MINISTERS LAUNCH PIONEERING INITIATIVES TO TACKLE HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT ISSUES IN AFRICA

The Second Inter-Ministerial Conference on Health and Environment, held from 25 to 26 November 2010 in Luanda, Angola, adopted the Luanda Commitment which outlines the continent’s health and environment priorities and commits countries to take actions to address them, and accelerate the implementation of the Libreville Declaration. The conference was jointly organized by WHO (World Health Organization) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and hosted by the Government of Angola.

The priorities listed in the Luanda Commitment include provision of safe drinking water; provision of sanitation and hygiene services; management of environmental and health risks related to climate change; sustainable management of forests and wetlands; and management of water, soil and air pollution as well as biodiversity conservation.

Other priorities are vector control and management of chemicals, particularly pesticides and wastes; food safety and security, including the management of genetically-modified organisms in food production; children’s health and women’s environmental health; health in the workplace and the management of natural and human-induced disasters.

With the Luanda Commitment, countries pledge to accelerate the implementation of the Libreville Declaration, especially because of the effect this will have on the attainment of Millennium Development Goals 4, 5, 6 and 7 relating to child health, maternal health, communicable diseases and environmental sustainability respectively.

The ministers also agreed to mobilize resources available from government budgets and the private sector, and to advocate for and monitor the allocation of 15% of government expenditure to the health sector, as stated in the 2001 Abuja Declaration by African Heads of State, and a substantial increase in government spending on the environment sector.

WHO and the UNEP, the co-organizers of the conference, are requested in the Luanda Commitment to increase their support for the implementation of the Libreville Declaration; broaden the participation of other relevant inter-governmental organizations, development banks and regional economic communities; and establish a mechanism to facilitate access by countries to existing financial resources for health, the environment and sustainable development, especially climate change funds.

The ministers also formally established the Health and Environment Strategic Alliance (HESA), a novel mechanism to stimulate policies and investments in favour of enhanced joint actions for health and environment in Africa. HESA, the first ever collaboration framework of its type between African countries and two United Nations agencies in Africa, was adopted alongside the other major conference outputs.

Building on the linkages between the health and environment sectors, HESA, now institutionalized, will develop and coordinate actions to effectively protect and promote public health and ecosystem integrity with a view to helping countries attain the Millennium Development Goals.

It will concretely support country efforts through advocacy, resource mobilization, capacity building, technical assistance as well as progress monitoring, as part of the implementation of the Libreville Declaration, adopted in 2008 to reduce environmental threats to human health and well-being.

Also, for the first time, African ministers of health and environment made their strongest pronouncement ever on climate change and health in the region, with the adoption of a Joint Statement on Climate Change and Health.

The statement articulates Africa’s common position on climate change and health, and calls for support for actions aimed at reducing vulnerability and building resilience in the health sector in African countries. It also captures commitments by African ministers to address climate change in the continent, particularly as its effects are likely to be more severe than originally anticipated and may exacerbate the effects of traditional and emerging environmental risk factors on human health, thereby hampering Africa’s efforts to attain the Millennium Development Goals.

The Joint Statement on Climate Change and Health will be tabled before the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change taking place from 29 November to 10 December 2010 in Cancun, Mexico.

Speaking at the closing ceremony of the conference, the Minister of Environment of Angola, Ms Fatima Jardim, said, “Angola can contribute by setting the example and through interaction and information, consolidate the mutual commitments set out in the important tools we have adopted at this meeting and which will serve not only as a link between the health and environment sectors but also to connect us in a commitment as countries of a continent.”

The Regional Director and Representative of UNEP in Africa, Mr Mounkaila Goumandakoye said, “The Luanda Conference is a milestone as the health and environment sectors become credible and strategic partners. I leave this meeting further convinced that the future of Africa is not cast anywhere. It is we who determine this by our commitments, our determination and our actions.”

Assessing the outcomes of the conference, the WHO Regional Director for Africa, Dr Luis Sambo said, “The three tools that we have adopted at this conference are clear and consistent and the decisions we have taken will serve us well in the implementation of the Libreville Declaration.”