



Parliamentarians for Global Action
Acción Mundial de Parlamentarios
Action Mondiale des Parlementaires

**Report on the Side Event on Environmental Health Initiatives:
Innovative Approaches for Building Sustainable Cities**

April 24, 2012 1:15 – 2:45 p.m.

Conference Room A, United Nations North Lawn Building

On April 24, 2012, Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), a non-profit, non-partisan network of over 1,000 legislators from 131 elected parliaments around the globe, in collaboration with United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), organized a Side Event to the Informal Consultations on the Zero Draft of the Outcome Document to Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The meeting addressed the challenges posed by environmental degradation to population's health and highlighted the importance of national parliaments in furthering sustainable development. It gathered some fifty participants, including members of parliaments, Ambassadors, representatives of various country missions to the United Nations, academia, civil society and the staff of various UN agencies and the Secretariat.

The event was chaired by H. E. Mr. Herman Schaper, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations and Chair of PGA's United Nations Committee. In his opening remarks, Ambassador Schaper noted that 2012 marks twenty years since the Earth Summit Conference in Rio de Janeiro and summarized the goals set before the participants of the upcoming Rio+20 conference. Following Ambassador Schaper's introduction, Ms. Shazia Z. Rafi, Secretary-General of PGA briefly summarized the goals and track record of PGA in the field of sustainable development, which runs back to the 1992 Rio Conference and explained that in 2012 PGA hopes to address Agenda 21 legislative implementation gaps and work to offer concrete solutions to the remaining environmental challenges. Today, at the threshold of Rio+20, Ms Rafi emphasized, is the time to bring everyone on the same footing to come up with innovative, effective and low cost solutions that address the challenge of economic growth versus environmental issues.

Ms. Elizabeth Thompson, United Nations Assistant Secretary General and Executive Coordinator for the UNCSO Rio+20 Conference, former Member of Parliament and government Minister from Barbados, discussed the Outcome Document for Rio+20 Summit and the role of legislators in its implementation. She noted that the principles of Agenda 21 remain, and that the conceptual and philosophical framework for Rio+20, will be operating. Ms. Thompson highlighted the challenges faced by cities in the areas of environmental health and city planning. Ms. Thompson urged world leaders to shift to green economy by mainstreaming sustainable development policies with cross-sectoral initiatives to involve various governmental ministries, legislators and local authorities. She stated that the warming of the Earth's climate has led to some 1.2 million deaths across the globe in 2011 alone, the impact of unsustainable economic development on availability of clean air and clean water has been unsurpassable, and diseases have widened significantly to affect millions people. She

concluded by emphasizing legislators must take the lead in adopting a more locally oriented approach when taking the issues from the ministries and implementing them on the ground.

Honorable Ms. Pindi Chana, Member of the National Assembly of the United Republic of Tanzania and Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional, Legal Affairs and Good Governance, continued the discussion by offering an overview of the Tanzanian legislative experience in sustainable development. Ms. Chana noted that policies that address and reconcile the very reasons for urban movement decrease the numbers of urban movers and lie within the scope of the legislative functions of any Parliament. She noted legislators are well equipped to implement policies, such as the Tanzanian Public Private Partnership initiative (PPP) that enhances environmentally friendly economic development of rural areas. She concluded by saying that aside for strong political will and leadership commitment to sustainable development, parliamentarians must effectively engage other stakeholders in dealing with the issues of urbanization, while focusing on their own capacity building and enacting anti-corruption policies.

Professor Ruby Pawankar, President of the World Allergy Organization (WAO), Professor at Nippon Medical School, Tokyo, Member, Collegium International Allergologicum, Executive Committee and Chair, ARIA Asia-Pacific and a Fellow of several national and international organizations and societies, discussed the impact of environmental degradation on human health, specifically the spread of non-communicable diseases, such as asthma and allergies. “While the developing world is developing, it is acquiring the diseases of development, while in the developed world the allergies are escalating and becoming more severe and complex. Twenty to 30 years from now, one in every 2 or 3 children will suffer from some kind of allergy.” Environmental health interventions are key to reducing the heavy financial burden of non-communicable diseases on national budgets. Professor Pawankar called upon legislators and governments to work together with health authorities, international organizations, doctors, academia, patient representatives and industry toward a common goal of reducing the burden of non-communicable diseases, developing cost-effective innovative preventive strategies and a more integrated, holistic approach to treatment to prevent premature and unwanted deaths and improve the quality of life of patients.”

Ms. Gabriela Rodríguez, Director General of VerdMX, offered the audience her perspective on developing creative strategies and cross-sectoral collaboration initiatives for building sustainable cities. VerdMX is a non-profit organization in Mexico City that combines art, ecology, communication and public awareness in an effort to create a more sustainable city. It is based on the idea that if people realize the economic benefits of ecology, they will act to create more sustainable environment. VerdMX works in alliance with large companies such as Nissan, WindStream Technologies, and the Association of Mexican Banks to create environmental awareness projects raising understanding among the Mexican population about sustainable environment and promoting environmental health and sustainability in Mexico City.

Mr. Ramón Cruz, Sustainable Development Program Manager, Institute of Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), New York City, noted that the issue of transportation has been absent from international agreements and negotiations as a separate issue. It has thus far been discussed in larger terms of fossil fuel reduction or alternative energy. Instead, Mr. Cruz argued that heavy reliance on sustainable city planning, which includes availability of adequate transportation networks, can lead to a substantial improvement of the air in cities. He argued that conscious efforts to encourage walking, using a bicycle or public transport when developing a city, significantly impacts the quality of air and reduces the air pollution. He also noted that although availability of reliable

and convenient transit routes is key to reducing fossil fuel dependency of large cities, city planning with the focus of redefining the neighbourhoods to include all services and facilities within easy reach of the population and available on a 24-hour basis, will encourage residents to refrain from using personal automobiles and consequently reduce air pollution.

During the discussion that followed, the need to address the root causes of urban migration was emphasized as key in the work of the legislators. The representative of the Mission of Mexico to the UN also argued that without inspiring private sector, civil society and MPs, achieving the Rio+20 commitments will not be possible. In conclusion, Ambassador Schaper stressed that sustainable ecology does not require a heavy price and can be achieved with the involvement of all sectors of the society, including government, civil society, academia, businesses, government and legislators.