

The Africa Regional Preparatory Conference for the United Nations  
Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)

Ministerial Segment

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Opening Statement by

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Mr Chairman,

Honourable Ministers,

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Our meeting here in Addis Ababa is the culmination of a process to ensure that the voices of the African people are heard at Rio +20. The Africa Consensus Statement to Rio +20 that will emanate from this meeting must reflect the aspirations of Africans.

The Rio declaration stated that: *“Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development.”* And that: *“The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.”* This message from Rio – that people are at the center of sustainable development – echoes UNDP’s focus on advancing human development.

Making human development sustainable is critical for people everywhere. But, as the documents prepared for this preparatory conference show, there are compelling reasons for why this agenda is particularly important for Africa.

Despite the marked improvements in economic growth rates over the last decade, our continent still has the highest proportion of people living in poverty and hunger. The overall conclusion from the 2011 regional MDG report prepared jointly by the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa and UNDP, was that the overall pace of progress towards the MDGs, while picking up steam in the last decade, has not been strong enough to meet the all the targets everywhere by 2015.

But the report also shows that real progress has taken place and that many countries are making strides in advancing human development. This mixture of good—even great—development experiences and celebrated development successes on one hand, and severe vulnerabilities and persistent human tragedy, on the other hand, is a distinctive feature of the state of our continent today.

This is why the agenda for sustainable and equitable development is perhaps even more important today for Africa than it was 20 years ago in Rio.

It is equally important everywhere, but especially in Africa, to pursue the sustainable development agenda giving equal importance to the three pillars of sustainability: environment, economic, and social.

No doubt, environmental sustainability plays a critical role in ensuring the well-being of current and future generations. But the evidence is quite clear: countries that have high levels of human development also have the largest ecological footprint and the highest carbon emissions.

For Africa the implications are particularly dire since the continent today enjoys the lowest level of human development but will pay the highest prices in terms of the impacts of unsustainable global practices such as climate change.

This presents a complex set of challenges for African countries and for the world. How can low and middle-income countries embark on a path towards high human development that does not mirror the unsustainable practices of those already there? And how can countries improve the utilisation of their natural resources such that critical environmental systems functions are preserved and such that the vast mineral and hydrocarbon wealth of many African countries are utilised in a way that maximises the human development of current and future generations?

The answer to these questions largely rests within the substantive theme for the Rio +20 conference: how to build green economies. Building *green* economies is essentially about building more *efficient* economies in which markets price in scarcities and external effects.

This will require political courage to take on the vested interests, commitment and coordination by leaders at all levels, technological advances, and well-designed measures to protect those who invariably get squeezed during economic transitions.

The growing political commitments by African leaders as expressed in national documents and legislation, and in the initiatives of the African Union—in particular those to be implemented by the NEPAD agency—are encouraging.

We need to see these commitments firmed up and consistently moved into actual policies as we prepare for Rio +20 and beyond. We welcome the efforts that have been taken by African countries to identify opportunities and challenges in the region's transition to a green economy. The draft consensus statement rightly emphasizes that "*the promotion of [a] green economy in the region should be underlined by national objectives, social and economic development imperatives and the attainment of the MDGs.*" There is a need to foster better understanding of the green economy in the specific context of Africa.

UNDP will continue to work with African countries to explore practical policy options and strengthen national capacities to ensure that sustainable development moves from the periphery to the core of national development planning efforts.

We also need to see the stronger commitment by African leaders matched by actions by the international community, including development partners, to raise the means for implementation. This involves not only public resources, but also setting up the conditions that would unleash the mobilization of private resources. Beyond improved financing, access to appropriate technology solutions, and support for institutional capacity development will be critical.

It is critical that the transition to a global green economy, does not exacerbate, but reverses the trends of deepening inequalities between and within countries and regions. And it is imperative for the aspirations for greater human development in Africa that the current rates of economic growth are sustained and be made more effective in bringing poverty down.

We are therefore encouraged by the strong commitment in the draft Consensus Statement towards “improving the environment for inclusive growth by strengthening the soundness of macroeconomic policies, promoting job rich growth and boosting agricultural productivity, as well as providing opportunities for vulnerable groups, including women.”.

Strengthening the linkages between poverty and economic growth require inclusive growth strategies that are tailored to overcome the specific challenges faced by each nation such as: generating jobs and improving livelihoods; raising agricultural productivity and strengthening value chains; expanding rural infrastructure and access to markets; promoting light manufacturing or trade in services for the many landlocked African countries; while investing more in human capital such as secondary education and vocational training especially for young and unemployed youth.

Systems for social protection have an important role to play, not only in terms of cushioning some of the unavoidable adverse impacts in the transition to the green economy, but also to make the growth process itself more inclusive by enabling the poor to consume, save and invest more, and by increasing their resilience to external shocks such as floods and droughts.

UNDP's work takes place in regional and global fora like this and we are on the ground in each and every African nation. We remain committed to working with African countries to meet the national needs and priorities for green growth in Africa. We will leverage our experience in supporting countries in measuring human development and tracking the MDGs to support the work on new and better measures of sustainable development. Our role as knowledge-broker and facilitator of South-South solutions will remain essential in our support to develop country-owned strategies for achieving agreed sustainable development goals and targets.

We remain committed to turn the challenges of sustainable development into opportunities for advancing human development for all Africans.



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