



United Nations Environment Assembly

Topic A: Capacity Building for the Achievement of SDG 13

Introduction

Nearly 10 years ago, all Member States of the United Nations (UN) signed the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda)* and set out to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ SDG 13 outlines the commitment of Member States to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.”² To achieve this goal, countries set individual targets such as increasing resilience and adaptivity against natural disasters, implementing and improving educational programmes and national policies regarding environmental protections, and bolstering capacity building measures for the most vulnerable States.³ As the world’s highest decision-making body on the environment, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) has been at the forefront of climate action since its inception in 2012.⁴ UNEA brings together stakeholders across the world, including all 193 Member States of the UN to set the global environmental agenda, provide policy guidance and response, and facilitate the achievement of international goals related to climate change, including those set out in the *2030 Agenda*.⁵

Ahead of COP-29, the World Meteorological Organization published its *State of the Climate 2024* report which highlighted these key messages: Greenhouse gases have reached a record high and continue to rise, 2024 is on track to be the warmest year on record, ice caps have continued to recede at a record pace, and ocean heat and sea levels continue to rise.⁶ While all countries are susceptible to these impacts of climate change, the greatest burden will land on developing nations.⁷ According to a recent World Bank publication, “more than 130 million people living in the most vulnerable countries will be pushed into extreme poverty due to climate change by 2030.”⁸ While the climate crisis continues, there exists an urgent need for capacity building measures for the most vulnerable States to protect not only livelihoods, but lives themselves.

Background

The first major World Climate Conference took place in 1979, but it was not until nearly a decade later that one of the first major mechanisms for assessing the effects of climate change was established as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

¹ UN General Assembly. A/RES/70/1 Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 2015.

² UNDESA. “Goal 13.” N.d.

³ Ibid.

⁴ UNEP. “About the United Nations Environment Assembly.” N.d.

⁵ UNEP. “The United Nations Environment Assembly.” N.d.

⁶ World Meteorological Organization. *State of the Climate 2024*. 2024.

⁷ The World Bank. “For the Poorest Countries, Climate Action is Development in Action.” 2023.

⁸ Ibid.

(IPCC), which is still active in climate science today.⁹ This laid the groundwork for the adoption of *Agenda 21* at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro which was a comprehensive and inclusive plan to address human impact on the environment and climate change.¹⁰ It was at this Summit that three main conventions that still guide the mission of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and UNEA were opened for signature by Member States: *The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)*, the *UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)*, and the *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*.¹¹

Since then, the Conference of Parties (COP) for the UNFCCC have met annually to pass notable climate change accords such as the *1997 Kyoto Protocol*, the *2011 Durban Platform for Enhanced Action*, and the *2015 Paris Agreement*.¹² By the time the *2030 Agenda* was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly in 2015, there was already extensive precedent to include SDG 13 to ensure there was a global effort to combat climate change, as well as to provide capacity building measures for the most vulnerable Member States first. The *Paris Agreement* alone called for the enhanced support of capacity building in developing countries through policy support, financing, and even established the Paris Committee on Capacity-building (PCCB) to address capacity needs and gaps across regions.¹³

In early 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted *A/RES/67/251*, supporting UNEP's decision to establish UNEA as the leading global forum on the environment and climate change topics, allowing representation of all 193 UN Member States along with a variety of outside partners.¹⁴ Since this time, UNEA has held its sessions at its UNEP's headquarters in Nairobi, producing a number of decisions and documents that deal with issues such as climate financing for development, best practices for multilateral support in countries of need, and technological advancements for early warning systems.¹⁵ The most recent UNEA-6 concluded in March of 2024 which focused on boosting multilateral efforts to address the effects of climate change.¹⁶ Many of the resolutions passed included the enhancement of capacity building efforts as a way to bolster multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).¹⁷

Current Situation

The effective mobilization of resources is essential for building the capacity of Member States to achieve SDG 13 and its targets. One of the main challenges to this goal is the

⁹ IPCC. "About the IPCC." N.d.

¹⁰ UN Conference on Environment and Development. *Agenda 21*. 1992.

¹¹ UNFCCC. "Process and meetings: The Rio Conventions." N.d.

¹² UNFCCC. "History of the Convention." N.d.

¹³ COP21. *The Paris Agreement*. 2015.

¹⁴ UN General Assembly. *A/RES/67/251: Change of the designation of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme*. 2013.

¹⁵ UNEP. "UN Environment Assembly and Governing Council Sessions." 2024.

¹⁶ UNEP. "Press Release: UN Environment Assembly advances collaborative action on triple planetary crisis." 2024.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

significant gap in sufficient green financing. Target 13.a called for the mobilization of \$100 billion annually by 2020 to support the “needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation.”¹⁸ However, according to UNEP’s *Adaptation Gap Report of 2023*, actual annual needs are estimated to be significantly higher than previously expected and the current finance gap is now estimated at \$194-366 billion per year.¹⁹ Lack of financial support can hinder the pace and quality of mitigation and adaptation policy implementation for developing Member States.²⁰

Nonetheless, the UNEA is built on developing partnerships and the sharing of best practices to achieve global environmental goals. Outside organizations and other UN agencies such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) have developed initiatives to assist countries in accomplishing SDG 13. For example, UNDP has provided policy advice and over \$100 million in grants to develop sustainable access to water through biodiversity and ecosystem restoration in regions like the Middle East.²¹ Additionally, the Green Climate Fund works to “accelerate transformative climate action in developing countries through a country-owned partnership approach and use of flexible financing solutions and climate investment expertise.”²²

Strengthening Human and Institutional Capacity

SDG 13 Targets 1, 2, and 3 deal directly with the creation of resilient infrastructure, implementing national action plans, and improving awareness and education, respectively.²³ There multitude of entities within global environmental governance that assist Member States in capacity building measures to address each of these targets. Specifically regarding resilient infrastructure, the UNDP works extensively with individual Member States to finance and develop such projects related to energy, transport, water, waste, and telecommunications to not only build back better after environmental disaster, but also to advance national development aspirations to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change on necessary infrastructure.²⁴

UNEP plays a vital role in helping Member States achieve SDG 13.2 to integrate climate change measures into national policies.²⁵ The organization helps “to enhance institutional capacity of countries in environmental law by providing technical assistance, capacity building programs, and guidance in developing and enforcing robust legal frameworks” such as MEAs and international treaties.

Bolstering climate education and advocacy to build resilient communities has been a core topic of discussion at many COP meetings, especially in Doha at COP 18 where

¹⁸ UNDESA. “Goal 13.” N.d.

¹⁹ UNEP. *Adaptation Gap Report 2023*. 2023.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ UNDP. *Accelerating the Green Transition: Socioecological Systems and the Future of Development*. 2024.

²² Green Climate Fund. “Green Climate Fund: Home.” N.d.

²³ UNDESA. “Goal 13.” N.d.

²⁴ UNDP. “Climate Resilient Infrastructure.” 2024.

²⁵ UNEP. “Environmental Law and Governance: Strengthening institutions.” 2024.

the UN Alliance on Action for Climate Empowerment was created.²⁶ The Alliance's goal is to support the "design, initiate, and undertake activities related to climate change education and public awareness, training, public participation and access to information."²⁷ One of the Alliance participants, the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has since been named secretariat of the Greening Education Partnership which is a collaborative platform to promote climate education in schools, curriculum, teacher training, and broader national education policy.²⁸

Protecting the Most Vulnerable

SDG 13 Target b "promotes mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth, and local and marginalized communities."²⁹ Despite only producing one-tenth of the world's emissions, lowest income countries will be most affected by the devastating effects of climate change.³⁰ This has already begun as the most vulnerable populations in these countries are suffering damaging outcomes from increased natural disasters, disruption to ecosystems and livelihoods, and rising sea levels.³¹ Often times, developing countries only have a small window of opportunity and limited resources to implement mitigation measures and protect its population before these effects take hold.³² Global environmental governance has established significant precedent and a large variety of programmes and initiatives to assist the most vulnerable in mitigating the effects of climate change and accomplishing SDG 13.

Apart from initiatives to create climate resilient infrastructure and urban planning policy, UN-Habitat provides data and guidance to Member States on climate change risk for the most vulnerable populations.³³ Their *2020 Climate Change Vulnerability and Risk* guide shares best practices on participatory action planning, settlement upgrading processes, the development of early warning systems in rural areas, and the creation of vulnerability and risk assessments.³⁴

Future Outlook

With only a few years left until the deadline of 2030, the achievement of SDG 13 may seem difficult, especially for developing Member States. Promoting partnerships, the sharing of best practices, facilitating green financing, the effective mobilization of sustainable resources, and improving livelihoods for the most vulnerable populations

²⁶ UNFCCC. "United Nations Alliance on Action for Climate Empowerment." N.d.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ UNESCO. "Greening Education Partnership." N.d.

²⁹ UNDESA. "Goal 13." N.d.

³⁰ Bhargawa, Ruma and Megha Bhargava. "The climate crisis disproportionately hits the poor. How can we protect them?" 2023.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ UN-Habitat. *Climate Change Vulnerability and Risk: A Guide for Community Assessments, Action Planning and Implementation*. 2020.

³⁴ Ibid.

are all ways to contribute to climate capacity building. While UNEA-7 will not take place until the end of 2025, there are many ongoing actions that global environmental governance, as well as individual Member States, can achieve in the meantime.

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