

Summary of the General Assembly Thematic Debate
“Addressing Climate Change: The United Nations and the World at Work”
New York, 11-13 February 2008

Opening Session

1. In his opening statement, the President underlined that the General Assembly had a unique role to play on climate change due to its global composition and the broad range of social and economic issues it covered. However, to contribute most effectively the General Assembly needed to respond to two key challenges. The first was to create more effective partnerships, involving as many relevant stakeholders as possible, with a common vision and a global alliance for action. The second was to help define a global strategy for the United Nations system to respond to the challenge of climate change. The overall goal should be for the whole to deliver more than the sum of its parts. The President also emphasised that climate change is not just an environmental issue; rather, it was a sustainable development issue.

2. The Secretary-General emphasized that the international community was now armed with a combination of authoritative and compelling science, a rising tide of public concern, and powerful declarations of political will voiced at the Bali Climate Change Conference. He underlined that every part of the United Nations system was committed to supporting Member States in implementing effective measures to address climate change. The overview report presented to the Membership by the Secretary General represented a first step, and reflects a commitment to strengthen and coordinate the work of the UN system into a common approach. He also underlined that success is possible only if all countries contribute, with developed countries to take the lead. Ambitious commitments from developed countries could be expected to elicit more action from developing countries.

3. Mayor Bloomberg of New York City noted that since over half of the world’s population lives in urban areas, cities were natural leaders in the fight against climate change. The experience of cities and local governments around the world demonstrated that ambitious action is possible, with win-win solutions available. He called on governments to make cities active participants in their climate change policies and actions. He also said that New York and more than 700 other cities in the United States, representing over 80 million Americans, have independently pledged to meet the Kyoto targets. New York City has embarked on measures reducing its carbon footprint. The Mayor also announced a reduction of the use of hardwood to assist in preserving rainforests.

Panel 1: “Rising to the Challenge: Partnerships on Climate Change”

4. The panel comprised speakers from various constituencies (parliaments, cities, non-governmental organisations, regional organisations, private sector and media) who addressed the role of partnerships in combating climate change. The panellists emphasized the importance of mobilizing popular support to build a global alliance for action and that multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels were necessary to promote global solidarity and cooperation. In this regard, it was recognised that non-governmental organisations could help to galvanise public support and encourage governments and the private sector to move away from “business-as-usual”.

5. During the ensuing interactive dialogue, it was noted that combating climate change and promoting sustainable development provided a significant opportunity to re-organize and re-energize the United Nation's work and institutional arrangements. It was highlighted that the United Nations sets the stage for and can facilitate action by the full range of climate change stakeholders. Partnerships could be organized at the global, regional and country levels, addressing social concerns and equity issues. National parliaments were considered to be particularly important stakeholders, as they are responsible for adopting legislation and for holding governments to account on behalf of their citizens.

6. It was noted that such partnerships should work to strengthen existing international cooperation on climate change and sustainable development and commitments made by developed and developing countries to achieve international agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

7. Most delegations stated that climate change and sustainable development are interlinked, and as a result there was a need to integrate climate change initiatives into national sustainable development strategies. In this regard, it was underlined that adaptation should be given more emphasis and, that there was an urgent need for more funding and technical assistance for developing countries – as they were least responsible for the problem but would bear the brunt of the impacts. There was also a recognition that adaptation strategies needed to evolve from reactive to proactive and planned approaches focusing on reducing vulnerability.

8. The importance of the Bali Adaptation Fund was highlighted including the need for it to be fully funded and begin operating quickly. The inadequate process of technology transfer was raised by a number of participants and it was noted that intellectual property rights were acting as a barrier. In this respect, closer partnerships and more cooperative approaches could prove useful, including by providing incentives for the private sector to invest in the development of affordable new technologies.

9. On mitigation, one speaker noted that channelling private sector funds towards cleaner and climate-friendly options would deliver results. In this regard, investment in infrastructure in developing countries was of key importance, because technology choices made today would have an impact of future emission for decades to come. In this regard, reaching agreement on emission targets for major emitting industrial sectors had the potential to deliver significant reductions. At the same time, it was also noted that such approaches needed to be reconciled with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

10. The centrality of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was emphasized. Also, that going forward negotiators should focus on the four Bali framework items, namely: adaptation, mitigation, financing, and technology as there was a risk of overwhelming the climate change negotiations with additional issues such as trade.

Panel 2 “Responding to a Multifaceted Challenge: The United Nations at Work”

11. The second Panel consisted of executive heads of UN agencies, programmes and departments. Panellists reiterated that action to respond to climate change should be considered within the context of sustainable development so as not to compete with it.

12. Panellists stressed the centrality of the UNFCCC for addressing climate change and that the United Nations should focus on action to address the four key aspects of the Bali Framework. They underlined the need to accelerate the distribution of affordable, environmentally sound technologies and stressed the need to address vulnerabilities and the humanitarian aspects of climate change. Panellists recognized the importance of partnerships between the United Nations and multiple stakeholders, particularly with the private sector and civil society and agreed that the United Nations General Assembly should continue to support the negotiation process leading to the Copenhagen Conference in 2009.

13. In the ensuing interactive dialogue many stressed that the UN should strengthen assistance offered to those countries most vulnerable to climate change, especially Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and African countries. The global public health impacts of climate change were also noted

14. Several speakers highlighted the need to move from reactive to planned adaptation processes, as well as, the need for strengthened climate observation and climate research. The role of the UN in assisting countries to raise funds, particularly for adaptation, was repeated. There was a call for the international financial institutions and regional development banks to scale up financing for adaptation and mitigation.

15. Many participants stressed the importance of coherence in the delivery of United Nations activities to address climate change. These speakers underlined that inter-agency coherence and collaboration on cross-cutting issues, such as the UN-Energy model, could contribute to the United Nations system “delivering as one”. It was noted that the urgency of climate change requires closer cooperation, strengthened management, leadership and accountability from the UN system. There is also a need to better define outcomes and to move to a “results based and rational planning process” to improve the UN’s effectiveness.

Statements by Member States and Observers

Partnerships

16. The United Nations has a key role to play in facilitating and promoting partnerships at all levels. A number of delegations highlighted partnerships to promote the development of advanced energy technologies to help protect the global environment while enabling economic growth. Many delegations also highlighted the importance of partnerships in the areas of renewable energy, energy efficiency and technology transfer. It also was noted that multi-stakeholder partnerships could play an important role in supporting national efforts. Some delegations also called on the Commission on Sustainable Development to do more to promote partnerships.

Climate change and sustainable development

17. Among delegations there was broad consensus that climate change is a sustainable development challenge, which needs to be addressed in an integrated manner, with due regard to all its economic, social and environmental dimensions. Delegations emphasized the seriousness that the impact of climate change could have on the three pillars of the United Nations work: development, peace and security, human rights and the rule of law.

18. Many delegations also stressed the need to adhere to the Rio Principles, in particular the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. In this respect, it also was important to recognize that poverty eradication and economic development remained the overriding priorities of developing countries. Therefore, the focus on climate change should not detract from the need to promote sustainable economic development, financing for development, and the achievement of the MDGs. Several delegations noted that these objectives were compatible with climate change mitigation goals.

19. The integration and mainstreaming of climate change into development planning and national sustainable development strategies was supported by many delegations, and several gave examples of national initiatives they had undertaken. Many delegations also reported on their national climate change strategies including progress on mitigation efforts, and called on the UN system to offer its full support. Some speakers also noted that the affects of climate change could exacerbate insecurity and instability and trigger large migrations.

UNFCCC and the Bali process

20. Delegations reaffirmed that the UNFCCC is the central multilateral instrument for addressing climate change. The importance of the Bali Action Plan was emphasized for establishing a vision for cooperative action and setting out the building blocks for a future agreement. Some delegations stressed that mitigation, adaptation, financing and technology development and transfer should all be given equal attention. It was also noted that the path from Bali to Copenhagen in 2009 would not be easy.

21. Several speakers reaffirmed the continued validity of the Kyoto Protocol and Convention and called for Parties to implement the provision more effectively. The first General Assembly thematic debate in on climate change in July/August 2007 and the High Level Event in September 2007 were noted as successful examples of raising awareness and strengthening political will. However, these discussions should aim to enhance, and not divert, efforts to strengthen the implementation of commitments under the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol. It was also noted that other forums had a role to play in supporting the UNFCCC process, including, the Financing for Development process, G20 and G-8, where the relationship between climate change, energy security, environment, development, finance and trade could be further defined and explored.

22. Several delegations were adamant that consultations related to international environmental governance (IEG) and System-wide Coherence should not be linked to discussions on climate change. Though many other delegations noted that these were integral aspects of the UN's overall reform agenda and would strengthen the ability and

effectiveness of the organisation to assist Member States in their own efforts to implement national climate change policies.

Means of implementation

23. Many delegations highlighted the importance of immediately implementing policies to promote energy efficiency, renewable sources of energy, and the deployment of clean and advanced technology. They noted that the effective implementation of commitments to address climate change was largely dependent on political will. In this respect, good governance, capacity building, financing and technology transfers, as provided by the Bali Action Plan, should be fully implemented. Many delegations called for additional resources to achieve this than provided by the Bali Framework and that in this regard, the UN had an important role to play.

24. The importance of adaptation for all countries was highlighted, but that international support for the most vulnerable countries should be the priority. Delegations provided numerous examples of climate vulnerabilities with respect to water, sea-level rise, natural disasters, agriculture and others. Many emphasized the specific conditions and challenges faced by SIDS, drawing attention to the impact of climate change on coral reefs, the marine environment, and fisheries. Several delegations described examples of adaptation policies and measures adopted, including innovative mechanisms such as risk insurance.

25. The need to drastically scale up support, particularly for adaptation in the most vulnerable countries, including in Africa, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small developing island states was supported by most delegations, including by mobilizing resources for both private and public sources. Levies on international air travel, joint implementation and emissions trading were mentioned as potential vehicles to finance adaptation activities.

26. Going forward, it was noted that there should be an effort to harmonize existing resources and prevent a proliferation of funds. Some delegations highlighted the need for innovative mechanisms to remove barriers to the transfer and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries, including new and additional financing, as well as, joint development of such technologies. Several delegations highlighted the need for African countries and least developed countries to receive a greater share of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects.

27. Many delegations called for consideration could be given to establishing an international technology transfer mechanism to overcome the barriers posed by intellectual property right regimes. There was also a proposal to establish joint ventures between SIDS and advanced countries for technology development under the umbrella of appropriate UN agencies.

UN System

28. Some delegations emphasized that the first and overriding priority of the UN system's work on climate change should be addressing the needs of the most vulnerable countries. Many delegations called for coordination of efforts within the UN system to avoid duplication and inefficiencies. Delegations also called for the United Nations to provide a solid platform

for facilitating technology transfer and to provide technical support to developing countries in this regard. The important role of the UN in disseminating knowledge and raising public awareness on climate change was recognized by many.

29. With respect to the report of the Secretary-General on activities of the UN system, many delegations underlined that questions relating to the way forward and specific mechanisms for coordination of the UN system remained under the purview of Member States. In general, the UN system entities should assist in the effective implementation of commitments and action plans of the UNFCCC, while coordination of UN system activities with respect to meeting the challenge of climate change required inter-governmental consideration and agreement, as well as oversight by Member States.

30. Many other delegations expressed support for the approach taken to strengthen coordination among entities of the UN system, including identifying strengths and opportunities for cooperation. Many delegations welcomed the report of the Secretary-General and the process underway in the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), in particular initiatives to make the United Nations system more efficient and results based. One delegation called for a coherent UN Climate Engagement Strategy under the leadership of the Secretary-General.

31. There was a further proposal to convene a High-level Meeting of all international development agencies to guarantee efficiency and strategic impact in the allocation of resources. The need for coherent and coordinated action by the UN and improved coordination and cooperation with donor countries, recipients and international organizations was noted by many speakers. One delegation expressed its concern about the lack of a central UN agency to tackle climate change

32. There were several specific proposals made by individual Member States in relation to the General Assembly's continued consideration of climate change, including:

- introducing a separate agenda item on climate change to allow regular debates in future;
- that the President of the 63rd session of the General Assembly consider convening a thematic debate on new and renewable sources of energy, energy efficiency and energy conservation;
- for the General Assembly to bring the situation of island states under threat from the affects of climate change to the attention of the Security Council;
- for the General Assembly to hold a High-level Event or Special Session to consider how reductions in the availability of drinking water as a result of climate change could undermine internationally agreed development goals; and,
- establishing a General Assembly Climate Change Adaptation Implementation Committee, to include Member States, relevant UN agencies and nongovernmental organisations.

33. In his concluding remarks the President proposed that in due course the Secretary-General should provide the General Assembly with a detailed briefing on efforts to

strengthen and coordinate the United Nations activities on climate change. In order to give further consideration to climate change within the General Assembly, the President also announced his intention to convene two additional meetings to consider specific aspects of climate issue in more detail: one focusing on the needs and concerns of vulnerable countries and the other on corporate responsibility and sustainability.

Further details about the thematic debate, including the programme, statements and video footage are available on the President's website:

<http://www.un.org/ga/president/62/ThematicDebates/themclimatechange.shtml>