

the challenge to our way of life

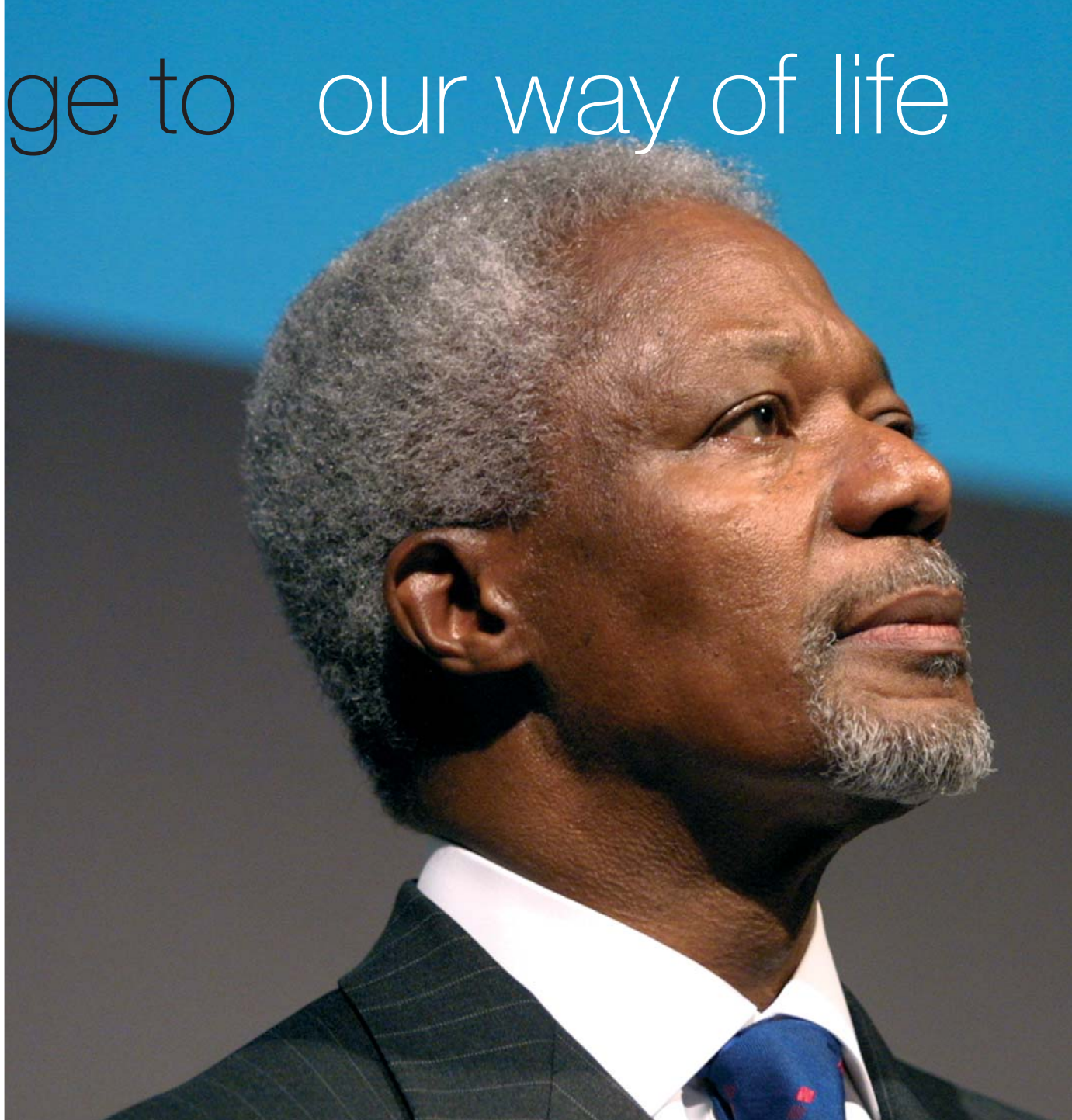
UN secretary-general **Kofi Annan** urged an LSE audience of more than 1,000 students, staff and alumni towards a 'coalition for responsible prosperity'. His theme, prior to this summer's World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, was that our way of life, and that of people in developed countries generally, must change.

It's a great honour for me to speak at LSE, which counts among its alumni so many heroes of the struggle for independence and for development in the former colonial world – including Kwame Nkrumah [PhD 1946], the founder-president of my own country. What I want to talk to you about this afternoon is essentially the continuation of that struggle.

Independence was achieved, but development has been very uneven – especially in Africa, which since independence has fallen sadly behind some other parts of the developing world. I do not need to describe for you the multiple hardships to which so many of our fellow human beings are subjected, each of which makes it harder to escape from the others: poverty, hunger, disease, oppression, conflict, pollution, depletion of natural resources. Development means enabling people to escape from that vicious circle.

Like the struggle for independence, the struggle for development has to be carried on mainly in developing countries and by their people. Its first prerequisites are basic security, the rule of law, and honest, transparent administration – which only national governments can provide.

But it is a struggle that concerns the whole world. Developed countries, like this one, have a strong interest in the outcome – both in whether development succeeds and in what form it takes. They can also do much to influence that outcome. It is to institutions like LSE's Centre for the Study of Global Governance that we look for intellectual leadership. LSE can play a part in this struggle no less important than its part in the previous one. ►





'Far from being a burden, sustainable development is an exceptional opportunity – economically, to build markets and create jobs; socially, to bring people in from the margins; and politically, to give every man and woman a voice, and a choice, in deciding their own future'

Eighteen months ago, at the Millennium Summit in New York, world leaders reached agreement on some immediate targets, the Millennium Development Goals, for halving extreme poverty in the world by 2015 by tackling both its worst symptoms and its most obstinate causes.

Those goals are ambitious, but even if we achieve them the struggle will not be won. There will still be hundreds of millions of people lacking the minimum requirements of human dignity. There will still be a great deal to be done.

And it will all be in vain if the achievement cannot be sustained. So it is equally important that we achieve another goal set by world leaders at the Summit: 'to free all of humanity, and above all our children and grandchildren, from the threat of living on a planet irredeemably spoilt by human activities, and whose resources would no longer be sufficient for their needs.'

I believe success depends on the answers to three global questions.

The first question is: Will men and women in the developing world be allowed to compete on fair terms in the global market? That question received the beginning – but only the beginning – of a positive answer at last November's meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Doha.

The second question is: How can we mobilise the resources so desperately needed for development? That question was discussed this spring at the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey, Mexico.

And the third question is: Can the people now living on this planet improve their lives, not at the expense of future generations, but in a way from which their children and grandchildren will benefit?

The three questions are clearly related, and the conferences should be seen as a continuum, not as isolated events.

Poor people in poor countries are not asking for a hand-out. What they want is a hand up. Indeed, the poor are enormous, untapped reservoirs of initiative and entrepreneurship, but their energies are often held in check by poverty, misrule or conflict. They would be the first to say that trade, not aid, is the path out of poverty.

That's why it is so important that we fulfil the promise of Doha – the promise of a development round of trade negotiations, which will remove the unfair subsidies now given to producers in rich countries, and fully open the markets of those countries to labour-intensive exports from poor ones. Not only do these subsidies make it impossible for developing countries to compete. They also do great damage to the rich countries themselves, by perpetuating unsustainable practices in farming, transport and energy use.

Powerful interest groups within rich countries will try hard to block meaningful concessions to the developing world. They will argue that the interests of workers and farmers are being sacrificed. But there are other ways to help those

groups that really need help – ways less costly to consumers and taxpayers in rich countries, and less harmful to producers in poor ones. To fulfil the promise of Doha, political and business leaders in the developed world must rise above special pleading and narrow sectoral interests.

However, even if developed countries were to declare their markets fully open, developing countries would still need help in walking through the door. Many small and poor countries do not attract investment – not because they are badly governed or have unfriendly policies, but simply because they are too small and poor to be interesting markets or to become major producers, and because they lack the skills, infrastructure and institutions that a successful market economy needs. The unpleasant truth is that markets put a premium on success, and tend to punish the poor for the very fact of being poor.

I hope the leaders of industrialised countries will also give new commitments of official aid – as Gordon Brown, for one, has so eloquently urged.

Our greatest challenge is to show that these problems are part of an even bigger problem – the problem of global poverty and underdevelopment. Islands of treatment are a vital start; but we must also address the larger sea of misery.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development is not, as some people think, simply another conference on the global environment. The whole idea of sustainable development, reflected in the Rio Earth Summit ten years ago, is that environment and development are inextricably linked.

Sustainable development may be the new conventional wisdom, but many people have still not grasped its meaning. One important task at Johannesburg is to show that it is far from being as abstract as it sounds. It is a life-or-death issue for millions upon millions of people, and potentially the whole human race. Let me try to put some human faces on it.

One of them might be that of a woman in a rural district – it could be in India, or almost any African country – who, year by year, finds she has to go further and further in search of water and fuel.

Another face might be that of a son or cousin of that woman who, precisely because that rural way of life was no longer sustainable for a growing population, is now living in an urban slum or shanty town. He has no work – or rather, he lacks the training and resources needed to start work, though his community desperately needs the contribution he could make. What is worse, although he himself does not know it, he is infected with HIV, and has passed it on to his wife. How much longer can this way of life be sustained?

A third face might be that of someone who looks much better off than the first two. He lives in a house or apartment, owns a car and has a job in one of the rapidly growing East Asian cities. But at this moment he has been sitting in that car for an hour, and it is not moving. He is eager to get

home to his wife and children but he is stuck among thousands like himself, all pounding on their horns and still running their engines. He also has a respiratory disease, caused by toxic chemicals in the factory where he works, and his children suffer from asthma.

He wants to get away from this environment, and he is saving money to pay for false travel documents so that he can join his brother in Europe or North America. What he does not realise is that his way of life when he gets there may not be so very different. The more 'development' follows this pattern, the less sustainable it is going to be in any part of the world.

Indeed, the fourth face may be that of any of us in this room. We lead immensely privileged lives, compared to the vast majority of our fellow human beings. But we do so by consuming much more than our share of the earth's resources, and by leaving a much larger 'footprint' of waste and pollution on the global environment. Moreover, our way of life is highly visible to many who cannot share it, but who see it in glamorised form on flickering screens in those slums and shanty towns. It is, one could say, flaunted before them as the model of 'development' to which they should aspire.

But is it sustainable, and if so, for how many people? Certainly not, in its present form, for all the six billion who already inhabit this planet – let alone the nine, 12, or 15 billion who will inhabit it, depending on which scenario you adopt, in the decades to come. Our way of life has to change, but how, and how fast?

Johannesburg must give us the 'how' – how to bring about the necessary changes in state policy; how to use policy and tax incentives to send the right signals to business and industry; how to offer better choices to individual consumers and producers; how, in the end, to get things done.

Johannesburg must give us that vision – a vision of a global system in which every country has a place, and a share in the benefits. And it must give us all a clear sense of our share in the task. In an era of rapid change, it must mark a break with business as usual. In an era of great wealth, it must show how wealth can be shared by all those living, and preserved for those who come after. And in an era of insecurity, it must offer the prospect of peace through hope: hope that life tomorrow will be better – safer, fairer, more enjoyable – than it is today. ■

Kofi Annan

spoke at the Peacock Theatre on 25 February 2002 as part of the Global Dimensions research programme. For the full text of his speech, see www.globaldimensions.net © UN, 2002

State of the Planet

LSE co-sponsored the State of the Planet Conference in New York on 13 and 14 May, in collaboration with Columbia University and UNESCO, as a forerunner to the Johannesburg Summit.

'State of the Planet 2002: science and sustainability' brought together leading natural and social scientists, opinion-makers and policy experts to debate social, economic and political challenges to sustainable development. The conference focused on three pressing issues: global food security, conservation of biological resources, and urban sustainability. On the agenda were debates about the physical and social dimensions of feeding a world population expected to reach nine billion by the year 2050, the challenge of protecting the diversity of the natural environment, and the lessons being learned from mega-cities such as New York, Mexico City and Rome for the creation of viable habitats in the future.

Speakers included leading figures from the World Bank, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and academics from Columbia, LSE and other US and UK universities.

Further information on the conference, its speakers and outcomes can be found at www.earth.columbia.edu/sop2002

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