

Hundred and seventy-first session

171 EX/52
PARIS, 31 March 2005
Original: English

Item 57 of the provisional agenda

**PROCLAMATION OF 2007 AS A UNITED NATIONS
INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF PLANET EARTH**

SUMMARY

This item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 171st session of the Executive Board at the request of the United Republic of Tanzania.

An explanatory note is attached.

Decision proposed: paragraph 20.

EXPLANATORY NOTE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The human race needs its planet. We depend on it completely, because we evolved from it, remain forever part of it, and can exist only by courtesy of the self-sustaining Earth system. The Earth is unique not only in our solar system, but as far as we know, in the accessible universe. It is not just the only planet we have – it is the only living planet we know, or may ever know.

2. Earth scientists have unravelled many of our planet's secrets already and made great progress in understanding how our planet works. Large parts of the Earth's crust have been mapped and huge quantities of geo-data are stored in digital databases ready to inform society about the subsurface. We know where to find the largest reservoirs of our natural resources stored in the Earth's crust and we know why and where earthquakes may occur. We are able to reconstruct past climates in a very detailed way and we know when and where Earth plates moved over the globe, how this is related to development of mountain chains and how these mountains were successively eroded. We can predict many – unfortunately, not all – of the natural hazards based on fossil samples and on our knowledge of the Earth processes.

3. This wealth of information is, however, not properly used in current planning and management, if at all. We build in the wrong places, we exploit our resources in an unsustainable manner and only occasionally do we apply recent knowledge to mitigate the disastrous impact of natural hazards, like earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, landslides or floods. If we were to continue in this “business as usual” fashion, society would continue to suffer, quite unnecessarily, from ignorance.

4. It is thus timely to call for action. Earth scientists worldwide are ready and prepared to assist society in its endeavours to arrive at a safer, healthier and wealthier planet for all. A first step towards this goal is envisaged in the International Year of Planet Earth.

II. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF AN INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF PLANET EARTH

5. As a means of demonstrating the unique and exciting ways in which Earth sciences can help the present and future generations meet the challenge of ensuring a safer and more prosperous world, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) decided to develop an International Year of Planet Earth. From the start, it intended that this Year should be proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in order to generate maximum public attention involving all United Nations entities in its implementation. The International Year of Planet Earth, subtitled *Earth Sciences for Society*, aims to expose current and new knowledge to the public, policy- and decision-makers and the media, on how society can profit increasingly and at progressively higher standards from the expertise available from the approximately 400,000 Earth scientists around the world.

6. The very successful International Geophysical Year in 1957 and 1958, which contributed greatly to understanding our planet and using that knowledge for the benefit of society, and the national Year of the Geosciences in Germany in 2002 served as models for the proposed International Year of Planet Earth. The German organizers kindly supplied their logo, showing the interdependence of all spheres in System Earth, to this international initiative.

7. To achieve maximum political impact, the organizers aim to proclaim the International Year of Planet Earth through the United Nations system and to target 2007 as the International Year. The

rather ambitious science and outreach programmes, however, cannot be implemented in just one year and would need at least a period of three years for their completion. The organizers anticipate that the Year's activities will start in 2006, culminate in 2007 and end in 2008.

8. The International Year of Planet Earth has two major lines of action:
 - (i) a *Science programme*, which leads to answers to specific scientific questions that address the needs in society;
 - (ii) an *Outreach programme*, which aims to expose the societal benefits of the geosciences and insert these into education systems.

III. UNESCO-IUGS INFORMATION MEETING ON “EARTH SCIENCES FOR SOCIETY” AND PRESENTATION OF THE PROPOSAL FOR AN “INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF PLANET EARTH” (PARIS, 11 FEBRUARY 2004)

9. International Years may only be proclaimed by the United Nations during their annual General Assembly meetings in autumn and only at the request of one (or more) of the United Nations Member States. In this regard, the United Republic of Tanzania takes this leading role with the understanding that a significant number of other United Nations member countries would support this initiative.

10. It may also be recalled that on 11 February 2004 a joint UNESCO-IUGS information meeting was organized at UNESCO and opened by the Director-General. The audience – representatives from 58 delegations to UNESCO, plus numerous members of the scientific community, representatives of United Nations agencies, IGOs and NGOs – were sensitized to the broad spectrum of activities in the area of geoscience and their importance in ensuring human security and sustainable development.

11. The second part of the meeting was dedicated to the presentation of the aims and objectives of the proposed Year, the progress made thus far, and the way forward. Information relating to this is included in the brochure *Planet Earth in our hands: Earth sciences for society*, which can be made available. It is important to note that while the Year's activities are indicated as running for three years in the brochure, it is proposed that it will run as a United Nations International Year during the course of 2007 only. In addition, emphasis was placed on the importance of including an education component in the activities of the year, as well as capacity-building. Also noted as important were the inclusion of natural history museums in the activities of the Year and linkages to International Oceanographic Commission (IOC) and the Washington Earth Observation Summit (EOS), as well as to the activities of International Geoscience Programme (IGCP) and programmes of UNESCO's Division of Ecological and Earth Sciences.

12. At that meeting the Permanent Delegates of the People's Republic of China, Brazil and the Russian Federation confirmed that their countries would be supportive to a draft resolution proposing the Year to the United Nations General Assembly. After that meeting, 12 additional Member States, including Argentina, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lithuania, Mexico, Namibia, Pakistan, Romania and South Africa confirmed their diplomatic support to this proposal.

13. Among members of the audience coming from the geoscientific community, there was broad support for the Year with many of them indicating that they had successfully presented it to their national scientific communities. Some also indicated that they would be lobbying their governments in this regard.

14. Further, at that meeting, the Brazilian delegate suggested that a draft resolution concerning the Year be presented to the next session of the General Conference through the Executive Board, as appropriate.

IV. UNESCO's ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT

15. UNESCO has the privileged position of being the only agency within the United Nations system with an Earth science and capacity-building programme. Its former Division of Earth Sciences and now the Division of Ecological and Earth Sciences was invited to join this initiative in its early phase, with a view to UNESCO becoming the leading United Nations agency during the implementation phase (2007).

16. The Chairpersons of the five scientific programmes of UNESCO – IGCP, International Hydrological Programme (IHP), IOC, Programme on Man and Biosphere (MAB) and Management of Social Transformation (MOST) Programme – have selected and presented the proposed Year as a “substantive item for collaboration” within UNESCO’s programmes to the 32nd session of the General Conference (32 C/Comm III, Annex, Joint Communication of the Chairpersons of the Five Scientific Programmes, Paris, 30 September-1 October 2003).

17. UNESCO through its Executive Board and the General Conference should bring forward and champion the process and the implementation of the International Year of Planet Earth following its adoption by the United Nations General Assembly.

V. CONCLUSION

18. Taking into account the discussions on this issue held at the UNESCO-IUGS information meeting, involving the Member States, members of the scientific community, representatives of United Nations agencies, IGOs and NGOs, it is concluded that proclaiming a United Nations International Year of Planet Earth is likely to benefit not only research in the field of “System Earth” sciences, but also society at large, as well as policy- and decision-makers concerned with sustained socio-economic development. It is crucial that scientists are demonstrating their willingness to cooperate on a global, multidisciplinary scale and to act jointly in geoscientific projects with social, cultural and educational components to ensure the realization of this initiative.

19. An International Year of Planet Earth will emphasize UNESCO’s role in the world of sciences and is considered as crucial in raising public awareness of the importance of Earth sciences in building sustainable communities, as well as emphasizing the importance of science and technology in the follow-up to agreements reached at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, South Africa, 2002) and the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (Kobe, Japan, 18-22 January 2005).

Proposed draft decision

20. In the light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to consider a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Mindful of the fact that the planet Earth offers life support systems to the human race and other living things,

2. Noting that the wealth of scientific information available on planet Earth, which could assist planning, disaster mitigation, resource exploitation and management remains untapped and hardly known to the public, policy- and decision-makers,
3. Having examined document 171 EX/52,
4. Taking into account the crucial role UNESCO could play in raising public awareness of the importance of Earth sciences, disaster reduction and related capacity-building in building sustainable communities,
5. Invites the Director-General to support all efforts leading to the United Nations General Assembly to declare 2007 the International Year of Planet Earth;
6. Recommends that the General Conference at its 33rd session adopt a resolution on this subject.

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ADDENDUM

CORRIGENDUM

(a) Add new section **V. FINANCING OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR**

18. The organizers will draw funds to undertake the various activities of the International Year of Planet Earth from other sources and therefore this item will have no budgetary implications for UNESCO.

(b) Renumber sections and paragraphs.

(c) Paragraph 21: Proposed draft decision

Replace the beginning of paragraph 21 by the following phrase:

21. Following the inclusion of this item in the provisional agenda of the 171st session of the Executive Board at the request of the United Republic of Tanzania, the draft decision hereunder is presented by the following States Members of the Executive Board: Brazil, Burkina Faso, China, Egypt, Ghana, Italy, Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Pakistan, Rwanda, Senegal, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Turkey and the United Republic of Tanzania.