



Washington, DC, Launch of *Africa: Atlas of Our Changing Environment*

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Edited Transcript – Hennie du Toit

Thank you, Geoff. Sitting up here I realize why my Ambassador -- why I'm the political counselor in the embassy, and my much smarter Ambassador is the ambassador. He probably took one look at this panel and realized it's going to be a tough act to follow, so we'll throw Hennie du Toit into the wolves.

But thank you so much, it's -- on a serious note, the Ambassador would have loved to be here. He had to travel -- circumstances beyond his control, and he has asked me to convey the message: thanks for allowing us to be here.

So as I said it is an honor for me to speak here today on behalf of Ambassador Welile Nhlapo. Our President, Thabo Mbeki, launched the African atlas at the AMCEN meeting in Johannesburg earlier last month. As the current chair of that organization, we therefore take the opportunity to thank the authors and UNEP for the thought- and hopefully action-provoking publication.

What we particularly appreciated about the African atlas is the visual pictures that it provides of these challenges. To use the old but true adage, and as Mr. Singh just said, a picture does speak a thousand words, and these photographs that we just saw highlight the damage that deforestation, loss of biodiversity, degradation, pressure from growing and moving populations, and erosion does to our common environment.

When South Africa hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the world recognized that poverty and global inequality were the greatest threats to sustainable development. It is this very challenge that continues to face us today in the face of even greater threats of climate change and environmental degradation.



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Indeed, climate change is one of the greatest challenges on the continent. Africa is one of the regions that is least responsible for climate change, and is also least able to afford the costs of adaptation. During our time as AMCEN President, we hope to launch a process that will lead to the formation of a comprehensive framework of African climate change programs, and an African common position on climate change. We will also work towards strengthening and supporting the implementation of the Johannesburg plan of implementation and build a strong place for international environmental governance. We believe that AMCEN, together with other African institutions like the AU should continue to spearhead efforts to manage and protect Africa's environmental resources.

We are happy to say that our goals as AMCEN chair and members of the AU are in line with the findings of the atlas publication and that we as Africans together with our international partners will continue to strive for solutions to the challenges facing our changing environment. We therefore hope that this atlas will be a rallying cry to Africans and the international community alike so that no one can say that they did not see with their own eyes the efforts of environmental degradation and the need for urgent action.

Let me end by quoting President Mbeki when he said in 1996,

I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land. We as Africans are well aware that our pasts, our presents, and futures are linked in our common environment, and as such we are committed to its preservation and sustainable development.

Once again, thank you, UNEP, for your crucial role in this very important initiative. Thank you.



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