

Strengthening Environmental Governance in the United Nations system

Partnership between UN Environment Programme
and Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
2020–2024

EGP
ENVIRONMENTAL
GOVERNANCE
PROGRAMME



GREENING THE BLUE

Environmental Governance Programme

E-mail: egp@swedishepa.se

Swedish Environmental Protection Agency/Naturvårdsverket

Address: Naturvårdsverket, SE-106 48 Stockholm, Sweden

Internet: www.naturvardsverket.se/en

©EGP 2025

Graphic production: Arkitektkopia AB



The partnership to strengthen environmental governance in the UN System focused on strengthening the systematic approach to environmental governance and improving the environmental performance. The partnership was jointly implemented by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the United Nations Environment Programme. It was funded by the Swedish Government.

Introduction

As a major donor and a member state of the United Nations (UN), Sweden demonstrated with the partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) that environmental sustainability efforts in the UN system can be advanced when donors actively support the UN system's sustainability agenda.

The United Nations is a large, global normative institution and its commitment to “walk the talk” when it comes to environmental sustainability and climate change is therefore crucial. The UN wants to show that it aligns its own performance with the principles that it has pioneered internationally. Member States supports this and have called for the United Nations to lead by example on environmental sustainability performance. Sweden took further action and has supported the UN system via e.g this partnership.

The partnership had two overall aims. First, to strengthen the systematic approach to environmental governance. Second, to improve the environmental performance of the UN system. Both aims are aligned with the UN's Strategy for environmental sustainability management in the United Nations system, 2020–2030 ([Sustainability strategy I](#)).

The partnership, running 2020–2024, was jointly implemented by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SwEPA) and UNEP. It was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

The partnership focused on the following key areas:

- Environmental management, building on the foundations established during the first phase of the programme (2014–2019).
- Environmental and social standards, supporting integration of sustainability into operations and decision making.
- Sustainable event practices, including the promotion of virtual meetings to minimize environmental impacts.
- Systematic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, particularly from air travel and event-related activities.
- Improved environmental sustainability reporting, enhancing transparency and accountability.
- Training and capacity building to support the implementation of sustainability measures across relevant institutions.

SwEPA mainly supported UNEP in the partnership by providing human resources. SwEPA had one staff-on-loan to UNEP, who was placed with the Sustainable United Nations (SUN) facility. SUN and additional SwEPA experts contributed to specific activities. SwEPA's role was to identify needs, lead the implementation of key activities in collaboration with the UNEP partners and to provide technical expertise.

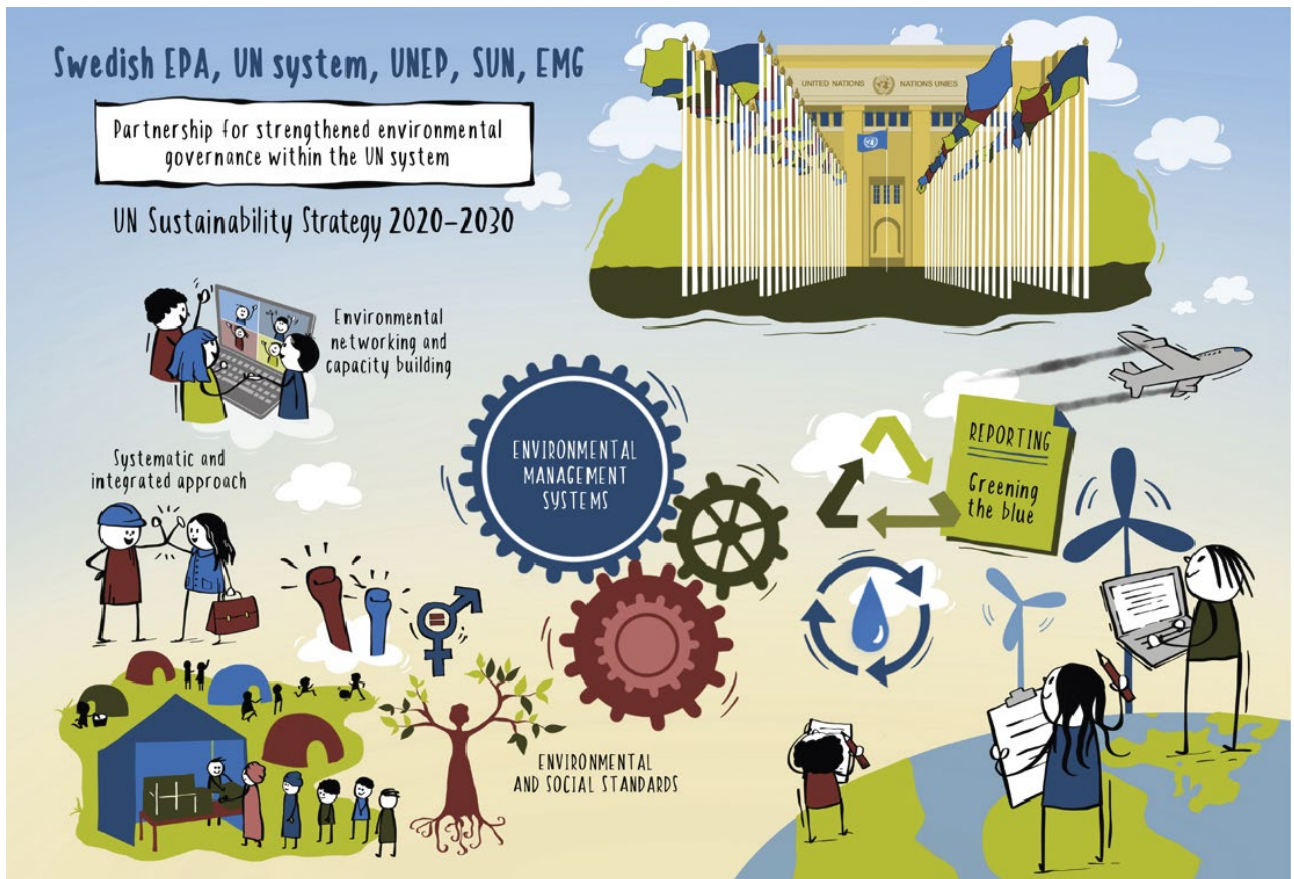


Figure 1. The focus areas of the SwEPA-UNEP Partnership.

For more information of the partnership, we refer to the [SwEPA](#) and the [UNEP Greening the Blue](#) websites.

“ The partnership with SwEPA on mainstreaming of environmental management in the UN system has been of tremendous strategic and concrete help to the UN system and determined the progress we can show nowadays. Via such an exchange, both partners benefit from the experience of the other. On one hand, the UN system earns the strategic advice. On the other, the SwEPA gains in understanding complexities and solutions that the project has been able to find to challenges at Headquarters and on the ground. ”

Isabella Marras, UNEP SUN facility coordinator until 2022.

Key achievements

- The EGP Partnership with UNEP was highly strategic, aligning with UN system commitments and utilizing existing work streams. It had the potential for far-reaching catalytic effects and was well aligned with Swedish and UN system wide policies.
- The programme contributed to accelerating the achievement of the goals of the *UN Sustainability Strategy I* at different UN entities, which is a part of reducing the environmental footprint of the UN system. This increases the UN's credibility in setting international standards and strengthens its function as an international role model.

SwEPA's expertise and staff-on-loan contributed to increased resources and competency of UNEP partners. SwEPA expertise delivered succinct and informative partnership results despite stretched resources. The staff-on-loan interacted with and trained, both bilaterally and in interagency settings, staff representing over 30 UN entities. Key target group and partners for activities were the sustainability focal points, who are appointed by the UN entities and the Working Group on Environmental Sustainability Management.

- Strengthened reporting on Environmental Management System (EMS) and other key areas of the *UN Sustainability Strategy I* targets and indicators. The staff on loan established with the environmental sustainability focal points UN-systemwide EMS criteria, analyzed results of EMS progress and incorporated reporting on environmental and social standards (ESS). Results can be seen in the UN System wide environmental report – [Greening The Blue](#).
- A steady increase of UN entities that meet and approach the set EMS criteria in 2023 compared to 2020.

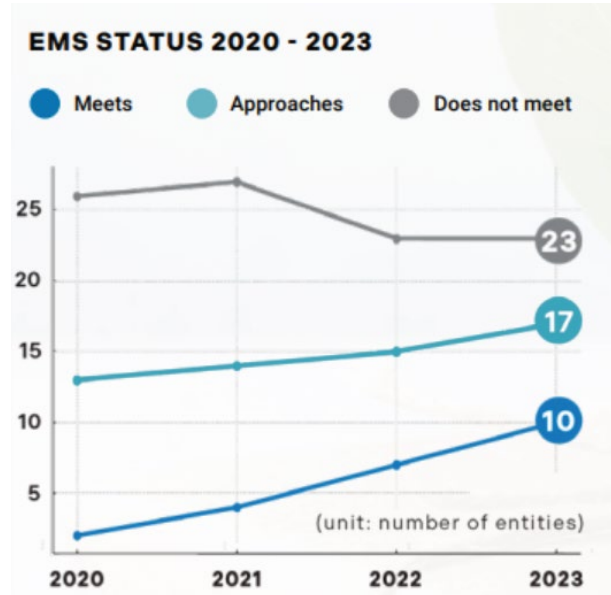


Figure 2. Number of UN entities that meet and approach EMS status, between 2020 and 2023.

Story of change 1: World Food Programme advances on EMS

During 2024, SwEPA observed an impact from phase I of this project at World Food Programme (WFP), which SwEPA selected as one of four Environmental Management System (EMS) pilots. When this pilot was initiated WFP had few staff in their sustainability team and no EMS in place. SwEPA supported WFP in Kenya and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) provided an EMS consultant to work in Kenya. In 2024, WFP reported that they had expanded their sustainability team to ten officers and had rolled out EMS to 67 countries representing 57 percent of the countries in which WFP has physical presence. The SwEPA – UNEP EMS pilot in Kenya spurred this work and WFP is considered a leader in the UN System on global EMS implementation and roll out, compared to other larger UN entities that did not receive this support.

Key experiences and lessons learned

Strategically designing the partnership based on existing commitments and working groups in the UN system was efficient

SwEPA and SUN could implement the partnership activities efficiently since the partners based the work on the UN system's existing commitments and targets in the *Sustainability Strategy I*. The partnership could directly target key stakeholders in an efficient manner by working through existing strategies and policies with units, networks and working groups of the UN system. Working via UN interagency networks have been key for identifying needs of target groups, capacity building, spurring knowledge exchange and for developing and sharing tools. Several UN interagency networks, such as travel-, country teams- and facility networks, are essential to mainstreaming environmental sustainability and accelerating results.

Testing and piloting guidelines, tools and methodologies proved to be useful

Several pilots were conducted and proved impactful in creating engagement, accelerating exchange and building capacity. The pilots also served to improve the tools and guidelines. The testing brought attention to the topic while the participants built capacity and suggested improvements. This made them advocates for the topic and when they shared their lessons with a wider peer network, this helped increase outreach via the UN interagency networks.

Pilots in the partnership

- UNESCO Virtual meeting and events – systematically integrating virtual – and hybrid meetings and events in the organizational culture.
- EMS internal audits at UNEP and at UN of Geneva tested tools, built capacity on internal audits and strengthened peer exchange.
- EMS and waste management pilot at the UN Common Premise of Almaty in Kazakhstan.

Story of change 2: Advancing EMS and waste management at UN common premises

To support the UN system in improving their waste management and EMS practices across UN country teams (UNCT), the partners organized a combined waste and EMS pilot in Kazakhstan. The pilot offered an opportunity to practically test and establish new methodologies. The UN Common premises managers and Swedish experts from SwEPA and Sweco collaborated in establishing a waste composition analysis and provided recommendations to improve resource efficiency. The SwEPA staff on loan piloted an approach for UNCTs on environmental management, including developing an environmental action plan.

The waste management methodology was later used as part of an internal EMS audit at UN of Geneva. Environmental sustainability focal points of other UN entities were invited to take part as auditors and observers for peer learning. In this way, the methodology that was developed in Kazakhstan was launched. At the same time the EMS internal audit guidance that was developed was put into practice, lessons learned were shared and this contributed to increased capacity of key personnel.

It enabled UN interagency collaboration and showcased how to jointly advance on waste management and EMS, strengthening the UN systems ability to lead by example.

Read more about the activities in this article; [Sorting It Out: UNOG tests SUN's guidance for waste audit | Greening the Blue](#)

“ The support provided through this partnership was critical in strengthening waste management across the UN system, particularly by enabling the piloting of waste analysis guidelines. This achievement marks an important step toward more sustainable and efficient practices. ”

Rie Tsutsumi, SUN facility coordinator at UNEP

Seize window opportunities – systematic support in improving environmental performance from emissions related to air travel and events

One of the major sources to greenhouse gas emissions from the UN system is emissions from air travel.

During the period 2020–2022, the pandemic, emissions from air travel in the UN system significantly dropped. The UN interagency working group on Environmental sustainability management took this as an opportunity to initiate dialogues on how to sustain a long-term change in working culture based on the lessons from this time.

Therefore, the staff-on-loan and the SUN facility coordinator decided to establish an UN interagency travel task team tasked to compile examples of policies and measures and draw recommendations for how to systematically reduce emissions from air travel.

Implementing changes in the UN System takes time, but can be accelerated by key actions

- Prioritize strategically among partnering UN entities in relation to available management support and human resources. Consider how strong interest is in bilateral collaboration on environmental sustainability efforts and the entity's impact on other UN entities.
- Implement activities that enhance action both top-down and bottom-up in parallel. For example, build capacity and create exchange at professional staff level while also strategically informing managers to spur action in terms of policy change, setting environmental targets and allocating resources for implementation.
- Integrate environmental sustainability issues into the agenda of other key networks and working groups, e.g., the interagency network on travel and the UN country team network. Or establish cross functional working groups, e.g., the working group on sustainable events.

Exchange with key Swedish governmental stakeholders helped advance the partnership and extend its impact

- When member states raise the importance of environmental governance, the UN system responds strongly.
- Furthermore, frequent exchanges with SwEPA colleagues who lead environmental management in Swedish public agencies have resulted in a mutual exchange of experiences and tools within environmental management.

Conclusion

The UN system has clear policies and commitments in place to advance the internal environmental sustainability agenda. To secure advancement it is of great importance that member states continue to demand action and to follow progress.

The partners UNEP and SwEPA could during the second phase still observe the effects of the first phase of this partnership and the UN system will most likely continue harvesting results from the second phase within the next years.

UN system interagency networks are key to driving progress, building capacity and supporting efficient exchange between UN entities in line with the [UN 80 Initiative](#). As we learned from this partnership, when member states such as Sweden supports this and asks for results, progress is further accelerated.

Training, guidelines and tools

The following trainings and material were developed during the partnership and were designed to address needs and reduce gaps. For example, improvement in reporting on EMS and ESS will bring attention to progress and highlight further needs.

- EMS Toolkit guidance
- Training in environmental management systems and EMS internal audit directed to UN personnel
- Recommendations on systematically reducing emissions from travel for travel unit, environmental sustainability focal points, and decision makers.
- EMS internal audit guidance and related templates
- Waste sampling analysis and data collection methodologies for facilities managers/ teams and environmental sustainability focal points
- Virtual and hybrid meetings guidance and a 10-step methodology bringing a systematic approach to integrating this into the organizational culture
- Further development of the Sustainable events checklist and of the *Green events tool*

The UN system's annual environmental report – Greening the Blue report 2021–2025



The 2022 edition of the *Greening the Blue Report* provides United Nations (UN) system-wide 2021 data on the environmental impact areas and management functions identified in the *Strategy for Sustainability Management in the United Nations System 2020-2030, Phase 1: Environmental Sustainability in the Area of Management* (hereafter *Sustainability Strategy*).

The Report highlights the 2021 environmental impacts of 207,000 personnel in 53 reporting entities across Headquarters, field offices and operations on the ground. It is composed of the 2021 data highlights, which are based on UN system-wide results, as well as more dynamic individual entity information that is provided by the Report's data tables and entity-specific webpages.

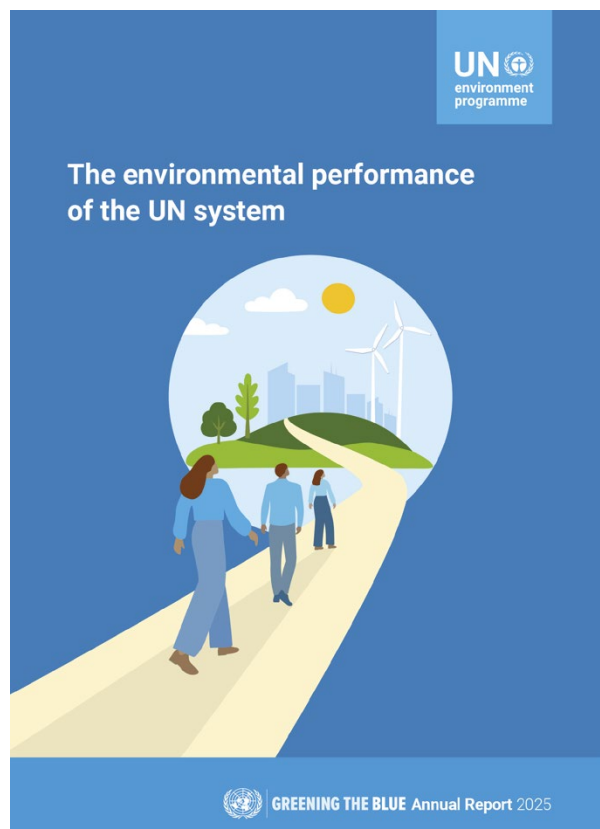
The UN system's environmental footprint decreased in 2021. The UN system also improved in the areas of environmental governance and environmental training. Forty-six per cent of entities have environmental training available for staff, and,

compared to 2020, double the number of entities meet the requirements of an environmental management system.

Fifty-six entities comprise the Greening the Blue community including the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which is the first non-UN organization to join the community. Three entities did not provide any data for this edition of the Report. As well, not all entities provided data in all reporting areas. For these reasons, the number of personnel and the number of entities included in each reporting area is specified.

Please note, throughout the Report percentages are rounded to the nearest integer, as a result they may not total 100.

Entity-specific data are available on the Report's data tables at greeningtheblue.org/reports/greening-blue-report-2022 and entity webpages at greeningtheblue.org/performance/entities



Strengthening Environmental Governance in the United Nations system

Partnership between UN Environment Programme
and Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

EGP
ENVIRONMENTAL
GOVERNANCE
PROGRAMME



GREENING THE BLUE