



COVID-19  
RESPONSE

UN  
environment  
programme

# Working With the Environment to Protect People

UNEP's COVID-19 Response



**The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) stands with the billions of people suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate priority is to protect them. But UNEP also has a duty to help nations build back better after the pandemic to increase resilience to future crises.**

COVID-19 shows that the health of people and the planet are one and the same. Human activity has altered virtually every corner of Earth, bringing humans into contact with new vectors: seventy-five percent of all emerging infectious diseases in humans cross from animals. The long-term threats of climate change and ecosystem and biodiversity loss also spring from the destruction of nature.

The idea that a thriving natural world is essential to human health, societies and economies has always been central to UNEP's work. But now UNEP must provide even more support to countries as they reduce the risks of future pandemics by restoring lost ecosystems and biodiversity, fighting climate change and reducing pollution.

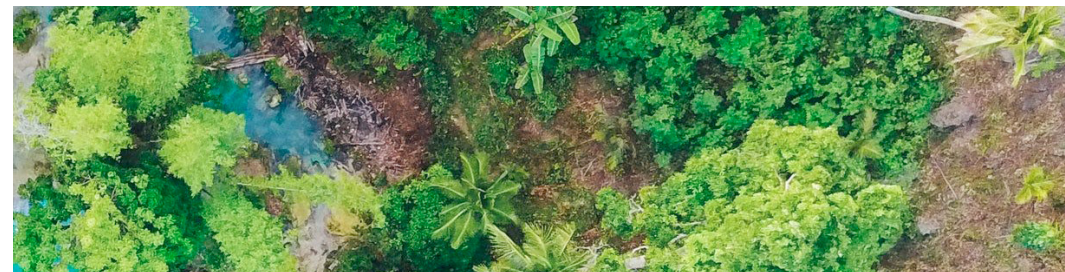
UNEP will support nations and partners to deliver stronger science, policies that back a healthier planet and more green investments through its core mandate and Programme of Work. It will expand and strengthen partnerships with other UN agencies to address country needs as they advance the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement and other crucial agreements. UNEP will pursue a just transition to new economic models that protect the world's poor and vulnerable – for it is these people who suffer the most from pandemics and environmental degradation.

In COVID-19, the planet has delivered its strongest warning to date that humanity must change. Shutting down economies is a short-term response to this warning. It cannot endure. Only by building functioning economies that work with nature, not against it, can the world's nations thrive.

— **Inger Andersen**,  
UNEP Executive Director



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Executive Director of the United  
Nations Environment Programme  
and Under-Secretary-General



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# THE CONTEXT

This document should be read in the context of the Secretary General's report on the *Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19* and the UN Sustainable Development Group's framework for the immediate socio-economic response to Covid-19. Within this framework, UNEP will be working with the UN System more broadly to support member states in their efforts to incorporate the environmental dimension into their response efforts.

The following two points from the SG's report are particularly relevant to the UNEP mandate:

- **The 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change are still our best chance for a brighter future.** Had we made faster progress on these processes, the world would have been better equipped to face COVID-19 – with stronger health systems, fewer people living in poverty, less gender inequality, a healthier environment and more resilient societies.

- **COVID-19 does not provide a 'silver lining' for the environment, but it provides the impetus to revisit our relationship with nature and build a better world.** Governments should respond to the COVID-19 crisis by making policy and investment decisions that also address crises such as air pollution and the climate emergency. ■

## RESPONSE 1:

# The medical & humanitarian emergency phase

Adverse impacts on human and planetary health will come from many sources as the world deals with COVID-19: a spike in hazardous waste, such as personal protective equipment, electronics and pharmaceuticals; masses of wastewater and massive use of detergents, disinfectants and antimicrobial solutions. UNEP's response to these emerging challenges will focus on:

- **Knowledge, information and awareness** – Educating frontline decision makers on how to deal with COVID-19 medical waste, with a strong focus on resource efficiency and circularity in the production process.

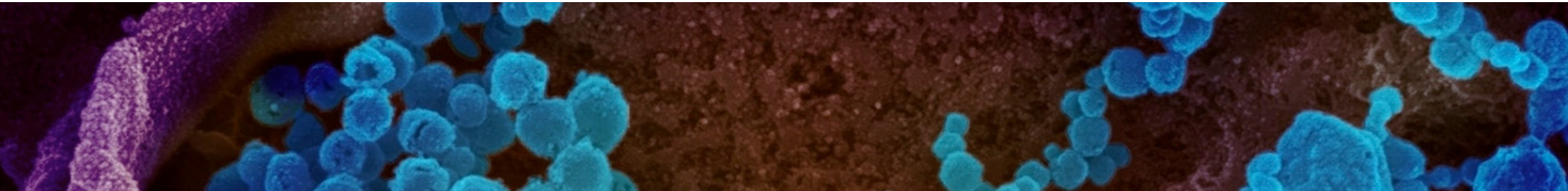
- **Country medical waste management capacity assessments** – Helping policymakers develop short-term strategies to make full use of existing capacity and, in the long-term, supporting a global assessment of medical waste management capacity to help nations incorporate pandemic waste strategies into crisis preparedness and response.
- **Policy and legal frameworks for management of COVID-19 contaminated waste** – Examining waste management legislation and developing guidance to tailor it to COVID-19 challenges. >>



- **Segregation, sorting, storage and stockpiling of COVID-19 waste** – Promoting environmentally sound waste management technologies and methods – including the temporary solution of stockpiling waste and preventing open dumping and burning, which can lead to further health issues.

- **New infrastructure and capacity** – Supporting nations to build new infrastructure for dealing with medical waste. Lack of access to state-of-the-art technology to treat mixed contaminated medical waste poses massive challenges to most developing countries. ■

***While there is a clear need to focus on an immediate humanitarian response, governments cannot lose sight of environmental sustainability***



## RESPONSE 2:

# A transformational change for nature and people

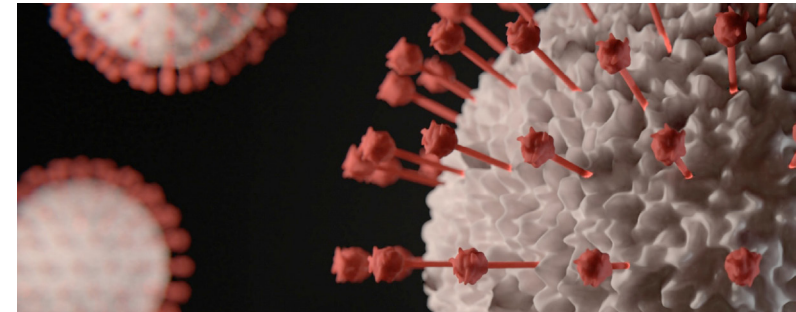
A healthy planet is critical to our ability to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent future zoonotic diseases, which are passed between humans and animals. The deterioration of ecosystems, and the biodiversity within them – from habitat loss and modification, agricultural development, climate change, pollution, and overexploitation of species – is increasing the risk of zoonotic disease pandemics. UNEP's response to these challenges will focus on:

- **Improved science and policy options to better understand and respond to zoonotic threats** – Designing a risk and response programme to improve countries' ability to reduce zoonotic threats through approaches that take impacts on nature into consideration. This includes providing new science-based policy options, a new global mapping of risks from the unregulated wildlife trade, habitat fragmentation and biodiversity loss, and expanded demand-driven policy responses for nations.





- » • **Investment in nature for improved human health, sustainable socio-economic recovery, poverty reduction and livelihood recovery** – Promoting expanded opportunities for valuing and investing in nature as part of the response to the COVID-19 crisis.
- **Science, technical support and advocacy to ensure progress on environmental issues through global processes** – Supporting nations to deliver stronger commitments under the Paris Agreement, agree on the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, and adopt the Post-2020 Chemicals and Waste Management Framework. Supporting them to deliver on commitments made to these and other processes.
- **Raising awareness of the links between nature, health and sustainable living** – Raising public awareness of environment and human health links, creating public support for green growth opportunities within economic recovery, and advocating sustainable living and smart choices through communication campaigns and educational platforms.
- **Continued learning** – With over 1 billion students no longer able to attend school, UNEP has been working with leaders in environmental education to create “Earth School,” an innovative set of lessons hosted on TED-Ed. UNEP will also collaborate with other UN agencies, educators and governments to integrate environmental themes across curricula to help the world “learn back better”.



***Over 30 new human pathogens have been detected in the last three decades alone, 75 per cent of which originated in animals. This pandemic should be a never-again moment.***

## RESPONSE 2: KEY FUNDS AND INITIATIVES

- **Multi-Partner Trust Fund for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration** – Will stimulate a new restoration economy to provide jobs and increased supplies of goods and services from healthy ecosystems.
- **Euro Seed Capital Assistance Facility for Forest and Landscape Restoration** – Currently at EUR 25 million, the facility will refocus on job creation and rural employment in priority areas hit hard by the current pandemic or under threat.
- **Community Based Resilience Fund** – With EUR 20 million, this fund will provide small grants to communities to rebuild resilient societies with nature-based solutions.
- **Transforming Agriculture and Food Systems** – Will help policymakers reform agriculture, including through subsidies and nature-based solutions. The AGRI3 Fund, with USD 1 billion available in loans to farmers, will support post COVID-19 economic recovery by accelerating shifts towards sustainable agriculture.
- **Climate Funders Alliance/Corporates for Nature Initiative** – Will provide a stimulus to ensure the 1 Green Gigaton commitment is realized by 2021, develop Principles for Investments in Nature-based Solutions and support corporates to invest in nature-based solutions. ■

*The pandemic has exposed many fragilities in our economies, and deepened existing inequalities, while highlighting the need for resilience, innovation and cooperation.*



### RESPONSE 3:

## Investing to build back better

Greening the recovery efforts can increase resilience to future crises by ensuring a healthy environment that backs healthy people. Green fiscal stimulus packages and financing can include the centrality of green and decent jobs; investments in public wealth and social and ecological infrastructure; circularity to advance sustainable consumption and production; responsible finance for climate stability and ecosystems integrity; and socially inclusive outcomes.

Specifically, UNEP's response will focus on:

- **Reaching real economy actors to rebuild, scale up and accelerate sustainable consumption and production, and create new green jobs** – Supporting better economic and

development planning along with sustainable, resource-efficient, responsible and inclusive value chains. This includes reaching businesses through partnerships with UN agencies, finance, government and private sector institutions, and revitalizing markets and supply chains for green and sustainable products.

- **Linking recovery efforts with the clean energy transition, nature-based solutions and the Paris Agreement** – Demonstrating how investments in climate friendly and nature-based actions will stimulate economic regrowth, create employment opportunities, and increase resilience to a recurrent zoonotic threat. This requires connecting the biodiversity and climate agendas early in planning cycles.





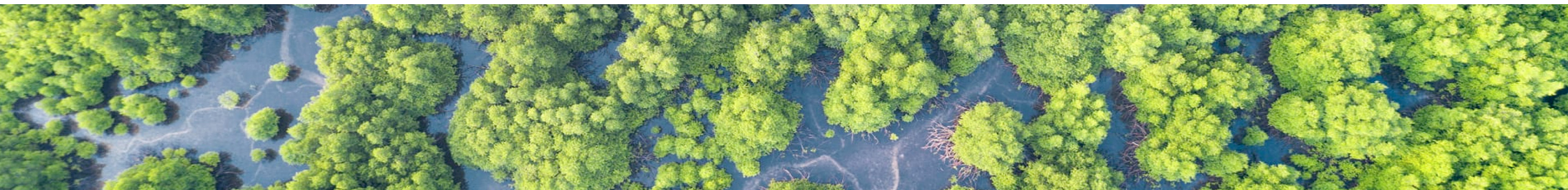
- **Supporting governments to rebuild the next generation of social, ecological and productive infrastructure** – Promoting needs-based, integrated approaches across the infrastructure life cycle. This includes supporting sustainable infrastructure, reimagining sustainable cities that are fit-for purpose in a post-COVID-19 world, and supporting sustainable finance recovery packages through fiscal reform, green bonds, and other public-private lending initiatives.

## RESPONSE 3: KEY ACTIVITIES

- **Supporting country actions on the Climate Promise** – repurposing energy, cooling and recovery investments to align with the Paris Agreement, in cooperation with UNDP and other partners.
- **Targeting high-carbon and resource-intensive sectors** with actions that are job-rich and connect

across the climate, nature and resource efficiency agendas.

- **Working with investors and ministries of finance to shift investments and subsidies towards nature-based and climate-neutral strategies**, including through global platforms such as the Net Zero Asset Owner Alliance and the Green Fiscal Policy Network.



## RESPONSE 4:

# Modernizing global environmental governance

Finding solutions to environmental issues is more urgent than ever, but the pandemic has led to the postponement of key meetings. This calls for an examination of how global environmental governance can move with the times. The Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity has already lifted its pre-COP 15 technical meetings to e-platforms. UNEP is reviewing the implications of moving environmental governance and multilateralism towards virtual, and thus lower environmental footprint, meeting platforms. Specifically, UNEP will:

- Evaluate the opportunities for intergovernmental bodies with regards to virtual meetings – applying rules of procedure to online meetings, setting out guidance and identifying barriers and possible reforms.
- Examine and work to overcome the logistical challenges of moving to online platforms.
- Organize training and staffing needs to ensure that UNEP and the Secretariats of Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEAs) have the tools they need to support virtual meetings.
- Ensure close coordination with MEAs and regional offices as UNEP moves forward with modernizing global environmental governance. ■



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