



**Executive Board of the United Nations
Human Settlements Programme
Second session of 2021**

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**Normative and operational activities of UN-Habitat,
including reporting on the programmatic activities of
the Programme in 2021 and the implementation of
subprogrammes, flagship programmes and technical
cooperation activities, and an update on the response of
the Programme to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)
pandemic**

**Report on cooperation between the United Nations Human
Settlements Programme and the United Nations Environment
Programme**

I. Background on cooperation

1. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have been cooperating with one another for 30 years. Throughout that time, the cooperation between the two programmes has striven to mainstream environmental considerations into urban policymaking and urban considerations into environmental policymaking at the local, national and global levels. At present, new internal strategic plans, a shifting funding landscape and accelerating global crises warrant a closer look at the modalities and themes of that cooperation.

2. The two programmes adopted their first formal cooperation framework in 2008, the urban environment partnership framework 2008–2013. Since then, the thematic priorities guiding their cooperation have evolved from environmental planning and management, to cities and climate change, to buildings and transportation. Until recently, the Joint Operation and Coordination group held formal monthly meetings and produced a joint progress report delivered to the programmes' respective governing bodies.

3. In 2014, the Joint Operation and Coordination Group oversaw an external review which revealed that while the cooperation was widely viewed by staff members of both programmes and Member States as beneficial for coordination, transparency and messaging, it also lacked incentives, a shared vision and an agreement on the two programmes' respective comparative advantages. Consequently, the review called for better-distributed costs and benefits, reduced transaction costs and catalysts for joint work and recommended that the programmes pursue a policy of collaboration, a core-funded flagship project and joint fundraising.

4. As a result, UNEP and UN-Habitat launched the Greener Cities Partnership, which incorporates many of the recommendations from the review. The Greener Cities Partnership also identified the following three new areas of focus:

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- (a) Resilient, resource-efficient cities;
- (b) Sustainable transport and mobility;
- (c) Waste and wastewater.

Since the launch of the Greener Cities Partnership, budget shortfalls and staffing deficits in both programmes have limited its implementation. Such restrictions notwithstanding, staff members have found ways to combine limited resources and capitalize further on opportunities to deliver double dividends from single sources.

5. Meanwhile, each programme has adopted a new medium-term strategy that has repositioned key aspects of their urban environmental work. The UNEP medium-term strategy for the period 2018–2021 has reconfigured UNEP to focus on nature, circularity, nature-based solutions, and climate and pollution. The UN-Habitat strategic plan for the period 2020–2023 sets out four new subprogramme areas, including strengthened climate action and improved urban environment. That enshrines growing, dedicated work on cities and climate change and provides an avenue for pursuing new work on resource efficiency and ecology.

6. The Programme Development Branch of the Global Solutions Division of UN-Habitat and the Cities Unit of the Economy Division of UNEP are currently coordinating the cooperation. They have shifted its modalities and are also addressing the evolving urban environmental priorities of their respective programmes. In 2021, they began experimenting with quarterly formal coordination meetings, complemented by fortnightly informal virtual “coffee hours” that take advantage of current teleworking arrangements.

II. Review of current activities

7. In May 2021, the two programmes surveyed the joint work they are currently undertaking. Highlights include the co-production of three flagship publications that benefited from substantive inputs from both programmes, including:

- (a) The United Nations Secretary-General’s policy brief, “COVID-19 in an urban world”, in which the programmes co-drafted a section linking the environment and the economy;
- (b) The UN-Habitat report, *Cities and pandemics: toward a more just, green and healthy future*;
- (c) The report on cities as part of the sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6 for Cities), co-branded by UNEP and UN-Habitat, for which UN-Habitat provided guidance to the advisory committee to the Outlook and peer and quality reviews to its coordination team.

In addition, UN-Habitat contributed to the production of *Resilient Cities: the power of nature-based solutions*, a working paper from UNEP for the Group of 20.

8. In parallel, the two programmes have collaborated in wider processes, including:

- (a) The United Nations common approach to biodiversity, through joint inputs and commitments on, inter alia, improving the quality of urbanization, promoting the greening and “blueing” of cities, and promoting the transition to a circular economy;
- (b) The Sustainable Cities Impact Programme, under the seventh replenishment of the Global Environment Facility;
- (c) Joint participation in the Environment Management Group consultative process on COVID-19 and the environment, to work towards a green and just coronavirus disease pandemic recovery;
- (d) Joint participation in an expert group consultation on climate change mitigation and other environmental and socio-economic benefits through the circular economy led by the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel of the Global Environment Facility.

9. Many of the norms, guidelines and commitments set out above are being demonstrated in projects under way in more than 20 countries with the involvement of UN-Habitat and UNEP, including Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Ethiopia, the Gambia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kenya, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Serbia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Thailand, Viet Nam and Zambia. Thematic lenses in those joint country and regional projects include peri-urban climate resilience, nature-based solutions, marine litter and non-motorized transportation. Several projects have embedded joint planning, fundraising and implementation, including the following:

- (a) The Go Blue land-sea planning initiative on the Kenyan coast;
- (b) The Myanmar Climate Change Alliance;
- (c) The project entitled “Building Climate Resilience of Urban Systems through Ecosystem-based Adaptation in the Asia Pacific Region”;
- (d) The SOLUTIONSPlus project on electric mobility;
- (e) The Global Wastewater Initiative.

10. Joint fundraising initiatives include a co-application for funded United Nations Volunteers positions, several joint applications for funding from the International Climate Initiative and high-level discussions on a new joint Junior Professional Officer post. Each programme has brought high-level representation to the most recent UN-Habitat Assembly and United Nations Environment Assembly, the tenth World Urban Forum, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Cities and Climate Change Science Conference, and the Sustainable Cities Dialogue, co-organized by UN-Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments. Arrangements are under way for co-organized events at the forthcoming fifteenth Conference of the Parties to the Conference on Biological Diversity, the twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Stockholm+50 meeting and as part of “UNEP at 50” activities.

III. Strategies for the future

11. Several recent initiatives have impelled the programmes to strategically reposition their cooperation. In 2018, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination adopted the United Nations system-wide strategy on sustainable urban development, which outlines four pre-COVID-19 pandemic frontier issues:

- (a) Digital transformation and new technology;
- (b) Sharing, privatization and multilateralism;
- (c) Land use and resource scarcity;
- (d) Adaptation, decarbonization and migration.

12. In response to those and other emerging issues, UN-Habitat and UNEP discussed the formulation of a revitalized Greener Cities Partnership at the tenth World Urban Forum in early 2020, which would have focused on the twin entry points of (a) urban landscapes: transforming city-region planning, green public space and ecosystem services; and (b) city infrastructure transition: sustainable housing, energy and mobility.

13. However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of a joint planning mission and an in-person meeting of technical staff, at which the revitalized Greener Cities Partnership would have been finalized. Once that finalization has been accomplished, the programmes plan to convene a joint meeting of their respective senior management teams, at which it is envisaged that the revitalized Greener Cities Partnership will be adopted.

14. Last year, the United Nations Secretary-General's policy brief, “COVID-19 in an urban world”, identified a number of additional substantive areas in which joint knowledge, policy and programming could be further explored. Those include the following:

- (a) A green urban recovery;
- (b) The transition to a circular economy;
- (c) Prevention of de-densification;
- (d) Stimulus for local climate resilience.

15. To accelerate the finalization of the revitalized Greener Cities Partnership, the programmes facilitated an open brainstorming meeting in June 2021. Results showed a very strong interest in the climate adaptation-mitigation-resilience nexus and its intersections with migration. Staff in the meeting also showed interest in the topics of de-densification and green urban recovery. In addition, there was interest in “lenses”, both traditional and novel, such as vernacular construction and nature-based solutions.

16. The Chiefs of Staff of both programmes also met in June 2021 to plan the modalities of a strengthened cooperation. They expressed their commitment to drafting an agreement of action that the Executive Directors of both programmes would endorse by the end of 2021. A joint meeting of the

respective senior management teams of both programmes is also under discussion. Meanwhile, the Programme Development Branch of UN-Habitat and the Cities Unit of UNEP will need to facilitate decisions on strategic priorities that address the new strategic plan of each programme and the matters set out above.

IV. Issues for discussion

17. There are several issues that warrant the reflection and advice of the Executive Board of UN-Habitat. Those include the following:

- (a) Within and beyond the framework of the revitalized Greener Cities Partnership, on which urgent new priorities should cooperation between UN-Habitat and UNEP focus, and which non-traditional funding sources and cost-sharing arrangements might be sought? Should this include joint engagement of UN-Habitat and UNEP in country analysis and cooperation frameworks for United Nations country-level programming?
 - (b) How might existing cooperation be leveraged to help UN-Habitat achieve its secondary outcome areas of climate change mitigation, resource efficiency and ecology, which are currently lagging behind in terms of normative and operational activities and results?
 - (c) Could the Executive Board help to strengthen the urban environmental capacity of UN-Habitat by expediting its application for accreditation to the Global Environment Facility? Approval has been pending for that application for a decade, despite it meeting the requirements of the accreditation process (for example, the adoption of new fiduciary standards and environmental and social safeguards);
 - (d) Under the current deficit, and with staffing shortages, both programmes are already hard-pressed to deliver on existing commitments. How might their respective Member States mobilize additional resources for dedicated joint work?
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