

Background note on Roundtable 7:

Dialogue on environmental sustainability

Organizers: UNEP and UN-Habitat

ECOSOC 2005 High Level Segment

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The Roundtable provided for a dialogue on the importance of ensuring environmental sustainability, and implementing the commitments made by the international community in this field, as a foundation for achieving the other internationally agreed development goals. Special emphasis was accorded to Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7 on ‘Environmental Sustainability’, which focuses on the integration of the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes, the reversal of the loss of environmental resources, the reduction by half of the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water, and the achievement of significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

As described in the background paper prepared for the roundtable by UNEP and UN-Habitat, with input from a number of other agencies, the MDGs were in many cases not only reaffirmed but enhanced in the outcome of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) and accompanying Declaration. The recognition that environmental sustainability is a necessary condition for sustainable development and for the achievement of all the other internationally goals was reaffirmed in the WSSD outcomes, and highlighted in various reports, including those of the Millennium Project. The project maintains that “Quite simply, Environmental Sustainability is the foundation upon which achieving all the other Millennium Development Goals must be built”, and underlines the vital link between environment and defeating poverty. The link between poverty and environment was also highlighted in the report of the SG’s Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.

Also acknowledged are the linkages between urban poverty, slums and the other internationally agreed development goals. In the year 2007, for the first time, the majority of the world’s population will live in urban areas. This demographic shift from rural to urban will result increasingly in the urbanization of poverty, characterized by the increasing numbers of city dwellers who are suffering from basic physical and social deficiencies, such as lack of adequate shelter, clean water and sanitation. The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (HABITAT II), which adopted the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda, recognized that more holistic, inclusive and participatory policies and strategies and actions are required to address urban poverty and to make the world’s cities and communities safe, healthy and equitable. The commitment of world leaders to achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 and the inclusion in the WSSD Johannesburg Declaration of *adequate shelter* as one of the key priority areas, underscore the fact that urban poverty must be directly addressed in order to achieve all the other internationally agreed development goals.

It is against this background that roundtable 6 on *Environmental Sustainability* was held during the preparatory meeting for the 2005 ECOSOC High-Level segment in 2005. The main conclusions of the meeting, based on the presentations of the six panelists and the subsequent interventions by Governments, UN agencies and NGOs can be summarized as follows:

1. Sustainable management of resources underpins development and environmental sustainability is the foundation on which achieving all the MDGs must be built. The Millennium Declaration, the WSSD JPOI and Johannesburg Declaration, the Declaration on Cities and other Human settlements in the New Millennium and the Habitat Agenda, along side the outcome of the other major UN conferences and summits, represent a global consensus and commitments to bring the vast majority of the world people out of the poverty trap.
2. Current projections are that 1 billion people will live in slums by 2020. The goal of achieving a significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers would therefore, if met, only impact on approximately 10%. Therefore consideration must be given to re-asses this target, and steps should be taken to not only support existing efforts being undertaken by slum residents, but also to prevent to prevent new slum formation and increasingly provide self-help housing and accessible and serviced land in addition to dealing with the existing phenomenon. The Millennium Project Task Force on Urban Slums recommended to take specific and forceful measures to stop slum formation over the next 15-20 years; improving substantially the lives of at least 100M slum dwellers, while providing adequate alternatives to new slum formation. The findings relate to the importance of the urban poor as positive actors for improving their own settlements, the essential role of both local and central government, placing the poor at the centre of all policies, programmes and plans and the local focus, involving all partners, including donors to achieve the goals. Recommendations include regularizing and upgrading existing informal settlements, providing a viable and affordable alternative to new slum formation through assisted self-help housing on accessible and serviced land, improving governance, supporting and enacting local pro-poor strategies, providing adequate and affordable land, infrastructure and services, mobilizing resources and investment, empowering local action, and monitoring progress. The creation of “Millennium Cities”, where cities are invited to embrace the MDGs and formulate locally based MDG poverty strategies was also recommended.
3. By 2007 more than half of the world’s population will live in cities, many of which are respectively located in coastal zones and classified as mega-cities. Coastal management plans must be integrated into urban infrastructure planning. In this context water and sanitation policies must be addressed in a holistic manner, bearing mind the linkages with freshwater aquifers, integrated water resource management and disease prevalence associated with inefficient waste management in rapidly urbanising settlements. Such a holistic approach is particularly relevant in Small Island Developing States, where early warning systems could assist in preventing extreme situations. SIDS are particularly vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters, climate change and sea level rise and need support to build capacity and reduce their vulnerability to external forces, as well as to manage freshwater and groundwater resources. The Millennium Task force on water and

sanitation highlighted the need to move sanitation at the top of the agenda, to integrate water and sanitation policies, planning and investment strategies into national priorities by making them MDG based, to adopt quick win actions, to focus on community based franchising for rural service delivery, to focus on sustainable service delivery, to give high priority to hand washing, hygiene education, treating safe water at the household level, school sanitation with separate facilities for boys and girls, to promote total sanitation coverage and public sanitation, and treat sanitation as individual right and a civic responsibility.

4. There is a growing need to build capacities at national levels to enable governments to mainstream sound environmental management practices into their sustainable development policies. Environmental sustainability underpins many of the development goals, especially in terms of ecosystems management and water supply, loss of biodiversity, land degradation and food production, health and child mortality, energy accessibility, etc.
5. It is evident that many of the development goals are not adequately being disseminated at local government levels. This situation should be addressed, perhaps through an international event where majors and municipal authorities could participate in sharing their knowledge and best practices. World Environment Day 2005, to be held in San Francisco, could be an opportunity to promote the Millennium Development Goals at local government level, as they are in the forefront in dealing with, and addressing, many of the goals. Similar opportunities are presented by the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development and the Decade of Water for Life. The importance of addressing the needs of the population at the local level and promoting the MDGs were highlighted. The engagement of all stakeholders, including the slum dwellers who are already implementing action to improve their living conditions; security of tenure which is essential to effectively address the challenges of urban poverty; recognition of the right to access for all, local to local cooperation, provision of adequate international support through ODA, including capacity building, are essential to achieving sustainable urban development and for the achievement of internationally agreed development goals. Leadership of cities is crucial, particularly as local authorities are not sufficiently involved in policy formulation at national and international levels, nor are they normally recipients of funding to achieve MDG related targets.
6. In terms of meeting the goals there is evidence that sub-Sahara Africa is most at risk of not meeting the targets. The time has come not to focus on good governance before assistance, or vice versa, but to apply a staged approach, such as learning by doing. This can be equally applicable in terms of the promotion of secure tenure as it could be in ecologically responsible practices. Among the possibilities for support are pure grant aid to the poorest countries and to follow a fast track approach with pilot countries that would receive rapid infusion of ODA for water supply and sanitation.