

Science-Policy Panel for Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution OEWG-3.2 Highlights: Tuesday, 17 June 2025

After a day of work in contact groups and informal groups, participants gathered for a stocktaking plenary, where progress was evident, although a lengthy list of issues remains.

Contact Group 1

Co-facilitated by Toks Akinseye (UK) and Miguel Ruiz Botero (Colombia), the group met throughout the day in informal groups and in the contact group.

Membership of the Interdisciplinary Expert Committee (IEC): An informal group reported back on the outcomes from discussions regarding the participation of observers in IEC meetings, including specifically who the observers are and what “NGO observers” refers to. The informal group provided text that bodies, organizations and agencies with observer status in any UN system entity, consultative status with UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), accreditation to the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), or any relevant MEA would be eligible for observer status in the Panel unless one-third of member states object to their admission. The informal group resumed discussions on outstanding issues of contention in the afternoon.

Upon returning to the contact group, delegates discussed two alternative texts regarding the participation of observers in IEC meetings. One text specified that observers could attend at the chair’s invitation, in accordance with the panel’s policy and procedures on the admission of observers, while the other did not require a specific invitation. A debate ensued, during which several delegations raised concerns about permitting all observers, citing both practical reasons and the risk of politicizing the independence of the science generated by the IEC. Agreeing on this point, one delegate further elaborated that in the case of the IPCC’s Bureau, members with elected scientists in the Bureau “get an extra seat in the Bureau,” creating what he called a “mini-Panel,” resulting in potentially less transparency. One delegate disagreed, stating that the admission of observers is common practice for the Stockholm Convention’s Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee (POPRC). One delegate stated that discussion on permitting observers from the IPCC or IPBES is premature given that “we’ve yet to discuss the functions of the IEC” and requested bracketing the textual proposals until the functions of the IEC are clarified. This delegate further noted that the IEC is comparable to the IPCC’s Bureau, which is closed to observers.

Membership of the plenary: The informal group reported back from their discussions, providing a suggestion for text on the participation of observers in plenary, in the hope that this would unlock discussions on non-governmental participation in the IEC.

Regarding Indigenous Peoples and local communities, a Major Group called for distinguishing between these groups, including clarifying related ambiguities regarding Indigenous Peoples’ rights. They proposed separating the terms with a comma, a

suggestion supported by two Member States, while another Member State voiced a preference for combining the terms. One delegate suggested clarifying that the paragraph apply *mutatis mutandis* to the IEC.

The group agreed to insert the text proposal in the foundational document, maintaining brackets related to the distinction between Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and deleting a specification that observer representation refers to sessions of the plenary.

Co-Facilitator Ruiz Botero invited the informal group to reconvene and work on a text proposal for paragraphs relating to non-governmental participation in the IEC.

Contact Group 2

The contact group, co-facilitated by Keima Gardiner (Trinidad and Tobago) and Kateřina Šebková (Czechia), met in the morning, afternoon and evening.

Secretariat: Following up on questions from a previous contact group session, the legal advisor elaborated on the difference between substantive and procedural matters, explaining that the selection of the secretariat is considered a substantive matter given its permanence and that it is not about the conduct of a meeting. The legal advisor also clarified procedures for hosting a new instrument, noting that the decision is taken at the first session of the panel once offers from Member States are presented.

Views remained entrenched on whether the foundational document should state that secretariat services are to be provided solely by UNEP, or to keep it open to proposals by Member States and/or to UNEP receiving support from other intergovernmental organizations, or even whether the decision can be taken at the first meeting of the panel.

A procedural matter arose when two delegations questioned the right of a regional economic integration organization to make proposals that would be reflected on the screen. The legal advisor clarified that, in accordance with UNEA Resolution 5/8 and other relevant rules of procedure, the organization in question is entitled to participate as a full member and its proposals may be shown on the screen.

Scope, objectives and functions of the panel: There was an attempt to lift brackets given extensive past discussions and that the carefully drafted language comes from UNEA Resolution 5/8. However, two delegations opposed and proposed changes to the text, including removing language on the protection of human health and the environment.

Decision establishing the panel: Differences arose on whether to request the UNEP Executive Director to report on the outcomes of the Intergovernmental Meeting, to directly invite UNEA and others to consider the decision to establish the panel, or to do both. After legal advice clarified that inviting UNEA and others to consider the decision exceeds the mandate of the Intergovernmental Meeting, the group agreed to request the UNEP

Executive Director to report to UNEA and other MEAs. All operative paragraphs were also agreed.

Preamble: On human rights-related language, delegates acknowledged long-standing views on these issues and sought a solution that includes human rights language that is universally accepted, unlike, one suggested, the UN General Assembly decision on the right to a healthy environment. Delegates also sought to keep reference to pollution prevention and intergenerational equity. They formulated a paragraph stating that the implementation of the sound management of chemicals and waste and pollution prevention contributes to the full enjoyment of human rights, and human well-being and dignity for present and future generations. One delegation called for bracketing the reference to pollution prevention, opposed by others who recalled they compromised by moving this idea to the preamble of the decision from the operating principles and approaches of the panel.

Various text proposals were attempted to find consensus on a paragraph addressing all forms of pollution. Sticking points included how to refer to prevention, legacy pollution, the range of pollution sources, and the release into different environmental compartments, such as air, water, and soil.

Contact Group 3

Co-facilitated by Sam Adu-Kumi (Ghana) and Itsuki Kuroda (Japan), the group met in the morning and afternoon to finalize the draft decision on the interim arrangements.

A long debate ensued on an invitation for Member States to submit offers to host the panel. Some drew links to contact group 2 discussions on the institutional host, which Co-Facilitator Kuroda stressed were unrelated, because a country could host regardless of which institution provides secretariat services.

Others questioned whether the deadline for submitting offers to host was the obstacle in agreeing to the paragraph and asked the Secretariat to clarify the legal advice provided during the regional meetings. The Secretariat stated that the issue is not legal, but rather practical, to avoid a situation where UNEP would have to interpret the mandate in a case where, for example, a hosting offer is submitted after the deadline. An informal group was tasked to work on the text to either delete the paragraph or insert a placeholder for the Secretariat to set a deadline. Disagreement persisted in the afternoon, including whether to meet as an informal group or present the issue in plenary.

After parties expressed divergent views on government oversight through a bureau or another mechanism during the interim period, an informal group was formed to develop text for the contact group to consider. There was a wide recognition that bureau elections should be avoided at the Intergovernmental Meeting owing to time constraints. Several preferred maintaining the current bureau during the interim period, noting that members can step down as per UNEA rules of procedure. Other suggestions included an informal set of regional liaisons chosen by the regions or asking the UNEA Committee of Permanent Representatives to work with the UNEP Executive Director. Informal discussions eventually led to agreed language requesting the UNEP Executive Director, in consultation with Member States, to prepare relevant documentation for consideration by the governing body.

Plenary

OEWG Chair Gudi Alkemade (the Netherlands) invited the Co-Facilitators to report back from the contact groups.

For contact group 1, Co-Facilitator Akinseye reported that the group met in both formal and informal sessions with agreement on deleting a chapeau paragraph providing an overview of all bodies that constitute the panel, on final text regarding functions of the bureau, a chapeau text on the functions of the IEC, and a chapeau

text on other subsidiary bodies of the panel. She noted that discussions on the admission of observers and non-governmental participation to the IEC were considerably debated and stated that further work is needed to finalize this issue.

For contact group 2, Co-Facilitator Šebková reported that the group did not have enough time to consider the name of the panel yet, but had agreed to: all operating principles, except for two principles relating to gender and with four principles moved to preambular text; secretariat functions, with text on host and location of the secretariat still under discussion; and streamlined text on financial arrangements, with additional text on the trust fund still under development. She noted progress made on the draft decision for the intergovernmental meeting to establish the panel, including agreement on some of the preambular paragraphs.

For contact group 3, Co-Facilitator Adu-Kumi reported that the group agreed to all preambular paragraphs of the draft decision on recommendations for the panel, with a placeholder remaining for the name of the panel.

Upon a suggestion from the RUSSIAN FEDERATION, delegates agreed to insert brackets around three annexes to the draft decision on recommendations for the panel containing the process for determining the work programme, the procedures for the preparation and clearance of panel deliverables, and the conflict of interest policy. IRAN and KENYA voiced concern over inclusivity and impartiality during the proceedings, with Chair Alkemade noting that finding solutions would sometimes require smaller groups working on proposals.

On arrangements for the interim period, contact group 3 Co-Facilitator Kuroda reported agreement on all operative paragraphs except one regarding the host country.

Noting that the outcome documents would need to be finished before 12 pm on Wednesday, 18 June, for translation and consideration by the Intergovernmental Meeting, Chair Alkemade called for focus on “getting the foundations right to establish the panel.”

In the Corridors

The flicker of optimism evident on Monday grew only into a small flame by the end of Tuesday. The informal groups started to make headway, earning their extra time, even if it meant that one contact group repeatedly “broke into” informals, hoping that the contact group could re-start. Key trade-offs were made explicit, including the need to untie voting from membership. The densest part of this knot, and still unresolved, was how regional integrated economic organizations would be treated.

Debates flared over where the panel would be hosted, at times linking it with which institution would provide secretariat services. Despite attempts to separate these issues, some thought that Kenya as host could make UNEP more likely to serve as secretariat, and similarly noted that Geneva was also the seat of the WHO, a controversial potential partner in providing the secretariat. A long-time observer with a keen eye on UN budgets noted that both organizations are facing massive cuts and wondered if either could alone, or together, significantly shape the panel’s work.

The stocktaking plenary revealed a narrower list of issues still up for grabs. Although shorter, the list remains substantial. It’s a wide range: host country, strategic partnerships, membership, financial arrangements, human rights and gender language, and the functions of the panel and its bodies, among others. The list is also substantial in terms of the implications for the future panel, including whether membership on the IEC could politicize science or provide transparency to the panel’s work. Delegates settled in for a very long night, under the deadline of noon on Wednesday.