

19 April 2007

Champion of the Earth Laureate Ms Viveka Bohn

Mr President, Distinguished Ministers, Honorable Laureates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank UNEP for extending this award to me as an acknowledgement of the cause for which I have worked. Allow me to pay particular tribute to former Executive Director Dr Klaus Töpfer, who never swayed in his support for a sometimes unorthodox diplomacy.

The challenges are well known: rapid environmental degradation; unsustainable consumption and production patterns; widespread poverty; ongoing globalization; poor governance; and gender inequality. But the challenges are by no means insurmountable.

Turning to the specific problem of chemicals, they have played a vital role in increasing standards of living in all countries. But we also know that chemicals pose a risk to human health and ecosystem services, thereby undermining the sources of income of a growing population and aggravating poverty. The global production, trade and use of chemicals are increasing.

The Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) provides a framework for global actions and concrete measures that will make it possible for us to eliminate or reduce risks associated with the life cycle of chemicals by 2020. It will create a level playing field for chemicals control globally and protect the safety of our children.

With SAICM, chemicals management has moved from regulating specific problems to addressing generic issues, including precaution and governance.

SAICM is unique in bringing together all stakeholders. In the negotiations leading up to the global strategy, governments, civil society, and the private sector participated on an equal basis.

The role played by the private sector is particularly important and encouraging. Initiatives by industry in support of SAICM objectives will largely determine the impact of the strategy. Success will depend on multi-sectoral involvement and ownership. Success will require financial investment. Success calls for visionary leadership. It is a window of opportunity for making a great leap towards a toxic-free future.

Implementation of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants is also crucial.

The Marrakech process aims at generating sustainable consumption and production. It is an approach to ordinary people's welfare and well-being that will have immediate and substantive effects towards halting climate change. Importantly, if the well-off consume less, then this opens up potential for poverty eradication within our given set of natural resources.

This prestigious award is an appreciation of my contribution to green multilateral diplomacy. I would like to share three of the lessons that I have learned.

One: Do your homework! Diplomacy is about listening and understanding divergent viewpoints. It is about remembering every detail of what has been said, disapproved or agreed. Diplomacy requires us to build alliances. In my case, colleagues from the Nordic countries have played a significant role.

Two: Do your housework! The Earth is the place where we live – our living room. In my profession, I have leaned not only on resourceful colleagues and supporting ministers, but also on the credibility and high standing of Swedish policies for sustainable and equitable development. Good ideas are not good enough to bring about change in the international community. To take the lead, you have to show what can be done from solid experience. Hence, national policy is both the foundation of and the limit to what can be achieved internationally. There is also a true need for championships among nations.

Three: Never give up! If we are going to survive on this planet, there have to be political leaders who are prepared to fight to achieve altruistic objectives. There need to be private sector CEO frontrunners. There will have to be individuals who persist. Women and men on an equal footing.

I am deeply honoured and truly grateful for this award. I consider it, more than anything, a recognition of multilateralism and international solidarity.

Let me end by quoting the words of former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme at the Stockholm Conference in 1972: "There is no individual future for the human environment – neither for individuals nor for nations. The future is common. We must share it. We must build it together."