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A Season for Stewardship

By Kofi A. Annan

If there is one word that should be on everyone's lips at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, one idea that must animate the "plan of implementation" to be adopted there, one concept that embodies everything the United Nations hopes to achieve, it is responsibility: for each other, as fellow members of a single human family; for our planet, whose bounty is the very basis for human progress; and most of all, for the future security and well-being of succeeding generations.

For more than two centuries, ever since the Industrial Revolution generated remarkable advances in living standards that the world had never seen or even imagined possible, economic development has rested in no small part on some very irresponsible activities and assumptions. We have filled the atmosphere with emissions that now threaten havoc in our lifetime in the form of global climate change. We have felled forests, depleted fisheries and poisoned soil and water alike. And all the while, as consumption and production continued at fever pitch, too many people -- in fact, the majority of humankind -- have been left behind in poverty, squalor and despair.

The Summit is an attempt to change course before it is too late. It aims to bring an end to wanton acts of destruction and the blithe self-delusion that keeps too many from seeing the perilous state of the earth and its people. It hopes to bring home the uncomfortable truth that the model of development that has prevailed for so long has been fruitful for the few, but flawed for the many. And it seeks to impress upon political leaders in particular that the cost of inaction is greater than the cost of conservation, and that they need to stop being so economically defensive, and start being more politically courageous.

Some say we should just rip up the fabric of modern life, and with it the unsustainable practices at its core. I say we can and must weave in new strands of knowledge and cooperation. Sustainable development need not wait for tomorrow's technological breakthroughs; green technologies, renewable sources of energy and other alternative solutions available today can begin to do the job. Governments have barely begun to fund research and development on an adequate scale, or to put in place the tax changes and other incentives that would give the right signals to entrepreneurs and the business community. But with concerted action in five key areas -- water, energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity -- progress could be far quicker than is commonly thought.

Action starts with Governments. They bear the primary responsibility for fulfilling the commitments they made at the 1992 Earth Summit and since. But the richest countries must lead the way. They have the wealth and the technology, and they contribute

disproportionately to global environmental problems. Developing countries, which naturally aspire to share the benefits enjoyed by the industrialized world, must of course do their part. But they have a right to expect that those who first took -- and for the most part are still on -- a hazardous path to growth, will set an example and provide assistance.

Governments cannot do the job alone, however. Citizens' groups have a critical role, as partners, advocates and watchdogs. So do commercial enterprises. I hope corporations understand that the world is not asking them to do something different from their normal business; rather, it is asking them to do their normal business differently. The more progressive and dynamic among them are already seizing the opportunities of an alternative, sustainable future; I hope this can grow to become a new norm.

The choice is not between development and environment, as some have framed the issue. Development that does not sensibly manage the environment will prove short-lived. Nor should this be an issue of rich versus poor. Both depend on resources and other environmental capital. One in every two jobs worldwide -- in agriculture, forestry and fisheries -- depends directly on the sustainability of ecosystems.

It is said that to everything, there is a season. The world today, facing the twin challenges of poverty and pollution, needs to usher in a season of transformation and stewardship -- a season in which we make a long overdue investment in a secure future.

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