LECTURE AT THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
AND POLITICAL SCIENCE:
“FROM DOHA TO JOHANNESBURG BY WAY OF MONTERREY:
HOW TO ACHIEVE, AND SUSTAIN,
DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY”.

London, 25 February 2002
Thank you, Professor Giddens, for that very kind introduction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
It’s a great honour for me to speak at the London School of Economics, which counts among its alumni so many heroes of the struggle for independence and for development in the former colonial world.

What I want to talk to you about this afternoon is essentially the continuation of that struggle.

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.

Much was achieved at Rio. Agenda 21, adopted there, remains as visionary today as it was then – and local authorities and civil society in almost every part of the world have been working to implement it. Moreover, legally binding conventions on climate change, biodiversity and desertification have been added since then, as well the action plans adopted at United Nations conferences throughout the 1990s, now brought together in the Millennium Development Goals.

And yet there is a feeling of loss of momentum.

As our attention has been focused on conflict, on globalisation, or most recently on terrorism, we have often failed to see how these are connected to the issue of sustainability. That word has become a pious invocation, rather than the urgent call to concrete action that it should be.

Prevailing approaches to development remain fragmented and piecemeal; funding is woefully inadequate; and production and consumption patterns continue to overburden the world’s natural life support systems.

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.

Her back aches from the long journey carrying a heavy load, but her heart aches even more from the fear that failure will expose herself and her children to hunger, thirst and disease. How much longer can her way of life be sustained?

Another 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 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, or twelve or fifteen 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?

Agenda 21 and all that flowed from it can be said to have given us the “what” – “what” the problem is, what principles must guide our response.

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.

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 reduce tensions over resources that could lead to violence and to give every man and woman a voice, and a choice, in deciding their own future.

One thing we have learnt over the years is that neither doom-and-gloom scenarios nor destructive criticism will inspire people and Governments to act. What is needed is a positive vision, a clear road map for getting from here to there, and a clear responsibility assigned to each of the many actors in the system.

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.