

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Remarks by Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**

**To the 19th Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean**

Los Cabos, Mexico, 12-14 March 2014

**Your Excellency, Juan José Guerra Abud, Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources, Mexico,**

**Your Excellency, Lorena Tapia, Minister of Environment of Ecuador,**

**Mr. Joel Avila Aguilar, Secretary of Economic Development of the Government of the State of Baja California,**

**Mr. Jose Antonio Agundes, Municipal President of Los Cabos**

**Excellencies, colleagues, esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen,**

I am deeply honoured to address this distinguished gathering as we meet here in the beautiful city of Los Cabos, thanks to the generous hospitality of the Government of Mexico.

It has been just over two years since this forum met in Quito on the road to Rio+20. Today, we convene at yet another historic juncture; months ahead of the world’s first ever UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) in Nairobi in June, the UN Small Island Developing States meeting in Apia in September, the UN Climate Change Conference in Lima in December and last, a final agreement is reached on the Post-2015 development agenda.

The fact that Latin America and the Caribbean region is hosting two of these milestone events is testament to the region’s growing influence and its capacity to push forward the international agenda on pressing environmental issues.

The Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean has, over the past 30 years, emerged as a leading political voice on environmental sustainability. The Forum has contributed to strengthening and streamlining the environment in development planning at both the national and regional levels, helping the countries of the region build synergies and share a vision of inclusive sustainable development that is in harmony with nature.

To avoid devastating and irreversible impact from climate change on economies and lives, bold and decisive action is needed in this year. We cannot afford to wait any longer. The world needs Latin America and the Caribbean to fulfil its global leadership potential on climate change. The results of COP-20, in Peru in December, will either continue to move our world on a path to environmental and economic collapse, or can start to turn the tide and set the stage for a new global agreement to keep climate change at a manageable level. For this reason, I am delighted this Forum is investing substantial focus on climate change, including a crucial session tomorrow morning with the participation of distinguished global leaders from this region, including Christiana Figueres, Secretary Juan Jose Guerra of Mexico, Mario Molina, Minister Manuel Pulgar of Peru, as well a global leader as Rajendra Pachaury. This Forum of Ministers has the potential to establish the foundation of a common interest and vision within for this region. The world needs Latin and the car to continue fulfilling its leadership potential on climate change, especially at this crucial juncture. UNEP pledges to you its unconditional support. I urge you to ensure that 2014 is a historic year of climate change leadership for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the last two decades, the region has witnessed significant environmental action as well as challenges on multiple fronts.

The economy grew from US $1800 billion to US $3500 billion, with a significant reduction in poverty and unemployment – despite the lack of equity in wealth distribution with the richest 20 per cent of the population earning almost 20 times more than the poorest 20 per cent.

In 2012, the region captured 6 per cent of the global investment in clean energy, worth some US $16.8 billion (of a total of US $268.7 billion).

Renewable energy production grew from 11.3 GW to 26.6 GW between 2006 and 2012, with almost 60 per cent of power generated from renewable sources (mostly hydroelectric).

And while air quality continues to pose a major threat to public health and the environment – with over 100 million people in Latin America exposed to air pollution levels that exceed recommended WHO guidelines – some progress has been made thanks to sectoral interventions and improved air quality management policies. The Regional Network on Atmospheric Pollution is set to present the Forum with a regional action plan to help streamline solutions region-wide, especially as air pollution extends to expanding urban areas.

I am also pleased to note that significant progress has been made at the national level to develop environmental strategies, create and consolidate the work of specialized agencies, establish institutional and legal frameworks and ratify international conventions.

Many countries in the region have taken steps towards the sound management of chemicals and waste, including the development of national assessments, legal frameworks and best practices that can be scaled up and replicated throughout the region.

To date, 18 LAC countries have signed the Minamata Convention on mercury. I would like to seize this opportunity to commend the region’s active involvement in the design and negotiation of the Convention and to welcome the clear commitment to its terms as stated in the Havana Declaration. The international community now needs to take firm action to expedite the entry into force of the Convention and its effective implementation.

The number of countries adopting climate legislation is on the rise. Mexico’s General Law on Climate Change, passed in April 2012, is a significant achievement. It establishes a comprehensive regulatory framework to address climate change and, at the same time, encourages the transition towards a Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. Other countries in the region have also enacted climate related laws, including Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, as well as others.

UNEP is committed to supporting these efforts, working with the Latin American and Caribbean Parliament ‘*PARLATINO’* and helping countries establish, pass and implement national laws and regulations on climate change.

For the past two decades, the region has been at the forefront of natural capital conservation, with 20 per cent of the total land area set aside for conservation -- as opposed to an average of 13 per cent in other developing regions. Natural capital is a critical asset, especially for low-income countries, where it makes up around 36 per cent of total wealth, according to recent World Bank estimates.

One of the greatest challenges facing the region is the sustainable management of its rich and economically-important natural resource base. The Latin America and Caribbean region is home to 34 per cent of the world’s plant species, 27 per cent of mammals, 31 per cent of the world’s freshwater resources, 23 per cent of the world’s forests and 57 per cent of the planet’s primary forests.

Recognizing the value of natural resources demands a rethink of the traditional links between resource use and economic prosperity. And while visions, methodologies and tools may vary, an appreciation of the value of natural capital is at the heart of efficient development planning.

By 2050, humanity could devour an estimated 140 billion tonnes of minerals, ores, fossil fuels and biomass per year – three times its current appetite – unless economic growth is "decoupled" from natural resource consumption. According to a report by the International Resource Panel, total resource use grew eight-fold in the last century.

But like all regions of the globe, successes are often overshadowed by the speed of environmental change that challenges the planet’s support system:

* Today, in LAC, over 79 per cent of the growing population lives in urban areas.
* The annual per capita water use exceeds that of any other region (average per capita for LAC is 7,231 m3/inhabitant/year), according to GEO LAC 3.
* LAC has the second largest green water (or rain water stored in soil) footprint behind North America, and yet faces challenges in regards to access to safe drinking water and sanitation.
* Chemicals are intensively used and released without proper management across various sectors from agriculture to mining. Solid per capita waste doubled in the past three decades.
* Economic growth in the region is strongly linked to extractive industries. Today, the region accounts for about 10 per cent of the world’s consumption of primary materials.
* Biodiversity in the tropics has fallen by around 30 per cent since 1992 due to unsustainable human activities.
* Economic growth was accompanied by unsustainable consumption patterns. Current growth in LAC includes economic incentives such as fossil fuel subsidies. Per capita domestic material consumption in 2008 exceeded 13.6 tonnes per capita, over 30 per cent higher than the rest of the world.
* Increased pressure on land for agriculture and raw material extraction led to wide deforestation across the region. Between 2000 and 2010, 4.4 million hectares of forest were lost annually, with the conversion of forest to cropland to grow soy for livestock feed accounting for most of the damage.
* Only 9 per cent of energy produced in the Caribbean comes from renewable sources. At the same time, demand for electricity has quadrupled in the last 20 years with a direct correlation between per capita energy consumption and CO2 emissions.

All of these relate to the discussions in New York on the Post 2015 Agenda. Your role as Ministers of Environment in this process is key as we are on the verge of defining the evolving development paradigm for the next 20 years. Latin America and the Caribbean is in a position to make contributions of paramount importance to the global agenda.

With your rich diversity of approaches and innovation you have a lot to offer in the definition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Inequality and discrimination have proven to be major impediments to sustainable development. A single balanced and comprehensive set of goals and agenda, universal to all nations would aim to eradicate all forms of poverty and integrate sustainable development in all its dimensions balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions in a way which will be aspirational, transformational inclusive and universal in nature.

If the concept of universality prevails, then the SDGs could bring both North and South into common cause based on the notion that supporting developing countries to eradicate poverty and develop in a sustainable way is only one leg of the challenge. Developed countries are the other with their consumption and production patterns also a big factor in whether a sustainable century can be achieved.

Strong monitoring and accountability will be crucial for the implementation of this Post-2015 agenda, and in this sense the work of Latin America and the Caribbean has been doing for many years will be key to be shared with other regions, and also to continue progressing the development of indicators to adjust them to the new Post 2015 agenda when adopted.

I would like to urge you Ministers to use UNEA as your high level political dialogue to inspire ministers of environment from other regions to all together in one voice make sure that the environmental dimension takes the place it deserves in an integral manner throughout all SDGs.

Thank you.