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World's environment parliament agrees 25 steps to save the Earth



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A week-long meeting of 2500 delegates from 174 countries has wrapped up after adopting 25 resolutions on subjects ranging from green finance to the trade in endangered species.

But the resolutions adopted at the headquarters of the UN Environmental Programme in Nairobi, Kenya, call for little in the way of new action, or fresh finances to tackle the world's environmental messes.

A call for UNEP to assess the environmental impact of Israeli attacks on the Gaza strip was abandoned after an all-night battle.

Delegates did agree that, among other things, member governments should make trade in endangered species a “serious crime” in their own laws – it is already banned under international treaties.

They also called on the chemical industry to help poor countries manage chemicals and their waste, and “consider” the marine impact of certain plastics in their products.

In a new initiative, they called on countries to finance regional efforts to deal with the

growing problem of sand and dust storms.

They also backed Ukraine's resolution recognising environmental problems as a cause of armed conflict, as well as a major outcome of it. And they called on UNEP to help countries deal with the environmental impact of war and with refugees – but “within available resources”, in other words with no new money.

The meeting's biggest plus may have been the launch, just before the ministers arrived, of [UNEP Live](#), a massive online database of open-access environmental data. It also allows researchers to mine data on press reports and other input, and gauge public thinking about the environment.

That in the end may matter more to the ministers than the other issues decided in Nairobi.

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World's parliament for the environment to tackle global issues



“The world's de facto parliament for the environment”

Pan Siwei/Xinhua/Alamy Live News

By Debora MacKenzie

For only the second time in its 44-year history, the United Nations Environment Programme is hosting a meeting of the world's environment ministers, which will take place this week at

its headquarters in Nairobi.

The aim is for governments to agree common policies, with 21 proposed resolutions on the table for issues from illegal wildlife trade to plastic in the oceans.

Will any of them make a difference? UNEP calls the [UN Environment Assembly](#) “the world’s de facto parliament for the environment”, but it is not a parliament with a constitutional role in a government. Other UN agencies such as the World Health Organisation have ministerial meetings every year, and their decisions are to some extent binding under international law.

The UN only gave UNEP the power to have ministerial meetings at all in 2012 at the [global environmental conference called Rio+20](#), so aside from this week’s meeting there has only been one other, in 2014. Efforts in 2012 to give UNEP similar powers to the WHO, led by France, were defeated by the US, China and others who feared such an agency would demand more action on climate change.

For this week’s conference to be anything more than a talking shop, national governments, in which environment ministries are rarely powerful, must decide to stick to their resolutions. UNEP hopes that peer pressure among governments, forged in the negotiations this week, will help drive those decisions.

Growth and decline

The ministers and their deputies will at least have an unprecedented assemblage of environmental science to mull over. Instead of a global state of the environment report, 1203 scientists have compiled [six separate regional reports for UNEP, together called Geo-6](#), partly to let ministers focus on issues that matter most at home.

There are few surprises. Consumer spending, and with it consumption of energy and resources, will boom from \$21 to \$56 trillion by 2030, with 80 per cent of the growth coming from east Asia; UNEP calls for technologies that decouple economic growth from resource consumption. North America has at least decoupled growth from air pollution, which is falling – except for carbon dioxide.

Geo-6 covers all major environmental issues, but air pollution is typical of overall trends. It has soared amid urbanisation and growing prosperity in Latin America.

The report calls it the greatest health risk to Europeans, with outdoor pollutants such as ozone and particulates killing 500,000 people prematurely per year, and indoor pollution killing another 100,000.

In Africa, indoor air pollution, mainly from cooking, kills 600,000 people a year. In east Asia, pollution controls have made some improvements, but overall, levels are still rising along with prosperity, with [short-lived pollutants such as carbon particles](#) and methane killing 153 people per 100,000 per year.

Earth, sea and sky

The assessment is especially bleak in west Asia where, UNEP starkly concludes, “high population growth and continuous conflicts mean that the carrying capacity of the land has

become too low to support people with freshwater and food”.

In response, UNEP’s members – officially all 193 UN countries, from which some 125 ministers are expected in Nairobi this week – will debate 21 resolutions. They range from anodyne calls for UNEP to continue supporting environmental education, to more substantive calls for it to help less-developed countries manage chemicals and toxic waste.

One resolution singles out lead pollution, much of it from batteries, an environmental problem long banished from more wealthy countries but which, UNEP reports, still stunts the brain development of millions in poor ones.

Others call for UNEP to monitor progress on the environmental aspects of [the Sustainable Development Goals adopted last year](#); for it to help countries handle sand and dust storms; assess the impacts of war on the environment; and – if the countries currently sparring over the wording agree – assess which waste management strategies are best at [keeping plastic out of the ocean](#).

Held to account

None of them bind countries to environmental targets, such as actually reducing plastic waste, or banning lead batteries.

“The UN is not a policing organisation, forcing nations to adhere to their own commitments,” says UNEP director Achim Steiner. “We facilitate and enable countries to commit to each other.”

It is for national parliaments, he says, to hold ministers accountable. National governments, are also anxious for their economic competitors to be bound by the same rules.

That may be the softest of soft power, but Steiner points to the [Minamata agreement on mercury](#), due to enter into force later this year [after a decade of negotiation led by UNEP](#), which will commit countries to cut mercury emissions. Nothing that big is on the table in Nairobi this week, but as ministers knock heads behind closed doors, the hope is that a host of environmental problems could move closer to solution.