

OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

Speech of the President of RSPO



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First Latin American Meeting of
the Roundtable on Sustainable
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I am extremely grateful to be here. This is my first visit to Colombia and to Cartagena. I had the pleasure of exploring your wonderful city yesterday morning, with some representatives from Fedepalma, and I have to say that it is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been.

Sustainable palm oil, sustainable development, sustainability. Many people still struggle with the concept of sustainability. Many times I have been asked what it means and, moreover, what it means *in practice*. I think that the simplest definition of sustainability is this: A sustainable activity is one that can be continued to be performed forever. In the case of the private sector, such a definition means, first of all, that a company should be able to make a profit, secondly that it should treat people well, and thirdly that it should protect the environment. If a company violates one of these three rules, it'll run into trouble sooner or later. And, boy, are we in trouble right now!

The world is suffering from a crisis mainly because we have ignored financial sustainability. I'm sure we will find a solution. The point is, of course, whether or not we ask the right question. This is how I explain it in my company, Unilever. Colleagues ask, What do you mean by sustainable development? What do you mean by sustainable agriculture? What do you mean by sustainable sourcing of raw materials? My answer is usually, which would you prefer given the choice: to develop your business while destroying communities and the environment, or to develop your busi-



ness while building communities and protecting the environment? The reply is invariably that they would prefer the latter. So then the question is, Why don't we do it? We think that it's been difficult to act sustainably in the past and that often it still is in the present, firstly, because of a lack of knowledge and, secondly, because of a lack of communication.

The world is very big and yet, at the same time, very small. We are all connected through global markets; what happens in one country affects the well-being of people in others. Companies like mine buy their raw materials and sell their products all over the world. Meanwhile, people all over the world connect with each other through the Internet: they know exactly what's happening and they ask us many questions about the origin of raw materials, about the way these materials are produced, and about the way we treat people who work for us, not just in Europe and the United States but also in China, in Argentina, in Colombia, in Mexico and so on.

The lack of communication can be solved by organizing multi-stakeholder platforms like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. You will hear a lot more about the RSPO after the coffee break, so I'll be brief in these opening remarks. One of the big advantages of the RSPO is the fact that it is a multi-stakeholder platform where growers, processors, traders, consumer goods manufacturers, retailers, banks, environmental NGOs and social NGOs sit down together and talk to one another. It is incredibly important to talk to each other and it is even more important to listen to each other.

I have the privilege of having been involved in the RSPO from its beginnings. As the years have gone by, I have seen in the various conferences that we've organized that people's behavior has changed. There

is more trust now between the people who come to the conferences than was there five years ago and you realize it by simply walking around and looking at how people talk to each other, how they interact, and how they listen to each other. If the RSPO is a success, it is because of this.

This does not mean that the work of the RSPO is done. The existing standard, the standard against which plantation companies are currently certified, will change; it will probably become stricter and more difficult to meet. That in itself is fine. As long as there is sufficient room for businesses to make a solid profit, there is no reason why they should fear stricter standards. Today we have tougher food safety standards, tougher labor standards and tougher environmental standards.

The fact that the world has become a global marketplace has created the need for new governance models in supply chains, such as the ones for commodities like palm oil. But it is not just palm oil. There are roundtables for soy, for cut flowers, for salmon, for coffee, for cocoa, for tea, for rubber, and for shrimps. Those are just the ones of which I am aware; I'm sure there are more.

It's also important that we have government representatives here today. I'm very interested in hearing the Minister of Environment and Territorial Development's address because I think that Colombia has shown real leadership in this area, leadership that is urgently needed. I'm particularly grateful to Fedepalma for the leadership role that it has played in organizing the National Interpretation of the RSPO standard. We will hear more about that later today and tomorrow. So I'm grateful to be here and I look forward to sharing the next two days with all of you.

Thank you very much.