

Environmental Sustainability is a Critical Foundation for Ending Poverty

Task Force proposes practical solutions to the environmental crisis in developing countries

17 January 2005, New York—Globally, over the last few decades the amount of water available to individuals has fallen dramatically, water pollution now kills 2.2 million annually, more than 75 percent of the world's fish stocks are over-fished and rising sea levels brought on by global warming could displace tens of millions. All of these crises have their greatest impact on the impoverished people of developing countries and are among the many environmental problems that collectively present a significant barrier to reducing poverty.

But they can be resolved if national governments and the international community implement specific interventions for managing the environment, promote structural changes, and integrate environmental issues into all sector policies, according to the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Environmental Sustainability.

The task force report on environmental sustainability—*Environment and Human Well-Being: A Practical Strategy. Report of the Task Force on Environmental Sustainability*—is part of a detailed global action plan for fighting poverty, disease and environmental degradation in the developing world. The Task Force on Environmental Sustainability was headed by **Ms. Yolanda Kakabadse Navarro**, Executive President, *Fundación Futuro Latinoamericano*, **Dr. Jeff McNeely**, Chief Scientist, IUCN, and **Prof. Don J. Melnick**, Executive Director and Founder, Center for Environmental Research and Conservation (CERC).

“Major global and national efforts are required to promote the development of environmentally friendly technologies for energy, transport, water management and agriculture,” the report said. “Direct public investments in related research should be substantially increased.”

Task Force recommendations for improving environmental management include:

- **Reducing the adverse environmental impact of agriculture by pursuing sustainable farming techniques**, restoring depleted lands and protecting the natural habitat around farms.
- **Reducing forest destruction by encouraging legitimate ways to pursue income-generating activities** that depend on maintaining healthy forests. This can be done in part by channeling the entrepreneurial spirit of those who harvest farm products—including loggers, wood carvers and bush meat hunters—toward sustainable but still profitable practices.
- **Improving freshwater resources through a focus on more efficient uses of water in agriculture**, setting and enforcing pollution reduction targets for ground water and surface water, establishing adequate river flow levels, and controlling invasive species.
- **Preventing a collapse of marine fisheries through management systems that are rooted in research and developed in concert with local fishers** and by establishing a network of protected marine reserves.
- **Addressing health problems caused by air and water pollution** through initiatives that reduce exposures to toxic chemicals and focus on atmospheric levels of carbon monoxide, lead, nitrogen dioxide, particulates, sulfur dioxide, ozone, and methane.

- **To combat climate change, adopting the target of stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere** at 450–550 ppm carbon dioxide equivalent. A key priority must be investments in cost-effective and environmentally sustainable energy and transport technologies.

Structural changes in the institutions and policies that guide environmental management efforts should include:

- **Strengthening institutions and governance:** Environmental experts must be recruited and trained and agencies that deal with environmental issues must be adequately funded.
- **Correcting market failures and distortions:** For example, payments can be provided for activities that improve ecosystems, subsidies that encourage environmentally harmful activities can be eliminated, and trade regulations can be developed that promote legal, sustainable practices, such as sustainable forestry.
- **Improving access and use of scientific and technical knowledge:** Poor countries need better scientific and technological tools that allow them to take action based on an understanding of existing conditions. Also, public financing, purchase agreements and other mechanisms can be used to promote the development of environmentally beneficial innovations.

The Task Force considered the importance of environmental sustainability to meeting commitments forged in 2000 at the Millennium Summit, where world leaders agreed to make the fight against poverty—and all of its faces—in developing countries their priority. The summit inspired the Millennium Development Goals, which are built on the recognition that, from health to the environment, from education to gender equality, a growing list of development issues can no longer be managed solely within the boundaries of a single nation.

The Task Force on Environmental Sustainability is part of the UN Millennium Project, which was commissioned by the UN Secretary-General in 2002 to develop a practical plan of action for enabling developing countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals and reverse the grinding poverty, hunger and disease affecting billions of people. As an independent advisory body directed by Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, the UN Millennium Project submitted its final recommendations in January 2005.

The Task Force on Environmental Sustainability is one of 10 UN Millennium Project Task Forces that together comprise some 265 experts from around the world, including members of parliament; researchers and scientists; policymakers; representatives of civil society; UN agencies; the World Bank; International Monetary Fund; and the private sector. The UN Millennium Project Task Force teams were challenged to diagnose the key constraints to meeting the Millennium Development Goals and present recommendations for overcoming the obstacles to get nations on track to achieving them by 2015.



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