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PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF AN OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

DIALOGUE SESSIONS WITH MAJOR GROUPS

Summary report of the dialogue session with scientific and technological communities

(11 April 1997)

Chairman: Ambassador John Ashe (Antigua and Barbuda), Vice-Chairman, Commission on Sustainable Development

Facilitator: Ms. Julia Marton-Lefevre, Executive Director, International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU)

Presenters: Representatives of the following organizations and programmes made presentations: Partner Programmes on Environmental Science (ICSU); Third World Academy of Sciences; Committee on Science and Technology in Developing Countries (ICSU); World Federation of Engineering Organizations (WFEO); Global Change System for Analysis, Research and Training (START); Committee for the International Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change Programme (IHDP); Species Survival Commission (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN)).

PRESENTATIONS

Scientists around the world, particularly those from the ICSU and IUCN networks, have been contributing to the field of environment and development for several decades, most notably through contributions to the United Nations

Conference on the Human Environment (1972, Stockholm) and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992, Rio de Janeiro). In their presentations, scientists noted their current activities, the obstacles they face and priorities for the future.

Activities

Panellists highlighted ongoing research and observation programmes, growing recognition of sustainable development issues, and partnerships that link the scientific community with other groups.

- The research community is no longer in an "ivory tower". Research and observation programmes encompass physical and social science activities and seek to provide useful information. The World Climate Research Programme (WCRP) aims at improving prediction of the physical climate. The International Geosphere Biosphere Programme (IGBP) investigates the effects of global change on ecosystems. The Diversitas programme coordinates research into biological diversity issues. The International Human Dimensions of Global Change Programme (IHDP) enhances understanding of the social and economic driving forces behind global change, as well as the impacts of and responses to that change.

- There is an important need for local solutions and the engagement of local expertise, particularly in the developing countries, in addressing sustainability challenges. Many scientific organizations are therefore focusing on capacity-building.

- Scientific organizations are developing advisory support round tables and partnerships with other major groups such as business and industry, to cultivate relationships that enhance scientific interface in global change.

- Some professional organizations, such as the American Society of Civil Engineers, have incorporated sustainable development principles in their code of ethics.

Obstacles

Obstacles to furthering science for environment and development involve funding, relationships between different disciplinary cultures, inequities between North and South, and difficulties in engaging the policy community. For example:

- Funds for research in the areas of sustainable development are often lacking.

- Research on sustainable development issues requires expertise from many different disciplines. Scientists with different backgrounds are still unaccustomed to working together.

- There is a shortage of developing country scientists and those that are available have inadequate participation in and inadequate access to decision-making processes.

- Scientists are often unable to engage the policy community effectively.

Priorities

Panellists outlined several priority areas. These address relationships within the scientific community, as well as those between that community, policy makers and the public.

- Multidisciplinary partnerships among natural scientists, social scientists and engineers are important for sustainable development.

- Women should play a larger role in science and technology endeavours.

- Regional and interregional cooperation is important for sustainable development.

- Science should be directed towards applicable, problem-solving efforts.

- Engineers should consider long-term costs in their design processes.

- Policy should be based on sound science, and dialogue between science and policy communities should increase.

- Public awareness of science and scientific knowledge related to sustainable development need to be further cultivated.

DIALOGUE

Representatives of the following Governments made statements: Czech Republic, Ghana, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Norway, Philippines, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America. A statement was also made by the representative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Some representatives requested scientists to comment more specifically on what they want from Governments (Norway and Switzerland). Several representatives noted the importance of improving public understanding of sustainable development and the scientific knowledge needed for it (United States, Indonesia). Others noted the lack of scientific information in the media (Czech Republic), and the difficulties in understanding the scientific information that is disseminated (Ghana). Some representatives noted links between science and Government (Japan) and between the scientific community and private sector research and development (Philippines). Others asked about best and worst practice issues (United Kingdom) and about the efficacy of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (Malaysia). UNESCO highlighted the urgent need to increase scientific capacity and funding for science and technology at both the national and international levels.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Some challenges and recommendations are set out below.

- Encourage support for basic science education and research for environment and development issues.

- Assist developing countries in national scientific capacity-building.

- Support coordination within the scientific community.

- Raise public awareness of scientific and technological issues related to sustainable development.

- Package scientific information such that it is understandable and accessible by ordinary citizens as well as policy makers.

- Facilitate dialogue between scientists and decision makers.

- Compile and disseminate information on lessons learned in science and technology.

- Improve relationships between the scientific community and the media.

- Give greater attention to research and development activities in the private sector.

- Create direct dialogue opportunities between the Commission on Sustainable Development and the representatives of the scientific community on specific topical areas of sustainable development.
