

GC-26/GMEF HIGHLIGHTS: MONDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 2011

Delegates at the 26th session of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GC-26/GMEF) convened in the morning for the opening ceremony, followed by consideration of organizational matters, and a policy statement by UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner. In the afternoon, delegates convened for ministerial consultations on the green economy and international environmental governance (IEG). The Committee of the Whole (COW) discussed organizational matters and began addressing draft decisions. The contact group on the budget and Programme of Work met in the evening.

OPENING PLENARY

The “Wafalme Kids for Kids” group presented their award-winning song “Trash is Cash,” and were presented with gifts by H.E. Mwai Kibaki, President of Kenya.

Actor Edward Norton, Goodwill Ambassador for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), praised recent efforts to implement CBD commitments. Noting efforts in countries like Rwanda for watershed protection, he said that developing countries can build new models for development without the impediments of “old infrastructure and old ideas.”

Henri Djombo (Congo), outgoing UNEP GC President, emphasized the need to speak with one voice to signal the importance of a stronger framework for IEG in the context of sustainable development. Jamil Ahmad, UNEP GC Secretary, presented a message from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in which he highlighted the establishment of the High-level Panel on Global Sustainability and its contribution to the intergovernmental process leading up to Rio 2012.

Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, said that many management and mitigation measures for climate change must be undertaken at the local level, and require strong local institutions, governments and legislation. UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner commended the work already being undertaken in Kenya and other African countries in beginning transformation to a green economy.

Mwai Kibaki, President of Kenya, called for a continued spirit of collective action at the UNEP GC-26/GMEF and the upcoming Rio 2012. He also urged nations to support the Green Economy Initiative, adding that developing countries should receive support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Green Fund to achieve green growth.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS: The plenary elected by acclamation Rosa Aguilar Rivero, Minister for

Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs, Spain, as GC-26/GMEF President. Other Bureau members elected were: Liana Bratasida (Indonesia), Zoltán Illés (Hungary) and Graciela Muslera (Uruguay), as Vice-Presidents; and Mauricio Xerinda (Mozambique) as Rapporteur. GC-26/GMEF President Aguilar Rivero thanked delegates and stressed the importance of 2011 for working towards Rio 2012. The plenary then adopted the draft agenda without amendment (UNEP/GC/26/1 and Add. 1) and agreed on the GC-26/GMEF’s organization of work.

POLICY STATEMENT BY THE EXECUTIVE

DIRECTOR: In his policy statement, UNEP Executive Director Steiner highlighted that while the rate of biodiversity loss was not reversed, several accomplishments showed that the year had ended on a far better note than many had thought, from the green light for the establishment of an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), to the agreement to establish the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) partnership.

On UNEP’s contribution, he lamented the shortfall in the core Environment Fund, which he indicated would be challenging to overcome. On relationships with multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), he highlighted UNEP’s eagerness to host MEAs but noted that conflicting administrative arrangements need to be addressed and a clearer framework is required. Finally, on IEG, he stressed that Rio 2012 should be a “political” project driven by by countries’ leadership rather than secretariats.

Regina Hess (Germany), Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP (CPR) briefed delegates on the CPR’s process for the preparation of the sixteen draft decisions to the GC.

Hungary, on behalf of the EU emphasized the EU’s support for the IEG process, saying that a comprehensive approach is required to address competing policies and financial demands, and to address institutional fragmentation. The US on behalf of the WESTERN EUROPEAN AND OTHERS GROUP (WEOG) noted that the first MOU between the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and UNEP, signed on Monday afternoon, signaled the US government’s commitment to playing a role in areas including green growth, sound science, strong international, national and local governance regimes for law and compliance, and the settlement of environmental disputes.

MINISTERIAL CONSULTATIONS

GC-26/GMEF President Aguilar Rivero explained that panel presentations would focus on the green economy and IEG. Izabella Teixeira, Minister of Environment, Brazil, noted

the need to secure new political commitment and find ways to sustain it, stressing that Rio 2012 should not be “an exercise in fingerpointing.” Sha Zukang, Secretary-General, Rio 2012, acknowledged there are divergent views regarding the concept of the green economy. Michelle Depass, US EPA, said that fostering a green economy will be one of the key areas for cooperation with UNEP under the signed MOU.

Umberto Rosa, Minister of Environment, Portugal, noted that UNEP is the main vehicle for addressing world environmental problems. Elizabeth Thompson (Barbados), Rio 2012 Executive Coordinator, defined the green economy as promoting economic growth while valuing the natural resource base and building social capital. Edna Molewa, Minister of Water & Environmental Affairs, South Africa, noted that a transition to green technologies should take into consideration international financing and trade.

Addressing the argument that a green economy may introduce the risk of new trade barriers, Achim Steiner said the issue was not unique to the green economy, and the question should be how to minimize the risk of misuse of new economic instruments. IRAN called attention to shortcomings in the implementation of MEAs. URUGUAY said that the three chemicals conventions and current work on mercury are among the clearest examples of progress in IEG. PAKISTAN highlighted the role of UNEP as contributing its technical perspective to the Rio 2012 process and helping clarify the link between the two themes of the ministerial consultations and the identification of implementation gaps. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION stressed that Rio 2012 should not be focused on setting new goals but rather on fine-tuning existing efforts.

MEXICO lamented the challenges posed by the proliferation of MEAs. GREECE proposed clustering MEAs and improving coordination and means of achieving MEA objectives. CUBA called for predictable public financing. GUATEMALA suggested focusing on practical outcomes of the green economy rather than the definition of it.

THAILAND said that financial and technical assistance will be required for developing countries to fully engage in preparations for Rio 2012. ARGENTINA said that transition to a green economy should not end in “green protectionism” or policies representing veiled trade restrictions. The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC called for the consideration of the impacts of climate change on Small Island Developing States. The CZECH REPUBLIC supported the concept of a green economy. NGOs suggested that UNEP can help support strong civil society participation in the Rio 2012 process.

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

On Monday afternoon, the COW elected István Teplán, Hungary, by acclamation, as the rapporteur. COW Chair Liana Bratasida, Indonesia, presented the proposed schedule of work (UNEP/GC.26/CW/CRP.1). Delegates adopted this schedule, and agreed to convene three working groups on: drafting, the budget and programme of work, and chemicals and waste. The US proposed that the latter group be given an open mandate to consider issues beyond chemicals and waste. Ibrahim Thiaw, UNEP, on behalf of the Executive Director, remarked on UNEP’s emphasis on science-based policy guidance.

INTRODUCTION OF DRAFT DECISIONS:

SWITZERLAND introduced the document (UNEP/GC.26/L.2) strengthening international cooperation for environmental crisis response, noting that response capacities for countries facing environmental risks need to be strengthened. Nigeria, speaking for the AFRICAN GROUP, discussed draft decision UNEP/

GC.26/CW/CRP.2 on lead and cadmium, calling for partnerships to ensure public awareness and entities to ensure children are not exposed to these substances.

Brazil, on behalf of G-77 AND CHINA, presented the draft decision on improving South-South cooperation on biodiversity (UNEP/GC.26/CW/CRP.3).

The Secretariat introduced documents on the state of the environment regarding chemicals management, including mercury, lead and cadmium, and waste management (UNEP/GC.26/5/Rev.1, UNEP/GC.26/5/Rev.1/Add.1, UNEP/GC.26/INF/11, UNEP/GC.26/INF/11/Add. 1-5, UNEP/GC.26/INF/12, UNEP/GC.26/8, UNEP/GC.26/11, UNEP/GC.26/ 11/Add.1, UNEP/GC.26/16, and UNEP/GC.26/L.1). The Secretariat also presented five related draft decisions from UNEP/GC.26/L.1: 3 (Chemicals management); 6 (Waste management); 8 (Consultative process on financing options for chemicals and wastes); 13 (Enhancing cooperation within chemicals and wastes cluster); and 16 (e-wastes).

In discussions, SWITZERLAND emphasized the importance of securing financing for the sustainable management of chemicals and waste. On e-waste, the US recommended that the GC identify ways to complement and raise the profile of existing international efforts underway on e-waste flows and the handling of used electronics. Denmark, for the EU, underlined that decisions on e-wastes should be combined with those on waste management.

On international chemicals management, JAPAN encouraged further consideration of scientific data prior to making final decisions. MEXICO highlighted the need for further support of national inventories of mercury and recommended the continual revision and updating of information for the intergovernmental negotiating committee. JAPAN, SWITZERLAND and the US supported continued negotiations on mercury, and INDIA recommended that a combination of voluntary and binding measures be included in any resulting agreement. COLOMBIA said that options of sustainable disposal of products containing lead and cadmium ought to be considered, including passing responsibility to manufacturers.

The Secretariat introduced the documents on IEG (UNEP/GC.26/3, UNEP/GC.26/18, UNEP/GC.26/INF/19, UNEP/GC.26/INF/23 and UNEP/GC.26/L.1). MEXICO said states had not been given adequate time to deliver their observations on IEG. SWITZERLAND added that the IEG process should continue under UNEP, while NORWAY said the process may benefit from an institution with a broader mandate than UNEP. INDIA supported strengthening IEG through UNEP.

IN THE BREEZEWAYS

GC/GMEF 26 swung into action with agenda-setting speeches, organizational decisions, inauguration of the new UNEP office building and the presentation of the UNEP Green Economy report. Meanwhile, some participants were heard commenting on UNEP’s in-house initiatives. To some, this “paperless meeting” looked eerie: the thick stacks of documents, and hand-outs were missing. A nostalgic delegate wondered if this new “revolutionary” mode would slow down proceedings. The general view, though, was that real-time electronic access made sense: indeed, the past spectacle of two tons of paper waste being dumped at each Governing Council’s conclusion was described as appalling. Another delegate commented that the “paperless” initiative is proceeding painlessly; apart from other things, it has already compelled the negotiators to come better prepared and focused. Having said that, though, internet access and power were down several times during the day, leaving some wondering whether “paperless” translated into increased energy use from electronic gadgets.