



United Nations Human Rights Council

Directed By: Hanna Burda

TSMUN XXVII BACKGROUND GUIDE 2023

**Topic I: Cultivating Access to Sexual and Reproductive
Healthcare Worldwide**

**Topic II: Ensuring Access to Healthy and Sustainable
Environments**



Dear Delegates

Welcome to Tallahassee Southern Model United Nations. My name is Hanna Burda and I am the Director of the Human Rights Council for TSMUN 2023. I am a student attending Tallahassee Community College and plan to transfer to Florida State University in the summer to study Psychology. This is my second year participating in Model United Nations and I am currently in charge of the Model UN's social media page. I am interested in film production and community volunteer work, as well as assisting with political canvassing, including Planned Parenthood.

The topics under discussion for this year's Human Rights Council are:

- I. Cultivating Access to Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare Worldwide
- II. Ensuring Access to Healthy and Sustainable Environments

The United Nations Human Rights Council is a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly. The purpose of the HRC is to protect and monitor human rights and freedoms in all Member States. The HRC is composed of 45 thematic and 14 country mandates, all of which contribute to the protection of human rights through investigation, communication between Member States, and the promotion of international human rights.

I hope you find this background guide useful in your preparation for the conference. This background guide is meant to introduce delegates to the topic that will be discussed in committee and provide guidance as delegates begin their research. Delegates are strongly encouraged to research the positions, views, and opinions of their Member States as well as relevant regional and international frameworks, past resolutions, and organizations and initiatives.

Each delegation will submit a position paper for the committee. Delegates must turn in their papers before the start of the first committee session. Papers may be emailed to hrc@tsmun.org and can also be submitted through a USB drive or hard copy. For a position paper guide and an example position paper, please visit <http://www.tsmun.org/position-papers.html>. Papers that are not in the correct format will not be eligible for awards. For conference information, resources for preparation, scholarships, and other useful information, visit <http://www.tsmun.org/>. If you have any questions leading up to the conference, feel free to contact me at sc@tsmun.org. I look forward to seeing you all in committee.

Sincerely,

Hanna Burda, Human Rights Council Council Director

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Committee Overview

Introduction

The Human Rights Council is a subsidiary body of the General Assembly (GA).¹ The purpose of the HRC is to protect and monitor human rights and freedoms in all Member States. The HRC is composed of 45 thematic and 14 country mandates, all of which contribute to the protection of human rights through investigation, communication between Member States, and the promotion of international human rights.²

Committee Mandate

As mentioned above, the Council has 45 thematic and 14 country mandates.³ The HRC's resolution 5/1 was created to set up procedures for the Council.⁴ Of these, there is the Universal Periodic Review Mechanism which assesses human rights situations in all UN Member States. It also includes the Special Procedures, which was established by the former Commission on Human Rights — the commission that HRC replaced — and dictates which entities will monitor, advise upon, and publicly report on thematic or human rights situations in specific Member States.⁵ Additionally, there is the Advisory Committee, which acts as the Council's "think-tank" and provides the HRC with high expertise and advice on thematic human rights issues. Lastly, the Complaint Procedure was established to address repetitive violations of human rights and freedoms and give individuals and organizations a way to call the Council's attention to human rights violations.⁶ Resolution 5/1 also established the agenda and framework for the Council, methods of work, rules of procedure, special sessions, organizational meetings, elections and leader positions in the Council, among other things.⁷

History

The United Nations leans upon many pillars of virtue, one of the most important being that of the protection and furtherment of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed in General Assembly resolution 217 A on December 10, 1948, to provide a common standard of human rights for all Member States. The UDHR has paved the way for the adoption of over 70 human rights treaties and is fundamental to most UN legislation.

The Council was created by the UN General Assembly on March 15, 2006 through resolution 60/25⁸. Its first session took place from June 19th to June 30th, 2006, and one year later the Council adopted resolution 5/1: Institution-building of the United Nations Human Rights

¹ Bichet, Emmanuel, and Stephanie Rutz. "The Human Rights Council as a Subsidiary Organ: Evaluating Its Relationships with the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council." Universal Rights Group, October 2016.

² "Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council." OHCHR.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*



Council.⁹ This resolution sets up the primary procedures and will be discussed further in the Governance, Structure, and Membership section of this background guide. Upon the HRC's creation, the UN General Assembly proposed/decided that the Council's work and functionality should be reviewed after five years.¹⁰ Resolution 12/1 established the guidelines for said review, passed in 2009, creating an intergovernmental working group with open-ended access to lead the review of the Council.¹¹ The 10-year anniversary of the creation of the HRC was celebrated in 2016 by holding high-level panel discussions on the Council's progress and hosted many events internationally to promote human rights and human rights obligations.¹² The first universal session of the Council was held on June 1, 2016; due to the opportunity provided by the Voluntary Technical Assistance Trust Fund, 16 Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries (SIDS/LCDs) were able to participate and bring their human rights struggles to the international stage.¹³ During the 10-year discussions, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the body to increase their influence as attacks on human rights increased.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic was a world of firsts for all institutions. Finding ways to maintain peace and stability while economies are shutting down and lockdowns being in effect was not an easy task for the Council. However, in 2021, the Council adopted Resolution 48/13, which recognized the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and held five special sessions, a testament to the Council's ability to respond urgently to a global crisis. The enabling of remote voting for delegates was done for the first time as well. The participation of 19 delegates from SIDS/LCDs through the SIDS/LCDs Trust Fund was another major first.

Governance, Structure and Membership

The Council is composed of 47 Member States elected by the UN General Assembly with a 3 year term limit and a 2 consecutive terms limit.¹⁵ The membership seats are based on equitable geographic distribution with 13 African State seats, 13 Asian-Pacific State seats, 8 Latin American and Caribbean State seats, 6 Eastern European State seats, and 7 Western European and other State seats. The Bureau of the HRC is made up of a president and four vice-presidents, and each represents one of the five regional groups. These five positions serve for one year before being replaced.¹⁶

Within the HRC, there are four main procedures that make up its structure: the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Special Procedures, Advisory Committee, and Complaint Procedure, as mentioned previously. The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) occurs every 4.5 years and it involves a review of all human rights records of all 193 UN Member States. It ensures equal treatment of and opportunity for Member States according to their human rights situations. There are UPR Working Group meetings held three years per year, and during them Member States

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ "Human Rights Council Review." OHCHR

¹² "United Nations Human Rights Council." OHCHR.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ "Welcome to the Human Rights Council." OHCHR

¹⁶ "Membership of the Human Rights Council." OHCHR.



acknowledge the achievements of and address their concerns towards the 42 States being reviewed that year. Recommendations will also be given, and on average a Member State under review will receive 180 recommendations, and on average 75% of these recommendations will be followed through on. The reviewed Member States will indicate which recommendations they approve of and report on what action and steps they will take to achieve them.¹⁷

The Special Procedures is composed of mandate holders appointed by the HRC, including special rapporteurs (SRs) and other experts and groups. The functions of the SRs are to respond to individual complaints, conduct studies, and take visits to countries to assess human rights situations. SRs also provide advice on technical cooperation, which is a critical component of HRC where governmental support is provided to member states to aid in the development of sustainable economies and sustainable development. Many SR's also receive information about specific allegations of human rights violations, and they will send urgent appeals or letters of allegation in response to the governments these violations concern.¹⁸

The Advisory Committee is the “think-tank” of the HRC, providing expertise to the HRC when it is requested. It is composed of 18 experts from different professional backgrounds who are elected by the HRC in a proportionate manner from the five UN regional groups. The first session was in August 2008, and since then it meets for a week in February and in August each year. The independent experts of the Advisory Committee serve for three year terms, and are only allowed to opt for re-election once.¹⁹ The Committee focuses on studies based on many thematic issues, which has included illicit funds, missing persons, local government's role in the promotion of human rights, the right to food, terrorist hostage taking, and prevention of attacks against persons with albinism. And in the HRC's September session, the Chair of Committee will present the Advisory Committee's annual report before the Council.²⁰ Additionally, the Advisory Committee has created draft resolutions and principles and guidelines, some of which have been given support from the General Assembly.

The Complaint Procedure was established in 2007 and it serves to address reliably attested human rights violations complaints filed by individuals, groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It is the only universal complaint procedure that covers all human rights in all UN Member States, and its work is completed in a confidential manner. The Complaint Procedure is composed of two working groups. The Working Group on Communications, which examines communications from human rights violation victims, and the Working Group on Situations, which brings news of these verified human rights violations to the HRC's attention.²¹

¹⁷ “Human Rights Council Booklet.”

¹⁸ “FAQs: United Nations Special Rapporteurs.” American Civil Liberties Union.

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ “Human Rights Council: Advisory Committee Booklet.” OHCHR.

²¹ *ibid*



Conclusion

The UNHRC is a fundamentally important committee that aids in the support and monitoring of human rights situations and aims to ensure all Member States' are given equal opportunity to improve and request assistance dealing with human rights violations. It is comprised of four major procedures being the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Special Procedures, Advisory Committee, and Complaint Procedure, which use the help of experts and mandates in assessing and improving human rights situations, and aiding in the prevention and rectification of human rights violations. The HRC holds no fewer than 3 regular sessions each year in addition to sessions concerning the four procedures.²² As a sub-organ to the General Assembly, the HRC stands to be a vital and foundational committee in assisting the UN's pursuit of a more peaceful, equal, and sustainable world.

²² "Sessions." OHCHR.



Topic I: Cultivating Access to Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare Worldwide

Introduction

What is sexual and reproductive health? As defined by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), “sexual and reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life, and have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so”.²³ Access to quality sexual and reproductive health services is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG) ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages.²⁴ This particularly affects refugees and other displaced people, and when provided proper access to care, have a leg up to a healthier, happier future.²⁵

Some of the most notable human rights standards established by HRC include those by the Committee of the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Committee of Educational, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR), and the Beijing Platform for Action. Under CEDAW, women are allowed to choose how many children they are going to have and how far spaced apart they are going to have their children, along with access to the knowledge and ability to exercise this right (CEDAW article 16). Women’s right to an education that includes family planning and skills that will specifically help a family is in CEDAW article 10, and the implementation of family planning and sex education to prevent unplanned pregnancies is in CEDAW Recommendation 24.²⁶

Current Situation

There are several areas in which sexual and reproductive healthcare (SRHC) could be more accessible to global citizens. For instance, 121 million pregnancies each year are unintended, and 6 out of 10 of these end in an induced abortion.²⁷ 45% of abortions are unsafe and almost all of said unsafe abortions occur in developing Member States.²⁸ There are also several instances of attacks on sexual and reproductive rights in recent years, including the Global Gag rule, which was expanded by former President Trump in 2017 and rescinded by President Biden as one of his first acts as president.²⁹ The Global Gag Rule prohibited foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who received global health assistance from the U.S. from providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare (including legal abortion service or referrals, and advocacy for abortion law reform).³⁰

²³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Sexual and Reproductive Health,” UNHCR (UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency).

²⁴ “Goal 3 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs,” United Nations (United Nations).

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ “Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.” OHCHR.

²⁷ “Abortion.” World Health Organization. World Health Organization.

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ “Home,” The Global Gag Rule.

³⁰ *ibid*



Additionally, in terms of recent events, the covid-19 pandemic also had drastic effects on global access to SRHC. Dr. Tlaleng Mofokeng is a medical doctor with experience advocating for universal healthcare, HIV care, and family planning who was appointed as the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health in 2020.³¹ Dr. Mofokeng, who is on the Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing, urged for the restoration of this healthcare access in her report to the UN General Assembly in October 2021, stating that: “The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the cracks in health systems, particularly with respect to those services important for affirming and realizing sexual and reproductive health rights.”^{32 33}

During the pandemic, around 14 million women lost access to contraception, and millions had limited or no access to maternal and newborn healthcare. Lockdowns and diversion of funds heavily impacted access to sexual and reproductive healthcare.³⁴ Healthcare facilities reduced SRHC services, and in other places, SRHC service providers were redirected to covid response efforts. And in Member States that did classify sexual and reproductive health as essential amidst the pandemic, there were still barriers to accessing this care like that of transportation bans (concentrated at the beginning of the pandemic). Furthermore, marginalized persons were often overlooked regarding their access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, which reflects the usual standard of marginalized persons in all Member States having greater barriers to sexual healthcare access than that of their national average. These persons include those who are LGBTQ+, disabled, adolescents, experiencing homelessness, migrants, sex workers, and living with HIV.³⁵

Female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced sterilization are recognized by Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) as a violation of women’s sexual and reproductive rights. In 2021, 34% of women worldwide aged 16-19 had undergone FGM, compared to the 49% of 16-19 year old women in 1991. While levels have decreased, 34% is still a significant number- resting just above 1/3 of the global population of teenage women. FGM has been currently documented in 92 Member States.³⁶ FGM is practiced in parts of 33 African Member States, within several ethnic groups in 6 Asian Member States, 7 Middle Eastern Member States, 4 Member States in South America, and 2 Eastern European Member States (Georgia and the Russian Federation). It is also practiced in many Western and European Member States by populations of people who have cultural ties to FGM in their home country.³⁷

Actions Taken by the UN

The range of sexual and reproductive healthcare that the UNHRC focuses on includes: maternal and newborn care, and sexual and reproductive health for adolescents, as well as focusing on raising the awareness of these services and related issues.³⁸ Issues that threaten sexual and

³¹“Tlaleng-Mofokeng: Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health.” OHCHR.

³² *ibid*

³³ “General Assembly A/76/172.” United Nations, July 2021.

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ “Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Frequently Asked Questions,” United Nations Population Fund.

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ *ibid*



reproductive health are sexual and intimate partner violence, FGM, transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Actions that the HRC has taken with the effects of covid on sexual and reproductive health on displaced women and girls includes donations of sanitary kits to several Member States as well as the transfer of information on gender-based violence (GBV) and Covid risks in the form of campaigns, webinars, radio shows, and community-based structures and groups. There have also been many helplines and other support services established to combat GBV due to its increase during Covid lockdowns and transportation bans. An HRC report from July 2020 illustrated the efforts made for GBV prevention, risk mitigation, and response, as well as the promotion of displaced women and girl's access to essential services and information. As of July 2020, the HRC distributed 36,740 sanitary kits containing menstrual products to women and girls in Iraq, and 3,000 "dignity kits" with menstrual products were distributed to women and girls in Mexico along with cash-based assistance given to 1,700 women from the HRC and humanitarian aid. Along with Mexico, cash assistance was also implemented in Jordan, Israel, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, and Lebanon. There were also counseling, information, and protection hotlines set up in Jordan, Ecuador, Morocco, Uganda, Cameroon, Egypt, Algeria, and Serbia. The HRC helped establish community support groups in Israel, Hungary, Malawi and Lebanon, and GBV services have been established in Cameroon, Zambia, Malawi, Columbia, Mauritania, Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon. Additionally, in Lebanon and Bangladesh, materials were provided targeting men and boys about stress-reduction and non-violent behavior with an emphasis on gender equality to reduce rates of GBV.³⁹

Regional and International Framework

The African Union (AU) made many developments in making SRHC more available in recent decades, but there are still many people who cannot access it and the level of care does not meet all recommended levels. The AU is committed to passing SDG 3, particularly Target 3.7 "Ensuring Universal Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health-care Services by 2030" and according to the AU Commission's Continental Policy Framework from July 2006, the AU seeks to promote current SRH policies, including those increasing access to HIV and AIDs services, family planning, maternal and newborn care, and prevention of unsafe abortions.^{40 41}

Primary healthcare in the Arab region suffers from fragmentation, with weak infrastructure and agendas driven by donor funds. Political turmoil and other conflicts in the Member States of the Arab region have impacted this as well, and in turn access to SRHC services has become increasingly difficult itself. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, all abortions that endanger the mother's life are permitted, but other complications, such as non-fatal health risks to the mother and fetal impairment, are not necessarily counted for. For instance, Morocco is the one Member State that permits abortions due to rape, and Tunisia is the only Member State with safe abortions accessible from government hospitals. Additionally, SRHC services for LGBTQ+ people are unsatisfactory. Two examples are the lack of SRHC policies and services that can be adapted for transwomen, and the "corrective operations" performed on intersex

³⁹ "Protecting Forcibly Displaced Women and Girls during the Covid-19 Pandemic." UNHRC, July 2020.

⁴⁰ "Sexual and Reproductive Health Investment Needs in the African Union." Guttmacher Institute, August 24, 2022.

⁴¹ "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights - African Union." African Union.



babies to alter their genitalia. In the second case, given that the children are unaware, they are unable to consent to the surgery and this purely cosmetic surgery leads to hormonal and psychological imbalances later in life. There is also a lack of HIV testing and treatment services, with Morocco being the only Member State in MENA with a fully functioning monitoring system for HIV.⁴²

When describing the SRHC laws in the European region, the Center for Reproductive Rights categorizes the access for abortion into four categories: on request, on broad social grounds, highly restrictive, and total ban. When abortion is legalized on request, this means a doctor or medical professional does not need to verify a particular justification to complete an abortion, meaning that the choice solely relies on the person who is pregnant. Broad social grounds means that an abortion can take place if it is in the range of social reasons which are verified by medical professionals or social workers. Highly restrictive abortion access allows abortion only under dire circumstances, such as the mother or baby's health being at risk, or conception due to sexual violence. Within the EU, all Member States have legalized abortion on request or on broad social grounds except for Poland and Malta which are highly restrictive. Poland removed a ground for abortion from its laws in 2020, becoming the only EU Member State in recent history to do so. Across the entire European region, 40 Member States have legalized abortion on request, 2 have legalized abortion on broad social grounds, and 3 have highly restrictive abortion laws, and two — Andorra and Malta — have total ban abortion laws.⁴³ As of 2017, restrictive abortion bans have also been tabled in recent years by the Russian Federation, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Spain, although these eventually failed due to public backlash.⁴⁴

The World Health Organization (WHO) published the regional framework for the Western Pacific region's SRHC services in 2012. The first is policy and legislation by planning for successful integration of national strategies, holding stakeholder discussions among all levels of government to foster group commitment, and creating or updating national SRHC policies on rights and services. The second is improving demand for SRHC services through identifying the target under-served populations and their needs, reducing social and financial barriers to SRHC services, and addressing gender and equity issues. The third is improving the supply and quality of SRHC services by upgrading the quantity and availability of services based on different needs, and developing stronger program management systems. The fourth goal is improving availability and quality of the commodities used in SRHC services. The fifth is SRHC financing with service costs and budgeting, and mechanisms to reduce financial barriers. The sixth is implementing better health workforce management, human resources, and training. The seventh goal is creating integrated health information systems that monitor, evaluate, and research the SRH services provided. The eighth and last goal is developing partnerships to promote multisectoral action and citizen participation.⁴⁵

⁴² "Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Arab Region." UN Women, 2021.

⁴³ "Reproductiverights.org." European Abortion Laws: A Comparative Overview. Center For Reproductive Rights, October 2022.

⁴⁴ Hoctor, Leah, Adriana Lamačková, and Katrine Thomasen. "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Europe." Council of Europe. Council of Europe Commissioner of Human Rights, 2017.

⁴⁵ "Regional Framework for Reproductive Health in the Western Pacific." World Health Organization. World Health Organization Western Pacific Region, 2012.



Conclusion

Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services is vital for achieving SDG 3: ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. SRHC services include both medical services and educational programs about sexuality and family planning. All global citizens should have access to quality sexual and reproductive healthcare services, but many do not, especially marginalized groups. There are 121 million unplanned pregnancies annually, and almost half of all abortions performed worldwide are unsafe for the mother or child. With the healthcare services and resources being allocated for combating the Covid-19 pandemic in the last few years, many people have lost access to SRHC services. Out of the regional frameworks mentioned, the AU and EU have continued to make notable progress, while the MENA region has insufficient SRHC services in part due to discrimination of LGBT+ persons and women. Here are a few questions that can help you develop a direction for your individual delegation to take in our committee:

In which Member States is there a lack of sexual and reproductive healthcare frameworks? Which Member States' healthcare systems were affected the most by the pandemic? Have they recovered yet, and if not, what can be done to restore and improve their SRHC services? How can the HRC help improve citizen involvement in community sexual education programs, and how can we motivate the Member States' governments to continue expanding the outreach and availability of their SRHC education and services?



Topic II: Ensuring Access to Healthy and Sustainable Environments

Introduction

Climate change is a complex issue with global ramifications; with increasing links to human right violations, there has been an influx of domestic legislation, judicial decisions, and academic studies observing the relationship between climate change and human rights.⁴⁶ Addressing climate change through human rights obligations, such as ensuring access to healthy and sustainable environments, encourages lawmakers to create human rights-based environmental policy that leaves no one behind. The Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment acknowledges the contradictions of the UN, signaling the SDGs' status as aspirations instead of attainable goals.⁴⁷ However, it is mentioned that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment being recognized by the Council is a step in the right direction.⁴⁸

Current Situation

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has welcomed the General Assembly's new resolution A/RES/76/300 from July 28, 2022 which declares access to a clean, safe, and sustainable environment to be a universal human right.^{49 50} The Secretary-General says it is a testament that the UN can successfully join together to stop the triple crisis concerning the environment. This triple crisis refers to climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss.

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) releases reports of updated science overviews on climate change. The Sixth Assessment Report will be released in March 2023, with information from the three Working Groups of the IPCC- physical science; impacts, adaptation and vulnerability; and mitigation. There will also be three Special Reports on Global Warming of 1.5°C Climate Change and Land, and Ocean and the Cryosphere in a Changing Climate. Previous IPCC reports have focused on the negative impacts of global warming reaching 2°C, but many severe impacts of climate change will in fact begin to occur at 1.5°C. The negative impacts at 1.5°C are much preferable to those at 2°C however. At 1.5°C, the likelihood of the Arctic Ocean having no sea ice in the summer would be once a century, but at 2°C the likelihood would be once a decade. By 2100, the global sea level would be 10cm lower at 1.5°C than at 2°C. And with global warming of 1.5°C, coral reefs would decline by 70-90%, but at global warming of 2°C, more than 99% of coral reefs would disappear.⁵¹

⁴⁶ "About Human Rights and the Environment." OHCHR. OHCHR.

⁴⁷ "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment ." United Nations. United Nations.

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ "UN General Assembly Declares Access to Clean and Healthy Environment a Universal Human Right." United Nations. United Nations UN News, July 28, 2022.

⁵⁰ "A/RES/76/300." UN Docs. United Nations.

⁵¹ "Climate Change." United Nations. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/climate-change>.



In 2019, 99% of the world’s population was breathing air that didn’t meet WHO guideline requirements.⁵² Air pollution can be split into two categories: household air pollution, and ambient — or outdoor — air pollution.⁵³ Ambient air pollution led to approximately 4.2 million premature deaths globally in 2019, and in 2020, household air pollution led to 3.2 million premature deaths globally.^{54 55} The two together cause about 6.7 million premature deaths annually, with common sources of the pollution being motor vehicles, inefficient household combustion devices using solid fuels and kerosene for cooking, industrial facilities, and forest fires.^{56 57} Household air pollution can be reduced by using more efficient forms of energy such as solar, electricity, biogas, natural gas, and alcohol fuels, or by using biomass stoves that meet the WHO guideline emission targets.⁵⁸ Ambient air pollution can be reduced through the actions of policymakers to protect the public health, rather than individual citizens. These can include policies that promote a circular economy within businesses and provide better access to clean energy resources for individual households.⁵⁹

When water is polluted, it is expensive and almost impossible to treat, which explains why 80% of global waste water goes untreated. Freshwater pollution has a particularly negative impact. When freshwater is polluted, its potential for human consumption and use — including drinking, hygiene, and agriculture — is greatly diminished. Additionally, it can damage freshwater ecosystems and the wildlife that inhabit them. Contaminated freshwater ecosystems are found to contain pathogens from human and animal waste, organic matter including agricultural runoff, chemical pollution and salinity from domestic wastewater and mining runoff, plastics, and even pharmaceuticals.⁶⁰

Biodiversity is what ensures our livelihood on this planet and the cohesion of the world’s ecosystems. According to the 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service, around 1 million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction, and many of them within decades. Maintaining biodiversity directly impacts humans, with many plant and animal species having the potential to provide us with food or new medicines. Over 80% of the human diet is from plants, but a mere three cereal crops provide us with 60% of our calories. Less than 1% of the 80,000 plus tree species have been studied for potential use. And fish provide 20% of the animal protein consumed by around 3 billion people, with only 10 species providing for 30% of marine capture fisheries and only 10 species providing for 50% of aquaculture production. Additionally, biodiversity can be impacted by poaching, which directly

⁵² “Air Pollution.” World Health Organization. World Health Organization.

⁵³ “Ambient (Outdoor) Air Pollution.” World Health Organization. World Health Organization.

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ “Household Air Pollution.” World Health Organization. World Health Organization.

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ *ibid*

⁵⁹ *ibid*

⁶⁰ Environment, UN. “Tackling Global Water Pollution.” UNEP. UNEP.



conflicts with conservation efforts. Illegal trade of almost 7,000 plant and animal species has been reported with ties to 120 different Member States.⁶¹

Actions Taken by the UN

The UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972 was the first UN conference to focus on the environment as a major issue.⁶² At that conference it was declared that people have the fundamental right to “an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and wellbeing”.⁶³ There are several actions taken by the UNEP to protect marine environments within that decade, such as the 1973 MARPOL treaty which worked to minimize spills and pollution from ships, the Regional Seas Programme in 1974 that helps protect marine ecosystem health through coordinated regional action, and the Barcelona Convention in 1976 that aimed to protect the Mediterranean Sea from pollution. Additionally in 1981, the UN GA assigned the 1980s as the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade as clean water begins to be scarce around the world.⁶⁴

Two important treaties addressed protection of the ozone layer in the mid- to late 1980s. The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer was adopted in 1985 and came into effect in 1988. It was the first convention to be signed by all the Member States involved, and reached universal ratification in 2009. The Vienna Convention was a framework laying out principles regarding the protection of the ozone layer that many of the Member States agreed on. However, it did not require Member States to take action to protect the ozone layer, and this convention was expanded upon two years later with the Montreal Protocol.⁶⁵ The Montreal Protocol was adopted in 1987 and regulates the production and consumption of almost 100 man-made chemicals which damage the ozone-layer when released into the atmosphere. It is the first UN treaty to receive universal ratification, and was amended in 2016 to add the need for a gradual reduction of some greenhouse gasses.⁶⁶

The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants aims to get rid of dangerous chemicals worldwide, and came into effect on May 17, 2004.⁶⁷ Ratified by 179 Member States, the Convention targets 23 pesticides and industrial chemicals such as DDT that are deadly for

⁶¹ “Forests, Desertification and Biodiversity - United Nations Sustainable Development.” United Nations. United Nations.

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ Report of the UN Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 5-16 1972.” United Nations. United Nations UN Library, June 16, 1972.

⁶⁴ “50 Years of Environmental Milestones.” UNEP. UNEP.

⁶⁵ “The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer.” The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer | Ozone Secretariat.

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ “Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants - United States Department of State.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, January 5, 2021.



humans, as well as damaging the nervous and immune systems, causing cancer, and interfering with child development.⁶⁸

The Paris Climate Agreement was adopted on December 12, 2015 by the UN Climate Change Conference. It came into effect on November 4, 2016 and it is a legally binding international treaty. It currently has 194 Parties, one of which includes the EU. The Paris Agreement aims to reduce the global temperature increase in this century to 2°C while pursuing the possibility of limiting it to 1.5°C. This involves cooperation between the Parties, and a review of Member States' commitments every 5 years. The Paris Agreement also seeks to provide financing to developing Member States to help them to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts.⁶⁹ Many years after the initial conference in 1972, “the human right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment” was adopted by the HRC on October 8, 2021, and it called upon the GA to do the same.⁷⁰ The next year on July 28, 2022, the UN GA finally recognized access to a clean, healthy, sustainable environment as a universal human right.⁷¹

Regional and International Framework

According to the World Bank's 2022 edition of Regulatory Indicators for Sustainable Energy (RISE) report, nearly half of the countries surveyed in each of the global regions had new energy policies to improve access to quality and affordable electricity.⁷² There were four pillars for policy improvements: renewable energy, energy efficiency, and in those countries where it was measured, electricity access and clean cooking. The global overall average score in 2021 was 60 points, with scores of 55 points for the global average of renewable energy and 46 points for the global average of energy efficiency. The global average for electricity access was 53 points and the global average for clean cooking was 32 points.⁷³

The East Asia and Pacific region had an overall regional score of 50, ten points lower than the global average and the 3rd-worst performing region. The regional averages for both clean cooking and electricity access did well being only one point below the global average, and both scored at 31 points. The East Asia and Pacific regional average score for renewable energy was 44 points due to low country scores on every indicator. The Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region had an overall regional score of 67, and tied with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for the highest average score. All but one of the 22 countries scored between 50 and 85 points. The regional average score for energy efficiency was 49 points, and the regional score for renewable energy was 51. The Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region scored a 61 for the regional average, with nine countries having advanced policy frameworks. The LAC

⁶⁸ “70 Ways the UN Makes a Difference Seventieth Anniversary.” United Nations. United Nations.

⁶⁹ “The Paris Agreement.” United Nations. United Nations.

⁷⁰ “A/HRC/48/L.23/Rev.1.” United Nations. United Nations Human Rights Council, October 2021.

⁷¹ *ibid*

⁷² World Bank Group. “Pandemic Recovery Efforts Trigger New Energy Access Policies: New Rise Report.” World Bank. World Bank Group, December 1, 2022.

⁷³ “Rise 2022 Regional Briefs.” RISE ESMAP. World Bank.



regional average for electricity access is one point higher than the global average — 54 and 53 points respectively. The LAC regional average for energy efficiency is 40. The MENA region did well with an average regional score of 67, and tied with ECA for the best performing region. The MENA energy efficiency regional average was 50, and the renewable energy regional average was 57. The South Asia region had an overall regional score of 48 points, and India was the only country out of the seven with advanced policy frameworks. The only pillar category that did better than the global average was clean cooking at 42 points. The South Asia regional renewable energy score was 43 points, and its regional energy efficiency score was 39 points. The Sub-Saharan Africa region scored the lowest in 2021 with an overall 39 point average. The regional average for renewable energy was 44 points, and the regional average for energy efficiency was 26 points. Both of these averages dropped from their 2019 scores, but the scores for electricity access and clean cooking both improved greatly since 2019 and reached or passed the global averages. The Sub-Saharan Africa regional score for electricity access was 54 points, and its regional score for clean cooking was 32 points.

The UNEP Regional Seas Programme as mentioned above was established in 1974 and works to bring together government and community stakeholders to work on region-specific activities. The UNEP Regional Seas Programme has three types of Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans (RSCAPS), which provide intergovernmental frameworks for ocean and sea degradation. UNEP-administered RSCAPs are established and directly controlled by the UNEP, which provides administrative duties such as finance management. There are five regional seas conventions — the Caribbean region, East Asian Seas, Eastern Africa region, Western Africa region and the Caspian Sea or Tehran Convention — and 2 action plans of the Mediterranean region and Northwest Pacific region. Non-UNEP administered RSCAPs are established under the sponsorship of the UNEP, but another regional body provides administrative services. These RSCAPs are: the Black Sea region, North-East Pacific region, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, ROPME Sea Area, South Asian Seas, South-East Pacific region, and the Pacific region. Finally, independent RSCAPs are RSCAPs that are not established by the UNEP but cooperate with the Regional Seas Programme and attend regular meetings. These RSCAPs are: the Arctic region, Antarctic region, Baltic sea, and North-East Atlantic region.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Fifty years after the first UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm declared the human right to a quality environment, the UN General Assembly declared the human right to a clean, safe, sustainable environment in July 2022. And a clean and sustainable environment can be achieved through combatting the environment's triple crisis. This triple crisis — climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss — is at the forefront of the current UN environmental action, and aims to reduce pollution and ensure the global temperature doesn't pass by 2°C. Both of these help to preserve biodiversity of the earth's species, and keeping the global temperature from passing 1.5°C within the next few decades will prevent significant biodiversity loss from that of a

⁷⁴ "Regional Seas Programme." UNEP. UNEP.



global temperature of 2°C. Here are a few questions that can help you develop a direction for your delegation in committee and think critically about this topic:

How do you think current environmental protection frameworks can be expanded? Which Member States and regions struggle with access to sustainable energy according to the World Bank's RISE report, and how does this compare to Member States GDPs? Should resources and technology be given to less developed Member States to aid with access to sustainable energy, nature conservation efforts, and polluted water treatment? If so, who should provide the funds and labor? What are the benefits of Member States engaging in circular economies, and how could this help with the triple crisis?



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