



The Global Forum on Oceans, Coasts, and Islands

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SPECIAL PRESENTATION: POVERTY REDUCTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: WHY IS SO LITTLE PROGRESS BEING MADE?

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Dr. Jeffrey Sachs is the Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and serves as the Director of the UN Millennium Project and Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the Millennium Development Goals. In 2004 and 2005 he was named among the 100 most influential leaders in the world by Time Magazine, and is the 2005 recipient of the Sargent Shriver Award for Equal Justice. His recent book, The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time, addresses issues of divergent global economic conditions which have resulted in debilitating poverty in many parts of the world and seeks to encourage sustainability despite these conditions.

Dr. Sachs gave the special presentation on reducing poverty and environmental sustainability to the Third Global Conference on Oceans, Coasts, and Islands live by video link.

International goals should be stated and have actual follow through, implementation, and achievement, which certainly applies to the Millennium Development Goals, as it does to almost every environmental objective that we have for the planet. We are having a very hard time following through on our very nice words. This is certainly the case across the board in environmental matters, but it is also certainly the case across the board in poverty reduction issues. If you put those two pieces together, the environment and poverty, which are so

inextricably linked with causation running in both directions from poverty to environmental degradation and environmental difficulties to an increase in poverty, there's a tremendous amount of neglect and an inability to move forward on promises that have been made.

Among the Millennium Development Goals themselves, goal number seven is environmental sustainability. It was recognized by the adopters of the Millennium Development Goals, in September 2000, that there could not be a fight against poverty without a fight for environmental sustainability. As a practical matter, and as someone very much engaged day-to-day in watching national policy making, the environmental component of the fight against poverty is probably the most neglected of all of the aspects of the Millennium Development Goals. This has many reasons, but even the basic structure of governance in poor countries leaves the environment minister far out of the inner circle of these concerns. The inner circle of concerns center on the budget and go out to some core ministries, with the environment minister typically on the outskirts of power. This means that, in the core documentation of poverty reduction strategies, including those that the IMF and the World Bank are so engaged in - the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), the environment is almost inevitably a deeply neglected factor that sometimes does not appear at all. This is in the context of massive coastal erosion, destruction

of mangrove areas, destruction of corals, over fishing, toxics, you name it – these issues often do not even appear in national policies to a very large extent. In our reviews and our continuing work - I just got back from a six country tour in Africa- this remains the case. We are not succeeding in integrating environmental thinking into national development strategies.

There are at least four factors that we should keep in mind. First is the syndrome of the poorest of the poor, of which I want everyone to be very conscious. The poorest of the poor comprise at least one billion people on the planet. Those that are way off track in achieving the Millennium Development Goals are literally struggling for survival every day. While they depend on the environment, they are pretty much systematically mining the environment. They are not building environmental capital, but depleting it as a desperate part of staying alive. I've just been in rural areas, as I mentioned, in six countries- Kenya, Malawi, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal- and everywhere, the environmental degradation is preceding deforestation in coastal areas. In Senegal, where I was a couple of days ago, a tremendous population increase is putting great pressure on coastal resources, and the communities do not have the wherewithal to save for environmental conservation. Soils are being depleted of nutrients, landscapes are being degraded, forests are being cut down, fisheries are being depleted, and, even when it's understood that vital resources such as Lake Victoria, on which hundreds of millions of people depend for their nutrition, for their livelihoods, for their long-term well-being, there's very little ability to make investments in these poorest countries. That is item number one that I would stress; the iron law of extreme poverty is environmental mining simply to survive. Without more help for the poorest of the poor, we will not turn the corner on environmental degradation. This is not only a matter of their awareness; it is a matter of the brutal realities of extreme resource deprivation.

Second, of course, are vested interests. Wherever one finds poor country settings, areas of natural resource wealth, including coastal or fisheries wealth, powerful interests definitely out compete long-term sustainability interests. This is true of fisheries and the arrangements made between African countries and powerful fisheries countries. There is a very big problem of the ability to put the long-term sustainable agenda in front of very powerful short-term financial claims; and we're not succeeding in that area either.

Third, global economic pressures are phenomenal and they are not going away. The successful developing countries, the Asian countries that are achieving so much growth, are adding increasing environmental

stress, in addition to the existing enormous environmental stresses coming from the consumption in very wealthy countries. Global forces are only conducive to even more environmental degradation, because we have not been able to delimit conservation areas and protected areas, among others, that we have been discussing for so long, but have yet to be implemented.

The fourth point, in addition to extreme poverty, to the vested interests, and the powerful global drivers, is the lack of scientific knowledge in the poorest countries - the lack of mobilization of the best science to even understand the ecosystem dynamics. Most of these countries are presently overwhelmed with the daily tasks of governance, much less the tasks of achieving basic economic development goals, much less the task of understanding complex interactions of climate change, environmental pollution, economic drivers, changing nutrient load cycles, demographic dynamics, exotic species introduction, pathogens, and the whole host of interconnected ecological phenomena that are impinging on these countries. In short, one of the reasons why these factors are not included in poverty reduction strategies is that the scientific base to say 'here's what's happening in this area of your country,' to understand how climate change, demographic pressures, and economic pressures are interacting to produce these outcomes, simply does not exist right now in a concerted and consistent way at the national level. Most of these governments do not have science advisory councils, much less ecological advisory units that can actually help them in these areas. Creating on-going scientific networks on these issues that scale down to country level in low-income settings would be extremely useful as well. In other words, getting ecosystem assessments not only at the global scale that tell us all of the fisheries disasters, but right down to the conditions in coastal Senegal or coastal Ghana or coastal Kenya so that these are regularly being monitored and reviewed is crucial. We need a regular cycle of global scale ecosystem assessments, but ones that scale down to national level quite systematically. It's an expensive proposition, but I can't think of a better investment in applied science than this one, and, as far as I can see it, also is not presently applied.

I've just written a book about the end of poverty, not about the expansion of poverty, because, I believe, we have very powerful tools to make a change. I'm not meaning to give a short intervention of doom and gloom, but it is to alert the ecological community that is represented in the room of the realities that exist. We are not at all on track to get these considerations into national policy-making. It's just not happening, and it's a very serious problem. Governments do not know how

to do it, they can't face the vested interests, and they can't keep these problems in the forefront when the pressure of daily life and demographic pressures are so extreme. I've been, of course, trying to think of any ways that I can to put this into decision-making right now. One thing that Walt Reed and I have recently taken up is the idea of trying to build on the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and the Millennium Project Report as two absolutely convergent visions to these challenges. We have taken the idea of trying to build up a Millennium Ecosystem Fund to help very poor countries mobilize the expertise they need to address these issues within their national development strategies. They literally can't do this right now; and they don't do it. Even if a few donors would come forward and just build an adequate fund of some tens of millions of dollars merely to provide the wherewithal to get this kind of analysis systematically into the forefront - in front of the finance minister who needs to understand it, in front of the IMF which needs to understand it and absolutely has no idea about it, unfortunately, and into the World Bank's thinking. All of this could make a difference in getting a seat at the table for these issues when budgets are allocated and when donor assistance is discussed. So that is issue number one in my view- we've got to get all of these

environmental considerations into national development strategies, year-by-year, systematically, and help these countries.

On all of the Millennium Development Goals, we face the fundamental challenge that there are a lot of nice words and pretty much all promises that need to be made have been made. However, we are way off track on actually doing what needs to be accomplished. It's just not happening, and we're not able to turn these words into substantive action, get the feedback, and get the follow through. The reason I'm an optimist is that we have such powerful tools, such powerful interventions, whether it's in food production or disease control or environmental management and environmental engineering, that problems that might appear insurmountable, in my view, are actually quite addressable. We could get disease burdens down sharply, we could preserve habitats that are under tremendous stress, but it will not happen on its own, market forces are certainly not going to do it, and the poorest of the poor cannot do it by themselves. There is just not a prayer in the world that they can do this on their own. No matter how many lectures or speeches are given, they need resources both to do analyses and rise above the mere survival level to a margin in which they can invest in the long-term future.

Transcribed by: Amanda Wenczel, Global Forum on Oceans, Coasts, and Islands.