

Thematic debate at the General Assembly
"Addressing Climate Change: The United Nations and the World at Work"
UN Headquarters, New York, 11-13 February 2008
By: Beatriz Eraso Puig, Climate Change Associate at WFUNA

United Nations General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim convened on 11-13 February 2008 the thematic debate "Addressing Climate Change: The United Nations and the World at Work ". The aim of this event was to discuss how the UN system can most effectively work with Member States, the private sector, and civil society in addressing climate change, and sustain the momentum built in Bali last year.

During the first day, two interactive panel discussions took place: "Rising to the Challenge: Partnerships on Climate Change" and "Responding to a Multifaceted Challenge: The UN at Work". On 12 and 13 February there was a discussion in which Member States made statements.

During his opening statement, the General Assembly President highlighted the need to focus on immediate practical action. "The General Assembly has a key role to play; we have a unique global composition, and cover the broadest range of social and economic issues. However, in order to most effectively contribute we must respond to two specific challenges." he said. These challenges are to create more effective partnerships to address climate change, and to define a "global strategy for the UN to respond to the many different challenges climate change poses". Mr. Kerim stated that the UN must respond in the context of the development agenda, especially by achieving the Millennium Developing Goals (MDGs).

UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, said "if 2007 was the year when climate change rose to the top of the global agenda, 2008 is the time we must take concerted action". Is his personal priority to work together with Member States to make sure that the UN system is prepared for the challenge. As a first step, he presented an overview report about the activities of the UN system related to climate change, which sustains that "the UN system is committed to supporting Member States as an effective, inclusive and credible partner in mitigating and adapting to climate change." Mr. Ban highlighted the UN's role to ensure the implementation of existing and future mandates.

Panel discussion "Rising to the Challenge: Partnerships on Climate Change"

Moderator: Timothy Wirth, UN Foundation

Chen Ying, China Enterprise Confederation
Fiona Harvey, Financial Times
Letizia Moratti, Mayor of Milan

Hans-Gert Poettering, President of the European Parliament
Youba Sokona, Executive Secretary of the Sahara and Sahel Observatory
Martin Khor, Director of the Third World Network

This panel highlighted the need for partnerships to solve the problem of climate change. Some of the issues discussed included: the concept of solidarity in partnerships, the need of further discussions regarding finance, technology transfer and capacity building, and the difficulties that developing countries are facing right now, as well as the need for urgent adaptation measures.

Mr. Poettering talked about the measures that the European Union is taking to combat climate change. He said we need to think about new partnerships and to avoid conventional thinking.

Ms. Moratti said that half of the world's population lives in urban areas, which are responsible for 80% of the global emissions. Many cities are aware that they have to play a major role, and they

are taking actions, such as the implementation of the Agenda 21 and the establishment of networks between cities to share problems and solutions.

Mr. Sokona explained that climate change was forcing some developing countries into “reactive adaptation”, and that we need to switch from this kind of adaptation to “planned adaptation”. He also said that climate change gives us a great opportunity to change many local and international institutions.

Ms. Ying said that governments need to take actions to encourage enterprises to reduce their greenhouse emissions and to join the UN Global Compact. She highlighted the need to educate consumers to face the global climate change challenge.

Mr. Kohr stated that the UN has to lead the action, but NGOs have an important role to play pointing to the future action and push governments to take action. In the North, NGOs should make sure that governments implement the commitments in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and in the South, they should help to adapt to climate change. He remarked that the role of citizens is to make sure that climate change remains at the top of the agenda.

The Director of the Third World Network said that the international community needs to recognize that the UNFCCC is “there to stay”, and that the Kyoto Protocol is not dead, as the architecture developed under this framework is an important part of the future climate regime. He stated that we cannot wait until 2012 to start the adaptation actions, and that a bigger effort in finance, technology transfer and capacity building is needed to build the confidence of developing countries.

Ms. Harvey talked about the increasing role of the private sector in climate change issues. In recent years, business are more willing to talk about this topic, although there is still “green wash”, as companies claim to be doing better than they are actually doing.

Some of the comments from the floor included the following:

- **Robert Orr**, from the Office of the Secretary-General, said that partnerships are essential for the UN and they are working to create more of them. He remarked that individual's efforts are needed, as “we are talking about changes in the way of life”.
- **Brice Lalonde**, France's Special Ambassador for Climate Change, stressed the importance of beginning to move forward with immediate actions. He said that the private sector help is crucial.
- **Slovenia**, on behalf of the European Union, repeated the need for immediate action.
- **Brazil's** representative highlighted their successful partnership with the private sector to produce biofuels. They have recently created a partnership with China to monitorize the deforestation in the Amazon.
- **Vicente Perez**, from Alterenergy, stated that companies should pay more attention to their impact on the environment and the benefits they create in their local communities. He suggested the need to promote programs for companies to work with NGOs and UN Agencies to provide electricity to the local communities in developing countries.
- **Switzerland** highlighted the need to reinvent the UN in order “to survive climate change”.
- **Spain** defended the need for adaptation to be treated at the same level that mitigation is, as many developing countries are already suffering the impacts of climate change and they need help to face them.
- **Panama** talked about the need for a stronger regulation for business activities, especially in the developing countries.

Panel “Responding to a Multifaceted Challenge: The UN at Work”

Moderator: Ricardo Lagos, Secretary-General’s Climate Change Envoy

Sha Zukang, Under Secretary-General of Economic and Social Affairs
Achim Steiner, Executive Director of United Nations Environment Programme
Kemal Dervis, Executive Director of United Nations Development Programme
Josette Sheeran, Executive Director of World Food Programme

Monique Barbut, Chief Executive Officer and Chairperson of the Global Environment Facility

The panelists discussed the role of the UN in the fight against climate change. They stressed the need for strategies and the need to promote new technologies, especially to help the developing countries. They gave examples of successful partnerships within the UN system, such as the one between the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). They talked about the need for an international governance system to help deal with climate change in developing and developed countries.

During his opening statement, Mr. Lagos highlighted that the UN must deliver as one in the climate change issue, as it is a crosscutting issues that involve the whole system.

Mr. Zukang stressed the need to integrate climate change into the development agenda, in this way he said “the effectiveness of all efforts would increase”. He said that climate change was an opportunity to all, and the UN’s task is to “shape the world discussion on action to meet the challenges of climate change in all key areas”.

Mr. Steiner said that the UN system is well positioned to respond to all the different issues that the climate change challenge involves. He repeated that climate change is much involved with the development agenda. He said that it is a great opportunity for the UN system coherence, as we can work through an integrated approach and improve the efficiency of the UN.

Mr. Dervis talked about the link between climate change and development, saying that they don’t have separate agendas. He said that, although the leadership has to come from the industrialized countries, much of the mitigation actions would require efforts from the developing world. Mr. Dervis added that civil society is important in the promotion of policy changes.

Ms. Sheeran said that the World Food Programme is at the front line of vulnerability. She said that if the predictions of the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report come true, the number of hungry people would increase. She described the present situation as a perfect storm: the food prices are at their highest point and the yields are dropping because of increasing floods, droughts and other factors. She added that the patrons of vulnerability are changing and we need to increase the vulnerability analysis systems in order to predict future disasters.

Ms. Barbut talked about the Adaptation Fund under the Kyoto Protocol, for which the Global Environment Facility acts as Secretariat. She said that the financing resources that are expected for the following two years are not very significant, although she highlighted that many stockholders have recently increase their financing promises. She added the need to improve the coordination of international funding initiatives.

Some of the comments from the floor included the following:

- The **Mexican Ambassador**, co-chair of the “Informal Consultative Process on the Institutional Framework for the United Nations environmental activities”, talked about this process and the need to improve the organization of the international community to be able to respond to the challenge of climate change.

- The representative from **Slovenia**, on behalf of the EU, said "sustainable development and mitigation was the best adaptation".
- **Michel Jarraud**, Director of the World Meteorological Organization, said the UN was needed to coordinate action at all levels. He added that scientific knowledge has to be continually refined, and that it is crucial to integrate it with decision-making.
- The representative from **India** stressed the need to begin the adaptation actions at the local level, especially in small islands developing states. The representative added that, Clean Development Mechanism need to be modified to benefit smaller projects.
- The representative from the **United Kingdom** talked about the financial resources and the need to increase the financing for the Adaptation Fund. They suggested that developing banks have to work more closely with the UN on this issue.
- The representative from **Egypt** said that the role of the UN was to "institutionalize lessons learned in the past and to synchronize the diverse efforts of the various groups working to tackle climate change".
- **Mats Karlsson**, of the High-Level Committee on Programmes and the Chief Executives Board for Coordination, talked about the possibility of climate change to galvanize the UN reform.
- **Maria Neira**, from the World Health Organization, said health should be brought to the center of the climate change debate, as the linked between both is very strong.

Closing remarks by Yvo de Boer, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Mr. de Boer talked about the outcome of the Bali meeting and the way forward. Regarding the role of the UN, he stressed the need to make important contributions in:

- Building the financial architecture needed;
- Integrating climate change into sustainable development ambitions of developing countries, to spur green, low-carbon growth in developing countries;
- Mainstreaming climate change into the development agendas of organisations, like the World Bank, UNDP, UNEP, etc.
- Mainstreaming adaptation actions in development planning to address increasing pressures through natural disasters, food scarcity, water scarcity, and human security risks at large;
- Initiating necessary action, including on the required technologies, in sectors like agriculture, energy, industrial development, aviation, maritime transport, etc., which all have specialized UN agencies.

General Assembly Plenary Meeting (12-13 February)

During the two-day debate, about 110 speakers addressed a wide range of issues related to climate change, such as partnerships, technology transfer, adaptation, mitigation, financing mechanisms, the UN role, etc.

Mr. John Ashe, Permanent Representative of **Antigua and Barbuda**, on behalf of the **Group of 77 and China**, said that the multilateral action must remain under the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol. Also, climate change has to be integrated in the development agenda.

He stressed the need for urgent action, as many poor nations are already suffering the impacts of climate change. "The Group of 77 and China is of the view that there should not be a parallel process of debates that would detract from the negotiation process under the UNFCCC [...] This thematic debate, as well as the Secretary General's report on the Overview of the UN activities in relation to Climate Change should not attempt to influence any other processes such as the

system wide coherence debate or the discussions on international environmental governance.” Mr. Ashe said.

Regarding the role of the UN to help developing countries he said, “the UN can play an important role through the promotion of an intellectual property rights (IPR) regime that facilitates the transfer of technologies”.

Mr. Janez Podobnik, Minister of the Environment of **Slovenia**, speaking on behalf of the **European Union**, talked about EU's commitments for 2020 to turn the region into a highly energy-efficient and low-carbon economy. He said that the four building blocks identify at Bali – mitigation, adaptation, technology and financing – are equally important.

“It is impossible to talk about climate change and development as two unrelated issues [...] The goal to halve the proportion of poor people in the world by the year 2015 will be impossible to achieve if we do not give due consideration to the natural resources and the environment our livelihoods depend on.” Mr. Podobnik said.

He highlighted the leading role of the UN as the appropriate framework to deal with climate change, and he said that the UNFCCC is “the only forum where global decisions about future actions can be agreed to”. For these to be accomplished, the UN must be strengthened and be able to deliver as one.

Mr. Podobnik finished his statement saying that “at the end of the day, we must not forget that the UN is the sum of its members and it is up to us to determine the size of this sum”.

Mr. Alejandro Wolff, **United States** Deputy Permanent Representative, said that his country supports the Bali outcome and “is strongly committed to achieving the goals of the Bali Roadmap and reaching an agreement in the UNFCCC in 2009”. He highlighted that partnerships with the private sector are crucial, and they are working to foster them.

For more information about the thematic debate (statements, background documents, etc):

www.un.org/ga/president/62/ThematicDebates/themclimatechange.shtml