

Statement at The First Preparatory Committee Meeting of The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD)

By Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs

New York, 17 May 2010

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the First Preparatory Committee meeting of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development to be held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. The 2012 Conference, also known as Rio+20, is one of the most important on the UN agenda. The Secretary-General ranks sustainable development as a top priority.

I would like to start by congratulating the Members of the Bureau and the two co-chairs on their elections. H.E. Mr. Park In-kook, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea, and H.E. Mr. John Ashe, Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda, have a most important and challenging task ahead in guiding the preparation of the Conference. I look forward to working with them and providing them efficient, effective and coordinated support from the Secretariat.

We are meeting against the backdrop of multiple crises. The financial turmoil and its aftermath continue to reverberate throughout the world economy. Food insecurity, as well as lack of access to modern energy services, along with volatility in energy prices, continues to loom large in the lives of millions of vulnerable people. On a global scale, climate change, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, and water shortages, are some of the cross-border challenges threatening prospects for long-term growth and sustainable livelihoods.

The sad truth is that despite two centuries of spectacular growth on our planet, we have failed to eradicate the scourge of poverty. Five million infants still die every year of preventable diseases. Two billion people live in poverty, many lacking access to basic services like health and primary education. If we continue on our current path we will bequeath material and environmental poverty, not prosperity, to our children and grandchildren.

Our stopgap solutions in response to these crises, with short-term timeframes and sector-based approaches, can no longer suffice in tackling the multiple crises. Only sustainable development, with its inherent emphasis on inter-linkages to address social, economic and environmental challenges in a balanced and integrated manner, can provide long-term and durable solutions to the crises.

Our only recourse is to pay urgent attention to sustainable development. Yet, indicators show that support for sustainable development has waned in recent years. The General

Assembly decided to convene the Rio+20 Conference, not as a commemorative event, but to renew political commitment to sustainable development, to identify gaps in implementation and to address new and emerging challenges. There has never been a more urgent time to drive political will and action to make our societies more economically strong and socially and environmentally sustainable. We need to reinvigorate support here and now.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know that you, by virtue of your attendance, are with me on this idea. But may I remind you that the year 2012 is close upon us. Work must begin immediately in order to ensure that the Conference meets the high expectations of Member States, major groups, and, most importantly, the youth of our world.

Given that the Preparatory Committee has just eight days of meeting time in the next two years, we need to be especially efficient. I remind you that the aims of the conference, as I just mentioned, are three: one, to secure political commitment; two, to assess progress; and three, to address new challenges.

How can you help us achieve these aims?

First, we need your help on specifying the mechanisms through which inputs from inter-governmental and non-governmental processes will be used. A number of international events are planned between now and mid 2012 – the MDG Summit, the review of the SIDS Mauritius Strategy of Implementation, the high-level event on biodiversity, the UN Climate Change Conference and COPs of other Rio Conventions, the UNEP Governing Council and Global Ministerial Environmental Forum, the UN-HABITAT Governing Council, the 4th LDC Conference, to name a few. The Preparatory Committee needs to determine how the results of these events will be assessed and made into building blocks toward a strong framework for Rio+20.

Secondly, we need concrete guidance from you on how to elaborate the themes of the Conference. As you know, the themes centre on building a green economy and an institutional framework for sustainable development. Please share with us your understanding of these themes and advise us on how best to address them. How do you understand the concept of a “green economy”? Can this theme underpin a new development paradigm? How can countries develop tangible action plans for a green economy?

In terms of an institutional framework, how can we, the international community, strengthen the global architecture on sustainable development? How can the UN Commission on Sustainable Development itself be strengthened? What do you see as the key ways that governments can prompt action at regional and national levels?

These questions have been on the minds of the Bureau and my colleagues in the UN system. Please focus your statements and interactive dialogue on these questions. We

need clear definitions and a common understanding of a green economy and an institutional framework if Rio+20 is to succeed.

Excellencies,

The Secretariat will be dedicating significant resources to the Conference, with support from the UN system. I am grateful to the Secretary-General for designating me as Secretary-General of the Rio+20 Conference and its preparatory processes. It will be an honour and a challenge. I will be supported by two Executive Coordinators and a dedicated secretariat, located in DESA, Division for Sustainable Development, headed by my able Director Tariq Banuri. DESA staff from other Divisions will contribute too. There will be a department-wide task force to help mobilize DESA resources.

But we will not be alone. Staff from various UN entities will be seconded to work full-time in the dedicated secretariat, in addition to regular DESA staff. Colleagues seconded from UN systems will help lead specific teams.

Equally important, there will be inter-agency collaborative mechanisms that will be an integral part of the preparatory processes. The EC-ESA Principals have already agreed to coordinate EC-ESA inputs and are in the process of nominating working-level focal points.

Furthermore, the Environmental Management Group (EMG), headed by UNEP, and the UN Development Group, led by UNDP, will provide support and inputs, both thematically and at the country-level.

These efforts will improve UN system-wide coherence on sustainable development. We acknowledge that increased cooperation among UN agencies and programmes is needed and we intend to meet that need.

Better coherence is also needed among all of us - Member States, the 9 major groups, international finance institutions and other stakeholders. The Rio+20 Conference should serve as an impetus, or springboard, for increased cooperation and serious follow-through on the sustainable development agenda.

The Rio+20 Conference is driven by Member States; Member States should take the leadership. We need your guidance, your vision and your initiative. I hope the negotiation of the outcome document will not be a process of seeking the lowest common denominators but will be a process of crystallizing a renewed vision built on Rio spirit and Rio Principles, a process of reinvigorating commitment, action and partnership, underpinned by Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

Governments alone cannot do the job. We need Major Groups, all 9 of you. I challenge all 9 Major Groups to mobilize your actions at all levels – working with communities, national governments, regional institutions and the UN system. You are Major Groups – live up to that expectation!

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will close by reminding you where we started. At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the international community adopted Agenda 21. It was an unprecedented global plan of action for sustainable development. Ten years later, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation was adopted so that we could better implement Agenda 21.

Progress, as I mentioned, has been too slow. In Rio in 2012 we need to reinvigorate our commitment to securing political will, assessing progress and addressing challenges.

I ask for your active participation in the next three days as we fortify plans to reach these aims and clarify the themes of a green economy and institutional framework.

Delegates from the least developed countries, we especially need to hear from you.

Donor countries, I invite you to consider supporting the participation of developing country representatives and major groups in the preparatory process as well as the Conference itself.

In terms of process, I look forward to spontaneous dialogue in addition to prepared statements.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Speaking in my capacity as the Conference's Secretary-General, I want to express my sincere appreciation for your commitment and contribution to sustainable development, and your presence here today.

Let me assure you that as the Conference's Secretary-General, I will make sure that the preparatory process is transparent, democratic and open. I have no personal agenda; nor does my Department. I will not tolerate turf fighting; I will not accept any actions that undermine the transparency of the preparatory process. This is exactly what I did when I was leading the preparation of UNCTAD XI. Let us work together to lay the groundwork for a successful conference. We cannot accept less.

The results of this meeting are crucial for a strong preparatory process for Rio. Let us listen to each other carefully and stay focused on the themes and aims of the Conference. There may be differences in priorities and perspectives, but I daresay there is sufficient common ground.

Thank you.