

THE EQUATOR INITIATIVE:
Identifying win-win solutions to lift people out of poverty and protect
biodiversity

Honorable Deputy Minister, distinguished guests, and friends;

It gives me great pleasure, as the Leader of UNDP's Environmentally Sustainable Development Group to address you on this important and auspicious occasion. I am also pleased to bring greetings from the Administrator of UNDP, Mark Malloch Brown, who has asked me to convey his best wishes.

Tonight we are gathered to celebrate the growing global awareness of the critical linkages between biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction. We are also gathered to recognize the tremendous efforts of local communities throughout the developing world who are charting new and innovative paths to global sustainability and who are actively engaged in forging a more sustainable future for us all. The essence of our initiative is to identify win-win or synergistic solutions to simultaneously lift people out of poverty and protect biodiversity.

The conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity is increasingly seen as vital to the full achievement of the poverty reduction targets laid out in the Millennium Development Goals and to wider sustainable development.

The Millennium Development Goals, also known as the MDGs, are derived from the United Nations Millennium Declaration of September 2000, where they were adopted by over 189 nations. These ambitious goals, many of which relate directly both to poverty reduction and to the natural environment, lay out the most important and far-sighted roadmap for sustainable development for our global family. As such they have attracted the attention of the development community and the public in both the North and South.

Ultimately, however, the success of this shared vision and effort will be measured at the local level. Although the goals are couched in international language the overall success in achieving them will be highly dependent on the success of local struggles to battle poverty and biodiversity loss. To assist communities in this challenge, it is our aim to help poor people and

poor countries lift themselves out of poverty and build a more sustainable future together.

The sustainability of local communities will be the cornerstone of any broader success in reaching the MDGs. In Johannesburg last year, during the World Summit on Sustainable Development, there was again a call for a focus on supporting and nurturing local efforts for sustainability. This local focus is essential because, as UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown noted, the MDGs will only be achieved community by community, family by family, and individual by individual.

We are here today on the occasion of World Environment Day because, for all of us at UNDP and our partners, the link between the environment and poverty alleviation is clear. And this link is especially evident in the tropics, where people depend on the natural environment for their livelihoods – for food, medicines and income. Indeed, both poverty and biodiversity co-exist in the tropics, and it is from this Equatorial belt that the solutions to achieve sustainability will have to come.

It is important to note that by biodiversity, we do not simply mean only the number or types of species – impressive though the incredible array of species is. Rather, our definition is more inclusive.

By biodiversity, or biological diversity, we mean “the full range and variety of life on earth, from plants and animals to micro-organisms, and including genes, species and ecosystems. In addition to being a source of food, fuel, shelter, medicines and livelihoods, biodiversity also provides the critical ‘ecosystem services’ of air and water purification, waste treatment, nutrient cycling, disease control and moderation of erosion, floods and drought.”

Tonight I would like to delve deeper into the vital link between biodiversity and poverty that has brought us all here.

We so often hear the two words – biodiversity and poverty – used together, but do we really understand the nature of the relationship between them and what this means for our combined efforts to reduce poverty and build a more sustainable world?

The linkages between biodiversity and poverty can be described in at least four dimensions: food security, health, income and livelihoods, and vulnerability.

1. First, and perhaps most intuitively, biodiversity loss affects food security.

The majority of the world's poor rely on natural food sources close to where they live. As a result, the loss of biodiversity can have devastating effects on the food security of local people. Without the wise use of biological resources, the most basic need of our own species – the need for food - is by no means secure.

We are highly dependent on the breadth of genetic resources present in nature, including those from wild and semi-domesticated sources, for the productivity of agriculture, livestock, and fisheries and for meeting the basic food needs of human society.

Biodiversity provides communities with an adaptation capacity so varieties can be created that best cope with changing local conditions. Biodiversity is also an essential source of alternate food sources during times of scarcity.

Because most food products are derived from biological diversity, the wise management and sustainable use of biodiversity is vital to achieving food security.

2. The second important linkage between biodiversity and poverty relates to human health.

Biodiversity loss can have severe implications for human health since many medicines and health treatments, especially in poor communities, are derived from natural sources.

Biodiversity is the source of the invaluable information and raw materials that underpin medicinal and health care systems.

Critically, biodiversity also holds the key to future medicines that may have the potential to treat and cure the world's most devastating diseases.

The world's poor, who continue to rely directly on biodiversity for the treatment of the most basic medical conditions, suffer most when species that are vital to traditional medicines and treatments are threatened.

With non-traditional medicines often priced far beyond the financial reach of the world's poor, the need to ensure that traditional remedies remain available becomes even more crucial. The need for biodiversity conservation, as a tool for securing traditional medicines and for ensuring that future sources of drugs and medicines are protected, is essential.

3. Biodiversity is also fundamentally connected with income generation and with the livelihoods of much of the world's population.

Poor people tend to be most dependent upon the direct utilization of biodiversity for their livelihoods and so they are the first to suffer when these resources are degraded or lost.

A major source of income generation comes from biodiversity – especially for poorer populations. This point cannot be overestimated.

Resource dependent communities exist in all nations. And indeed, the wealth of even the most developed countries on earth is tied to the extraction and use of natural resources.

The link, therefore, between biodiversity and livelihoods is of immense importance and must inform the future direction of development as a whole.

4. Finally, biodiversity loss is also inherently linked to the vulnerability of the world's peoples.

Biodiversity and ecosystem services play a vital role in protecting us from natural disasters and in ensuring the productivity and security of our lives and livelihoods.

We all have seen the debilitating effects natural disasters have on poorer populations. Many of these catastrophic events, such as floods and drought, are caused by degraded ecosystems, often connected to deforestation and soil erosion. The impact of climate change is already producing devastating effects in many regions of the world.

These conditions frequently leave many people homeless and without access to food and clean water.

As mentioned, proper ecosystem management plays an important role in disaster prevention.

Ecosystem services – including the purification of water, the generation of the air we breathe, the replenishment of soil, the natural treatment of waste, and the mitigation of droughts, floods, and erosion – play a vital role in protecting our species from the effects of natural disasters.

As well, these critical ecosystem services contribute to the productive activities of all nations, but are especially critical to the rural and urban poor.

Ecosystem services are, in the purest sense, public goods, providing indirect values that are not traded in the marketplace but are central to the well-being and livelihoods of all people.

It is clear, therefore, that biodiversity loss has a dramatic impact on poverty and that the loss of biodiversity has severe implications for the health and well-being of each and every one of us. And this realization is more important now than ever before. Why? Because we are at a turning point in the way that the global community addresses biodiversity issues.

An ambitious framework for action to achieve sustainable development was laid out in Johannesburg and, increasingly, the linkages between biodiversity and the achievement of these goals is becoming a priority for the international community.

It has become clear that any successful strategy to achieve the MDGs, and achieve sustainable development more generally, must address biodiversity issues. This is not only because the proper management of biodiversity is a key to achieving virtually all of the 8 MDGs, but also because in order to sustain the gains we do make, we will need to continue to conserve biodiversity and ensure that ecosystem services are protected for future generations.

And progress is being made.

I am pleased to say that UNDP's Equator Initiative is leading the way by encouraging and rewarding grassroots initiatives at the community level for successful efforts to conserve biodiversity while also lifting people and communities out of poverty.

The Equator Prize is one of the most important mechanisms we have for identifying and recognizing the outstanding local initiatives that are already engaged in tremendous work on the connection between biodiversity loss and poverty.

Among the nominees for the Equator Prize 2002, we saw a remarkable array of community projects from Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The range of local successes was truly stunning:

From the establishment of eco-lodges and game reserves in East Africa, the manufacture and marketing of sustainably harvested soaps and beauty products in Brazil, the restoration of traditional marine management practices in Fiji, to the creation of sustainable lending and credit schemes in Thailand – the nominations for the Equator Prize 2002 truly captured the essence of the win-win scenarios that are needed between the environment and income generation and which must be built upon if we are to make real headway in achieving broader sustainable development globally.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan described these communities perfectly when he said, “The passion, dedication and courage with which these communities have adopted the cause of local sustainable development are a source of inspiration to the entire global community.”

Tonight, it gives me great pleasure that the call for nominations for the Equator Prize 2004 – the next chapter in this remarkable venture – is officially open. We encourage all of you to nominate worthy candidates.

From a wide array of expected nominees, from throughout the developing nations of the Equator Belt, six exceptional communities will receive an award of US\$30,000 each, to be presented at the Seventh Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Malaysia, to be held in early 2004.

The call for nominations for the Equator Prize 2004 also coincides with the beginning of the Second Phase of the Equator Initiative's work. In Phase II, the work undertaken by Equator Initiative partners will focus on championing and supporting sustainable communities through capacity development, sharing of knowledge, and learning from best practices:

- 1) Sponsoring the biennial **Equator Prize** that recognizes sustainable community innovation in the tropics;
- 2) Establishing **learning exchange grants** so that grassroots practitioners can share their best practices with other communities in the tropics;
- 3) Facilitating **eco-entrepreneur mentoring** to provide business and financial advice for small sustainable business startups;
- 4) **Making the community-to-policy connection** by linking local sustainable development innovations with policies that affect them, and advocating to ensure these communities have the input, political support and funding their contribution warrants;
- 5) Fostering **research and learning** by enlisting networks of scholars and experts both from developing and developed countries to use community best practices to inform policy and development priorities;
- 6) Mounting a global **public awareness campaign** to raise the profile of sustainable communities and encourage adoption of community best practices in developing regions; and
- 7) Assisting **people in protected areas** who balance generating sustainable livelihoods with conserving the biodiversity in or near World Heritage Sites.

The spirit of hope and optimism that is associated with the Equator Prize 2004 and with the launch of the second phase of the Equator Initiative brings me to the most important topic of my speech this evening. This is the new partnership that is being cemented tonight between the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Equator Initiative. This partnership builds on the strengths of both organizations and highlights the new face of successful development practice.

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has a remarkable record in advancing the cause of sustainable development. Their decision to partner with the Equator Initiative opens a new chapter in this proud history.

BMZ is also actively engaged in research on how to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Johannesburg Plan of Action. This complements the work being undertaken by UNDP and the Equator Initiative over the past year to examine new ways of effectively achieving the MDGs and ensuring that biodiversity issues are integrated into the global MDG effort.

Together Germany and the other Equator Initiative partners will gain enhanced effectiveness in their work when they consolidate efforts to promote community-based issues in the area of biodiversity protection and poverty reduction. There are many win-win solutions that have been identified and we can now attempt to bring these to scale.

On behalf of the Equator Initiative partners, I am honoured to welcome Germany to the Equator Initiative partnership. We are committed to many of the same issues – from facilitating south-to-south learning among and between communities, to securing sustainable livelihoods for the poor living near protected areas.

I would like to thank you all for your time this evening and close by saying that I look forward to a long and fruitful partnership between BMZ and UNDP and the Equator Initiative, and with a request that we will see nominations from all of you over the coming months for the Equator Prize 2004.

Thank you.

Alvaro Umaña
5 June 2003