

UN in Addis

The Green Customs Initiative

Report by Rose Munyiva

Illegal international trade in environmentally sensitive commodities is an international problem with serious repercussions both to human health and environment. This trade is an issue that affects most Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) that have trade components because it undermines the effectiveness of MEAs by circumventing rules and procedures agreed in international treaties. This is the rationale of the Green Customs Initiative, under whose rubric a training workshop was held in Addis Ababa at the UN Conference Centre from 16th to 18th April 2008.

Ethiopia's Federal Environment Protection Authority (EPA) organized the three-day workshop for Ethiopia and Djibouti in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Customs officials, EPA representatives, government officials, National Meteorological Agency professionals, and representatives from the American Embassy attended. The workshop's principal resource persons and facilitators were UNEP staff from Nairobi: Mr. Patrick Odala Salifu (Compliance Assistance Programme, Regional Office for Africa/Ozone Unit) and Mr. Arnold Kreilhuber (Division of Environmental Law & Conventions).

Sub-regional workshops have been a stock in trade for UNEP's OzonAction Programme that is under the Division of Technology, Industry and Economics (DTIE) based in Paris, as part of the organization's role as an implementing agency of the Multilateral Fund for the Implementation of the Montreal Protocol. Speaking on behalf of the organizers, Strike Mkandla of the UNEP Addis Ababa Office said partners to the Green Customs Initiative include 7 MEA Secretariats and 3 international Organizations, and that the Green Customs concept was developed to provide integrated introductory training encompassing several MEAs, to be delivered to customs officers at the same time. "The partners whom we have been collaborating with in the development of Green Customs Initiative include: Interpol, WCO, MEAs Secretariats that have trade related provisions (CITES, Montreal Protocol, Basel, Stockholm, Biodiversity and Rotterdam Conventions) as well as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons", he said. Building the capacity of customs officials, who are at the forefront of every country's efforts to combat illegal trade, is vital, the statement continued. Dr Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, Director General of the EPA, expressed similar sentiments and stressed the need for cooperation between countries in order to curb illegal passage of environmentally sensitive commodities through customs.



UNEP facilitators: Patrick Salifu and Arnold Kreilhuber (with rapporteur Rose Munyiva in the background)

Trade related aspects of MEAs

The presentation sessions, chaired by Arnold Kreilhuber and Patrick Salifu, focused on the trade related aspects of key MEAs: The Montreal Protocol, the Basel Convention, the Rotterdam Convention, Stockholm Convention, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and the Chemical Weapon Convention.

The discussions covered the main objectives and provisions of each of these MEAs: how they work, which commodities they cover, which ones already have national legislation in this case with regard to Ethiopia, and how they can be implemented nationally, with the main implementors being the customs authorities. Of the MEAs that were focused on, the ones that have been ratified by the Ethiopian government and that have a comprehensive national implementation legislation, are the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Rotterdam Convention and CITES. The Ethiopian government has designated national authorities to serve as the national focal point and enacted legislation for effective implementation.

Involvement of Customs Authority

The workshop was focused on training and equipping the custom officers with the necessary knowledge to ensure compliance and enforcement of trade related aspects of the MEAs. This is because the customs authority is part of the enforcement chain, since at the national level it is they who take care of the environment through regulation

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and control of transboundary movement of commodities. In this forum, the customs officials were familiarized with their roles as regards the implementation of MEAs. They were also trained on the various smuggling tricks and methods of detecting smuggled commodities in order to help in regulating legal trade and at the same time detect and interdict illegal trade.

Scaling up efforts

On the final day of the workshop, participants were asked to contribute towards scaling up and

enhancing the activities of green customs in their respective countries, by identifying and suggesting what support and assistance was needed and where this support could be sourced, how the stake holders and countries could cooperate in controlling of environmentally sensitive commodities and, finally, how data discrepancies on environmentally sensitive commodities between importing and exporting countries could be addressed. The suggestions were then to be adopted as recommendations from the workshop.