



**A Statement from the South African NGO Forum for the  
World Summit on Sustainable Development Johannesburg 2002  
CSD 10 United Nations, New York 30 April 2001.**

*Presented by Michelle Perssend*

The people of South Africa have emerged from decades of apartheid and centuries of colonization and oppression. This history has forged a civil society deeply conscious of the relationship between power and quality of life. It is not surprising then that the constituency we represent sees the *environment* as a site of political struggle -- a struggle for resources, livelihoods, justice and equality -- a struggle for the basic human right to a clean and healthy environment. It is with this particular understanding of the environmental challenges of the world and the challenges faced by the CSD that we, the NGOs of South Africa, invite governments, NGOs and business leaders from around the world to Johannesburg next year. Not only will your deliberations and commitments be watched closely by the world's media, but also by millions of South Africans, many who's livelihoods and futures may depend on the outcomes of the Summit.

**The state of the world**

An important legacy of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit was a significant convergence in our understanding of the concept 'sustainable development. At the core of this was an understanding that the environmental problems of the world were not merely problems of pollution, biodiversity loss, and natural resource management, but that they were equally, problems of development and underdevelopment — problems of wealth and poverty, problems of abundance and scarcity, problems of security, equity and justice. But despite this understanding, the global environmental problems we face in 2001 look strikingly similar to those we faced in 1992. In many cases they are even worse.

**The time is now!**

More than ever before it is evident that the environmental and developmental challenges facing each individual, each community and each country are intricately linked and inherently part of the greater global challenge. No action by an individual, community or country can be said to be free of consequences on others. More than ever before, we see evidence of the negative impact of human activities on the environment. Irreversible changes in global temperature can now be measured. Plant and animal species are disappearing at an alarming rate. Natural habitats are being destroyed and productive land degraded. Droughts and floods kill hundreds and force thousands to flee their homes (We remember the lives lost in the recent disastrous floods in Mozambique).

We know what needs to be done. We know we need to work together. We know that there is no more time to waste. *The World Summit will be seen as a failure if it does not ensure that time, energy and resources are committed to immediate action.*

**Poverty and over-consumption – two sides of a coin**

We live in a world where the 3 richest people own more wealth than the 48 poorest countries, where a quarter of the world's population consume three-quarters of the

world's energy and minerals, and eat more than half the world's food. The huge gap between rich and poor, between weak and powerful is growing bigger.

Poverty traps people in a cycle of unsustainability. The survival needs of poor people seldom allows them to choose the best and most sustainable environmental options. But their poverty is only in relation to the wealth of others, and they invariably bear the brunt of waste, pollution and excessive over-consumption. Despite the increasing wealth gap, the flow of official development aid from wealthy to poor countries has reached its lowest point in many years. The poorest countries pay millions to service their debts, yet there is no recognition of the enormous ecological debt owed by the developed countries.

Sustainable development is simply not possible while millions live in poverty. Yet there is no hope of governments being able to address poverty and redistribute wealth in their countries while wealth disparity continues to increase at a global level. *The World Summit will be seen as a failure if it cannot reframe global environmental issues as issues of global inequality, of poverty, of social and environmental justice.*

### **Participation**

At all levels, from household to global, the link between disempowerment and environmental degradation is clear. Participation in which all stakeholders are equally empowered is an essential requirement for sustainable decisions. The 1992 Earth Summit and subsequent meetings of the CSD set important precedents for the participation of a broad range of stakeholders. Yet the reality is that many are still marginalized – not just from the CSD process, but from decision-making at all levels. Participation of civil society groups is sometimes constrained by a limited capacity and lack of information. But too often is because decision-makers simply do not like what they say.

**The World Summit will be a failure if key decisions are taken behind closed doors, and if the opportunity for forging real partnerships between government, business and NGO is not grasped.**

### **Our commitment**

We, as representatives of NGOs in the host country commit ourselves :

- To making the World Summit a significant milestones in the path towards sustainable development.
- To include as many sectors of civil society as possible, from South Africa and other countries in our planning.
- To assist and accommodate all sectors of civil society from all countries of the world, but will give particular attention to those representing the traditionally disempowered, from countries in Africa, and from rural people, women and indigenous communities
- Starting now, to work to establish initiatives, programmes and networks that will last beyond 2002
- To work with and support our government in its role as host of the World Summit.
- To build the capacity of ordinary people and help them to play an active role in sustainable development, locally, nationally and globally.

To an honest and open appraisal of our government's progress towards sustainability and Agenda 21 objectives, and the progress of others.

/ends

For more information contact: [admin@earthsummit2002.org.za](mailto:admin@earthsummit2002.org.za)