

ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment 2010

Side Event Summary

Environmental Emergencies at humanitarian and environmental crossroads

New York, 15 July 2010

The round table discussion on environmental emergencies hosted by Switzerland was seen as timely in light of the growing scale and frequency of disasters, and the future implications on ecosystems, and human health and life. Environmental and humanitarian actions are intrinsically linked, and must be recognised as such.

The session called for a high level commitment to ensure that environmental emergencies do not fall between the proverbial gap of humanitarian and environmental fields, and brought together the representatives of these fields; Sir John Holmes, USG and ERC; Ambassador Toni Frisch, SDC; Margareta Wahlström, ISDR; and Ricardo Sanchez, UNEP. Permanent missions, delegates, UN agency representatives, and NGOs were present to share lessons learned and discuss the need for stronger cooperation between humanitarian response and early recovery efforts, long term action, and governmental and local capacity building, in light of the frequency of weather related disasters and the increasing human pressure on the environment.

The discussion centred on the challenge inherent in integrating environmental concerns into humanitarian response, the latter most often focused on life saving measures. Ms. Wahlström pointed out the huge network and resource base that can be utilised to assist in this work. Environmental issues cannot continue to be sidelined, as the protection of relief workers and affected population equally depends on good resource management. Conflict can be both the cause and effect of a fragile environment, and all the actors must work together to address these issues. Increasing focus on preparedness is the key to addressing increasing vulnerabilities and raising local resilience to environmental emergencies.

Environmental emergencies needs to be put higher on the political agenda, and Ambassador Toni Frisch appealed to the member states, and the audience as a whole, to support and push for a UNEP Governing Council Resolution in 2011, as well as together work towards widening the political support at the 2012 summit. John Holmes reiterated that although there is a mandate to deal with environmental emergencies, there is no political system and as such no comprehensive international framework, to shape the way forward. The will and support must come not from a core group of responders and nations, but from the many member states who at various times may be either donors or recipients of international environmental emergency assistance.