

Statement by Workers and Trade unions:
Committee of the Whole, 18Feb 2013

Agenda Item 5: Follow-up to and implementation of the outcomes of the United Nations summits and major intergovernmental meetings, including the decisions of the Governing Council

The number of people suffering from a lack of adequate nutrition, housing, water, and livelihood opportunities is daunting. 1.4 billion people are living in extreme poverty on less than US\$1.25 a day, and close to 1 billion people suffer from hunger. Worse, this statistic underestimates the numbers that are finding it hard to make ends meet, in both developed and developing worlds, even while they work. 60% of workers are without a secure employment contract and 75% without social protection.

Many could still wonder why would trade unions care about an environmental governance discussion. This is not our case. The labour movement confirmed in its Second Assembly in Rio that it was not going to be possible to achieve our objectives of decent work for all and social justice if we were not able to live within our planetary boundaries. There will be no jobs in a dead planet.

This is why our ambition in this agenda is high and we see its slow progress with a great deal of concern. Investments aimed at transforming our societies into sustainable ones are not happening. Green and decent jobs remain the exception rather than the rule. Social and environmental rights are being seen as costs and therefore cut putting once again the burden of the impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable. The social and development agendas remain disconnected and have both been weakened by lack of regulation and commitments by governments. And workers and their families are still dying or losing their health in trying to earn a living. This must change.

Build a strong international environmental governance might not be the only necessary element, but is with no doubt a precondition for succeeding in the paradigm shift we need.

Discussions opening tomorrow here might therefore build or endanger our capacity to deliver a better world for the people and the planet. We will be calling for the strongest options in terms of regulations, the capacity of UNEP to address critical gaps when it comes to environmental protection and our ability as representatives of workers to intervene and shape the decisions being made.

We will also be highlighting concrete demands when it comes to specific issues in the governing council discussions, such as the need for complementing current knowledge on environmental impacts with socio-economic information,

improve the coverage and accelerate the global regulation of chemicals substances and products, and the need to link human rights and the environment to workplaces, to mention a few.

The window of opportunity for planning a transition which leads to social justice and environmental protection is closing. It is our responsibility as unions, but also as citizens to make this clear to governments. A transition, to be just for workers and communities, must start now. Only a massive movement will succeed in this task.

- State on the environment. Sound information on the state of environment must guide decision making and the management of the transition towards building sustainable societies. In this regard, we support the efforts to improve information, for example through GEO. Enough information is available right now to start taking action on many challenges. Together with elaborating and compiling environmental information, a coherent and consistent integration of socio-economic impacts on livelihoods, incomes and jobs is crucial to facilitate sound decision-making, and most important, help a smooth translation of those decisions into public policies.
- Chemicals and waste management. Trade unions see with concern the slow path taken by international regulations to overcome chemical risks. Millions of workers lose their lives every year from the exposure to chemical substances in the production of goods, but also in the recycling and waste management phases. The integration of the Secretariats of the three chemicals' conventions has to be followed by a real integration when it comes to addressing emerging challenges and negotiating solutions. UNEP has to be mandated to fill the gaps, to deal with impacts on health and environment of chemicals and promote international regulation and implementation. Although we see with optimism the inclusion by SAICM of new emerging issues such as Endocrine Disruptors, Lead in paints or electronics, we can only regret that this is still a voluntary framework that very often results on an expression of will to address the problems instead of bold action. We urgently need a global ban of the most hazardous pesticides and a much better integration of occupational health and safety issues.

On Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) we support the need to abandon the use of DDT and encourage alternatives, highlighting that there is an imperious need for improving primary attention health systems and access to treatment, which are the main causes of making malaria a mortal disease.

- Justice, Governance and Law for the Environment. Trade unions are hoping this meeting will make decisive steps towards justice, governance, and law of the environment. A just transition towards a sustainable world

has to be anchored in the human rights framework, which include workers rights and the rights of future generations. We strongly support the human right to a healthy environment. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration need a global convention in order to ensure its implementation. The right to know, to participate in decision making and access to justice must find a correlation in the workplace. Workers must enjoy the right to have access to environmental information, from the substances they are using to the impact that the production system has on the environment, the right to participate in decision making in their companies if these can have an effect on environment, for example through environmental representatives, the right to be protected when raising alarm if their company harms the environment (whistle blower protection) and the right to refuse dangerous work or work that harms the environment.

- Budget and management of funds. UNEP needs to be funded on a basis which corresponds to the challenge of its mandate and function, no less. It is time for governments to put in place fiscal measures needed to contribute to global governance and implementation and provide the funds in an accessible and predictable manner, avoiding as much as possible earmarked contributions.
- Water Quality guidelines. Trade unions recognize the need to urgently act in the protection of water resources and guarantee its quality in the framework on the human right to water. Water quality guidelines for ecosystems are of outmost importance but their use should not serve the purpose of privatizing water utilities. According to research, water management and ecosystem restoration and protection are amongst the sectors that can contribute the most to creating green jobs. Job creation is therefore within reach if the public sector leads in promoting initiatives in this sense.