

At the Rio de Janeiro Conference in 1992 the international community has demonstrated its determination to grasp this opportunity and to work together to find solutions to global environmental problems. You will recall that this conference evoked a vision - the vision of sustainable development. For many people around the world Rio was a beacon of hope.

Today we are forced to admit that this vision has not been realized as fast as many had hoped. On the threshold to the next millennium we must ask ourselves: Where do we stand today? What is the state of the global environment?

A look at trends in the global environment confronts us with a hard reality: the loss of forests, desertification, drinking water shortages and, above all, global warming all continue undiminished. These developments affect humanity's vital nerve.

Against this background the question arises: What tangible progress towards worldwide protection of our sources of life have we achieved together since Rio? The latest United Nations Environment Programme report published last month gives a sobering reply: despite continued efforts and initiatives, despite an increase in environmental awareness throughout the world, we have not yet attained our goals.

To be sure, there have been positive developments, e.g. in the protection of the ozone layer. The climate negotiations held during the last few years did achieve a measure of success. What is more, many states have made considerable progress in air quality control and water protection. However, not least due to meteoric population growth, this progress in individual spheres is quickly cancelled out by increasing burdens in other areas.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In identifying further causes we must turn our attention to the globalization of the world economy. As a result of global markets the economic basis is changing faster than ever before.

On the one hand, integration into world trade and economic cooperation can open up new windows of opportunity, particularly for developing countries. On the other hand, there is a danger that globalization will be accompanied by overexploitation of natural resources and neglect of environmental protection. The fire clearance of forests and overfishing of the seas do not bode well.