

Message from Dr. Klaus Töpfer

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Only one year before the Summit on Sustainable Development is to take place, humankind faces great challenges: the gap between the great majority of the global poor population and the rich minority has widened since the Environmental Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Kofi Annan's goal to reduce absolute poverty by 50% until the year 2015 can only be achieved by a fundamental change of attitude with regard to solidarity among the countries of the northern and southern hemisphere.

Apart from the dramatic and continuously growing poverty in developing countries the excessive consumer behavior and the inefficient use of resources in highly developed countries is by far the greatest threat to the stability of nature, to the environment and to a peaceful living in this world.

The following example will illustrate this situation: about 13% of the world's population lives on the African continent but it accounts only for 3,2% of the global CO² emission which is the most important greenhouse gas that influences the climate. However, the impact of the greenhouse effect is particularly dramatic in Africa: extreme climatic circumstances such as droughts and flood-like rainfalls, and progressive desertification accompanied by the loss of arable land. Increasingly limited water resources are becoming the center of conflicts. More and more people are becoming "Environmental Refugees".

The example shows: the highly developed "rich" nations of this world load great parts of their affluent society costs onto underdeveloped countries. This "ecological aggression" is the starting point and constant reason for conflicts. Global environmental prevention policies are therefore becoming a decisive component of regional peace policies.

Part of the necessary changes of attitude in highly developed countries is to remember common values and to comprehend that we are all responsible for the protection of the environment, the conservation of biodiversity, and the efficient use of the limited resources of our planet.

The Earth's Charter illustrates this in a remarkable way. The United Nations Environmental Program supports the principles formulated in the Charter and will work on strengthening the culture of solidarity between continents, as well as among governments and civil societies. This is not a naive but realistic optimism that is based on the fact that with a better knowledge on increasing problems also the technical possibilities and the ethical sense of responsibility for their solution have increased. It is my hope, that the principles formulated in the Earth's Charter may serve as guidelines for governments, non-governmental organizations, industry and science, and as a basis for the preparations of the World Summit in Johannesburg.

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