

**University of Bern Media Release**

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***Rio+20: The Future Switzerland Wants***

**The world's ecological problems can only be solved by sustainably reducing poverty: this was one of the conclusions reached by a panel discussion organised by the University of Bern's Centre for Development and Environment (CDE). Just days before some 50,000 people start descending on Rio de Janeiro to debate "The Future We Want", members of the Swiss Rio+20 delegation met to discuss the role that Switzerland can play.**

*"We must act fast. We must act very fast."* So spoke Swiss Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti in 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio. Twenty years on, members of the Swiss Delegation to Rio +20 are more reservedly optimistic regarding the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development: Rio+20 should not be measured solely by the official results, but also by the many impulses and actions it triggers.

Before the discussion turned to Switzerland, two international keynote speakers presented their visions. Måns Nilsson of the Stockholm Environment Institute outlined how sustainable energy could help meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 1-6: *"Modern energy gives access to information technologies as well as basic needs such as lighting to do homework. It can also free up time for education that is now used for gathering fuelwood, fetching water, and cooking."* However, Prof. Nilsson pointed out that technology alone is not enough to achieve sustainable energy for all: improvements in efficiency must include changes in lifestyle and consumption.

Representing the South Centre, an intergovernmental policy think tank based in Geneva, Mariama Williams referred to **the three pillars of sustainable development – the economic, the social, and the environment** – as laid out in the Brundtland Commission's report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987.

*“Twenty years after the inspiring vision and articulations of Rio 1992, the integration of the three pillars is still at initial stages and needs considerable effort, both conceptually and in terms of the means of implementation, to bring the vision of sustainability to fruition,”* urged Dr Williams.

Panel speakers had been selected to represent each of the three pillars: Martin Dahinden (Director of SDC), Bruno Oberle (Director of FOEN), Hans-Peter Egler (SECO), David Bresch (Swiss Re), Annemarie Huber-Hotz (SRK), and Hans Hurni (CDE). There was consensus among the panel members on the issues at stake: How can the needs of developing countries be reconciled with the increasing scarcity of natural resources? How can industrialised countries such as Switzerland reduce their use of resources to a sustainable level? And how can Switzerland contribute to a fair and sustainable distribution of resources, which would ultimately lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth?

The panel also agreed that the world order has changed: it is no longer the “North” that sets the agenda for sustainable development in developing countries. And while the BRICs – Brazil, Russia, India, and China – have a much greater say than 20 years ago, their interests lie in protecting the MDGs rather than promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) put forward by the North.

According to Hans Hurni of CDE, the potential to generate knowledge is probably the most important resource of development and transition countries in creating their own future. *“In the draft text for Rio+20, the central role of knowledge generation and tertiary education is not mentioned. This is regrettable,”* said Prof. Hurni. *“Knowledge societies are not solely the privilege of post-industrial countries.”*

For the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, it is clear that ecological problems can only be tackled by sustainably reducing poverty. *“We also need the courage to break taboos, and to talk about subjects such as population growth; economically, socially, and ecologically damaging subsidies; and the equitable distribution of natural resources,”* said SDC Director Martin Dahinden.

Along with other countries, Switzerland is calling for the completion of a “Green Economy Roadmap” at Rio+20. The Roadmap should be linked with national strategies for sustainable development and poverty reduction.

A podcast and photos of the event will become available at: [www.cde.unibe.ch](http://www.cde.unibe.ch)

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