Statement by
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On the occasion of the
UNU/UNESCO International Conference

Globalization: Challenges and Opportunities for
Science and Technology

Yokohama, Japan
23 and 24 August 2006
Mr. President,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour to have been invited to attend this important Conference. On behalf of the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to Professor Mohammad Taeb for this very special honour and the opportunity given to me to address this distinguished group.

Mr. President,

1. All of us here today agree that science and technology is a major driver of globalization. It is happening, and most of us believe that it is unstoppable. Many of us see the type of science and technology that drive globalization as helping to cure a multitude of the world’s ills.

2. To those of us working to combat desertification and land degradation, “globalization” refers to the compression of the world and the tightening of all the linkages – economic, political, social, environmental – between developments here and events in far corners of the world. Every country feels the reverberation of globalization. It is a process of integrating not just economies, but also cultures and environment.

3. A decade before the word ‘globalization’ became fashionable in the late 1980’s the environmental community both in and out of government was realizing that environmental problems were becoming increasingly trans-boundary in nature and were reaching global-scale proportions. The early 1980s saw the emergence of an international environmental agenda, and what has taken place over the past two decades in response to that agenda can be thought of as the first attempt at global environmental governance. Perhaps the only concept as heavily laden with multiple agendas as “globalization” is the concept of “sustainable development. In many respects the paradigm of sustainable development was the international community’s first attempt at global environmental governance. It is important to note what has been accomplished to date in the area of global environmental governance and this may help us find our way in the discussions on policy at this conference.

4. There are seven principal environmental activities that have taken place over the past twenty years. First, several international conferences, negotiations, action plans, treaties, and other initiatives to promote sustainable development have occurred. New fields of international environmental law and diplomacy have been born. There are
now over 250 international environmental treaties, two thirds of them signed in recent decades.
Second, there has been a vast outpouring of impressive and relevant scientific research and policy analysis.
Third, an ever-stronger community of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations has launched increasingly sophisticated campaigns.
Fourth, governments as well as multilateral institutions from the United Nations to the international development banks have recognized these concerns and have created major units to address global-scale issues.
Fifth, many multinational corporations have moved ahead with impressive steps, often ahead of their governments.
Sixth, in academia, international environmental affairs have become a major subject of academic inquiry and teaching.
And
Seventh, the United Nations has sponsored an extraordinary series of milestone Events beginning with the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment was followed by the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.
5. How should we assess the progress of the last two decades during which we have been aware of extraordinary global environmental challenges? Progress has been made on some fronts, but not nearly enough. There are outstanding success stories, but rarely are they scaled up to the point that they are commensurate with the problem. For the most part, we have analyzed, debated, and negotiated these issues at length. We now need to translate all the good will into actions. How should we grade the international community’s responses to the global-scale environmental challenges? And how can globalization deliver science and technology in such a way as to address the environmental challenges?
6. The three Conventions on desertification, climate, and biodiversity—coming out of Rio have called attention to the problems and have led to action programmes in the three areas. For various reasons these agreements are not yet fully implemented. For instance the priority activities under the action programmes to combat desertification have just started and the Kyoto Protocol is the first significant step beyond the framework Convention on climate change. These actions represent only a modest down payment on what is needed.
The principal response of the international community to global scale environmental challenges to date has been a legal one, often regulatory in nature. Other avenues have been pursued, such as somewhat increased government spending on these issues, and mechanism such as the Global Environmental Facility.
8. In my view, the approach taken to global environmental governance should give due consideration to technology transfer that might address underlying causes. The UNCCD has contributed to this effort through the establishment of a Committee on Science and Technology and the definition of specific guiding principles on technical and scientific cooperation.

At a time the international community is celebrating the United Nations International Year of Deserts and Desertification it is important to emphasize the critical role of science and technology in achieving the expected goals of the UNCCD.

Mr. President,

9. Today the transition to a globalized world is progressing rapidly, but the transition to a sustainable one is not. Some believe that globalization is a prime reason for the failure to realize sustainable development. But many of us here today will argue that globalization can and should advance the transition to sustainability.

10. One of the points I would like to make this morning is that the globalization of markets, driven to a degree by science and technology, has brought about a globalization of the environmental problems. Global warming, the loss of biodiversity, the depletion of natural resources, the widespread deforestation and desertification are examples of global environmental deterioration that have emerged and worsened while the process of globalization has accelerated. Generally speaking, technology and science have exploited natural resources. History shows us that new waves of technological innovation have raised new environmental problems along with new opportunities for solving them.

In my view there are three types of environmental challenges, which confront globalization and sustainability:

The first one deals with shared problems involving the global commons, that is, fundamental elements of the ecosystem—among the most significant challenges, in my view, are desertification with its loss of topsoil, and of course climate change.

A second category of global environmental problems involves the interlinked challenges of demographic dynamic and resource consumption—pressing examples under this heading include mass human migration, and threats to the existence of certain species.

A third category of problems is trans-boundary pollution such as acid rain, or river pollutants, or the contaminated rain.

11. At the core of any policy discussion on globalization and environmental challenges is the long-term correlation between these three categories of
problems and the modern process of globalization of international markets and environmental degradation.

Mr. President,

12. We are at the early stages of the journey to sustainability. The sustainable development paradigm incorporates the following: the needs of all countries, big and small alike; a commitment from the strong to help the weak; a concern with both environment and development; and a realization that the state and the international community must intervene on behalf of the public interest to attain greater social equity and bring about more sustainable patterns of production and consumption.

13. Globalization should not destroy the environment. In some instances however increased international trade appears to harm the environment. When business activity is increased in a generally unsustainable way it tends to spoil the environment.

14. In my view a focus of this conference should be on the contrary force, which can be developed through science and technology — there are a set of factors that suggests that globalization may help environmental quality. Global corporations can spread the most advanced environmental management technology and techniques. The strengthening of capacities in government to manage economic affairs can have spillover effects, strengthening environmental management. Globalization can lead to increased incomes, which in turn can lead to governmental revenues for environmental and social programs and to increased public demand for environmental amenity.

15. Scientists are a cautious lot, by and large, so when the most respected issue a plea for “active management of the planet,” we must take notice. Today we are moving rapidly to a swift and appalling deterioration of our environmental assets particularly in our soil resources. There is still world enough and time enough, but the decades immediately ahead are crucial. The next doublings of the world economy cannot resemble those of the past. Governments must bring a new toughness to international environmental law and complement it with serious efforts both to address more directly the underlying drivers of environmental deterioration and to improve dramatically the overall economic and political context that determines whether legal regimes surrounding globalization are meaningful or weak and whether they succeed or fail.

On the environment front, there should be a matching of the WTO with the collective global environmental mechanisms. The push for liberalized trade and investment flows should be complemented by equally concerted efforts on the
environmental and social fronts. This should be one thrust of our policy recommendations from this conference.

16. Globalization is a multifaceted phenomenon with potentially devastating but also potentially beneficial consequences. Environmental NGOs have been particularly afraid—and not without reason—of globalization in its one-sided economic aspect.

17. It is possible to reinforce the positive effects and reduce at the same time the negative effects of globalization on the environment through appropriate policies meant to implement a robust process of sustainable globalization. What is important to discuss at this forum is how to use science and technology to address environmental challenges in a sustainable development context. Not an easy task, but it makes for a rich discussion, especially when one introduces the concept of sustainable livelihoods, alleviating poverty and emerging topics such as the dramatic loss of fertile top soil, mass migration of peoples and the global problem of youth unemployment.

Mr President,

18. It is easy to talk about the greening of economic globalization but tremendously difficult to accomplish. No amount of science and technology can free societies from the enchantment of limitless material expansion. The late John Kenneth Galbraith has called this the “highly contrived consumption of an infinite variety of goods and services.” The global-scale environmental problems cannot be blamed only on big corporations when lifestyles, mismanagement by governments North and South, and other factors are clearly implicated. Increasingly, pollution and other problems come not from something going wrong but from normal life.

19. Sustainability is the imperative that pushes the environmental agenda. The desire for a rich quality of life, strong human ties, and a resonant connection to nature is the lure that pulls us toward the future.

20. Whatever globalization’s environmental consequences in the past, the future holds much room for improvement. There are a great many things that science and technology can deliver and should deliver in order to green globalization and give it a human face.

Realizing this brighter future will require heightened international cooperation, particularly between industrial and developing countries, but also among developing countries. We therefore welcome current initiatives to revive the commodity trade in the poorest of economies. But these initiatives are too limited. They will succeed only in expanding unsustainable and inequitable patterns of growth unless they are complemented by powerful initiatives to promote social equity and to protect the environment. Indeed, there is much reason to believe, based on past experience and current trends, that unless
major complementary initiatives are undertaken to bring environmental, economic, and social objectives together, liberalizing trade and reviving growth could lead to short-term gains and long-term disaster.

Mr. President,
Ladies and gentlemen,
21. We live on an active planet. Earthquakes are continuous, a million and a half of them every year. Our friends here in Japan are well aware of this frequency. A Richter 5 quake every six hours, a major quake every 3 weeks. A destructive quake every 8 months. It’s nothing new, it’s right on schedule. At any moment there are 1,500 electrical storms on the planet. A tornado touches down every six hours. We have ninety hurricanes a year, or one every four days. Again, right on schedule. Violent, disruptive, chaotic environmental activity is a constant feature of our globe. This is the world. This is our environment. It’s time we knew it and responded to the challenges it presents to us.
I wish you every success in your deliberations and I thank you for your kind attention.