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Ministerial Round Table on Oceans
12-13 October 2009

**Building stewardship for the Ocean:
The contribution of UNESCO to responsible ocean governance**

Report

On the occasion of the Ministerial Round Table on oceans, thirty-two ministers and twenty-five national delegations gathered to discuss and highlight the vital role of oceans in understanding climate change, in providing ecological services to human well-being, and in particular to coastal communities, as well as the role of UNESCO and its Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) in supporting global governance of the oceans.

1. The Director-General of UNESCO, Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, opened the session by noting that investment in the sciences, including the ocean sciences, is key to economic development. The oceans are already highly impacted by human activities and ecosystems are degraded, especially in the coastal environment; many fisheries practices may be unsustainable and in the near term, climate change is expected to compound the problems. Management of these problems requires international cooperation under a law-based regime regulating the use of the oceans and their resources. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is universally recognized as the comprehensive framework upon which to build sound regulations.

2. The Chairman of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, Eng. Javier Valladares, addressed the session noting that ocean regulation frameworks for shipping and fisheries have helped develop the strength of the "Blue Economy". Quoting Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, he stressed that "Climate change is the defining challenge of our time". The ocean plays a fundamental role in regulating climate change. The ocean has already spared us from dangerous climate change. It is the capacity of the ocean to absorb the extra heat and carbon dioxide

generated by climate change that has prevented dangerous climate change. But if we want to preserve these desirable properties, we need to maintain the natural systems of the ocean functioning, we need to keep the ocean healthy. The Regular Process is a global effort which integrates not only regional concerns, but also programmes and services. IOC and UNEP, by leading the start-up phase of the Regular Process, the Assessment of Assessments, have made a fundamental contribution to improve the stewardship of the ocean.

3. The Chairman of the Science Commission of the General Conference, Dr Simeon Anguelov, greeted the ministers and pointed out that the benefits we derive from the ocean underline our responsibilities to the ocean. UNCLOS recognizes the ocean as the common heritage of humankind, but grants coastal jurisdiction to States. The high expense of coastal ocean science puts effective management out of the reach of developing countries. A strong capacity-development programme must, therefore, be part of any global scheme promoted for ocean management.

Theme 1: The role of science and the United Nations in providing governance for the Ocean

4. Moderator Lucien Chabason introduced the first theme of the Round Table, focused on the role of science and the United Nations in building governance for the Ocean. The moderator and theme presenters reminded the ministers of the frameworks currently in place for the governance of the oceans at the global level:

- the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), operating under its own Conference of Parties;
- the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea, acting as a “multistakeholder” forum and reporting to the United Nations General Assembly;
- United Nations-Oceans network, providing internal coordination of the institutional and technical support offered by several United Nations specialized agencies and programmes in charge of sector regulatory frameworks.

5. Additional mechanisms supporting ocean governance include regional fisheries organizations (RFOs) and regional seas conventions as well as a plethora of bilateral and multilateral agreements, totalling 589 valid agreements on oceans and coasts to date.

6. The ocean was also recognized as a special international space. The ocean as a global commons was considered a central concept, because it not only provides goods and resources exploitable with immediate economic benefits, but because it sustains basic ecological services, such as oxygen production to the atmosphere and the remineralization of organic compounds from ocean and land-based sources. The role that the ocean plays in mitigating climate change by absorbing the extra heat produced and by absorbing approximately one-third of the total annual emissions of carbon, is having a toll: the basic systems of the oceans are being modified and irreversibly altered.

7. The ocean is recognized to be of key importance to coastal communities and nations, in particular to those with the greatest economic dependency on the oceans and vulnerability to changes, as well as land-locked countries. The involvement of all nations in the processes for building sound ocean governance is key to the sustainable management of ocean resources.

8. There was unanimous agreement on the importance of making ocean policy based on sound scientific evidence. Furthering the Regular Process of assessments of the oceans was seen to be a key step to support governance, and sustained and systemic observations and information on the oceans are needed to underpin this.

9. Many participants urged the United Nations to address the rationalization of the many strands of activity related to ocean governance. It is particularly difficult for small nations, some of whom depend very strongly on the oceans for their livelihoods, to service all of the agreements and to accrue maximum benefit. Some ministers stressed that legal matters related to ocean governance should be exclusively negotiated through the Conference of Parties to UNCLOS.

10. There was strong support for the importance of the work of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO in the coordination of marine science and observations. A number of ministers invited UNESCO to reinforce support for IOC, and suggested it could expand its work in the future, maintaining science and monitoring as its core functions but also furthering discussions and facilitating the management of the oceans.

11. Many ministers emphasized the importance of building national capacities in research and monitoring of the oceans to support wise ocean policies and governance. In addition to working at the international level, a strong call was made to countries to start working at the national level to integrate ocean governance, coordinating under a sufficiently high national political authority the rationalizing of policies for fisheries, shipping, ocean science, and conservation.

12. Emerging issues for global ocean governance were identified, including climate change and the vulnerability of coastal States to sea-level rise as a key issue. Other key issues were marine biodiversity and trans-boundary fisheries management. The moderator also reminded ministers that ongoing issues such as marine pollution required continued work at the international level.

Theme 2: The contribution of UNESCO to monitor the state of the Ocean and its ecological services: the United Nations Regular Process

13. Moderator Prof. Jacqueline McGlade, Executive Director of the European Environment Agency (EEA), introduced theme 2 of the Round Table focusing on the contributions to global ocean governance of UNESCO/IOC and the Regular Process for Assessing the State of the Marine Environment.

14. The moderator and theme presenters highlighted that significant gaps existed in our understanding of complex ocean processes, and as a result, a more holistic and integrated picture of the state of our oceans through the development of a regular process is urgently needed.

15. In 2002, the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development agreed to “establish by 2004 a Regular Process under the United Nations for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including socio-economic aspects, both current and foreseeable, building on existing regional assessments (Johannesburg Plan of Implementation)”. The purpose of these individual assessments “... is to keep the marine environment under review and, through enabling States and other bodies to draw upon the best scientific evidence available for their decision-making, to contribute to maintaining the sustainability of the oceans and seas.”

16. Participants were briefed on the efforts led by IOC of UNESCO and UNEP in implementing the first phase of the Regular Process through “The Assessment of Assessments” (AoA), which provides the foundation for launching the initial cycle of a global integrated assessment by 2014-2015.

17. The analysis of existing information conducted under the Assessment of Assessments was summarized as follows:

- Assessment on living marine resources and water quality are strongest.
- Assessments on habitat quality are less developed and focused on some habitats only.
- Assessment of protected species is limited outside the developed world.

- Assessments of social and economic conditions are extremely few and seldom integrated with environmental aspects of assessments;
- Coverage of assessments beyond national zones is particularly weak.
- Integrated assessments are rare, reflecting narrow mandates of those requesting them.
- Use of biological or other reference points are intrinsic to processes that are common to fisheries and water quality, and lacking for other purposes.
- Major data gaps exist globally, coverage is limited, availability of data restricted, interoperability between databases is limited.
- Often assessments have unclear links to decision-making bodies and are one-off processes; policy options seldom analysed.
- Assessment processes are seldom well documented to facilitate review.

18. Building on the review of best practices of existing assessments, the Assessment of Assessments proposes a global framework and a set of institutional arrangements for launching the Regular Process.

19. Many participants commended the work accomplished under the “Assessment of Assessments” and stressed that the recommendations of the report provide a sound basis for considering the way forward. Concerns were expressed by some ministers as to the potential delay to 2010 for UNGA to take a decision on the institutional arrangements of the Regular Process.

20. There was strong support for the development of regional cooperative approaches that would allow States to work together, using similar information, techniques and shared capacity, to help ensure a global overview of the oceans, recognizing that different regions and ocean processes are interlinked.

21. Participants recognized that the Regular Process is also urgently needed in order to focus our scientific efforts on the issues that are threatening the stability of basic natural systems in the ocean, improving the understanding of their causes and their significance in environmental, social and economic terms.

22. Given the existing knowledge, the baseline of the current state of the ocean and the use of indicators will allow for developing appropriate management schemes and policy options for current needs at the national, regional and global scale. It will also allow for detecting trends and formulating scenarios for developing appropriate responses.

23. The participants stressed the central role that UNESCO through IOC should play in the coordination of the Regular Process, as the United Nations organization technically competent on issues relating to ocean sciences and ocean observations. It has the relevant mandate and scientific reputation to lead a global effort of this nature in close cooperation with UNEP and other United Nations agencies and programmes.

24. Participants of the Round Table called upon all Member States of the United Nations to support the launch of the Regular Process and its first cycle of global integrated assessment as soon as possible, and no later than 2010.

25. Participants agreed that, while it is recognized that there are several thematic and geographical gaps of information, there is sufficient knowledge, expertise and data to support such first global assessment. The Regular Process will become an important user of ocean monitoring systems, and in particular the Global Ocean Observation System (GOOS). As such, strong

synergies with an evolving GOOS should start to incorporate the regular monitoring of variables determining water quality and the status of biological systems.

26. To be meaningful and comprehensive, this initiative will need to be accompanied by a major global effort for capacity-development targeting specifically developing countries and providing support for the training of personnel and the building of institutions, as well as the transfer of technology relating to marine assessments. Several participants urged the establishment of a voluntary trust fund that would support the operations of the Regular Process and in particular its capacity-building programme.

Theme 3: Oceans and climate change, the impacts on and from the Ocean: Adapting coastal communities to sea-level rise

27. Moderator Dessima Williams introduced the third theme. The moderator and theme presenters highlighted several impacts and consequences of climate change impacts on societies in the coastal zones, i.e. coastal flooding, sea-level rise, coral bleaching, ocean acidification, loss of biodiversity, changes to ecosystem services, coastal habitats and ultimately population migration in the coastal zone. Several delegates stressed the particular vulnerability of small islands States.

28. Many delegates stressed the global dimension of the problems and stressed the need to find global solutions. New observations and tools are needed for building adequate policy responses. Solutions have to be based on solid science while also acknowledging local evidence and knowledge. Furthermore, solutions have to be holistic and integrated, involving all relevant national ministries/institutions.

29. The need for capacity-development was stressed and with focus on strengthening national institutional capabilities.

30. The issue of ocean governance was raised by many delegations. Several delegations stressed the important coordinating role UNESCO/IOC plays in providing observations, science and capacity-development. Some delegates saw a need to give IOC a broader mandate.

31. Delegates stressed the need to act at all levels, from partnerships with other United Nations organizations, to supra-regional bodies and national bodies (including science and education institutions). Building such partnerships will require flexibility, given the complexity of the issues faced.

32. Virtually all delegations emphasized the importance of the COP-15 meeting in Copenhagen and stressed the need for political will and concrete actions, including the need for adequate and appropriate levels of adaptation funding.

33. IOC, because of its knowledge on coastal inundations, and the tools developed to forecast the impact of tsunamis (a very fast inundation), can assist with the risk assessment of sea-level rise and jump-start a process of adaptation in the countries most exposed to sea-level change. IOC should organize and develop a major programme to do this.