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CHAIRMAN OF THE WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

PRESENTATION OF 'OUR COMMON FUTURE'
TO THE 4TH WORLD WILDERNESS CONGRESS
ESTES PARK, COLORADO

Thursday, 17 September, 1987

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen

I see this 4th World Wilderness Congress as a vivid and strong response to the call for action of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Having followed this Congress from a distance over the past few days, I know I am speaking to an audience that is very familiar with the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. I am heartened by your overwhelmingly positive response to it, and I can't express how pleased I am to be with you here today.

Our Common Future is also your report. It was formed through an open process as we heard and received hundreds of submissions from people and their organizations in all parts of the world. Our public hearings were as important as our

private deliberations. Without continuous interaction with the people who cultivate the land, live in the slums, direct the companies, do the research, hold high political office, work in the media, etc., our report would not have been the same.

The process through which the report was formed has been of vital importance to its message and perspective. Bill Ruckelshaus, who was in Denver a few days ago and so eloquently summarized our report's major conclusions, Minister Salim of Indonesia, a Soviet member of the Academy of Science, the Finance Minister of Zimbabwe, a Chinese and a Saudi Arabian scientific director, a Colombian environmentalist, and Maurice Strong, to mention but a few, all agreed on a common analysis, on shared perceptions and concrete recommendations addressed to the global community.

As we worked, nationalism and artificial divides receded. In their place emerged a common concern for the planet and for the interlocking ecological and economic threats facing humanity. This experience is one that must be shared by millions of people around the globe. Only if mutual understanding can replace mutual mistrust, only if mutual respect and solidarity can prevail will we be able to take the necessary corrective action. We offer our own consensus as one on which the international community can build.

Throughout the history of man a number of great political changes have taken place which have proven to be irreversible. Even temporary setbacks cannot detract from the fact that universal suffrage, large-scale decolonization and the establishment of a universally recognized set of fundamental human rights stand out as such great historic achievements.

The present world situation calls for new leaps forward. The world's political map and agenda have changed. The environment- previously viewed as a theme of protection - has now become a theme of survival. We must recognize that the interrelated issues of environment and development belong at the very top of the international political agenda on a par with the vital issues of disarmament and security. If the Commission succeeds in establishing this world agenda, gaining an irreversible foothold for this work, we will indeed have fulfilled our mandate.

On the screen we have seen the tragic examples of unsustainable practices which are the direct consequences of economic and social conditions and of mismanagement of natural resources; the slash and burn of vegetation, the felling for forests, the overuse of lands.- causing soil erosion and desertification and ultimately threatening the carbon dioxide cycle which in turn threatens to alter the global climate. We have seen how the excesses of affluence in the North, the burning of fossil fuels, the use of chemicals and the treatment of industrial

wastes threaten lakes and soil and cause damage to human health. We have seen how the atmosphere's ability to absorb our emissions is approaching its limits. We have seen how all these phenomena interact, across national borders and between continents.

Clearly these trends demonstrate that we have come to a point in our history where we can no longer act primarily as citizens of any single nation state. We have to behave as world citizens. We are entangled in the same destiny, and we have been brought closer together, so much closer that we no longer have the option of placing more distance between us - even though some gaps between us are widening.

We are drifting further apart as the gaps between the rich and the poor are widening. But we have been brought closer through communications, capable of bringing news about people's life and destiny around the globe in seconds. This gives hopes of building identification and a feeling of human responsibility. We have become closer through the sheer force of numbers. 100 million people are added to the global population every year. We have come so much closer that we run the risk of ruining our future, but together we can also save it.

Since the Stockholm Conference frustration has been growing over our inability to deal effectively with crucial environment and development issues. We have had a number of political

conferences, but sufficient political action has not yet been forthcoming.

The establishment in 1983 of the World Commission as an independent body reflected the high priority assigned to environment and development issues by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This happened at a time when we experienced the paradox of a decline in international cooperation and multilateralism parallel to an obvious increase in global interdependence.

Our analysis covers the entire political agenda. It discusses the international economic relations system, food security, industry, energy, the urban challenge, the protection of genetic resources and international institutions. How can we assure enough food for a growing world population, while at the same time avoiding environmental damage from large-scale agriculture? How can industry produce all the goods required to remove poverty and squalor without depleting the world's natural resources? How can we meet the growing energy requirements of developing countries without a global environmental breakdown? How can we curb rapid urbanization and get rid of urban slums? Is it within our reach to protect the genetic resources of the planet's plants and animals?

The international imbalances which are at the root of the environment/development deadlock must now be corrected. In a world ridden by poverty, only economic growth can offer hope for a better life for the poor ~~who~~ who now number close to 800 million and create the capacity to solve environmental problems. Sustainable development itself- the overriding political concept of the Commission's report is, in fact, a new concept for economic growth and we have called for a new era of growth. This new growth must be substantial but its content will need 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, or policy reforms across the spectrum of human imagination. It requires more equal access to knowledge and to resources. It requires a more equitable distribution within and among nations. There are no limits to growth itself, but it can and must be managed in such a way as to enhance the resource base on which we all depend.

To pursue a new era of economic growth, we need to breathe new life into the multilateral approach to problem solving. There is no alternative to concerted and coordinated action. Deteriorating terms of trade, soaring interest rates, protectionism, declines in financial flows, and debilitating debts strangle development potential in the Third World and

threaten to destroy our environment. Clearly, the developing countries will have real opportunities to follow sustainable paths of progress only when external conditions offer them reasonable hopes for a better future. We in the industrialized countries must do more to ensure that the international economy serves the interests of developing countries rather than leaving them behind in the poverty trap.

Consequently, commodity prices, which are now showing slight signs of recovery following the recent record lows, must be further increased and interest rates must come down. The debt crisis must now be seriously addressed, taking due account of the legitimate interests of both lenders and borrowers. Increased capital transfers and development assistance are clearly necessary, and new funds must be forthcoming for projects that aim at sustainable development.

Sustainable development is possible through a more equitable international economic regime. We must establish a world order based not only on equal rights among nations and people, but on more genuinely equal opportunities.

Our analysis is clear. Environment is not a separate sector distinct from key economic sectors such as industry, agriculture and energy. It is not a question of environment or development. It is both or none. Ecology and economy will have to merge. Environmental concerns must become an integral part of decision-making at all levels.

These goals will require changes also in the policies of the international organizations responsible for trade, aid, technological and financial assistance. Further reorientation of the policies of the World Bank, the IMF, the regional development banks, GATT, UNCTAD, UNDP, WHO and FAO, to mention a few very key agencies, will be at the core of the process we call for.

During the international debate this year about the Commission's report, some scepticism has been voiced about certain implications of the Commission's call for the incorporation of sustainability criteria into international financing. Applied to North-South issues, this has been perceived by some as implying a new form of conditionality, a constraint imposed on the developing countries from the outside.- an assymetric burden-sharing, since the North would seemingly be exempted.

It must be noted, however, that the Commission was emphatic in coupling its call for higher quality in aid and lending with substantially increased financial flows. Recipient countries bear an obligation equal to that of lenders and donors as regards setting their development priorities on the basis of long-term sustainability criteria. The notion is not one of

unilateral conditionality, but of solidarity and equality among nations. It is one of common pursuance of mutual self-interest.

This integration of sustainability criteria into the decision making process must be made operational by governments themselves as part of their national strategies. Developing countries will need external assistance from UNEP and other organizations in order to increase their capacity to manage this integration in practice. Such assistance must come from the international community at the request of the countries concerned.

Ladies and Gentlemen

When our report was launched in April, we had worked together for 900 days. Since then the Commission has conducted a broad public outreach programme. The response and the interest generated by this work have strengthened us in our conviction that is possible to reach the minds and hearts of people, irrespective of where they live or their economic situation. I know all the Commissioners carry with them a strong sense of dedication.

We have presented our report and discussed it with governments and NGO's in Eastern and Western Europe. We have also presented it in China and Latin America, in South Asia and Africa; and now we are here in North America. Our Common Future offers motivation and a challenge to governments and peoples alike. We have sounded a message of warning and hope, and we have set in motion a process which will motivate governments to act. And act they will, if presented with enough broad public pressure to that effect.

In my country, a broad campaign of information and education on environment and development has been launched as a joint venture between private organizations and public authorities. Our government has also asked all ministries, including the ministries of finance, justice, defense and others not normally perceived to be close to these issues, to review and study the Commission's report and compare our domestic and foreign policies against its principles and recommendations. They have been asked to note where our present policies differ, and if they do, to consider what steps can be taken to bring them into line with the report's recommendations.

You are aware that the United Nations General Assembly will begin its consideration of 'Our Common Future' in about a month's time in accordance with the resolution which established the Commission.

But what are the practical implications of this coming UN Debate? What can the United Nations do?

The Commission has called on the General Assembly to transform our report into a UN Programme of Action on Sustainable Development. We believe that responsible action by the world organization will strengthen its standing and authority. We believe it can breathe new life into the multilateral approach to international cooperation and that the United Nations has a unique opportunity to demonstrate leadership in making a fundamental commitment to sustainable development.

The Secretary General himself should be the pivotal force for environment and development. What could be more appropriate than international civil servant number one taking responsibility for the basic elements of human survival, peace, environment and development?

In mentioning the UN, let me add that critics of the UN have long dominated the debate on its role, and it is true that there have been setbacks due to inefficiency, bureaucracy and lack of support. But, at this juncture, where multilateral cooperation is at a low ebb, we need a renewed commitment to multilateralism and we need governments infused with a moral vocation which goes beyond pursuance of national interests. The time has come to restore the authority of the international

institutions we have created. My work on the Commission has further strengthened my own conviction that we need the United Nations now, more than ever before.

Ladies and Gentlemen

We should ask ourselves: What happens next? Who should do what? What is my role in this? What can my organization do? My appeal to all of you is this: Use your influence. Do whatever is possible to create awareness and promote change.

Our report places a powerful tool in the hands of all interested citizens' groups, institutions, trade unions, businesses, executives, company boards, nations, the media and, not least, individuals. I call upon each of you to use that tool. You, indeed, all of us, face a challenge and an opportunity. Sustainable development should be taken out of books and reports and implanted into decision-making processes. Sustainable development will depend on a decision-making process capable of securing effective citizen participation. It is the concerned public that can put environment and development issues onto the political agendas.

We must build on the present momentum. In particular we must build on the enthusiasm of young people.. We must all do our part in launching a global campaign to inform and to educate. We need a new motivation for a global transition to sustainable development. We must secure a constructive debate and persuade public opinion to heighten its pressures and hold governments, institutions and policy-makers responsible and convince them of the merits of our overriding goal of sustainable development.

In light of the critical thresholds we are already approaching, the next decades are crucial. This one very finite earth must provide food and energy, and meet the needs of a doubled world population. It may be required to sustain a world economy five to ten times as large as the present. It is quite clear that this cannot be done by multiplying present patterns. Changes are needed. Decisions are due now. We must chart a sustainable course of action.

To secure our common future, we need a new international vision, one which looks beyond narrow and short-sighted national and entrepreneurial ambitions. We must have a new deal in international cooperation. Timing is urgent. The environment/development crisis is real. We must all join forces in a new partnership and start acting together. We are dependent on one another and we share a common future.

Before concluding, I want to say that we are all very grateful to Colorado State University for their dedicated assistance during the last three years in planning this Congress. Deep thanks and appreciation are also due to the International Wilderness Leadership Foundation for sponsoring this Congress and to all of the members of the Executive Committee and the hundreds of volunteers who have worked on this Congress for their untiring work, the success of which we witness this week.

Upon the 200th anniversary of the Constitution of the United States of America, what could be more timely for this congress than to acclaim the pioneering role played by this great nation in the field of environment. The names of Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir are firmly engraved in the history of conservation. More recently, the evolution of various interrelated questions of environment and development into major issues on the international political agenda owes a great deal to the initiatives and the leadership of the wide variety of citizens groups and organizations that give the US environmental community so much of its vitality and dynamism. The United States will play a crucial role in translating the central message of the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development into practice. The echo from Denver, your response to 'Our Common Future' will provide a great stimulus from within, which will ultimately extend far beyond the borders of the United States.