

May 9, 2016 – the EPI at the UNITED NATIONS

Speaking at The United Nations in New York today, Kim Samuel, joined by Dr. Angel Hsu, Assistant Professor at Yale-NUS College, Elliot Harris, Assistant Secretary-General and Head of the New York Office of the United Nations Environment Programme, and Janine Coye Felson, Ambassador for Belize and Legal Advisor to the President of the General Assembly, provided an important briefing on the 2016 Environmental Performance Index.

Kim Samuel released the following statement:

It's an honor and a privilege to be here at the UN, just a few months after the Sustainable Development Goals came into force. Over the next 15 years, the world's countries will mobilize to tackle poverty, advance prosperity, and combat climate change.

We believe the Environmental Performance Index can be an important resource.

I've been involved with the EPI since its inception, almost two decades ago. I'm delighted to be sharing this year's index—now in its 10th iteration.

The 2016 EPI ranks 180 countries—our greatest number ever. It covers 99 percent of the world's population and 97 percent of global land area. It turns a spotlight on two broad areas of policy concern: protection of human health and protection of ecosystems.

And it ranks countries' performance in 9 high-priority environmental categories, by examining key indicators such as household air quality... the change in forest cover... wastewater treatment... and critical habitat protection.

The result is a global and country-level report card that shows policymakers the state of their environment—helping them see where they're doing well, and where more concerted action is required.

The results of this year's index give cause for both optimism and alarm.

Regarding human environmental health, for example, countries have reduced deaths from waterborne illnesses... and the number of people

lacking access to clean water has been cut nearly in half, from 960 million in 2000 to 550 million today.

Still, this means that 8 percent of the world's population does not have access to clean water. Moreover, 23 percent of countries have no wastewater treatment—a critical driver of water quality. Sustainable Development Goal 6—to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all—aims to halve the proportion of untreated wastewater by 2030. Our data show that we still have a lot of work to do, with more than 80 percent of the world's discharged wastewater untreated when it is released into the environment.

Meanwhile, air quality has worsened over the last decade. Today, more than 3.5 billion people—half of the world's population—breathe unsafe air. In China and South Korea, more than half of the population is exposed to unsafe levels of fine particulate matter. In India and Nepal, the proportion climbs to nearly three out of four.

When we look at protection of ecosystems, nations are within 2 percent of reaching global targets on biodiversity and habitat protection, with 15.4 percent of the world's land area and 8.4 percent of marine habitats protected in 2014.

Yet, forests covering an area roughly twice the size of Peru were destroyed in 2014. And fish stocks too are in stark decline, with 34 percent of global stocks overexploited and collapsed.

Finally, one-third of the 2016 EPI's countries are reducing their carbon emissions per unit GDP. But with 2015 being the hottest year on record, we need more ambitious action if we are to avoid dangerous climate change.

The EPI's value lies not only in sparking productive competition, but also in offering a diagnostic tool to help environmental policymakers drive improvement.

Measurement matters—to inject objectivity into debates... and to help allocate scarce resources efficiently.

New data also equips all to engage effectively. Sustainable solutions require ensuring that every voice is heard—from marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples to local and regional governments.

And when we're talking about the very survival of the planet, the stakes could not be higher. We can't achieve the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals unless we have information that can be shared, compared, and used to drive action.

That was the motivation behind the Global Partnership on Sustainable Development Data that launched earlier this year, with the aim of promoting standards and policies... filling key data gaps... expanding access to data for citizens, NGOs, and policymakers... and using data to drive development outcomes.ⁱ

The EPI's data is updated every year, so it never gets old or cold. It can be a tool not only for governments, but for civil society too—empowering people from the bottom up to push for the policies and programs they need, and to demand accountability from their governments.

Likewise, as countries work to implement the emissions reduction commitments that came out of the climate conference in Paris, the EPI can inform data-driven decision-making... and inspire collaboration around best practices... as we strive to build prosperity while protecting the planet... and ensuring that no one is left behind.

In that regard, I want to highlight one area of increasing importance and urgency... and that is better managing environmental challenges in urban areas.

The number of people living in the world's cities has more than quintupled since 1950... and by 2050, the proportion of the global population that is urban is expected to grow to 66 percent.ⁱⁱ

As cities expand, the infrastructure needed to sustain new populations often cannot keep pace with demand. For that reason, unchecked urban growth can negatively impact human health and safety, gravely lowering the quality of life for city residents.

The impact is already becoming evident in cities around the world. In China, for example, residents of Shenzhen worried that rampant construction growth was creating a dangerous accumulation of debris. Their concerns were largely ignored until December 2015, when a massive landslide of dirt

and waste destroyed more than 30 buildings, claiming dozens of lives. Also in December, the capital city of Beijing, which is being developed into a supercity larger than Senegal, issued two unprecedented “red alerts” as a result of hazardous smog in the air.

When we look at the issues the EPI tracks, such as air and water quality, wastewater treatment, and energy consumption, we can see that the urban condition is the human condition... and we need to find ways to lift both.

If we do not measure and understand these challenges at the urban scale, we will not succeed in improving people’s lives in the places that most people live.

But if we DO, we can work together to find innovative solutions for addressing environmental quality and economic development in tandem.

Our hope is that, by holding up a mirror on where we are, the EPI will inspire policymakers and leaders in every sector to reach for what could be. For as my fellow Canadian, the late Marshall McLuhan memorably said, “There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew.”

And the only way to protect our planet is if we work together.

ⁱ <http://www.data4sdgs.org/master-blog/2016/3/4/why-the-global-partnership-for-sustainable-development-data-matters-to-civil-society>

ⁱⁱ <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf> World Urbanization Prospects.