an International Legally Binding Instrument” and 5/8 on a “Science-policy Panel to Contribute Further to the Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste and to Prevent Pollution” are key to eliminating chemical and waste-related harm for a safe and sustainable future.

The draft **WHO Pandemic Agreement**, finalized on 16 April 2025 after three years of negotiations, is set to be submitted for adoption by the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2025. The instrument includes a One Health approach to pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response. UNEP plays a critical role in supporting and promoting the integration of environmental considerations into policies and actions designed to prevent future pandemics.

2. **Environment and Health Nexus action**

Implementing global mandates, applying key principles and approaches and continuing to bridge the gap between the health and environmental communities by fostering collaboration among environmental and health organizations, practitioners, and Ministers of Health and the Environment are essential strategies to advance in the direction of achieving mutually reinforcing environmental and health benefits. A key approach is the **One Health approach**, which recognizes the interconnectedness of the health of humans, animals and –the environment, and emphasizes the need for a coherent, integrated, coordinated, and collaborative effort among all relevant organizations, sectors, and stakeholders to address issues such as zoonotic diseases and antimicrobial resistance, among others.

Over the years, various **international and regional initiatives have emerged to foster environment and health collaboration**. Examples include the [Quadripartite partnership on One Health](#), where UNEP plays a critical role in supporting and promoting the integration of environmental considerations into policies and actions designed to address key issues including prevention of zoonotic diseases and antimicrobial resistance and to mainstream the environment in all One

Health efforts, as part of the [One Health Global Plan of Action](#), and as a member of various governance bodies. The [United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Non-communicable Diseases](#), the Issue Management Group set up to implement the [UN Common Approach towards a pollution-free planet](#) are other examples of interagency efforts addressing issues at the interface of environment and health. Regional processes such as [the Asia Pacific regional Forum on Health and the Environment](#), [the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Europe](#), and [the Libreville declaration in Africa](#) aim to advance environment and health results.

UNEP leads and contributes to several joint programmatic efforts addressing the environment and health nexus, including:

- **Air Pollution:** UNEP is working in close collaboration with key agencies including WHO, UNICEF, UNECE, UNESCAP and WMO, through joint knowledge generation, advocacy efforts, and initiatives including the revitalization of the WHO, CCAC, UNEP and the World Bank's BreatheLife Campaign that is showcasing solutions and building awareness of emerging evidence of the health impacts of air pollution. UNEP/CCAC, actively contributed to the WHO-led Second Global Conference on Air pollution & Health in Cartagena, Colombia where the [Global Air Quality Network](#) and the [Africa Clean Air Programme](#) were launched, as requested by UNEA6/10 Resolution. UNEP supports member states with integrated packages—including knowledge sharing, sectoral actions, legislative frameworks, and global and regional cooperation—to enhance air quality strategies and address major sources of air pollution. Air pollution is also a critical focus area of the United Nations Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of NCDs (UNIATF) and recognized as a significant risk factor for NCDs and ranked as the second leading cause of NCD-related deaths after tobacco smoking which will be discussed in detail in the next section of this brief.
- **Wastewater and Nutrient Pollution:** UNEP works on sustainable wastewater and nutrient management to prevent their adverse effects on the terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments, and on air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, as mandated by UNEA Resolutions 3/10, 4/14 and 5/2. This is a crucial area of work as wastewater and nutrient pollution contribute to biodiversity loss and human health risks (such as blue baby syndrome), ozone depletion and climate change. The UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen, with 96 member States nominate focal points, has been promoting an integrated approach to address nitrogen pollution, including the development of national action plans (NAP) for sustainable nitrogen management, in 2024, UNEP has supported Sri Lanka and Trinidad and Tobago in developing such plans.
- **Wastewater surveillance,** to enhance ecosystem and public health is another critical area of UNEP's work. UNEP is currently implementing the Wastewater Surveillance for Africa (WWS) Initiative, with the generous contribution of EU, providing capacity on how to enhance or establish wastewater surveillance systems to African countries. The main deliverables include a roadmap, a harmonized approach for wastewater surveillance, training, communication products and capacity building for key transportation hubs such as airports and ports.
- **Wastewater and Health in conflicts:** UNEP in collaboration with UNEP-DHI Center for Water and Environment, with the support of Danish Government, is providing technical assistance to Ukraine laying the foundations for Sustainable Wastewater for green recovery / building back better, considered as a key component of environmental and health nexus in the country.

- **Biodiversity and health:** the 16th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP16) adopted the Global action Plan on Biodiversity and Health in 2024. The Plan calls for mainstreaming biodiversity and health interlinkages into national policies, strategies, programmes, and accounts. UNEP's initiative Nature for Health (N4H) is a concrete mean of implementation of the Global Action Plan providing support to countries to tackle environmental considerations of zoonotic diseases with pandemic potential at the national level through a systemic approach.
- **Climate and health:** UNEP In collaboration with other UN agencies, contributed to the UN Secretary General's Call to Action on Extreme Heat, providing scientific evidence on Climate Change influence over extreme weathers and its implications beyond the environmental sector, including human health, social development and welfare outcomes.
- **Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR):** UNEP, as a key member of the Quadripartite Joint Secretariat on AMR (QJS) alongside FAO, WHO, and WOA, played a key role to advancing global efforts to tackle AMR known as a "silent pandemic". In 2024, the second High-Level Meeting on AMR at the UNGA produced a Political Declaration targeting a 10% reduction in global deaths from bacterial AMR by 2030 (based on 4.95 million deaths in 2019), and committed to a multisectoral approach integrating human health, agriculture, animal, and environmental interventions to address AMR's complex, cross-cutting nature. This meeting was followed by the fourth Global High-Level Ministerial Conference on AMR which adopted the Jeddah Commitments that reiterated priority actions from the 79th UNGA High-Level Meeting political declaration on AMR and further specified mechanisms to translate the UNGA political declaration into action, including call for the establishment of an Independent Panel for Evidence on Action Against AMR.

References:

- IPBES (2024). Thematic Assessment Report on the Interlinkages among Biodiversity, Water, Food and Health of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Harrison, P. A., McElwee, P. D., and van Huysen, T. L. (eds.). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13850054>
- United Nations Environment Programme (2023a). Bracing for Superbugs: Strengthening environmental action in the One Health response to antimicrobial resistance. Nairobi, Kenya.
- United Nations Environment Programme (2023b). Wastewater – Turning Problem to Solution. A UNEP Rapid Response Assessment. Nairobi. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/43142>
- World Bank (2025). Accelerating access to Clean Air for a Liveable Planet (English) Washington, D.C: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099032625132535486>.

PART II – The Fourth High-level Meeting on the Prevention and Control of NCDs and the Promotion of Mental Health and Well-being

Briefing by the Secretariat of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases

The fourth high-level meeting on NCDs is scheduled for **25 September 2025** during the 80th United Nations General Assembly in New York.¹ The theme is *equity and integration: transforming lives and livelihoods through leadership and action on NCDs and the promotion of mental health and well-being*.

The 2018 political declaration included air pollution as a fifth shared risk factor.²

A [modalities resolution](#) outlines the scope and format of the high-level meeting, including the decision for a concise and action-oriented political declaration agreed in advance by consensus through intergovernmental negotiations. The meeting will consist of two multistakeholder panels: (i) tackling the determinants of NCDs and mental health through multisectoral governance and collaborative action; and (ii) reshaping and strengthening health systems and financing to meet the needs of those affected by NCDs and mental health conditions.

The [preparatory process](#) has included global and regional events, including briefings for Member States and non-state actors in New York and Geneva, an [international dialogue on sustainable financing](#) for NCDs and mental health, the second [global conference on air pollution and health](#), the [small island developing states ministerial conference](#) on NCDs and mental health, and a series of dialogues for New York missions, including one on environmental risk factors.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases, are responsible for the majority of global deaths annually (over 43 million deaths, with 18 million dying prematurely – before the age of 70 years) and also cause the majority of morbidity and disability.

[NCDs, air pollution and climate change are major health crises of this century](#). Of the 7 million deaths caused by air pollution, 85% are due to NCDs. Climate change is impacting human health with extreme heat worsening health risks for those with chronic conditions, droughts and floods driving food insecurity and malnutrition, and extreme weather events disrupting access to medications and healthcare services. Exposure to harmful chemicals in the air, water, and soil increases the risk of serious diseases, including cancer, as well as cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses.

To support countries in tackling NCDs, the UN Secretary-General established the [UN NCD Task Force](#) in 2013. It brings together 46 UN agencies to advance action on NCD-related Sustainable Development Goals and reports to the UN Economic and Social Council.

To support Member States negotiate the political declaration, the Secretary-General has provided the General Assembly with a [report on progress since 2018](#).

WHO is encouraging Member States to agree a political declaration that:

- is concise and action oriented. Ambitious but realistic. Above all, based on evidence.
- emphasizes the impact of NCDs and mental health conditions on human capital and the drag on national economies.

¹ The three previous high-meetings were in [2011](#), [2014](#), and [2018](#)

² The other four being four being tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol

- is positive, emphasizing that progress has been made, and if more is done, we can go a long way to meet national and global targets, and that this will contribute significantly to economic growth.
- focuses on a set of granular interventions where we can make rapid progress, while highlighting key enabling functions such as governance, finance and strengthening health systems.
- emphasizes the need for action across all age groups.