

**THIRD INTERMINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON HEALTH AND
ENVIRONMENT**

ANGONDJE CONFERENCE CENTER - LIBREVILLE, GABON

MINISTERIAL MEETING

**Thursday, 08th November
09.00 – 10.30**

Keynote Statement

**Dr. Juliette Biao Koudenoukpo,
Director and Regional Representative**

UN Environment - Africa Office

Excellency, Prime Minister of Gabon
Excellency, Minister of Health of Gabon
Excellency, Minister of Environment of Gabon and President of AMCEN
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

10 years ago, Ministers of health and Ministers in charge of environment from African countries converged, here in Gabon in this beautiful City of Libreville. At the end of their meeting, they created one historic and insightful vision – that an integrated approach to policy-making which values the services that ecosystems provide to human health, is possible.

We all left Libreville 10 years ago with a real source of hope, that if the health and environment sectors worked together within a strategic alliance, then they could make the hope a reality by bringing the value of environment and health to the forefront of the development agenda.

In hosting the first ever Inter-Ministerial Conference on Health and Environment in Africa, the Government of Gabon played a leadership role that led to the adoption of the Libreville Declaration. The Declaration enhanced our sense of confidence - that the vicious cycle linking poverty, environmental degradation, and ill health could be broken.

The adoption of the Libreville Declaration is the most concrete continental expression of our common vision to transform sustainable development from an abstract concept into a concrete reality. The Declaration firmed up our conviction that policy, institutional and investment changes could be made to:

- overcome the long persisting “traditional” challenges ranging from lack of access to safe drinking water, poor hygiene and sanitation; to poor housing and waste management systems, among others;
- deal with new and emerging challenges including impacts on health due to climate change, accelerated urbanization and indoor and outdoor air pollution, persistent organic pollutants, and electronic waste and radiation.

The momentum created by the Libreville Declaration catalysed unprecedented intersectoral dialogue that culminated in the adoption, by ministers of health and ministers of environment in 2010, of the Luanda Commitment, and the institutional arrangements for the Health and Environment Strategic Alliance.

Excellencies,

The Libreville Declaration has contributed to a change of perception of health and environment sectors' respective roles. Health actors are increasingly recognizing how multiple economic, social and institutional drivers exacerbate environment risks, impacting on human health and increasing the burden on health services.

We live in a rapidly changing and dynamic landscape – with new opportunities arising from fast-evolving technologies, increased human mobility and new scientific knowledge. Therefore, a focus by the health sector solely on disease treatment and health care delivery is no longer an option. Prevention has always been the best 'medicine', and prevention of environmental health risks must be accorded increased emphasis.

Similarly, for the environment sector, protecting and ensuring the sustainability of ecosystems, can no longer be perceived as an issue of "nature conservation" in the narrow sense, but as an issue of human well-being - recognizing that human health is inextricably intertwined with the broader natural environment.

Consequently, most of the United Nations activities, have emphasized the need to adequately address the links between health and environment.

This recognition has been reflected in the themes and focus of the last two sessions of the United Nations Environment Assembly on environment and health ("Healthy Environment, Healthy People") and pollution ("Towards a Pollution-Free Planet") respectively. It demonstrates the increased understanding that without firm global, regional and country level commitment and actions to address the environmental root causes of ill health, sustained progress on sustainable development goals will be undermined.

Once more the African region is demonstrating its leadership on this agenda as this third inter-ministerial conference is an immediate response to our UN Environment pollution free planet global commitment.

The outcomes of this conference are expected to provide invaluable inputs to the fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly to be held from 11 to 15 March 2019 in Nairobi.

Excellencies,

Thanks to "development", enormous improvements have been made regarding global human health in recent decades. But this should not lead to

complacency. There is increasing appreciation, by leaders from both health and environment, that these gains could be eroded by environmental factors including climate change, ecosystem degradation and natural resource depletion.

Added to these is the growing awareness of the risk to health of “novel entities”. Our high-level ministerial panel discussion on global health security and environmental security will provide interesting latest knowledge and insight in this regard.

A refreshed and scaled up approach to health and environment is thus called for. This third inter-ministerial conference provides a unique opportunity to commit towards a strategic action plan for health and environment. This should generate a fresh momentum not only for a pollution-free planet, but also in other ways that transform Africa’s Agenda 2063 and the 2030 agenda for sustainable development into a reality.

Excellencies

How many more crises do we need, to understand that most of them are largely preventable? How many more examples are needed to realize that most often it is only when a longstanding environmental risk erupts into a health emergency that governments and society wake up to the hazard?

The clearest rationale of our conference and the expected adoption of a strategic action plan is to demonstrate to our policy, development and financial partners that we can stimulate a move from a reactive to a pro-active policy approach. Hence, risks that might develop into full-scale environment and health emergencies can be mitigated, reduced or even prevented.

We the environment actors are health sector’s unique partners to re-position environmental health as the most effective preventive arm of public health. Together, the health and environment sectors remain the essential strategic allies in achieving the sustainable development goals.

The expected outcome of our conference and the adoption of the strategic action plan should lead to greater programmatic effectiveness, maximize the use of limited resources, and improve decision-making.

Both health and environment sectors recognize that economic arguments are increasingly critical to making the case for sound investments and development policies. Decision-makers are far more likely to opt for environmentally

sustainable models of development when the health and environment costs of alternative policies are fully valued both in terms of natural resource depletion and conservation.

Excellencies

Let us drive our passion for scientific knowledge about the root environmental causes of diseases and let us build on our experience in overcoming the fragmented knowledge on environment and health and catalyse concrete actions at the country level.

Let us harness the wealth of existing knowledge on environment and health accumulated over the past decade to make the business case for enhanced collaboration between the two sectors at the country level.

Let us bring health, environment and development and financial decision-makers to the same table. It is time to reach out to a wider audience and to expand the Health and Environment Strategic Alliance to further demonstrate the relevance that joint and practical actions on health and environment, can have towards achieving our common goals.

We need to further stimulate policies and investments for the joint contribution of the health and environment sectors towards the achievement of Africa's Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Be rest assured that UN Environment will spare no effort to sustain our commitment made ten years ago here in Libreville. We look forward to working closely with you towards the successful outcome of this third Inter Ministerial Conference.

I thank you