

Speaking points
on the occasion of World Environment Day 2019:
Roundtable in Geneva - Beat Air Pollution: the need for a multi-level response

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Monday, 3 June 2019, 12:00-13:30, followed by a reception
International Environment House II

Opening Statement

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today to celebrate together with you the World Environment Day and join forces with colleagues from the UN system to raise awareness on the importance of clean air.

We need clean air for our environment and for our own health. We cannot just stop breathing to avoid taking in harmful pollutants in our air.

Even if air pollution is sometimes invisible, the damage it does can be quite significant.

The good news is: air pollution can be prevented, and we have the measures to do so. In the UNECE region, as I will explain more in detail during the roundtable, countries decided to work together to reduce air pollution 40 years ago, in the framework of a legally binding international treaty: the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution.

Cooperation between Parties in the region has resulted in remarkable progress, but we also know that more needs to be done.

We see it in the news headlines every other day; smog in Stuttgart, ozone pollution in Paris, bad air quality in Milan.

Wherever we are, we are still exposed to air pollution that often exceeds the recommended levels by the World Health Organization.

The only answer is: Beat air pollution through cooperation across sectors and at the different governance levels.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Roundtable discussion

Questions to be posed: You have had a leading role in the past 40 years, as UNECE is one of the first organizations to identify air pollution as an environmental threat. What have been the achievements of the Convention and the persistent threats? What are the successes that can be shared?

3 background slides will be shown (as indicated below)

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Air pollution is often seen as a local problem alone, when in fact, air pollutants can travel long distances.

Air pollution is therefore a problem that transcends local, and, if you will, any boundaries.

Air pollutants emitted thousands of kilometres away can affect us here in Geneva today.

(Background slide 1: Meeting of the delegations of Norway and the USSR)

The realization that air pollution is indeed a transboundary problem led to the signing of the UNECE Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution (for short: the Air Convention) in 1979. Norway and the Russian Federation (then USSR), as you can see in the photo, were instrumental in the negotiations.

The Air Convention has been the first international governance mechanism providing policy solutions to the air pollution challenge on a regional basis.

Allow me to share with you some of the achievements and lessons learnt from the 40-year history of the Air Convention:

Since its entry into force in 1983, the Convention has subsequently been extended by 8 protocols that are setting emission reduction targets for several pollutants.

The results of this collective effort so far have been significant: Emission reductions by 70 percent for sulphur and up to 40 percent for nitrogen oxides since 1990 in the region.

Today, the Convention provides a platform for countries to discuss policies to reduce air pollution and to negotiate new emission targets.

This is important to achieve the SDGs, mainly SDG 3 on Good Health and Well-Being.

The science-policy interface under the Convention has always played a strong role.

It has created a common scientific understanding and ownership among Parties.

For example, a joint Task Force with WHO provides scientific evaluation of the risks to health from air pollution.

Joint work with WMO focuses on air pollution monitoring and modelling.

With UNEP, Convention Parties are discussing the implementation of the UN Environment Assembly resolution 3/8 on Preventing and Reducing Air Pollution to Improve Air Quality Globally

The Convention also monitors compliance of Parties and supports countries in capacity building at the national level.

(Background slide 2: Towards Cleaner Air – Scientific Assessment Report 2016)

In 2016, the Scientific Assessment Report under the Convention found that decoupling of economic growth and air pollution trends had prevented 600,000 premature deaths annually and increased average life expectancy in Europe by one year.

Despite this progress, one of the remaining issues is the reduction of background levels of pollution in the UNECE region.

This essentially means that, even if emissions are reduced at the local and national level, the background pollution influenced by transboundary sources is still higher than what WHO recommends.

This is why international cooperation on the transboundary part of air pollution, including beyond the UNECE region, is key.

(Background slide 3: Save the date – 40 years of cooperation for clean air)

In response to the need for stronger cooperation with countries from outside the UNECE region, the Convention will launch a Global Forum for Cooperation at its 40th Anniversary Special High-Level Session, which will take place in December 2019.

This will be an opportunity to further strengthen the national-regional-global linkages to tackle air pollution.

I invite you all to join us for this event and to work with us on the Global Forum.

The 40 years of experience of the Convention have shown that the problem cannot be solved at the local or national level alone.

Reducing emissions has to be tackled at all scales, the local, national, and importantly, the regional and global ones.

Cooperation between these different government levels is critical.

Further cooperation with organizations and networks beyond the UNECE region is also needed.

While the Air Convention is a regional instrument, other regions are looking to us for advice.

We believe that the Convention as a framework is a great model that could be replicated in other regions.

UNECE is happy to share its lessons learnt in this regard, so that future generations, world-wide, will breathe clean air.

Thank you for your attention.