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The Challenge of Sustainable Development*

by Kofi Annan**

... "This may be my first visit to Bangladesh as Secretary-General, but Bangladesh has always loomed large in my awareness, and in that of the United Nations. Bangladeshis are among the world's most willing and able peacekeepers. Your non-governmental organizations and entrepreneurs are known throughout the world for their innovative schemes to fight poverty and empower women. The United Nations-Bangladesh partnership is strong, ready for the challenges of a new century.

Sadly, today there is another reason why Bangladesh figures so prominently on the world stage: it is expected to suffer, more than almost any other place on earth, the devastating impact of climate change.

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – which includes some brilliant scientists from Bangladesh – has just released its latest forecast. The Panel's portrait of a warming world makes for chilling reading. It warns of adverse consequences such as the melting of glaciers and polar ice caps, leading to rising sea levels. It predicts more extreme droughts, floods and storms, and significant changes in the functioning of critical ecological systems such as coral reefs and forests. Warmer and wetter conditions would increase the spread of infectious diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. And the inundation of low-lying islands and coastal areas could lead to the displacement of hundreds of millions of people.

Among those coastal areas is, of course, the beautiful and fertile river delta of Bangladesh – the largest delta in the world – which is home to millions of people and to a wealth of biodiversity, and which is already under great stress from human activities.

The climate Panel's report says that sea-level rise could cause the disappearance of vast swaths of this region, and along with them species such as the famed Bengal tiger. It suggests that crop production and aquaculture would be threatened, and with them the livelihood and food security of many of the delta's inhabitants. And it points out that the cyclones and monsoons that already bring such damage to the area could become even more frequent and intense.

Climate change brings us face to face with an uncomfortable fact about development as we know it: its unsustainability. In the industrialized countries, and in those

parts of the developing world that are fast following in their tracks, the prevailing model of economic development is wasteful, short-sighted and hazardous for humans and the natural environment alike.

Unsustainable practices are woven deeply into the fabric of modern life. The burning of fossil fuels produces dangerous greenhouse gas emissions yet still accounts for 80 per cent of the world's energy supply. Almost 70 per cent of our oceans have been over-fished or fully exploited. Freshwater consumption is outpacing the rate of population growth. World population will increase most in countries that already contain the largest number of hungry people, and the most stressed farmlands. Billions of dollars in subsidies perpetuate practices in farming, transport and energy use that make it harder for the environment to provide the life-sustaining services on which we depend.

Sustainability is in everybody's interest. One of two jobs worldwide – in agriculture, forestry and fisheries – depends directly on the sustainability of ecosystems. But it is the developing countries that will suffer most if the world as a whole fails to achieve sustainable development.

Bangladesh, for its part, has taken steps to address threats such as air pollution and the contamination of ground water by arsenic. United Nations agencies are doing their best to help. But such efforts will not be easy. The poverty that afflicts Bangladesh and other developing countries simultaneously degrades the environment and inhibits their ability to protect it. Developing countries are further hampered by trade barriers, debt burdens and declining aid.

One thing we have learned over the years is that doom-and-gloom scenarios are not enough to inspire people and governments to act. The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 did indeed sound an alarm. But it also set out a positive vision of a sustainable future, as well as a detailed road-map – Agenda 21 – for integrating environment and development. Legally binding conventions on climate change and biodiversity were also adopted in Rio, adding to a previous treaty to protect the ozone layer. A treaty on desertification was subsequently added to the arsenal. Despite these achievements, we have gone on with business as usual in far too many ways. Moreover, some damaging myths have taken hold.

It is said that we face a choice between economic growth and conservation, when in fact growth cannot be sustained without conservation.

It is said that it will be too costly to make the necessary changes, when in fact cost-

effective technologies and policies are available.

And it is said that developing countries should focus on development, saving the so-called luxury of environmental protection for later, when in fact the environment provides many of the precious resources and capital that societies need today to develop and sustain themselves.

But it is not enough to say that sustainable development can be achieved; we must make it happen – with new technologies, with energetic North-South cooperation, and with smart policies that create incentives and send the right signals to business and industry. One key sector in which this effort is needed is that of energy, which lies at the heart of both development and global warming.

Two billion people lack access to electricity. Two billion people – not all the same 2 billion – cook with traditional fuels which contribute not only greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, but also poisons to the household, which cause illness and several million premature deaths each year.

The picture is even grimmer when you consider that several hundred million women and girls spend hours each day foraging for, and carrying, fuel and water. This back-breaking work is a tremendous burden in itself; it is also a tragic loss of time that could be spent on more productive pursuits, such as educating, earning or simply caring for the health and well-being of one's family.

Helping these men, women and children to lift themselves out of poverty will necessarily require a bigger supply of energy. Our challenge is to do so in a way that does not pollute the environment or contribute to global warming. The answer lies in energy efficiency, renewable energy resources, and cleaner use of fossil fuels. Hundreds of technologies and practices are available now, and many more are being developed, that promise a brighter, less damaging energy future.

This is not a dream scenario, based on discoveries we hope will be made later this century; it is a "win-win" situation for today, based on the views of energy experts, including the World Energy Assessment, a report produced jointly by the United Nations and the World Energy Council, an organization representing major energy suppliers. The technical, financial and economic obstacles, which have denied many of the world's peoples access to the benefits of a high level of energy services and a better environment, are all rapidly disappearing.

What we do in the field of energy, we can and must do in other areas as well. Ultimately, we are talking about a new ethic

* Extracts from a statement made on 14 March 2001 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. See page 129.

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of global stewardship. And this, of course, is also a political challenge.

This stewardship must come from countries big and small, rich and poor. It would mean that the more industrialized countries re-examine their consumption and production patterns. It would mean that in our effort to eradicate poverty, we look at democratic governance, institution-building and community-based development. It would mean upholding international commitments to provide developing countries with the finance and technology they need. And it would mean placing the advancement of women and the education of girls at the very centre of these efforts. In short, sustainable development requires the equal treatment of the three pillars of sustainability: economic growth, social development and environmental protection.

Next year in Johannesburg, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, world leaders will have an opportunity to show that they take the idea of stewardship seriously. But they need not wait until then; indeed, they must not. One immediate test of resolve is the Kyoto Protocol, which aims to reduce greenhouse emissions, but which has yet to enter into force.

The burden of leadership at this juncture falls on the industrialized countries,

and in particular the United States, the European Union and Japan. They are responsible for most of the world's past and present carbon emissions. And they are best placed, both economically and technologically, to move ahead with their own reductions and with assistance for the developing world. To abandon this process now would set back the global climate strategy for many years.

At the same time, even as we look to the industrialized countries to take the lead, developing countries themselves can do more.

First, they can make sure that environmental issues are fully integrated into mainstream economic and social policy.

Second, companies and entrepreneurs in developing countries should explore the new business opportunities that changes in climate policy will make available. Green technologies offer some of the brightest business opportunities of the new century.

Third, developing countries should prepare projects for the "clean development mechanism", a key element of the Kyoto Protocol that will allow industrialized countries to gain emissions credits by making climate-friendly investments in the developing world.

Finally, developing countries should consider their own contributions to the glo-

bal climate strategy. Developing countries will be doing themselves no favours if they, too, pursue a path of industrialization which before long proves unsustainable.

Sustainable development will not happen of its own accord. We need a break with the harmful practices of the past and a break in the political stalemate that prevails on too many environmental issues.

There is some good news to report. I don't want to sound too gloomy. Public awareness has grown. Civil society is engaged. The private sector is beginning to seize the opportunities of green technology. Partnerships are being formed. The global machinery of policy-making and governance is moving in the right direction. We have the human and material resources to place our economies on more sustainable footing.

But the bottom line is that the challenges of sustainability are overwhelming our responses. In the past, we could afford a long gestation period before undertaking major environmental policy initiatives. Today the time for a well-planned transition to a sustainable system is running out. We may be moving in the right direction, but we are moving too slowly. We are failing in our responsibility to future generations, and even to the present one."

