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Ban calls for a Green Economy to ensure sustainable development

1 February 2011 - UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called for "revolutionary action" to achieve sustainable development, warning that the past century's heedless consumption of resources is "a global suicide pact" with time running out to ensure an economic model for survival.

"Let me highlight the one resource that is scarcest of all: Time," he told the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in a session devoted to redefining sustainable development. "We are running out of time. Time to tackle climate change. Time to ensure sustainable, climate-resilient green growth. Time to generate a clean energy revolution."

Calling sustainable development the growth agenda for the 21st century, Mr. Ban recited a litany of development errors based on a false belief in the infinite abundance of natural resources that fuelled the economy in the last century.

"We mined our way to growth," he said. "We burned our way to prosperity. We believed in consumption without consequences. Those days are gone. In the 21st century, supplies are running short and the global thermostat is running high.

All this now needs rethinking to secure the balanced development that will lift people out of poverty while protecting the planet and ecosystems that support economic growth, he told the assembly of heads of State and government, international economists, business and industry leaders and civil society.

"Here at Davos - this meeting of the mighty and the powerful, represented by some key countries - it may sound strange to speak of revolution," he said. "But that is what we need at this time. We need a revolution. Revolutionary thinking. Revolutionary action. A free market revolution for global sustainability.

"It is easy to mouth the words 'sustainable development,' but to make it happen we have to be prepared to make major changes - in our lifestyles, our economic models, our social organization, and our political life. We have to connect the dots between climate change and what I might call here, WEF - water, energy and food." WEF is also the acronym for the Davos World Economic Forum.

"We need you to step up. Spark innovation. Lead by action. Invest in energy efficiency and renewable energy for those who need them most - your future customers. Expand clean energy access in developing countries ? your markets of tomorrow."

He called on business leaders present to join the 11-year-old United Nations Global Compact, the world's largest corporate responsibility initiative committing businesses to

aligning their operations and strategies with 10 universally accepted principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption.

And he called on governments both in Davos and around the world to send the right signals to build the green economy. "Together, let us tear down the walls," he declared. "The walls between the development agenda and the climate agenda. Between business, government and civil society. Between global security and global sustainability. It is good business - good politics - and good for society.

"In an odd way, what we are really talking about is going back to the future. The ancients saw no division between themselves and the natural world. They understood how to live in harmony with the world around them. It is time to recover that sense of living harmoniously for our economies and our societies.

"Not to go back to some imagined past, but to leap confidently into the future with cutting-edge technologies, the best science and entrepreneurship has to offer, to build a safer, cleaner, greener and more prosperous world for all. There is no time to waste."

At a separate event, Mr. Ban launched a new Global Compact initiative called Global Compact Lead with a group of 54 global companies as founding members, who have committed to be at the cutting edge of environmental, social and governance issues, joining forces to translate sustainable development principles into business operations and deepening partnerships with the entire UN system.

"When companies like yours drive sustainability issues deeper into your operations and strategy, year after year, you send a powerful signal. Indeed, you change the world," he told the business leaders. "In this century far more than the last, we need business to achieve our fundamental purposes at the United Nations.

"This is why LEAD and the Blueprint for Corporate Sustainability are so important. By working together at the strategic level as well as in concrete partnerships, we can leverage our respective strengths to address some of the toughest problems of our time."

Speaking at a news conference, Mr. Ban noted that he had dedicated much of his time in Davos to building momentum on efforts to deal with climate change, stressing that agreement among all nations is both necessary and possible. "It may not be easy, but things worth doing seldom are," he said.

UN-sponsored conferences in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Cancún, Mexico, over the past 13 months have narrowed some differences including pledges to help developing countries mitigate the effects of climate change and action to tackle deforestation, which accounts for nearly one-fifth of global warming carbon emissions.

But the major components of an accord to cap the increase in the world's average temperature at two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels still remain to be worked out.