

Acceptance speech by Dr. Atiq Rahman
Recipient of “The Champion of the Earth Award 2008” – Asia Pacific Region

In all humility I stand here to express my gratitude to UNEP all those who were involved in giving me this award. I am pleased to accept this rare honour. I accept this on behalf of all the people who are contributing to sustainable development of this planet, particularly the poor. Sustainable development (SD) is a complex, holistic and integrated approach; it represents enhanced goods, resources and services, access to rights and freedoms of all individuals and communities of today and tomorrow. But these have to be environmentally sound and socially just. Thus, there can be no sustainable development without alleviation of poverty.

I am pleased that one of the reasons for which I have been given this award has been to transform Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies into a leading think tank in the world working on sustainable development. This signifies a recognition that of the greater need for genuine North South dialogue and recognition of southern perspectives in the climate discourses, global policy and actions.

After teaching and researching for over 15 years in the leading universities in the West I returned to Bangladesh in late 1980s. Then one of my ideas was to establish a leading centre of excellence on sustainable development in one of the poorest countries of the world. Your award and recognition is fulfilment of that dream. One lesson we learnt is the need for independent institution and internal capacity building, investment in manpower and in the pursuit for scientific excellence. Our fifty published books is a testimony to these efforts of many of my colleagues present and past. They share this award and honour with me.

We live in an unequal and unjust world. Despite all recent economic fluctuations we have a global economy wealthiest ever. But one third of its population lives below one dollar a day and two thirds below two dollars a day. In an increasingly globalizing and interconnected world, these inequalities are enhancing the sense of injustice and may result in social and political destabilization, which will threaten our efforts towards achieving sustainable development.

My next point is on climate change. Global climate change is the greatest threat faced by mankind today. Climate change impacts threaten global food security, likely to generate huge number of climate refugees. The poor individuals and families, communities and countries, have contributed least to the problems of climate change but will suffer the most. This will enhance global injustice and threaten the global economic and social stability if we do not heed to the warnings of IPCC. For this we have to mitigate and we have to adapt. But adaptation has limits – when an ecosystem or a human community has been threatened with question of survival, adaptation has hit the limit. Led by the industrialized countries, rapid mitigation is urgent and a must.

For appropriate solutions we will need to harmonize the dominant paradigm of Cartesian scientific knowledge with indigenous people's knowledge and experiences. During the twenty years of my scientific career, I have learnt a lot from my professors in the leading universities of many industrialized and developing countries as well as my own country. As we marched on the path of sustainable development I learnt as much, if not more from my indigenous “professors”. These include mostly non-literate wise women and men who practised sustainable development with their lives. One such teacher is a single mother in rural flood plain in Bangladesh who integrated all components of her life to develop sustainable livelihood for her family of four. Wisdom of common people must be integrated into the development process. Lowering the risks of climate change, elimination of poverty and achieving sustainable development are within the possibility of the human enterprise if we all act together guided by knowledge and wisdom.

We look forward towards a world of implementing sustainable development with greater equity, justice and environmental protection. We need to move to a future world of lower carbon content,

equitable and right type of development for the poor and marginalized people simultaneously. We will have to rapidly reduce poverty with protection of our environment. We will try to integrate scientific knowledge with peoples' wisdom and take the benefits of that knowledge to all communities across the world. Injustices, whether in climate regimes, science or information, access to goods, services or rights and freedoms will only delay in our journey to achieving sustainable development.

We must act now, urgently, boldly and collectively for a better climate regime and a safer, a more equitable, and poverty free world for all. A just society is a more sustainable society.