

REGIONAL AFFAIRS

AMCEN

Decisions and Policy Proposals

The eighth session of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) took place in Abuja Nigeria, from 3-6 April 2000.

The ministerial part of the session was held on the 5 and 6 April and was attended by ministers from AMCEN member States and representatives of African regional and subregional organisations, United Nations agencies, secretariats of various environmental conventions and inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations.

The opening session was chaired by George Vilakati, (Swaziland), outgoing President of AMCEN, on behalf of Nadia Makram-Ebeid of Egypt.

The President of Nigeria, Olesegun Obasanjo, officially opened the ministerial session. He commended the UNEP secretariat on its new policy goals and strategy for Africa and said that an enhanced and revitalised AMCEN emerging from the present meeting could define the way forward by spearheading regional efforts. These should be buttressed through the strengthening of institutions, manpower training and the acquisition of appropriate and environmentally sound technology, as well as the development of capabilities for environmental impact assessment, disaster prevention and management and emergency preparedness. He stated that he would be making contact with fellow African Heads of State in order to mobilise support for AMCEN and the AMCEN programme.

Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said that each AMCEN session offered an opportunity to take a long-term perspective on the state of the African environment in the light of current conditions. Four trends, he said, characteristic of the twenty-first century, would form the basis for AMCEN's future work: growing deterioration of the environment in Africa and globally, increasing social and economic inequality, with associated impacts on the environment, accelerating economic globalisation and rapid changes in the global economy, the environment, technology, consumption patterns and demographics. Those challenges would require changes in the approach, focus and organisation of AMCEN, and the proposals before the Conference were designed to help it meet those challenges.

He stated that under AMCEN's new programme, the existing legal and other instruments should be critically reviewed and adapted to changing circumstances, and supplemented with new ones where necessary. Such endeavours should be underpinned by strategic partnerships at the national, subregional and regional levels. Future activities

should be guided by a) the need to enrich AMCEN's mission and long-term agenda; b) a clear focus on regional needs; efforts to build on previous regional experience; c) sequencing of activities to ensure institutional energy and maximise coherence; and d) emphasis on activities that had a high probability of being replicated.

In the key area of capacity building, he explained that UNEP had organised consultations for developing countries preceding major environmental fora, and hoped to formalise the arrangement under the Climate Change Convention. In the context of its GEF (Global Environment Facility) activities, it had promoted a \$60 million work programme covering all the African subregions, and had launched a major initiative on land and water in Africa.

In his opening statement, George Volakati, said that previous sessions of AMCEN had highlighted the indissoluble link between Africa's economic and development crisis and its grave environmental problems.

The medium-term programme which had been reviewed by the Expert Group was designed, he said, to integrate environmental considerations as an indispensable component of economic, social and cultural development activities, building partnerships and promoting participation at national, subregional and regional levels. It was also intended to build strong regional negotiating capacities for use in international negotiations and dialogue on the environment.

Election of the Bureau

A representative of the secretariat said, that in accordance with the decision taken by the Expert Group to adopt new institutional arrangements for AMCEN, the Bureau would, in future, comprise the President, three Vice-Presidents and a Rapporteur elected from the five subregions of Central Africa, Eastern Africa, North Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa.

On assuming the presidency of AMCEN, Hassan Adamu (Nigeria) underlined the need for cooperation and partnerships between the member countries of AMCEN for the attainment of sustainable development. He expressed the hope that the current session would generate results-oriented reforms that would transform AMCEN into a performing organisation.

AMCEN's role in sustaining Africa's future (Agenda item 3)

The secretariat introduced three papers containing suggestions for action by the ministers, which had been

prepared by the secretariat and reviewed and amended by the Expert Group: 1) *Proposals for policy and institutional change*, 2) *Proposals for a medium-term programme (2000-2004)*, and 3) *Suggested decisions*. The third paper contained decisions on the action needed to ensure the successful implementation of the proposals in the other two.

In the ensuing discussion, the ministers commended the secretariat for preparing the papers and for its commitment to finding solutions to African environmental problems. It was unanimously agreed that if implemented the proposed actions would go a long way in revitalising AMCEN as a continental organisation capable of guiding African countries in their search for solutions to environmental problems. In particular, the ministers were confident that the restructuring of the institutional machinery of AMCEN through the creation of an Inter-sessional Committee and an Inter-agency Technical Committee would greatly enhance the effectiveness of the Organisation. Although the suggestions were practical and useful, their implementation might be hindered by lack of funds. For that reason, AMCEN should look for sustainable sources of funding. Given the prevailing poor

that AMCEN should establish a fund to enable African environment ministers to attend environmental meetings and participate more effectively. Such a fund would also enable senior environmental experts and technical advisers to accompany the ministers.

It was pointed out that AMCEN should give priority to the environmental problems facing not only the Sahel, but also all countries. The most formidable problem in those countries was desertification. The extreme poverty of the population had exacerbated the desertification problem because people relied totally on wood fuel, other sources of energy being beyond their reach.

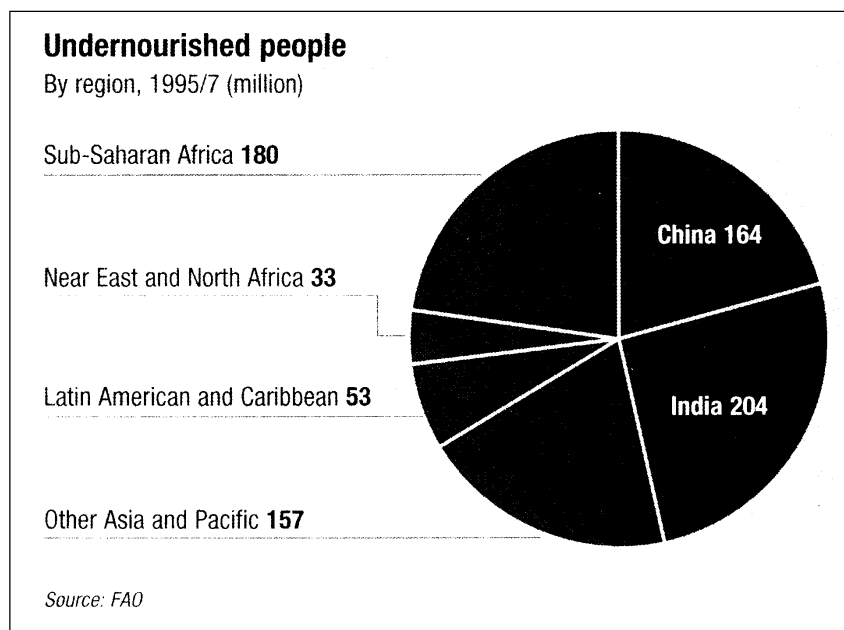
A number of ministers observed that in general, African countries lacked the capacity to deal with environmental problems and that it was therefore necessary to seek assistance from developed countries, particularly in the areas of education and training. However, some ministers, while agreeing that lack of capacity was a widespread problem, expressed the view that African countries should, on the contrary, cease to rely on developed countries and learn to rely on their own resources and assist one another in capacity-building.

It was decided that the AMCEN President should attend the summits of the Organisation of African Unity and make a presentation on the AMCEN programme. Also, that the AMCEN President should address other African ministerial conferences, such as conferences of ministers of finance, planning and economic development, and industry.

Concerning the mobilisation of resources, the ministers agreed on a target of \$10,625,000 to be constituted as an endowment, the interest from which would be used in financing the implementation of AMCEN activities. That sum would be accumulated as follows: contributions from AMCEN member States, \$3,250,000; contributions to be sought from donor countries, \$3,375,000; contributions to be sought from the private sector, \$4,000,000.

The ministers further agreed that it would be the role of the AMCEN Bureau to undertake the necessary fund-raising assistance of the AMCEN secretariat.

A number of delegations emphasised that the problem of waste and waste management was growing in many of the cities in the region. It was therefore recommended that waste management activities should be included in the medium-term programme. The issue of hazardous waste, its transboundary movement and its serious environmental implications was also discussed. The ministers recommended that AMCEN should encourage African countries to ratify or accede to the Basel Convention



Courtesy: *Financial Times*

state of African economies, it was advisable to consider approaching developed countries for financial and technical assistance.

The ministers commended UNEP for promoting the protection of the environment in Africa. However, they lamented the fact that, for lack of funds, Africa was often represented by only a handful of ministers at international environmental negotiations while all the environment ministers of the developed countries attended such negotiations and had the advantage of being able to come up with a common position. Accordingly, it was suggested

and its Protocol on Liability and Compensation, as well as the Bamako Convention, and ensure effective compliance with the obligations under them.

In view of the important role played by women in the conservation and protection of the environment, as well as their vulnerability to adverse environmental impacts, emphasis was placed on the need for them to be included in all policy-making and decision-making processes.

Delegates referred to the recent natural disasters in all the countries of the region affected by floods or other types of disaster, and what delegates considered to be the slow response of the international community in providing assistance. They recommended that the international community be approached with a view to establishing a rapid response fund to help African countries faced with natural disasters. The importance of contingency planning was also emphasised.

Ministers agreed to support the candidatures of Morocco and South Africa to host the forthcoming seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention and the second Earth Summit respectively.

At the end of the discussion on item 3, ministers adopted the proposals for policy and institutional change and the medium-term programme, with some amendments.

The ministers also adopted a number of decisions forwarded to them by the Expert Group (see page 203).

In line with the new policy and institutional change and the medium-term programme, ministers recommended that the AMCEN constitution should be reviewed to accommodate the new functions of the conference and its organs.

Consideration and adoption of the Abuja Agreement on AMCEN (Agenda item 4)

Ministers had before them an "Abuja ministerial declaration" which had been approved by the Expert Group for presentation to the ministerial session (UNEP/AMCEN/8/4). Following considerable discussion, they decided to adopt a revised version, under the title "Abuja Declaration on AMCEN 2000" (see page 202).

Country presentations (Agenda item 5)

A number of ministers made presentations on the environmental situation in their countries. They also commended UNEP for its continued support to AMCEN and for having organised the session.

It was generally felt that there was an urgent need to strengthen the AMCEN Trust Fund to support the medium-term programme which had just been adopted, calling for greater investment in capacity-building, and especially the enhanced implementation of international conventions. Countries were therefore urged to update their contributions to the Fund and most of the ministers pledged their commitment to its revitalisation. It was pointed out that the transfer of safe and environmentally friendly technology was another important strategy for

enhanced capacity-building.

All African countries were affected by environmental degradation, and there was now a general tendency to create a separate ministry of the environment in order to tackle the problem more effectively. The ministers emphasised the need to enhance public awareness of environmental issues and to raise the profile of the environment on the national agenda. Efforts were also being made to strengthen institutional capacities in order to guarantee participatory and sustainable management of natural resources.

It was noted that some of the most serious environmental problems facing African countries were 1) Land degradation caused by a variety of factors such as agriculture, mining, overgrazing, recurrent bush fires and population pressure. 2) Deforestation due to increasing population and the consequent demand for agricultural land and urban demand for forest products. 3) Loss of biological diversity due to deforestation, firewood harvesting, slash-and-burn agriculture, mining activities, and bush fires and overexploitation of marine resources. 4) Pollution of freshwater resources due to mining and urban waste.

It was pointed out that population pressure had resulted in a shortage of agricultural land and employment opportunities in the rural areas, which had led to increased rural-urban migration. That had resulted in overcrowding in urban centres, which in turn had caused the rapid spread of diseases such as malaria and typhoid. Urban overcrowding which led to unplanned expansion in a situation of financial crisis was also responsible for rising environmental degradation.

There was a consensus that African environment ministers had an obligation to give a new impetus to AMCEN by improving its structures and working rules and making it an effective forum for communication on environmental strategies. Ministers agreed that they had a responsibility to ensure that the environment was sustainably managed and utilised. To that end there was a need for partnership and cooperation in the management of the natural resources of the continent, because environmental problems did not recognise international boundaries.

The Mozambican minister said that the recent disastrous floods in southern Africa made it imperative to establish a mechanism for subregional, regional and international cooperation for the prevention and management of natural disasters. He appealed to those who were financially better off to assist in expanding into southern Africa mechanisms that already existed within the United Nations system, in particular, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR).

The Environment Minister of Uganda conveyed to the Conference his Government's offer to host the ninth session of the Conference – scheduled to take place in 2002 – in Kampala, Uganda. The ministers accepted the offer with appreciation. (MJ)