

UNCTAD Expert Meeting on Systems and National Experiences for  
Protecting Traditional Knowledge, Innovations and Practices

Geneva  
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**Statement by UNEP**

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Mr Chairman, UNCTAD staff members and distinguished colleagues:

On the occasion of this meeting UNEP would like to bring attention to the important role Traditional knowledge (TK) plays in promoting the sustainable management of natural and environmental resources, and to the urgent need to support capacity building efforts aimed at promoting the use of TK to help ensure sustainable patterns of trade in goods and commodities deriving from natural resources.

For centuries TK has enabled rural indigenous communities to survive in a balanced way with their natural environment. By its very nature of providing for this balanced relationship, TK is truly the ‘science’ of sustainable development at the local level. The Rio Declaration clearly recognises this, stating that **“Indigenous people and their communities, and other local communities, have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices.”** This principle is echoed in a number of international environmental agreements, including, but not limited to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention to Combat Desertification and the Statement of Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests.

As TK is closely related to survival and subsistence, it provides a basis for efficient local-level decision making in agricultural farming and the exploitation of fisheries and forests, ensuring the long-term viability of natural ecosystems so that the resource needs of future generations can be met. In indigenous communities throughout the world, TK has prevented land and soil degradation, fisheries depletion, biodiversity erosion and deforestation.

With the advent of globalisation, however, TK and its environmental benefits are threatened. On the one hand, world trade has created increased demand from distant markets for locally-sourced agricultural, fisheries and forest products, pushing producers to harvest resources beyond the sustainable limits that TK would normally advise. On the other hand, TK transmission to current and future generations is faltering as global communications and mobility attract younger generations to a diverse set of non-traditional livelihoods, often in distant urban settings. The challenges of globalisation must therefore include identifying ways for local communities to fully participate in, and benefit from, globalisation in an environmentally sustainable manner while ensuring that traditional livelihoods and TK are competitively compensated in financial terms to prevent their erosion.

Together with UNCTAD, UNEP believes that efforts to enhance countries' capacities to deal with trade-environment-development issues, including the promotion of TK, are critical to the sustainable management of globalisation. For this reason, UNEP and UNCTAD initiated the joint UNEP-UNCTAD Capacity Building Task Force on Trade, Environment and Development (CBTF) to strengthen the capacities of countries, particularly developing countries, to effectively address such issues at the national level and to participate effectively in related deliberations at the international level.

I am pleased to announce today, that 26 countries have recently responded to a CBTF Call for Proposals with more than 35 proposed projects. In view of the relevance of TK to trade, environment and development, it is not surprising that many of these proposals have strong TK elements. Evaluation of country proposals is ongoing and projects selected for implementation are scheduled to begin in early 2001. Together with UNCTAD, UNEP looks forward to sharing the results of CBTF activities that aim to promote TK in future TK meetings such as this one.

UNEP thanks you, Mr Chairman, for the opportunity to address this meeting.