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ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

JAMES MARSHALL MEMORIAL LECTURE

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This has been a most memorable day for all of us who have been working on the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. This morning I had the pleasure of presenting our report - Our Common Future - to the General Assembly. I welcome this opportunity to share the results of our work and to deliberate with you over what needs to be done to assure this work bears fruit.

Over three years we looked into the future and found that so many current human activities are blind alleys down which lie increased poverty and decreased options for future generations. You will find the details in our chapters on the international economy, on population growth, on the production of food, energy, and industrial goods, on our efforts to manage the global commons, and on peace and security.

The Commission concluded that international imbalances, which are at the root of the environment/development deadlock, must be corrected. In a world ridden by poverty, only economic growth can offer hope for a better life for the poor and create the capacity to solve environmental problems. Sustainable development itself - the overriding political concept of the Commission - is, in fact, a new concept for economic growth.

A new era of growth is what we call for. This new growth must be substantial but its content needs to be changed. The ability of future generations to meet their needs can be compromised as much by affluence - the excesses of industrial and technological development - as by the environmental degradation which is the result of underdevelopment. A new era of growth must be supported by a

broad process of change and of policy reforms. It requires more equal access to knowledge and to resources. It requires a more equitable distribution - not only among nations but also within nations.

I am gratified to end this day by speaking to the world community of non-governmental organizations, and I wish to thank the NDRC for making this possible. You have a crucial role in carrying our message forward.

We found, after careful consideration, that major changes are not only crucial but are well within the realm of present human possibilities. We have the technology for increased economic growth within the framework of ecological realities. We have the communications facilities to allow us to cooperate in achieving such growth and spreading its benefits more equitably. For as our report notes, present human and national inequality is "the planet's main environmental problem; it is also its main development problem".

Today, in speaking to the General Assembly, the focus was on the challenges to governments. Tonight we should be concerned with the challenges for the non-governmental community - the NGOs.

We have the ability to change toward sustainable paths of progress, and I discern a readiness to change. You will note that many governments have welcomed the Commission's conclusions in the present General Assembly debate.

There is so much work to be done, work that covers a broad spectrum which stretches from individuals, homes, and villages to the decision-making chambers of governments and their multilateral institutions. The NGOs are crucial in

keeping the lines of communications open all along that spectrum.

The Commission found that a major prerequisite to sustainable development is a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision-making. The NGOs have shown what an effective force they can be in bringing the realities and the concerns of local people to the attention of national governments. This happens not only in the North where communications and affluence can ease the process. It happens to an increasing extent in the developing world as well.

A major theme of Our Common Future is that a new multilateralism will be crucial for progress. NGOs, especially those that operate internationally, can be and are a force for change in this respect. The NGOs have been effectively informing the government's decisions of the northern industrialized nations for decades. They have more recently expanded their activities into the international forums, as demonstrated by the innovative work of our hosts, the NRDC. Such work sets examples for other NGOs and for the governments themselves. In the developing nations, a younger NGO movement has been increasingly effective in opening and deepening channels of communication between governments and their citizens. We came into contact with such efforts in India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and many African and Latin American nations.

Our report strongly advocates that flows of resources from the industrialized to the developing world must be increased. At the same time, the North must be more prepared to listen to and act upon the concerns of the South. Can the NGOs help to show the way in these areas? Can the wealthy organizations of North America and Europe share their resources with the newer, poorer NGOs of the South? Equally important,

are the Northern groups open enough to learn from the South - to follow their lead in areas that most directly affect them, such as deforestation, desertification, and the realities imposed by debilitating debt?

There is a third way in which the NGO community keeps lines of communication open in the struggle towards human progress which meet the needs of this and future generations. Up until a few years ago, the fragmented concerns of NGOs all too accurately mirrored the too fragmented concerns of the governments and their institutions. There were conservation groups, development groups, relief groups, women's rights groups, population groups, and disarmament groups. Too often they competed against one another more often than they cooperated; too seldom did they seek out common ground.

Today, there is a chance for all of these groups to work together on a broad front. All of our concerns - your concerns - have fallen together. Conservation groups have realized that they cannot conserve species when international trade patterns force agricultural nations to destroy natural habitats to plant cash crops. Relief groups who used to ship food and blankets to growing numbers of environmental disasters of droughts, famines, and floods now increasingly act upon their underlying causes as well. Women's groups are protecting forests and planting trees to provide fuelwood and protecting crops. And development groups find that their efforts are often wasted in a world which devotes so much of its scientific creativity and cash to weapons systems rather than health, education, nutrition, and communication systems.

The many issues of the many non-governmental organisations come together in the one issue of sustainable human progress. Are we equal to the opportunity? Are our

visions broad enough to look beyond our traditional mandates and see how all issues and all peoples are now united in a common concern for our common future?

There is a most obvious, but no less important, way in which the NGO community can play a part in directing the planet down the path of sustainable development. That is by using your considerable communications skills and facilities to spread the word. I did not say "to spread our word". You may disagree on particulars. You may feel that we have not gone far enough, or have gone too far. Such debate must be part of the process itself.

The Commission's report is a consensus document drawn up by Commissioners from 21 countries. It is designed to sound an alarm and to encourage and lay the foundation for the debate which must follow. But it was never intended as an operational manual. It is up to others to translate into action and adapt its analysis to local, national, and regional needs. Governments should do this, but so should the NGOs. And we should all inspire one another.

For instance, we call upon national governments to make their central economic and sectoral agencies directly responsible and fully accountable for ensuring that all of their activities support development that is socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable. With the advice and watchdog role of the NGOs, the chances for real change will be greatly increased. We inserted a section in our final chapter entitled "Making Informed Choices" in which we call for a strengthening in the roles of the scientific community and non-governmental organizations to help governments do just that: make better-informed choices of options.

I therefore challenge the NGO community tonight to take advantage of this atmosphere and to test our report and government reactions to it to the utmost. Did we weaken our argument in places by being too general, by not naming names? Name them. You have a reputation for being frank and direct. Put it to good use now.

Are the governments and international organizations publicly committing themselves to the ideals of sustainable development and privately going on with business as usual? Judge them; prepare report cards. We have of necessity presented a general case for sustainable human progress, for planetary stewardship for the future. But this is meaningless unless sustainable development is woven into the fabric of national policies and laws. I challenge all national NGOs to work with governments in preparing national strategies for sustainable development and national audits of environmental resources and their uses. Examine governmental and industrial operations and see how they match the recommendations of the report. If there is a divergence, is it the government at fault or is it the report?

The government of Canada has already acted upon this recommendation. Recently environment and resource ministers there teamed up with scientists and NGOs in a task force on environment and economy. A similar exercise has been mounted in my own country. I know of several national and international NGOs which are working on national sustainable development strategies and checklists of national sustainable development indicators.

Our Common Future emphasizes the need for the involvement of other types of organizations which are also "non-governmental", but are rarely referred to as such. I am

thinking now of industry and trade unions. Already top industrial leaders have been meeting to analyze our report. One such group which came together in Colorado endorsed the concept of sustainable development and accepted the invitation to cooperate with governments and international bodies in combining the goals of economic growth and environmental maintenance. The final statement of that gathering in Aspen mentioned unspecified reservations concerning some of our recommendations. I am not surprised. Industry will have difficulties marrying the needs of future generations with their own needs to show their share-holders annual profits. We must encourage them in their attempts to do so.

Trade unions have been quick to respond to our call, with novel ideas covering issues as diverse as hazardous wastes and the spread of technology from North to South.

In the foreword to the report, the need for basic education campaigns is stressed. Unless we are able to translate our words into a language that can reach the minds and hearts of people young and old, we shall not be able to undertake the extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development.

NGOs have already taken a lead in making our world more accessible to people everywhere. There have been Readers Guides, Media Guides, videos, several international television series, and popular articles; in many countries NGOs are preparing material for classroom use. There have also been teach-ins and symposia organised by NGOs of all persuasions. One such meeting in London was organized by groups as disparate as the Quakers, the Other Economic Summit, and the national chapter of the World Wildlife Fund, a mixture demonstrating the

point about the melting pot of issues forged by the concept of sustainable progress.

The Commission recognized that you often work without adequate financial or technological resources. You also work often without adequate information.

We thus have called upon governments to recognize and extend NGOs' rights to know and have access to information on the environment and natural resources; their rights to be consulted and to participate in decision-making on activities likely to have a significant effect on their environment; and their right to legal remedies and redress when their health or environment is being seriously affected. Let us tonight renew that call upon governments to recognize these basic rights of citizens' groups.

It is necessary not only for logistical reasons that the message reach the citizens of this world. It is part of a debt we owe to them. For our report was written by the people of the world. Look at the final pages of the report and you will see the wealth of human and organizational ingenuity which entered our deliberations through our public hearings. It is our duty to recycle those findings. And this must be done by you, because our official work is over.

In the beginning of our work, right now, and in the future, our success depends on the efforts of others. It is for this reason especially that I am pleased to be ending this most important day for the World Commission by speaking to those who must help spread the message.

There is another reason why this is a most appropriate forum. We meet here tonight in honor of the late James

Marshall, a founding trustee of the Natural Resources Defense Council. He was a lawyer, an educator, and an environmentalist. He personified the motto of "Act locally, think globally" in his work in conserving the Adirondacks and his proposals for the foundation of UNESCO. His achievements demonstrate what can be accomplished by one person of broad vision and deep conviction.

This address in honor of his memory also reflects the breadth of issues common to all NGOs; my predecessors at this rostrum have included jurists, conservationists, and astronomers. Tonight you have invited a physician who became a politician. I hope that my presence here is an indication that environment and development issues have now risen to the top of the political agenda. Their effects upon economic progress, upon national and international stability and security, and upon trade are now so obvious that we can no longer treat them as side issues.

The message of sustainable development is a political necessity and an intellectual imperative. Let us all, government and non-government, sharing insights and informing the choices of one another, work together in broadening the options for the present generation and in keeping open the options of future generations.

Thank you.