

POLLUTION AS THE THEME FOR THE THIRD UN ENVIRONMENT ASSEMBLY

Comments from Canada

Suggested focus:

We would see value in addressing a specific aspect of pollution and therefore suggest a discussion focused on air pollution as a global issue requiring global action.

Background:

Air pollution impacts human and ecosystem health, contributes to climate change, and places a significant burden on the global economy:

- WHO estimates that air pollution contributes to over 7 million premature deaths each year worldwide. The World Bank estimates that deaths attributed to air pollution cost the global economy about \$225 billion in lost labour income in 2013¹.
- Air pollution consists of a number of pollutants, namely fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), ground-level ozone, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, ammonia, and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Ozone and particulate matter are especially of concern as they can cause negative health effects at any level of concentration.
- Some air pollutants such as black carbon (a component of PM), and ground-level ozone are also short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs), which have significant near-term warming effects on the climate as compared to longer-lived CO₂. Methane, another SLCP, also contributes to poor air quality indirectly as it leads to the formation of ground-level ozone. In addition to impacting the climate, SLCPs are themselves responsible for a significant portion of air pollution related deaths, as well as impacts on crops and hence food security.
- Though air quality is traditionally viewed and addressed as a local or regional issue, it is transboundary in nature, with emissions from one country or even continent capable of having significant health and ecosystem impacts in others. And given that some air pollutants are also climate warming agents, air pollution contributes to global climate change.
- Air pollution is explicitly mentioned in 3 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (3.9, 11.6, 12.4). Air pollution is implicitly connected to almost all of the other SDGs, including those on hunger, health, water, energy, growth and jobs, infrastructure, cities, sustainable consumption and production, climate, water, and land.

Considerations:

- Air pollution is a common challenge for all UN Environment regions as identified in the Summary of the GEO-6 Regional Assessments: Key Findings and Policy Messages (UNEP/EA.2/INF/17).
- UN Environment has been working on strengthening its role in promoting air quality since the adoption of resolution 1/7 at UNEA 1. Since then, work in this area has advanced to the point where air quality is now explicitly addressed in the 2018-2021 Medium-Term Strategy - Chemicals, Waste and Air Quality.

¹ *The Cost of Air Pollution: Strengthening the economic case for action*, a joint study of the World Bank and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

- Air quality and climate change are currently being addressed through two different sub-programmes of UN Environment. There is growing recognition internationally of the need to address these two environmental issues in a more integrated manner, given their linkages, specifically in the potential co-benefits and dis-benefits of various mitigation strategies.
- Policies and investments supporting cleaner transport, more energy efficient housing, cleaner power generation, and better municipal waste management would reduce key sources of outdoor air pollution.

Proposal for discussion:

- Convening UNEA member States and stakeholders around the theme of air pollution could help generate political will and serve to identify priority solutions to reduce emissions in targeted sectors at the local, national and global levels; determine how to measure progress; and sharing air pollution data.
- The UNEA could look at concrete actions to provide results, and be solution oriented – for example:
 - 1) Raise to the global level, the recent commitment of the Clean Air and Climate Coalition (CCAC) from the Marrakesh High Level Assembly to take action on black carbon through seeking support for global endorsement of the Global Strategy to Introduce Low Sulphur Fuels and Cleaner Diesel Vehicles; and development or continued refinement of black carbon inventories and projections.
 - 2) Raise awareness on air pollution through the CCAC/WHO's Breathelife Campaign by encouraging States to have major cities recognized as "Breathelife" cities.
 - 3) Commit to take action on methane, also an ozone precursor, by, for example:
 - Committing to scaling up regulations/actions
 - Seeking to develop and implement national methane reduction strategies that could target key sectors such as oil and gas, agriculture, waste management
 - States could encourage their oil and gas companies to join the CCAC's Oil and Gas Methane Partnership, and the Global Methane Initiative
 - 4) Work to advance the discussion on a shared global response to air pollution.

Potential outcome:

- A short and focused ministerial declaration stemming from the thematic discussion on air pollution could address the following statements and call to action:
 - Sustainable Development goals outline a roadmap to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection and prosperity for all. Reducing global air pollution will bring the world closer to achieving the vast majority of sustainable development goals.
 - Air pollution is a global problem which permeates all aspects of our society and addressing air pollution results in multiple benefits – to climate, to health, to our economy.
 - Solutions exist to address air pollution; and
 - To do this, we must to work together through various existing fora (i.e., UNEP, CCAC, UNECE) to raise awareness, identify solutions that exist, and develop a shared, global response.