

**Speech by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende in honour of the fifth anniversary of the Earth Charter, Amsterdam, 9 November 2005**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you this morning at this conference in honour of the fifth anniversary of the Earth Charter.

Queen Beatrix will be joining you this afternoon. She and her late husband, Prince Claus, have always been deeply involved in promoting the goal of the Earth Charter: a global society that is both just and sustainable.

Prince Claus was a leading expert in the field of sustainable development. We can still learn a great deal from him. In 1988 he said:

‘While money is important as a means of promoting development, development is essentially a *cultural* process. It is not a question of material goods but of human resources.’

He went on to say that:

‘It is impossible to “develop” another country or person from the outside. People develop themselves and so do countries. All that we can do is assist in that process.’

‘To assist in that process’. I’ve had a chance to see with my own eyes just how important that is.

Last month I was in Nigeria and Mali.

In Zaria, in northern Nigeria, I visited a training centre for medical professionals who care for TB and leprosy patients. There, doctors and other healthcare workers learn how they can fight these terrible diseases. I talked with doctors. And with patients. Brave people who, despite their disfigured bodies, continue to believe in the future.

In Mali – one of the poorest countries in the world – I paid a visit to a village school. The average class size in Mali is fifty-seven pupils. Twice as many as in the Netherlands. There is a major shortage of buildings and well-trained personnel. The problems are serious. But the school head also told me about the *positive* developments. Fifteen years ago only a

quarter of the children in Mali went to primary school. Now that figure is two-thirds. A huge step forward in a relatively short time.

The Netherlands supports education in Mali. In the words of Prince Claus, we 'assist in the process and invest in human resources'.

To those who are cynical about the effects of aid, I say, 'Go visit that school in Mali and see for yourself'. Even with limited resources, we are making a difference.

Of course, we mustn't be naïve. I am all too aware that seventy per cent of Nigerians are living below the poverty line. Despite the fact that the country is one of the biggest oil producers in the world. I also see the corruption, the violence and the ineffective government. During my visit, I spoke with President Obasanjo about his reform programme. His vision for his country is the right one, but much remains to be done before it becomes reality.

The problems confronting us are enormous. The important thing is how we respond to them. Do we use them as a source of cynicism? As an excuse to do nothing? Or will we instead see them as a reason to take action?

A world that lets itself be guided by cynicism is a world without hope, a world without prospects.

This is not the world of the people in that hospital in Nigeria. Nor the world of those schoolchildren in Mali. It's not my world, and it's not your world.

What I like most about the Earth Charter is the way it builds a bridge between values and action.

Values like freedom, solidarity, respect for human rights and respect for the Earth are not 'possessions'. They are not shiny medals we can pin on our chests to impress others. Values are a call to action. Values create obligations.

Do we still have the courage to have ideals? Do we still dare to believe in a world 'founded upon freedom from want and freedom from fear', in the words of Franklin Roosevelt? Are we still willing to speak out in favour of an international community that refuses to pass the buck to its children?

Perhaps our greatest mission is putting an end to all the cynicism. Today, more than ever, idealism is simply a matter of common sense.

In politics, a lot of our attention is taken up by short-term matters. We are too easily held captive by the issues of the day. The Earth Charter and the UN's Millennium Declaration, by contrast, inspire us to look beyond the moment.

We tend to be reactive. We only take action once the crisis is upon us. But we are also expected to anticipate the future: not only responding to crises, but also doing our part to promote sustainability. And that isn't easy.

Especially when you consider that the challenges before us are not isolated. They are firmly linked to one another.

Anyone who says 'make poverty history' needs to ask himself if Mother Earth can actually tolerate this added prosperity. More prosperity means a rise in the demand for clean water, raw materials and energy. Experts warn us that we are already asking more of the earth than it can provide. Spreading prosperity means an even greater strain on the environment.

Those who call for sustainable development should also ask themselves how bad governance, corruption, war and other conflicts can be reduced. They destroy what has taken so much trouble to build. Without the foundation of justice and security, even the best development projects sink into oblivion.

Ladies and gentleman, we all know how great the task before us is.

We know that every day thirty thousand children die of poverty.

We know that entire communities can be thrown into chaos by diseases like HIV/AIDS – especially in Africa. Every day eight thousand young people are infected. I agree with UNICEF when they say that this problem deserves our full attention.

We know that in the last century the Earth's temperature rose by one degree Celsius. When I was born, the chance of holding the *Elfstedentocht* – an ice-skating marathon in the province of Friesland – was one in four. By the time my daughter was born, the chance had dropped to one in ten.

We have seen the satellite photos of the melting Polar icecaps and the shrinking rain forests.

We have seen the terrible consequences of tropical storms and the misery they cause in tens of thousands of families.

We know that there is a clear link between poverty and civil war. And we see the desperate attempts people make to escape a life of poverty.

The Earth Charter is right to stress that economic development, health, environmental protection, human rights and security are interdependent. Its message is that today, more than ever before, a threat to one is a threat to all.

Together with the Brundtland report 'Our Common Future' from 1987, the Earth Charter paved the way for this new way of thinking. The United Nations officially recognised this chain of interdependence at the Summit in New York last September.

It's like the poet Walt Whitman wrote:

'All people of the globe together sail,  
Sail the same voyage,  
All bound to the same destination.'

We share one world. No one can say, 'Stop the world, I want to get off.'

Once people realise this, they cannot help but dedicate themselves fully to the ideals enshrined in the Earth Charter and the Millennium Declaration.

Ladies and gentlemen, how can we help build a healthy world that can meet the needs of both the present generation and those to come?

By way of an answer, I'd like to discuss five points with you today.

First of all: we must focus our energies on peacekeeping, stability and good governance. These are the conditions for sustainable economic growth. This is why good governance is one of the chief priorities of Dutch development policy.

Let's not lose sight of the good things that are happening at regional level in the developing world. Just look at how the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) is helping to reinforce peace and security in Africa. It mediates conflicts, opposes the spread of weapons and sets up training programmes for African peacekeepers. These kinds of initiatives deserve our support.

The second point I'd like to mention is the key role of energy.

I clearly remember a conversation I had with Mohamed El-Ashry, the former chair of the Global Environmental Facility. He described energy as the engine that drives development. Energy allows people to build a better life for themselves. But increasing use of energy is also the cause of erosion, air pollution and climate change. Not only that, but fossil fuels are being exhausted at an ever faster rate.

Developed countries attained their present position thanks to their unchecked use of energy. El-Ashry believes that these same countries now have a special responsibility. Not only do they have to save energy 'in their own backyard', by making their own consumption cleaner and more sustainable. They also have to support up-and-coming economies and developing countries in adopting responsible energy practices. They can do this through investment, knowledge transfer, international agreements and partner programmes.

If we succeed in making the shift to a more sustainable approach, the ideals of the Earth Charter will be one step closer. It is absurd to think that a specific amount of energy is needed to achieve a specific standard of living. There are countries in the world with similar standards of living, yet the one may consume a full fifty per cent less energy than the other. That should give you some sense of the enormous margins we are dealing with.

My third point is that we have to tailor our approach to the specific situation in the countries we are trying to help. We need to use the momentum that is already present in certain countries or regions. There is no single formula for success that we can impose wherever we please. Let's direct our support to what is already working. In the knowledge that change must take place within.

Take China, for example. A country whose economy is growing by leaps and bounds. A country that has succeeded in freeing millions of people from the grip of poverty. But also a country with major ecological problems. The air in urban areas is polluted. Loss of vegetation is causing enormous dust storms. 'Brown rain' is harming not only China, but also South

Korea and Japan. To make matters worse, China is suffering from an acute shortage of clean water.

There is a danger of an ecological meltdown if nothing is done. Not only the environment is under threat; the further development of the economy and society are at risk too. To their credit, the Chinese understand this. The authorities are now concentrating on promoting cleaner, more efficient energy consumption and sustainable water management. Of course, it would have been better to prevent the problems in the first place. But at least there are now ample opportunities to switch to a more sustainable path. We need to seize these opportunities together. By sharing knowledge and introducing clean technologies.

This brings me to my fourth point: scope for innovation. Innovations support the bridge that will lead us to a sustainable world.

There are more possibilities than we think. Let me give you an example.

The Netherlands is an important transport hub. After arriving at the port of Rotterdam or Schiphol Airport, goods are loaded into trucks, and then shipped to destinations throughout Europe. In our densely populated country, it is critical that the transport industry generate as little pollution as possible. We are strongly committed to developing innovations that make cleaner transport possible. It is no coincidence that Dutch teams have won the World Solar Challenge rally in Australia for years.

But there's more. A major truck manufacturer in this country has developed a new generation of engines for the largest vehicles in its fleet. These engines emit ninety-four per cent less particulate matter than traditional engines. They already meet the strictest new EU standards. A good example of innovation as the driving force behind sustainable development.

One more example, this time from the world of agriculture. In the past several years, greenhouses have been developed in the Netherlands that produce energy rather than consume it. This goes to show that if we open our minds to innovation, the sky's the limit.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a fifth quality that can help us. It strikes me that we tend to act separately a lot of the time. You have the government. Then you have business and industry. And then you have civil society in all its diversity. Three sectors that have far too little contact with one another.

These sectors often look critically at each other. In itself, this is not a bad thing. Each has its own perspective and goals. But let's not forget that there is more that binds us than separates us.

By creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, we can come one step closer to a sustainable world. Governments create the conditions for sustainable growth. Civil society supplies the human resources. Business and industry provides the power and capacity. The more the three can work together, the more we can accomplish.

In my many meetings with NGOs and business, I have noticed that people in one sector now have a much greater appreciation for the contribution made by the other sectors. This is a positive development. Many businesses have made great strides towards sustainability. By this, I don't mean that they've begun a few showcase projects. But rather that their corporate philosophy is based on the conviction that sustainability offers the best guarantees for stable performance and a bright future.

In the words of Jeroen van der Veer, the CEO of Shell:

'If you want to continue to succeed as a company in the coming decades, you have to put solid business principles, including sustainable development, at the heart of how you do your business.'

And more and more corporate leaders are following his lead.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Earth Charter says, 'As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. This requires a change of mind and heart.'

Change is the hardest thing in life. In the nineteenth century, the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy lamented, 'Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.'

Our sometimes painful experiences have taught us that every change for the better begins with ourselves.

The Earth Charter is, in the truest sense of the expression, a people's document. A source of inspiration for everyone who realises that in this day and age, idealism is no more than common sense.

Let's continue to fight cynicism. Cynicism is unproductive and unnecessary. There is so much we can do.

I keep thinking about those schoolchildren I met in Mali last month. About their enthusiasm and faith in the future. Let us – like them – work to achieve change.

Thank you.