

'Higher education and sustainable development'

Address by Professor H Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, at a gala event for delegates to a meeting of the International Panel for Sustainable Resource Management in South Africa

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Distinguished delegates to the 7th meeting of the International Panel for Sustainable Resource Management and the associated policy dialogue, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, a warm welcome to you all. It is a privilege to have you in our country and on our campus, especially at this time of growing global awareness that humanity needs to approach development in a more sustainable way.

In the old days, parents used to tell their children if they wanted to secure the future for themselves, they needed the “three Rs”: “reading, writing and arithmetic”. These days our kids will tell us the “3Rs” stand for “reduce, reuse, recycle”. This is more appropriate, because it goes beyond the private good to include also the public good.

In today's world, sustainability is one of our major challenges – and it affects everyone, including those of us at institutions of higher learning. Stellenbosch has positioned itself as a relevant university. We form part of a world-wide network of engaged institutions. We subscribe to the notion that higher education institutions do not exist in isolation from society. They have a social responsibility and need to devote resources to the needs of local and global communities.

The way we look at it, is to consider our immediate environment – greater Stellenbosch and all its people – as our first laboratory. This is where we start moving science out of the confines of the classroom and the laboratory, and take it into those communities where development is needed most. Our second laboratory is the rest of the country, our third, the African continent at large, and our fourth laboratory, the world.

You start by asking: “What are the problems that people experience?” And you find that the challenges themselves guide you to the kind of solutions you need to focus on. Let me give you an example: Professor Mark Swilling, who, as you know, serves on the Resource Panel as one of its expert members, heads up one of Stellenbosch University's transdisciplinary initiatives called the TsamaHub.

Mark and his colleagues and students are partnering with the local municipality on issues such as land reform, spatial development, water purification, refuse management, infrastructural planning for the future and responsible resource usage in this area, which is the country's leading wine and deciduous fruit region. So, they do cutting-edge research, but their science is focused on tangible challenges facing real people.

The TsamaHub is one of 22 initiatives that make up Stellenbosch University's HOPE Project, which was launched earlier this year. It came about when we identified major challenges in society, such as poverty, hunger, disease, homelessness, exploitation, corruption, violence, pollution and unemployment.

We realised that as a university, it was our duty to use our key strengths – our academic excellence and cutting-edge research – to be of service to society. So, we analysed the UN's Millennium Development Goals and our government's development priorities, as contained in the Medium-term Strategic Framework, and distilled five themes from it.

They are (1) the eradication of poverty and related conditions, and the promotion of (2) human dignity and health, (3) democracy and human rights, (4) peace and security; as well as (5) a sustainable environment and a competitive industry.

The fifth theme of the HOPE Project is of particular relevance to your work. Our emphasis is on striking a balance between the environment and industry. Industrial development is important for economic growth, which, in turn, is crucial for human development. However, our economy clearly needs to move beyond its resource and energy intensive nature, as is advocated in South Africa's latest Industrial Policy Action Plan, or IPAP2. This is a challenge that not just our country but the whole of Africa faces as it gears up for accelerated growth and development.

The issue of striking a balance between competing demands is also one that we are battling with as an institution. We have been around for a long time, but if we want to remain the knowledge partner also of future generations, we need to do more with less.

Sustainability affects all three of our core functions – teaching and learning, research and community interaction – as well as our support services and infrastructure. Let's take teaching and learning as an example. It is one of our goals to produce students "who can play a leadership role in society as responsible and critical citizens in a democratic social order". Fortunately today's generation of young people share in the growing global consciousness of the need for sustainability, which makes the learning and teaching process truly reciprocal.

Ladies and gentlemen, whenever I speak about the HOPE Project, I always say that it is the right thing to do and that future generations deserve nothing less. The same can be said of the work of the Resource Panel, which has been meeting at the Sustainability Institute this week. The Sustainability Institute is a formal partner of Stellenbosch University, which means we too share a commitment to the important work of the Resource Panel.

We had identified your meeting in South Africa this week as a great opportunity to tap into the unfolding debate around sustainability. We also think that the policy dialogue following on from the Resource Panel meeting could help shape significant initiatives, such as the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Global sustainability, which is co-chaired by President Jacob Zuma. Let us use every opportunity to learn from each other and strengthen our collaborative ties. After all, we share a commitment to sustainable lives and livelihoods.

We wish you well with the rest of your deliberations. We will now be screening a short DVD to highlight some of the work that is being done at Stellenbosch University around sustainability. And after that I look forward to the reply of Professor Ernst von Weizsäcker, Co-Chairperson of the Resource Panel. Thank you.