

## Science-Policy Panel for Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution OEWG 1.2 Highlights: Monday, 30 January 2023

Resuming the first session of the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG), delegates set to the task assigned to them by the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) Resolution 5/8: to develop a science-policy panel to contribute further to the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution. Much of the day was devoted to procedural matters, particularly the election of officers, before participants turned their attention to the scope of the panel.

### Opening of the Session

Ulf Björnholm, Secretariat of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), reported that Vice-Chair Valentina Sierra (Uruguay) would serve as Acting Chair until the process for the election of officers was concluded.

Acting Chair Sierra noted that during the first part of the meeting, delegates delivered general statements sharing views on the establishment of the science-policy panel. She urged participants to “dive into the substance and turn our vision into reality.”

Pinsak Suraswadi, Director General of the Pollution Control Department, on behalf of Varawu Silpa-Archa, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Thailand, underscored that chemicals, waste, and pollution lack an intergovernmental science-policy body like the ones for climate change or biodiversity, stressing that such a body is necessary to address the triple planetary crisis.

Sheila Aggarwal-Khan, Director, Economy Division, UNEP, on behalf of UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen, noted that many multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) already address scientific questions under their respective mandates and have set up relevant bodies. She underscored that policy relevance will be key, stressing the need to draw lessons from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and the International Resource Panel.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General, World Health Organization (WHO), emphasized that exposure to chemicals and air pollution leads to avoidable public health tragedies. He stressed that the panel could offer a strategic approach and provide opportunities to work together and innovate, focusing on prevention.

### Election of Officers

**Election of the Chair:** The RUSSIAN FEDERATION requested postponing the election to later in the week or holding a secret ballot. SWITZERLAND suggested proceeding with the election of the Chair.

Following informal consultations, Acting Chair Sierra proposed, and parties agreed to, a secret vote. She outlined the UNEA rules of procedure that would apply, as contained in UNEP/SPP-CWP/OEWG.1/INF/8. After confirmation from the

Secretariat that 111 member state delegations were present in the room, Acting Chair Sierra observed that the quorum was met. OEWG 1.2 elected Gudi Alkemade, the Netherlands, as Chair of the OEWG with 88 votes in favor.

Chair Alkemade thanked delegates for their support and underlined her intent to help delegates arrive at consensus through a transparent, inclusive process.

**Election of Officers other than the Chair:** Acting Chair Sierra noted that following the resignation of Vice-Chair Salma Qadoori Jabir (Iraq), Li Jinhui (China) was elected through a silence procedure.

Acting Chair Sierra recalled that four self-nominations from Eastern European states region were received, from Georgia, Romania, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine. She reported that the CEE region requested to delay a decision on this nomination until the next OEWG. The OEWG agreed with that approach.

### Adoption of the Agenda and Organizational Matters

The OEWG adopted the agenda and organization of work for the resumed meeting (UNEP/SPP-CWP/OEWG.1/1, and Add.1 and 2).

The EU and IRAN suggested limiting the number of parallel sessions to two, to accommodate small delegations and ensure full participation. SWITZERLAND suggested not renegotiating elements included in the UNEA Resolution 5/8 to make the best use of limited time. COSTA RICA emphasized that discussions on the scope and functions are interconnected, suggesting, with IRAN, that discussing scope first is the best way to proceed.

Chair Alkemade agreed that initiating discussions by focusing on scope would make sense, adding that the best way forward would be clarified once the deliberations began. With no objections, delegates approved the organization of work.

### General Statements

Chair Alkemade invited written submissions from delegations that had not provided a statement in the first part of the meeting.

Nigeria, for the AFRICAN STATES, underscored the need for an integrative approach, focusing on the lifecycle of chemicals and waste, and preventing pollution. He called for coordinating actors, including the private sector, academia, and others, because, among other reasons, the region lacks technical and scientific capacities and financial resources. He said this leads to information asymmetry that sidelines Africa and other low- and middle-income countries.

### Timetable and Organization of Work for the OEWG

The Secretariat drew attention to the lack of nominated focal points, noting that 113 have registered. He reiterated the necessity for sufficient resources to make the OEWG process successful, highlighting that approximately USD 8.25 million needs to be mobilized, of which USD 2.3 million has been raised.

The EU agreed with the elements in the proposed budget and programme of work as the basis for further discussions and called for further clarity on some costs. The US urged discussing scope and function before intersessional work and budget.

NORWAY and the US suggested discussion of and clarity on the OEWG's outputs necessary to establish the panel and on

elements to be decided by the panel once established. NORWAY suggested the panel itself could develop its prioritization mechanism, procedures for deliverables, and horizon scanning.

SAUDI ARABIA said the OEWG should address all the elements of the UNEA mandate, including the name of the panel, arrangements for engaging experts, conflict of interest, and review and adoption of reports and assessments.

Delegates agreed to establish a contact group on the timetable and organization of work for the OEWG, including discussions on the resource mobilization strategy, which will convene later in the week.

### ***Preparations of Proposals for the Establishment of a Science-Policy Panel***

The Secretariat presented the documents on scope (UNEP/SPP-CWP/OEWG.1/4) and principal functions (UNEP/SPP-CWP/OEWG.1/5). He noted that the overall landscape is complex, containing several relevant bodies and processes. On options for the panel's scope, he suggested four key steps: an integrative approach to establishing scope; a conceptual framework to guide the panel's work; a decision regarding the inclusive versus exclusive character of the panel; and identification of entities the panel would directly support.

Regarding the functions, he said they are well defined in Resolution 5/8, including undertaking horizon scanning, conducting assessments, assuming knowledge management functions, and facilitating information sharing. He highlighted capacity building.

On the **scope**, there were several calls for closely aligning with Resolution 5/8. Many countries supported an integrative approach and broad scope for the panel, with several adding that flexibility is key. The EU, SWITZERLAND, and others suggested an integrative, multi-sectoral approach. BRAZIL, GHANA, and others called for integrating chemicals, wastes, and pollution in the panel's scope. The US called for including pollution of air, water, soils, and oceans.

The EU, SWITZERLAND, and TANZANIA stressed that a broad scope would help the panel capture future developments and emerging issues. CANADA called for striking the balance between specificity and responsiveness to emerging issues.

The UK and ARGENTINA called for a conceptual framework, with the UK noting its importance in helping set priorities.

SAUDI ARABIA and QATAR called for a well-defined scope, noting that it could help avoid duplication of work with other bodies.

The EU, the US, CHINA, the REPUBLIC OF KOREA, and others also agreed to avoid overlaps with other conventions and agreements. THAILAND observed the need to coordinate with regional bodies.

SWITZERLAND, MEXICO, the UK, the US, CANADA, and JAPAN cautioned against a too strong focus on value chains. MEXICO suggested it could exclude other opportunities, while JAPAN noted that it could create more issues. COLOMBIA supported a broad, integrated approach and supported a focus on value chains.

The GLOBAL ALLIANCE ON HEALTH AND POLLUTION preferred the "impact/pollution-down approach," which is initiated by the observation of environmental and human-health impacts, compared to the "chemical-up" approach focused on value chains.

On **functions**, the REPUBLIC OF KOREA, NIGERIA, and the UK noted that the panel should be policy relevant, and BRAZIL, BAHRAIN, and others added that the panel should not be policy prescriptive.

AUSTRALIA said horizon scanning should produce precise outputs within reasonable time limits.

TANZANIA, KENYA, NIGERIA, and IRAN called for capacity building as a key function. CHINA urged focusing on the key considerations of developing countries and regions, with support.

WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP drew attention to in-kind and voluntary support to achieve the panel's objectives.

THE INTERNATIONAL POLLUTANTS ELIMINATION NETWORK said that the proposed objective is insufficient as it

omits chemicals and does not address preventing harm from toxic elements.

Chair Alkemade noted some points of convergence and said a way forward will be determined on Tuesday.

### ***Deep Dive on Scope***

Moderator Kevin Helps, UNEP Secretariat, opened the session.

Valerie Hickey, World Bank, stressed the importance of integrating the social sciences, including economics, in the panel's work. She emphasized that we know we cannot "grow now and clean up later" as environmental degradation has reversed development gains.

Santos Virgilio, Angola, focused on developing countries. He called for a global perspective, taking into account the special circumstances of developing countries, strengthening collaboration with academia, and involving the private sector.

Ahmed Ansari, Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals (ZDHC) highlighted the Manufacturing Restricted Substances List (MRSL) approach and emphasized the importance of lifecycle frameworks.

Martin Kayser, BASF, noted that the International Council of Chemical Associations (ICCA) supports the panel and its potential to elevate chemicals, waste, and pollution issues within the global environmental arena. He stressed that the chemical industry faces multiple transition challenges, including digitalization, circular economy, and climate change.

Panelists then addressed how to accelerate concern about pollution to match climate change and biodiversity. Hickey called for including pollution in governments' balance sheets, recommending that the panel collect evidence in affected communities rather than only assessing existing data. Ansari noted that sustainable chemical management is profitable in saving energy. Kayser called for "new chemistry," saying innovations must succeed in the market to lead to change. Virgilio said developing countries need scientific evidence that healthy populations require quality, not just a quantity, of jobs.

In the following discussion, participants considered:

- preventing conflicts of interest within the panel;
- ensuring developing country scientists' engagement;
- if a well-defined scope for the panel might avoid overlaps with other bodies, but require deciding on priorities; and
- challenges in providing economic recommendations.

### ***In the Corridors***

Participants gathered in Bangkok with the hopes of embarking on substantive discussions to establish an effective, policy-relevant panel. They immediately met choppy waters churned up by geopolitical tensions. Voting for the Chair by secret ballot took considerable time. After the process was followed to the letter, the OEWG had its chair: Gudi Alkemade from the Netherlands.

With someone to steer the helm, several noted the diverse crew on board. Some participants are technical-level experts, including participants from established scientific bodies, such as the Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee and the Chemical Review Committee. There are some "higher" level delegates, usually active at the COPs of the various chemicals and waste bodies. Still other countries perhaps focused on organizing a science-policy panel more generally, drawing on the experience of their IPCC experts.

The observer contingent flowed over into the gallery seats, ready to steam ahead after the Major Groups' meeting held on Sunday. For some observers, the UNEA Major Groups feel like "an odd fit," as one put it. Many are used to the chemicals and wastes COPs or SAICM, which have different rules and practices for observer engagement. Here, observers are wading into new institutional waters, trying to figure out the best ways to engage in the panel's design, and with one another.

The "deep dive" on scope allowed participants to later dive into substance in plenary. Views varied on scope, although one country (perhaps optimistically) sensed an "emerging consensus" for a broad scope, but noted "that puts a lot of pressure on prioritization – how and when to decide what to focus on."