

The real sustainability challenge

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Introduction

For me, being invited to talk to you today, is a ray of hope in an otherwise darkening world, and I am immensely grateful for this opportunity. For too long, the discussions of what constitute development, and by implication, civilisation, has been dominated by the West, and has been driven by the agendas of Western self-interest. By inviting me into the discussions of this conference you are signalling that perhaps the Western monologue about what sustainable development should and shouldn't be is finally turning into a dialogue that includes the developing world. It is not going to be an easy and painless process, but it is the only route that has any chance of leading us to a better, safer, and more sustainable world. However, in order for us to work together, we have to reach out past our own prejudices – and that is what I want to talk about.

The impression we get from the outside is that for the average American, the world stretches from sea to shining sea, with the developing world out there behind the sign that says: "Here be dragons." A place where "they" grow coffee and bananas and dictators. A gigantic film set for the makers of action hero movies and art films and really depressing docudramas. But it is a place with no real people. The people of the developing world have been dehumanised, reduced to "collateral damage", ciphers with no substance as individuals.

To many Americans (and I must add Europeans) the characters in soap operas are more real than the dying children and maimed people in Kisangani or Kabul. America is seen by many as having not only set itself apart from the rest of the world, but above it. The impression created by your media and your politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike, is that the rest of the world exists only to serve America's economic interests.

However, the very fact that you are sitting in this hall means that you have realised that Americans are part of the greater community of life and that you are willing to take up your responsibilities as members of that community. You have realised that solving the environmental problems of industrialised countries will not mean much if your very survival is threatened by the social fall-out of an exploitative economic growth model. You have realised that one does not fight terrorism and hatred with violence, but with compassion, and that the first step towards compassion is to understand the nature of your relationship with the "other", with those on the outside.

I thank you for having the courage and the willingness to reach out beyond the dragons. You have no idea how powerful that gesture can be.

However, for the dialogue to be on equal footing, you have to understand the enormous challenges facing those countries outside the lager of privilege; you have to understand the role of the West in perpetuating these problems, and the subsequent distrust of the agendas of the West. You further have to understand that amongst the misery, there is also hope. And that this hope is kept alive through another approach to life that provides a counterpoint to the self-centred materialism of the West. It is the difference between doing something because it is good for business, and doing it because it is for the greater good of all.

Some background

In the culture I was born to it is considered bad manners to start a conversation without properly introducing oneself and explaining where one comes from. This has two purposes: the first is to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings, and the second is to get an understanding of the other party's background and concerns so as to work towards a mutually beneficial outcome of the discussions. So please allow me to start by introducing you to the world I come from.

For many of you I may not really fit the bill of what an African looks like, but I am a 13th generation South African. I am not Dutch, I am not German and I am not French, although I share a genetic heritage with these nations, and a few others. I am what is known as an Afrikaner. Like most true Afrikaners, I also have enough coloured blood in my ancestry to be classified black according to America's old 'one drop' rule. I am a member of what has been described as the white tribe of Africa - a group of people that until fairly recently was one of the most despised nations in the world. Because of my heritage I have been insulted, cursed and spat on by people from the so-called civilised world who did not even pay me the common courtesy of talking to me before attacking me. And I am sad to say that most of them were Americans. Because of my heritage, I have been welcomed as a sister, a member of the extended African family, wherever I have travelled in Africa and in African communities from England to India, even during the years of apartheid. These communities treated my fear with love, accepting me as a member of the community, however dysfunctional I may be. This, in turn, enabled me to be compassionate. Such is the power of reaching out.

On South Africa

My country, South Africa, lies at the confluence of the First World and the Third World. It has an incredibly sophisticated First World component that floats on top of the archetypal Third World mayhem and mysticism, and these two worlds intersect in the most surreal ways, enriching both. In the streets of Johannesburg and Pretoria you can find shops selling crocodile fat, baboon whiskers and magical potions, standing cheek by jowl with the Stock Exchange and the Reserve Bank. Shembe priests and their congregations dance in stone circles underneath the flyovers of six lane highways. The *sangomas* ("witchdoctors"), black and white, have mobile phones and websites and conduct ritual sacrifices in the suburbs. Members of Parliament come to work in Italian shoes and inflated goat bladders in their hair. Communists are running the government's privatisation drive, and capitalists are fighting for free basic services to the poor. Instead of contradiction and polarization, we celebrate tolerance and diversity.

And South Africa is a place of great diversity. In an area little more than twice the size of Texas we have seven distinct biological kingdoms, nine semi-autonomous provinces, eleven official languages and at the last election, 27 political parties. The streets of our cities are alive with traders, preachers and artists from all over Africa

and Asia, and business meetings are often conducted in as many as three languages.

It is further a country of great contrasts. We have one of the most liberal constitutions in the world, one of the most gender-balanced governments and were the first, and so far only, country to voluntarily dismantle our nuclear arsenal, yet we have the fifth highest levels of inequity in the world and our cities take turns to wear the title “crime capital of the world”, while one in every three women is a victim of rape.

South Africa is also a place of great hope and forgiveness. It is the only country in the world where those in power went to the ballot box and, with no way of predicting the consequences, voted to give up their power. And where the oppressed then formed a government of national unity with their previous oppressors - choosing reconciliation over retribution. South Africa has produced four Nobel Peace Laureates and gave the world the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - a process of lancing old wounds and providing a safe space where victims and perpetrators could finally recognise each other's humanity and so find forgiveness and healing. We are trying to create a society that can form the bridge between the developed and developing worlds; a society where we can find a happy medium between the western model of development with its focus on technological development and economic growth, and the African model of development that focuses on social development and personal growth. We are trying to create a society where the individual will take responsibility for the well-being of the community, so that the community can take responsibility for the well-being of the individual. We are trying to build a society that, once again, live by the values of the African philosophy of Ubuntu.

On Africa

I am also an African. The continent that is my home is the second largest landmass on the planet, and speaks a third of the world's languages, yet it is home to only 11% of the world's population. Despite high fertility levels and abundant resources, the continent has not reached the population figures or levels of development found in other nations. There are several reasons why Africa keeps lagging behind.

- The first is the effect of the slave trade. UNESCO estimates that during the 400 years of large-scale commercial slavery, up to 100 million people were captured and sold into slavery. Most of these people never reached their destinations – they were simply taken out of the gene pool.
- Colonisation took its toll as well – during the reign of King Leopold the second in Belgium, between 10 and 15 million people were killed in the then Belgian Congo. The king simply worked them to death in his mines and rubber plantations, or killed them if they refused to work. Leopold's legacy continues to haunt the region up to this day, with the tensions in Rwanda created by his rule, killing 800 000 people in the space of a hundred days a few years ago.
- Post-colonisation the continent remains in turmoil as it battles to overcome the arbitrary divisions and groupings created by the colonial powers, as well as the legacy of the Cold War's puppet dictators and their shady arms deals with the West's arms merchants. In 2001 1.2 million Africans were killed in warfare. The continent is awash with forgotten landmines, unexploded ordinance, easily available weapons and deeply traumatised people who can no longer remember a time before war. They do not know another way of living.
- Add to this the disastrous results of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank's structural adjustment policies that forced countries to export the food they produced while their own people were starving. Not many people realise that during the Ethiopian famine of the 1980's, which killed almost a million

people, Ethiopia was a net grain exporter. This tragedy is now repeating itself in Malawi, where the World Bank 'advised' the government to sell its grain stores, even though Africa is entering one of its drought cycles. Every year more than a million Africans die of nutritional deficiencies, while the very selective free trade policies of the World Trade Organisation is further reducing the ability of countries to protect their agricultural industries from the heavily subsidised agricultural surpluses of the West.

- And finally, Mother Nature is doing her share in keeping Africa's population down and in poverty. Depending on whose estimates you believe, 28-35 million Africans have been infected with HIV - 70% of all those infected on the planet¹. By 2010, Sub-Saharan Africa will have 71 million fewer people than it would have had without the effect of AIDS. The United Nations is preparing for 30 million AIDS orphans on the continent by 2010, and it is estimated that AIDS will kill 67% of today's African teenagers.² Malaria is killing a further 900 000 people every year, while diseases of poverty and underdevelopment kill another 2 million on average, mainly children. The average life expectancy of an African is 37 years³.

As the double-edged sword of Western Civilisation sweeps the continent, it leaves behind a tangled mess of ill-conceived good intentions, tragic cultural conflicts, misguided aspirations, blatant exploitation and the erosion of social systems and traditional values. The end result is a formidable barrier to sustainability and a level of poverty unimaginable to most people living in the developed world.

Considering its mineral wealth, Africa should be one of the richest continents, yet it remains trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. Fifty-eight percent of the world's low-income countries are in Africa. There are no high-income African countries.

To call Africa a developing continent is in many instances a misnomer. Most African countries are either undeveloped or undeveloping – having lost most of the infrastructure they inherited from colonial rule, and losing the infrastructure provided by development aid, because this aid rarely comes with an operations and maintenance budget.

The continent has fewer roads than Poland and only 16% of them are paved. Just over half of Africans have access to clean drinking water, mostly from communal taps and other external sources, 44% have access to adequate sanitation, and only 20% have electricity in their homes. Africa has only 2% of the world's telephone lines and half of them are in South Africa. There are 10 telephones for every 1 000 people, and having a personal Internet connection is rare, even in South Africa.⁴ And even if the infrastructure was available, only 56% of Africans are literate. Of the 25 countries with the lowest scores on the UNDP's 2001 Human Development Index, 24 were African.

The reasons for Africa's poverty are not simple. The main sources of foreign income remain agricultural products and raw materials. With the value of most of these commodities showing a steady decline over the past few decades, African countries find it increasingly difficult to access financing or pay back debt. Seventeen percent of Africa's GDP goes towards debt repayment. However, the World Bank and the IMF continue pushing African countries into producing monoculture cash crops that are only viable through imported fertilisers and, increasingly, through genetically modified seed. Funding that is conditional to the implementation of structural adjustment programmes force countries to open up their mineral resources to the multinational mining and oil companies, while the World Trade Organisation's Multinational Agreement on Investment attempts to remove all power of local communities and their governments to prevent development which they see as

harmful to their environment, their way of life and their local economy. But this is only one part of a very complex problem best left to economists. More important is how poverty impacts on our business, which is the creation of sustainable human settlements.

The problems created by poverty are not unique to Africa, but characterise the challenges of developing countries in general and aggravate other problems such as rapid urbanisation, growing inequity and low levels of human development faced by these countries.

Developing world challenges

Cities of the developing world show a low rate of investment against an extremely high rate of demographic growth. What this means is that while the population of cities continue to grow, the ability of the population to contribute to the tax base and investment does not. The people who are moving to cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America do so because they can no longer survive in rural areas for a number of reasons, and are being pushed out of their traditional homes, or because they see more opportunities for themselves to eke out a living in the city.

In most cases they are too poor to pay for basic services, let alone contribute to the tax base. The result is decaying infrastructure and urban environments, dangerously low levels of service and people taking matters in their own hands with sometimes disastrous and tragic results.

Within this context any technical improvements that increases the total capital cost of housing or infrastructure will probably face opposition. Even small changes, which here would count as almost no-cost options, can have a huge impact. For example, increasing the roof overhang of South Africa's subsidy houses with 10 cm completely wipes out the profit margin of the builder. In societies where people buy 100g packs of sugar and single cigarettes, technologies that may bring life-cycle savings in the long term, but at higher initial capital costs are simply not an option. And when you have to count your pennies, few people are prepared to invest in an unknown technology – they simply cannot afford the gamble.

But perhaps the most critical challenge is the lack of actual capacity to implement sustainable construction practices. This lack is a factor of the number of human resources, the skills of those resources and the tools and technologies available to decision-makers. There simply are not enough professionals, tradesmen and labourers who have been trained to support sustainable construction, nor are there people who can train them. In fact, the capacity of the construction sector in many developing countries can barely deal with the demands of routine construction. As the vast majority of construction firms in developing countries are small enterprises that rely on outsourcing personnel as required, the traditional apprenticeship system has all but disappeared. This has severely affected skills training and the retention of expertise and organizational learning.

Limited access to tools like computers, knowledge networks and databases, or even relevant textbooks, further compounds the problem. An uncertain currency market and limited foreign reserves limit the ability to import technologies such as computers or solar panels that could help with the developmental problems while making sure that they are sustainable. Even previous millennium technologies like books become almost unaffordable.

There are also high levels of inequity within developing countries, with many countries having developed a dual economy with a wealthy elite that has consumption patterns equal to those in developed countries, and the majority of the country living in abject poverty. However, this internal inequity is only a symptom of a much larger global inequity. You all know by now that the industrialized countries continue to use far more than their fair share of global resources and I won't hammer you with the figures. However, from our studies of ecological footprints and productive environmental space, we know that the Earth cannot support this level of consumption for all people currently living on the planet. Yet, this is what politicians and marketers continue to promise to people of both developed and developing nations. The aspirations this creates in the poor then becomes a very effective barrier against the introduction of technologies that may be more sustainable, but are perceived as second-rate because the rich do not use them.

This inequity is further contributing to a deep suspicion of sustainable development. It is seen by many as yet another ploy by the rich nations to keep all the good things of the world to themselves. The main focus of the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development was on partnerships between big business and governments and in many ways represented the triumph of the neo-liberal economics version of market-driven sustainable development over that of the civil societies that are calling for a better, more equitable world - a world with values that transcend the market.

Few developing countries think it likely that sustainable development (in the form they would like to see it) will be possible through the model of development espoused by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Especially since many of the problems experienced in the developing world are a result of the development models these institutions encouraged the developing countries to follow.

Is it then any wonder that protests against this system, as well as against those who are seen as its protectors, are on the increase, and are becoming increasingly violent?

For the real root of the problem, that is the unequal distribution of power and resource consumption is not really being addressed. There is much talk about poverty alleviation, improving governance and generally getting the developing countries to pull themselves out of their misery. Forgetting for a moment that most of the US and Europe's wealth historically came from the exploitation of developing country resources, let's look at how much of this wealth they are prepared to share.

The rich countries of the world give 53 billion US dollars a year for overseas development aid. Every year the US, the EU and Japan spend 350 billion US dollars on agricultural subsidies for their own farmers, while demanding in the interests of free trade, that developing countries phase out their own subsidies. Global military spending equals 800 billion US dollars. Developing countries account for 70% of all international arms deliveries in the past four years. In 2000, America's overseas development aid totalled about 10 billion. During the same year, it sold arms worth 12.6 billion dollars to developing countries.

At a university lecture I recently gave on ecological carrying capacity and footprints, one of the students asked the following: "If the earth can only support 2 billion people at the lifestyle of the average North American, what is there to stop the rich 20% of the world to just make sure that the other 80% can never reach the same level of consumption, or use an even more drastic solution such as killing the poor 80%?" From the back of the class someone shouted: "What makes you think they are not

already doing that?" Looking at the above figures, I cannot but ask the same question.

As Ghandi said:" the world has enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed." Without addressing the overconsumption of the developed world, we will not be able to meet the needs of the developing world without seriously jeopardizing the survival of us all. However, the action plan that came out of the World Summit on Sustainable Development leaves Northern production and consumption patterns virtually untouched. Until these patterns are addressed, there is no way that we can meet the Brown Agenda of poverty alleviation and underdevelopment, as well as the Green Agenda of living within the planetary carrying capacity. And meet them both we must if we want a sustainable world.

This is not a profound new insight – we have known for years that a certain amount of letting go is necessary. So why the resistance? In South Africa, farmers often have to deal with baboons destroying their crops. The baboons are wily creatures that very quickly figure out any traps. However, one simple way still continue to catch them. The farmer would make a hole in a pumpkin just big enough for the baboon's hand to go in. The baboon would stick in its hand, grab hold of a handful of pumpkin seeds and find that it cannot get its hand out again. It could easily get away and save its life by letting go of the seeds, yet it remains trapped by its own greed. We human beings are no different from that baboon.

The bright side

I am often asked: "But don't you feel helpless in the face of such tremendous challenges?" And the answer is yes, sometimes I do, but then I remind myself of this old folk tale.

There was once a great forest fire and all the animals were running fast to escape it, except the humming bird. Instead, she went to the river and picked up a drop of water and dropped it into the fire. Then she flew back to pick up another drop of water. Meanwhile, the other animals were shouting at her: "What do you think you are doing? Do you really think you can put out the fire by yourself? Save yourself!" To which the little hummingbird replied: "I am doing what I can." When the Great Power heard her, he was so moved that he sent a rainstorm to put out the fire.

What keeps me going, are all the little hummingbirds I know. Ordinary, yet extraordinary South Africans who are doing what they can, and who by their efforts remind me that change does not have to happen in big upheavals, but can happen through the many small actions that are within our power to perform. I'd like to introduce you to some of these inspiring individuals.



Andries

Thulie

Vusie

Frik

Naledi

Anton

Meet Andries Keswe. Andries is to me the embodiment of what sustainability is about. He lives in the small town of Clarens in the Eastern Free State. By virtue of its location in one of the most scenic parts of the country, Clarens has been earmarked for tourism development and has indeed seen a dramatic growth in its tourism

income. However, this does not necessarily translate into the creation of jobs. Andries therefore decided to take matters into his own hands. Working with what he had, he decided to build a tourist reception centre at the entrance of the informal settlement where he lives. In this centre he is planning a small outdoor café, an art gallery and a consulting room for his friend who is a traditional healer. The difference between Andries and the big-time developers in the main town, is that he has to do it all with found materials. The walls of his centre are built with bottles from the town dump, the roof sheeting salvaged from a demolished house. The furniture in his tea garden is constructed of sticks and reeds and found objects and all forms one elaborate structure, so no one can cart it away overnight. The artworks he and another of his friends make are created out of whatever they can find lying around. He asked no one for any money and received none of the tourism grants that went to the big operators. All he had to work with was his ingenuity and the goodwill of his community. It is going slowly, as he also has to keep himself alive with small piece jobs, but his determination and can-do spirit is already infecting the rest of his small community.

Then there is the Greenhouse People's Environmental Centre Project⁵ situated in Joubert Park in Hillbrow. Hillbrow used to be the Manhattan of South Africa, home to the cosmopolitan high society of Johannesburg. Where before the streets spoke Queen's English, French, Greek and Hebrew, they now speak Wolof, Swahili and the universal language of the AK 47. The stately Art Deco high-rises are homes to immigrants from all over Africa who live twenty people to a room in buildings where the services have collapsed a long time ago and rent is collected at gunpoint. Into this urban jungle, Vanessa Black of Earthlife Africa brought a small haven that combines community involvement and education with environmentally friendly building practices. The project has three main focus areas:

- 1) To demonstrate development practices which will sustain people and the environment by being a living example of green building;
- 2) To support organisations working to improve the urban environment, particularly community-based organisations in the Johannesburg inner city; and
- 3) To disseminate information that will enable individuals to improve the quality of life in their community in a sustainable manner.

The development of the project has also provided training opportunities for the community. Twelve local community members are being trained in organic growing methods to produce food and *muti* (medicine) plants in the confined inner city spaces they occupy, and a female-headed construction company was trained in the environmentally friendly building principles used. Thulie Manana and her workers are now keen to use these principles in other projects and in their own homes.

Meet Vusie Mema. He and his friend Mlondolzi Kosi grew up in one of the poorest towns in the poorest province of South Africa, and each have a family history that would make a grown man weep. Yet, through the sacrifices of their families and community they managed to get a good education and can both now boast with degrees in biochemistry and microbiology. The two also won scholarships to study with the Zero Emissions Research Initiative, and spent a year in Germany learning about the various systems ZERI has developed for small-scale sustainable agribusinesses. Keen to bring their knowledge back to South Africa, they returned to the country two years ago. Since their return, both of them have been unemployed and are living off relative's old age pensions, together with their siblings and sundry other unemployed relatives. Just their battle to get to job interviews in far-flung parts of the country from their remote village is a saga on its own. Eventually they decided that they will have to do something themselves. Selling chickens and vegetables, they raise money to pay for Internet access at an Internet café in the nearby big

town. Through the Internet, they have used their contacts in Germany to get a donation of ten computers, and have persuaded a local businessman to give them the use of these unused storerooms for a year. Here they plan to set up a training centre, teaching people from the community basic literacy, numeracy and computer skills, as well as the ecological sanitation methods and small-scale organic agriculture they learned at ZERI. The obstacles facing them are unimaginable to someone living in a developed country, yet they continue to be optimistic and their sporadic email messages are one of the highlights of my life. But I remain frustrated that I have not been able to help them.

Meet Frik Grobbelaar. Frik owns a farm in the Eastern Free State, but found about ten years ago that he could no longer continue to farm commercially, as he could not compete with the subsidised wheat and maize from the EU and the States. He decided to turn to tourism instead and created Rustler's Valley⁶. Rustler's by itself has become a South African legend for its alternative approach to life and excellent music festivals. Their Easter festival is rated as one of the top ten alternative music festivals in the world. However, while the tourism part of the farm did provide some employment opportunities for the 150 farm workers who live on the farm, the income was sporadic and uncertain, and Frik could not afford to keep 150 people on his payroll. There were many social problems within the community and crime was becoming a major problem. To solve this headache, he could kick them off the farm, as many of his neighbours were doing, or he could find a more compassionate solution.

Frik found the compassionate approach. He put a large chunk of his land into trust for the farm worker community and set about making them self-reliant. Together with his partner, Jeunesse, who runs an NGO called Food and Trees for Africa, they taught the community permaculture farming methods, providing them with the first seed stock and materials for fences. Making them almost self-sufficient in terms of food production, freed up to the cash that came into the village via old age and disability pensions and child support grants. This means that the villagers could start improving their services. They installed a pump and built a dam, and now every house has a tap in the yard. As the community prospered and started selling some of their surplus produce, they have now built a three roomed school with accommodation for two teachers, bought television sets which they power with car batteries recharged at a communal photovoltaic installation, and is in the process of upgrading their rudimentary sanitation to ecological sanitation facilities. They are also building a soccer field for the children. Meet Anton, one of the success stories of Naledi Village. From being an unemployed, uneducated youth with no future, he has become a thriving small businessman, running a small convenience store for the community, and providing sacrificial livestock to the nearby community of *sangomas*. He has recently also built a small bar with pool table for the entertainment of locals on the other farms and the visitors to Rustler's. Naledi is to me one of the prime examples of how a community, with a little help and guidance, can empower themselves if they work together.

These are but four stories out of millions, but I hope that they illustrated to you that the developing world has more than problems – it also has some innovative, home-grown solutions and people with the courage and creativity to make them work.

Now that you know where I am coming from and have a better understanding of the concerns of that world, we can proceed to the next stage where I tell you what the developing countries bring to the table.

The developing world contribution

An old African legend tells of the first time when all life sprang from the marriage of the Tree of Life, and Ma, the great earth goddess. Ma created the first race of humans and taught them the Great Truth that binds all living beings. Unfortunately, these humans used their knowledge only to serve their own interests. They ate all the fruit on the Tree of Life and all the plants around it until the land turned to dust. They killed the animals, and they killed each other. And in their arrogance they took metals from the sacred body of Ma herself and made awful beasts that destroyed everything in their path and whose breath poisoned the air and the rivers. The Tree of Life became very angry and told Ma that she will have to destroy all the humans before they destroy not just the great Tree of Life himself, but all life. But no matter how sad they made her, Ma could not destroy all her children. So she saved the twelve wisest people, and together with their families sent them off to the furthest corners of the earth. To each of these families she gave a part of the Great Truth, but only a part. And she told them that only when they have become wise enough to use this truth without destroying the earth and everything on it, will all the different parts come together once more and humans will again know the Great Truth.

In many ways our quest for sustainability is the quest for that one Great Truth that will allow us to live in harmony with the greater community of life. But no one nation or group of people knows the full truth, and for us to once again fully know the Great Truth that binds all life, we must bring all the pieces from the corners of the earth together. This morning we are starting to take those first small steps to bringing the Great Truth together.

For the past two years I have been working with experts from around the developing world on a project that is an attempt to create a path for knowledge and hopefully wisdom from all the corners of the earth to come together. The Agenda 21 for Sustainable Construction in Developing Countries⁷ attempted to identify the specific contribution that developing countries can make to sustainable development and construction; in other words, their bits of the great truth.

Developing countries have a different perspective on life, and different ideas on what is important and on the place of humankind within the greater community of life.

The developing world also has a different value system from that driving the industrialised nations. You are all familiar with the triple bottom line defined by the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and others as “people, planet and profit”.

Those of you who are observant would have noticed that for the World Summit on Sustainable Development the South African government changed the ‘profit’ to ‘prosperity’. This is a small but significant shift in emphasis. The South comes from a people-centred view of development where an individual or company’s worth is not only judged by the amount of profit that is being generated, but also by the prosperity that is created and how well the person or company looks after the less fortunate members of the community.

It is based on a notion of development that is very different from the Western understanding of development as mastery over nature through technological development. Instead, for developing countries, development has to do with mastery

of the self through cultivating forgiveness, compassion and unselfishness. Where for the West progress is sacrosanct, for the developing countries harmony is far more important. And finally, while the West is in pursuit of knowledge, the developing world is in pursuit of wisdom.

While centuries of warfare, slavery and invasions has destroyed much of the traditions of developing countries, and the influence of the West is rapidly eroding these value systems, they still have a powerful influence in the developing world and help to expand our thinking around sustainable development.

This expansion of thinking can also be seen in the Agenda's answers to the question: "So what do we need to help us take sustainability further? "

Yes, we need technology to help us on the way forward, and the developed world which owes its wealth and high standard of living to its commitment to technological development would see this as the most important step forward. However, the developing world, coming as it does from a people-centred view, recognizes that ultimately it will be the behaviour and choices of people that will determine the success or failure of sustainable development, not the availability of sustainable technologies. We therefore also need an institutional environment that encourages and enables people to change their behaviour. And most importantly, we need to give them a moral or ethical compass that will point them in the right direction, thus giving them reasons for changing this behaviour that are based on more than just material profit.

The real sustainability challenge is not to develop the perfect assessment system or toolkit or an unlimited energy source— it is to change our current relationships with each other and with nature from one that is based on the rights of individuals or groups of individuals to one that is based on reciprocal responsibility. It is in meeting this challenge that developing countries can perhaps provide the biggest contribution to sustainable development.

I am, because you are

I mentioned earlier the African philosophy of "Ubuntu". Ubuntu describes the African view of humanity and its place in the greater order of things. In its simplest form Ubuntu is the principle of "I am because you are", as opposed to the "I think, therefore I am" of the Cartesian worldview that has influenced Western thought for the past few centuries. Ubuntu visualises a community built on interdependent relationships and regards humanity as an indivisible part of the ecosystem with a communal responsibility to sustain life. The emphasis is not so much on human rights, but on human responsibilities. Following our responsibilities and performing our duty of care secures us our rights. Ubuntu has equivalents in the traditions of almost every developing country and indigenous peoples. These traditions have the following values in common:

1. **Oneness or unity:** all life is interconnected and interdependent, part of a greater whole that makes up not only the planet, but also the entire cosmos, and all of it is sacred. By harming one component, you are ultimately harming all.

2. **Harmony:** to maintain our physical, social and spiritual health, harmony between individual members (human, animal, plant and elements) must be maintained at all costs.

3. **Respect:** To maintain harmony we must respect other members of the community (including the planet), honouring the sacrifices they make to keep us alive and keeping these to the minimum, using only what you need for your own survival.

4. **Responsibility:** The responsibility for maintaining harmony lies not with the leaders but with each individual. While everyone has certain basic rights, they also have mutual obligations and responsibilities. Thus there is a reciprocal arrangement of responsibility between individual and community, with people charged with the very specific responsibility of stewardship of the Earth.

In practice, applying these principles would mean that a building is designed to have a harmonious relationship with nature as well as with its human neighbours. It would respect the sacrifices made by the Earth to provide the materials and other resources necessary to build and use the building, and try to limit the use of these resources to the absolute minimum required, aiming for sufficiency, not just efficiency. It would respect the body of the Earth and all the organisms (including humans) living on it by not polluting or otherwise endangering them. When constructing and using buildings, resources should be seen as precious and treated with reverence. Above all, it would make use of the spirit of cooperation to strengthen its place in the community. The benefits of cooperative society as an alternative to technology is well illustrated in the following story:

The great white hunter came upon a tribe of pygmies celebrating around a dead elephant. The hunter was really mystified by how these small people could kill something so big. "O easy," the pygmy replied, "we used a club". "It must have been a very big club", said the hunter. "Yes, it was about sixty people big," the pygmy replied. This story ties in with an African proverb that says the only way to eat an elephant is bite by bite. You may need a community to accomplish the task, but it will only be accomplished if everyone does his or her bit.

Meeting the real sustainability challenge is an enormous undertaking that will require plenty of innovation and commitment from all of us. But if we form a big enough club and take it bite by bite, we can do it together. So let us finally look at what you can do.

What you can do

America is the undisputed leader of the world. You have the strongest economy, the most powerful army; you can hold countries, even the United Nations to ransom. In more ways than one, you hold the very survival of the human species in your hands. But, as Spiderman said: "With great power comes great responsibility."

Your responsibility is not to develop the developing countries, but to allow them the economic and environmental space within which to develop at their own pace according to their own standards of development. However, if you would like to become more involved in helping the developing countries there are several avenues to follow, apart from providing funding (which, of course, is always welcome).

Probably the greatest need in developing countries is capacity. We need to train the next generation of professionals and scientists to work within the sustainability paradigm, but we have very few people who can do the training, and even fewer educational tools. Thus if you are part of a training institute, set up exchange programmes of students and staff with educational institutes in the developing world.

Help us to set up education and demonstration centres. Give us access to information at affordable costs.

If you are a member of a research organisation, use your technical knowledge and access to technology and resources to help developing country researchers find solutions that are appropriate to their local contexts. What we need is not necessarily your solutions, but the technical knowledge and understanding that you have developed that will help us develop our own solutions. In other words, don't give us the fishing rod – teach us the principles and techniques of fishing and help us to study and understand the quirks of our own fish, so we can design the appropriate tackle with which to catch them.

If you are a manufacturer of ecologically responsible materials or components, consider expanding your business to developing countries by setting up regional manufacturing capacity in partnership with local partners. This not only makes your product more affordable, it also provides an example of best practice for local manufacturers, proving that sustainability can be good business.

However, your greatest responsibility as a country is to set a good example for the rest of the world to follow. The citizens of America set the aspirations for the rest of the world. But if the world follows the example that you, as a nation, is setting at the moment, the generations that follow us are all doomed. And yes, it is going to require sacrifice. It will require that Americans change their way of life, if the American way of life means driving a big, gas-guzzling SUV and the right of the individual to consume as much as her credit cards will allow. But I don't think that is the true American way of life. There is another American way of life that has inspired the world. It is a way of life with a tradition of caring about your neighbours and about the basic rights of all humans, of moving from your comfort zones to be pioneers and open up new possibilities, not just for America, but for the entire world. Now, more than ever before, we need the innovation and pioneering spirit of America to lead the way for the rest of the world.

And finally, accept your personal responsibility for the well-being of the world. Each and every one of us has a responsibility as individual to practice what we preach, and lead by example. We have a responsibility as service providers, manufacturers and business people, to make sure that people have a choice; that when they want to live a more sustainable life, there are products and tools that will allow them to make this choice. We have as decision makers a responsibility to ensure that our decisions, be they about building design, urban planning or the management of our business processes, will lead to a more sustainable world. Furthermore, we have a responsibility as citizens to make sure that our governments make wise decisions, not just politically and economically expedient decisions, and that we elect people who can provide this kind of leadership. And we have a responsibility to educate those who follow in our footsteps, whether they are the next generation in the developed world or the aspiring consumers of the developing world. We have to teach them to treat the earth with reverence and respect. We have to teach them that money and possessions are not the true measure of a person's wealth or value. And most importantly, we have the responsibility of being honest with ourselves about our own culpability in the current state of affairs, and teach those that follow that ours is not an example that should be followed blindly. For our biggest duty is to teach those who come after us to be better members of the community of life than we have been.

Surely, another world must be possible if we are all prepared to make the necessary changes in our lives – even if that means giving up power and privilege. Scary as that

may sound, as a South African who had to do just that, I can tell you the benefits far outweigh the cost.

And I can think of no stronger argument against the politicians and the big business interests that may try to stop you than this prophecy that came from one of your very own first nations:

"Only when the last tree has died and the last river had been poisoned and the last fish been caught, will we realize that we cannot eat money."

Endnotes

1 World Health Organisation. World Health Report 2002.

2 Stanecki, K. July 2002. The AIDS Pandemic in the 21st Century. US Census Bureau.

3 World Health Organisation, op cit.

4 World Bank Report. 2000. Can Africa claim the 21st Century?

⁵ See <http://www.earthlife.org.za/>

⁶ See <http://www.rustlers.co.za/> and <http://www.haveadzewilltravel.co.uk/Project.htm>

⁷ See www.sustainablesettlement.co.za