

Acceptance speech by Senator Elizabeth Thompson

Recipient of “The Champion of the Earth Award 2008” – Latin America and the Caribbean

The Caribbean is long way from here but the problems of environment, sustainable development and the threats of climate change are not, their tentacles grip every corner of the globe, graphically demonstrating that the earth is a common shared space where we are interconnected and the actions of inhabitants of other countries affect us all as part of the global family of nations.

The challenges of environmental management have been with us from the time early man sought to manage and control his environment by lighting his first fire and using animal skins for cover and warmth. What is new, is the technology and the capacity for waste, and harm on a global scale.

In Barbados and the Caribbean, as in all SIDS we are highly vulnerable to exogenous shock, economic and environmental. This peculiar vulnerability makes SIDS the world’s barometers of development gains and losses. In the Caribbean region we have suffered from frequent and intense weather events, severe coastal damage and destruction of our fringe coral reefs. These idyllic isles are now amongst the most water scarce countries on the planet. In fact, increasingly, our capacity for development is constrained by environmental factors. Climate change is not for us an academic or esoteric issue. It is one of survival, threatening land, sea, livelihoods and life.

I am deeply honoured and utterly amazed that you should recognise and award me for working in an area about which I am passionate, that I tremendously enjoy and one that is of such critical importance to my country and region. You will appreciate therefore that I cannot let this opportunity go without recognising all those who are working in this area without similar recognition. If I may I should like to urge that all of the Champions and the countries from which they originate should consider the establishment of a “Champions of The Earth” Fund or Foundation for the implementation of climate change and sustainable development projects in SIDS. The processes for transparency and administration can be worked out but the fund must circumvent the long, complex prequalification procedures which generally accompany development funding and confound countries with limited human resource capacities. It must facilitate speedy project delivery.

We come to this award ceremony at a time when the world is experiencing unprecedented problems which all have some nexus to ecology and threaten sustainable development. These include spiralling energy and food costs and the threat of climate change. The most recent Human Development Report notes that “climate change is the defining human development issue of our generation.” Never before has there been such a global convergence of ecological and economic issues.

At the UN Summit on Climate Change last year, the former Prime Minister of Barbados, the Rt Hon Owen Arthur made an incisive comment. “There exists no reason, scientific nor political, for delaying an immediate response to this global crisis.... Inertia would be tantamount to a crime against humanity.” As “Champions of The Earth we must find a tangible way to make a global difference.”

Excellencies, I thank UNEP’s executive Director for having such good eyesight that he was able to see me all the way in the Caribbean. I also thank all those whose work and assistance over the years have allowed me to stand here this evening.

Thank You.