

18/01/2005



Press Release UNEP/261

ENVIRONMENT'S CRITICAL ROLE IN DEFEATING POVERTY, DISEASE, HUNGER

OUTLINED IN UN MILLENNIUM PROJECT REPORT

(Reissued as received.)

NAIROBI, 18 January (UNEP) -- Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), today hailed a report from the Millennium Project as a milestone in underlining the vital link between environment and defeating poverty.

The Project, commissioned by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, has developed a global plan on how the world can, by 2015, meet the eight Millennium Development Goals.

The Goals' targets range from halving extreme hunger and achieving universal primary education to reducing maternal mortality by three quarters and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases.

Findings from the Project's environment report, one of 10 being issued, were outlined today by Shafqat Kakakhel, UNEP's Deputy Executive Director, at a press conference in Kenya.

"It is appropriate to discuss these findings here in Kenya. Kenya not only hosts the world headquarters of UNEP, but is one of a handful of pilot countries where action to deliver the Millennium Development Goals is being tested. The new report concludes that environmental sustainability is a critical foundation for ending poverty", he said.

Indeed, the Task Force charged with addressing Millennium Development Goal 7, the goal specifically related to the environment, argues that without a healthy and secure environment many of the other Goals will be tough to achieve.

"A considerable body of scientific data points to environmental degradation -- the erosion of genetic diversity, the loss of species, the degradation of eco-systems, and the decline of ecosystem services -- as a direct cause of many of the most pressing issues we face today, including poverty, declining human health, hunger, undrinkable water, emerging diseases, rural-urban migration and civil strife", says the report, *Environment and Human Well-Being: A Practical Strategy*.

Mr. Toepfer, who is currently in Kobe, Japan, attending the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, said: "The environment has for too long been the poor relation to economic growth. Conserving the environment, be it rivers and lakes, forests, the atmosphere or the oceans, has all too often been seen as a luxury which is only addressed when all other issues have been resolved. But this very welcome report makes it clear that real, long-lasting and secure development can only be achieved if the environment is put at the centre of decision-making."

He said the Earth's life support systems, worth trillions of dollars a year, were being denuded, degraded and damaged often without a thought to the value and services they provide for current and future generations.

"A wetland area may be on the one hand a wonderful watering hole for hippos and elephants and resting and feeding area for birds. But it is also a vital water storage and flood control system as well as a natural, low cost, purifier of polluting agricultural and human wastes", he explained.

"The same goes for forests. These are not only beautiful places in which to walk and reflect. They supply wood for shelter and fuel, natural medicines and food for local people, soak up carbon from the air and harbour a wealth of genetic materials that may prove crucial to current and future science. The same arguments can be made for coral reefs and mangroves, for flower meadows and mountains, for peatlands

and tundras", said Mr. Toepfer.

"Our motto for three years has been 'Environment for Development'. The report points out that, although many of these nature-based services are free, they are worth trillions of dollars a year. Therefore, investments in conservation and anti-pollution measures are not frivolous luxuries, they are critical for the survival of our species, the planet upon which we depend and the health and prosperity of its 6 billion inhabitants", said Mr. Toepfer.

He said the report's findings would enrich discussions and decisions taken by environment ministers at UNEP's upcoming Governing Council taking place in Nairobi between 21 and 25 February.

These will, in turn, be part of UNEP's submissions to a high-level summit of the UN General Assembly on the Goals taking place in New York in mid-September this year.

The Millennium Project's environment report makes a series of key recommendations on how to reverse the loss of forests and plant and animal species and restore healthy land, air and water in order to meet the Goals and the World Summit on Sustainable Development's (WSSD) Plan of Implementation drawn up more than two years ago in Johannesburg, South Africa.

These include:

-- Training and strengthening of the staff, government departments and agencies charged with environmental affairs.

-- Tackling subsidies and market distortions that promote environmentally damaging activities such as over-fishing.

-- Investments in cost effective and environmentally sound energy and transport technologies.

-- Better access for developing countries to scientific and technical knowledge and mechanisms to promote environmentally beneficial innovation.

-- Boosting the efficient use of water in agriculture, the most water-thirsty industry in the world, and setting and enforcing pollution reduction targets for groundwaters and rivers.

-- Establishing a network of marine protected areas, as outlined in the WSSD Plan of Implementation, as one way of improving the prospects for fish stocks.

Details of Millennium Project can be found at www.unmillenniumproject.org

Details of the twenty-third session of UNEP's Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum can be found at www.unep.org/resources/gov/

For more information, please contact: Eric Falt Spokesman/Director UNEP Division of Communications and Public Information, on tel: +254-20-623292, e-mail: eric.falt@unep.org; or Nick Nuttall, UNEP Head of Media, on tel: +254-20-623084, mobile +254-733-632755, e-mail nick.nuttall@unep.org

* * * * *