I. UNIVERSALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

1. I believe that we have been exposed to enough situations of conflict around the world in the last decades to be able to appreciate the importance of respect for human rights and ethics as being of critical importance in affecting human behaviour and international relations in a way that could contribute to reduction of tensions and solutions to conflicts. Exchange of experience among national human rights commissions, and human rights activists, can be useful not only as a reaffirmation of universally shared values but also to learn from each other about innovative and imaginative solutions found by other societies through adopting measures to promote respect and understanding.

2. We have been living through a transition on a global scale. To meet the challenge of change in response to universally-shared human expectations, policies for economic liberalization, aiming to create a global market economy were promoted along side the resolute endeavour of the international community to promote universal human rights. A process of consensus building culminating in global conferences achieved positive progress. The Vienna Declaration of the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), states proclaimed their commitment to promote universal respect for, and observance and protection of, all human rights and fundamental freedoms, asserting that:

(a) the universal nature of these rights and freedoms is beyond question;

(b) all human rights are universal and indivisible, interdependent and interrelated;

(c) the international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis.

While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is acknowledged that nonetheless it is the duty of all States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

3. Economic growth which does not focus on the realization of the rights of all leads to the widening of inequality within and among states and, ultimately, tends to push the global economy towards a crisis. Scholars have offered substantial evidence to suggest that political and civil rights have a positive impact on economic progress and that political rights play a critical role in the case of meeting human needs.

4. Respect for human rights itself calls for respect for cultural and religious pluralism. Neither history nor anthropology validate the claim of any particular religion or geographical region to be treated as the exclusive source or fountain-head of civil and political rights. Those who in Africa or Asia, in Nigeria or Burma, violate these rights and resist universal appeals to respect human rights as alien interventions, deny history as well as their own religious and cultural traditions. Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and
Sikhs had fought along with Christians and Jews against fascism, which had threatened all humanity from aggressive centres in Europe and Asia. Human rights had been invoked by Asians and Africans, of different faiths, in their sustained, and ultimately successful, movements for independence against colonialism and against apartheid. Many African and Asian nations were not represented in San Francisco when the Charter of the United Nations was adopted, or were not present when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. That does not detract from the universal recognition since accorded to them by the peoples of all nations. The spirited participation in the Vienna Human Rights Conference of civil society activists, specially women and youth, had made it impossible even for the hesitant among the government representatives to deny universality.

5. Popular movements for democracy and independence across the world have invoked universal human rights as their basis. People of different faiths have been inspired to challenge colonial and authoritarian regimes by a commitment to vindicate their human rights. They have reaffirmed this commitment when they have adopted new constitutions. In doing so, they have invariably relied upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN human rights instruments to formulate their own charter of rights. I can testify from my own experience, as chairperson of the constitution drafting committee, of Bangladesh, after it had gained independence. In drafting the constitution, we had unhesitatingly drawn upon universally recognized formulations of human rights derived from international instruments. The post-apartheid South African constitution unequivocally assured universally recognized human rights to all in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society.

6. The global economic crisis is diagnosed as being caused by an unregulated market, taken advantage by those who callously sacrifice the public good and social responsibility for unlimited personal gain. Governments as well as powerful corporations, therefore, must adhere to principles which would require them to be socially responsible, to respect human rights and to be accountable for their conduct measured by human rights standards. The role of an active civil society to mobilize opinion in support of those standards and to monitor their observance would be of critical importance.

II. PROMOTING RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING AMONG PEOPLES AND NATIONS: “CIVIL PATHS TO PEACE” (2007)*

7. A Commission established by the Commonwealth and chaired by the Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, had in its Report entitled Civil Paths to Peace (2007) made persuasive recommendations on how respect and understanding could be promoted among peoples and nations. Respect it urged is about acknowledging a common humanity, and a preparedness to treat everyone, no matter how different their world views, with the dignity they deserve because of their humanity. It is as much about how we treat those who occupy lower social positions as it is about how we respond to those who are more senior. There is an important distinction to make between respecting persons

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* This section draws upon the Report entitled: Civil Paths to Peace, Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding: Amartya Sen (Chairperson) and Members: John Alderdice, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Adrienne Clarkson, Noeleen Heyzer, Kamal Hossain, Elaine Sihoatani Howard, Wangari Muta Maathai, Ralston Nettleford, Joan Rwabyomere, Lucy Turnbull.
(and their right to hold their own views) and indiscriminately respecting what they believe in or how they behave. We can show respect to others without agreeing with their particular doctrines or their actions.

8. Understanding implies an ability to grasp what someone else is saying in order to get to the heart of what they are trying to communicate. To do this requires a willingness to put aside one’s own preconceived notions in order to appreciate their world view. Understanding, therefore, involves the acknowledgement that one’s own culture and experience are not the only models for thinking or acting. Like respect, understanding does not necessarily involve agreement with the views or beliefs others hold. A consensus to do something jointly therefore, given the different views that people hold, is not preconditioned by the necessity of any unanimity of view. No-one or nobody should hold a veto that requires subordination of all to a single view or belief.

9. The Report explained how important it is to understand disrespect and what it is like to be disrespected. Disrespect for an individual or a community can be expressed simply through passive rejection, ignoring their presence and their needs. The poorest people – those marginalized by their poverty, social status, gender or disability – often have the least power to mobilize and make demands. Local services might be high quality but still be delivered in ways that make poor women feel like cattle, or worse. And being a woman might mean that you are all but certain to receive a sub-standard service. Being treated as invisible or irrelevant in a clinic, on a bus, or in a shop is an indication of disrespect. It is equally possible that those who are put in positions of authority can be treated with disrespect, not because of how they have behaved, but simply because they are in authority. Respect should be a characteristic of all our relations.

10. Respect and understanding are intimately connected with human rights expressed in terms of the four great freedoms (from hunger, disease, ignorance and fear) – to which one might add freedom from violent conflict. These freedoms are not attainable in a vacuum. They necessarily require consideration of the nature of basic values that underlie the actions necessary to achieve these freedoms.

11. For any society to create a common vision for itself, it is necessary for it to find effective ways to nurture a sense of belonging among all its members, including young people. These members are not merely required to be of that society, they are also entitled to be treated in a way that values them as integral to the society. They need to have a sense of being part of a common destiny and a shared future. For this reason alone, there has to be some public endorsement and acceptance of identity even if there are plural identities involved. It is preferable for richly textured and multi-layered identities not to be collapsed simplistically into identification based on a single characteristic only, be that racial, linguistic or religious.

12. The aim in future must be to strive even harder to recognize and nurture connections between groups on the basis of their multiple identities in order to avoid the pressure of being coalesced into polarized worlds. Efforts can be made at many levels. The starting point is personal awareness. Each of us can resist the tendency of identity politics to ignore the complexity and multiplicity of our identities through broadening our understanding of the richness of human identity. A Hutu who is roused to hostility against a Tutsi can be reminded that they are both Rwandans, both Africans, perhaps even both Kigalians. He should be asked to recognize, too, that they share a human
identity. Even though the British, French and Germans tore each other apart in 1914–
1918, they now recognize each other, with little difficulty, as fellow Europeans.

13. The task is to build the foundations of a community that is both cohesive as well as
diverse in its composition. This involves several elements whereby

* There is a common vision and all communities have a sense of belonging.

* The diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances is
appreciated and positively valued.

* Those from different backgrounds have similar opportunities. Language
fluency and language barriers to entry into particular occupational categories
are a prime example that can prevent this.

* Those from different backgrounds develop strong, positive relationships in the
workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

14. Some very specific issues exist around dialogue in conflict situations, particularly
when there has been outside military intervention. Even if military intervention is
sanctioned by the United Nations, it does not mean that a UN force will be
automatically welcomed or their presence accepted by local populations. Whether this
happens will depend in large part on how the intervention is managed and how
processes for dialogue with local leaders and people are developed. This involves
literally how the actions of those on the ground are able to gain, or do not gain, the
confidence of people and institutions. However bad the situation that led to the
intervention, no occupying force can expect local support unless people themselves
feel included and respected.

15. Systematically ‘engineered violence’ makes effective – and often lethal – use of
selected group identities with adversarial attitudes towards other groups, combined
with the downplaying of many other identities that human beings also have, including
the broad commonality of our shared humanity. In resisting engineered violence, we
need as clear an understanding as possible of the ways and means through which the
thinking of a large number of activists is influenced in a violent direction. The battle
for the human mind is at least as important in resisting terrorism and brutality as
battles to secure physical bridgeheads.

III. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, ETHICS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

16. Now it is widely acknowledged that real development, in the interest of all (and not just
the privileged and powerful few), has to be sustainable development, the multi-
dimensional character of which needs to be understood. The Stockholm Declaration
itself had recognized the importance of both aspects of the environment, ‘the natural’
and the ‘man-made’. The Club of Rome’s 1991 report describes a sustainable society not
only in terms of physical sustainability but in terms of one based on social justice, thus:
“A sustainable society implicitly connotes one that is based on a long-term vision in that
it must foresee the consequences of its diverse activities to ensure that they do not break
the cycles of renewal; it has to be a society of conservation and generational concern. It
must avoid the adoption of mutually irreconcilable objectives. Equally, it must be a
society of social justice because great disparities of wealth or privilege will breed destructive disharmony.”

17. The 1996 Human Development Report reminds us that Immanuel Kant had urged: “So act as to treat humanity in every case as an end, never, a means only”. The great Bengali poet and Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore had written, thus: “We have for over a century been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot, choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, humbled by our own helplessness and overwhelmed by the speed. We agreed to acknowledge that this chariot-driver was progress, and the progress was civilization. If we ever ventured to ask ‘progress towards what, and progress for whom’, it was considered to be peculiarly and ridiculously oriental to entertain such ideas about the absoluteness of progress. Of late, a voice has come to us to take count not only of the scientific perfection of the chariot but of the depth of the ditches lying in its path.”

18. The universally shared values and aspirations of ordinary women and men the world over, underlining their common humanity, were powerfully voiced by the participants in the NGO Forum held parallel to the Earth Summit in Rio nearly two decades ago. They expressed their shared concern over the damaging consequences of a development model grounded in the pursuit of economic growth and consumption to the exclusion of human and environmental concerns. They judged current thought and action that dominated economic policy to be “a path to collective self-destruction, not to sustainable development.” In the People’s Earth Charter adopted by the Forum, they resolved to define their vision for an alternative future, candidly acknowledging that there were no clear models, but that a beginning towards crafting that alternative could be made by declaring their commitment to certain principles on which there was a broadly shared consensus. These included the following:

* the fundamental purpose of economic organization is to meet the community’s basic needs, such as for food, shelter, clothing, education, health, and the enjoyment of culture; this purpose must take priority over all other forms of consumption, particularly wasteful and destructive forms of consumption such as consumerism and military spending;

* the quality of human life depends more on the development of social relationships, creativity, cultural and artistic expression, spirituality and opportunity to be a productive member of the community than on the ever increasing consumption of material goods;

* organizing economic life so that it is responsive to environmental and social concerns, and to the priorities and needs of ordinary women and man and the community in which they and their families live;

* all elements of society, irrespective of gender, class, or ethnic identity, have a right and obligation to participate fully in the life and decisions of the community; the presently poor and disenfranchised, in particular, must become full participants; women’s roles, needs, values and wisdom are especially central to decision making on the fate of the Earth; there is an urgent need to involve women at all levels of policy making, planning and implementation on an equal basis with men;
knowledge is humanity’s one infinitely expandable resource; beneficial knowledge in whatever form, including technology, is a party of the collective human heritage and should be freely shared with all who might benefit from it;

transparency must be the fundamental premise underlying decision making in all-public institutions, including at international levels.

19. The women and men who framed the People’s Earth Charter acknowledged that the thinking underlying its principles had been enriched by the teachings of many religious traditions represented among them. They underscored the central place of spiritual values and spiritual development in the society they aimed to create.

20. Three critical components of their strategy for mobilizing the forces of international society in pursuit of just, sustainable and participatory societies were:

* A massive commitment to education and to human rights learning, new understanding, values and skills are needed at all levels and across all elements of society;

* A commitment to use their votes and their moral authority to choose socially responsible persons to replace those who occupy positions of authority and abuse their positions to adopt and advance socially and economically destructive policies to serve short-term elite interests; this calls for empowerment of women and men at the grassroots so that they can liberate the electoral process and representative institutions from the control of powerful elites and replace them with socially-responsible representatives committed to strive for sustainable human development aimed at the realization of the human rights of all.

* Coalition-building and consensus-building across boundaries – between members of civil society, including the business community, and government – in order to broaden and deepen consensus and promote respect and understanding among peoples and nations through “countless dialogues and negotiations throughout the world” to enlarge the growing global movement.