

2023 first regular session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

Special address by Ms Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme

H.E. Artur Andrzej Pollok, President of the Executive Board (President): Good morning, colleagues, welcome to the second day of our session. We are now going to restart with our discussion.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, it is now an honour for me to welcome Ms Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme. Ms Andersen is online with us from Nairobi.

Madam Executive Director, the Board is grateful to you for being with us today and we want to warmly welcome you to deliver a special address to this Board session. We are very concerned about the climate crisis facing humanity and look forward to hearing your views on the links with humanitarian action and the critical need to build long-term resilience of people and communities.

In particular, we are keen to hear about the results of collaboration between UNEP and WFP to improve adaptation to climate change, food security and nutrition as well as healthier agriculture and other ecosystems, in particular vulnerable communities.

Madam Executive Director, I have the honour to give you the floor.

Ms I. Andersen, Executive Director, UNEP: Thank you very, very much to you, Ambassador, and congratulations on your election and, of course, to my dear colleague, David, it is a pleasure to be here today. To all delegates, thank you for inviting me to make this address.

I speak to you today about the collaboration between the United Nations Environment Programme and WFP. About how we can strengthen our joint work on addressing the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste. This work is crucial. Because there can be no peace, no stability, and no end to hunger and poverty without healthy nature and a healthy climate.

Many of the crises to which WFP responds, such as the searing drought in the Horn of Africa, are intensified, or caused, by climate change. Floods in low-lying deltas and coastal zones due to sea level rise and greater intensity of storms. The collapse of glacial lakes. Drought, increasing desertification and the associated reduced productivity of the land. Climate change is here, now.

Inadequate global action on bringing down emissions means we can expect far worse in the future. In 2019, climate change was linked to the displacement of over 70 percent of 33 million people. And some estimates indicate that by 2050 climate change could internally displace 216 million people. As the United Nations Secretary-General has said, the climate crisis has escalating implications for international peace and security.

Closely linked is the water challenge. By 2050, an estimated 6 billion people will face water scarcity due to climate change, pollution and increasingly unsustainable consumption and production. Degradation and loss of land fertility, and associated natural habitats and biodiversity, is another threat. Millions of people are facing extreme hunger and severe food shortages. Hundreds of millions of people face hunger every day. Billions of people struggle to afford a healthy, balanced diet. And billions of hectares of productive land are degraded. Our productive seas and waterways are increasingly polluted. The estimated annual market value of food dependent on pollinators is over half a trillion dollars. Yet these pollinators are in decline.

This perfect storm of environmental factors is undermining our efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. This perfect storm makes it crystal clear that the mandates of UNEP and



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WFP are intertwined. We can only calm this storm by investing in the foundations of human and planetary resilience: vibrant and healthy nature and a stable climate.

Friends, WFP and UNEP are partners that play to each other's strengths. WFP has the mandate to eradicate hunger and malnutrition and a massive presence on the ground. UNEP has the technical and scientific know-how to secure ecosystems, mitigate and adapt to climate change and create sustainable consumption and production, to generate equitable benefits for people and nature. Together, we can help to break the cycle of hunger, poverty and humanitarian crises through nature-centred, as well as people-centred, solutions.

The way I see it, there are three key areas behind which WFP and UNEP can unite.

The first area is resilience and adaptation through investments in nature-based solutions and early warning systems.

Look, even if we were to turn off the tap on greenhouse gas emissions today, the proverbial bathtub is still nearly full. Indeed, to remain at 1.5 degrees Celsius we have around 400-500 Gt of CO₂ left to emit before we zip past that limit. If we want to remain at 2 degrees, we have around 1,150-1,350 Gt of CO₂ left. Consider that in 2019 we emitted 59 gigatonnes of CO₂ equivalent and that between then and now, we have increased, not decreased, our emissions load. So, the CO₂ tap is, for the moment, still wide open. Climate impacts are here to stay. They will intensify. We must help vulnerable nations and communities adapt to long-term changes and plan to survive disasters.

This means focusing on resilience through nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based adaptation, as WFP and UNEP are doing, for example, in South Sudan. In partnership, we are developing a Green Climate Fund proposal to enhance integrated land and water resource management in Eastern Equatoria. This will improve the resilience of communities to floods and droughts.

And there is no doubt that science-based, data-driven climate services and early warning systems save lives and livelihoods. Around 1.4 million people in least-developed countries lost their lives to weather, climate and water-related hazards in the 50 years leading up to 2020. Yet only 40 percent of 138 World Meteorological Organization countries have multi-hazard early warning systems in play.

We need to see more of what is happening in Lesotho, for example, where UNEP and WFP are supporting vulnerable communities to receive access to climate information and forecasting systems. Coupled with local adaptation strategies – such as crop diversification, water harvesting and grassland restoration – this is helping communities build resilience.

By working together on identifying common programmes, sharing tools and science, and co-mobilizing resources, UNEP and WFP can bring such projects to many more people.

The second area is nature-positive, climate friendly food systems.

It is obvious that our food systems need to reform. Agri-food systems are responsible for around 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. They are causing damage through fertilizers and pesticides, and the leakage of antimicrobials. They are very wasteful, with huge amounts of food lost between farms and markets – up to 40 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. They are over-reliant on just a few crops, with wheat, corn and rice making up around 60 percent of the world's food energy intake.

But there is a lot we can do. For example, UNEP is developing agroecological approaches that work with nature to support resilient and genetically diverse species of crops, livestock and soil



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microbes. Agrobiodiverse diets improve human health and nutrition, while these approaches also control the use of harmful chemicals, antibiotics and other unnecessary nutrient inputs.

On the food loss front, the lack of effective cold chain is estimated to result in losses of 475 million tonnes, or 13 percent, of total food production globally. But UNEP, with WFP and other partners, is working towards the widespread adoption of energy-efficient and climate friendly cold-chain solutions in the agriculture and health sectors. The benefits of climate friendly cold chain are many and varied. Beyond making more food available, cold chain brings economic empowerment for farmers, increased export revenues and the mitigation of environmental impacts, to name but a few.

By working together to take cold chain innovations to scale in WFP and partner operations, collaborating on country food systems reviews, and working with the finance sector, donors and private partners to finance nature-positive food systems, UNEP and WFP can start to steer food systems in the right direction.

The third area is integrated water resource management.

As I mentioned earlier, water scarcity is a serious and growing concern. In sub-Saharan Africa, irrigated areas are expected to double by 2050, but this water must come from somewhere. Because we need water for people, water for food, water for industry, but also water for nature. Failing the latter, we risk breaking natural cycles, interfering with soil moisture and the hydrological cycle and risking longer term impacts for people and for planet. Around 41 percent of global irrigation water use is at the expense of environmental flow requirements. So, we need to get better at using ever scarcer water.

Research shows that water-harvesting and conservation could boost rainfed kilocalorie production by up to 24 percent, so this is a real option. And UNEP projects are proving that such interventions work.

In Darfur, for example, we are collaborating on the European Union-funded Wadi El Ku Catchment Management Project which has been helping 200,000 farmers cope with dry conditions and reducing resource conflict. These farmers are using climate-smart methods such as nature-based water harvesting, improved seeds and livestock breeds, erosion-control techniques and much more. In Kenya, UNEP and WFP are working with the country team to build a new programme for an integrated water and food security response in the ten most drought-affected regions of the country.

UNEP and WFP can take such work to scale to reach more people and ecosystems. Roll out water monitoring and management tools to ensure they are captured in WFP's climate adaptive, food system transformation. Integrate common social and environmental resilience and safeguards in the work of United Nations country teams.

In short, friends, there is much that UNEP and WFP can do together to build resilience through ecosystem-based adaptation and nature-based solutions.

The joint areas of our work are clear: the food, energy and water nexus. Our complementary strengths are clear: WFP with the huge country presence and operational capability, and UNEP with the expertise on nature-centred solutions.

If we work more closely together, we can create real, meaningful impact. We can enhance climate mitigation and adaptation. We can support vulnerable populations to address nature-induced conflicts and natural disasters. We can maintain healthy, productive and resilient ecosystems. We can, ultimately, deliver on both our mandates and reduce the vicious cycle of humanitarian crises.



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I thank you very much for this opportunity.

