

**STATEMENT OF THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA AND  
PRESIDENT OF THE SUMMIT**

**THABO MBEKI**

**AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE MEETING OF HEADS OF STATE AND  
GOVERNMENT AT THE WORLD SUMMIT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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***Statement of the President of South Africa and President of the Summit Thabo Mbeki at the opening session of the meeting of heads of state and government at the World Summit for***

***Sustainable Development***

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Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government, Heads of Delegation, Secretary-General of UN, Kofi Annan, Distinguished Representatives of Civil Society, Delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

I am honoured to welcome you to the city of Johannesburg, to South Africa and to the African continent. I also welcome you to this important part of the deliberations of the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD).

I would like to thank all the Ministers, Officials and leaders of non-governmental organisations, who worked tirelessly during the course of the past week to ensure the success of the World Summit.

The progress they have achieved should enable us, the Heads of State, Government and Delegation, representatives of civil society and business leaders, to take the necessary decisions that will make it possible for us to emerge from this Summit with a concrete Plan of Action that will give meaning to our theme - People, Planet and Prosperity.

During the period we have engaged one another at the World Summit for Sustainable Development, we have achieved much in bringing together a diverse and rich tapestry of peoples and views, in a constructive search for a common path that will move all of us forward faster, towards a world that practically respects and implements the vision of sustainable development.

The matter rests with all of us gathered here this morning whether, when we conclude our work as we meet on this continent that is the Cradle of Humanity, we will be able to say, truthfully, that we have taken decisions that will meet the objectives we set ourselves when we decided to convene the World Summit for Sustainable Development.

I am certain that the billions of people of the world on whose mandate we occupy our seats, expect a very clear and unambiguous answer to the question whether we are ready and able to respond to the pressing challenges of sustainable development.

Two days ago, people took to the streets of Johannesburg to give voice to the demand that our Summit meeting must produce practical and meaningful results on very specific matters. The same message has been communicated from the many meetings held by representatives of civil society as part of this great gathering of the peoples of the world.

The message is simply this - that we can and must act in unity to ensure that there is a practical and visible global development process that brings about poverty eradication and human advancement within the context of the protection of the ecology of the planet Earth.

It is that this Summit must set concrete goals and targets for the realisation of these objectives and agree to implementation and monitoring processes that will ensure that all of us respect the global agreements into which we must enter.

As Africans, we have been privileged to host the leaders and representatives of the peoples of the world as they met to consider their response to the urgent challenge of sustainable development. As these hosts, we are moved by a deeply felt sense that the ordinary peoples of the world understand that a new and brighter world of hope and a better life for them is struggling to be born.

That expectation is informed by the recognition by these billions that not all is well with our societies - the way they function, the way they treat human beings, the way they treat the environment that constitutes the irreplaceable base for the sustenance of all life on our planet.

It is informed by the sense that the means and the knowledge exist within human society successfully to address all these challenges. The question arises as to why as human beings we do not act, when we have the capacity to overcome problems that are not God-given, but are the creation of human society and human decisions and actions.

Where there is every possibility to act to communicate a real message of hope, why is there despair! Since the means exist to banish hunger, why are so many without adequate supplies of food and others are faced with famine, including millions in this region of Southern Africa!

Why are people being swept away to their graves by floods that are without precedent in recent history! Why do millions die every year from avoidable and curable diseases when science, technology and engineering have the means to save these human lives! Why do we have wars when we established institutions to end war!

Why are there many who cannot read and write and count when, every day, human intelligence breaks through many barriers of darkness to make the seemingly unknowable part of the ever-expanding stock of human knowledge! Why does the accumulation of wealth in human society produce human misery!

What are the answers to all these questions and others! Who are the beneficiaries of these perverse eventualities, and who, the victims! Who and what is to blame! What shall we do! What should we do!

I believe that we gathered in Johannesburg to answer these questions. The poor in the world believe that we travelled from all corners of our common globe to the very Cradle of Humanity to find answers to these questions.

They believe that important changes in the world, including the end of the Cold War, created the possibility and necessity both to pose and answer these questions. What we decide by the middle of this week will tell them clearly whether they were right in their belief.

It may be that the fault rests in the fact that we are prisoners of the immediate, and consider it a cursed spite that we are called upon to right a time that is out of joint. It may be that we draw comfort from doing what we have always done. The known, order, routine, conformity, stability and inertia are, after all, an important part of what makes for a life of individual human fulfilment.

It may be that we fear a break with the present because we know the present, ugly as it may be in many respects, and are fearful of a better future that only exists in the imagination, and may have unknown and unintended consequences, if we dared to have the courage to break into the future.

But, surely, there is no one among us who thinks that billions in the world should continue to be condemned to poverty, underdevelopment and a denial of human dignity. Surely, there is no one among us who believes that we should not care about the natural world whose environmental integrity is the fundamental condition for the very survival of humanity.

If this conclusion is correct, and I believe it is, then we have every possibility to establish the Johannesburg World Summit for Sustainable Development as a defining moment that will live forever as the midwife that brought into our world the child that humanity conceived at Stockholm and Rio de Janeiro, and brought up during a period of gestation that has encompassed the UN Millennium Summit and other important international conferences held since 1992.

This, I believe, is the task we all face as we work to conclude the World Summit for Sustainable Development.

Less than a decade ago, this country was home to the anti-human system of apartheid, even as it was part of the combination of African countries that have given us proof that Africa is truly the Cradle of Humanity. The legacy of that inhumane system is evident everywhere in this country.

It would be correct that from here, the home of our common ancestors, the leaders of the peoples of the world communicate a genuine message that they really care about the future of all humanity and the planet we inhabit, that they understand and respect the principle and practice of human solidarity, and are therefore determined to defeat global apartheid.

From this city that owes its birth and growth to gold, itself the product of billions of years of natural evolution, must issue a strong and united voice that says - now is the time to act!

A message must come from this original home of all humanity that we are ready and prepared to be judged not by the number and eloquence of the resolutions we adopt, but by the speed and commitment with which we implement our agreements that must serve the peoples of the world.

Nothing, whatsoever, can justify any failure on our part to respond to this expectation.

I trust that you will have a fruitful and enjoyable stay in South Africa.

I wish the Summit successful deliberations.

I thank you.

Issued by The Presidency