

RADAR SOCIOAMBIENTAL

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The 4th United Nations Environment Assembly



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Introduction

In its 28th edition, the Socioenvironmental Radar analysis the results of the 4th United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). This edition provides an overall view of the UNEA, presents the assembly's agenda and the positions of the BRICS countries. The final section points to the results of the assembly through official documents published and the current Brazilian conjecture.

UNEA 4

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment. It addresses the critical environmental challenges the world faces today. UNEA meets biennially to set priorities for global environmental policies and develop international environmental law, and through its resolutions and Calls to Action, the Assembly provides leadership and catalyses intergovernmental action on the environment.

UNEA was created in June 2012, at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also referred to as RIO+20, to embody a new era in which the environment is at the centre of the international community's focus and is given the same level of prominence as issues such as peace, poverty, health and security.

The first two sessions of UNEA addressed issues such as illegal trade in wildlife, air quality, environmental rule of law, financing the Green Economy, the Sustainable Development Goals, and "delivering on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". One document compiled in the first session, in 2014, was the Ministerial Outcome Document that called for the integration of the environmental dimension, the elaboration of Post-

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2015 Development Agenda that can be achieved and integrate all the dimensions of sustainable development.

The third session of UNEA took place in Nairobi, in 2017. The Assembly under the theme “Towards a pollution-free planet” addressed five sub-themes: Water Pollution, Land Pollution, Marine Pollution, Air Pollution, and Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste. It adopted a Ministerial Declaration and 11 resolutions and 3 decisions, calling for accelerated action and strengthened partnerships on, inter alia: combating the spread of marine plastic litter and microplastics; eliminating exposure to lead paint and promoting environmentally sound management of used lead-acid batteries; environment and health; improving air quality globally; pollution control by mainstreaming biodiversity into key sectors; addressing water pollution to protect and restore water-related ecosystems; managing soil pollution to achieve sustainable development; and pollution prevention and control in areas affected by terrorist operations and armed conflicts.

The 2019 Assembly took place in Nairobi, Kenya, from March 11th to 15th of 2019, under the theme “Innovative Solutions for Environmental Challenges and Sustainable Consumption and Production”. It addressed issues such as environmental challenges related to poverty and natural resources management, including sustainable food systems, food security and halting biodiversity loss; life-cycle approaches to resource efficiency, energy, chemicals and waste management; and innovative sustainable business development at a time of rapid technological change.

The Assembly focused on the role innovation represented in changing people’s choices and the way they consume and produce and aimed to provide global leadership and catalyze the necessary intergovernmental action for people to live sustainably. It held side events and events more focused on specific issues, such as, geoengineering, the elimination of pollution through waste management solutions, African solutions to addressing the impacts of mining, sustainable food systems that ensure food security for future generations, global partnerships to achieve energy efficiency and inclusive green economies and the relationship between migration and the environment. Besides those, there were also high-level events named Leadership Dialogues, that focused on topics like environmental challenges related to poverty and natural resource

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management and life-cycle approaches to resource efficiency, energy, chemicals and waste management.

The Assembly also launched several initiatives and platforms, like the Network of African Women Environmentalist (NAWE) - that aims to ensure the participation of African women in dealing with environmental problems in a coordinated and significant manner -, the Science Policy-Business Forum whose work is aligned with the one of the Assembly, the Global Partnership on Marine Litter/Clean Seas tent that was a hub for all things related to marine litter and microplastics, the Tiny House: an Ecological Living Module - developed by UN Environment Programme, UN Habitat and Yale Center for Ecosystems in Architecture to show how sustainable design can provide decent, affordable housing while limiting the overuse of natural resources and impacting climate change - and the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion - a UN commitment to change the path of fashion, reducing its negative environmental and social impacts.

The Secretariat of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) hosted 14 side events during UNEA 4, the assembly also counted with another parallel event, the third edition of Sustainable Innovation Expo, an UN Environment's solutions-oriented platform that supports the Assembly's mission, and aims to provides leadership on global environmental policies and set the international environmental agenda. The Expo was composed of several events that dealt with issues such as the use of big data to promote eco-innovative changes in supply chains; the rule of law in environmental issues as well as the identification of a legal tool that integrate the concerns of less privileged, marginalized and underrepresented groups; the expected creation of a global partnership to tackle marine litter; the role of youth and innovative educational methodologies; sustainable finance and climate finance; sustainable food system. Moreover, through the knowledge of the role faith and religion have in the world, UNEP launched the Faith for Earth Initiative, a platform for Faith Based Organizations to share their religion's relationship with the environment; the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion¹; and the adoption of sustainable practices through tourism value chains.

¹ "The United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion is an initiative of United Nations agencies and allied organizations designed to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals through **coordinated action in the fashion sector**. Specifically, the Alliance works to support coordination between UN bodies working in fashion and promoting projects and policies that ensure that the fashion value chain contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals' targets." See more in: <https://unfashionalliance.org/>

BRICS countries at UNEA 4

Representatives of the five BRICS countries attended the assembly and made statements affirming their contributions to tackling environmental problems.

Representing Brazil, the Minister of Environment Ricardo Salles spoke about what Brazil has been doing in the field, he mentioned the creation of National Agenda for Urban Environmental Quality, which focuses on population living in big metropolis and provides guidance on urgent public policies and highlighted features like: the implementation of the National Plan of Solid Waste; the funds the country has been receiving from the Green Climate Fund in order to tackle deforestation; Brazilian energy and economic matrix and its prominence in protecting areas. The Minister also mentioned some manners that need to be dealt with within the field, like the expansion of sustainable tourism for concession to private company, public use and national parks, and stated the country's disagreement with the tone sometimes used to criticize developing countries agricultural outputs.

Representing the Russian Federation, the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Dmitry Kobylkin saliented the role of ecology in the government, as it appears in a presidential decree and a national project developed by the minister itself, and put in high standards for the implementation of circular economy, in which the government sees as an alternative to dealing with the environmental problem and already has some history with implementing some principles of it. The Minister also emphasized the importance of international cooperation and dialogue and the positive impact they might have on improving economic efficiency.

India's representant, Rahul Chhadra, presented the country's best practices in the environmental field including: the Prime Minister's call on the elimination of single use plastic by 2022; the organization of the India Resource Panel; the implementation of National Clean Air Programme, National Action Plan on Climate Change and others; and the long lasting relationship with circular, green and low-carbon economy.

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China's representant, the Vice Minister of Ecology and Environment Zhao Yingmin shared the country's commitments to the promotion of an ecological civilization, and some of the action that are being taken in order to fulfill that goal. Such are the optimization of the economic structure and reduction of the pressure on production resources; the implementation of a certification system for multiple products in different sectors and the provision of green products and services; implementation of the government green procurement system; implementation of green finance and tax incentives; development of new consumption formats and the raise in citizen awareness and the advocacy of green listyles.

South Africa's representant, the Director General of the Department of Environmental Affair of the Ministry of Environment Nosipho Ngcaba, spoke about the nation's efforts in tackling environmental issues. Points to be highlighted in his speech were the positive impact innovation presents at the African region and South Africa as a possible problem solver for social, economic and environmental issues; the creation of a heightened awareness that enables sustainable consumption and production; the studies conducted by the country on plastic material flows and policy measures to deal with plastic management and single use plastic products; the development of programs like The Oceans Economy, The Biotechnology and Wildlife economy and the Circular Economy; following the topic of the Assembly there was also the Ten Year Innovation Plan (2008-2018) with a vision at transforming South Africa into a knowledge-based economy; and like the Russian Minister he stressed the importance of cooperation and multilateral organisms.

Outcomes of UNEA 4

As a result of the Assembly, a number of documents were published with decisions and calls for action made during the event, pertaining to subjects discussed in those days. The main one is the [Ministerial Declaration of UNEA 4](#) that addressed issues such as the advance in sustainable consumption and production patterns, the encouragement of sustainable and resilient agricultural practices, the implementation of sustainable ecosystem restoration, conservation and biodiversity loss, the execution of actions to restore and protect marine and coastal ecosystems,

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the support of the creation of a global environmental data strategy by 2025 by the United Nations Environment Programme, the reduction of the use of single use plastic products by 2030 and the promotion of financing opportunities and mechanisms to unlock new capital for sustainable investment.

Other documents treated in a more specific way about those general topics dealt with in the Assembly and in the Ministerial Declaration. As an example of the document “Innovative Pathways to Achieve Sustainable Consumption and Production” that talks about the role of the private sector and market based initiatives to support sustainable consumption, the enabling of consumer knowledge over products and services regarding their resource efficiency and sustainability, the invitation to member states to contribute with the One Planet Network² and the partnerships and education policies to stimulate sustainable consumption and the production of sustainable products.

Another document addressed environmental challenges through sustainable business practices, and among other things dealt with the stimulation of investments in sustainable business practices, and a point controversial to environmentalists was the emphasis on the development and strengthening of sustainable financing mechanisms.

Two documents, combined, addressed the issue of marine plastic litter and microplastics and single use plastic products, highlighting the importance given to plastic residues in the environment and its use by people. The points discussed in regards of those topics were the roles government, society and private sector in diminishing plastic waste and microplastic release and abolishing single use plastics, through consumption reduction, technology development, regulation and cooperation among different sectors of society and different countries.

Highlights of the decisions made were also the attention given to gender and the poverty environment nexus. Concerning gender, the Assembly invited member states to join the For All

² “The One Planet network brings together actors from all regions and all sectors to bring together expertise, resources, innovation and commitment towards a shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption.” See more in: <http://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/>

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Coalition³, to establish social and gender criteria in the national level for environment-related projects and programs, to implement policies that increase the participation and leadership of women in decision making processes regarding environmental issues and the recognition of gender equality to safeguarding the environment. When it comes to the poverty environment nexus, there was a general focus on eradication of poverty, the Assembly made a call for the promotion of development and application of poverty measures that include links to environmental and natural resource sustainability.

Other points that need mentioning are the invitation made by the Assembly that Member States work together with relevant stakeholders in order to find solutions to reduce food loss and waste, to promote sustainable mobility and to invest and promote sustainable infrastructure, and also the Assembly urged for the protection of marine environment from land-based activities.

The topic of geoengineering received a fair amount of attention in the assembly with a proposal backed by Switzerland and ten other countries that required the preparation of a comprehensive assessment of geoengineering by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), this would look into the science and technology behind it and how to manage research and use. The proposal was made with the intention of transforming UNEA in the institutional home for geoengineering, but countries like United States, Saudi Arabia and Brazil opposed it. The United States insisted that the topic of geoengineering be left to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), since there already is a report on this matter to be published by IPCC IN 2021 and 2022. But experts and environmentalists worry that this is only an artifice to back each country's independence in dealing with geoengineering. Another concern raised by scientists and environmentalists is that in resorting to geoengineering countries may leave behind climate mitigation and adaptation measures and continue its high exploration of fossil fuels.

³ “The For All Coalition aims to ensure that States both understand, and – crucially – fulfil their commitments to all their people and to our planet.” See more in: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23687&LangID=E>

Final Remarks

As the highest decision body on the environment, the fourth assembly of UNEA brought to the table the importance of talking about consumption and production when dealing with environmental challenges, and the need to dialogue with different sectors of society and government. That shows a difference from previous assemblies, because it talks also about the part population plays in dealing with those challenges.

The speeches made by representatives of the BRICS countries were quick in portraying initiatives held by them individually in order to tackle environmental problems, the topic of circular economy was also brought up by them, with the exception of Brazil, and in consonance with the Assembly's theme they emphasized what they are doing to deal with the consumption issue to make it sustainable.

The Brazilian speech was an attempt to smooth international worries over the setbacks of the current government's environmental policies⁴, as it pointed to what the country has been doing in general in the field, with no focus on the topic of the Assembly. Those setbacks jeopardize the protagonist role the country has in international environmental discussions and also the cooperation initiatives that have a foundation on tackling environmental problems, and that raises the need for a closer look into what is going on in the country and its environmental policies.

As a result of the number of panels and side events hosted, there were a number of documents published that made clear the decisions made in the Assembly, in that aspect it should be highlighted the recognition of the role gender plays in dealing with the environment, and how the increase of women participation in environmental discussions shows positive to the outcome of the discussions.

In addition, the protagonism given to the business sector in the Assembly deserves a careful analysis. Although it's imperative that they should be included in the solutions to environmental problems, given their scope of activities, a close look is also imperative as to make

⁴ See more about it in: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/ex-ministers-condemn-course-of-brazils-environmental-policy/2019/05/08/b8791b9a-71e8-11e9-9331-30bc5836f48e_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.131d945a1896

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sure that the relationship between business and the environment does not become one where the business sector has the higher power and the environment is put aside.

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Radar Socioambiental

This publication has focus on environmental news related to the five BRICS countries. Each month one relevant issue is chosen, and the topic is published with the highlights.

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