

Press Release

President Bill Clinton at the Eye on Earth Summit: inequality, bad financial systems root causes of global inability to adapt to a changing world

Abu Dhabi, December 13, 2011 – Speaking at the Eye on Earth Abu Dhabi 2011 Summit, President Bill Clinton gave one of his famously wide-ranging speeches to make a number of compelling points: we can help the world prepare for the future, but need to come together to do it. Inequality is damaging to us all, for it pushes us apart. We must always show through concrete examples that doing good makes dollar sense. We must push our financial systems to treat renewable energy sources on the same investment timeframes as conventional projects. And, with more and more people living in cities, dealing with building efficiency is by far the most efficient way of saving massive greenhouse gas emissions.

For President Clinton, the mere fact that the Eye on Earth Summit is taking place in Abu Dhabi is a sign of the huge progress in awareness we have made. "This is an incredible venue. A few years ago, it would have been unthinkable to have a conference to debate data and emissions here in the Gulf. We are doing this in the UAE because we know the path we are on is not sustainable."

In a speech followed by a question and answer session in front of a high-level audience including UAE leadership, President Clinton gave a virtuoso performance studded with enlightening facts and leavened by the extraordinary experience he has gained around the world with his Clinton Foundation. He ranged across the globe from Iceland's geothermal potential to the Maldives' post-tsunami decision to concentrate its population on 13 islands whose very height is being raised.

He ranged across history to bygone times, too. "Now we know that those of us who are not 100% sub-Saharan African have inherited about 4% of our genes from our pre-human ancestors, the Neanderthals. My wife and daughter were amused because this confirmed what they always knew, that I was part Neanderthal!"

The world today is a village. "Our borders today look more like fishing nets than brick walls." They are crossed by migrants, financial flows, pollution, trade and more. At any given moment, half a million people are in the air, flying from one city to another.

"The main point is that we are all going to be affected by things that began somewhere else," Clinton said. "For example, the Greenland icecap is melting at an accelerated rate. If this continues at today's rates, all that fresh water in the north Atlantic could block the Gulf stream" which keeps Europe temperate. Were that to happen, the countries most responsible for historical greenhouse gas emissions would again experience a little ice age like 700 years ago. "Paradoxically, as the world is heating up everywhere else, some of those who caused it may for while avoid much of the warming".

Clinton repeatedly drew a link between inequality, instability and prosperity, drawing on multiple examples to show that prosperity will flow from a world that has more common purpose and less inequality. "The world is too unequal within and across borders. You've seen that the protests are not just those of the Arab spring, but in the US too, with Occupy Wall Street and in Europe with the eurozone crisis. It's important to remember (the eurozone crisis) started with us, in the US," Clinton said, leading to paralysing instability. "Some instability is necessary to the system. But too much instability freezes people up."

For Clinton: "The economic model we have been following is not sustainable because of the way we consume energy and the depletion of resources. In this context, this is a very good meeting and those of you focused on giving us good data are profoundly important."

Measuring things is indeed important, but only if that information informs better decision-making. Take "the controversy about oil-rich counties leasing or buying farmland in Africa, where the topsoil has been taken care of pretty well by African farmers. Now that's not necessarily a bad thing, but it makes all the difference how it is done. If it's industrial, mechanised agriculture, the topsoil and water will be depleted, and Africa will not be able to develop, preventing the more and more trade and interdependence which is what we need. We live in an interdependent world." And, Clinton emphasised again, in such a world we need to be inclusive. "We cannot divide the world into haves and have-nots."

In that respect, the Eye on Earth Summit, whose ambition is to help developing countries reach better decisions through access to more and better data, is a significant development that signals Abu Dhabi's efforts to deal with these serious issues.

Clinton reminded delegates that what really matters is concrete examples, not mere words. "I'm not sure what was agreed in Durban, but of this I am certain: the agreements won't matter if we don't have demonstration projects. Most of my life is spent with people, telling them 'if you doubt it can be done, go look at this project, or at that project. Look at these farms in Africa whose productivity was multiplied, or those buildings in the US which use far less energy.' I'd rather do one project than give 10 speeches."

Clinton repeatedly returned to financing issues. Effecting changes to our energy systems, he said, had more to do with bad habits and inadequate financing than with technology.

He envisions a world in which energy comes from far more diversified sources – but these would have to be treated by investors and financial institutions at least on a par with more polluting power systems. One example: "One of my dreams is to get rid of every landfill in the world, to recycle all the plastics and glass and metals, to compost the organic waste and to use everything else for energy. I want more geothermal. And it's largely a question of finance. If you want to build a new coal fired plant, you'll get 20 years to pay for it. It's a long and well established process which everyone knows. You will get 30 years to pay for a nuclear plant."

But there isn't anything like these financial packages for renewable projects. "A really good waste to energy facilities pays for itself in less than 20 years. But I'm always asked: 'how can you finance something over 17 years?' Well, we do it every day for polluting power plants!"

Regarding disaster planning and resilience, Clinton pointed out that it's not just about data. After the Indian Ocean Tsunami, he learned that "an early warning system can help us be more like the animals that ran away. They had an early warning system. That's important. But you should think not just about preparedness, you can actually prevent damage." After the Kathrina hurricane that swamped New Orleans: "A study was conducted to see why the levees broke. It found that if the wetlands had been in the same state as thirty years ago, it would have cut the speed of the water by half and damage by 90%."



Media Release

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Preparing for the future also means conserving past natural assets.

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About the Eye on Earth Summit and Exhibition

Held under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, the Eye on Earth Abu Dhabi 2011 Summit & Exhibition is hosted by Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi (EAD), facilitated by Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative (AGEDI) and held in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Eye on Earth Abu Dhabi 2011 Summit is dedicated to the critical issue of greater access to environmental and societal data for enhanced decision making, especially in emerging economies. It brings together the global leadership of the environmental information movement, a group dedicated to bringing the benefits of better information to people and decision-makers around the planet.

For more information visit, www.eyearthsummit.org

About Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD)

The Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) was established in 1996 to preserve Abu Dhabi's natural heritage, protect our future, and raise awareness about environmental issues. EAD is Abu Dhabi's environmental regulator and advises the government on environmental policy. It works to create sustainable communities, and protect and conserve wildlife and natural resources. EAD also works to ensure integrated and sustainable water resources management, to ensure clean air and minimise climate change and its impacts. For more information, visit www.ead.ae

About Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative (AGEDI)

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