

# Why is the World the Way It Is?

## Two Talks at the UN for the New Millenium

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**Ashok Khosla  
at the United Nations  
19 November 2002**

[Speech on Receiving the 2002 UN Sasakawa Environment Prize]

Excellencies, Dr Klaus Toepfer, Mr Iqbal Riza, Lord Clinton-Davis, Ishii San, Distinguished Guests, Dear Friends and Colleagues,

As a person who spends much of his life with peasants and third world villagers, I hope you will forgive me for being somewhat overwhelmed to find myself among such a distinguished gathering. It is only the serendipitous setting of this evening's event that gives me the courage to share a few thoughts with you – because the thoughts uppermost in my mind concern the lives of those very kinds of folk whose art surrounds us this evening at this wonderful and elegant location.

I am grateful to the United Nations Environment Programme and the Nippon Foundation and of course to the Sasakawa Award Jury for having honored me with this year's prize. And, equally, I feel quite humbled. Humbled, when I think of what little I myself have been able to do and of how much credit I get for the work and effort of so many others.

Parents, family, teachers, friends, some of them present here contributed far, far more to the outcomes you have generously described this evening than I can enumerate within the time allotted to me here.

And, of course there are my fellow workers, all those colleagues who did the actual work. Over the years, I have had the fortune to work with some of the world's best. For most of my professional life, my job was quite simple: all I had to do was to listen. And that is perhaps why I am here, because I did try to listen: to the people who taught me, to the people I worked with and most of all to the people I set out, some thirty years back, to try and serve: the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten – a description that we sometimes forget fits more than half the people living on our planet. The kind of folk whose art this beautiful museum celebrates.

What I heard was quite discomfoting.

- Why, they asked, are so many of us hungry, thirsty, unhoused, unclothed and illiterate when we work as hard as anyone else and there is enough knowledge, technology and wealth in the world to make a decent life possible for all?
- Why are the waters we drink, the air we breathe and the forests, soils and rivers which feed and nurture us being hijacked for the greed of the

powerful few, while we have to keep moving to ever more marginal lands to meet our most basic needs?

- Why do our lives keep getting worse while world leaders proclaim so loudly that they are doing everything for our benefit?

In some ways, peasants are not very different from the child who could not see the Emperor's new clothes. They tend to ask rather obvious, down to earth questions. "If more than one trillion dollars has been poured into the developing countries over fifty years of so-called international development assistance, why is my life no better than it is?"

We all know the figures. A fifth of the people on this planet live on less than one dollar a day. Almost half of them live on less than two. Can any of us imagine living on two dollars a day? Even in a low income, low cost country like mine, it would seem impossible. Yet, that is what nearly 3 billion people around the world manage to do. It's not living, really; it's more like an animal existence – a daily battle against hunger and basic needs, a losing war for the last vestiges of human dignity, self-respect, hope. And they have neither the financial nor the political power to do anything to help themselves. If you can't feed yourself, how can you hope to govern yourself?

Is our society so immunized that it needs a St Francis or a Mahatma Gandhi to arouse our sense of outrage at the inequity and injustice that exists in our world? Or could we somehow find it by ourselves in our own consciences? Is it acceptable to our individual or collective sense of humanity, in today's world of knowledge and plenty, that there should be a single woman, man or child who is hungry, thirsty or illiterate? Let alone 3 billion, the greatest mass of poverty known in history? I believe that it is no more unacceptable than the absence of democracy, human rights and freedom over which so many people do occasionally manage to get worked up. And meeting here in this extraordinary tribute to people's creativity and surrounded outside by the greatest concentration of wealth and power ever seen in history, one has to ask is this simply a massive disjoint? Or is there some connection? Could it be that massive wealth cannot exist without massive poverty?

Whatever the headlines are preoccupied with today, I believe the Central Question right now is: How do we eradicate poverty and rebuild the health of our environment? And this question is relevant to the lives of all, whether in the North or the South. Lifeboat Earth as a whole cannot stay afloat for long if the leak at one end keeps on growing. The answers provided by political leaders, practitioners and professional researchers have been highly complicated and arcane – partly because this is a good way to stay in business, and partly perhaps because they know no better. The interventions they prescribe, however, are usually simplistic, narrow, mono-dimensional and short-term. But the opposite is what we need: the real answers are, in fact, quite simple, though they might need fairly complex and strategic interventions to achieve them.

Having worked for some twenty years in academic research, business, Government, and in the UN, I decided to try the civil society. I soon found that

none of these conventional sectors could, in their present form, answer the Central Question. They are too busy solving their own problems, creating their own conceptual and operational frameworks, their own continued existence gradually becoming the entire *raison* of their *etre*. Very few, if any, were able to make more than a superficial impact on the lives of the poor or on the quality of the local resource base. And those that could, such as the wonderful and highly dedicated community based initiatives one finds scattered throughout the world, were not scalable.

What we need is new kinds of institutions. Even the global community is beginning to recognize this, witness the latest terminological fashions in international dialogue: partnerships, alliances, corporate social responsibility and Type II relationships. But, to tell you the truth, even these emerging concepts do not go far enough. To achieve truly sustainable development, the new institutions we need have to merge and meld, within their own domains the strengths of each one of the sectors: the social objectives of civil society, the motivation of the private sector, the innovativeness of academia, the reach of government – and, above all, the participation of the people. In short, we must bring into being a new institutional species, which could perhaps be called the “Independent Sector”. The term “Social Enterprise” is another possibility.

Some 20 years back, my colleagues and I set out to design just such an organization, which has now come to be known as the Development Alternatives Group, one of the first independent sector organizations and the first dedicated to sustainable development.

Our mission was to find an answer to the Central Question. And, over the years, I believe we have made some progress towards finding it: if we genuinely wish to eradicate poverty and to bring back our forests, rivers and soils, we must create sustainable livelihoods – large numbers of sustainable livelihoods.

What are sustainable livelihoods? Simply put, they are jobs that produce goods and services for the basic needs of people and at the same time generate a decent income with which to purchase these. They give meaning and dignity to life and in parallel regenerate the resource base which has been devastated over the past half century of mal-development. In the Third World, we will have to create some one billion sustainable livelihoods over the next fifteen years. The concept may well be relevant in the First World too, but that – like the urgent need for more sustainable consumption patterns and sustainable production systems in the North -- is a subject for another occasion.

Today's development patterns are not creating such livelihoods. In fact, they are decreasing them. The imperatives of the current market systems are forcing more and more people out of the factories and farms of poor nations and replacing them with machines. We are creating more and more products but adding less and less purchasing power. That, by the way is in good part the root of today economic stagnation. If the number of customers with

money levels off, to whom can one sell all the output of the vast productive capacity we have built up around the world?

I am not for a moment suggesting that the market is always bad. It is not. On the contrary, I believe local enterprise, is the key to answering the Central Question. It has brought the awesome wonders of modern technology to all parts of the world. Many of us live longer, healthier and more interesting lives in part because of globalization. But its benefits have mostly been appropriated by only those who can afford to pay for them – the middle class and above. Half the people of the world have been left out of its ambit – and many have actually been impoverished by it. The UNDP Administrator earlier this week wrote that “people in some 60 countries got poorer over the past decade.” Such an outcome is not in anyone’s interest – for the wealthy or the poor. There is considerable evidence now that the world economy will not be sustainable unless the basic needs of every inhabitant are met and the resource base is made healthy again.

So, it is not just a moral imperative to eradicate poverty, but an economic one and above all an ecological one as well.

Sustainable development – in which the environment, social equity and empowerment are equal partners with economic improvement – cannot be achieved by economic policies that only nurture big, centralized, transportation-intensive, energy-guzzling, resource-wasting production systems. The trickle-down hasn’t worked and the environment cannot take it. In some instances, economies of scale do imply large-scale production but for most of the things people need, local, decentralized, environment-friendly production is far more sustainable. And this leads us to the basic question: how do we go about creating sustainable livelihoods?

They cannot be created by narrowly conceived, short-term interventions, and certainly not by the kinds of highly subsidized, give away approaches common in many so called “poverty alleviation” programmes. Sustainable development needs holistic, systemic interventions that help societies and communities build the capacity to define their own problems and design appropriate solutions. This means building the technical, managerial and financial skills of people, setting up robust decision support systems, and creating institutions of local governance capable of managing resources for the benefit of the community. They also need strong public infrastructure – not just the big power stations, highway systems, airports and dams that are favourite activities of the development profession, but also local, renewable based energy production in remote areas, rural roads and universal connectivity. And they need a vibrant, alert and capable civil society.

Over the years, Development Alternatives has taken a no alibi, no excuse responsibility to strike out on new paths that lead to the creation of sustainable livelihoods. To create new types of technologies and institutions, we have built up an effective capacity to innovate on the ground. To multiply and scale up, we have chosen the viral replication approach of the business enterprise and the marketplace. To ensure that the technologies and markets

stay true to the purpose of sustainability, we have chosen the local, the decentralized and the renewable over the big, the concentrated and the non-renewable. Our ability to build the capacity of local groups led DFID of the UK Government recently to appoint us custodians and managers of \$70 million to distribute to small organizations in the poorest areas of India over the next four years, making us the largest single donor agency for sustainable development in the country. We have to give all the money to others, so unfortunately it's not available for our own programmes!

Sustainable livelihoods are not created by governments or by big corporations or even by NGOs. They need sustainable enterprises. And sustainable enterprises need sustainable technologies, sustainable financing systems and sustainable management methods. This chain of reasoning quickly leads us to what the world must, sooner rather than later, do: innovate, finance and manage its resources in a completely different way so that everyone can benefit from the enormous progress a part of our world has tasted, both in the scientific and the political spheres. Sustainable livelihoods, by their nature, have to be created largely at the local level, with local resources and for local production. But even the most remote, local village economy does not exist in a vacuum. Whether sustainable livelihoods get created depends in large measure on policies and economic instruments determined at the national and international levels. In the current situation, these policies act not to nurture but to destroy them.

Which brings me back to the emperor's new clothes. How, I have to ask, can a world that espouses certain basic civilisational values such as the primacy of law, the centrality of logic and the non-negotiability of the principles of fairness countenance so many activities that are so unlawful, illogical and unfair?

Where is the fairness in any of the current international environmental negotiations – climate change, biodiversity conservation – where virtually every nation is continuing to act in narrow self-interest to perpetuate existing disparities regardless of whether they will threaten the survival of the planet or harm the interests of the poor?

Where is the logic in the Millennium Goals set by a Summit of national leaders without establishing the ways and means to achieve them? Talking about these goals, do you think they realized that by setting goals in terms of halving the proportion of the population, instead of halving the actual numbers of people, that are poor or hungry or without drinking water, they simply endorsed, more or less, the status quo? If the stated goal for people living in extreme poverty is met, the number of such people will come down from 1.3 billion in the year 2000 to 1 billion in the year 2015. Such is the inexorable mathematics of exponential population growth. In fifteen years, there will still be twice as many people living in extreme poverty as the entire population of Europe and North America put together. And, according to the UN Secretary General, even this rather unambitious goal is unlikely to be reached. In fact, his recent figures show that just in the two years since the Millennium Summit, Sub-Saharan Africa has actually added 16 million more people to the

numbers living below the \$1 a day poverty line. In my own country, despite (or is it because of?) more than a decade of liberalization and 6 or 7 % annual growth rate, the number of unemployed has actually risen significantly.

The other day, I was at a big international meeting where the chairperson opened the plenary with a simple question to all the delegates: “What in your honest opinion is the practical solution to the food problem of the rest of the world?” he asked. Within half an hour, the conference had degenerated into total consternation and chaos. The East Europeans wanted to know what opinion meant. The Asians said they didn’t understand the word honest. The Latin Americans had difficulty with the word practical and the Middle Eastern delegations could not understand the concept of solution. The Africans asked what is food and the Europeans had no translation for the word problem. And the Americans – well, they were completely mystified by the term the “rest of the world”.

We all recognize that global dialogue is needed more today than at any time in history. But we need a genuine dialogue. Not a dialogue of the deaf that characterizes so much of the environment and development debate that continues today.

If we are to create the sustainable livelihoods that alone can form the basis of a more sustainable development, each one of us will have to evolve a better understanding of our long-term interest and to work together, nationally and globally to make them possible.

# Can World Summits Save The World?

**Ashok Khosla**  
**at the United Nations**  
**30 April 2001**

[The First Chip Lindner Memorial Lecture, Dag Hammarskold Auditorium]

It is a great privilege for me to be here with all of you for the first Chip Lindner Memorial Lecture. He was a very special friend and I can think of no greater honour than to be able to pay my tribute to him for all the legacies he left us – his massive commitment to the issues that have become the prime causes of today: the campaign for environmental conservation, the fight against social injustice and the war on AIDS. And, of course the finest legacy of all, his family, all of whom we are proud to have here with us this evening.

Chip and I worked together for many years. We met late in our working lives, in the corridors of the Brundtland Commission, where we quickly found a deep convergence in our concerns with the issues that underlie what has come to be called sustainable development. He brought an intensity and rigour to any discussion of these matters that I found unusual even among professionals of his calibre and therefore unusually refreshing. We became close collaborators, first building up the Centre for Our Common Future and then the process of bringing civil society directly into the process of the first Earth Summit, held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Our working association continued well after that until his health finally began to fail.

It was not only his professional qualities that helped to make us good friends: he had many wonderful personal qualities, too. He was, above all, an enormously generous and loyal friend. He always placed service to others over his own interests in a way that very few people do. And he was an extraordinary entrepreneur, a rare phenomenon in the world of NGOs. He was a person who loved to create something out of nothing, who imagined things that never were and made them happen. And if he couldn't make them happen himself, he would gather together the people and resources that *would* make them happen. Above all, he was a thorough professional, a person who believed in excellence and perfection, and drove himself to the limits to achieve them.

It is from Chip's commitments and concerns that I draw much of the inspiration for what I am going to talk about today. Particularly his commitment to the rights, the fundamental rights, of people. He brought, with this commitment, a sense of outrage, of a feeling of such strength, that few could resist its power. An outrage towards the inequalities and inequities that exist in the world. An outrage against social injustice. An outrage, that he felt particularly strongly, over the human greed that leads to destruction of our environment and natural resources. But Chip was not just a person with strong feelings: he was also highly result oriented and so he always insisted

on pinpointing what had to be done, who was going to do it, when was it going to be done? And, as a consequence, he also brought a sense of ownership to these commitments, a sense that is quite rare, that he himself had a responsibility to do something about them.

### **Poverty: the Central Issue**

So what I am going to talk about this evening are things that he had thought about, things that I have thought about, things on which we converged, and others where we occasionally diverged. But in essence, all of these are little pieces of a big jigsaw -- the vision of a better world that we both knew needed to be brought together, aligned and joined into a bigger design.

Certainly, the first priority in his life, as in mine, was the fight against poverty. Both of us saw the existence, let alone the pervasiveness, of poverty as totally unacceptable in a world that had more than enough resources to eradicate it forever. And, we both agreed, the effort to eradicate this affront to human dignity must be the single most urgent task facing humankind today. I think both of us realised that while the moral grounds were sufficient justifications for this, practical, social and ecological arguments were also necessary to convince public opinion and policy makers to do something concrete about it.

Remember we were not obvious allies, Chip and I. As his son, Christoph pointed out in his introduction earlier, Chip came from a family of modest means and worked his way through schools and universities. Largely by his own efforts, he made a distinguished career for himself, working for many years closely with world leaders and top professionals at the cutting edge of concept, process and policy on many of today's most pressing issues. My career trajectory, on the other hand, was exactly the opposite. Having had the privileges of attending the best schools and universities in the world, I had ended up working more or less with my hands, directly at the grass roots with things like village cookstoves and mud houses. My colleagues were as often as not peasants and villagers in a Third World country. My professional concerns were with local initiatives, particularly business initiatives, at the community level, and with how better technology choice could promote self reliance at the national level.

But it was, perhaps, precisely this complementarity that gave our team the strengths it needed to make a contribution. The insights we could provide to each other helped enormously to illuminate our respective work and joint efforts and that is why we functioned so well together. Of course, the fact that my good cop role occasionally allowed him to play his bad cop one even more effectively may well have had not a little to do with the results.

### **The Highway to a Better Future?**

The subject I was asked to talk on is 'The Road from Rio to Johannesburg'. It is not difficult for me to do so, because the whole of it could, in essence, be encapsulated in one sentence: The road is, at the moment, heading in the

wrong direction – back, in fact, towards Stockholm – and the traffic moving on it is carrying very little cargo of any value.

Here are some facts to bear out my contention. The Kyoto process looks doomed, unless the obduracy of the lone remaining superpower that places its narrow and short term self-interest above all else provokes the rest of the world to bring it to heel. The CBD process continues to amble along at its own leisurely pace. Agenda 21 has elicited some talk in the CSD but little action on the ground. And, with less than 18 months to go, Johannesburg has yet to come up on the radar screen of most of the prime players in the business, particularly the ones, such as the World Bank or UNDP, who have the responsibility to put development back into sustainable development.

Ironically, WSSD, which is the first global conference with the magic words Sustainable Development in its title, is at the moment mostly confined to issues of the environment. Where are the equally important issues of equity, employment, education and empowerment in the preparatory dialogues? Without these, development almost certainly cannot be sustainable. Nor, as I will show in a moment, can it become environmentally sound.

While my own professional commitment is, as I mentioned just now, to work at the local and national level, it is clear to me, as I am sure it is to all of us here, that international processes are important too. On a global scale, a more sustainable world is impossible without them, and even local and community efforts like those of my organisation are sometimes impacted by what happens at the international level. Although I have not seen many instances of the poor getting much direct benefit from such international processes, the international system unquestionably can influence national governments, private companies and others in ways that can affect local communities. In any case, sustainable development can only be achieved if there is concerted effort at all levels, local, national and global.

### **A View from the Grassroots**

What I would like to share with you this evening is a view from the grass roots of what the international system is doing, and what it is not doing, and what we really need to be doing. To do that meaningfully, we also need to consider who decides what is to be done and who does what. In more sophisticated language, we need to explore what is the agenda of the international dialogue? Who sets it and how universal is its relevance? What should it be? And how well are the decisions it arrives at implemented? I believe that a better understanding of the answers to these questions can help make Johannesburg a more fruitful exercise.

Let's start with something about Rio. Chip and I were integrally involved in the processes of Rio, before and after the event. Naturally, we both carried strong feelings about what, in our opinion, happened and what didn't.

Many of you know the history of the concept of sustainable development. Many people think its origins lie in the Earth Summit at Rio, 10 years ago.

Others believe that its genesis dates to the Brundtland Commission in 1987 when the report *Our Common Future* was published. Actually, it goes back all the way to the early 80s. To the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, 1980, to be precise. The term "sustainable development" was put into the lexicon of international discourse by the World Conservation Strategy, a seminal document prepared jointly by IUCN, WWF and UNEP, and launched at 10 am GMT on that day.

I know this well because I was one of the contributors to the Strategy. The term sustainable development has come under increasing attack in recent years from several quarters. Some feel that it is too ambiguous and allows everyone to interpret it in a different way to suit their convenience. Others feel that it is highly dangerous because it gives a false sense that economic growth can go on forever and lets everyone off the hook in terms of making difficult decisions. (Incidentally these are probably also the strengths of the concept: it has had a far longer life than most other similar concepts in the highly ephemeral vocabulary of international environment discourse.) Whatever its shortcomings, the term sustainable development is a wonderfully integrative concept that combines so many dimensions – environment, social justice, intergenerational equity, etc, and above all *development*. If any of these is absent, development can be shown to be unsustainable. And, the reverse is also true: for development to be sustainable, all the factors must be taken care of simultaneously.

Coming from this theoretical background, I have to tell you that this week in New York has been a total, and rather devastating, revelation for me. Over the last several days, I have met people at all levels – in the UN, diplomats, well-informed people from different walks of life who for 20 years have been hearing – and using – the phrase sustainable development and have not yet understood it. I met programme officers, directors, even Assistant Secretary Generals of the UN, people with whom I was involved in rather intensive discussions in connection with a UNDP project and many of them simply equate sustainable development simply with environment. Certainly not all, but many still don't seem to get it. "*Many of these issues of sustainable development will have to wait until the countries can afford to deal with them.*"

This is not meant as a criticism of the UN or its wonderfully dedicated staff. The reactions of diplomats attending the Commissions and Committees in this building seem to show that they have even less of a clue. One of them, centrally involved in the preparations for the UN Conference on Financing for Development which are now at an advanced stage, admitted in a panel discussion in a crowded room this afternoon that the concept of sustainable development had not yet come up in their negotiations. "*Oh, yes! The green thing? Sure, the environment is very important – but hasn't that already been taken care of at other conferences?*"

Case by case, compartment by compartment – that is how international discourse has been fragmented and, in the process, made ineffective. If our decisions are going to be made in the conventional, one-dimensional way, how can we hope to better a world that is entirely made up of complex

linkages? Few people seem to see the issues of equity and empowerment as germane to the sustainability of the development process.

But in a sense these stories simply show that people like you, and Chip and I have failed in the work we set out to do. As with all of us gathered here this evening, much of our effort has gone into preaching to the already converted. We urgently need to go beyond, to intensify our efforts rather than move back, open fronts in new sectoral territories and bring back new converts. But sometimes, I find myself wondering whether international workshops, seminars, conferences and summits are the way to do it. We have had scores of conferences on one or another of the subjects that together constitute sustainable development.

Since the Stockholm Conference of 1972, there have been at least 45 or 50 major international conferences – almost a dozen of them at the Heads of State or Heads of Government level -- and frankly the world does not seem to be much better place for all this high level to-ing and fro-ing. There are more poor people today in the world than there were in 1972. There are fewer trees in the world today, fewer rivers, poorer soils, more marginalized people, and each of these numbers is getting worse. I am not alone in this perception. This week's Economist, a magazine not renowned for its liberal views, clearly demonstrates the same thing. The lead article shows that poverty is actually on the increase, even today.

So, while we strut in and out of big UN meetings, chatting with decision makers and national representatives, the fact is that the lives of people and the health of the environment are not getting better. This was something that totally outraged Chip. And he spread that feeling of outrage to many of his friends, including myself. We are, today, living with many “gaps” and “divides”. We have digital divides, housing gaps and even water conflicts. Let us look for a moment at the income gaps. I suppose most of you have seen that beautiful champagne glass in the Human Development report? UNDP has shown how the top 20% in this world get almost 100 times as much as the bottom 20%. And this ratio keeps growing. The 100 wealthiest people in the world have more money than the GNP of dozens of countries. And, over the last two decades, the champagne glass has kept getting wider and wider. What do we have? More and more wealth in the hands of a few rich people and less and less in the hands of billions of poor ones.

We have other kinds of gaps as well. The technology gap is one of my favourite subjects. Another is the democracy deficit, possibly the most fundamental missing link for sustainable development. The most urgent, on the other hand is the basic needs shortfall. I would like to come back to some of these in a moment.

### **What is on the International Agenda?**

So, what are the possibilities for international action? Perhaps we should analyse recent international negotiations and try to derive lessons from them to enable us to design more effective mechanisms for the future. Let me

start, therefore, by stating what / think has happened over these years. We all went to Rio, as we did earlier to Stockholm, with a lot of expectations. One of the significant divides throughout the Rio process, as in many other international processes, was of course between the industrialised countries of the North and the developing countries of the South. Neither the North nor the South is a monolith and it goes without saying that even among each group there were great variations of opinion. But in its simplest and most essential terms, despite the real successes of the event itself, not very much has happened as a result. The operation was a success but the patient's health has not improved. Our diplomats, Ministers, Presidents and Kings, were brought to Rio with the underlying promise – made by who? mostly by the rich countries – that if you come to Rio and sign on the dotted line – of what? of The Climate Change Convention, the Biodiversity Convention, and the Rio Principles -- then we will basically fund you with something called Agenda 21 and you can take care of all your development problems. Poverty eradicated, tick it off; drinking water cleaned up, tick it off; forests protected, tick it off. It sounded like a good bargain.

Technically, of course, no one actually signed a commitment or made a direct promise – except for the two conventions – but the commitment and the promise were certainly implied in the negotiations. You sign on the Conventions and we finance Agenda 21. Was that not the basic bargain? If not, then what was all the negotiating about?

Agenda 21 had been the result of extensive series of workshops, meetings, consultations and prepcoms convened by the UNCED secretariat. It comprised some 30 odd chapters, each presenting an action plan covering the basic issues of managing economies, the environment and society to ensure sustainable development. On the basis of detailed consultations with representatives from governments, economic sectors and civil society, Agenda 21 identified the types of intervention needed to reorient global development on to a more sustainable path and presented calculations on roughly how much this would cost. The global estimates for implementing Agenda 21 came close to \$ 625 billion a year, a figure that the international community could generally take in its stride, given its familiarity with the kind of money going into armaments, trade in wildlife, drug trafficking, etc, not to mention subsidies. It was further agreed that the bulk of these costs would have to be borne domestically by national budgets, and the international community would be responsible for mobilising about 20%, which came to \$125 billion dollars per year. This price tag for the international component of Agenda 21 was meant to be additional to the existing North-South flows of official development assistance, which was then running at about \$ 80 billion. This total of some \$ 200 billion per year over a period of ten years was expected, more or less, to get the world onto a sustainable development trajectory.

Today, nine years into this ten-year period, the total amount of money that has gone into Agenda 21 is still pretty close to zero. Not the agreed \$ 125 billion per year – which would have come close to a trillion dollars over the period thus far – but ZERO. Instead of ODA continuing to go up from the

prevailing level of \$ 80 billion, as it normally used to at a few percent a year, it has come down to half that, around \$ 35 billion. So, instead of going from \$ 80 billion up to \$ 200 billion, it has actually come down to \$ 30 or 40 billion. The only visible financial outcome of Rio is about \$ 5 billion worth of commitments, most of them for the Global Environment Facility. Out of these, less than \$ 2 billion have actually been spent. And those are entirely earmarked for – guess what? -- climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation, the problems of interest to primarily the North.

I certainly would not want to be heard saying that climate change and biodiversity are not important for poor countries. On the contrary, it is the poor countries that are paying the highest costs resulting from these global catastrophes. It is the island and coastal nations in the tropics that are going to disappear under rising sea levels and floods. It is their agriculture that is going to need the genetic material of cultivars to stay ahead of pests and declining yields. So, I am not suggesting for a moment that the poor countries are not concerned about either of these issues. But the reason they are being funded is, let's face it, because they touch the concerns of the rich.

### **Environment and Development**

Who cares about the poor? And who wishes to mount a serious attack on poverty, basic needs and the current highly inequitable global order? Well, there is not much evidence that any government does, but certainly it would not appear to be of much interest to those who decide on the subjects allotted to UN conferences. Is it a mere oversight that in all its 50-odd years, the UN system has never held an international conference, let alone a Summit, on the issue of poverty eradication? For many of the member nations, surely this must be the number one concern. Fully one half of the population of this world, three billion people, actually exists on less than two dollars per day.

Can you imagine living on two dollars a day? I don't mean in New York, where it would clearly be impossible. In fact, only a few minutes back, I was reminded how impossible. To quench the thirst I got from thinking about what I should say at this lecture, I went, a few minutes back, to the Delegate's Lounge to get myself a cold drink. A small glass of cola, mostly filled with ice, cost me \$ 2.35. So clearly it's not easy to survive in New York on that kind of money. But it's not easy to survive even in a low, really low, cost country like India. \$ 2 can't get you very far anywhere today and if you try to live on that, you are going to have to give up something, either food, or water, or clothes, or shelter, or medicines, or education, or whatever. And that's how 3 billion people in the world manage, through sheer ingenuity, to survive every day. And among all the scores of global meetings it convenes, the UN has never felt it necessary to address this fundamental issue.

Perhaps it is because the delegates who represent us here have not had to live on \$ 2 dollars a day? Perhaps they got used to prices in the Delegates Lounge and cost of living is no longer an issue for them? Today, under the leadership of the World Bank, international organisations are racing to jump onto the bandwagon of "poverty alleviation". Yet, I am hard pressed to see

how their programmes have in any way changed to respond to this changed priority. If global conferences are seen to be a cost effective way to define global strategies, then surely it would make sense to deal with the issues head on. And, by the way, after 50 years of international development effort isn't it a bit embarrassing to be talking of alleviating poverty? Surely the world now has to *eradicate* it, and in short order.

But then again, is lack of money the only problem? Or even the main problem? I, for one, am certain that it is not. In fact, many of the environment and development ills of the Third World probably stem from too much money, not too little. Or, more accurately, too much money for the wrong purposes and too little for the right ones. Overseas investments in a recipient country, whether private or public, carry with them the genetic code of the donor or lending country. In less subtle language, this simply means that they bring with them technologies, management systems and consultants that often respond more to the priorities and approaches of the investing country than of the host country. The literature of development is replete with examples of huge, expensive projects that not only missed their stated development objectives but also led to large-scale environmental and social costs, which had to be paid by the local communities.

### Who sets the Agenda?

To arrive at Johannesburg thinking that lack of money is the primary problem and that more of it will solve it would be to consign the process to failure before it starts. Making development more sustainable certainly needs more money. But it also needs much more than simply money. It needs fundamental changes in the global economy, as well as in the domestic economies of nations.

The agenda, unfortunately, is set by the rich and powerful. That is why the issues discussed at most international conferences are *their* issues. Look at the Montreal Protocol, for example. For decades, we had access to these "miracle" compounds, the freons, and all of a sudden, they come and tell you that you have to stop using them: they are destroying the stratospheric ozone shield. It is, of course, a pure coincidence that corporate scientists have recently developed substitute substances that are less destructive to the ozone layer. The rest of the world comes with its usual knee jerk reaction: "*give us the money and transfer the technology and we will sign on the dotted line*".

Or take the Climate Change negotiations. Having dumped huge quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere for a couple of centuries, the industrial countries now realise that the globe is about to get warmer and the sea level is going to rise. They set in motion a process of international negotiation that involves substantial changes in the economies of all countries, rich and poor, and considerable expenses to bring about these changes. Once again, the machinery of international negotiation cranks up, and once again the rest of the world produces its usual knee jerk reaction: "*first give us the money and transfer the technology*".

It is rare that the countries of the South get their act together to actually try and put forward their own issues onto the international agenda. Part of this is perhaps because they have memories of the few abortive attempts they made in the past, such as the demands for a New International Economic Order and the New Information Order. Those quickly disappeared into oblivion: they found no supporters among the countries of the North. The only issue emanating from the developing world that actually led to a major international conference was Desertification but, again, little follow up has been visible since. The rest of the time, the role of the South has been mainly limited to reacting and responding to initiatives taken by others. Usually, this response is for more money and more technology, a factor that tends to dampen the interest of the rich countries in these kinds of dialogues.

### **Complexity and Simplicity**

I already discussed the issue of money. The issue of technology is more sophisticated – and much more dangerous. At least some of the trouble that the world finds itself in can be traced directly to the technologies we have chosen and the way we have used them. There are, no doubt many who will disagree: I have heard eminent scientists say that if there are a few things wrong with technology, a little change here, a little fine tuning there will take care of the problem. I am afraid that line of thinking does not mesh well with the vast social exclusion and environmental destruction we see around us. If it were true, we certainly would not have needed to call world leaders all the way to Stockholm or Rio or Johannesburg next year. The cry for more technology by southern delegates is, therefore, not necessarily in the long term interest of the South.

What sorts of solutions, then, should our delegations to Johannesburg be looking for?

My own work points very strongly to some solutions that are actually quite simple to understand and consequently to implement. Before I get to them, let me recognise the existence of a fundamental law of cybernetics, which applies to any system, including organisations and policy frameworks. This is Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety. Ashby's Law simply states that for any solution to work, it must be as complex as the problem, neither more nor less so. In other words, we cannot hope to solve a complex problem with simplistic solutions. But simplistic is not the same as simple. Within a simple statement, understandable by all, and carrying the seeds of its implementation can lie various levels of complexity, also understandable by all. By setting self-organising systems in motion, with well-defined rules and appropriate rules, it is possible for a simply stated solution to acquire the requisite variety to match the variety (complexity) of the problem.

Let us apply this logic to the concept of sustainable development. As all of us know, sustainable development has several dimensions: economic, social and environmental are the primary ones of concern to us here. They are manifested in such issues as resource efficiency, equity and justice, and

environmental conservation. It is hard to see how the world can be sustainable if substantial portions of its resources are being destroyed or depleted, either through overuse or because of waste. That is what happens with the use of wrong technologies, bad fiscal policies or distorted prices that do not reflect the real, environmental or social costs of those resources. It also happens when there are extreme disparities in society: the rich overuse certain types of resources (mainly non-renewable), while the poor often tend, out of the exigencies of survival, to destroy other types of resources (mainly renewable ones).

In addition to maintaining the resource base, sustainable development also means energising people and their communities. It also means education, enterprise and empowerment. And thus enabling them to find meaning and dignity in their lives. Perhaps above all, it means building their capacity to make endogenous choices – their own choices, reflecting their own realities, their aspirations and their knowledge of their resource endowment.

### **Sustainable consumption and production**

If sustainable development involves such a rich mix of considerations, of which economic growth is only one, then how do we bring it about? Well, in one sense, it is a highly complex business and will require, as Ashby's Law indicates, a highly complex response. In another sense, however, by breaking it up into manageable parts, it is not all that difficult: there are actually only two things you have to do to get on the sustainable development path. The first is to make your consumption patterns (or lifestyles) sustainable and the second is to make your production systems (or livelihoods) sustainable. That's all, really. If you do these two things, you are well on the way to a sustainable future.

Unfortunately, the changes required to convert societies to sustainable consumption patterns are not always seen as convenient or acceptable. Throughout the UNCED process and at Rio itself, I recall constantly being asked by audiences and media persons questions such as *"Do you mean to say we've got to give up our cars for sustainable development?"* That's not a pleasant thought in some societies. No, it is probably not necessary to give up all cars; but yes, we may well have to give some of them in favour of other forms of transport. Or design better cities that need less movement of people and goods. Or find other satisfiers for the desire we currently have for excessive mobility. But this is not the central issue: the basic principle is that whatever we consume and waste must be within the capacity of nature to take care of on a continuing basis. This means that the prices and incentives that drive consumption behaviour have to be realigned to promote conservation of resources and a more equitable access to the goods and services on offer in the marketplace. In any case, despite the importance of this subject, the questions of lifestyles and consumption patterns hardly ever came up for serious discussion in the Rio process, and I wonder if it will for Johannesburg.

No less important than sustainable consumption and lifestyles is the question of sustainable production and livelihoods. Today's production systems are

not sustainable. They are too capital intensive, too resource consuming, too heavily subsidised (first by nature and then again by a distorted economy) and too wasteful. Yet, virtually every country wishes today to “become competitive in the global economy” by emulating the same technological strategies.

Let us look at what this implies in terms of economics. The capital investment needed to create one job in a modern industry in the US averages about one million dollars. In some industries it may be as low as \$ 500,000; in others it can be \$ 1.2 million – the cost of creating one workplace. It is said to cost about DM 2 million in Germany and more than \$ 2 million in Japan because of higher levels of automation. In the North, it basically costs anywhere between one and two million dollars to create a job in modern industry. In a country like China or India, the costs can be brought down somewhat, but not a lot – most of the technology, equipment, knowhow is imported. The figures range from \$ 100,000 to \$ 500,000. Now let us look at the implications of this.

Take the example of India, a typical country trying to prove itself in the global market. Let us assume that all of a sudden India’s industry becomes the most efficient in the world and it can create jobs for as low as \$100,000. According to official estimates, the country needs to create some 12 million jobs every year, off farm. If they are to be in modern industries, the total cost will be around one trillion dollars, which is three or four times the GNP. That is the figure needed just to create jobs. There are two choices: either we forget about food, water, shelter and clothing and just spend our money on creating jobs or we spread it around for a bit of everything. Either way, there will be more unemployed people next year than there are today, and they will go on increasing each year thereafter.

### **Competing in a Global Economy**

In other words, there is just no way with present economic options that the problem of unemployment can be solved. We need a fundamentally different approach. One such possibility has come to be called sustainable livelihoods. This is what my organisation Development Alternatives works on. A sustainable livelihood is a job that gives a decent income, gives you some status in society and some dignity and meaning in life. It also conserves and, if possible, regenerates the environment. It provides opportunities for people to work right in their community instead of having to migrate to the slums of a big city. And the purchasing power and lifestyle provided by such a livelihood would be at least comparable to that of factory worker in an urban area where the wages have to be much higher than in the village to compensate workers for higher costs of living.

How can the global economy flourish if fully one half the population of the planet is unable to participate in it, either as consumers because of inadequate purchasing power or as producers because of inadequate skills and resources? On the other, if the whole population of the world does start participating in this economy in a manner that resembles the industrialised economies of today, how will our life support systems be maintained? These not so simple questions are what we need to address at Johannesburg.

For people like us here, the world gets better and more interesting everyday. We live longer, know more, travel to more places, have more things than people at any other time in history. But it is not so for more than half the people of our world. For many of them, things are getting worse, not better. It need not be that way, but to change from the trajectory the world is currently on to another, more socially equitable and more in harmony with the imperatives of nature, and thus more sustainable, we have to be prepared to make much harder decisions than we have in the past.

No doubt, what I am suggesting will evoke the normal response that we have to be “realistic” and work within the constraints of the international system. But who sets the constraints? The leaders who represent us at these conferences may well be afraid of the political consequences of taking more courageous positions on the international stage, but as citizens, we also have the duty to demand real solutions on behalf of our constituencies. My constituency is the large number of men and women who remain outside the mainstream economy even after 50 years of international development.

They don't know about the World Bank or UNDP or, indeed, UNEP and what these agencies do for them or about Rio or Johannesburg. Nothing seems to change in their lives, no matter how many conferences and summits the leaders of their countries attend. And many things get worse. Certainly, we have conquered many diseases, but we also have growing epidemics of TB, malaria, HIV/AIDS. We have all kinds of new building materials, yet there is today the largest number of shelterless people in the world. We have all kinds of scientific methods for managing our environmental resources, and still the forests, rivers and soils keep disappearing. And for many, many people, destiny is something completely outside their control.

### **New Mine Sets**

I think what the world needs is a different set of paradigms. Since no one seems to like the word paradigm, let us call them mindsets. Actually, since my English is not too good, I thought they were called mine-sets. I would like to share with you the three mine-sets that I believe have brought us here.

The first mine-set, which might be called the “hit and run” mine-set, was actually the one that the 1972 Stockholm conference was called to deal with. It is summed up by ‘mine and plunder the resources of the earth and leave the clean up to others’.

The second mine-set, which can be thought of as the “egocentric bully” mine-set, an attitude that afflicted certain participants at the Rio Earth Summit, and continues to be the guiding force today – for example at the Kyoto Protocol discussions – and this is ‘what's mine is mine, and what's yours is up for grabs’.

The third mine-set, which might also be described as the “might is right” mine-set, an attitude that has been seen on the global stage in places as far apart as Grenada and the Gulf, is simply stated as ‘mine and bomb the natives if they don’t give you what you want’. I doubt if the issues arising from this mine-set will come up at Johannesburg, and hopefully it will be some years before we have to convene conferences to deal with it, but it is an incipient attitude that could come to the surface at any time in a unipolar world such as today’s.

So these are three mine-sets that have increasingly manifested themselves over the past several decades and they make the planet, with its growing, intertwined and interdependent linkages a more and more dangerous place.

### **A Minimalist Approach**

Earlier, I suggested that a very simple way to treat sustainable development is to break it into its components, lifestyles and livelihoods, and design interventions at the global, national and local levels to make these sustainable. I tried to show you how, despite Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety, such a strategy could lead to better outcomes for all, now and in the future. But there is, actually, an substantially simpler way that can lead to effective operational solutions, which are even easier to understand and implement. Since WSSD is to take place in the African continent, these solutions are highly appropriate for hammering out at Johannesburg.

The simplest, and with a little public familiarity, the most effective way to arrive at a sustainable future is to take care of the two primary preconditions of sustainable development:

1. Meet the basic needs of all
2. Protect the environment

So, if Johannesburg is to really produce outcomes that lead to a more sustainable path for our world, it must first make decisions that lead to improving the lives of the three billion poor living in it and slow down the destruction of its natural resources.

It is obvious that the people with interests vested in the existing system will not see this approach as simple at all, nor as practical, because they will perceive such decisions as inevitably resulting in calls on them to pay huge amounts for meeting these two preconditions. But they need to be shown that their fears are not justified since, as Agenda 21 showed, these preconditions can actually be met at a quite affordable price. In actual fact the costs can be brought down further if the solutions are designed to build the capacity of each economy to solve its own problems and to generate its own resources.

We should also remind them that not everyone out there is waiting simply for a handout. People all over the world want a chance to make their own lives,

and the job of international agreements is to help national governments to enable local governments to build the capacity of their citizens to stand on their feet and create their own livelihoods.

Once the basic needs of everyone are met, decision makers could agree that the international community will no longer have to exercise responsibility in this field.

### **Breaking out of Locked-in Designs**

As you can see, I am a firm believer in genetic coding. Everything, and not just biological life, has its form of DNA. I mentioned earlier that technology carries its DNA. When technology is bought from another country where it was designed or adapted for local conditions, it brings with it the memory of the factors of production appropriate for that country. These are in turn determined by such issues as the resource endowments of that country, the skills available and the stage of industrialisation. All of these may well be completely different in the importing country, often making the technology highly inappropriate.

Similarly, the instruments and institutional structures we have for financing today are patterned after the ones that gave birth to them. In economies that are small and poor, the financial institutions are often designed by western experts and patterned after the experiences of such entities as the World Bank or the regional development banks. This can introduce major distortions in their structures and functions. It costs the World Bank close to a million dollars to appraise a loan. How can it but design projects of a size that has to be a minimum of, say, \$150 million to \$200 million. Big power plants, big mines, big road networks, big factories, big, big, big. Fortunately they stopped building big dams, not so much because they might cause more damage than benefit but because they were found to evoke strong opposition locally and the loan repayment could not be guaranteed. The success of the Grameen Bank demonstrates the kinds of innovations we need in this sector. Johannesburg provides an excellent opportunity to make such initiatives happen on a large scale.

Sustainable development requires a different way of doing things. It is about smaller projects. It needs decentralisation. And it uses renewable resources wherever possible. This means that our present systems are just not geared for this kind of development; there is a basic mismatch between what is being delivered by both the public sector and by the mechanisms of the marketplace on the one hand and what is needed on the ground on the other. Their genetic code, the DNA built in to them, promotes the wrong choice. It has a kind of terminator gene.

My organisation Development Alternatives, was set up twenty years ago, one of the first organisations whose mission was specifically to promote sustainable development. After a couple of years working in the field, we

realised that the primary and most effective means to achieve this was to create sustainable livelihoods on a large scale, which thereafter became our primary objective. The creation of sustainable livelihoods needs many things, such as good technologies, effective management systems, access to finance and grassroots democracy. Development Alternatives has, gradually, built up its competence in all these areas, making it a truly multi-disciplinary action research organisation.

We have innovated a variety of technologies to enable small, decentralised enterprises to produce products and services needed in every village and at the same time to create several local livelihoods. Our technologies include cookstoves, briquetting machines, handlooms, recycled paper units, roofing tile units, and equipment for manufacture of building materials, including microconcrete roofing tiles. We also make small check dams and plant forests on denuded land. With all these, the enterprises create jobs. The capital needed to create one of these jobs averages less than \$ 1,000 dollars. Our work has led to the creation of perhaps as many as half a million jobs, sustainable livelihoods. Can you imagine what happens to a village community when its adults start working and making some money?

And the environmental impacts are often extraordinarily positive. We make small dams, called check dams or stop dams. They simply slow down the water flowing in streams and help recharge the groundwater aquifers. They can be any where from 10 metres across to 100 metres. They cost a pittance: a dam of average length costs roughly \$ 8,000. With such a small investment, we can totally revolutionise the lives of several villages – as many as 10,000 people for an investment of not much more than \$ 1 per person. These dams essentially change the whole landscape within 15 to 18 months. In two seasons the stream is perennial again and provides not only water for drinking and irrigation throughout the year, but also fish, transport, wild birds and recreation.

Now, how would the conventional systems of financing deal with that? Clearly, they can't. The only way they can deal with it is by proposing get another Three Gorges Dam or a Ten Gorges Dam or a Twenty Gorges Dam. If it doesn't cost \$ 500 million or a billion dollars, it's not worth doing. And that's not sustainable. There may well be occasional projects that need that but they are certainly not common. So, we have to now look critically at our financing systems, our marketing systems, our technology to determine whether the existing ones can lead to genuinely sustainable outcomes.

### **Governance**

If any issue has been identified thus far for discussion at Johannesburg, it seems to be what the UN calls IEG, the international environmental governance. In normal usage, the term governance refers to the processes of decision making at the local level, the national level, the international level. The discussions under this rubric generally focus on issues such as democratisation, participation, transparency and accountability. There is a growing body of opinion that grassroots democracy is a prerequisite for

sustainable development. Why? Because unless communities have a sense of ownership over their resources, they tend to neglect them. And acquiring a sense of ownership requires some attributes of real ownership, such as the right to tax and the right to decide how to use the resources. These issues are of profound implications for sustainable management of natural and other resources, but they lie largely in the realm of national and local policy. Even so, although an international negotiating forum such as Johannesburg probably cannot play much of a role in getting sovereign governments to introduce genuine democracies, it can certainly serve as a place to exchange ideas.

But in the UN the term governance currently has a different, and rather specific, meaning. Over the last few years, various ministerial and other fora have been paying attention to how the mandates of different international institutions can be realigned to make them more efficient, and particularly more cost-effective. And in the field of environment, since there has been a proliferation of bodies after the Rio Summit – CSD, UNFCCC, CBD, in addition to evolving responsibilities in UNEP, DESA, UNDP and the World Bank – this goes to the core issue of the capacity of the international system to deal with the environment and sustainable development. Isn't it odd that UNEP, which has so much of its work devoted to developed country environmental issues is located in Nairobi and CSD, whose mandate is largely development issues of concern to the South is located in New York? And why are the convention secretariats located in scattered places like Bonn and Montreal, when they should be in constant contact with each other and UNEP? What precisely should be allocated to whom, is the question that governments would like answers to, and Johannesburg is a good place to work them out.

But surely "governance" ought to have a meaning bigger than just defining who is responsible for what parts of the environmental problematique in the UN family. It also should be about accountability and about direction. The world is not the same as it was in 1944 when the United Nations was set up. Governments are no longer the only or even dominant actors affecting the lives of people throughout the world, though they continue to have a monopoly in governing international institutions. Civil society, corporations and other groups are now growing rapidly in terms of their influence on people's lives. Since the Earth Summit at Rio, these groups have taken increasingly active roles in UN discussions, particularly in UNEP and CSD processes, but the time has come to explore how these roles can be further strengthened and formalised.

Not since the 1960s has there been so much attention given to poverty alleviation by the international development institutions. Yet few of them have been able to identify specific interventions that can take them towards this goal. The one intervention that seems to offer powerful results, as noticed by not only civil society organisations but also the British development agency DFID, seems to have been sidelined by both UNDP and the World Bank.

Should the matter of governance not also address the need for building institutions that work and produce visible results? Isn't it time that international agencies got a bit of their internal act together? I have been in and out of the World Bank and the UN system, sometimes as a staff member or advisor, at other times as an external observer, for some 30 years – since the Stockholm Conference, in fact. And out of those 30 years, I don't recall more than a very few when there wasn't some deep restructuring or other going on in these agencies. I have personally observed more than half a dozen restructurings in the World Bank and UNDP – periods stretching over one or two years – when pretty well everything comes to a halt. Each time they change the leadership seems to be a signal for fundamental restructuring, of objectives of strategies of staffing patterns. If these huge, expensive structures want to get governments to be more efficient, they must set a much better example of efficient operations themselves.

It is now time for us to be much more demanding of ourselves. The UN system has had several decades of support from the world's tax payers, and a lot of their expectations. What have we done with all of that time and money and hope? The time has come for more accountable institutions. At least businesses have a bottom line that provides some degree of accountability at least in terms of commercial performance. And (some) governments have to face elections. But international agencies operate with systems of accountability that are quite inadequate. And civil society is in some ways the least accountable of all. All these issues need to be dealt with rather with some degree of seriousness.

### **A One Point Agenda for Johannesburg**

There are many issues of sustainable development that need to be dealt with at the international level. What is the nature of the institutions, technologies, and collaborative mechanisms that we need to get the world on to a more sustainable path? Some of these have been discussed many times at earlier conferences, but could stand further discussion. Others may be relatively new: ten years is a long time at the rate science moves these days. How do you improve technological choices: promote renewables, reduce waste, substitute for coal and so on? How do you design new financing systems that will promote small industry, enterprises and so on? How do you develop information systems that support the aspirations of real people, instead of researchers, decision makers and other intermediaries? The incredible new opportunities that information technology, biotechnology, and all the other technologies are giving us, which if allowed to go the market way will marginalize and divide people even more, but if they are properly handled, could actually solve most of the basic problems of the world within a few years.

But first, let us look at the current gap that most deeply threatens the whole process of international negotiation to which we are all so strongly committed. This is, of course, the Implementation Gap. Closely related to it is the Accountability Gap. Who is asking what it is that we are doing about the promises we made at Stockholm, at Nairobi, at Mexico, at Dublin, at Tblisi, at

Paris, at Rome, at Rio, at Istanbul, at Beijing, at Copenhagen, at Cairo or at any of those other wonderful places that our diplomats love to travel to? This is a gap that is widening precipitously. Every time we hold a conference we promise more, and we do less. And there is no one to hold us accountable, not even civil society. Governments took on the responsibility but they are too busy scratching each other's backs.

I believe that the Implementation gap and the Accountability gap are now becoming the major cause of our other problems. We now have to close them. And I propose that the road from Rio to Johannesburg has to be the road across this gap. Right down this corridor, today, the first preparatory meeting is taking place to consider what should be discussed at Johannesburg. Delegates have come to New York from all over the world this week with one aim: *let's find something interesting to talk about at Johannesburg*. Personally, I think we should tell them that they don't need to look for any more interesting problems to talk about at Johannesburg. For the people of the world, by far the most interesting thing would be to find out what has happened to all those agreements and promises.

Thus, there is only one thing that WSSD really needs to do: check out the performance of those governments, major groups, civil society organisations and others who made commitments. Let the Heads of State assemble at Johannesburg and receive the reports and deliberate whether this process is yielding results and, if not, what can do to make it better. I know that it would take a lot of leadership and courage from the Presidents and Prime Ministers to come all the way to South Africa and receive reports on how little is happening to protect the interests of the planet and its inhabitants. How would they go back and face their electorates? Perhaps they won't subject themselves to such an event.

If, however, Johannesburg were to do just that – evaluate the progress made on implementing all those promises and commitments, it would certainly be guaranteed to win the title of the most interesting conference ever, a distinct first in history.