



Our common responsibility for tomorrow's world
Statement of the President of COMECE
to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) Rio +20

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Twenty years after the first "*Earth Summit*" in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Heads of State and Government meet in June 2012 again in Rio for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD). With this meeting, countless people are expecting that concrete measures are taken on the path to a more equitable and sustainable development. In a world where millions of people lack access to adequate food, clean water, energy, health care and education and which is threatened by climate change through global warming, these steps are more necessary and urgent than ever.

Sustainability | For the conference in Rio in 1992, the concept of "*sustainability*" was central. From a Christian perspective, the recognition of the dignity of man is the basis for any sustainable development. The 1992 Rio Declaration had already stressed as its first principle that man must be the focus of concern for sustainable development. He has the right to a healthy life in harmony with nature. Sustainability as a principle of comprehensive human development has the goal to find a balance between social, economic and environmental needs and to cope with the basic needs of the present generation without thereby putting the life-chances of future generations at risk. Sustainability is applied to a solidarity that extends beyond space and time. The development of a framework for a "*green economy in the context of sustainable development* (GESDPE)" that is being sought by the Conference and a corresponding policy must be judged by whether and to what extent they will meet the basic needs of all people, especially the poor and marginalized as well as future generations.

Responsibility | *«We are all responsible for the protection and care of the environment. This responsibility knows no boundaries. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity it is important for everyone to be committed at his or her proper level, working to overcome the prevalence of particular interests.»*¹

The responsibility for global warming lies first of all with the developed world. Therefore the Northern part of the world, and the European Union in particular, should assume the highest share, whilst developing countries should be granted special means and conditions, according to the principle of '*Common differential responsibility*' as defined in Rio in 1992.² The concept of a '*Green Economy*' still needs to be more accurately defined. To be in step with the concept of sustainable development, it should not only include changes in production but also changes in consumption.³ Our current model of consumption puts too much emphasis on the consumption of material goods and tends to ignore other dimensions of human dignity

¹ Benedict XVI, «If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation». Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace 2010, Art. 11

² COMECE (2011): A Christian View on Climate Change – The implications of Climate Change for Lifestyles and for EU Policies, A Report to the Bishops of COMECE, p.19

« Within the framework of the agreed principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, the European Union bears a special responsibility for combating climate change, not only in view of the history of global climate change but also in view of its technological and financial means and its experience with cooperative action (...) But even if certain countries do not live up to their responsibilities for the poor and for future generations, this cannot be taken as an excuse for the European Union not to introduce its own necessary measures; but the EU should also make every effort to convince all actors concerned of the necessity to protect the Earth's climate system. »

³ CIDSE (2011) : *People and Planet First – Alternative ideas about development*, p.11.

and sustainable development.⁴ Moderation in consumption is therefore needed which is capable of liberating the notion of richness from its focus on materialistic aspects. Moderation will not renounce the desire for material goods but instead discern what is essential and what is superfluous.⁵

Development | Since food is the first means to fight poverty and sustain a growing world population, a global sustainable agricultural sector as well as just, but efficient, land tenure systems are needed. This includes the necessity to change and to adapt our European model of intensive farming that depends to a great extent on the importing of animal feed from developing countries and the exporting of farming products to the same countries.

The appearance of a '*post-oil era*' puts pressure on the use of fertile farmland. In past years we have seen increased competition between '*food-crops*' and '*fuel crops*' and, subsequently, rising prices for food. Our energy over-consuming life-style in combination with the necessity to reduce CO₂-emissions from fossil fuels is a threat to the food security of developing countries. Therefore a '*Green and sustainable economy*' will have to work hard on the development of smart and environmentally-friendly generation of energy without being a menace to food production.

Furthermore, economic growth can no longer be the sole goal of human development: We should engage in an agenda where comprehensive human development becomes the key factor. Thus, there is a need for agreement on alternative indicators for measuring development such as school enrolment rates and life-expectancy measures, which go beyond the economic-concentrated perspective of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Given our limited resources, neither economic competitiveness nor social justice can be achieved in the long run without the integration of the ecological factor.⁶ Thus, ecology must not be excluded in any measurement of sustainable living. Christians will have to be critical of a predominant lifestyle which is too single-mindedly focused on consumption, and especially on a disproportional consumption of energy.⁷

Cooperation | Cooperation will be the imperative of the future. Institutions at all levels of decision-making should improve their cooperation towards a sound global governance system, which is capable of ensuring policy-coherence. At the global level the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) should be upgraded into a specialized Agency for the Environment. This possible 'World Environment Organisation' which the COMECE bishops had already proposed in 2001⁸ will strengthen the synergies of the more than 500 existing Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)⁹ and articulate environmental concerns in an audible, credible and effective manner¹⁰. According to the principle of subsidiarity, authorities at local, national, regional and global levels should face up to their responsibilities when it comes to regulation, political priorities and the implementation of sustainable development policies. Municipalities in close cooperation with civil society, the private sector and the Churches should urgently make use of the participation tools offered by the Local

⁴ COMECE (2011) : *A Christian View on Climate Change – The implications of Climate Change for Lifestyles and for EU Policies, A Report to the Bishops of COMECE*, 2nd edition, p. 17

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ cf. COMECE (2011) : *A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility – A statement of the COMECE Bishops on the EU Treaty objective of a competitive social market economy*, Art. 21.

⁷ COMECE (2011): *A Christian View on Climate Change – The implications of Climate Change for Lifestyles and for EU Policies, A Report to the Bishops of COMECE*, p. 24.

⁸ COMECE (2001): *Global Governance - Our responsibility to make globalisation an opportunity for all*, Report to the Bishop of COMECE, Art. 62.

⁹ Preparatory Committee for UN Conference on Sustainable Development (2011): *Preparatory Committee for United Nations Conference on Sustainable Developments - Concludes by Adopting Decision Outlining Contents, Format of Outcome Document*, press release; retrieved from UN website <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/envdev1201.doc.htm>.

¹⁰ COMECE (2006): *Global Governance Assessment 2006 - Missed Opportunities and New Perspectives*; p. 21.

Agenda 21 to make a concrete contribution to the debate and the elaboration of action plans. Definitely, the most efficient actions lie in the hands of the people and the local and regional authorities.

A conversion of hearts and minds | Development is not uni-dimensional. It is not only about the determined fight against poverty and hunger and the struggle for access to clean water, health-care and education for more than two billion people. It is also the critical endeavour to develop globally a sustainable lifestyle that brings about a “*fundamental conversion of the hearts and minds of the developed and rich countries*”.

Instead of being driven by materialism and self-interest we need to become generous and show solidarity. We need to work on a new culture with respect for Creation, for solidarity and justice, for true and authentic human development.

The world expects that their leaders in Rio will embrace their responsibilities and will be accountable for their commitments. The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU wishes them the courage to decide in favour of just solutions.

Munich/Brussels, June 2012

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[COMECE](#) is the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, and comprises 26 Bishops representing all Member States of the EU. For more than thirty years now, COMECE has been accompanying the process of European integration, and offering its reflections. COMECE is now a partner of the EU institutions in the dialogue foreseen by Article 17 (3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.