



2021 will be a crucial year for the environment and, since we all depend on the natural world, it'll be an important year for us too. It's a time for important actions and decisions that will impact people everywhere for generations to come. It's also a time to assess the COVID-19 response and recovery and how businesses can take transformative action to

invest in nature and build back better by leap-frogging to green investments that create green jobs and facilitate the transition to a carbon neutral future.

We need to stop destroying our environment and start to restore nature so it can continue providing us with essentials such as a stable climate, healthy food, timber, clean water and clean air. Nature ensures our health and well being as well as our lifestyles and profits.

The most recent Global Environment Outlook Report (GEO), entitled "*Healthy Planet, Healthy People*," is the most comprehensive and rigorous assessment on the state of the environment and underlines the key scientific findings of 250 experts from more than 70 countries. As the flagship report of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), it warns that the health of our planet is so poor that people's health is, and will be, increasingly threatened unless urgent action is taken.

According to the Report, the world today is not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 or even the goals of the Paris Agreement by 2050. As never before, urgent and sustained action is needed, because any delay in efforts to clean up the environment increases not only the cost of achieving other social and economic goals but could reverse any progress in realizing them.

The Power of Partnerships

Against this grim setting, the GEO Report also highlights the hope –backed by solid facts– that the world has the science,

technology and finance it needs to move towards a more environmentally sustainable pathway. But to do so, it needs the political will of governments to implement policies and technologies fast enough and at scale using partnerships and coalitions which integrate the efforts of businesses, public institutions and civil society to tackle the challenges and grasp the opportunities for a sustainability-driven future.

Increasingly, building those partnerships is becoming a global reality. The UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), which took place in 2012, capped a trend that has been growing over the past few decades in which partnerships are recognized as playing a critical role in addressing global challenges. Rio+20 resulted in a political outcome document, the *Future We Want*, that contains the practical measures for implementing sustainable development.

These partnerships were given additional importance in the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. Adopted in 2015, the Agenda emphasizes the need for partnerships that work with stakeholders across all levels and in all sectors, recognizing that no single public/private entity can achieve sustainable development alone. More specifically, in the area of the environment, it has always been clear that environmental issues are much too large to be addressed by any single entity and only through innovative partnerships can we find solutions to these complex problems in a way that meets the needs of all in society.

Engaging the Private Sector

The private sector contributes to the most pressing environmental problems, such as climate change, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and generation of plastic waste. At the same time, the private sector also has the power to reverse these negative trends and bring some positive and sustainable action. Especially in this COVID-19 pandemic period we have seen businesses step up and play a bigger role in supporting communities and innovating new transformative ways to do business. Indeed, business is becoming more aware of these environmental challenges and the need for a collective

solution as reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Ultimately, all businesses –big and small –can promote and provide awareness and solutions to our global sustainability issues and help us to fast-track towards a circular economy. We must change our way of thinking where the ‘grow now, clean up later’ model is changed to a ‘near-zero-waste economy’ by 2050.

Action from polluting businesses, not just sustainability champions, but those with large room for improvement, has the potential to hugely benefit society and the environment. If these actors are not engaged, they will continue to create unsustainable pressures on the environment and transformational change will not occur.

Engaging all businesses in this “near-zero-waste economy” should aim for:

1. Transformational behavioral change
2. Raising standards for Sustainable Development
3. Innovation
4. Creation of environmentally-sustainable business models
5. Measurable and positive economic impact
6. Meeting the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals

GEO for Business Briefs: Agenda for 2021

The newly launched Global Environment Outlook for Business briefs look at the GEO findings through a business lens. Written ‘by business for business’, the briefs bring the science of the GEO to the business community to support them in developing plans, business strategies, technology pathways, mechanisms and enablers towards building a green and circular economy.

A high-level Advisory Committee of major business and non-governmental organizations working on the environment (see table) have designed six thematic briefs covering three systemic areas: food, waste and energy. These short and stimulating products will be released periodically throughout

2021, supporting UNEP’s priority for the super year for Nature while providing ‘how-to guides’ for business on specific environmental issues.

The six themes to be covered in the GEO for Business briefs are:

1. **Adapt to survive:** Business transformation in a time of uncertainty: An overarching introductory brief which covers the call from GEO for transformational change – what will businesses need to do in response to the science?
2. **Moving from linear to a circular economies and what this means for business:** Addressing resource efficiency, waste and supply chains in a cross-cutting brief which explores circular economy as a means to achieve the SDGs, and the implications for business. This report links to the analysis from the Ellen McArthur Foundation.
3. **The changing role of business in transforming food systems:** Producing environmentally-sustainable food, in the right place and at the right time to meet poverty and food-related SDGs. This is a sector/system specific brief which addresses food and agriculture and links to the recent analysis in the World Resources Institute ‘food gap’ report.
4. **How business can manage the transformation towards decarbonization and full electrification:** A sector/system specific brief which addresses the transformation of how we produce and consume energy to meet climate challenges. This brief links to the recent analysis in UNEP’s Emissions Gap Report.
5. **Future-proofing infrastructure and infrastructure services for climate resilience:** Sector/system specific brief which addresses climate-proofing current and future infrastructure investments. Focusing on the scope and scale of projected infrastructure investment to 2050, including the questions over how this can be delivered in line with the environmental dimension of the SDGs and a move towards nature-based solutions. This brief links to the on-going work of GEO for Cities.
6. **Changing finance, financing change:** The brief will address how financial services can be realigned to play a transformational role in achieving the environmental dimensions of the SDGs and related international

agreements. It aims to inform, challenge and enable action on global environmental challenges by the financial sector.

These Briefs are meant to be practical and solutions-oriented and are targeted at small to medium-sized enterprises that may be operating with the supply chains of large multinationals and are exposed to international trade or only supply domestic markets. Based on the advice of our expert Advisory Committee, the Brief will fill a gap in the current information that is provided on environmental issues.

The Briefs will be drafted by expert authors from the business community and published by UNEP and its partners. Throughout 2021, we expect to share practical information and knowledge, and we also hope to learn how this type of product can help stimulate transformational change at the scale and in the timeframes that are so clearly outlined in GEO-6.

Important Links:

- UN Environment Programme’s Strategy for Private Sector Engagement <https://bit.ly/2NMsJY9>
- Global Environment Outlook – GEO-6: Healthy Planet, Healthy People: <https://bit.ly/34AltEn>
- Global Environment Outlook –GEO-6: Summary for Policymakers https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27652/GEO6SPM_EN.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Frontiers 2018/2019: Emerging Issues of Environmental Concern <https://bit.ly/36KMHuP>
- Global Chemicals Outlook II: From Legacies to Innovative Solutions <https://bit.ly/33ry2CX>
- Emissions Gap Report 2019 <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/30797/EGR2019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

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To visit the website, please go to:
<https://www.unenvironment.org/global-environment-outlook>

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