

STATEMENT TO THE
COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
11TH SESSION
by
MR. NITIN DESAI
UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL
FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

28 April 2003

Thank you Mr. Chairman,

May I begin by congratulating you on the assumption of this office. We are particularly glad that you are in the chair in this very crucial session of the Commission on Sustainable Development. A great deal depends on how this particular session of the Commission on Sustainable Development shapes the follow-up of the Political Declaration and the Plan of Implementation that came out of Johannesburg.

The printed version of the Political Declaration and the Plan of Implementation is from the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD). It begins with a foreword from the Secretary-General which recalls what those five children said when we started the Summit segment – their challenge to all of us to do what we said we were going to do. That is the heart of the challenge of Johannesburg. How do we ensure that we actually do all of the things that we said that we were going to do?

If we had done that for Rio, the whole tenor and tone of the Johannesburg meeting would have been different. It is very important that we ask ourselves, in the follow-up, what is it that we have to do in order to pursue the Johannesburg Programme of Implementation and ensure that it truly gets implemented. For this reason we say that Johannesburg as a Summit was about implementation. In looking at implementation, we necessarily also look at the modalities. That is the context in which there was the discussion of partnerships, which, as our Chairman has pointed out correctly, are not a substitute for what governments and international organizations have to do. They are a way of adding to what lies within the responsibilities of governments and international organizations, a way of making the processes of implementation real and more relevant to people.

Our Chairman has outlined very well the basic frameworks that we have to work with in order to answer some of the questions about implementation. How do we ensure adequacy of reporting and monitoring? How do we ensure accountability? How do we ensure that what was decided in Johannesburg leads not to some separate strand of policy

development, programme development, project development, but gets effectively integrated into the processes that are already under way? For instance, the processes that are under way for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, processes at the country level, like the poverty reduction strategy documents, the UN Development Assistance Framework, and so on. Our challenge is to see in what way this Commission can act so as to ensure that what it does is pursued, not simply in the context of set piece programmes for sustainable development, but also gets reflected in other implementation processes. That is why it is very important that we in the UN Secretariat see the follow-up of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation in the same cooperative spirit that we prepared for Johannesburg itself.

I am particularly glad to have Dr. Klaus Topfer, the Executive Director of UNEP, sitting here with me. In many ways his presence represents and symbolizes our willingness as the UN to work together for the implementation of Johannesburg. UNEP was a great source of support as we were preparing for Johannesburg and I am absolutely certain it will remain so as we implement Johannesburg.

In many ways, we in the UN need to make sure that we work together for the implementation of the Johannesburg commitments. It is not possible to look at this as a totality and say that every single area is something where we will set up strong United Nations based processes. No, we need priorities. When we were preparing for Johannesburg, the Secretary-General identified water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity as priorities. Certain others emerged from the Johannesburg Programme. For instance, there is a strong emphasis on issues related to oceans. We would wish to look at all of these areas and ask ourselves how adequate are our mechanisms for cooperation, coordination, joint action in the United Nations. We are in fact doing that. I have just come from a meeting of the Chief Executives Board, in Paris, where the major item of discussion was the follow-up of Johannesburg. The focus was on what we need to do in the UN system to: (a) provide a coherent and coordinated response to what is required of us by the Johannesburg Programme; (b) connect the Johannesburg Programme with all of the other things that we, as UN Organizations, are involved in

implementing. I assure you that, depending on the decisions you take in this CSD, we will follow up and ensure that the UN system comes out with a strong visible, coordinated follow-up to the Johannesburg process.

Two areas in particular I would wish to commend for your consideration: one is water, and the other is energy. Both of these are important parts of the Johannesburg Programme. There are certain very important goals that were agreed on in Johannesburg in these areas. I know that in the case of energy there is some disappointment about the lack of a quantitative goal for renewable energy. But the language is very strong – much stronger than we have ever had. The mandate is clearer, much clearer than we have ever had and I think it is very important that we show that, during what our President would call the Johannesburg Decade, we ensure that there is a coordinated response from the world community to what countries do to implement their programmes for sustainable water and energy development.

We in the UN certainly also need to bring our act together because almost every UN agency is involved in water and energy in different ways. Some coordination mechanisms are in place. What we need is more than just coordination. We need mechanisms which are credible in the eyes of national governments, in the eyes of political processes, in the eyes of partners, credible in the sense that they provide access to information on who does what in the UN mechanisms and where there is a certain focus or advocacy. This is something that we have been talking about among ourselves. We will certainly await any guidance that you have in this regard.

Mr. Chairman, let me just turn quickly and finally to the role of CSD itself. In many ways, the pursuit of sustainable development has to be a political process. First, because one of the key things that we are trying to do there is to reflect the interest and concerns of future producers and consumers, future generations. Those people can never be represented through market mechanisms. They have to be represented through a political process. That's one reason why sustainable development necessarily has to rest on a political process as opposed to a purely technocratic or bureaucratic one. Second,

sustainable development is about equity; about the way in which the costs and benefits of development will be distributed within and between generations. That too is a political matter requiring a political process. The terminology that we use for this varies. We call it burden sharing. Sometimes we call it common but differentiated responsibility. And third, it involves integrating three very different areas of discourse (the economic, the social, the ecological) in the sphere of policy-making, in the sphere of academic research, in the sphere of practical action. This requires a space which is not just political, but which connects the political with the scientific and with civil society and with the business sector. That, in essence is what the CSD has sought to be.

Our challenge is that a political process which has been good at defining policy frameworks and goals must now show itself as being effective, also, in maintaining the pressures for implementation. It is a new type of challenge, but it is very necessary that we respond to this. We cannot treat the processes of implementation as if they can be handled in an entirely non-political manner. And it is very important that the CSD use its strength, which is its capacity to bring so many diverse actors together and the openness that it has to civil society, the way in which it has embraced the notion of partnerships, to really focus, not just on policy development, but on implementation.

Mr. Chairman,

I will certainly agree with many of the NGOs that the tasks of policy development are not over. We always face the dilemma that we will not be satisfied with the adequacy of the goals and commitments. But the question that always arises is that, in a situation where what has been agreed has not been implemented, should we be focussing on ratcheting up the goals or on what stands in the way of implementing what we have already agreed? This balance will always have to be drawn. At the present stage, much of the balance is on the latter, focussing on the barriers to implementation in terms of political will, in terms of financing, in terms of technology and other issues. That is the role of the CSD.

Mr. Chairman, as many of you know, this is in some ways the last time that I will be speaking in an official United Nations capacity on sustainable development. It is something that has provided a common thread in my international career for the past fifteen years. What has been achieved since we first wrote the Brundtland Report, since we had the Rio Conference, all the way on to Johannesburg is a matter of great satisfaction to me.

It has been a great process. Much of it has been focussed in terms of making the idea of sustainable development credible. For this to happen, this idea has to be stated in a clear way and the evidence must show that it is necessary. Beyond this, it must reflect something which is already there in the sentiments of the people it is addressing. I believe all of these things have happened: the idea of sustainable development has been stated in a compelling way; the evidence is mounting that it is absolutely necessary for human survival, and I believe that over these ten to fifteen years the very culture of international relations has changed to make this idea something which truly responds to peoples' search for prosperity and peace.

Thank you very much.