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Press Release

Climate Change and our Changing Oceans: The case of *Sargassum* Seaweed Influx on West Africa and Caribbean coasts showcased at the 2nd Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)

Since 2011 there has been an explosion in the quantity of *Sargassum* seaweed reaching the shores of countries in the Caribbean and West Africa inflicting severe socio-economic impacts, particularly to the tourism sector and coastal fisheries. Pelagic *Sargassum* is a free-floating brown seaweed that blossoms naturally in the warm waters of the Sargasso Sea of the Northern Atlantic Ocean. The unprecedented recent influx of *Sargassum* seaweed on coastal shores in West Africa and the Caribbean is being attributed to factors that include warming of the ocean due to global climate change, discharge of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) from agricultural runoff and wastewater originating from point sources and from major river basins such as the Congo and Amazon Rivers, and the deposition of iron and nutrient-rich Saharan dust on the ocean.

The Regional Seas Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), namely the Abidjan Convention and Cartagena Convention Secretariats, in partnership with UNEP/Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities (GPA) and USAID/West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change Programme (WABICC) held a Green Room Event on the *Sargassum* Seaweed influx in West Africa and Caribbean coasts at the recently concluded 2nd Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) held over the 23rd to 27th of May 2016. The Green Room event took place on Friday 27th May which brought down the curtains on what was a highly informative and engaging series of Green Room events organized within the UNEA.

High-level guest speakers at the UNEA Green Room event from West Africa and the Caribbean were the Honourable Minister Anyaa Vohiri, Minister of Environment, and CEO of the Environment Protection Agency of the Government of Liberia, Mr. Cheikh Fofana, Deputy Director of Environment of the Ministry of Environment Classified Establishments of the Republic of Senegal, Mrs. Haddijatou Jallow, Executive Chairperson of the Environment Protection Agency of Sierra Leone, the Honourable Alvin Da Breo, Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, Grenada, Mr. Alistair Edwards, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, St. Kitts and Nevis and Assistant Secretary General Douglas Slater of the CARICOM Secretariat. Mr. Sahr Abraham Grass-Sessay, WABICC's Policy Advisor to UNEP/Abidjan Convention presented the state of knowledge on *Sargassum*, Dr. Yannick Beaudoin, Chief Scientist with GRID-Arendal projected the satellite narrative on the *Sargassum* movement, and Mr. Abou Bamba, Regional Coordinator of UNEP/Abidjan Convention, presented the strategic direction in addressing the *Sargassum* challenge. This was followed by an interactive discussion from the audience. The session was moderated by Dr. Christopher Cox of the UNEP/GPA Coordinating Office.

The panelists from the affected West Africa countries noted that the *Sargassum* seaweed influx resulted in significant impacts mainly in the artisanal fisheries sectors where fishers faced severe challenges as the nets filled with the seaweed significantly reducing fish catch ability. Navigation by fishing vessels has been impacted due to entanglement of engine propellers. The general loss of catch revenue has resulted in significant economic losses in fishing communities with hardships being faced by many fisher families. In Sierra Leone for example, where the fishing industry contributes 10% to the country's GDP, the *Sargassum* infestation has resulted in a 20% reduction in fish catch, triggering unemployment amongst some 30,000 engaged in the sector. With declining household incomes children, particularly girls have been kept from school and food insecurity has been threatened.

On the other side of the Atlantic in the Caribbean, the panelists noted that the Atlantic coasts of many islands were most severely affected. In Grenada the government had to assist residents in some coastal communities to evacuate, given the severity of hydrogen sulphide gas emissions from rotting washed-up *Sargassum* mats. Across many of the islands, hotels have seen cancellations in bookings due to the degraded quality of beach fronts and adjacent coastal waters, and the stench associated with decaying seaweed. In St. Kitts and Nevis one death was indirectly attributed to *Sargassum* when a fishing boat crew was washed overboard as their engine became disabled due to entanglement in the seaweed. The Caribbean panelists did note however that micro-enterprises have been emerging around use of *Sargassum* for a range of purposes including as fertilizers, soil ameliorants, nutraceuticals and food products.

UNEP's Abidjan Convention and Cartagena Convention Secretariats, with responsibility for the protection and management of the coastal and marine environments of West Africa and the Wider Caribbean respectively, have been collaborating with affected countries across these two geographical regions to seek solutions in addressing the issue and raise awareness. Through UNEP/GPA, south-south cooperation between these global regions is being explored to address the sources of this global trans-Atlantic climate change-related issue. The global partnerships of researchers, policy and technical specialists from the Global Partnership on Nutrient Management (GPNM) and the Global Wastewater Initiative (GW²I) under the GPA will lend support through building the research base and mobilizing resources to assist affected countries.

The high-level delegates to the event welcomed placing the matter within the UNEA agenda, and urged that UNEP, through its Regional Seas Programmes and the GPA maintain momentum to address the matter at regional and global levels in terms of the source of problem, and also at the local community level to help them adapt and generate economic benefits from conversion of *Sargassum* to marketable commodities, thereby creating green jobs. The delegates also welcomed the support and work of partners including the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory of the University of Southern Mississippi, the Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW) Regional Activity Center under the Cartagena Convention, USAID/West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change (WABiCC) Programme, the University of the West Indies, GRID-Arendal and the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP).



L-R: Christopher Cox, UNEP (moderator), AbouBamba, Abidjan Secretariat; Honourable Minister Anyaa Vohiri, Liberia; Mrs. HaddijatouJallow, Sierra Leone; Honourable Alvin Da Breo, Grenada; Mr. Alistair Edwards, St. Kitts & Nevis



Participants at UNEA-2 *Sargassum* Green-Room Event



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Useful weblinks

Abidjan Convention Secretariat <http://abidjanconvention.org/>

UNEP Caribbean Regional Coordinating Unit, Caribbean Environment Programme (CEP) <http://www.cep.unep.org/>

Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPA) Regional Activity Center <http://www.car-spaw-rac.org/?lang=en>

University of Southern Mississippi, Gulf Coast Research Laboratory <http://gcr.usm.edu/sargassum/>

The Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI) <http://www.gcfi.org/index.php>

UNEP Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities (GPA) <http://www.gpa.unep.org/>

