

UNCTAD/XI/3
14 June 2004

STATEMENT OF SECRETARY-GENERAL TO CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM IN BRAZIL

(Reissued as received.)

This is the text of remarks by Secretary-General Kofi Annan at a Civil Society Forum in São Paulo, Brazil, yesterday (13 June):

When I come to major United Nations conferences, I always look forward to the civil society forum. It is often the best part. And this one is no exception.

As I look at you, I see passion and boundless energy. I see people not content to sit at home, criticize from the sidelines, or leave it to others to do the heavy lifting. I see people who want to get involved, often at considerable personal sacrifice and even risk. I see men and women reaching across gulfs of identity, geography, class and culture to find common purpose and strength in numbers.

It is people mobilized as you are, more than any government initiative or scientific breakthrough, who can overcome the obstacles to a better world. From global campaigns to community organizing; from peaceful protest to the provision of life-saving services; from day-to-day projects to humanitarian emergencies, the civil society movement continues to grow and make its mark.

You have come to São Paulo to shape the debate on the crucial point where trade and development intersect. This is an area where non-governmental organizations, church groups, labour unions, and others have been working relentlessly to make sure that international trade and globalization work for the poor, not against them.

I share your concern about agricultural and other subsidies in the developed world that create unfair competition, and about how hard it is for developing-country goods to gain access to rich-country markets.

Like you, I have called on governments to remember that poor countries need more and better aid. And I, like you, am trying to defend cultural diversity, and calling for developing countries to have a bigger say in the economic and financial decisions that affect the lives of their people.

Ultimately, the challenge that has brought us all together is the fight against poverty. There is of course a powerful moral imperative at work here. But poverty is everyone's concern for practical reasons, too,

(more)

since it is linked to environmental degradation, conflict and other ills -- not in direct causal chains, of course, but in various vicious circles from which we are trying to break free.

Poverty also has a huge opportunity cost, robbing the world of the contributions that so many talented men and women would otherwise make to the growth and well-being of their societies. As Thomas Gray wrote nearly 300 years ago, "child penury repressed their noble rage". We should be ashamed that, in the 21st century, that is still true.

Thanks in no small part to your efforts, the quest for balanced, equitable, sustainable development has reached a turning point with the Millennium Development Goals. Civil society organizations played a leading role in extracting those commitments from governments. I know that some groups have said they should really be called the "minimum" development goals. And to be sure, even if the goals are achieved, there would still be enormous deprivation. But I believe the goals are strikingly different from other pledges that became broken promises over the past 50 years.

They are measurable. We can see where we are making progress, and where we are failing and falling behind. They have unprecedented political support. All the world's leaders have signed on to them. So have all the main arms of the international system. Most important, they are achievable, even in the relatively short time we have left.

But we need to take action now. You have been making valuable contributions, by linking your existing campaigns to the first seven goals -- on poverty, hunger, health, education, women, AIDS and the environment. But prospects for achieving those goals depend crucially on how we do on the eighth -- forging a global partnership for development. The Goals represent a deal. Not every developing country has made sufficient progress, but as a whole the developing world is doing its part. The same cannot yet be said of the wealthiest and most powerful countries, especially when it comes to levelling the international trading system and creating a development-friendly global economic environment.

So we urgently need you to do what you do best. We all understand what it takes to achieve the goals: resources, know-how and will. But political will shifts only if there is national and local mobilization by the public, and only when leaders are held accountable. Appeals by international organizations are one thing. But what would really make a difference is if, at the local level, the goals achieve a critical mass of support and even become "vote-getters". You can and must help make that happen. If we do not, millions of people will die, prematurely and unnecessarily. That fact, and this conference, should be a call to action.

Our contacts have expanded greatly in the past decade or so, enriching and enlivening our work, but also generating tensions with which you are all familiar.

Next week, I will release the report of the high-level panel, headed by the former President Cardoza, which I established to advise me on how we can get the most out of our expanding ties and partnerships. I think you will welcome its emphasis on the UN's convening role, bringing together all actors -- governmental and others -- who can contribute to tackling the world's toughest challenges. I am sure you will also approve of its ideas for strengthening the contributions of Southern civil society groups, and

(more)

forging closer links between the deliberative and operational sides of the United Nations.

As we move forward with these proposals, I hope at least one thing will be clear to you: that I personally am committed to opening the doors of the United Nations -- to you and to all stakeholders.

You are a growing presence in your own societies and on the world stage. Liberated by the advance of democracy, linked by shared interests and by the Internet, increasingly effective at using your consumer and voting power, you have the weight to tip the balance. So please, keep up the pressure!

* * * * *