

Environmental Governance Programme: Partnership for Strengthened Internal Environmental Governance within the United Nations System – Annual Report 2023

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List of Abbreviations

BOS	Business Operations Strategy
CO	Country Office
DCO	Development Coordination Office
EGP	Environmental Governance Programme
EMG	Environment Management Group
EMS	Environmental Management Systems
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ESS	Environmental and Social Standards
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
GtB	Greening the Blue
SEPA	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SUN	Sustainable United Nations
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WG	Working Group

1. Introduction

This report summarizes results and activities within the ‘Partnership for Strengthened Internal Environmental Governance within the United Nations (UN) System’ (hereafter ‘the project’), during 2023. The project is jointly implemented with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)’s Sustainable United Nations (SUN) facility and the UNEP-hosted UN Environment Management Group (EMG) Secretariat, and part of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SwEPA) Environmental Governance Programme (EGP). The project is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and supports the implementation of the UN Sustainability Strategy 2020-2030 on Environmental Sustainability Management.

Programme activities are concentrated within three major working areas; (i) Environmental Management Systems (EMS) including a component on virtual meeting culture; (ii) environmental sustainability within UN system programmes; and (iii) reporting on environmental performance. The project supports inter-agency coordination and advises UN entities on establishing environmental governance frameworks in UN system facilities and operations. SwEPA’s role is to identify and lead the implementation of project activities in collaboration with UNEP partners. For this purpose, a staff on loan from SwEPA is placed with SUN in UNEP.

2. Progress and Achievements

2.1 Environmental Management Systems

The work on EMS carried out within the project supports the target in the UN Sustainability Strategy on Environmental management that all UN entities should implement an EMS by 2025.

The work in 2023 builds on earlier achievements in 2021-2022, when the Greening the Blue (GtB) EMS criteria were updated and gaps in EMS implementation were identified. The voluntary EMS advisory group, consisting of focal points from around 15 UN organizations, was initiated by the project in Phase 1. The EMS advisory group plays an important role for creating interagency cooperation, promoting peer pressure and knowledge sharing between UN entities, eventually increasing the potential for a systematic and harmonizing approach on EMS in the respective organizations. The staff on loan has continued to chair the EMS advisory group on various topics and met bilaterally with around 10 UN entities (UNFCCC, ILO, UNOG, UN Secretariat, UNOV, IMO, WHO, UNEP, UNRWA and UNICC) to support them individually. Other UN entities have been supported with advice on policies and strategies.

The project continued to focus on internal audits of environmental management systems. Efforts were initiated in 2022 to strategically target to strengthen capacity on internal audits through development of guidance and webinars. The work continued in 2023, where the project facilitated the implementation of an internal audit training and established internal audit pool on EMS among UN entities.

Key activities and results during 2023 were:

- 38 UN personnel were trained on internal audit of EMS. After the training, an internal audit pool on EMS was set up and three regional groups were convened on internal auditing to spur knowledge exchange and exchange auditing services between entities. The training resulted in that several entities decided to perform internal audits of their EMS during 2023, which will show results in the upcoming 2024 annual environmental report “Greening the Blue”.
- Continuation of the EMS Advisory groups to strengthen capacity of the UN entities environmental focal points on EMS.
- Developed a plan for EMS introductory training for UN entities and procured instructor to proceed with the training in 2024.
- Bilateral meetings supported over 10 individual entities in progressing on EMS through e.g. reviewing policies and strategies and by responding to requests for support in their implementation of EMS (e.g. UNEP, OHCHR, UNOG, Peacekeeping missions and special political missions etc.). This resulted in several UN entities advancing on various EMS issues and adopting policies or approving updated EMS documents.
- Reviewed the EMS toolkit guidance, which will result in an updated and improved guidance to support the advancement of EMS in the UN system.
- Participated in internal auditing of EMS at UNEP to support the initial internal audits. This led to that UNEP performed their first internal audits of EMS and now comply with the EMS criteria on auditing.

2.2. Reducing emissions from air travel, and sustainable meetings and events

GHG emissions from air travel make up for over 40 percent (2019 and earlier) of the total GHG emissions reported by the UN system. It is therefore key to reduce air travel and its related emissions. The project extended its scope from sustainable virtual- and hybrid meetings culture and practices to also focus on the systematic approach to reducing emissions from air travel. During a working-group meeting on environmental sustainability management in June 2022, focal points from the working group expressed interest in forming a task team on reducing emissions from air travel. The task team was established in January 2023 and was chaired by the staff on loan. Around 15 entities were represented in the task team, that worked and met eight times until the end of 2023. A set of 15 recommendations and a report on reducing greenhouse gas emissions from air travel in the UN system were finalized in 2024.

Activities and results of the travel task team:

1. Spur knowledge exchange between UN entities on good practice of measures to reduce emissions from air travel.
2. Map current policies and travel procedures in the UN system that helped identify good practice and opportunities for improvement.
3. Provide a set of recommendations to the UN system on how to work systematically to reduce emissions from air travel.

A survey on travel policy and practices was sent out to UN entities during summer 2023. Results from the travel survey were that around half of the responding UN entities have travel policies that are older than five years, few entities have set emission reduction targets on air travel, and that several entities show the carbon emissions from air travel when booking the travel and many entities have approved booking of direct flights. The findings were presented to the Working group on Environmental Sustainability management and to the interagency travel network (IATN) in the UN system. The final recommendations and report will be further communicated to key stakeholders on air travel for use by UN entities and interagency networks for supporting the UN system to systematically reduce emissions from air travel.

Further results from this work will be assessed during 2024.

Sustainable events

The online open-source tool on green events (GET), greeneventstool.com was launched by SUN at UNEP and UNFCCC in 2022. During 2023, the staff on loan issued a survey on the use of the tool and collaborated with the tool's partners to further develop the tool and to identify a methodology to accommodate virtual and hybrid meetings. The staff on loan took part in a working group at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) on developing a standard for accounting emissions from virtual meetings and represented SUN in a Sustainable event working group at the UN Secretariat.

Key activities and results during 2023 were:

- A survey on the user experience of the GET was developed and sent to focal points of the Working group. The survey resulted in suggestions of concrete activities to improve the tool.
- Took part in meetings to prioritize areas of improvement together with UNFCCC and the developers of the GET. As result a concrete action plan was developed.
- Took part in a working group at the ITU for drafting a standard for accounting emissions from virtual meetings. The effects of this work will be assessed in 2024.
- Contributed to the Sustainable events working group at the UN Secretariat. The results of this work will be assessed in 2024.

2.3 Mainstreaming of environmental sustainability in programmes and projects

Based on the analysis of the UN Sustainability Strategy 2020-2030 indicators and targets, reporting on Environmental and Social Standards (ESS) in the UN system

was included for the first time in the “Greening the Blue“ (GtB) report in 2021. In 2023, the project continued to follow up on this aspect to support the strategy’s target that 100 % of entities have an entity specific ESS by 2030, including a commitment to integrate environmental and social safeguards in project activities. According to the GtB data from 2022, 23 UN entities had standards in place, 13 entities were in the process of putting standards in place, 9 entities reported that they do not have such standards (12 entities did not respond to the survey question).

In their work with developing or updating their Environmental and Social Standards (ESS), UN entities may voluntarily use the Model Approach for UN Programming, a benchmark guideline published in 2019 by the EMG Consultative Process on Advancing Environmental and Social Sustainability in the UN System. Since 2021, the project worked with the EMG Secretariat and UN entities to identify activities supporting the ESS. During 2022, interviews and meetings were held with UN entities to identify current challenges and needs for support in implementing ESS. The interviews revealed that the approach to ESS varies among entities. Some have a stand-alone framework whereas others have integrated it into other frameworks, programme management manuals and similar. Support and training are still in demand.

In 2023, a summary report was drafted which includes results from the meetings and interviews that identified:

- needs for support among entities intending to develop or update ESS or have indicated that they lack an ESS.
- the importance of the role of community of practice for the Model Approach on ESS and exchange on knowledge resources and opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.
- the need for capacity building /information exchange on the concept and content of the Model Approach on ESS.

The report also includes recommendations in response to the identified needs of support.

2.4 Environmental reporting

A focus area of the project, where the staff on loan plays a key role, is the annual update and release of the UN system-wide internal environmental sustainability report, the Greening the Blue report. Results from previous work is that the report is developed to further reflect progress on the UN Sustainability Strategy on Environmental Sustainability Management 2020-2030. The staff on loan managed the Environmental governance survey and the EMS and ESS sections of the Greening the Blue report that was launched in December 2023. A result from the work is that an analysis was included in the EMS section, a new addition to the report.

2.5 Advocacy and Communication

Sweden is one of the largest donors to the UN system and it is therefore relevant that Swedish stakeholders are updated on the UN entities internal work on environmental sustainability.

During 2023, the Swedish EPA has presented the project and its results to Swedish agencies working with the UN. These included Sida, the Ministry of Climate and Enterprise, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency and the to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The purpose of these dialogues was to exchange knowledge and promote synergies among Swedish stakeholders working on environmental cooperation within the UN system, thus increasing the leverage effect of the project's lessons learned.

3. Risks

At outcome level, the main challenge is institutionalizing the implementation of the UN Sustainability Strategy 2020-2030 on Environmental Sustainability Management. Two key areas are identified as risks to achieving this: the lack of for-the-purpose-dedicated permanent staff resources in the UN system with environmental sustainability expertise; and at some entities the lack of senior management commitment and accountability.

Staff turnover at project partners, e.g. both permanent staff of the SUN team left for other positions in 2022, brought the risk that previous project outputs are not harvested from. Some examples of this are the efforts to improve environmental sustainability reporting and the guidance material on sustainable virtual and hybrid meetings. This risk is addressed by informing new colleagues of previous work and making use of the material that has been produced.

Another risk for the UN system is that the lessons learned from the global pandemic when greenhouse gas emissions from air travel were strongly reduced, and online operations were increased, are not made use of. To mitigate this, the staff on loan initiated and chaired a travel task team during 2023 as mentioned in section 2.2. This risk should continue to be addressed as part of the ongoing work of the SUN team to promote sustainable meeting culture and the continued efforts on reducing emissions from air travel.

Another identified risk is potential delays in internal processes at UNEP which could affect project activities planned for 2024. This risk is mitigated by frequent meetings and project updates with project partners.

Like many organizations, the UN entities still partly tend to work in silos, which is a risk factor for achieving system wide goals, such as the targets of the UN Sustainability Strategy on Environmental sustainability management 2020-2030. The project has identified interagency collaboration on implementation of system-wide processes and policy documents as key to achieving peer-to-peer support as well as peer pressure. This in turn creates demand at entity level for capacity

building and resource allocation. The project therefore focusses on strengthening interagency cooperation as a core instrument for achieving project goals.

Ultimately, there is a continued need for member states to advocate for a higher priority of internal environmental sustainability, as part of their dialogue with the UN system. The project continued with the component of advocacy towards Swedish actors with responsibility for UN support and will extend this activity during 2024. Continued dialogue from Swedish stakeholders with the UN system would be an essential activity after the project closes in 2024 to ensure progress on sustainability in the UN system.

4. Conclusions and Way Forward

The progress of the ‘Partnership for Strengthened Environmental Governance within the United Nations System’ within EMS and environmental reporting was at large according to plan. There is continued relevance to support interagency coordination mechanisms in the ongoing implementation of the UN Sustainability Strategy on Environmental sustainability management 2020-2030 targets on EMS, ESS, environmental reporting and the objective to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In 2024, the project will work with the areas environmental management systems with focus on UN common premises, sustainable events, reduced greenhouse gas emissions from air travel and waste management including guidance, data collection and reporting.

Ongoing activities of the partnership are to systematically support the internal UN system interagency environmental work, by e.g. chairing advisory groups, further capacity building and the development of practical tools that will serve over the long term.

Within EMS, the project will focus on Country Offices (COs) and UN Common premises by supporting the implementation of EMS and integration of the sustainability strategy in the UN Business Operations Strategy (BOS 2.0). The project will pilot EMS implementation at two UN common premises, at which a key area is to set a joint EMS scope and clear responsibilities regarding EMS to avoid overlap and gaps by each UN entity implementing EMS individually. Review of waste management at the common premise and piloting a methodology for data collection will also be included in the pilots.

During 2023, the UN system returned to in-person meetings and a higher degree of travel. As air travel accounts for around 40% of the GHG emissions from the UN system (e.g. 907k tons CO₂-equivalents (CO₂-eq) in 2019 and 532k tons CO₂-eq in 2022), it is relevant to continue to act to reduce its emissions as seen during the global pandemic 2020-2022, see table 1. The project will disseminate and communicate the recommendations and findings of the travel task team to key stakeholders in the UN system to continue this work.

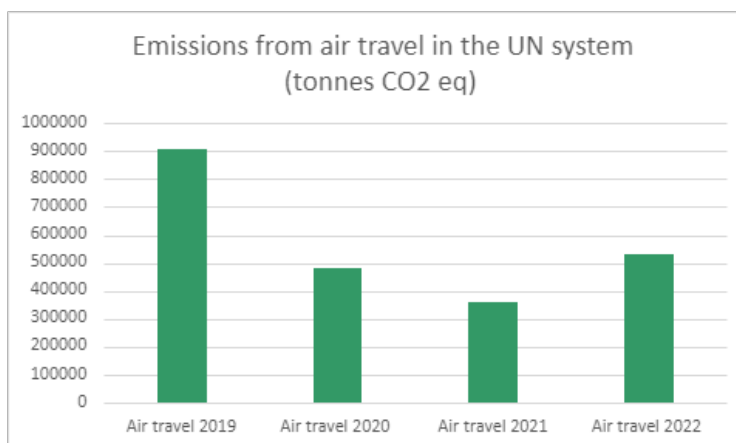


Table 1. Emissions from air travel in the UN system 2019-2022. Data from Greening the Blue reports 2019-2022 www.greeningtheblue.org

Overall, since the adoption of the second phase of the UN Sustainability Strategy 2020-2030 in 2021, the UN system has adequate frameworks in place. However, there is still a need for senior management to prioritize and allocate resources to implementation of the strategies and goals. Accountability frameworks to monitor progress are not always in place, and the situation varies between entities. A recommendation for Swedish actors in the UN system who represent Sweden as a member state, is to include internal sustainability as a question for dialogue with the UN system, at the overall level and with the respective agencies as part of core support. Therefore, the project will continue to promote information exchange with key Swedish stakeholders in 2024.

During 2023, the project reduced both activities and time of staff and partners when revising the component of ESS. UN partners (EMG and DCO) still request support for the development of country level implementation of environmental and social standards in programmes as these partners do not have project funding set aside for this work. A recommendation to Sida is to explore how the lessons learned by UN entities work on ESS that is funded by Sida could be further spread to a wider audience in an interagency setting. For example, the piloting of ESS at country level in the Sida-funded Programme on Environment and Climate Change with UNDP to a large extent corresponds with the ideas for piloting discussed with the UN entities in the Working Group on Sustainability in Programmes (the former Model Approach working group). Lessons learned and any training, tools and expertise developed in this programme could be leveraged by other UN entities if shared at the interagency level. In 2024, the work on ESS will be, upon their request, supporting the EMG Secretariat with the organization of “deep dives” (webinars) on different areas of the ESS framework and continued data collection and reporting on progress.