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The Agenda: Ecology, Poverty Reduction, Disarming

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Three interlinked themes -- environmental protection, poverty reduction and disarmament -- are vital to preserving the human future.

In no area is human interdependence clearer than in protecting the global environment.

A consensus for a policy of sustainable development was achieved at the first UN Environment Conference, held in Stockholm in 1972. That milestone led two decades later to the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, which produced agreements on climate change, forests and biodiversity. Next year the Earth Summit in Johannesburg will assess progress and setbacks.

The 1987 Montreal Protocol has been a remarkable success in eliminating ozone-depleting substances and reducing ultraviolet radiation levels. Global warming is a different story. Projected temperature increases will increase weather-related disasters and melt glaciers and polar ice caps, raising sea levels and threatening millions who live along coasts and on low-lying islands.

Applying the 1997 Kyoto Protocol is a vital element of a new global ethic of conservation and stewardship, which aims to preserve the sustainability of ecosystems and the jobs that depend on them.

Alternative and renewable sources of energy, rather than the burning of fossil fuels, can provide energy while sparing the environment. Our common responsibilities as inhabitants of one small planet must take precedence over the selfish pursuit of parochial prosperity.

The second global imperative is economic development. Imagine the world as a village of 1,000 persons. Here are some of its characteristics [from the Millennium Assembly Report by

Secretary-General Kofi Annan]: 150 villagers live in affluent areas, 780 in poverty and 70 in a transitional neighborhood; 200 villagers dispose of 86 percent of the wealth, while nearly half live on less than \$2 a day; 220 villagers (two-thirds of them women) are illiterate. Fewer than 60 villagers own a computer, and only 24 have access to the Internet. More than half the villagers have never made or received a telephone call.

There is some good news. Life expectancy in developing countries has risen from 46 to 64 years, infant mortality rates have been cut in half, the proportion of children enrolled in primary school has increased by more than 80 percent, and access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation has doubled.

In the Millennium Declaration of last year, the world's leaders committed themselves to halve by the year 2015 the proportion of humanity living in absolute poverty, lifting more than a billion people out of their misery. This target can be achieved by making the benefits of economic globalization more equitable and by allocating \$7 billion a year to provide primary education for 130 million children in the developing world.

The third requirement for securing the human future is to end the arms race.

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, many people became complacent. Roughly 30,000 nuclear warheads still exist, many of them at frightening levels of alert. Two more countries have crossed the nuclear threshold by openly testing nuclear devices. Conventional weapons, with the so-called "revolution in military affairs," have assumed new levels of accuracy and lethality. More than 500 million small arms and light weapons circulate, some in the hands of 300,000 child soldiers. Levels of global military expenditure remain at 90 percent of their Cold War zenith.

Every state has a right to self-defense enshrined in the UN Charter. But national defense plans should not imperil strategic stability and make other countries feel insecure. Only cooperative security arrangements can uphold the norms of disarmament treaties and conventions, reinforce the rule of international law and invest law-abiding countries with the moral authority to enforce compliance by outlaw states.

The writer, United Nations undersecretary-general for disarmament affairs, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.