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United Nations Human Settlements Programme
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Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

**Activities of the United Nations Human Settlements
Programme, including coordination matters**

Activities of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme

Addendum

Joint activities in the urban environment: joint progress report of the executive directors of the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme**

I. Background

1. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have been collaborating for more than three decades. During this time, they have sought to mainstream environmental considerations into urban policymaking and urban considerations into environmental policymaking at global, national, and local levels. More recently, new internal strategic plans, a shifting funding landscape and accelerating global crises have prompted the Programmes to re-examine the modalities and themes of this collaboration.
2. In 2008 the two Programmes adopted their first formal cooperation framework. Since then, the thematic priorities guiding them have evolved from (1) environmental planning and management to (2) cities and climate change to (3) buildings and transportation. Until recently the Joint Operations and Coordination group held formal monthly meetings and produced a joint progress report delivered to the agencies' respective governing councils. In compliment, the Deputy Executive Directors of both Programmes co-chaired an annual high-level meeting.
3. In 2014 UNEP and UN-Habitat commissioned an external review of their cooperation. It revealed that while the cooperation was widely viewed by staff and member states as beneficial for coordination, transparency, and messaging, it also lacked incentives, a shared vision, and an agreement on the two agencies' respective comparative advantages. Consequently, the review called for better-distributed costs and benefits, reduced transaction costs, and catalysts for joint work. Ultimately it recommended the agencies pursue a policy of collaboration, a core-funded flagship and joint fundraising.

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4. Consequently, UN-Habitat and UNEP launched The Greener Cities Partnership, which incorporated many of the recommendations from the review. The GCP also identified three new focus areas: (1) resilient, resource efficient cities, (2) sustainable transport and mobility, and (3) waste and wastewater. However, budget shortfalls and staffing deficits in both agencies limited its implementation. All the same, staff found ways to combine limited resources and capitalize further on single opportunities to deliver double dividends.

5. Meanwhile, each agency has adopted a new medium-term strategy that has repositioned key aspects of their urban environmental work. The first UNHA approved HSP/HA.1/Res.1, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme strategic plan for the period 2020–2023, which granted the agency four new subprogramme areas including on ‘Strengthened climate action and improved urban environment’. It built on a legacy of work relating to cities and climate change adaptation and has provided mandates for growing work on climate change mitigation and resource efficiency and ecology.

6. Since the first United Nations Habitat Assembly, UNEP’s Medium-Term Strategy 2018–2021 expired and was superseded by For People and Planet: the UNEP strategy for 2022–2025, which addresses the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

7. UN-Habitat’s Programme Development Branch of the Global Solutions Division and UNEP’s Cities Unit of the Economy Division are currently coordinating the collaboration. As they have leveraged it to address the evolving urban environmental priorities of their respective agencies, they have also shifted its modalities. In 2021 they began experimenting with quarterly formal coordination meetings complimented by biweekly informal virtual coffee hours that take advantage of current teleworking arrangements. These have since evolved into monthly staggered formal and informal coordination meetings.

II. Review of recent and current activities

8. Three flagship publications coordinated wholly or in part by either UN-Habitat or UNEP have benefited from substantive inputs from one another: (1) the 2020 UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief *COVID-19 in an Urban World*, led by UN-Habitat with a section linking the environment and economy co-drafted with UNEP; (2) the 2021 *Cities and Pandemics* Report, led by UN-Habitat with substantive urban environment contributions from UNEP; and (3) the 2021 co-branded Global Environmental Outlook for Cities: towards green and just cities, led by UNEP with guidance from UN-Habitat to the steering committee and peer and quality reviews to the coordination team.

9. In addition, UN-Habitat contributed to the production of UNEP’s guidance note for the G20 on nature-based solutions in cities.

10. In parallel, the two agencies have collaborated in wider interagency processes including: (1) the UN System-Wide Common Approach to Biodiversity, through joint inputs and commitments on, inter alia, improving quality of urbanization, promoting greening and bluing of cities, and promoting the transition to a circular economy; (2) the GEF-7 Urban Shift programme, with UNEP having led the Secretariat until 2023 and UN-Habitat participating on the Advisory Task Force; (3) joint participation in Environmental Management Group on Green, Just COVID-19 Recovery; (4) joint participation in a GEF-led EGM on circular cities; (5) subnational track of the Stockholm+50 Conference, with UNEP leading and UN-Habitat contributing; (6) the Ministerial Segment at UNFCCC COP26, with UN-Habitat leading and UNEP contributing; and (7) the subnational track of CBD COP15, including the parallel 7th Summit for Cities and Subnational Authorities.

11. Many of the norms, guidelines and commitments above are being demonstrated in projects underway in more than 20 countries, inter alia: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Gambia, Iran, Kenya, Laos, Malaysia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Pakistan, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Serbia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Thailand, Vietnam, and Zambia. Thematic lenses in these joint regional and country projects range from peri-urban climate resilience to nature-based solutions to marine litter to non-motorized transportation.

12. Several projects have involved joint planning, fundraising and implementation: (1) Building Climate Resilience of Urban Systems through Ecosystem-based Adaptation in the Asia Pacific Region, (2) the Global Wastewater Initiative, (3) Go Blue Land-Sea Planning on the Kenyan Coast, (4) the Myanmar Climate Change Alliance, (5) SolutionsPlus Project on electric mobility, and (6) the Urban Shift initiative.

13. Other joint fundraising initiatives during the last four years have included a co-application for funded United Nations Volunteers, several joint applications for funding from the International Climate Initiative, and higher-level discussions around a new joint Junior Professional Officer.
14. Each agency has brought high-level representation to the other's most recent Assembly, the 10th and 11th World Urban Forums, a cities event of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and a high-level ministers' and mayors' dialogue on multi-level governance.
15. The thematic area of plastic pollution and marine litter has built momentum and still contains significant potential for further interagency growth in the next few years. UN-Habitat is also supporting the UNEP-led Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter. Now the two Programmes are cooperating on the harmonization of monitoring and modelling methodologies for plastic pollution. As a first step the Programmes have co-organized an expert group meeting and identified activities critical for the harmonization process. The adoption of a Resolution on plastic pollution at the United Nations Environment Assembly in 2022 has set in motion the formal process for a legally binding treaty on the topic is likely to accelerate momentum through 2024 and beyond.
16. In parallel, the United Nations General Assembly passed a Resolution on Zero Waste that proclaimed 30 March as the International Day of Zero Waste. This was first observed on 30 March 2023 with a High-Level Meeting in New York. UNEP and UN-Habitat facilitated this with their respective Executive Directors issued a joint statement. In addition, the two Programmes co-organized in-person celebrations in Nairobi and New York in which they showcased several Zero Waste initiatives.
17. In the context of the EU-funded Go Blue project in Kenya, UNEP and UN-Habitat are jointly implementing a component on environment and planning issues, which aims at mainstreaming the conservation and sustainable use of coastal urban and marine environment in planning and management at policy and behavioural levels, in direct connection to sustained and inclusive economic growth and coastal tourism, as well as adopting climate change mitigation and adaptation measures. The team is working on guidelines for regional, integrated and ecosystem-based land-sea planning, considering national efforts towards integrated Marine Spatial Planning and relevant County planning tools, such as County Spatial Plans. Several pilot interventions are being rolled out in each of the six coastal counties belonging to the coastal economic bloc (JKP). They range from wastewater interventions in informal settlements, to municipal solid waste facilities, public space upgrading, but also support to management of Beach Management Units and Locally Managed Marine Areas. In Lamu, the team is also working on a Blue Carbon component, generating global carbon credits with local mangrove protection measures.
18. On the Urban Shift project UNEP and UN-Habitat collaborated on the development of a training course on neighbourhood design based on UNEP's neighbourhood design guidelines and UN-Habitat's Five Principles of Urban Planning. The two Programmes delivered this course for 25 participating cities in Buenos Aires. Now they are jointly assembling a fundraising proposal for green and thriving neighbourhoods.

III. Considerations for moving forward

19. Several initiatives have impelled the agencies to strategically reposition their cooperation. In 2018 the Chief Executives Board (CEB) adopted the UN System-Wide Strategy on Sustainable Urbanization. As reported to and discussed by UN-Habitat's Executive Board in 2021, this strategy outlined four frontier issues of continued relevance to the cooperation between UNEP and UN-Habitat: (1) digital transformation and new technology; (2) sharing, privatization and multilateralism; (3) land use and resource scarcity; and (4) adaptation, decarbonization and migration.
20. In response to the start of the pandemic in 2020, the UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief *COVID-19 in an Urban World* identified several themes as critical to response and recovery. As reported to and discussed by UN-Habitat's Executive Board in 2021, the two Programmes have considered strengthening their cooperation around four urban environment-related themes: (1) a green urban recovery, (2) the transition to a circular economy, (3) prevention of de-densification, and (4) stimulus for local climate resilience.
21. To accelerate the finalization of GCP 2.0, the agencies facilitated an open brainstorming meeting in June 2021. Results showed very strong interest in climate adaptation-mitigation-resilience nexus and its intersections with migration. Green urban recovery and the prevention of de-densification also had strong convergence. Additionally, there was interest in lenses both traditional and novel such as vernacular construction and nature-based solutions.

22. The Secretary-General's Common Agenda of 2022 includes a commitment to 'protect our planet' as well as specific actions, several of which could be taken up in the cooperation between UNEP and UN-Habitat: (1) preventing and resolving environmental displacement, (2) implementing the post-2020 biodiversity framework (since adopted as the Global Biodiversity Framework), (3) accounting for the environment in economic models, and (4) providing a package of support to developing countries.
23. Within the realm of Subprogramme 3, the secondary outcome areas of climate change mitigation (3.1) and resource efficiency and ecology (3.2) are currently lagging in terms of normative and operational activities and results. Since the first United Nations Habitat Assembly, the adoption of the Paris Agreement and Global Biodiversity Framework have provided fresh momentum for the Programmes to strengthen cooperation around climate change mitigation and biodiversity, respectively.
24. The Chiefs of Staff of UN-Habitat and UNEP meet periodically to strategize the modalities of a strengthened cooperation and have drafted an agreement of action for consideration for endorsement by the respective Executive Directors. Also, under discussion is a joint SMT-Executive Committee. Meanwhile, the Programme Development Branch (UN-Habitat) and Cities Unit (UNEP) will need to facilitate decisions on strategic priorities that address each agency's new strategic plan as well as the emerging and frontier issues listed above.
25. The United Nations Environment Assembly no longer requires UNEP to submit a joint progress report of the Executive Directors of UNEP and UN-Habitat. Given the lack of equivalency in mandate and corresponding challenge of jointly producing such a report, the United Nations Habitat Assembly may wish to consider revising this requirement to align with the current situation. One option would be to integrate the reporting on joint activities with UNEP into UN-Habitat's overall report on cooperation with agencies and organizations within the United Nations system.
26. This report takes a broader view of interagency cooperation according to each Programme's mandate and means. However, joint activities, as clarified by the 2014 external review of cooperation between UNEP and UN-Habitat, constitute a narrower group of initiatives in which design, fundraising, implementation, and monitoring are shared equally by the two Programmes. Moving forward, properly 'joint' activities may require their Member States to mobilize additional, dedicated funding. It may also require UN-Habitat and UNEP to seek non-traditional funding sources and test innovative cost-sharing arrangements.
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