

Opening of the resumed third session of the ad hoc open-ended working group on a science-policy panel to contribute further to the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution (SPP OEWG 3.2)

Your Excellency Edgardo Ortuño, Minister of Environment of Uruguay,
Madame Chair, Ms. Gudi Alkemade,
Excellencies and distinguished delegates,

My thanks to the government of Uruguay for hosting us here in the beautiful city of Punta del Este for the resumed third session of the ad hoc open-ended working group on a science-policy panel on chemicals, waste and pollution prevention. And, of course, for the Intergovernmental Meeting that is planned to immediately follow and consider the establishment of the panel.

My deep thanks also go to all delegates, who are tasked with filling a critical science-policy gap. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides us with the state of science on climate. The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) provides us with the state of science on biodiversity and ecosystem services. But the pollution and waste challenge has lacked a science body for too long. This is why governments, at the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) in March 2022, adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of the science-policy panel on which you have been deliberating.

As you may recall, I stood in front of you one year ago to make some suggestions on how to move forward with a slim foundational document for this panel. Unfortunately, there was not enough time to resolve all the issues – which is why we are here today at this resumed session.

And please let me be clear: we really are now out of time. Every year without a strong global scientific body is another year in which countries that may not have easy access to the best peer-reviewed science on chemicals, waste and pollution struggle to address the challenge of managing pollution. By working together, reviewing the best science and making this science universally available, we can reduce the exposure and harm that chemicals and waste cause to people and to the environment. So, let's agree that what lies ahead in the negotiations over the coming days is entirely doable. We can and we must see this panel established.

To achieve this, it is critical that we agree the foundational elements upon which the substance can be built. So, what should this foundation look like? To answer this question,

please allow me to return to the key points. Some of these points I also made last year, many of which still hold true.

First, operating principles and approaches.

The language you need for this element is already in UNEA resolution 5/8, which I suggest you use as your North Star, your Southern Cross. This resolution called for a panel that, and I quote:

- (a) Is able to deliver outputs that are policy relevant without being policy prescriptive.
- (b) Is interdisciplinary, ensuring contributions from experts with a broad range of disciplinary expertise; including inclusive participation, including indigenous peoples; and has geographical, regional and gender balance.
- (c) Has procedures that seek to ensure that the work of the panel is transparent and impartial and that it can produce reports and assessments that are credible and scientifically robust.
- (d) Undertakes work that is complementary to and does not duplicate the work of the relevant multilateral agreements, other international instruments and intergovernmental bodies, including those that are members of the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals.
- (e) Coordinates, as appropriate, with others.

The guidance from UNEA is very clear. You are not establishing a convention or a treaty. This body will not impose compliance or obligations on Member States. This body will, to the best of its ability, deliver the best science that the world can agree on. And individual countries will have to decide whether such science will be helpful to them in deciding their own future pathway.

Second, membership of the Panel.

Here there are two options based on precedent from the IPCC and IPBES. There is the “all-in” approach in which membership is automatically open to UN Member States and members of UN specialized agencies. And there is the opt-in approach, in which governments decide to join the panel when they are ready. Again, you have clear precedent here. The IPCC has an “all in” approach, i.e. all members of the UN are automatically members of the IPCC. IPBES has an “opt-in” approach. IPBES started with 94 members. Today it has a total membership of 150.

Third, decision-making.

There are strong views on this fundamental issue – consensus or voting – so I urge you to come to a resolution at an early stage in this meeting. This may help unlock other issues and allow for real progress. I count on your flexibility and willingness to compromise.

Fourth, the role of observers.

We are looking at the establishment of an intergovernmental panel, which means governments will be in the driving seat. But in today's world, environment, social and economic issues must be addressed in tandem. The knowledge the panel produces must show how chemical, pollution and waste issues can be addressed while factoring in economic, social and business realities. This requires broad thinking. This panel must be set-up to benefit from diverse views, with broad interdisciplinary and stakeholder discussions taking place before governments make decisions. So, I invite you to consider how best to ensure that all valuable voices are heard in the deliberations of the panel.

Fifth, the matter of terminology.

I read the outcome of the Geneva meeting and see a preference for the use of 'governing body'. When the governing body comes together to take decisions, it does so in a 'plenary meeting'. A plenary is therefore a meeting of the governing body. I urge that you to agree on this nomenclature and get rid of those brackets. It can be done with the stroke of a pen in the next hour.

Sixth, on the issue of secretariat.

The panel itself, once established, will need to set up its own secretariat and decide on its hosting arrangements. This decision will not happen today, but you know my stance on the issue. UNEP has been privileged to serve as the secretariat of this process. I expect UNEP to continue in this role once the panel has been established.

Of course, UNEP does not propose to go it alone. There are skills and expertise that do not fall directly within our mandate. We are always comfortable working with others in any manner of modalities that Member States desire. UNEP, while providing secretariat services, would be able to draw on the expertise and competencies of other UN agencies with whom we have strong collaborative partnership – notably the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and others. But I suggest you do not let this issue detract from the negotiations at this time.

Seventh, financial arrangements.

As I said last year, you should not worry too much about fine tuning financial arrangements right now. That can come later. My advice is that you decide to set up a simple voluntary Trust Fund managed by the secretariat. A Trust Fund managed by the secretariat would be the simplest and most-effective financial arrangement. So, in this regard, I suggest that you simplify the current text.

Eight, strategic partnerships.

On this point, let us again look at precedent. IPBES did not address the issue of partnerships immediately. IPBES took its time, discussed and reflected before taking a decision at its third plenary session. That decision produced a carefully negotiated annex outlining stakeholder engagement. In this spirit, I suggest you pass the work on defining strategic partnerships to future sessions of the governing body of the panel, once established.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates.

Thank you for bearing with me as I outlined how to get this panel across the line.

Now more than ever, we need a panel that makes sense of all the science and knowledge out there, and answers questions that governments have based on the realities they face in their own context: their own environment, their own economies and their own societies.

This week, you must honour the commitment made by UNEA in 2022. Put forward your proposals for the panel to the Intergovernmental Meeting in a short few days so that the Intergovernmental Meeting can establish the panel. And lay the foundation for a panel that will work in the spirit of, and alongside, the IPCC and IPBES to give policymakers the information they need to address the full triple planetary crisis.

Thank you.