

**REMARKS BY PROF. MOHAMMED S. SHEYA, MINISTER PLENIPONTENTIARY,
PERMANENT DELEGATION OF THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA
TO UNESCO ON THE OCCASION OF THE IYPE GLOBAL LAUNCH
EVENT AT UNESCO HQ, PARIS ON 13 FEBRUARY 2008**

Mr Chairman,
Director General of UNESCO,
Distinguished Participants,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

The 22nd December 2005 will always be remembered in the history of humankind. It is the day when the United Nations General Assembly through its resolution 60/192 proclaimed 2008 the International Year of Planet Earth. The 22nd December 2005 is therefore a day of great importance, not only to the 400,000 or so geoscientists and the global scientific community; it is indeed a day of great achievement for the entire humanity.

Following the decision by the United Nations General Assembly to proclaim 2008 the International Year of Planet Earth we are subsequently gathered here at UNESCO HQ on these two memorable days to launch and formally celebrates the Year globally. This is again a historical moment in the living memories of humankind. This moment will certainly be remembered by the future generations.

Mr. Chairman,

The formal process leading to the United Nations General Assembly proclaiming 2008 the International Year of Planet Earth began at the 171st Sessions of the Executive Board of UNESCO. As member of the Executive Board of UNESCO, the United Republic of Tanzania was approached by the international geo-scientific community to lead this process by putting forward an item on the agenda of 171st Session of the Executive Board on the International Year of Planet Earth. With great humility Tanzania accepted this challenge, which was in deed a great honour. At this juncture I would like to express my profound gratitude to Professor Eduardo de Mulder and his team of Earth scientists who identified Tanzania and gave it this honourable task.

Mr. Chairman,

The follow-up process leading to the proclamation of the Year was by no means simple. It required sensitising and lobbying Member Sates both at UNESCO and at the United Nations. Further, the time available to put a proposal on the Agenda of the United Nations General Assembly was rather short. It also meant the General Conference of UNESCO had to meet first to approve the Year before the proposal could be discussed by Committee II on Sustainable Development. Since the General Conference of UNESCO was to meet in October, and the United Nations General Assembly's Sessions were to start from September going through to December, it was decided to have a two track approach. Two processes were therefore run concurrently, one at UNESCO with the hope that the General Conference would approve the Year and another one at the UN. Thanks to the good teams we had on the ground supporting the two processes, it was possible to harmonise positions of UNESCO and UN Member States, which led to the United Nations General Assembly proclaiming 2008, the UN International Year of Planet Earth on 22nd December 2005.

Mr. Chairman,

The Earth system, which is composed of rocks, water, plants and animals, soil and air, is a dynamic system with variable features subject to various phenomena. Variations of its features can cause natural disasters with wide impact and implications to humankind. Landslides, earthquakes volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, hurricanes, droughts, flood, etc are common in many parts of the world. When they occur, they can cause loss of lives and properties. Of major concern is the lack of knowledge among the general public on what to do to avoid loss of lives and properties in the event of such tragedies.

The knowledge of the Earth which is prevalent among 400,000 world's Earth scientists continues to be under-utilized. This knowledge if it is properly utilised could reduce at least in material term the many natural risks to life and livelihood and could provide a better understanding of the Earth resources. How much of this knowledge is shared with policy and decision makers and the general public? How can Earth scientists in collaboration with scientists of other scientific disciplines, such as environmental scientists, social scientists, medical scientists, etc help to bring about sustainable living and prosperity, particularly to developing countries and save lives and property at the time of natural disasters? Are the global hazards monitoring, early warning and mitigation systems effective enough and equitably distributed globally? How do developing countries particularly least developed countries cope with various hazards and natural disasters occurrences?. Are these countries hazards sensitive and prepared? What measures should be put in place by governments and the international community to help?

Mr. Chairman,

The overexploitation of Earth resources is a cause for concern and requires our collective attention and appropriate action. For example, soils are major support systems of human life and welfare and yet soil mismanagement is a common problem in many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries. Good examples of soil mismanagement are bad farming practices; effects of shifting cultivation and overgrazing, which can lead to soil erosion and soil degradation. Also indiscriminate harvesting of forest products and overexploitation of its resources can invariably lead to desertification. Indiscriminate and unplanned quarrying (stone quarrying) and mining (sand mining, gold mining, natural gas, etc) may lead to depletion of scarce resources and indeed to environmental destruction. Haphazard and unplanned construction and ill placed structures may lead to environmental disharmony and land instability. This is a typical problem especially in squatter settlements, in valleys and flood prone areas. In these places of habitation urban planning is sometimes compromised and yield to the pressure of human settlements. How can the society cope with these kinds of challenges given meagre resources to plan and affect such plans, particularly in developing countries?

Mr. Chairman,

Clean water is essential to our well-being. Yet solving scarcity of fresh drinkable water particularly in developing countries has been a major challenge. We all know what water shortages mean to the people, both in the rural and urban areas? How then should countries address water shortages in an ever growing urban demand and increasing population? For how long should people continue to rely on rains as the main source of water in an increasingly changing global weather pattern and shortage of rains? With overdependence on rain water, is irrigation farming possible or sustainable in some countries? How do we address water related bad practices such as tempering with river catchment areas for peoples immediate needs and personal gains?

What are the potentials of ground water resources as a source of water supply? Has the mapping of such resources been adequately conducted especially in developing countries? Do the natural water cycle, geological conditions and local climate history of our countries favour ground water abstraction? Are there planned governments and international interventions to water scarcity in developing countries, particularly in Africa through mass abstraction of ground water as a solution to the perennial water crisis? How do we cope with ground water pollution due to enhanced levels of harmful natural substances such as arsenic, fluorine, nitrate, sulphate, etc? These are some of the questions one would wish to address through studies in the context of the scientific programme of the International Year of Planet Earth.

Mr. Chairman,

A number of developing countries, particularly in Africa have a long coastal belt with several miles of territorial waters. These countries continue to face the challenge of ever increasing erosion of their coastal zones; indiscriminate destruction of fish and coral reef; pollution of the sea and its effects to marine life and human health; over fishing and the depletion of marine resources. What measures are being taken to address these challenges? How well are these countries benefiting from their ocean and other natural resources endowment in order to address nutritional health of their people and help to eradicate poverty?. It is my belief that the implementation of the International Year of Planet Earth would also address such questions and many more affecting the welfare of society, particularly in developing countries.

Mr. Chairman,

Without any doubt the launching and implementation of the International Year of Planet Earth will help to improve society's awareness and appreciation of the Earth as the ultimate source of all our everyday needs, and the very foundation of global society and economy. The Year will also help to raise awareness in the minds of politicians, policy and decision-makers, scientists of all disciplines and the general public on the challenges facing planet Earth and the opportunities lying ahead through the exploitation of knowledge about the Earth and its resources. We need to properly put this knowledge into good use if the threats to human life and livelihood are to be effectively mitigated in the future. Planet Earth is here not only to serve the present generation. It should also serve future generations. This is only possible if we are all committed to act and behave responsibly in all our actions in the interest of the entire humanity.

I thank you for your attention.