

GCSS-12/GMEF HIGHLIGHTS: MONDAY, 20 FEBRUARY 2012

Delegates at the 12th Special Session of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GCSS-12/GMEF) convened in the morning for the opening ceremony, followed by consideration of organizational matters and policy statements. In the afternoon, delegates convened for ministerial consultations in a symposium on “environmental change and global responses in 2012.” The Committee of the Whole (COW) also met in the afternoon.

OPENING OF THE SESSION

Graciela Muslera, Minister for Housing, Land Planning and Environment, Uruguay, and Acting President of the GC/GMEF, opened the meeting, calling on governments to address chemicals and waste management at the upcoming UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) meeting. Supporting institutional strengthening, she urged delegates to use Rio+20 to address social, environmental and economic challenges, and redouble their commitment to the mercury process.

On behalf of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Amb Amina Mohamed, Deputy Executive Director, UNEP, emphasized that scaling up the green economy is a process that has been “incubating for 40 years.” Speaking on the International Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD), she noted the challenge of “joining the dots” between, *inter alia*, food security, water provision and management, climate change, inequality, and women’s empowerment, and called for clear, practical, science-based outcomes from Rio+20 to “achieve the future we want.”

Joan Clos, Executive Director, UN-HABITAT, drew attention to joint efforts of UNEP and UN-HABITAT, including: promoting low-carbon housing, streamlining urban mobility and urban public transport, tackling the challenges of climate change in the Pacific, and up-scaling green economy ideals in the development and management of urban areas.

Sahle-Work Zewde, Director-General of the UN office at Nairobi (UNON), affirmed UNON’s efficiency, cost-effectiveness and commitment to “delivering as one.”

Henri Djombo, Minister of Sustainable Development, Forestry and the Environment, Republic of Congo, emphasized the region’s support for the green economy, and called for transforming UNEP into a specialized agency based in Nairobi, with a decision-making system representing all states, ensuring consistency and coherence in the administration of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).

In his opening remarks, Achim Steiner, Executive Director, UNEP, described the meeting as both a view towards Rio+20 and a review of Stockholm+40, and acknowledged the presence of three of four former UNEP Executive Directors.

Mwai Kibaki, President of Kenya, highlighted that the meeting offers a unique opportunity to build consensus on the outcome of Rio+20. Noting that the transition towards green development requires strong institutions, he stressed the need for reforming international environmental governance (IEG). He called on the GCSS-12/GMEF to support the AU’s common position on transforming UNEP into a specialized UN agency.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS: The GCSS-12/GMEF elected Federico Ramos de Armas, (Spain), President of the GC. László Borbély (Romania), and Dana Kartakusuma, (Indonesia), were elected Vice-Presidents. Delegates adopted the agenda and the organization of work (UNEP/GCSS.XII/1/Add.1/Rev/1). Delegates established a COW chaired by László Borbély. A “Friends of the President” group to compile recommendations from the Ministerial consultations was also established.

Policy Statement by the UNEP Executive Director: Achim Steiner highlighted UNEP’s role and achievements during the current climate of economic uncertainty and social turmoil. He focused on UNEP’s pioneering work in monitoring the state of the environment, the science/policy interface, climate change and support for MEAs. He outlined UNEP’s progression from focusing on the physical environment to a new phase, embracing equity, social justice and sustainability. Steiner emphasized UNEP’s contribution to strengthening the links between the three pillars of sustainable development and to the preparatory process for Rio+20. In this connection he highlighted the green economy and the growing role of UNEP in the UN system.

Statement by the Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) to UNEP: Amb Geert Aagaard, Denmark, presented seven draft decisions prepared by the CPR (UNEP/GCSS. XII/L1). He highlighted matters for consideration, including: whether or not a decision on IEG should be linked to the Rio+20 ‘zero draft’ document; adoption of a 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production; and providing a mandate to the Executive Director to continue facilitating a process for integrated financing of chemicals and waste.

Switzerland introduced a draft “UNEP at 40” declaration, pointing out that the aim was not to preempt any decisions, but to send a clear ministerial message underlining the need to strengthen environmental action.



Denmark, on behalf of the EU and Croatia, observed that while there have been many significant achievements since Stockholm, the state of the environment has not improved. She noted that more ambitious reforms are needed, and supported proposals to upgrade UNEP to a specialized agency.

ECUADOR called for the Rio+20 preparatory process to incorporate input from regional initiatives, citing key issues for the Latin American and Caribbean region as social inclusion, intergenerational solidarity and support for communities affected by natural disasters.

Responding to the Swiss proposal, South Africa, on behalf of the G-77/CHINA, INDIA and BRAZIL cautioned against introducing new language at this advanced stage as it may hamper progress in the intergovernmental preparatory process for Rio+20.

MINISTERIAL CONSULTATIONS

ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT: GCSS-12/GMEF President de Armas introduced the item on emerging policy issues in environment and development (UNEP/GCSS.XII/13, Add.1 and 2). In a keynote address, Sir Robert Watson, Chief Scientific Advisor, UK, prioritized, *inter alia*: internalizing economic externalities; sustainable consumption and production; and educating girls and empowering women.

The Secretariat introduced the fifth Global Environmental Outlook (GEO 5) report. Jacqueline McGlade, European Environment Agency, facilitated a panel discussion with several environment ministers on the report. Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Secretary-General, Abu Dhabi Environment Agency, emphasized the need for reliable data, noting this could be “a less contentious starting point” for collective action. Izabella Teixeira, Minister of Environment, Brazil, proposed adopting sustainability as a value, linking democracy to sustainable development, and calling for an inclusive green economy approach. Yoo Young Sook, Minister of Environment, Republic of Korea, outlined a national policy of low-carbon green growth, proposing to play a bridging role between developed and developing countries. Mercedes Bresso, President, EU Committee of the Regions, proposed: a convention on access to information on the environment and public participation; decentralized data collection and disaggregation to the local level; and voluntary, measurable commitments implemented in partnership with local communities.

In a second keynote address, Lena Ek, Minister for Environment, Sweden, called for: strengthening UNEP; and greater cooperation and collaboration among UN agencies.

In a third keynote address, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Secretary-General, African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group, highlighted the Cotonou Agreement, which provides ACP countries a platform to leverage financial resources to scale up green economy policies and programmes.

In a session moderated by Achim Steiner, former UNEP Executive Directors Mostafa Tolba, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Klaus Toepfer, and Maurice Strong (in writing) offered contributions towards Rio+20. Tolba called for a concrete methodology to achieve sustainable development goals, lamenting non-compliance and lack of funding support as major weaknesses. Dowdeswell highlighted the value of UNEP’s scientific work and emphasized the need to halt continuing discussion about governance in order to deal with “the real issues.” Toepfer suggested there could be many pathways to sustainable development and that UNEP should lead this discussion. Strong called for Rio+20 to support a higher status for UNEP, stating that radical changes to the economic system would require an unprecedented degree of cooperation.

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

ORGANIZATION OF WORK: Chair László Borbély opened the COW. Liana Bratasida (Indonesia) was elected as COW rapporteur. Delegates approved the COW’s programme of work (UNEP/GCSS.XII/CW/CRP.1). Amina Mohamed, UNEP, welcomed delegates, and briefly commented on the seven draft decisions before the GCSS (UNEP/GCSS.XII/L.1).

IEG: The Secretariat introduced the draft decision (UNEP/GCSS.XII/L.1), and delegates discussed it paragraph by paragraph. SWITZERLAND suggested dropping reference to “progress” in implementing incremental reform; the EU insisted on retaining this reference. Supporting this, the US proposed broader reform and consultations on IFSD. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION proposed deleting two paragraphs referring to “incremental reform,” which, he said, is not clear.

On opening up the GMEF to other ministers responsible for sustainable development, CUBA and MEXICO, supported by BRAZIL, proposed delaying consideration of this text to avoid pre-empting Rio+20 negotiations. The US, however, called for maintaining an “environmental voice” within the UN system.

CHEMICALS AND WASTE: The Secretariat introduced two related draft decisions on a consultative process on financing and enhancing cooperation within the chemicals and wastes clusters (UNEP/GCSS.XII/L.1). The EU, NORWAY and SWITZERLAND supported the focus on an integrated financing approach and called for a full proposal to be elaborated in time for the third International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM 3). CHINA opposed linking this process to the mercury negotiations, as these are at a crucial stage. BRAZIL, CUBA, ARGENTINA and the US noted the proposals were premature and called for continued consultations to secure more predictable and sustainable funding. IRAQ noted that priorities should emerge from the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) process.

IN THE BREEZEWAYS

As over 80 ministers converged on Nairobi for GCSS-12/GMEF their attention focused on the session’s practical outcomes. In the morning, they faced the first stumbling block: a Swiss draft ministerial declaration aiming to encapsulate the message of this Council session to Rio+20. Some worried that, if taken up, the draft would require serious negotiation of text, thus drawing away precious time from the three-day Council session. The mood mirrored that at the just concluded Major Groups consultations, where many expressed doubt about the chances of a real breakthrough at Rio, due to insufficient political will at the highest level. A Major Groups representative commented that now might be the time to draw on the African spirit of Indaba to get a real dialogue going. Nevertheless, former Executive Directors offered reminders in the afternoon that success at both the 1972 Stockholm Conference and first Rio conference in 1992 had also been preceded by doomsayers and political issues, including country boycotts and developing-country concerns that environmental commitments would eat into funding for development aid.

In a further twist, some former Executive Directors went against calls for a UN Environment Organization, calling instead for UNEP to maintain a cross-sectoral mainstreaming approach and a focus on scientific and thought leadership. What remains to be seen is whether these thoughts will influence current advocacy for an increased institutional role for UNEP.