Theme 2 – A Unity of Purpose: Environmental Ethics

Presentation: The Democratic Opportunity
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This chapter was adapted from an address before the fourth international symposium on "Religion, Science and the Environment," held June 5-10, 2002. Malloch Brown was speaking shortly after attending a preparatory conference in Bali devoted to laying the groundwork for the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

Thank you. I am glad to have this chance to speak here at such an important moment in history. Democracy seems to be spreading around the world and, in parallel, there is growing awareness of the need for international cooperation on environmental matters. But in both trends, signs of strain are emerging. It is true that a striking number of developing countries around the globe have staged a dramatic move toward democracy over the past fifteen years; but at the same time, there has been a profound and widespread loss of faith in the institutions of democracy. In parallel, this pattern of growing opportunity and hope accompanied by rising frustration is playing out in the realm of environmental affairs. We may be closer than ever to achieving international consensus on the nature of the environmental problems we face. But disagreement on how to share the costs of solving these problems may be poised to undo the progress made so far.

Both the ingredients for consensus and the seeds of its undoing were already on full display at the conference just held in Bali in preparation for the coming World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

On one hand, there were signs of increasing support for the use of a common framework for accountability and cooperation between donor and developing countries: the Millennium Development Goals, a set of timebound, difficult but achievable targets adopted two years ago by 189 nations for achieving environmental

sustainability, education for all boys and girls, access to health care and poverty reduction.

But as the Bali preparatory conference ground to a rather incoherent, incomplete finish late on Friday night, I suspect its outcomes were disappointing and weak in the eyes of many of you in this room. A lot of the targets on critical environmental goals have been stripped out of the draft document at this stage. There has been a major effort, by the United States in particular, to water down the language about mutual accountability for tackling the global ills of environmental degradation. Moreover, the watering-down did not come just from one side. Developing countries also have been reluctant to enter into a framework of cooperation in which there will be obligations required of both sides.

These outcomes from Bali exemplify the way the debate about environment has tended to separate from the debate about development in recent years. It is a trend that threatens to exclude environmental issues from the consensus-building process wrought by the Millennium Development Goals. In development, it has been well understood for some years now that the willingness of donor countries to make resources available depends very much on the performance of developing countries. Inherent in the mutual adoption of the Millennium Development Goals is the understanding that *both* donor *and* recipient countries must commit resources toward achieving the goals; whenever developing countries seriously embrace social priorities in their government spending, whenever they encourage sensible economic growth and reform their political institutions to deepen democracy, such strides should be supported by increased resources from donor countries.

In contrast, in the debate on environment, where so many issues are global and interrelated, the sense of mutual responsibility has been drowned out by demands from each side for redress and reparation from the other. In some ways the dialogue about obligations and accountability came unstuck at Bali, and the important consensus around shared responsibility for the problems of our planet seemed to be receding.

The political challenge now is to pull that back together before Johannesburg. While some people were disappointed about the targets stripped from the draft

document produced at Bali, it is essential to focus on the fact that some were left in, most notably the Millennium Development Goals. These goals can serve as a basis for forging ahead at the world summit in Johannesburg.

The stakes in Johannesburg are very high. There is an urgency now that can be sensed by anyone who runs a development organization. As the head of the UN Development Programme, the UN's agency for sustainable development, my job is to serve the people of developing countries, more than half of whom are under 20 years old. In such predominantly young populations, there is a sense of excitement about the possibility of change, but also a sense of frustration at its pace. Thus while many of us may think of development as a rather cautious, incremental business, the people we work with and work for today are tremendously impatient. They are frustrated with established systems that they feel are failing them, not only failing to protect their environment, but also not meeting their educational needs, not offering them jobs as they graduate from school and not offering them the opportunity to participate adequately in the political and social lives of their countries. They are frustrated and they are angry.

There is much that can be achieved at Johannesburg, but it will require clear thinking about what is needed and what realistically can be accomplished by a world summit.

Let me set out what I think are four, key challenges facing us as we head to Johannesburg, four areas where there is room for achievement. One is to define sustainable development clearly. A second one is to determine who at the national level is responsible for sustainable development. A third challenge is to determine to what level of action -- local, national or global -- it is best to direct our energies and resources. And the final challenge is to recognize which political and economic

forces are helping sustainable development and which are threatening it, so we know just where it needs our defence.

As for the first challenge, how to define the term "sustainable development," let me acknowledge that it is a concept that lends itself to multiple interpretations and is, as you know, always at risk of being hijacked by special interests of one kind or another. How broad or narrow is sustainable development? Secretary General Kofi Annan and I tried, in the run-up to the meeting in Bali, to come up with a very pragmatic description that we hoped would at least carry us through Johannesburg. And, as always at the UN, this description was immediately dubbed with an acronym, WEHAB, which stands for five sectors: Water, Environment, Health, Agriculture and Biodiversity. The hope is that by defining sustainable development in this concrete way, we may be able to come out of Johannesburg with ambitious partnerships in each of the five areas, partnerships focused on the Millennium Development Goals and forged among a broad array of actors and stakeholders.

The second challenge, to determine who at the national level represents and champions sustainable development, has not yet been addressed. Sustainable development, with its three pillars -- not just environment but also social policy and economic policy -- does not fit into the typical structure of national governments. Who represents a given nation in the Johannesburg process? Ministers of the environment do not always understand the triggers of growth and are not necessarily even sympathetic to them. Ministers of finance are deeply unsympathetic to what they look at as the limitations that an environmental policy places on growth. And ministers of social policy, anxious to put people first, too often see finance ministers and environment ministers as the enemies of their investment in people.

In fact, only one country in the world, Bolivia, has a Minister of Sustainable Development. He attended the Bali conference and had to stand up in every meeting that we attended together so that I could say: "Meet the world's only Minister of Sustainable Development!"

Organizing a summit in this field, when national governments have no single minister responsible for the multi-sector agenda of sustainable development, is a very hard political process to manage. But of course, the problem is not just that it makes for tough summitting. It is indicative of how far behind the structures of national government are, how ill-equipped they are to tackle the kinds of problems that by their very nature must be confronted at the national and global level.

This brings us to the third challenge. Although sustainable development must command attention and resources from all levels -- local, national and global -- the actual work of achieving sustainable development is for the most part accomplished at the local level. The scope of an international conference may be global, but in the end the problems of sustainable development must be solved locally. Religious leaders preach environmental awareness village by village. Community leaders organize themselves village by village and urban slum by slum to insist that forest coverage be protected, just as they insist that their kids get decent schooling, that the teacher actually shows up on time, that there are books in the classroom. It is that level of local commitment, that level of local organization and accountability that finally determines the outcome of our global fight for the environment.

Far too much of the international discourse on sustainable development becomes unanchored from the central focus that we must have on what can be done to build *local-level* outcomes. You need look no further than the Adriatic Sea surrounding us right here, right now, to see how its ecology is degraded or sustained, damaged or supported by the actions of local communities on its shores.

This does not relieve national or global players from responsibility. On the contrary, it should guide our understanding of what a national government or a world summit can do to achieve local-level success. It is no small achievement for a summit to help promote the idea that capacity-building at the local level must be at the heart of sustainable development. This means the best role for national governments and

international organizations is to support and sustain the capacity of local communities to take action.

Toward this end, UN Foundation President Tim Wirth and I -- working from that ultimate of local places, the breakfast room of the Harvard Club in New York -- came up with an idea we have called the Equator Initiative. This program will identify, highlight and publicize successful local initiatives that promote sustainable development in tropical ecosystems. The first phase of the program will involve giving awards at Johannesburg for the best examples of such local community initiatives. The hope is that if we can showcase them, the knowledge will be endorsed and shared globally. Many of these initiatives can be scaled up and replicated across the broad equatorial band that encompasses so many communities facing common environmental crises and challenges.

However, I must say it is no simple business to build capacity at the local level, to enable communities to take matters into their own hands and reverse the environmental and development crises they face. It is not accomplished with the arrival of a western expert at a hotel in the capital city to give a little seminar and go home. One of the least unlocked secrets of development is how to draw from indigenous knowledge and add to it the relevant know-how and experience from other communities around the world. We may be very good at the macroeconomics of development, such as building bridges or dams -- though some would argue we are not even very good at that and I suspect many in this room would be in that second camp! But the imperfection of our knowledge about such "hardware issues" of development pales in comparison to the depth of our ignorance when it comes to the "software" of development: capacity building in local communities.

If ever there was a place where religious leaders have a critical role to play, it is in listening, communicating and building capacity at the community level for sustainable development.

However, for all that I have just said about the central role of local actors, it is also clear that there is a powerful global dimension to sustainable development. Empowered or not, capacitated or not, local communities are finding the very landscape of their possibilities being shaken and shaped by global trends. Unless these forces are channelled and contained, the community-by-community approach will always remain only half the answer, half the solution.

This brings me to the fourth challenge: how is sustainable development pursued and defended amid the political and economic changes wrought by globalisation? Here I think we have to seize the elements of a new politics. When over half the population in developing countries is under 20, it is not hard to believe that there is space for a new politics. One of the most remarkable political trends in developing countries in recent years has been the broad move toward democracy as the preferred system of government. In the mid-1980s, only about two billion people in the world lived under democratic rule. Today, between four and five billion out of a world population of six billion do.

At the same time as this massive expansion of democracy, however, there has been a loss of faith in democratic institutions. Polling in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa over the last year has shown a collapse of respect for political institutions. Largely it is because people feel those institutions have not heard their voices of despair. Poverty is growing and democratic government has proved no more effective than generals were at reversing it.

Thus we are caught at a critical juncture: it is an extraordinary moment of democratic opportunity, but unless we can help democratic leaders respond to the demands of younger, increasingly impatient and dissatisfied populations, this time may well be looked back upon as the time when opportunity passed us by.

Democratic opportunity is critical to the agenda of sustainable development, because sustainable development is all about choices as close to the problem as possible. It is about villages deciding on the tradeoffs between forest cover and

firewood. It is about local communities making the hard choices about rates of growth, innovation and change in the economic character of their societies versus the preservation of their cultures and traditional ways of life. These decisions have to be taken at as local a level as possible, by people who are as politically empowered as possible. It will not happen if we allow this fleeting democratic space that we have to close down.

Let me offer a few observations about what is happening to that democratic space globally and how we can protect it. Matters are not being helped by the worldwide erosion and corrosion of human rights today. They are not being helped by the fact that the rights of women in many parts of the world are more under attack than they have been for many years. They are not being helped by the fact that the campaign against terrorism, legitimate though it may be, is being used by many governments all over the world to crack down on the human rights of their citizens. It is a very short-sighted response to terrorism, given that terrorism is often bred in places where people have no political voice.

I must add that there is another area, a very different one, where a right of another kind is in need of defence. It is the right of scientists to explore controversial issues. I believe many in this room may feel that environment and religion are beleaguered voices in world affairs. But running a development organization, I have to tell you that science too feels beleaguered. One example is in the field of genetically modified foods. In this area, the environmentalist and development communities are quick to jump to conclusions, without even allowing scientists to undertake prudent research and experimentation. Disagreements over issues like this have produced some of the toughest fights I have had to face in running the UN Development Programme. In other areas of science, the enemy is different but the results are the same: medical research may not be opposed by the communities in this room, but corporate business interests around the world often seem determined to close down or constrain funding for research on the diseases that afflict the poor. This has exactly the same consequence of reducing the space for scientific inquiry and experimentation.

So aside from defining sustainable development in concrete terms, so that specific partnerships can be built to pursue it; and aside from creating a few more

ministries of sustainable development in the world, so the sole existing one in Bolivia no longer stands alone; let us hold on for dear life to the space for a new politics. Whether it is a scientist's right to explore new solutions to the problems of development, or the right of a woman in an Indian or African village to make political choices affecting her community's development and environment, these are precious spaces we must all hold dear.

It is very exciting that a joint statement is to be issued from this symposium and the religious faiths represented here will be speaking out. In many of the countries where I work and serve, there is no more powerful organization than the churches, particularly across Africa and Latin America. So often, you are much more organized than governments and much bigger than any other part of civil society. If anyone can represent, can lead, can shape opinion, it is you. As a member of one of those churches myself, I humbly ask, please, speak out clearly against the sin of ravaging our planet's resources. Let us save our Earth for the next generation, our children.

Thank you very much.