

# Towards a Pollution-Free Planet – A Report from the Recent UN Environment Assembly

**Mr. Ulf Björnholm**

*Here below follows an abstract of the lunch lecture Mr. Ulf Björnholm (Head of the UN Environment Programme's Brussels Office) gave on 15 December 2017. The lecture was organized by the United Nations Association Flanders Belgium (VVN) and the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies. It took place at the UN House in Brussels. We are grateful to Mr. Björnholm for taking the time to give this lecture and to the UN House for their hospitality.*

Ulf Björnholm, a national of Sweden, is an expert in European and international policy on sustainable development and environmental policy. As Head of the United Nations Environment Programme's Brussels Office, he is responsible for promoting and facilitating partnership-building between UN Environment and the EU institutions as well as key EU stakeholders in Brussels. This includes taking the lead on facilitating the policy dialogue between UN Environment and the European Commission under a joint Memorandum of Understanding, supervising and coordinating UN Environment's outreach initiatives in Brussels, assisting and advising the UN Environment leadership on EU Policy, and representing UN Environment in meetings and public events. Mr. Björnholm is also member of the Heads of Agencies Team of the United Nations Offices in Brussels, and he chairs the UN Brussels Policy Group on Sustainable Development. He also oversees the Greening of the UN House in Brussels. Prior to joining UN Environment, he served in the European Commission where he contributed to developing a major proposal for a new EU Clean Air Policy, presented in 2013. Linked to this, he participated actively in international UN negotiations relating to air pollution. Mr. Björnholm has also held several positions as a representative and diplomat for the Swedish Government, both in Stockholm and abroad. In his role as a political advisor and negotiator on international environmental affairs for Sweden, he chaired and represented the EU at several UN/EU environmental negotiations during two EU Presidencies – in New York (2001) and in Brussels (2009). For more than seven years, he served as Environment and Climate Counsellor at the Swedish Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels. Before joining the Swedish Government, he worked for local municipalities and for a youth network under the Swedish UN Association to promote the implementation of Agenda 21 in Sweden. Ulf Björnholm has a Master of Science from the University of Lund. In addition to being fluent in Swedish, Norwegian and English, he also speaks French and Portuguese. He took up his duties as Head of UN Environment's Brussels Office to the EU on 22 April 2014.

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Good afternoon everyone,

It is good to be here and good to engage with you. It is also nice to see so many young people engaging in UN matters. For me, voluntary work for the Swedish UN Association was a very significant first step towards my career and my engagement in general in global matters and environment/sustainable development. In a way, I am a fruit of the Rio conference on Environment and Development in 1992. I was not in Rio myself but very soon after the Rio Conference I was very inspired by the outcome document Agenda 21 and the other decisions taken there. I was engaging locally in the South of Sweden where I was studying to implement the results from Rio. I lead a youth group in Lund, which tried to promote the implementation of Chapter 28 on local Agenda 21. From there, I became more and more internationally engaged. Through the UN Association in Sweden, I first engaged voluntarily but then I got a paid job with them, focussing on how to inspire other young people to also engage in the implementation of Agenda 21. At the time, Local Agenda 21 was gaining a lot of traction in Sweden. Almost all the local communities eventually even hired people to implement their local version of Agenda 21. It was in that respect the birth of a sustainable development movement at the local level. Since then, I have had many different hats but all of them around the same themes such as sustainable development, climate change, environment. In all the different roles that I have taken on, I believe that idealism has been a very important driver – and it is something that I would like to encourage others to heed to as well.

## **UN Environment (UNEP)**

UN Environment Programme was formed in 1972 after a first UN Conference on Environment in Stockholm the same year. The programme was designed to support the implementation of the decisions take at the Conference and more broadly to serve as the “environment voice” of the UN. It was decided to locate its headquarters in Nairobi, as one of very few UN organizations based in the developing world.

More recently there has been a push, especially from the EU, to upgrade UNEP from a UN programme to an UN Agency. This sought to ensure a more stable economy through assessed contributions, and a stronger legal foundation– similar to for example FAO or WHO. As a compromise, governments at the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 decided to upgrade UNEP through and reform its governing body to become a universal body called the UN Environment Assembly. It would be the world’s principal global forum for environment ministers, responsible for setting the environmental agenda and the support and guide implementation of UNEP’s work and mandate. It would transform from being a governing body of a relatively small UN programme to something much broader, that going beyond the governance of this UNEP towards influencing the whole UN system and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development which is in charge of implementing the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

Rio+20 was the main starting point for transforming the Millennium Development Goals agreed in the year 2000 which were largely focused on traditional economic development and poverty reduction, towards embracing a more comprehensive sustainability agenda through 17 concrete Sustainable Development Goals adopted globally in 2015. Alongside the Paris Agreement on climate change, this is arguably the best blueprint humanity has ever created for a sustainable future. It is more comprehensive, more integrated and more ambitious than, for example the

MDGs. Also, it is more concrete, because the goals are supported by specific targets as well as a whole system of indicators designed to measure progress.

To me, the 2030 Agenda represents is a major breakthrough, conceptually. Of course, there is a lot of discussion whether it is implementable and possible, whether it is too ambitious, whether the timeframe is too short, etc. Those questions are all valid however I would say that if humanity really came together, and if we really pooled all our resources together, and if we solicited the necessary political will and worked together with the private sector and civil society – well then of course it is possible to achieve.

I would also argue that humanity is better equipped today than ever before. We have more resources, we are smarter, we are more educated, we have more advanced technology than we have ever had, and, on a global level, we are richer than we have ever been (notwithstanding that the gaps between the rich and poor still widen, making the picture very complicated). So - if we cannot make progress towards sustainable development, it is not because we don't have the means, but because we collectively do not want to do it.

One of the main priorities of the new UN Secretary-General, Mr. Guterres, is to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris agenda, alongside peace and security. He is also pushing for reform of the UN to create an organization which is more relevant, more efficient, less bureaucratic and more effective in terms of improving the life of the people we need to reach. To reform the UN to make it more efficient is unfortunately not all that easy. He will also rely on support of the member States. The UN reform process is ongoing in New York based on a first report from the Secretary-General which will be transformed in consultation with member States to more concrete proposals presented next spring.

So how does UN Environment and UNEA fit into this? Well, we are actually trying to do the same, at a smaller scale. Our leader, Erik Solheim, Executive Director of UN Environment, is pushing very hard for a similar reform agenda. UNEA is also part of this picture. One of the things Erik Solheim wants to do is to make UN Environment more visible, to promote a higher awareness and willingness to take on the global environment, both by putting the environment higher up on the political agenda, and by promoting a discussion around the kitchen tables at our homes. One way of doing this is simply to communicate the very name of the organization differently. If I meet someone on the street and tell them that I work for UNEP, most of them would not have a clue what that means. If you say UN Environment, you will immediately be better understood, because the name is self-explanatory: it is the environmental arm of the United Nations.

### **UN Environment Assembly (UNEA)**

Let me now turn to the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA). This was our third UNEA session, and it was the most successful meeting so far. The theme for the meeting was pollution to land, air, water, oceans, which affects both human health threatens our ecosystems. It is an issue which often does not get the political attention it deserves. For example, many European leaders seldom talk about pollution in their political discourse. So, we wanted to put pollution firmly on the global agenda as a basis for debate everywhere in member States, civil society, academia and in the private sector. The meeting solicited significant political support as well as many headlines and a lot of media attention. There is a strong interest for pollution among ordinary people simply because they it impacts our health and our children. In fact, as much as 9 to 12 million people die

every year prematurely from various forms of pollution - way higher than other causes of death. The economic cost for the global economy is enormous; estimated to some 4,6 trillion USD per year. This is about 6-7% of the global economy. So, this is a very serious matter, and there is good reason to put this on the political agenda.

The meeting turned out to be very successful, and Member States as well as other stakeholders were very engaged and constructive. We adopted a very ambitious and inspiring political declaration; I recommend taking a look at it. We also adopted 11 specific resolutions and three decisions. that tackle issues such as marine plastic litter, led in batteries, environment and health, water pollution, pollution control and prevention in areas affected by terrorism and conflicts, etc.

While resolutions focus on a specific challenge and identify recommendation for member States and the UN system and the partners to address it, decisions are more about housekeeping, such as the date for the next UNEA, how to manage our trust funds, and when the next UN Environment flagship report called the Global Environmental Outlook should be finalized. the Outlook provides a full assessment of the state of the environment in the world, based on detailed environmental assessments from all the regions. The global assessment will be presented at the next UNEA which will take place in Nairobi again in March 2019.

What mention above is the formal and negotiated outcome of UNEA. In addition to that, we also encouraged member states and stakeholders and even individual citizens to make voluntary commitments - somehow inspired by the Paris Agenda on climate change. Eventually, some 70-80 member States made voluntary commitments, including 20 made jointly from the EU. In addition, we had almost 2.5 million pledges from individuals around the world, through the online #BeatPollution campaign. You can still sign up through a website to commit; it is quite fun actually. Depending on ambitious you want to be, you get a grade ranging from pollution intern to pollution guru. It is up now to those who made the commitments to implement them. It has also raised the attention

UNEA is moving from a purely governmental platform towards a “fairground” for the environment. This UNEA, we had something called a ‘sustainable development expo’, which brought some 40-50 companies that showcase practical pollution solutions-

Altogether, UNEA hosted about 4300 delegates, making it the biggest meeting we have ever had in Nairobi. 1200 of them were from member States and the rest were from civil society, business society and academia. A dedicated science and business policy forum focused specifically at the scientific basis for how to best address the pollution challenges.

Finally, we organized so-called leadership dialogues which we prepared carefully, covering different pollution topics like innovation and solution, partnership-building, scientific base, etc. Environment ministers were directly engaging in an interactive dialogue with other leaders in academia, leading companies and civil society. The discussions were then summarized and presented to the plenary of the meeting on the final day as a source of inspiration. This was a bit of an experiment, but it turned out to work pretty well.