

SECRETARY-GENERAL'S HIGH LEVEL PANEL ON SYSTEM WIDE COHERENCE HOLDS SEMINAR IN NAIROBI ON THE THEME OF 'ENVIRONMENT'

Last week, the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on System-Wide Coherence held a seminar in Nairobi on environment issues. Although Panelist and former Chilean President Ricardo Lagos Escobar was unable to attend at the last moment, the seminar was attended by Mohamed El-Ashry, Swiss UN Ambassador Peter Maurer, incoming UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner, Pakistani Environment Minister Malik Amin Aslam, and various representatives from UN entities including UNEP, UNDP, WMO, UNESCO, HABITAT and FAO. Various experts on international environmental governance and one representative from civil society also attended.

Recommendations that were made on the issues of coherence in the normative and analytical work of the UN in the field of the environment and the institutional framework for the UN's environment activities included the need for a comprehensive assessment of existing global environmental governance, a strategic review of UNEP and its comparative advantages, and the creation of a new position of UN Under-Secretary-General for the Environment. Other suggestions included the need for stronger leadership, better communication mechanisms, a focus on knowledge generation and scientific assessment and monitoring, the strengthening of the Global Ministerial Environment Forum, more stable and predictable funding, a stronger Environmental Management Group, a swift, direct and effective reporting mechanism to review progress in implementation of policies, and the development of a strong norm and policy setting body with direct links to operational activities. The needs for national ownership and strengthened public participation in development policy-making were also stressed.

On the issue of mainstreaming environment in development decision-making, calls were heard from various UN bodies for incremental change and for further cooperative work between UNEP and UNDP. Others recommended the need for strong environmental expertise with direct links to UNEP in each country office, strengthening implementation of UNEP's Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building, and the better provision of technical assistance to developing countries in meeting the 2005 World Summit commitment for developing countries to produce new MDG-consistent national development strategies in 2006. The establishment of sufficient incentives – both nationally and internationally – to correct market shortcomings and to recognize and account for environmental services in development policy and the need for the translation of environment issues into dollar terms were

also proposed. It was stressed that development without environmental care, cannot be sustained. The importance of institution building in order to ensure effective implementation was also emphasized.

Concerns were expressed regarding the links between the Panel's work and that of the General Assembly in its informal consultations on international environmental governance, stressing the need for the Panel's recommendations to emphasize measures to strengthen international environmental governance.

The Importance of Environment and Civil Society Input

Although Panel members have stated that they wish to include the views of stakeholders, many members of civil society have expressed concerns that the process is not inclusive enough. In particular, various NGOs have noted their disappointment that the Panel has allowed few NGOs to engage and that it held its consultations in Nairobi while significant numbers of civil society representatives were in New York for the CSD.

Panelists will hold further meetings over the coming weeks in Islamabad, Geneva, Vienna and Barbados to gather regional perspectives and consider various other themes that are relevant to its work. In order for the Panel's outcome to obtain civil society support, there is an urgent need for greater civil society ownership in the Panel's work. To address this, the Panel should hold civil society hearings covering all three areas of the Panel's work as soon as possible.

The Secretary-General's High-level Panel on System-Wide Coherence will provide the vision for UN operational activities for the foreseeable future in the development, humanitarian assistance and environment fields. It must provide a strong environmental message, which addresses the integration of environment with development, the need for strengthened international environmental governance, and better coherence in the UN's normative work in the environment field. The Panel's recommendations must be fed into ongoing GA work on these issues and must not be restrained by a risk of non-complementary outcomes. The Panel's recommendations must be open-minded, bold, ambitious, and realistic. But they must also be comprehensive. It must articulate a vision of the future commensurate with the environmental crisis, which provides the inspiration to address the roots of the problems, which have impeded the achievement of the MDGs.