



THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

15 March 2012

Excellency,

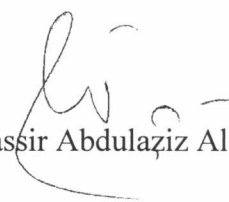
As mandated by General Assembly resolution 66/204, I have the pleasure to invite your delegation to participate in the interactive dialogue of the 66<sup>th</sup> General Assembly on Harmony with Nature, to be held on **18 April 2012**.

The interactive dialogue aims to examine *the scientific findings on the impacts of human activities on the functioning of the Earth System*. It will also explore how human activity has damaged the Earth System, especially by focusing on those areas where such damage has already affected the regenerative capacity of the planet. The dialogue is intended to promote an exchange of ideas and experiences from multiple perspectives, with particular attention to the contribution of science.

I am pleased to share with you the concept note and tentative programme of the informal interactive dialogue for your reference. Updated information about the event will be available on the website of the President of the General Assembly.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

*[Faint signature]*

  
Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser

All Permanent Representatives and  
Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
New York

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE OF THE 66<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON HARMONY WITH NATURE

Wednesday 18 April 2012 · New York

**Subject: Scientific findings on the impacts of human activities on the functioning of the Earth System**

**Venue: United Nations Headquarters, New York**

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At the launching of the Secretary General's report of the High Level Panel on Global Sustainability on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2012 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon highlighted the importance of science as an essential tool for decision-making on sustainability issues. The report "Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing" calls on the Secretary-General to lead efforts to integrate scientific knowledge across sectors and institutions, and to consider naming a chief scientific adviser or establishing a scientific advisory board with diverse knowledge and experience to advise him or her and other organs of the United Nations.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Ban Ki-moon further stated that sustainable development is a top priority for his second term. "The signposts are clear: We need to change dramatically, beginning with how we think about our relationship with each other, to future generations, and to the ecosystems that support us". He further added "With seven billion of us now inhabiting our planet, it is time to reflect on our current path. Today we stand at a crossroads... Achieving sustainability requires us to transform the global economy... Citizens will no longer accept governments and corporations breaching their compact with them as custodians of a sustainable future for all".<sup>1</sup>

Science and Economics have already told us that our current path is unsustainable. If we are to enhance humankind well-being, further global justice, strengthen gender equality and preserve the Earth System, we must adopt a new paradigm. This could be the greatest challenge to be addressed by the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, known as Rio+20, to be held in June 2012. Scientists must guide this new chart and the UN System has to look forward to that direction.

The Secretary-General's intervention also built on his Report on Harmony with Nature submitted to the 66<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly (A/66/302). The report addresses both the evolving relationship of humankind with nature as reflected in environmental legislation and the important role of science. One of the most important conclusions of the report is that humankind must accept that it is an intrinsic part of

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<sup>1</sup> Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A future worth choosing. The Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability.

nature: "By contaminating and depleting Mother Earth, we are also contaminating and depleting ourselves... We are contributing to the forces and imbalances that cause the increasing natural disasters that are striking us...The more humans learned about nature, the more difficult it became to entertain the notion that the universe existed for humans. No longer were people considered as the masters of nature, but rather as members of the natural community". Such statements reaffirm the holistic approach that gave this document its unique identity.

On 22nd December 2011, the UN General Assembly, at its 66<sup>th</sup> session, adopted Resolution A/RES/66/204 on Harmony with Nature, requesting an interactive dialogue to discuss the scientific findings on how human activities are affecting the Earth's System.

Harmony with nature is an integral part of sustainable development that involves reconnecting humans with the world around them and forging a new consensus among countries of differing levels of development. Holism, which is embodied in the concept of sustainable development, implies that all things are interconnected and that nothing occurs in isolation. In order to reinforce the principles of sustainable development, we must work to render whole each one of its pillars: environmental, social and economic. As the three pillars integrate, they will reinforce the dynamics of sustainability that so far has eluded us. Indeed, the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Sustainable development is premised on the worldview that nature and humans are inextricably intertwined in the same web of life. Formulating and implementing sustainable development policies that are truly in harmony with nature implies profound changes in current consumption and production patterns, and all that they yield: food, energy, water, material products and lifestyle aspirations. Such deep changes require letting go of the old worldviews that set humans apart from Nature and they can only be accomplished through major shifts in thinking, values, education and behavior. Changes in public policy and consensus building at all levels through inclusive processes that respect national sovereignty and the rights of individuals must also occur. Awareness must be raised on how human activities have damaged and continue to damage, in many cases irreversibly, the regenerative capacity of Nature.

Given the infinite interactions and reactions that occur in the web of life, the extent to which the Earth System is able to retain its regenerative capacity remains one of the greatest unanswered questions in the history of humankind. The paradox of the last hundred years is that we have accumulated significant knowledge and yet understood very little. Our relentless crises are constant reminders of our shortcomings. The knowledge so far gathered has been fragmented and our understanding is yet to be as holistic as the web of life.

The regeneration of Nature is a dynamic process by which life recovers spaces when Nature has been partially or totally destroyed. However, the regenerative process can be slowed, interrupted or brought to an end. Humankind is weakening and destroying this process upon which we depend for our survival. In this regard, climate change is

only one of the multiple facets of the environmental crisis. What measures must we take now to prevent more destruction? And, how long will “now” take?

The United Nations could help answer these questions during the Rio+20 Conference, setting the stage for more discussion and understanding of the scientific complexities that have so far eluded us, as well as on how Earth Science can further reveal our complex relationship with Nature. Despite our wealth of knowledge on our relationship with Nature, we have failed to demonstrate impacts of sustainable development.

The United Nations Conference on sustainable development (Rio+20) is an opportunity to assess our relationship with nature over the last 20 years to reaffirm commitments made in Rio and Johannesburg and to inject new impetus and to chart a sustainable way forward. The contribution of science and innovation in achieving sustainable development should not be underestimated.

For humankind to thrive with equity and equality on its journey towards sustainable development, we must keep the Earth in full view when we are making decisions and taking action. We need a major shift from a Self-centered to an Earth-centered approach, and science can guide us in this regard. The interactive dialogue can contribute to a better understanding of the holistic construct that lies at the core of sustainable development.

### **Objective and Expected Outcomes**

As expressed in UN resolution A/RES/66/204, the interactive dialogue of the General Assembly on Harmony with Nature aims to examine how human activity has damaged the Earth System, especially by focusing on those areas where such damage has already affected the regenerative capacity of the planet. The dialogue is intended to promote an exchange of ideas and experiences from multiple perspectives, with particular attention to the contribution of science.

The dialogue is expected to yield the following outcomes:

- A precise and accurate diagnosis of the negative impacts of human activity on the Earth System, in particular its regenerative capacity; and,
- Institutional responses to catalyze science for sustainable development.

### **Programme**

The interactive dialogue will take place on Wednesday, 18 April 2012, during the commemoration of International Mother Earth Day, at UN Headquarters in New York. The dialogue will consist of one moderated panel discussion with eminent scientific experts. The floor will be opened to delegates and other participants for questions to the panelists, as well as brief interventions to share their experiences and other perspectives.