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At the occasion of the

DPI Briefing for the community of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on
Biodiversity - The Basis for Human Well-Being:
Celebrating the International Year of Biodiversity in 2010

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Just last month, I had the opportunity to address a working group of eminent persons on the next steps to be taken by the global community to combat the loss of biodiversity. Quoting Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, I reminded them that the challenges of this new era of the 21st century can be solved by cooperation, a new constellation of international cooperation that includes governments, civil society and the private sector, working together for the collective global good.

Today, I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to meet with you, the representatives of global civil society and extend an invitation to you to become part of this constellation, and work with us to celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity in 2010.

Some of you may already be familiar with the term biodiversity. Some of you may even know of the existence of the Convention on Biological Diversity. There may even be those among you who are aware of the 2010 Biodiversity Target and its significance for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

If you are part of any of these groups, you are in the minority. Recent surveys across Europe, the United States, China and South Africa have shown that most people have not heard the term biodiversity. Fewer still understand what it means. And only a tiny minority know the impact of their daily actions on biodiversity.

If the world is going to meet the challenges of conserving and sustainably using biodiversity, and equitably sharing the benefits from the use of the genetic resources of our planet, we will need to reach out to this majority, inform them of the vital importance of biodiversity and find the ways to encourage them to change their attitudes and behaviour.

Today I want to invite you to join the movement of governments, organizations, both private and public and individuals, who will, in 2010, during the International Year of Biodiversity, celebrate the diversity of life on our planet, recognise its importance for our well-being, and then take the steps needed to ensure that it is available for future generations.

What is Biodiversity?

The term biodiversity was developed by scientists in the 1980s in order to encapsulate and describe the mixture of other scientific concepts and relationships that described the complexity of life in the natural world. The term does have simplicity to it – it captures all aspects of diversity of life – genetic and species diversity and the variety of the ecosystems or our planet.



The genetic diversity of our planet is not necessarily visible to the naked eye, but it is a key to the functioning of life on earth. Small differences at the genetic level have tremendous consequences for the behaviour of organisms, and their roles in more complex ecosystems.

For most people, the recognizable aspect of biodiversity is the diversity of species. The beauty of the creatures of the land and sea and sky around our world can be breathtaking and inspiring, as film maker Attenborough and the National Geographic Society have demonstrated. The charismatic species of our planet – the tigers, elephants and pandas have inspired people to conserve nature.

Biodiversity is also the diversity of the awe inspiring ecosystems on our planet. From the vastness of the forest of the Amazon, of the Namib Desert, to the expanse of oceans and seas, these complexes of life are fascinating. They are also the basis for all life on earth, including humans.

It is also important to realise that human beings are also part of Biodiversity – our actions affect all of this and ourselves.

What does this term mean for us?

While biodiversity has an intrinsic value, we now know thanks to work of scientists involved in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, that it has a crucial value to humans. Biodiversity provides a range of goods and services which are fundamental to human well-being and our overall security. Forests, wetlands and oceans characterised by diversity are able to provide important ecosystem services that furnish physical and cultural goods for human use. These services also regulate, support and preserve the continued functioning of the ecosystems.

Biodiversity is the source of the medicines that heal us, the food that sustains us, the forests that shelter us. It is the basis for our stories and legends. Our cultures are founded upon the environments and ecosystems in which our civilizations emerged. Diverse ecosystems are also stronger ecosystems and better able to withstand the changes that come with disruptions such as those expected to be brought on by climate change.

We also now know of the economic value of biodiversity. Estimations of the global value of pollinator services provided by bees and birds vary widely from US\$ 112 to 200 thousand million annually. The value of the watershed protection provided by intact coastal ecosystems, such as mangroves and other wetlands, has been estimated at US\$ 845 per hectare per year in Malaysia and US\$ 1,022 per hectare per year in Hawaii, United States of America. Three different wild peanuts have been used to breed commercial varieties resistant to root knot nematodes, helping to save peanut growers around the world an estimated \$100 million a year. The list is extensive.

And yet, the importance of biodiversity is too often overlooked, misunderstood and undervalued in our global economy. We have developed systems of economic production that over exploit biodiversity. Increasingly settled in urban communities, we no longer are aware of the role that the diversity of nature plays in our comfort and we therefore take it for granted.

Humanity is currently facing several global development challenges including increasing demands on natural resources, a global food crisis, the crisis from climate change and a global economic recession. Studies conclude that if properly managed biodiversity, offers pathways for meeting these challenges. It is our insurance policy for the future.

How can my actions affect it?

In our relentless pursuit of progress, security and a better way of life, our actions have indiscriminately undermined the resources of our planet. The aggregate of billions of individual acts of thoughtless consumption have led to the over exploitation of these natural resources.

For example, the increase in global meat consumption has contributed to deforestation. A global appetite for fish, matched with industrial models for harvesting has led to depletion of global fish stocks. Expansion of transportation networks has led to habitat fragmentation. The global decline of biodiversity is being caused by forces which are increasing in severity, and poses a serious challenge to society as a whole.

By the year 2000, only about 73% of the original global natural biodiversity was left. The strongest declines have occurred in the temperate and tropical grasslands and forests, where human civilizations first developed.

In the last 300 years, the global forest area has shrunk by approximately 40 per cent. Forests have completely disappeared in 25 countries, and another 29 countries have lost more than 90 per cent of their forest cover. Since 1900, the world has lost about 50% of its wetlands. Half of wild marine fisheries are fully exploited, with a further quarter already overexploited.

A striking aspect of the consequences of biodiversity loss is their disproportionate but unrecognized impact on the poor. For instance, if climate change resulted in a drought that halved the income of the poorest of the 28 million Ethiopians, this would barely register on the global balance sheet – world GDP would fall by less than 0.003 per cent.

What can we do?

Human actions have created the crisis and individual and collective actions can alleviate and reverse its course. What we need is a redoubling of efforts at all levels. Governments can create the regulatory environments that can guide more sustainable actions. Private sector actors can begin to take the costs of biodiversity loss into account in their business models. Individuals can make choices that reduce their impact on the planet. What is needed is a framework to help this happen.

The Convention on Biological Diversity is the acknowledgement of the world's leaders of the importance of biodiversity for current and future generations. Its three objectives – the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources, are recognition that protection of nature, economic development and an equitable future are interrelated goals.

After years of entry into force, it is obvious that more needs to be done to implement the Convention around the world. More countries need to create and implement National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans and to main stream biodiversity as an element in development and poverty reduction plans. The task of better implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity is a task not just for governments, but also for partners in civil society.

Where can you help?

Indeed, 2010 will be a decisive year, certainly for the Convention on Biological Diversity, but also for life on Earth as we know it. Biodiversity is our safety net; it is our key to coping with change and mitigating what we have instigated but can no longer halt. Through our use of biodiversity, we control whether the planet improves in the coming decades or whether it undergoes increasingly dramatic changes and deteriorates further into a less and less accommodating place.

In 2010 the international community will be asked to assess their efforts to date for the Convention on Biological Diversity and to set the next round of targets. Indeed, the biodiversity targets agreed in 2002 have provided an impetus to seriously look at the consequences of our activities on the living environment. They have rallied and stimulated many actors to commit themselves to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from its utilization. Even the most unexpected actors, such as cities and business communities, have begun to think hard how the true value of biodiversity and how the services provided by ecosystems can be reflected in our economy. In this respect, 2010 is a time to ensure that the growing momentum and support for mainstreaming on the international agenda continues and grows.

Your organizations are the bridge between national citizenry and international decision-making processes. You are uniquely placed to mobilise societies and to provide advice to decision makers at both levels. We need you to be a key multiplier.

We need to adopt a positive tone for the actions that we need to take in the years to come. While the task at hand is urgent and the consequences of failure are dire, we need to communicate to the world that something can be done, that stakeholders can work towards and achieve a positive target.

We need your assistance with increasing public awareness of the importance of biodiversity. We need your assistance to ensure that environmental issues become a core component of decision making across a variety of sectors.

We also need you to help us to integrate our work across a variety of issue areas. Biodiversity loss is not a standalone problem and cannot be tackled through separate initiatives that merely target species loss as an issue separate from poverty, climate change, water scarcity, growth in demand, development, conflict, and the many other challenges that face our world.

The most powerful nations in the world are beginning to take notice of the issue of biodiversity and are taking action. Efforts begun at the G8+5 Summit in Potsdam, under the leadership of Germany are now being continued by Japan during its G8 presidency leading to the Kobe Action Plan on Biodiversity. Recently the Carta Siracusa represents its continued momentum. Civil society can act to support these efforts – to provide support, advice and vigilance such that they continue.

There is increasing recognition that the true value of biodiversity and the services provided by ecosystems must be reflected in our economies. It is hoped that the study on the 'The Economics of Ecosystems & Biodiversity (TEEB), led by Mr Pavan Sukhdev, will provide the rationale for the gradual internalization of the costs of biodiversity loss and other environmental degradation into our accounts.

Civil society organizations can support this, provide research, and examples of “green success stories” for 2010, which can demonstrate the validity of these approaches. In this climate of economic crisis, we all need to identify opportunities for major shifts towards a green economy as UNEP is proposing.

In 2010, here in New York, the General Assembly will hold a special session on Biodiversity. This will be your opportunity to highlight the need to link the actions with those of the Millennium Development Goals.

You and your organizations are active in international forums. You are active in the Commission for Sustainable Development, you work in ECOSOC, the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues, the United Nations Forum on Forests, you attend the meetings of our Conference of the Parties to the CBD and countless others. The International Year offers you an opportunity to highlight the relationship between biodiversity and a number of other issues at these meetings and therefore influence the international agenda in 2010 and beyond.

Conclusion

We are mobilising partners now to support the International Year of Biodiversity. Governments are planning celebrations that celebrate their achievements. International organizations including UNEP, UNESCO, the United Nations World Tourism Organization, The Global Environment Facility and others, are planning celebrations and activities for the year.

Film makers and producers are creating films and mounting film festivals that will highlight the importance of biodiversity during the year.

We call upon you to organise celebrations during the year. We ask you to promote your own success stories. We invite you to work with national governments for the year.

It is an opportunity for you to add your voice, for you to shine in the constellation of actors who will work for biodiversity and for life on earth.

Thank you.
