

## **Statement by Maurice F. Strong at Special United Nations General**

### **Assembly Event on Rio+20, New York, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.**

#### *Subject to Change and/or abbreviation on Delivery*

First let me say how pleased I am to participate in this Special Event in preparation for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development to be held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, Rio+20. I very much appreciate the opportunity accorded to me by Under-Secretary-General Sha Zukang, in his capacity as Secretary-General of Rio+20, to assist him and his Secretariat in their challenging task of preparing for the Conference and sharing the insights and lessons learned from previous UN Conferences, notably the Earth Summit of 1992.

Brazil demonstrated, in its hosting of the Earth Summit in 1992, its unsurpassed capacity to organize and host such events as well as making important contributions to the preparatory process. As host and Chair of Rio+20 it will make an indispensable contribution to the prospects for its success.

There have been immense changes in the world since the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 put the environment issue on the world agenda. Some notable progress has since been made in awareness and understanding of the issues we must address, in our capacity to do so, in the urgency of the need for decisive actions and the dire consequences of our failure to act.

The ominous paradox is that the will to act suffers today from the decline in public attention and the pre-occupation of governments with more immediate financial and economic concerns. This is reflected in the continued lack of progress in implementing past commitments as well as the prospect of undertaking new ones at Rio+20. This recession in political will will have far more damaging consequences for the human future than the more immediate issues that give rise to it.

Indeed, it has never been more important to heed the evidence of science that time is running out on our ability to manage successfully our impacts on the Earth's environmental, biodiversity, resource and life-support systems on which human life as we know it depends. We must rise above the lesser concerns that preempt our attention and respond to the reality that the future of human life on Earth depends on what we do, or fail to do in this generation. What we have come to accept as normal is

not normal, as increased human numbers, the growing intensity of human impacts and the demographic dilemma faced by so many nations are returning the Earth to the conditions that have been normal for most of its existence that do not support human life as we know it.

We must deal with this as the most dangerous security issue humanity has ever faced, with the very conditions necessary to life on Earth at risk.

It is in this larger context that we must view Rio+20 as a unique opportunity to make the fundamental “change of-course” called for by business leaders at the Earth Summit in 1992. It requires fundamental changes in the way in which we manage the activities through which we impact on the Earth’s sustainability. This will require a degree of cooperation beyond anything we have yet experienced at a time when competition and conflict over scarce resources is escalating.

The decisions and policies which determine our impacts on sustainability are primarily motivated by economic and financial considerations. The transcendent importance of the actions to be taken at Rio + 20 require that they be firmly rooted in our deepest moral and ethical principles. This is why I feel so strongly that Rio +20 must endorse and be grounded by the Earth Charter. The change of course called for at Rio in 1992 requires radical changes in our current economic system. This will need to be led by those countries, mostly Western, which have dominated the world economy during the period in which our cumulative damage to the Earth’s life-support systems, its precious biological resources and its climate, have occurred and have monopolized the economic benefits of this. Rio+20 must reinforce the focus on Biodiversity to which this Decade on Biodiversity is devoted so that it will lead to specific actions on implementation of the measures required to protect these resources so essential to global sustainability.

Experience has demonstrated that those countries that have been most successful in improving their environment are those, like Japan, which have been most efficient in managing their economies and reducing the energy, resources and materials used to produce their GDP. Rio +20 must provide for special measures to assist developing countries in the efficiency of their economies.

No issue is more important to the human future than that of climate change in which the political will to act cooperatively and decisively has dangerously diminished. Rio+20 must reinforce international efforts at Durban and beyond to reach agreement and renewal of the Climate Change Convention and its implementation. Paradoxically, if we fail to act, the reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions could occur through

the collapse of the world economy, to which none of us would aspire. After all, the roots of the environmental and climate change crises are the same as those of the economic and financial crises – the inadequacies of our economic system.

Only an enlightened view of their own self-interest in the security and sustainability of life is likely to induce the more developed countries to accept the principal responsibility they bear for the fundamental change of course that we must make. Developing countries must play their part but their responsibilities are of a different order of magnitude. The concept of shared but differentiated responsibilities must be strongly reinforced at Rio+20.

The growing inequities in sharing the benefits of economic growth continue to provide a widening rich-poor divide in virtually all countries, even in China, which has lifted more people of poverty than any nation has ever done. This undermines the prospect of enabling the poor and disadvantaged to share fully and equitably in the benefits of sustainable development and will lead to social unrest, evidence of which is already emerging.

Time precludes my elaborating on the various actions that could be taken at Rio+20 which would make it a major milestone on the pathway to sustainability. As most of these have already been raised at the High-level Symposium in Beijing and the Delhi Ministerial Dialogue in New Delhi, I will note them only briefly here.

- Objective evaluation by civil society organizations in each country of their performance in implementing their commitments at the Earth Summit and other fora;
- Establishment of a process of continuing assessment of the performance of each country in its implementation of past commitments and accountability for them. This should lead to a system in which countries which fail to meet their commitments are subject to penalties and sanctions.
- Establishment of an investment instrument in the form of “Earth Bonds” to be purchased by private sector foundations, funds and individuals, for investment in sustainable development projects, principally in developing countries; The World Bank’s initiative in issuing Green Bonds to finance climate change projects provides a useful precedent. The World Bank and/or its private sector affiliate the International Finance Corporation could also be the issuers of the Earth Bonds. They and the regional development banks could initiate and manage projects funded by the Earth Bonds. A high level group of experts is now developing the proposal.

- Agreement to establish a system based on Principles 21 and 22 agreed at the Stockholm Conference in 1972 through which victims of environmental damage in one country resulting from development in another country can seek legal recourse and compensation for the damages they have suffered.

Under today's conditions, this and other measures that I am raising will be deemed unrealistic. But denial cannot change the reality, only increase its dangers. What seems unrealistic today will become inevitable tomorrow, too late to change. The need for such actions is real and urgent. Rio+20 cannot do it all but it can and must set these processes in motion and give them the support and impetus they require.

- On the issue of governance, there is a real need to clarify and strengthen the role of UNEP by agreeing to accord it the status of a specialized agency, without treating the environment, which is essentially a systemic issue, as a sector. This could lead to establishment of a World Environment Organization as some have proposed.

An alternative to the proposal to establish a strong and high-level Council on Sustainable Development would be to provide a new mandate to the Trusteeship Council which has fulfilled its original purposes and could become the forum in which member states exercise their trusteeship for the global environment, the commons and the Earth's life-support systems.

The cities are at the very foundation of environmental governance as the main sources of environmental problems as well as their solutions. I would urge Rio + 20 to give their key role recognition and a strong voice in policy and implementation.

Of a different nature is the need to create much greater public interest and awareness in Rio+20 as an event in itself. This is what helped to attract unprecedented numbers of world leaders, media and non-governmental organizations to the Earth Summit in 1992 and encouraged more governments to take decisions beyond original expectations. But time is short and the resources available to the Secretariat and others preparing for Rio+20 are meager. However much can still be done to give greater visibility, public awareness and political priority to Rio+20 by making the Event itself more attractive. This could be done, for the example, by using the occasion to present very prestigious and high level Awards for exceptional contributions to sustainable development: an Earth Gala in which leading stars would perform at the time of the Conference and other accompanying events. These would enhance the global

awareness of and public attention to Rio+20 and provide further incentive for world leaders to participate.

The United Nations alone cannot be expected to undertake such initiatives but it can reach out to the many others around the world that are willing and able to engage. The fact that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has himself accorded Rio+20 highest priority will ensure a positive response by others. The work of the preparatory Committee and those who are already engaged can help to mobilize the wide-spread support needed to ensure that the Conference succeeds. We cannot afford failure. The security and sustainability of life on Earth depends on our success. If our actions at Rio+20 are too little they will surely be too late.