



PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

Climate change to have devastating effect on many sectors, experts warn; the poorest to be worst hit

Islamabad, Pakistan, 14 January, 2009 (IUCN) – Weather patterns in the future will be characterised by intensity and extremes, and the effects will be felt in a wide range of sectors from agriculture and water resource management to health and infrastructure. This was stated by experts participating in the two-day regional conference, “Climate Change: Challenges and Opportunities for South Asia.”

The conference, organised jointly by the Ministry of Environment and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Pakistan, and supported by the UK Department for International Development and the Norwegian Embassy, brought together experts from the South Asia region.

The second day’s technical sessions kicked off on Wednesday with an in-depth look at the effects of climate change on three key sectors: water, agriculture and disaster management.

In his presentation on the effects of climate change on water management, Dr Ainun Nishat, Country Representative of IUCN Bangladesh, warned that changes in water quantity and quality will occur, affecting food availability, stability, access and utilisation. The effect of sea-level rise, meanwhile, will be devastating on a country like Bangladesh. Close to 17 million people (or 15% of the population) and 22,000 sq km (or 16% of the country’s land area) are likely to be hard hit. According to a study carried out by IUCN Bangladesh, rural communities are already feeling the effects of climate change, reporting excessive and erratic rainfall, an increase in number of flash floods, temperature variation, changes in seasonal cycles, and the increased occurrence of drought and dry spells. These effects are likely to worsen and adaptation strategies are urgently required. Areas where such measures will prove most effective, he noted, include flood and drought management, improvements in water supply and sanitation, erosion control and coastal afforestation. The time to act on adaptation is now, he said, especially in the water sector.

Dr. Amir Muhammad, Rector of the National University for Computer and Emerging Sciences, spoke about the impact of climate change on agriculture. He said that agriculture is the largest sector in an economy, especially in South Asia. This sector is crucial because it is the main source of livelihoods for the majority of the population. The health of the agriculture sector is the foundation for food security. The sector provides raw materials to many industries and it is a source of foreign exchange earnings. But climate change has had an impact on food grain production, he explained. What is needed is to develop adaptation strategies, for example by changing cropping patterns and developing new cultivars that are able to survive in the changed climatic conditions. The challenge is complex, he said, but can be converted into an opportunity, if the right approach is followed.

The implications of climate change on natural disaster management were spelled out by Lt Gen (Rtd) Farooq Ahmad Khan, Chairman of the National Disaster Management Authority. He said that risk reduction needs to become a priority in national policy. Climate change is already hampering the economic performance of South Asian countries, he warned, and it is affecting the lives and livelihoods of millions. In fact, he pointed out, the number of vulnerable populations is increasing, and marginalised groups are among the most vulnerable of all. This is largely because resilience to climate risks is poor in most sectors.

To manage the risks of disasters associated with climate change, early warning systems are essential. Disaster preparedness is another key step, he explained, along with systematic efforts to reduce the underlying risk factors. A national disaster response plan, with standard operating procedures, is critically

INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE



important. At the same time, economic and productive sectoral policies and plans must incorporate risk management strategies. He said that the development of a regional early warning system with enhanced inter-state flow of information on disaster risks would be an important step.

But other ways to be better prepared to manage disasters include the development of adaptation strategies. Increasing income levels, education and technical skills, and enhancing food supply, for example, were also broader ways in which disaster risks can be managed. He reminded participants that climate change and its impacts on South Asia are imminent, and that we need to learn to live with the changing realities. Shared vulnerabilities warrant regional cooperation, he added.

The second technical session focused on broader issues. Dr Adil Najam, Professor of Global Public Policy at the Boston University, USA, and Director of the Pardee Centre for the Study of the Longer-Range Future, discussed the politics of climate change. Our world is a Third World country, he said, explaining that if the world was a single country, it would be very poor, very divided, very degraded, very insecure, poorly governed and unsafe.

This matters, he explained, because environmental challenges are connected, forcing us to face the reality that we are all connected as well. Many environmental issues are global in nature and climate change is the quintessential global challenge. He said that environmental challenges are essentially challenges of insecurity.

We know why climate change happens, we know its effects, and we also know that it is not just a theory, he noted. But that does not necessarily mean that a choice must be made between environment and development. In fact, he said, the key to breaking through this seemingly intractable problem is to link climate change concerns to sustainable development. Both adaptation and mitigation measures are necessary.

Climate change will hit the poorest first, he warned, and it will hit them the hardest. He said that climate policy was predominantly energy policy, but increasingly it will become water policy. Noting that a new energy economy is in the making, he said there is a need for more policy coherence, but the problem of climate cannot be tackled by policy alone. Internationally, the politics of climate will remain fractured but efforts will be required to reverse this trend.

Dr Zafar Altaf of the Pakistan Agriculture Research Council highlighted the potentially devastating effects of climate change on agricultural production. Agriculture is an imperfect science, he noted, and uncertainty and risk are an integral part of the sector. But certain measures can nevertheless be adopted to mitigate the most serious effects. These include saving water in rice production, switching to aerobic rice, shifting to new cash crops, and finding ways to improve yields.

Malik Amin Aslam, former Minister of State for Environment, discussed the financial instruments for combating climate change.

The technical sessions were followed by a panel discussion in which participants discussed the policy, research and implementation gaps with respect to climate change in South Asia. They focused on commonalities and differences in country-specific responses, highlighted the role of various players and suggested measures to make regional response effective.

The conference concluded with an address by Federal Minister for Environment Hameed Ullah Jan Afridi, who said that the conference would lead to the adoption of a unified stance and shared vision for a comprehensive plan of action to avert the threat of climate change.

He said climate change is a priority for our country and for our region. We have not been major emitters or the cause of the problem, but we are likely to suffer its consequences and are likely to do so very soon.

We need to keep pushing industrialised countries to meet their commitments and reduce their emissions, he said. But, meanwhile, we also need to develop our own policy response. In this regard, we need to see this challenge as a serious threat but also as an important opportunity for change.

He strongly emphasised the need to adopt a coordinated regional approach to address the common development issues that arise as a result of climate change. There is also a need to adopt a common and more strengthened stance at the political level, he said, to present our common concerns to the global community.

He said there was a need to set up a regional task force and an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) regional centre for climate change. He added that Pakistan would be glad to provide this platform. He assured participants that, based on the recommendation of this conference, the Ministry would take the initiative to adopt a more coordinated effort to deal with the issue. He acknowledged the significance of the work being done by IUCN and hoped that it would play a catalyst role in supporting this initiative in the South Asia region.

Notes to editors

For more information or to set up interviews, please contact:

Shahzad Ahmad, Programme Officer, IUCN Pakistan, Islamabad Programme Office
Tel: +92 51 2850250, Mobile: +92 333 5236060, shahzad.ahmad@isb.iucnp.org; Web: <http://iucn.org>

About IUCN

IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges by supporting scientific research; managing field projects all over the world; and bringing governments, NGOs, the UN, international conventions and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice.

The world's oldest and largest global environmental network, IUCN is a democratic membership union with more than 1,000 government and NGO member organizations, and almost 11,000 volunteer scientists and experts in some 160 countries. IUCN's work is supported by over 1,000 professional staff in 60 offices and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world. IUCN's headquarters are located in Gland, near Geneva, in Switzerland.

www.iucn.org