

Ensuring India's Sustainable Development

(transcript)

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The Delhi Sustainable Development Summit has firmly entrenched itself as the one of the world's most important yearly gatherings on sustainable development, and I feel honored to be addressing you here. The challenge of sustainable development, as Mr. Klaus Topfer mentioned, is a complex one. It is more than simply managing the environment or the economy; it is seeking prosperity for the poor by finding a way to live in synergy with the planet. The Earth Institute at Columbia University, which I'm privileged to direct, is organized around the challenges of sustainable development. Addressing these challenges is complicated because it engages experts from many academic disciplines and different parts of society — climatologists, earth engineers, ecologists, economists, public health specialists, social activists, politicians – in an exploration of matters that come upon us with great urgency even before we have any clear answers.

There is a brighter side – though 2003 was a fairly dreadful year of war and violence for the world, we also had the chance to make breakthroughs towards ending extreme poverty for the first time in human history. We are now within reach of doing it in India, and I would say throughout the world. It may appear strange to talk about the end of poverty when it is so evident all around. However, one only has to look at the unprecedented pace of India and China's economic growth, the latter of which has been doubling the standard of living each decade now for 25 years. Indeed, India and China show us that technology and the world economy are powerful forces giving us opportunities that we never had before.

If we are to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty without destroying the environment, there must be five areas of success:

1. We must make globalization work by expanding the size of the world economy and linking the ideas that emerge from the different parts of the world. We have the chance to accelerate economic progress, and India's 8% growth rate per year allows us to think in unprecedented terms about ending extreme poverty.
2. The second success is the spread of democracy, in which, again, India is a forerunner and champion.
3. Third, our science and technology are improving at an ever-increasing rate. If we take the opportunity to use that knowledge for human benefit, we have a tool of unprecedented strength.
4. Though we have learned how vital it is to invest in the well-being of the poor, we have not carried it out to the full extent. We have designed new tools to achieve universal access to education and health, and to enable the villages of Africa, India, and other parts

of the world to benefit from modern technology. However, we have not yet succeeded in applying those tools as widely as we could.

5. The fifth success we need is a global vision of sustainability. Economic development can no longer be a machine running on its own ignoring long-term environmental needs; development and environmental sustainability are part and parcel of the whole process.

India is uniquely placed to play a significant role in achieving the end of extreme poverty in an environmentally sustainable manner. As the world's largest democracy imbued with a great tradition, India is an inspiration to all countries.

Despite economic progress, India is home to a quarter billion of the world's poorest people. Though the weight of poverty is declining under the forces of the economic progress, the numbers are still vast and in many places recalcitrant, which makes it difficult to solve the problem without intensified effort.

India faces some great environmental challenges needing urgent attention. For instance, the country must strategize on what kind of energy system is suitable for the future and how it will be consistent with the global needs for safe and prudent energy systems for the 21st century.

India will undoubtedly be one of the economic leaders of the 21st century, as will become dramatically apparent in the years ahead. However, India has an unfinished agenda: it must take steps to ensure that the benefits of economic progress are extended to a quarter-billion people that do not yet benefit from them. I believe that this requires great intensification in thinking and planning by the Government of India as well as by the thousands of organizations, communities, and non-governmental groups in the country. India needs expanded investment in the health, nutrition, and education of its people. To this day, this is an unmet need and stands in the way of India's emerging economic dynamism. The challenge of illiteracy has to be resolved, as does the country's inadequate public spending on health (only one percent of the gross domestic product).

In addition to the domestic challenges, there is a vital need for India to be a more visible leader and to help place the challenge of ending extreme poverty more squarely at the center of the international agenda. Sometimes, from the concerns of the United States and a few other countries, it seems that the only issues in the world are terrorism or conflict; and the issues of ending extreme poverty and environmental sustainability are pushed off the agenda. Without the voices of India, South Africa, Brazil, and other great developing-country democracies, the international agenda is bound to remain grossly skewed. Next year, as the world leaders gather to review progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and strategize on the ten remaining years to achieve them, it is critical that India, Brazil, and South Africa make it clear to the developed countries that commitments are needed on financial assistance, technology transfer, and an open trading system.

The rich world has not fulfilled its promise to base international trade on development. This promise collapsed temporarily in Cancun, Mexico, in the summer of 2003 when the rich world, going through its own elections, did not want to tamper with the protectionism that leaves some of the most impoverished farmers in the world unable to sell their goods in the rich-world markets of the Europe and the United States. The voices of the developing world's democracies

are needed – especially India’s powerful voice. It must be made clear that the multilateral trading system is not an option, it is a necessity for the whole world and it must be open and fair and at the service of not just the powerful but also of the weak.

The last point that I want to make is that India has a special role to play in the struggle for environmental sustainability. This entire subcontinent is in many ways under stress – its biodiversity is in danger and its forest cover has long been lost to deforestation. The pressures continue. There are great challenges now of linking India’s vast river systems, and of addressing the threats to biodiversity. These require serious thought, scientific analysis, and commitment to ensure that they are addressed in a way consistent with the long-term environmental needs of India and of the planet as a whole.

One of these great environmental challenges lies in the energy sector. India sits on vast coal deposits, as does China. If, for example, India’s rapid development led to use of that coal under current technologies, it would drastically exacerbate the ongoing spiral of man-made climate change. India and China, as fast-growing economies, will have to cooperate with the United States and Europe to find fair and prudent ways that give their economies the chance to grow dynamically, which, at the same time, would ensure that we have a global system consistent with our long-term well-being. As chair of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), Dr. Pachauri leads the world’s thinking on these issues. With just 5% of the world’s population, the United States is disproportionately contributing about 24% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions today, and it has not taken up responsibility commensurate with this incredible weight. Yet, India will soon be sharing the stage with the United States in assuming responsibility for an equal weight of devastation. In addition, India and China will, over time, have economies just as large as the United States; by my rough calculations, this is likely to happen by mid-century. With India, China, and the rest of Asia, set to rival the size of the economies of the West in this century, the global leadership in solving these problems becomes critical.

In conclusion, I reiterate what I have said in my earlier visits to India. This country can do what it sets out to do. Over a decade ago, India set out to end its economic stagnation and to assume its rightful place as one of the world’s most dynamic economies. It has accomplished this. It has every prospect of continued success, if it can make proper social investments to end its own extreme poverty, and if it raises its powerful voice as the world’s largest democracy to call for a balanced global agenda that prioritizes sustainable development and makes the world a much better and safer place for all of us.