

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars, and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education, and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

For today's Earth Charter podcast episode, we will have a conversation with Ashok Khosla, an old friend who I deeply admire, and who is the founder of Development Alternatives that is based in New Delhi, in India.

Ashok was instrumental in the organization of the NGO Forum during the Real Earth Summit in 1992, and he has been involved with many initiatives, including the initial years of UNEP. He was the president of IUCN, the World Conservation Union, and also the Club of Rome. And he is currently a member of the Earth Charter International Council. Thank you, Ashok, for joining us today.

It's nice. Thank you, Mirian, for inviting me. It's a long time. We first met in Rio in 1992. It's nearly 30 years, and it's incredible. I'm delighted to be here with you and to be able to share a few thoughts.

A lot has happened since we first met because the world has, in fact, gone through several revolutions in terms of thinking, in terms of its activities, in terms of its general approach to how to get faster and faster into Tuesday. And we've really had over the last 30 odd years a lesson in how not to run a planet, how not to build a world that is good for any purpose whatsoever, even for a single person, to be able to live a decent life, let alone all the people on this planet.

We've done pretty well everything wrong. So obviously, we need to take a look, step back, take a look at what we need to do. And this virus, you know, horrible, though it is, gives us an opportunity to do just that, to be able to look at where we are and see the world for what it is. It's not the virus that is to blame, it is ourselves, the systems that are so broken, that a little virus. You know, Mirian, there was a calculation I read the other day, that if you put all the viruses in the whole world, all the coronavirus, into a little spoon, they won't weigh one gram.

The total weight of the viruses all over the world has, with one gram, has brought the entire economy of the globe to a standstill. So it goes to show that we were not very thoughtful about where we were going. And you can't blame one group and not another, because all of us basically have lived off the fact of the land. We've all been able to live good lives, we've got beautiful homes, we've got travel, we've got cars, we've got fridges, we've got all the things that make life comfortable for a good half of the people on this planet.

Oblivious of the fact that the other half have nothing. So obviously, things were going to break down one way or the other. If it was not a piece of plutonium, if it was not a piece of virus, it would have been something else. But we were heading for trouble, and a lot of us, already in 1992, were aware of that. And so I would say, Mirian, that our job today

is not to play a blame game, but to figure out what is it that we've got to do to get away from the kind of fragility, the kind of vulnerability that we've landed our economies, our societies, our political bodies into such serious trouble.

So that's where we are. COVID-19 disease, which comes from this novel coronavirus, has actually provided us with an opportunity to be heard a little better. It may be that those who are in charge will be oblivious and will go on doing what they do as they did in 2008, when the whole economy of the world collapsed, and as they did in 2000, when the whole economy of the world also collapsed, and as they did in 1992. They've been doing it every eight or ten years, and managed to come up with the same old story.

This time, I think it's going to be harder. I hope it's going to be harder for the time.

Harder in a way that we don't forget. Because there's a crisis, the crisis passes, and we very quickly forget.

Of course, everybody forgets, and the people who run the show want everybody to forget, because obviously they know exactly what they're doing. It is a sad commentary on a world which is run by a very small group of very highly invested people, people who have the power and the money to do whatever they want.

And for in almost every way, for doing things that are only in their own interest and no one else's. But that's short term, because when you destroy your ecosystems, when you destroy the life support systems, the climate system, the biodiversity, even the very rich will suffer, obviously. They may not suffer during this particular lifetime, the children will for sure. We feel that it's now time to keep hammering away that it's not in your interest to go on having such a lopsided world. A world that is so distorted and asymmetric that it's bound to fall on the face.

So that is really what we're facing at the moment. Big issues, in my opinion, the big issues are extreme poverty and hunger on the one hand, that's the people's issues, and the climate change, biodiversity, species extinction stuff on the other hand, which is the planetary issues, the natural issues. So you've got nature and people, both are important, and both have major issues, which are actually two sides of the same coin. They're causing each other. They are inextricably linked. The extreme poverty and hunger that you have in the world, that's very different, is not separate from the issues that you face in changing climate and loss of living resources and all the other things that we do.

So essentially, if you keep going back to higher and higher level problems, you end up with the causal. What is the reason for keeping on running into the wall all the time? Where are we having this problem with? Virtually everywhere we turn, pollution is getting us, the oceans are dying, plastics are going up, our nostrils are going into our bodies, everything is happening. And ultimately, of course, it is our consumption factors. It is our production systems. It is the very lopsided approach that we've taken to things.

Now you look at the room around me, and I'm as guilty, as you can see, of having things. And I was very tempted to have a different background, but I figured that I can't blame other people if I don't accept the fact that my lifestyle is also partly to blame. And I think

it's very important for the whole world to see that it's not a kind of saintly simplicity. Now you don't have to be a Mahatma Gandhi to have a great life. You can have a great life in the here and now, with material comforts, with all that modern science, technology and economics makes possible for us.

Fulfillment through knowledge, fulfillment through interaction, through relationships, through travel, through learning. All of these things are what makes today's world so much better for everyone. We live longer lives, most of us. Now that the diseases, lifestyle diseases, are catching up with us, of course that may be different. We live lives that are in many, many ways more fulfilling than even the fair of that in the olden days. So the issue is not that we shouldn't live hugely rewarding lives.

It is that it has to be in balance with the resources that Mother Nature gave us to live with. And we pretty well, within two and a half centuries, starting from almost scratch, destroyed them. We basically brought them to their knees in terms of their productivity, their ability to continue to serve the interests of our children and our grandchildren. So frankly, the COVID disease that has, pandemic that has hit us, is a wake up call. And as you say, if we don't wake up and stay awake and not lose track of this, because our memories are so short that we give it up, it may be a good thing.

Because if we go on the way we were going, we were going off the cliff. So the COVID pandemic, in a sense, is a barrier that we're hitting to slow us down. It's kind of a speed breaker. And hopefully we will treat it like that.

So you mentioned about our current production patterns and consumption lifestyles. I understand you think these are at the root of all these problems. Like what we are talking about all this challenge that we are currently living. And can you expand a little bit more in terms of what do you think are the root causes? What are causing all this challenge that we are currently facing?

There are many different root causes. Although they probably in many ways relatable to each other. One major root cause is our consumption pattern, which has now made it impossible to live a life that people find acceptable without massive use of natural resources and energy in water. Natural resources, materials, water, all of them have now got to a stage where we are hurting mother birds ability to survive, to live a productive and regenerative life.

Yes, consumption patterns are very important. Our production systems, which is a separate issue, the kinds of ways in which we produce the things that serve our consumption needs are also very wrong, are very destructive. Why are they destructive? Because they are usually very heavy, large scale. They are imagined and run by people who essentially have very little care about what they do to their surroundings, to their environment, in terms of both extraction of resources as well as getting rid of the wastes.

So for them, the earth around them is a source and a sink for large amounts of resources and wastes. So certainly consumption and production are very deeply at root. But then you've got to go to what's it, so why are we doing these things? Well, that's our value systems. So then the root cause is one step higher level. Our value systems, which are

very conservative, even in our parents' time, even my parents or your grandparents, were people who didn't throw anything away. They used every single item that they had.

When they bought vegetables, they made the soup out of the leftovers and they used everything. They threw anything away. There's no such thing as a single use container.

They would even keep every single container that came in because it was used for something else. Now that's all gone, all within a generation. Gone. So what we need to do is to keep going step back. If you want to go to root causes, then you want to see the root cause or bad root cause. Then you go beyond even this value system, the value systems that kept us in balance with nature, in harmony with nature, have been thrown away. And it's now acceptable, widely acceptable, to do bad things. Like throw away waste and litter and pile it up in landfills and throw it into the oceans to burn energy and essentially emit throw away carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

And nobody is there to ask you why not. Of course, there are people and we come to that. But basically, it is doable. We do it.

Now, if you want the root cause of our value systems having disappeared, you actually cycle back to the issues of science, technology, etc., which are on the one hand terrific because that's what's made possible such great advances in our ability to fulfill, lead fulfilling lives. It's also been misused in order to essentially go beyond the kinds of comforts that we're entitled to.

So in the last 250 odd years, these value systems are very rapidly deteriorated. And I'm not going to blame anybody, but I would say that the kind of economic systems that we adopted, what are now called neoliberal economies and neoclassical economics, the two feeding each other, the two basically providing the reason for the other,

are completely crazy. I mean, a neoclassical economist doesn't see any difference between a GDP that comes from

well-lived lives and a GDP that comes from destroying Mother Earth. It's all the same for economics. And neoclassical economics has a great deal to blame for this. And I would say that that is a root cause for some of our breakdown of our economy. It's a root cause for some of our breakdown of our values because we've gone into that value. So that's a meta-level value in some ways. And neoliberal economies, politics, has led to the belief that capitalism, that accumulation of wealth, but not just accumulation of just capital, reasonable capital, to be able to generate economic activity, but huge amounts of accumulation by individuals

way beyond any meaning in terms of economic value. These are all the value systems that lie behind the breakdown of our values. Today, everybody is now seeing the glorification of being a billionaire.

And so everyone else thinks, well, that's the way to be. And all our systems feed into each other, our media, our educational systems, our political systems, even our families, even our parents now, teachers, try to teach us that it's good to be rich and you've got to basically

not worry about things like what are the side effects, the impacts of your life and your lifestyle. So it becomes complicated because it's not a hierarchical set of root causes because each one is sort of cycling with each other. But I would say that neoclassical economics and neoliberal thinking

feed into the breakdown of the value systems that were necessary for sustaining a long-term

relationship with Mother Earth. Now, I'm not suggesting that everybody should become a hot-and-tot or a personal living in Papua New Guinea.

They live wonderful lives and they're entitled to that. But basically, the whole point about modernity and democracy and all that we've gained in terms of new ways of thinking of liberal democracies means that everybody should choose what they like to do. Indigenous people have a right to live whatever way they want to live and city people like us have a right to live whatever we want to live as long as we don't destroy each other's ability to do what each of us wants to do. So there's a question of responsibility.

So, you know, we've learned a lot about our rights, but we haven't been able to enshrine the corresponding responsibilities. Absolutely. These are the breakdowns.

Absolutely. But you know all this. I don't know why I'm telling you all this, but you know it all.

It seems that I'm listening to myself, but it's very inspiring listening it through your words and with your energy. Now, we need change, right? The world is in much need of change and it seems that it's urgent as time goes by, it's more and more urgent. So what do you think is needed the most to take humanity to a new path? We need to change and put humanity towards a new path. What is needed for us really to make this shift? Is it education, is laws, international treaties, policies, international cooperation, money, funds? What do we need the most to really make this change of path?

Well, listen, you know, you asked the question that I've often had to think about over the last many years. It's not only what, but it's who. Who is going to cause that change? And is it our teachers? I'm afraid my impression is from having been associated with academic institutions from the age of two or three to the age today.

Over eight decades, I can't say that I expect them to really change their way of working sufficiently to cause that.

Is it the religions, you know, their record and I don't know of any religion as such that is going to help bring about the change that we want because they tend to become very narrow in their way of thinking.

In the past, such change was brought about by two things, one of two things.

Either it was charisma or it was a crisis. Those are the only two ways I've seen over the millennia things, fundamental things, fundamental perceptions and attitudes and way of thinking mindsets, what you might call paradigms, change either because there's a Jesus

Christ or a Lord Buddha or a Mahatma Gandhi or a Saint Francis of Assisi. These are the people.

Is the charisma of a person.

The charisma of a single human being with Godlike characteristics who comes and basically takes over people's minds. And in many of these cases, you can see, you know, Confucius, whoever it might be, there are every thousand years or so, there is a person who comes along who actually makes that happen.

Now, we've had a few of those in the last thousand years, so I'm not sure that we can expect another one very soon. I mean, I think it would be too much to ask that we sit down and wait for somebody to come through the door in the next few days. So charisma is, was the proper way to do it and was the way that has basically made a huge difference. Muhammad, you know, these are the people who change the world through words, through action, through example.

The examples of people like Lord Buddha and Jesus and Saint Francis and even Mahatma Gandhi, you know, these are the people who carry so much weight through that charisma that it was possible to bring about change. So I'm not sanguine about that happening in the next few days. It would be nice and if any of us have that God-given skill, it would be worth doing. I think it's important. But I've come to the conclusion that for the last 20 years, I've been waiting for a crisis. And it looks like we might have the right one.

I mean, it may not be because as you say, memories are short. And unless we go for the jugular right now, people like you and me, people like the Achadar and Development Alternatives, people like IUCN, all the big jobs in Rome and all the other stuff, unless we actually go and really drive it home, then we will have lost the chance. So I think the crisis is more likely to happen. In fact, it's definitely going to happen unless we change our ways. And if it's not this one, it will be the next one, which will be worse.

I mean, we've already been getting these prices at the rate of a decade or so in terms of financial crises and in terms of things like pandemics or maybe an asteroid or something will come along that will get us to think, wow, we better shape up. But I would like to think that COVID-19 might just provide that. And I don't want to lose that chance. So a lot of my work over the last few months has been really to try and mobilize what this crisis means for the future of the planet. Many of my friends say, no, no, no, no, we're in such trouble.

You can't think about what happens to the next generation. You've got to think about survival now. Our businesses are going out of business. We don't have money to pay our salaries and so on. And everybody around me is telling me, I've got to take, worry about today and tomorrow. And I am, I'm worried about today and tomorrow because we've got to be around. But this is an opportunity we can't afford to waste. So the answer to your question is that I don't know about Costa Rica or Brazil, but I do know that in my society over the last 50, 60 years, let's say since independence, since we became an independent republic,

there is no actor in society that is taking care of values, not even parents. I look around me and all I see, of course, there are exceptions, of course, but the exceptions don't make the room.

I don't see the professors. I don't see the school teachers. I don't see the media. Media leads the world because they've been completely bought.

And everybody now is actually in the pockets of the business. And even the politicians are in their pockets. So the people who are in the pockets of the politicians are in the pockets of the business. So essentially, it's only the very rich that are dictating the value systems. And you know what their value systems are. You know, I mean, it's in their DNA now, and that DNA is not going to change all of a sudden. So I'm hoping to, my answer to your question is that who and what will bring about the change?

Is us. And it is actually civil society. I don't really see how else. You remember that right after 1992, Maurice Strong, who was my idol and guru and mentor.

Maurice set up the Earth Council for that reason, to be the champion of civil society as an adjunct, as a parallel to the governmental process and the business process. And he was very wise. He worked in all of these spheres. He'd been in government. He'd been in business. Successfully did a lot of stuff everywhere. But he realized that the one sector of society that needed to be strong, as strong as the other two, was civil society, broadly defined, including, of course, media and universities and educational institutions. These are all, they're neither business nor government. They're not non-government. They are civil society. So the Earth Charter, which led to the Earth Council, which led to the Earth Charter, was basically, and I recall, coming to Costa Rica three or four times during that period, more than that. They went there a lot of times for when we set up the Earth Council, and then we read life into the Earth Charter. And it seems to me that the short answer to your question is who and what is going to make this happen.

This change of fundamental value systems, the change in mindset, is our partners in civil society. And you know, if you look back on history, nothing else has. The whole issue of human rights, the whole issue of gender equality, the whole issue of universal franchise, nothing that is worthwhile that we talk about today came from anybody else other than civil society. Social movements, all the social movements, they were in your face. The government's hated them. The business people try to kill them.

They've done everything to stop them from happening. But it was because of them that you have a world in which, you know, freedom and human rights and gender equality and all the things that we care about exist because of civil society. You know? So my answer to your question is that it is so crucial now for civil society actors, and they're not, they can't act as one because they have different viewpoints. And they should have. And we've got to nurture them. The point is that they bring together a sense of outrage at the way things are.

And they may not be able to articulate them in exactly the same way because they have different views. Some are, you know, women's groups. Some are issues relating to race. Others are worrying about issues relating to... Children rights, disarmament, many things. So, but as a whole, my answer is let's work together to build up the strength of civil

society, which is very weak compared to the powerful people who've got nuclear weapons and they've got, you know, big factories and everything else. Yeah.

Yeah. Thank you so much. It's good to hear these thoughts. Charisma, it's important. Crisis are important in helping humanity to take a new path or better path. But the importance for us to think about not only what, but who in a well-articulated movement collaboration across sectors and regions of civil society.

Now, you have played such an important role in social movements worldwide. You took a leadership role in the Rio 92 NGO forum. Of course, that was in 92. The world was in a different moment, a different historical moment also with the end of Cold War. The emerging role of civil society precisely around that shift of the between the 80s and the 90s. And I would like you to share with us some of your reflections and thoughts of that moment. If you can share with us some of the highlights of your experience in the Rio 92 summit, what happened, what made it happen, and maybe link with what's happening now in 2020. But the point here is, well, first I would like to honor you. They attribute to the role, the leadership role, the visionary role you play in social movements around the world in sustainability movement. It was such an important role. We played influencing people's perception on the role of civil society in grass wood people, in grass wood movements. So you started development alternatives. And it was really essential what you did in back in 92. Can you share with us from your memories, what was your feeling back in your vision, your source of inspiration in the 92 process? And what do you see now in terms of articulation of civil society?

Well, at that time in 1992, I had an organization in India, which was about 10 years old. And it was quite big and well known to be doing things that my colleagues and I felt were important, which was basically to create jobs, create livelihoods that were in harmony with nature. So we were into making sustainable livelihoods. And my full time job was to build an institutional framework that would be able to change the mindset of all our economic systems, including our governments, into putting its number one emphasis on the poorest of the poor.

It may sound Gandhian, but in fact, for us, it was the only thing to do to find ways in which an economy would be good for all its members was that the first priority of government must be to basically bring every single citizen to a level where they had decent life. They had a decent material existence and they had access to the basics, the education and the health and all the other things. In order to do that, we take the conclusion that you needed income. And income usually nowadays comes from jobs.

And therefore we take the conclusion that our mission in life was to create models, to create methods by which large numbers of jobs could be created. In other words, we were not going to employ people. We were going to create the means by which a lot of people would either create employment for themselves or get employed by others.

And this was a brilliant idea and initiative.

It was time and we were all alone. And the way we wanted to do that was to set up what is called a social enterprise, which is the very first in the world to set up an NGO that worked like a business.

Now, for us, the marketplace was not an enemy. The marketplace and economics for satisfying the needs of people was nothing wrong with that. As long as you didn't get hijacked by the faceless, not the faceless, but the faceful, rich people who essentially cornered the capital, cornered the money and used the capital for essentially excluding everyone else. So our way was to make decentralized small industries in all over the country, to make them profitable because profit is essential for any business to work and to grow, but to be able to service local people, local markets.

And so, you know, we came to the conclusion that your future in a country like India or Brazil or any southern country, country in the south, needs small industries, micro enterprises, mini enterprises that can not only create jobs, but the goods and services that people need locally. So you also save the environment. You don't have to be large amounts of transportation, warehousing, large factories, you essentially, but you can do a lot of things that way. And there are some things that need big, big factories and big ports and big highways, and you have those too. But those are automatic, the rich and powerful will all will certainly get those done because they make the decisions. Whereas the things that we were talking about, there was no champions. There was nobody basically influential enough to force government investments, policies to be. So when we were about 10 years old, in 1992, this conference was to take place. And I was a very old friend of Maurice and others, and I got involved. And one of the most remarkable people that you and I worked with was Chip Linder. And Chip wrote me into taking on the responsibility of being the chair of the NGOs, whom he had invited in Geneva in a little town called Lyon. And in Lyon, we had this conference of about 150 NGOs. And we all decided that the summit in 1992 in Rio was too important for us, for the civil society not to have a big presence. So they asked me to chair a whole process, which took two and a half, three years. And we basically managed to mobilize the civil society from around the world. We were given a space by the Brazilian government in the beach, in Flamengo Beach, where we had a huge operation, I think, where 35,000, 40,000 NGOs came there.

And it was very influential because it became a part of the whole process, thanks to Maurice Strong and the Brazilian government and everybody else. They all essentially found the inputs to thinking and to policymaking from civil society useful, because there were a lot of original, innovative people who were not in government and who were able to. It was one of the major, first major, there had been many, many earlier ones and good ones, but this was the first major event in which civil society, NGOs, women's groups, all kinds of organizations from around the world, were present and were good, were vocal and were able to influence the discussions in the main conference.

We could say that it was the first time there was a really collaboration around so many different themes, collaboration among various groups of interests that were non-state actors. And it was also the first time governments and state actors were looking at the non-state actors with new eyes. You have a place we want to hear you, so it was kind of a big change.

So we had this wonderful conference and it gave us an opportunity to see each other and many of the government delegations relied upon the NGOs, especially the smaller governments from Asia, Africa, even Latin America, didn't have the strength of big countries like the US and Europe. And so they needed help and there was a lot of that being provided and this partnership was very important and set the tone for many, many summits afterwards. It was actually a major starting point for that interaction.

Do you remember any special moment, any unique moment you lived in that 92 Rio NGO forum that was kind of, ah, this was so important as a learning moment for you?

Well, there were many moments. There were so many moments. There were moments like Ted Turner turning up from big business and seeing how important this was. There were people, virtually, you know, all the big celebrities came there and even James Bond turned up there in a boat.

But we also had almost all the prime ministers come. In the case of George W. Bush, he didn't come to Flamingo Park, but I went to see him at his pavilion, but it was a very interesting meeting with NGOs, with civil society over there. But at Flamingo Park, at the NGO forum, one of the more big breakthrough things funnily enough was the Indian prime minister. I mean, I hate to say that because I'm in India, but essentially that was an evening which was a very large impact, subsequently, on national policy. It happened at a time when, you know, the prime minister wasn't sure he wanted to come there, but was persuaded and they did come, and it was a big revelation of a magnitude that he wasn't expecting. And that was probably true almost all the people came. You know, there was a big tree of life with messages, millions of messages strung up from all over the world, from the children of the world.

It was a lot of hope, you know, a lot of hope from people and inspiration. It was vibrant. It was open. And I think that had an impact on many of the visiting VIPs, VVIPs, who came to actually sort of came under duress. They came because they had to come. But, you know, when they arrived, they found it amazing. And to your credit, you were working there and Chip and all the people who worked. This was an amazing event. It was well beautifully, well designed. There was space and people would walk around and they could picnic and they could see things and, you know, contribute and talk. People felt that they had a, their message was being heard. And that was very important.

And felt change was possible. Now, nearly 30 years have passed since that Rio 92 process in Summits. Now the UN and the world is looking at this new UN 2030 SDG agenda. How do you compare in terms of process and content of what was in Rio 92 and what we have now with the SDGs? And how also you're thinking, if you're thinking evolved in terms of processes of social change over these past nearly 30 years?

Well, there are three questions embedded in your question. One is how has the international process evolved and these big summits and these events as well as these processes have evolved. The second is whether it's changed in any real way. The way things work, whether there's been much of a real fundamental change. And what I feel is the evolution at where is it going and how it could be. Now, you know, I remember you asked me in an earlier question, what was one of the, what were the dramatic things that happened for me

in Rio in the Flamingo Park? And I remember sitting under a tree, not the tree of life, but another tree with Barbara Pyle, who was the filmmaker for CNN.

And we were talking and I was telling her about the fundamental value systems that we've got, which are a problem. Now, this is in 1992 and she misheard me. She misheard what I said. I was talking about mindsets and she said, what do you mean mindsets? So I said, well, there are three mindsets, M-I-N-E, not mind, but mind, mindsets. And I made them up right on that moment because I mean, I hadn't really thought about it, but I wanted to capture her attention. So she said, what do you mean by mindsets? I said, you know, the world is run by three mindsets. And the first mindset is mind and extract whatever you can from Mother Earth and run. Mind and run is the first mindset and that is what got us into the trouble that has brought the Stockholm Conference. That was why in 1972 we went to Stockholm because we were mining and extracting the earth and making such a mess of the atmosphere with sulfur dioxide. And she said, what's the second mindset? I said, the second mindset is what's mine is mine and what's yours is up to grabs. In other words, while we're here, we can take what we want, but you're not allowed to do that. That's the story between the North and the South. That is basically the whole question of UNTAD is all a question of, you know, the global trade systems. This is what North Americans do to Chile. They do it to Bolivia. They do it to India. Whatever they want, they can grab because they are powerful.

So the second mindset is about unmitigated power structures which led us to a lot of problems. And then she said, what's the third mindset? The third mindset is mine and bomb the natives if they don't give you what you want. So you have three mindsets and frankly, I was giving a memorial lecture last week here on a very big memorial lecture and I repeated them because they still exist. Those mindsets haven't changed. So from that middle conversation under the tree in 1992 to this conversation under this tree in what is it, 2020, we still have the three mindsets and those three mindsets have driven the world into a state of despair with somewhere around 2.5 billion, maybe 3 billion people completely deprived of any dignity or any reasonable quality of life. And 2.5 billion, maybe 3.5 billion people living like, well, like princes in the old days. And a few, like a few hundred, living on islands in the Caribbean and having a great time. So it's a problem that has not been solved. In fact, if you look at 1992, actually one year before Rio was the production of a very important report by UNDP called the UN Human Development Report. It was published in 1991 and the cover page had a champagne glass. It had a champagne glass showing the distribution of income between different categories of people. So it said that 80% of the world's income goes to 20% of the people and the bottom 50% get virtually 4 or 5%. Today, we don't talk about 20 and 80. We talk about 1%. We talk about 0.1%.

Things are worse. There are much worse. The distribution of wealth, the distribution of income and distribution of wealth has gone from 20 and 80 to 1 and 99. So frankly, if you ask me, the three mindsets not only exist but are controlling our lives and things are actually getting worse because every, that champagne glass has now turned into a bar stool. I mean, basically it's sitting on a bar stool and all the wealth is concentrated. And in Davos, Oxfam has done studies which are presented in Davos, which show that literally a handful of people, less than 100 people own half the wealth of the world. So you have to think, is it getting better or is it getting worse? So in my opinion, climate change is

showing worse signs, biodiversity and species extinction is much worse. Poverty and extreme hunger is far worse. There are more people today than there were in 1992 who are deprived, badly deprived. So what am I to say?

The answer to your question is that we're losing. We're losing the battle because those mindsets are very, very powerful and the rest of us and the poorest of the poor have given up. They're not even fighting. So what is happening in the US right now, protest movements and so on, is a little bit of reassurance that maybe there's still life left in us, but we're not in good shape and it's programs like yours, like this one that has to mobilize all the young people to say, no, it's not good enough. I cannot be a human being if I see another human being good. That's what St. Francis said. St. Francis said it is highly objectionable for anyone in the world to live, poorer than I am. It was not because he wanted to be poor. It was not acceptable and indeed Mahatma Gandhi said the same thing, to be a parasite on society. And so we now have to change the set. You are young still, but nobody listens to me, but if they did, I would say to young people, your job is to make the world a place that's livable for your children. And even if you haven't got to the stage of getting married, your job is now to think 100 years. Because none of us did.

So long term thinking, long term thinking and looking at our mindsets as a way to promote this change. So in terms of 30 years after 1992, the change of tactics, your approach would be in helping the new generation to awaken, to change tactics and focus on mindsets.

No, I think to tell you the truth, I would say that the only way I can see a way forward is to do something constructive. I mean, you actually build a life in which you are doing things that excite you, that you are rewarded by, that intellectually satisfy you, that make you a reasonable living so that you can take care of yourself and your family. But to do it in ways in which the world is improved, either because human beings' lives get improved, maybe jobs, like in my case, and jobs and basic needs. Because if you don't have water and shelter and clothing, so when I talk about big jobs, I also mean that they will produce stuff that, you know, my organization Development Alternatives is probably number one in the world for affordable housing, for example.

Or how do you regenerate derelict lands that have been destroyed by overgrazing more by bad farming practices, by losing water and so on. So we do a lot of work in terms of both creating the jobs and creating, generating and delivering services and goods and products that people need for a decent life. So I would say to everybody, your job is to take on the job of building a new world. Not to talk about it, not to go and give advice to people, you know, be listening. Not really to spend almost time proselytizing and preaching, but basically to get on with doing things. Now I am proselytizing and preaching right now. So I have to be forgiven because most of the day I was actually working trying to make something happen.

Now the UN SDGs, the new UN 2030 agenda, what are your views on that? Will the UN be able to achieve? Is it well articulated? What's missing there? What are your views on that?

Well, SDGs, I was very much involved in the process of starting them and putting them together. I was at all the preparatory meetings for the SDGs. But I can say on the one

hand, it is a totally remarkable achievement that the globe, nearly 200 countries got together and signed off on a document agreeing to do something. This was an amazing achievement. There is nothing like it in the history of the world, not even banning nuclear weapons, not even, there's been nothing that has brought all the countries of the world to agree to doing something like the SDGs. So to the extent that it is a reflection of a consensus, of opinions around the world, at the government level, at the head of state level, it's incredible. All I can say is it's one of the most amazing achievements. And I don't want to be heard negating that. That is important. But you still have to recognize that in order for it to be accepted by 200 countries, there were some compromises made. There was need to leave out some things that are extremely important. Because some country or another found them objectionable.

And often the countries, particularly the US and Saudi Arabia and others, who have very strong opinions on some things, have a way of becoming barriers to what needs to be done for a sustainable world. And so when the SDGs were being discussed, there were delegations who would object to the use of certain words or certain concepts and so on. And they had to be left out simply to be able to ensure a consensus agreement at the end. As it all happens. And it's a necessary compromise that you're going to make. But that means that you're getting not the highest common factor, but you're getting closer to the lowest common denominator. Frankly, the SDGs don't go that far down. The SDGs were uncomfortable in various places for certain countries. And they accepted them nevertheless.

So I wouldn't say it's a lowest common denominator, but it's not the highest common factor either. It's somewhere in between. So to that extent, it's a wonderful achievement. It has basically focused the mind. And I think it's a great way of carrying forward commitments that are made by people and monitored and hopefully largely achieved over the 10, 20 years that they were set up for. Now, Agenda 2030 and the SDGs do have certain shortcomings. They were very carefully organized in terms of targets and indicators. They were goals. These are the 16 goals plus the cooperation one.

These 16 goals were beautifully divided between major issues from poverty and hunger all the way to environmental issues and economic issues and consumption patterns and so on. Almost all the big issues were covered in there and the commitments were made, which were frankly very good.

What is missing is strategies and what you call tactics. What is missing is how, not the what, what we achieved, but how are we going to achieve it? If you don't have the how, you don't actually have the commitments because the commitments are meaningless unless people are going to change their policies. They're going to have to make changes in their fiscal and their financial systems. They're going to have the right incentives for people to do the right thing. They have to have national laws and a lot of that basically has still not been worked out by most of the actors, by many of the actors. Some of them have taken it more seriously in some way.

So the answer, the first part of my answer to your question is incredible achievement, great thing for the world to aspire to, good end product definition, goals, targets and indicators means basically how you're going to measure them and an acceptance by virtually every country. That's all good. Now there is a negative to this and the

negative is that because the SDGs cannot cover all the big issues, they cover most of them, but there are in a specific country, let's say in India, problems that don't actually fit into an SDG, but which are very important.

Now if I go to the government or I go to an international agency or I go to a foundation, I say I need some money to do this, is you know that doesn't fit into the SDGs. So the SDGs become not only enabling, but they also become restrictive because if you're not, if your big problem is not in the SDGs, then you know, you can't get funding for it. Now they're not very many, they're not very many such things, but the big things are process things, process things like innovation, like building up institutional capacity to do things that are different.

Things of that kind nature are not so much in the SDGs. The SDGs are about water and food, but they're not about building institutions that will enable you to do water and food.

And so I worry a little bit that they tend to focus the mind of donor agencies too much. So if a charter goes and says, you know, I want to do some training program, if you don't fill the SDGs, you're not going to get very far. And that has been happening. It happened to my organization because we are actually frontier level people, you know, we're doing things that are not being thought of in the past. We're always looking at ways to do things that no one thought of. So to some extent, there is a little problem there, but you know, I'm willing to live with that problem. I think by and large, the net effect of having the SDGs is very positive.

Good, good. Thank you. Economic growth. It's something that is articulated there in one of the SDGs. I'm sure you have given a lot of thoughts to how to address poverty, how to address economic inequality. Is economic growth the way for the panacea to address poverty and economic inequality?

Look, as I said, there are nearly 300 million people who don't have enough. And you're going to have to have an economy that is substantially larger than it is today. So how do you get to be larger? You grow. But we never use the word economic growth. We prefer to use economic development because it's structurally different. There has to be more for people who have nothing. Otherwise, you know, they stop, they die. So I mean, you know, I don't want to get into a discussion and debate on the word growth, because it evokes visceral and violent reactions. And we stopped using the word economic growth 30 years ago, long before Rio. But the issue is, what is sustainable development? Sustainable development is converges. For those who are using too much, they have to lower their expectations with those who don't have enough. They have to rise until they come to roughly the same kind of levels. So sustainable development for me means an equitable, environmentally sound, fair, just, socially just end product, a goal that we have to reach.

But it's a question of converging between those who have too much and are killing Mother Earth and those who have too little and are also killing Mother Earth, because they are then forced to eat the seed corn, then they are forced to destroy the trees, because they could survive. So even the poor have an impact on resources, and they have no choice. Whereas the rich have a choice, and they still, you know, massacre, massacre Mother Earth. So don't let's get into this economic growth, because it's a debate for teenagers to

have. But it's not real, you know. If you're living in a country like India, or you're living in a poor country in Africa, in Mali, you can't expect them to de-grow. You know, they need to get food, water, shelter, and energy. They're going to have decent lives, they've got to go to school, and have hospitals, and have nourishment. So of course you need growth. I mean, it's crazy to get into that argument. You don't need growth where they've already got too much.

We don't need growth when in places where they already have too much. It depends on the context. The point you raised is important on the convergence. That's good.

There is a question of sufficiency, and there's a question of sufficiency. I need enough to live decent, but there's a sufficiency at the ceiling, which I don't need to go beyond this to have a decent life.

Wonderful.

So the word sufficiency means two different things.

Okay, we are coming to almost an end in our today's recording, but I do have a last question for you. If you could share with us, I think our audience would love to hear your thoughts on the earth charter, especially in terms of what you think is the value or the relevance of the Earth to current times in addressing all these challenges, and how do you think an instrument such as the earth charter can be used?

Well, I think the earth charter is one of the great shining examples of very precise, thorough, publicly consulted document, one that is, reflects a deep commitment to the value systems that I was talking about earlier, the value systems that will sustain our Earth. Having said that, the earth charter is one of the few documents in history that has the legitimacy of having been, in some ways, like the SDGs, of having a vast input and scrutiny by a very large number of thoughtful people, of people whose lives were devoted to thinking about what is important in life, what is a good life.

I think it shines because of that, because it has a brevity, but at the same time, it's like the Ten Commandments, it's got the force of great thought behind it, and it's very hard to pick anything in the earth charter and say, I disagree with that.

So, any thinking person who values a same future for the planet, and for civilization on this planet, the earth charter gives you a very solid basis to not only guide you, but even to measure how successful you are in your journey. So, I think the earth charter, and I've always been from the beginning, I was one of the founder members of the earth charter, but there are too many things in life, and so I wasn't always there when it was becoming an adult, but at its birth I was there, and I think the earth charter has been a tremendously valuable document. I don't think it's as well known as it should be, and so you have a very big job to do, simply to make sure that it gets out there to everyone in every language, in every sphere. So, I just want to wish you a very solid success, because this is the basis of the new value system I was talking about at the beginning.

Wonderful. Well, thank you so much Ashok for spending this wonderful, unique, precious time with us and for sharing your knowledge and wisdom. Thank you.