

REMARKS OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE UNIT FOR
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT
AT THE HEARING BEFORE THE INTER-AMERICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS ON THE
EFFECTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON
THE EXERCISE AND ENJOYMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE HEMISPHERE

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I would like to thank the representatives of the Center for Human Rights and Environment for this opportunity to address the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

At the outset, I would like to cite the results of a recent poll conducted by Environics of Toronto, Canada in 20 countries, jointly representing 65 per cent of the world's population. They found that a majority of the respondents point to human rights and environmental protection as issues needing stronger international safeguards and binding controls. Today, we have come to the understanding that human rights should be an integral part of international relations, and organizations such as the OAS and this Commission should continue to strive for its promotion and eventual compliance. Its linkage to the environment arises out of the discourse of humanities' need for protection from abuses and the right to lead a life of dignity, in an environment of equality and non-discrimination.

In the year 2000, the OAS General Assembly in Costa Rica underscored, through resolution 1819, the importance of further study on the links between the environment and human rights. The most recent General Assembly, held in Barbados in June of this year, approved resolution 1896 to, and I quote, "remain seized of the issue, paying special attention to the work being carried out by the relevant multilateral fora in this area." (end quote) This resolution also encouraged institutional cooperation in the area of human rights and the environment in particular between the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and the Unit for Sustainable Development and Environment. As Director of that Unit I take this opportunity to pledge our utmost commitment to work closely with the Commission in the execution of this mandate.

The rate at which we are altering the environment, the extent of that alteration, and the consequences of these changes – for biological diversity, water quality and other resources plus the goods and services they render- is unprecedented in human history. That having been stated, altering the natural state of any region is an inevitable consequence of human development. However, uncontrolled and unplanned development can, overtime, negatively, and at times permanently, impact future development opportunities.

The classic definition of sustainable development from the 1987 Brundtland Report is that it is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future

generations to meet their own needs. My thoughts on the subject now include the broader perspective of enhancing the human condition through increased freedom on a sustainable basis. Any society's assets include more than land, labor and capital. And by essential freedoms I refer to not only economic opportunity, but also expanding political participation and broadening social opportunities. Open public discussion, often stifled in authoritarian societies, is pivotally important for leading a fuller human life and to strengthen the understanding of the need to better manage basic resources of soil, air and water. Property rights, the rule of law, transparency in decision-making, an independent judiciary, and even trust count too. There are many rewards of seeing people as "agents" who can exercise their freedoms in a proactive fashion towards positive change, rather than as "patients" whose needs have to be met.

In an article published by *The Economist* in 1999, noted economist Jeffrey Sachs underscored the argument that unless the impacts of environmental degradation to basic resources are reversed, long-term solutions are not likely to succeed, regardless of the levels of investment. A case in point may be made in the analysis on the issue of access to sufficient quantities of quality freshwater. The struggle for water will be one of the gravest problems of this century. It is a struggle that will affect all societies worldwide and will revolve around concepts as diverse as sovereignty, national security; culture; human rights; and economic development models. The Americas is a "water rich" hemisphere, yet there are areas facing the effects of severe and prolonged drought as well as the impacts of pollution on their supply of freshwater. Seventy percent of our people will live in urban areas by 2025 and yet 70% of our current water use is in the agricultural sector – and this latter figure is increasing.

The economics of water has become an issue of development and survival, since a lack of water will affect the lives of millions of people around the globe. It is a US\$200 billion dollar a year market, growing at a staggering 6 per cent rate annually. Nevertheless, decisions about allocation and distribution of water must include the principle that access to this natural resource is a fundamental human right. It should not be based solely on the ability to pay.

Rivers and reservoirs are running dry as growing populations literally fight over a shrinking source of life. According to the United Nations, as the world's population grows to 8 billion by 2025, the number of people suffering from an inadequate supply of clean water will grow to 5 billion from the current 2 billion. According to reports published by WHO and PAHO the lack of drinking water and sanitation is also directly connected with the high incidence of disease in developing countries. Thirty-five thousand children are dying each day from dehydration, dysentery and water-borne parasites. We cannot avoid these painful issues if we are to meet the WSSD goal of halving the number of people without access to clean drinking water by 2015.

These pressures on the environment are due to a combination of increasing urban population density in large part catalyzed by degradation of the natural resource base creating a new class of citizens which I call "environmental refugees", increasing per capita consumption, depletion of critical resource systems and inappropriate institutions and policies for managing natural resources. I also have to note the lack of political will and corruption as problematic in this

process. Clearly modern society is not in balance with the available resources and the technology used to exploit them.

The Summit of the Americas process has led to an increased awareness of the link between human rights, property and environment. My fundamental message to this Commission is that this Hemisphere should continue to promote dialogue among all sectors of society on the fundamental issues concerning economic and social development and including the concepts of corporate social responsibility, environment and human rights.

We must continue to strive towards the enhancement of partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors for the achievement of sustainable development at all levels. Please remember that it was the Bolivia Summit in 1996 that led to the development and formal approval of the *Inter-American Strategy for the Promotion of Public Participation in Decision-Making for Sustainable Development*. This Commission should use this tool to its fullest potential as a means to help ensure that human rights are respected in decision processes.

I would like to conclude with a statement by Dr. Wesley Hughes, General Director of the Planning Institute of Jamaica, at a conference held just two weeks ago at the Inter-American Development Bank on "Security and Development." He stated that it is important that justice is not sacrificed on the altar of efficiency. He stressed, and I quote that "we cannot treat human beings as simply numbers in a financial programme or a project document. Policy makers have to contend with real people who will literally die of want and hunger if the transition is not managed with a sense of justice." (end quote.)

I hope that this Commission, together with the leaders of the countries of this Hemisphere, and with the commitment of civil society organizations, such as CEDHA, will help pave the way to find answers to those critical questions in a positive, fruitful, and sustainable light.

Thank you very much.