

Concept Note

Ecosystem Approaches for shifting the world onto a sustainable pathway

Joint meeting of the UNGA Second Committee and ECOSOC

15 October 2019

3:00 pm

Background

Recent reports on sustainable development (for example the Global Sustainable Development Report, September 2019 and the Special Edition of the Secretary-General's SDG Progress Report, July 2019) depict a world that is not on track towards reaching the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or the Paris Agreement. While progress continues to be made towards several critical objectives such as the eradication of extreme poverty or reduction in maternal mortality, rates of progress are not sufficient to reach the 2030 targets. In other cases, such as hunger, rates are increasing after a long period of decline. Inequalities are increasing within and across countries. And in some of the most critical, such as greenhouse gas emissions or biodiversity loss, negative trends continue without signs of a slowdown. Such trends are especially worrisome as recent research indicates only a limited window within which corrective action must occur, if humanity is to avoid damaging and potentially irreversible consequences on a large scale.

Such an outcome is not inevitable, but these developments signal the urgent need to re-balance the relationship between humans and nature at all scales.

Solutions from nature

A significant contribution towards such a re-balancing can be made through ecosystem approaches. A prominent example of this are *nature based solutions*, that secure significant benefits to humans and society through simultaneously working to sustain and support the ecosystems that provide them. A more formal definition¹ considers nature based solutions to be actions that 'protect, sustainably manage and restore natural or modified ecosystems which address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits.'

These actions are distinct from purely engineering solutions – for example, a nature based solution to coastal flooding could be in the restoration of natural mangroves while a purely engineering solution would be to build dykes or seawalls – with potentially longer term adverse impacts. However, they can also be implemented in conjunction with technology in an integrated manner. They can be implemented in urban contexts, for example 'green' infrastructure that improves air quality and reduces storm water runoff and water pollution.

Nature based solutions are practical applications of understanding both the positive and negative linkages between human activity and nature in different contexts. They represent concrete examples of how the

¹ Nature based solutions to address global societal challenges, IUCN (2016).

interlinkages across the various goals and targets of the SDGs can be leveraged – both through avoided trade-offs, and realized synergies- to deliver beneficial outcomes for multiple objectives. As such they draw from other related areas of knowledge and action, such as valuation of ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation. They are also intrinsic to the lifestyles and belief systems of many indigenous populations, and are present in traditional knowledge systems. The emergence of this concept into the mainstream of policy formulation, however, is relatively recent and it can be argued that they are yet to become an integral part of many policy makers’ toolkits.

Nature based solutions, the SDGs and the Paris agreement

Both the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and the Paris agreement recognize the importance of nature as underpinning human well-being. The Preamble to the 2030 agenda explicitly mentions the determination to ‘protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of present and future generations.’ The Preamble to the Paris agreement also acknowledges ‘the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth.’

Several vivid examples of nature based solutions are to be found in the context of both climate change mitigation and adaptation. Immediate impacts on mitigation are to be found in the conservation of ‘high-carbon ecosystems’ such as peatlands, wetlands, rangelands, mangroves and intact forests. Their destruction, on the other hand, will further exacerbate climate change – it is estimated that deforestation and forest degradation release about 4.4 gigatonnes of CO₂ annually, around 12% of anthropogenic emissions.² Afforestation, reforestation, the reclamation of degraded soils, agroforestry and the overall restoration of high-carbon ecosystems are also critically important as carbon sinks, but take more time to deliver.³ Among adaptive measures, restoring and sustainably managing wetlands, rivers and coastal areas can reduce the risk of flooding during extreme weather events.

Ecosystem approaches grounded in nature-based solutions also support nations in meeting multiple SDGs, including 1 on poverty, 2 on hunger, 3 on human health, 6 on clean water, 8 on economic development, 13 on climate change, and 15 on land. Already the focus of a coalition for the September 2019 UN Climate Action Summit and more than 100 World Bank development projects, nature-based solutions will be key to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Nature-based solutions therefore represent powerful strategies for nations to deliver on international commitments and achieve sustainable development in a warming world. Mounting evidence points to nature-based solutions as cost-effective, low-risk alternatives or complements to other options that may have immediate positive effects, but be more expensive in the long term. Ultimately, sustainably managing nature can lead to the development of a more resource-efficient global economy with job creation and economic growth occurring at the national level.

² Climate change 2014: synthesis report. IPCC (2014)

³ Climate change and land. IPCC (2019)

Objective

The joint meeting of the Second Committee and ECOSOC would aim to provide a deeper understanding of how ecosystem approach grounded in nature-based solutions can be applied to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals including biodiversity based 2020 targets. Bringing together experts from a range of scientific, academic, and policy backgrounds, the discussion would explore the concept of nature-based solutions and the opportunities they hold for sustainable development around the world.

The event would also underscore key opportunities and challenges in the shift to nature-based solutions, with the goal of identifying areas for the formation of partnerships and the development of enabling policies to support the implementation of nature-based solutions.

The outcome of the meeting would be an informal summary by the Secretariat highlighting the main points of the discussion and specific proposals or ideas leading to action-oriented results, supporting the acceleration of efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Guiding Questions

- What are nature-based solutions, and how do they relate to technology-based solutions?
- How can ecosystem approach grounded in nature-based solutions be leveraged and scaled up to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?
- What are the most significant opportunities and barriers to the implementation of nature-based solutions, and how can they be overcome?
- How can we make such solutions an integral part of policy design and implementation? How can economic and social policy measures themselves support such solutions?
- What roles can other stakeholders – businesses, civil society, individuals, scientists and institutions – play in broader adoption ecosystem approaches grounded in nature based solutions?