



PRESS RELEASE

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AT INAUGURAL PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM, “VOICELESS” HAVE STRONG WORDS FOR GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

Representatives of civil society, private sector tell UNCTAD and officials of other agencies that global turmoil is taking a painful toll

Geneva, 18 May 2009 -- UNCTAD's first public symposium opened today with a chorus of demands for significant international reaction so that poor countries and people are not ignored as the global financial crisis plays out. There also were repeated calls for significant reforms to prevent similar crises in the future.

Issues raised by speakers from the floor included the effects of the crisis on human rights; potential social unrest in least developed countries (LDCs); why more government and international funding is not being dedicated to reducing high levels of unemployment; increasing inequalities in wealth around the world; the disproportionate impact on women of the global turmoil and resulting job losses; barriers to the transfer of useful technology to developing countries; and the potential for renewed food crises as the worldwide downturn continues.

Titled “the global economic crisis and development – the way forward,” and described by UNCTAD Secretary-General Supachai Panitchpakdi as a way to “give voice to the voiceless,” the symposium grew out of UNCTAD efforts to implement the “one UN” concept and the organization's stepped-up policy of responding to global developments and broadening debate on global issues. The outcome of the two-day gathering will be forwarded to the President of the United Nations General Assembly and to the UN Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development, scheduled for early June in New York.

Opening the symposium, Mr. Supachai repeated earlier calls for an “exit strategy” from the crisis for the world as a whole. “If things start moving in the Western economies, the rest of the world will not be cured,” he said. “It will not be an automatic process that the rest of the world will start to recover. We cannot go back to the same old cycle of boom and bust. We cannot make cosmetic changes. We need to think about real reforms.”

Mr. Supachai said key ingredients of the crisis have included a dichotomy between the lack of financial regulations at the international level and the tight disciplines imposed on the global trading regime; and overhasty financial deregulation.

“We need to think about people who aren't on Wall Street or Main Street but have no street to walk on,” he said. “The impact of the crisis on developing countries will be tremendous.”

Juan Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Office (ILO), said ILO has advocated a “global jobs pact” to face the unemployment issue and work in concert with

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economic stimulus packages. Jobs or lack of them are where ordinary people interact with the global economy, Mr. Somavia said: unemployment worldwide grew by 14 million in 2008 and at this point probably has grown by 50 million.

Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), said his department, along with UNCTAD, had long warned that a crisis was coming. "We expected it. But we have been surprised at its severity." Announcements that a recovery may begin as early as next year may be premature, he warned, adding that it is important for donor nations to honour their aid commitments to the developing world, even as they commit huge sums to domestic stimulus measures. "Don't say there is no money," he said. "If you make commitments, keep them."

Anders B. Johnson, Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), said Parliaments "have some soul-searching to do" on why they did not have regulations in place to prevent the financial abuses that led to the crisis, as they were public monitors of their governments' management of national economies. Tighter financial controls are needed, he said: "We must re-enforce the regulatory control of greed." A better balance also is needed between the functioning of markets and the overall well-being of countries and their peoples, he said.

Guy Ryder, Secretary-General of the International Trade Union Confederation, said the mood among trade unionists "is of anger and fear. Anyone who doesn't take seriously the danger of social instability is missing the point. The feelings of injustice out there are not misplaced. There are very real and genuine reasons for people to be angry. They fear, they feel, they know that they are the innocent bystanders in a crisis they have done nothing to create."

And Céline Charveriat, Head of the Geneva Office of Oxfam International, said that as a result of the crisis, another 55-90 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty in 2009. This is on top of 130-155 million already reduced to that state in 2008 because of soaring food and fuel prices. "Behind the headlines and big numbers, lives are being shattered," Ms. Charveriat said.

Moderating the morning plenary, on "the global economic crisis – its causes and multiple impacts," was Debapriya Bhattacharya, Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) of Bangladesh. Moderating the afternoon plenary, on "assessing existing responses to the crisis at international, regional, and national levels," was Ernesto S. Martínez Gondra, Minister Plenipotentiary and Deputy Permanent Representative of Argentina to the United Nations Office at Geneva.

Experts contributing to the debate were Nuria Molina of the European Network on Debt and Development; Vice Yu of the South Centre; Arjun Karki of LDC Watch; Jan Atteslander of Economiesuisse; Manzoor Ahmad of the Food and Agriculture Organization; Diana Aguiar of the International Gender and Trade Network/Women's Working Group on Financing for Development; Elizabeth Tankeu of the African Union; Emmanuel Gyekye Tanoh of Third World Network-Africa; Carlos Benavente of LATINDAD Network; Mustafizur Rahman of CPD Bangladesh; Janwillem C. Acket of Bank Julius Baer & Co.; José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs of the ILO; and UNCTAD economists Charles Gore, Anne Miroux, and Yuefen Li.

"Breakout sessions" also were held on the topics of "the global jobs crisis;" "least developed countries in the crisis," and "the global downturn: are women disproportionately affected?"