

ECA SCIENTIFIC ROUNDTABLE ON THE CLIMATIC SITUATION AND DROUGHT IN AFRICA, HELD BY THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA (ECA) IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA, DURING 20–23 FEBRUARY 1984*; ALSO THE ECA CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS, HELD IN ADDIS ABABA IN MAY 1984

This event was attended by representatives from 25 Member states of ECA, the Organization of African Unity, 10 other nations, 9 UN organizations, and 4 non-governmental organizations. The substantive sessions of the Roundtable dealt with three main topics as follows:

1) The review of the climatic situation and drought in the region (by WMO) and their impact on the socio-economic systems in Africa (a report by a representative of ECA on a UNEP meeting on this topic, supplemented by other material). The impacts of the drought range from complete crop-failures resulting in famine in many places, to increased human diseases and worsening economic conditions. The discussion by Members representing states led to agreement that useful information can be provided to farmers and planners using existing climate/weather information, despite the fact that the duration of the drought cannot be predicted accurately, nor can the drought be broken by artificial rain-making.

2) Review of country experiences. The representatives of each ECA Member state reviewed the drought experience in their countries, giving valuable information on specific drought situations, on the impacts, and in many cases on the actions that are being undertaken.

3) The draft Plan of Action to Combat the Impacts of Drought, which contains proposed actions at the national, regional, and international, levels in the short-term (1984–85), medium-term (1986–90), and long-term (beyond 1990). The actions were grouped under the major headings of climate, food and agriculture, renewable natural resources, water and energy, research and data, and manpower and training. The ECA requested, in the draft Plan of Action, that the UN and regional bodies form a Regional Interagency Working Group on Drought in Africa (RIWGDA), to monitor the progress made in implementing the Plan and to develop common strategies on how to deal with the drought problem.

Overall, the ECA Scientific Roundtable took a practical, no-nonsense approach to the problem of the drought in Africa and its terrible impacts on human life. The draft Plan of Action provides an outline of concrete actions which can be taken now and in the near future by African nations individually and regionally, and by the international and nongovernmental organizations involved.

When the ECA Conference of Ministers met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in May 1984, one of their major topics was the drought in Africa and its impacts. The Secretary-General of WMO, Professor G.O.P. Obasi, addressed the Conference on the climatic aspects of the drought. He pointed out that the current drought is the worst in this century, but is not unprecedented in histor-

ical times. Statistical analysis shows that the climate has not changed to increase the frequency of droughts, nor is there a useful cyclical behaviour which can be used to predict droughts. Although we understand much about the general physical mechanisms which produce droughts, the quantitative explanation of droughts in Africa is not yet fully understood. Therefore meteorologists cannot yet accurately predict the onset or duration of a major drought. But it is clear that droughts are of common occurrence in arid and semi-arid regions, and hence governments must develop flexible, robust mechanisms, especially in agriculture, to be able to withstand prolonged drought. It is also clear that Mankind may aggravate the effects of drought through overgrazing and other mismanagement of land-usage.

The Secretary-General of the WMO also addressed the question of rain-making. He stated that the WMO position is that operational rain-making activities are not yet justified, especially in drought conditions, but that careful scientific experiments are of course welcome.

Professor Obasi proposed a series of short-term practical actions to improve the use of existing climatic data and information to help increase food production. He also made a proposal to adopt a resolution to develop an African Centre for advanced meteorological research, so as to understand better the drought, tropical cyclones, and other major atmospheric phenomena. The ECA Ministers adopted this proposal, and also adopted a resolution to strengthen the meteorological services in African nations, so that they can provide better service to their peoples than heretofore. Finally, the Ministers adopted the Plan of Action to Combat Drought in Africa which had been proposed by the Scientific Roundtable (*see above*). Now it remains to get the job done!

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SECOND INTERNATIONAL WETLANDS CONFERENCE,
HELD AT THE HYDROBOTANY SECTION OF THE BOTANICAL INSTITUTE OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, TREBON, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, DURING 13–23 JUNE 1984

The vast diversity of wetland biomes and their component ecosystems is reflected not only in their kinds and the biota which they support, but also in the terms used to designate them, and people's perception of their values. Until rather recently, most attention was devoted to the study of mires, which included areas known as bogs, fens, and carrs in English-language literature, and by a large number of other names in German, Russian, Swedish, Finnish, etc., which have enriched the science of these biomes and ecosystems. Other wetlands are marshes and swamps, often associated with lakes and rivers, and the floodplains themselves. Mangroves and coastal salt-marshes are also wetlands, distinguished from others by their saline nature. Numerous temporarily-flooded shallow water-bodies,

* *See also* Dr Potter's account of the Expert Group meeting in preparation for the Roundtable, held by WMO at their headquarters in Geneva during 6–7 October 1983 under the Chairmanship of Professor F. Kenneth Hare, and published in our Spring issue this year (pp. 85–6).—Ed.