

UNDP Speech by Ela Bhatt June 27, 2011 Tarrytown, NY

Respected Helen Clark, Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, distinguished colleagues and friends. Thank you for inviting me to speak at the UNDP Global Meet to share some of my ideas on inclusive, equitable growth, and, on people, poverty and development. Coming from a labour organization, my worldview begins with people. In this context, I am to stress today on fulfillment of the Millennial Development Goals.

MDG is a pathetic story. The deadline for meeting the Millennium Development Goals is fast approaching, and still we find ourselves wondering why despite our best intentions and efforts, we have not made significant headway. Surely, it is time to reconsider our approach. After all, one cannot solve problems with the same thinking that brought us these problems in the first place. We need a fresh vision. We need to think seriously of a new approach.

At the Tallberg Forum, two women from Ghana said, We are farmers, but what we produce, we do not eat, and what we eat, we do not produce. The women grew cash crops for export, but at mealtimes, they ate frozen and canned food imported from another continent. Such ironies confront us at every corner today: farmers who till the land and feed the world go hungry themselves. World food consumption is increasing, but farming is no longer a viable occupation. Countries that have the most abundant natural resources are among the poorest. Their indigenous populations, neglected and pushed away to remote forest areas are now once again being driven from their lands because it is rich in timber and minerals. They join the growing numbers of economic refugees. Women work from dawn to dusk fetching water, collecting fuel, tending cattle, growing crops, processing grain, sewing, making baskets, but their labor is not considered work. They form the backbone of any developing country's economy but they remain invisible, their work considered marginal, and their contribution considered negligible to the national economy.

My appeal is that before we rush ahead to modernize and urbanize our world, armed with technology and capital, we must pause and look more closely at the economic and social structures that are collapsing, or are being dismantled in the name of development. Urbanization is not development. Technology, if it creates imbalances is not a solution. If profit is our only measure of success, we will turn a blind eye to the exploitation of people and nature. So long as the goal is maximizing production and consumption, and progress and wealth are measured by a country's capital-intensive industries, exports, and GDP, we are embracing both imbalance and inequality. But if our goal is to build a society where everyone's basic needs for food, clothing and housing are fully met, and where the full potential of every human being is realized, we will need a radically different approach. We will need to get in partnership with our conscience; we will need to get in partnership our fellow human beings and we will need a long-term partnership with Mother Nature.

It is time we paused and took a fresh look at older subsistence farming methods and horticultural practices, to learn some lessons in sustainability, in risk reduction, and in maintaining biodiversity. Their finely tuned production and consumption cycles which are holistic, and designed to meet human needs in the face of adversity, are systematically being broken. Even today, such self-sustaining communities and sustainable forms of agriculture and production still survive in our countries, but they are considered backward, inefficient, and unrealistic! Their plots of land are considered too small, their methods of farming too inefficient, their output too small, and their knowledge of local crops and local soils too specific and worthless! Indeed, where development is seen as membership in a cash-based market economy, where crops are a commodity, and market forces are large and increasingly distant and invisible, what hope does a simple farmer have of survival? This is our mistake. People who are still intimately tied to their land have many lessons to teach us. If we do not learn them, we are allowing our hope for the future to die; they are our lifeline.

Is industrial agriculture with its economies of scale really the answer? The developed world is beginning to question today's industrial food system, which they recognize is unsustainable in the long run. The industry is besieged by issues of pollution and pesticides, overproduction and waste, large-scale crop failures and unrealistic commodity prices. Science and technology are solving one problem, and in the process creating another. Consumers are questioning the quality of food at their table.

I strongly believe that the greatest source of imbalance is the distance between producers and consumers. If both the producers and consumers lived side by side, each would be accountable to the other, both would expect fair wages, fair prices, and good, nutritious produce, and neither would tolerate harmful pesticides, pollution of land, overproduction or waste.

So what is our alternative? Mahatma Gandhi saw the village economy as the key to nation building. He believed that by closing the distance between producers and consumers, by meeting local needs with local skills, one strengthens the economy, one strengthens the community, and one lays the foundation for a society that is fair and equitable because it is accountable at every level.

Along those lines, my own vision is of a society where six of our primary needs—our daily staple food, shelter, clothing, primary education, health services and banking services can be found within say a hundred mile radius. With this approach, we address the fundamental issue of creating livelihoods, building the local economy and feeding the world. The demand for local products generates local employment. It brings to full potential the multiple skills of villagers, and there is work for everyone, for all levels of ability, and for all types of rewards. Our products are then organic, locally made, using local material, recyclable. Grains like millet, sorghum, ragi, barley, of all different local varieties would reenter our diets, improving nutrition. What is not locally available, must be gradually produced with the help of the considerable knowledge and technology that exists in the world today. Let us not dismiss this as a utopian dream. At SEWA, we have

already made a beginning. Let us, in all humility, look into how lightly we can live on this earth.

My 100 Miles principle is not parochial. It weaves local and global in a way that strengthens the local.

The 100 Miles principle weaves decentralization, locality, size and scale, into livelihood. What one needs for livelihood as material, as energy, as knowledge will stem from areas around us. Seed, soil, water are forms of knowledge will be retained locally....Security stems from local innovations, not distant imports.

Therefore, let us begin the principle with our daily staple food.

The most importantly, the organic human link with Nature has to be restored. The millennia old link between production and consumption has to be recovered in the case of food, at least....Ultimately, the Nature as cosmology is the weave of life, let us weave it tight.

Economic decentralization brings both capital and tools into the hands of the actual producers. If there are active links between producers and markets, our villages will thrive. We will still have cities, but they will not be demonic; instead they will become good trading centers. We will still have cell phones and computers and global trade, but they will enter our lives by invitation, not as agents of colonization.

What we need is a shared vision, and a partnership with the poor. We need the active engagement of each community, and its organizations, in the planning, implementing and monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals if we want to achieve them. “ Projects cannot bring change. At SEWA, I want to share with you - we have devised a simple process to define our vision, turn it into concrete action, and then to regularly evaluate it. SEWA women, managers, leaders, any and everyone can follow the process. Of any undertaking, we ask ten questions: Will this action increase employment? Will it increase income? Will it increase ownership of assets? Will it make the individual and the collective more self-reliant? Will there be greater access to healthcare, childcare, water and sanitation? Will it provide better housing? Will it provide more food and better nutrition? Will it unite and strengthen the community? And will the leadership emerge from within the local community, from among the very people whose lives it affects? If the answer is yes, we are reassured that we are on the right track, we are heading in the direction towards inclusiveness and equitability.

Finally, Let us remind ourselves that in committing to the Millennium Development Goals, we are in fact pledging to become partners with the poor. Let us place the development goals squarely in the center of our National Plans and the National Budget. Furthermore, let us make sure that fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals are on the UN Agenda in its every Peace building process. They are powerful tools with which to build peace within and between nations. After all, ceasefire is just the end of war; it is work, food, and shelter that are the true elements of Peace.

This much what I said is a woman's insight, a movement's knowledge, a community's wisdom. I hope it has a place, a claim in your very important and serious deliberations during the next three days.

Thank you.