



**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
the Round Table on
„THE 21ST CENTURY, A CENTURY OF GLOBAL
INTERDEPENDENCE AND SOLIDARITY“
20th Anniversary of the North-South Centre
of the Council of Europe
Lisbon
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Your Excellencies
Ladies and gentlemen

It is both an honour and a personal pilgrimage to return to the Council of Europe, especially the venue of the North-South Centre, rooted in a dialogue initiated three decades ago by the Parliamentary Assembly.

In the early 1980s, I had the great fortune, as a young member of the Icelandic Parliament, to be sent to Strasbourg and enter what was indeed a high-level practical training in European affairs and international relations. Through the Parliamentary Assembly and its committees, one could witness the spectrum of European affairs and learn to work with people from different political parties and diverse political cultures.

Together with my university education, the involvement in the Parliamentary Assembly was the most significant training experience of my career, making me better equipped to represent my country and engage in wide-ranging international endeavours.

This dimension of the Council of Europe, how it moulds the vision and capabilities of elected representatives who work together in that unique forum, has perhaps not been sufficiently recognised in the evaluation of the Council's contribution to European development.

The dialogue, reports and resolutions which ultimately led to the 1984 Conference, "North-South: Europe's Role," here in Lisbon reflected a new dimension, and signalled that the Council would not restrict itself to Europe alone but would also begin to examine global issues, to define Europe's role in dealing with some of the great challenges of our times.

The Conference was, I believe, the largest gathering of European Parliamentarians that had been assembled up to then in order to discuss economic and social development within the North-South context. It was strongly influenced by the Brandt Report and thus it was only natural that Willy Brandt should be invited to deliver the Keynote Address. In selecting the other speakers, we demonstrated that the Council desired to engage other continents in this new European dialogue. Narasimha Rao, then Foreign Minister of India, and later Prime Minister, spoke on behalf of the Non-Aligned countries in the South and the distinguished Mexican diplomat, and later political leader, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, represented the G77, a group of developing countries within the United Nations. Furthermore, international bodies like the World Bank, the IMF, the OECD and various UN Agencies were involved in this policy process.

For me it was a heavy responsibility but also a rewarding experience to be the rapporteur and later the chairman of the committee responsible for the Conference. Today, I want to recognise the great contribution made by Hans de Jonge, one of the most able officials to serve at the Council of Europe, and also to thank my old friend António Guterres, then a young member of the Portuguese Parliament, and later Prime Minister of this marvellous country, for his interest in bringing the Conference to Lisbon. It was an unforgettable experience when the three of us, all rather young, sat down at a luncheon with the Prime Minister at the time, Mario Soares, to convince him, successfully as it turned out, that the Government and the Parliament of Portugal should take this opportunity to exercise leadership and help to lead Europe on a new and important journey.

Today I pay homage to this history and thank the leaders of Portugal for embracing our vision in a determined way, establishing in due course the North-South Centre to institutionalise the continuation of our joint effort.

But I also refer to these endeavours of more than a quarter of a century ago in order to remind us of the fundamental changes which have

taken place, both in the North and in the South; changes which must in the decades to come profoundly affect our efforts and our vision.

In the North, the Council of Europe now embraces 47 democratic countries and the European Union has grown to 27 member states.

In the South, China and India have in the new century become global economic powers and the strength of Asia has enabled it to weather the current financial crisis much better than Europe and the United States.

In Africa and Latin America, democracy has gained formidable ground. The relationship between good governance and successful development which the World Bank made a guiding principle during Jim Wolfensohn's leadership has now become a pillar of North-South cooperation.

The enhanced significance of the South for Europe, and indeed for the entire Western World, has been formally recognised by adding the G20 meetings to those of the G8.

The interdependence of the North and the South is, however, most critical in urgent global endeavours directed at preventing irreversible climate change. The melting of the Antarctic ice cap and of glaciers in Northern countries will transform the oceans, leading to rising sea levels in distant countries and threatening the livelihood of farmers and fishermen, city dwellers and villagers, in Asia and Africa, with serious consequences in both the Americas. The future of Bangladesh and the Maldives is now intertwined with what happens in the Arctic. Never before has the whole world been so interconnected in the face of a major adversity. Our common fate is the core of the defining challenge of the 21st century.

Many policymakers are justly concerned about climate change. But the climate crisis is primarily a call for a fundamental energy revolution, a comprehensive change from fossil fuel to green energy sources such as solar, wind, geothermal, hydro, biomass and others.

In all of these categories, the nations of the South enjoy a richer potential than those of the North. Thus, a green energy era could become a century of progress for the developing world.

It is fascinating to think how the green energy achievements made in recent decades, principally in the Western World, could, within the right policy framework, be of great benefit to the developing countries, to Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Bright sunlight and strong prevailing winds characterise conditions in the South. What is less well-known is the abundance of valuable geothermal resources which in many ways are the golden secret of the global energy debate.

Although we all learn in school that there is a huge fireball inside the Earth, we tend to forget or ignore its enormous energy potential. With modern drilling and engineering technologies, it is now possible to harness this heat for the benefit of economic and social development, rural and urban electricity production, the creation of industrial regions and organic agriculture, for aluminium smelters and greenhouses alike, for spas and data storage centres.

The great advantage of geothermal, solar, wind and other green energy sources is that the scale of investments can be tailored to the need. The excess capacity and huge initial investment costs inherent in big coal and nuclear power plants are absent from the equation. The tapping of solar, wind and geothermal sources can be adjusted to the needs of a small village, a few households, a growing town or emerging industrial projects. It can then be scaled upwards with each stage of successful development.

A few decades ago, when we assembled for the North-South Conference here in Lisbon, this energy dimension was entirely absent from the formulation of development strategies, simply because the technological evolution of green energy was still in its early stages. Now, however, developing countries can base their prosperity on proven green energy technologies which can be tailored to every stage of development, and to the needs of different regions.

With respect to their geothermal potential, most countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are still in the early stages of this process. China has recently discovered how many coal plants can be replaced by geothermal sources for urban space heating. Indonesia and the Philippines are planning increased electricity generation from geothermal sources. In East Africa, countries like Kenya and Djibouti are looking at this resource in a fresh way, as are many countries in Central and South America.

In fact there are about 100 countries, mostly in the South, that have a considerable geothermal potential. For them, the example of my country can provide both an inspiration and concrete practical lessons.

In my youth, over 80% of Iceland's energy consumption was provided for by fossil fuel in the form of imported coal and oil. We were a poor nation, primarily of farmers and fishermen, classified by the UNDP as a developing country right down to the 1970s. Now, despite the

effects of the present financial crisis, we are among the most prosperous nations in the world, largely due to the transformation which made our electricity production and space heating 100% based on clean energy.

The magnet nature of clean energy production is especially important for 21st century IT investments, for software and information-based companies. In ever-growing numbers they are willing to go anywhere in the world if they can gain permanent and secure access to clean energy, thus becoming well positioned when a global carbon tax, in one form or another, will be introduced. For this reason alone, an abundance of clean energy could give developing countries a strategic advantage in the 21st century global economy.

In recent years we have gained increasing awareness of how our world is in fact a single eco-system, how developments in a particular area of the grand mechanism of our existence may have hitherto undreamt-of consequences in another. Perhaps the most dramatic contemporary manifestation of this interdependence is the relationship we have come to understand between climate change and the destruction of the soil, and how this constitutes a vicious circle.

As land loses its cover and vegetation retreats, its capacity to capture carbon is reduced, and this in turn accelerates climate change. Warmer years may result in droughts, affecting water resources and an endless number of eco-systems, and often furthering the spread of dangerous diseases.

Environmental challenges can thus translate into human conflicts, soil erosion becoming the root cause of humanitarian crises, with vicious and tragic ethnic confrontations. The crisis in Darfur is but one example. In a score of countries, in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, the deteriorating quality of the land and the enlargement of the deserts threaten to sow the seeds of crises and conflicts in the years to come.

We need to move on from the old ways of looking at national, regional and international security towards the unfamiliar yet urgent challenges that lie ahead. Let me mention some:

- The widespread water crises caused by the drying up of rivers, lakes and the spreading of deserts. Many of the Earth's biggest rivers run through a number of countries. Their drying up could cause nations to take drastic measures, and even military action, to secure their own water supplies.
- In all continents, the reduction of arable land will have a severe impact on food security and may create an acute crisis

for even hundreds of millions of people. Conflicts over water and land, the basis of agricultural production, have historically led to wars in Europe and could do so elsewhere in the new century.

- Climate refugees could bring migration between states, regions and even continents to a level hitherto unknown. Almost two billion Asians live within 35 miles of the coastlines and a large proportion of them could lose their homes as a result of rising sea levels.
- Fragile states could be in danger of collapsing, and some small island states may see most or all of their territories disappear. Thus, entire state structures could wither away, leaving the populations in a political no-man's land and entirely reliant on aid from abroad. Similarly, communities within states with special ethnic or historical characteristics might see their land destroyed, causing great strains on the capacity of their national governments.
- Humanitarian crises caused by extreme weather events will also become more frequent and more dramatic. Where many of these occur simultaneously, it would severely test the capacity of the existing international institutions.

No one will be immune from these threats and we must therefore seek guidance from the heritage which has grown out of earlier experience and model our actions with respect to frameworks already in existence, on treaties and institutions, both regional and global, which provide the pillars of the existing international community.

Dialogue on how this should be done, how to proceed from analysis to preventive action, how to extend and develop this new international framework, must now become a clear priority of the North-South dialogue.

We must improve cooperation on research and thus foster the growth of a global community of committed scientists, who will collaborate with governments and international authorities and engage both the private sector and civil society to think in constructive and novel ways. If the four pillars of modern society – governments, scientific communities, business sectors and civic associations – can unite and combine their resources, we can indeed build the foundations for constructive and lasting success.

We need a visionary collaboration, accompanied by an invitation to all concerned citizens to become involved, to be heard and counted.

That was indeed the vision which inspired the North-South Conference here in Lisbon a quarter of a century ago and consequently led to the foundation of the Centre; a vision based on democratic involvement by elected representatives and active citizens, on joint determination to create a better world.

That was our mission then. That indeed is our mission now.