

OPENING ADDRESS
by Mr. Nitin Desai
TO THE WORLD SUMMIT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
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Mr. President,

Distinguished Delegates,

I should begin with a word of thanks to you Mr. President, and, through you, to the people of South Africa, the people of the Province of Gauteng, and the people of Johannesburg who have worked so hard to make these extraordinarily wonderful arrangements for our meetings here. I also wish to take this opportunity to thank, through you, all of the members of your team – Minister Zuma, Minister Moosa, and all of the officials in their ministries and other ministries who, over the past year and a half, have been working so hard to ensure that this Summit will be a great success.

Mr. President,

In many ways, this Summit is the last in a great cycle of global conferences that the United Nations has held in the 1990s. The cycle began with the Children's Summit and the Rio Earth Summit, and continued with a series of conferences which have addressed all major dimensions of economic and social development. Taken together, these conferences have defined for us, for the world, not just a framework for development policy and development cooperation, but also a comprehensive vision of what human progress is all about. Of all these conferences, perhaps Rio was the most ambitious, with the most wide-ranging agenda. Its outcomes included, as you know, Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration, the statement of principles on forests, and the launch of a number of major conventions, which, together, have put before the world a truly ambitious agenda, combining the social, economic and environmental dimensions of development, and focusing on the challenges facing us in three key areas: eradicating poverty; moving us to a pattern of consumption and production which is ecologically more sustainable; and allowing us to handle critical eco-systems like forests and oceans in a more holistic and integrated way.

Many assessments have been made, Mr. President, in preparation for this conference on how much progress has been made in meeting the Rio challenges. They have been the subject of many reports and extensive discussions over the past year. We know that there have been some successes - that there is heightened awareness, and that there have been many concrete achievements, particularly in communities which have established local Agenda 21s. NGOs have managed to do some very creative things especially at the local level. But, in spite of improvements in social conditions and progress in enacting environmental legislation, overall, the record card is very poor. Extreme poverty and avoidable diseases persist, environmental deterioration of soil, water, oceans and forests continues. Risks accumulate as in the case of global climate change as well as in other areas. But rather than dwelling on the problems, what we must ask ourselves is why they persist. The purpose of this Summit is to tackle what has stood in the way of us making progress, and what can we do in order to get action, to get results.

One basic factor here, Mr. President, is that the world has been changing rapidly in this decade. We now talk every day, everywhere of globalization - a word which we hardly used in Rio. And, certainly, the fact that economic development is now increasingly driven by trade and financial liberalization has, in some ways, made it more difficult to pursue some of the social and environmental objectives which were set at the great cycle of UN conferences beginning with the Rio Conference. And, as you have said, Mr. President, globalisation has not led to greater equity. It has, in many ways, widened the divide between the rich and the poor, both between and within countries.

And these are not the only changes that should concern us. In Rio we hardly talked about the AIDS pandemic. In countries which are seriously affected by HIV/AIDS, it is simply not possible to think of implementing the objectives of UN conferences unless we directly address this pandemic and find ways of containing it and reversing it.

There are other changes of a different character which have taken place over this decade, and which present us with a widely different set of circumstances than those that prevailed at the time of Rio. One example: this has been the decade of information technology and many countries have prospered because of it. Today we take it for granted in many parts of the world. I sometimes have to remind people that when we did the Rio conference, there was no worldwide web. The Internet was

there, but not the worldwide web. And yet we have not adequately connected the potential of information technology with the agenda for sustainable development.

So, one reason why we have not fully succeeded in implementing what we agreed in Rio is that we have not been able to adjust the means of implementation of the Rio agenda, and of the agenda of the conferences that followed it, to the major changes that have taken place over this decade. But there are other equally fundamental reasons.

The Rio agreements presumed an improvement in the macro-economic climate for development. This decade has not witnessed that. This has been a decade of declining ODA. And the measures that have a potential for improvements in market access and debt relief have come only at the end of the decade and are still quite modest. We must, therefore, accept that the expectations that we had in Rio about an improvement in the macro-economic prospects for developing countries have not, by and large, been fulfilled. This is certainly a very important reason why we have not made the progress that we had sought. It is not, however, only the absence of adequate macro-economic support that can explain why we have not had the types of results that we ought to have had on the ground in relation to poverty, to the environment, and to risk management.

A basic constraint is that we have not yet truly grasped what it means to bring these things together. Many people turn around and tell me: why is the Summit's agenda so broad? Why do you cover so many things? The reason is that we have, so far, been working along sectoral lines. And that, simply, does not work. I could give you lots of illustrations but let me give you only one very telling example: getting girls into school. – girls' education. In many parts of the world, one of the most useful things you can do for this is to improve water supply. Quite simply, if you improve water supply, you reduce the time the girls take to go to collect water for their house, and that improves their attendance in school. Now, imagine an education department going to a finance minister and saying that, for the education programme, they need money for water supply. Of course, if you have a finance minister who is as bold and as far seeing as yours he would probably say "yes". But I suspect that a lot of other finance ministers would not be so happy to do that. But this is only an example. What we need to do is to connect. But we do not have in place the processes which will allow us to do so, at the national level or the global level.

Another factor is that Rio was a grand vision, a road map. But a road map is not quite enough for starting to travel. You also need a route plan. You need to say I am going to start here and end there, and these are the resources I am going to use. What is needed is a medium-term framework.

I believe, Mr. President, that we have a framework now available to us for our work in Johannesburg which addresses some of these barriers.

On the macro-economic side, we have seen important positive developments in the agreements that were reached for the Doha round. We have the advantage of the Monterrey meeting on Finance for Development, where substantial commitments were made for additional development assistance. We have the recent agreements reached on the replenishment of the Global Environment Facility. And the Millennium Summit has given us a comprehensive set of medium-term goals for the year 2015, focusing on issues of poverty, education, health and sustainable development. As I said earlier, we have lots and lots of wonderful examples of local success. We must bring these things together in order to scale up these successes, so that what is happening in a few places can happen much more widely. If we connect the medium-term framework which we have all accepted at the Millennium Summit with the larger vision of sustainable development, if we use the opportunities which a successful implementation of Doha and Monterrey can provide on the finance side, then I think, we can show results. This is what our work so far has been oriented towards: a plan of implementation focused on targets, timetables, goals and activities which can lead to concrete results.

It is important that we focus here on key, current challenges in the areas of water and sanitation, energy, health, agriculture and bio-diversity, in ways that will give us a sense of concrete commitment, that will give us something which is both achievable and monitorable. In addition, we need to connect what governments are going to agree on with what can be done by scaling up the wonderful initiatives that we have had at the local level and by NGOs, and, in many cases, in the business sector. This is where the notion of “partnerships” comes in. Partnerships come in basically to connect the dynamism that we see at the local level with the commitments which the governments need to make. We need both. Not one or the other. Both. Partnerships without the commitments of governments will not work. The commitments of governments are important. But partnerships add credibility to the commitments, and enhance our capacity to implement them in practice.

These partnerships will also mark a new stage in the involvement of civil society in the United Nations. Where Rio marked a critical phase of the engagement of civil society with the United Nations in advocacy and policy development, let us see to it that this Conference marks the stage at which we complete this engagement not just in the processes of advocacy and policy development, but also in the process of actual implementation. And that is why at this Conference what is important is not only what takes place in Sandton but also what takes place in the many other venues in this city where members of civil society are meeting.

But let us bear in mind that this is a medium-term framework. I keep reminding people that when you half the number of people who do not have access to safe water by 2015, that's only half way to sustainability. When you bring half the number of poor people over the poverty line, that's only half way to sustainability. We still have a longer way to go.

We are focusing on the medium-term because we want action. But it is in the nature of the agenda of sustainable development that we should not lose sight of the long term – not only in our thoughts but also in our decisions. When we ask people to focus not only on 2015 but also on 2050; sometimes they say, “Isn't that rather far away?” But we should bear in mind, Mr. President, that more of half of the people who will be alive in 2050 are already born. So, focusing not just on 2015 but also on 2050 it is not something theoretical. We are talking about what will be the life of more than half the people who are already here in the world: our children, our grandchildren. There are many areas of sustainable consumption, of energy, of ecosystem management where we must operate within a longer-term framework.

Above all, there must be a sense of urgency, the realization that we don't have time to lose. Every year, 3 million people die because of air pollution; 5 million people die because of waterborne diseases. If these were a single disease – if they had one name – would we not treat it as an emergency? But we do not. And we let it continue. If we can bring together this sense of urgency, precision in the medium-term framework for action, partnerships, and a vision which can guide us towards longer term sustainability, then, I believe, we will be able to show results. And when we meet ten years from now, perhaps again in Johannesburg, we will be able to talk not about what we have not achieved, but what we have achieved and what more we can achieve.

Mr. President, let me conclude by recalling something you said yesterday. You described the world, as is now, as a form of “global apartheid”, a phrase which has resonated with many people: a world divided between the rich and the poor; between those who have access to safe water, and those who don’t; between the 2 billion people who have access to energy, and the 2 billion who do not. And you correctly asked that we should attack this form of apartheid with the same vigour that the world mustered to fight the apartheid which existed in your wonderful country only a short while ago.

And how was this done, Mr. President? Two things were important. One – the rest of the world did not say this is their problem; it said it is also our problem. Second – it exercised solidarity and accepted responsibility in supporting you in your fight to change that system. And it is this same sense of solidarity and responsibility that we need today in addressing the underlying issues behind this global apartheid.

With these words, Mr. President, I thank you once again, and look forward to an outcome that will mark a turning point in the struggle to ensure that this global apartheid between the rich and the poor characterizing today’s world will finally be eliminated.

I thank you once again.