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Introductory remarks for retreat “on the UN Conference on Sustainable Development
(Rio+20)
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Your Excellencies, dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung I want to welcome you and thank you for agreeing to participate in this retreat for Permanent Representatives of the UN on Rio+20. Many of you probably already know the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, which is a German political foundation committed to the advancement of public policy issues in the spirit of the basic values of social democracy. We have 110 offices around the world and we are celebrating this year our 30th anniversary of FES New York. The reason for establishing an office in New York was to promote debates around the Willy Brandt report, which was published in 1980 and was the most comprehensive and broad analysis of the various issues of international development. The ‘Brandt Report’ received much publicity and wide ranging acceptance as the best way forward for governments globally to realistically reduce the growing economic disparity between the rich North and developing South. However the proposals put forward by its eminent and diverse range of members were never adopted by governments due to the Cold War and a resulting lack of political will to act on these issues.

I am referring to the Brandt-Report so extensively, because we are facing a similar challenge now. The global financial and economic crisis has aggravated the social and economic situation for millions of people around the world. They are in despair about the future, especially the youth, and have taken political developments into their own hands. From the ongoing democratic uprisings in the Arab world, to the protests against further social burdens in Europe, Israel, Latin America and even in the United States, we see that young people are deeply concerned about inequality and an international financial system, that is dysfunctional.

These events have triggered a major (and controversial) debate about economic and social disparities between countries, as well as inequality within countries as to their negative impact on long-term sustainable growth and development. I just returned last Sunday from a trip to Washington, where we held a high-level meeting on persistent, rising inequality and the threat it poses not only to the stability of the international monetary and financial systems, but also to social and environmental well-being, and to development.

The upcoming UN conference on sustainable development gives all countries and their governments a major opportunity to come to an agreement about a new paradigm for development, one that would address sustainability and equity together, and that would

identify policies on both national and global levels, which could initiate mutually reinforcing progress towards these interlinked goals. Bold political action is needed on both fronts if human development progress for most of the world's poor majority is to be sustained. Although living standards in most countries have been rising - and converging - for some time now, we could experience a reversal of those trends if environmental deterioration and social inequalities continue to intensify.

It is the world's most disadvantaged people who suffer most from environmental degradation, including in their immediate personal environment, and who disproportionately lack political power, making it all the harder for the world community to reach agreement on needed global policy changes. Rio+20 opens an avenue to create positive synergies in the quest for greater equality and sustainability, at the national as well as the global level.

Thus it is imperative to find political consensus about a number of issues, including the human right to a healthy environment, the importance of integrating social equity into economic and environmental policies, and the critical importance of public participation and accountability. Also, new approaches to global development financing and environmental controls are essential to reach those goals.

Rio+20 focuses on two themes in order to renew the political commitment to sustainable development. I suggest we stop debating what the green economy *is* and instead talk about how we can embark on a green *transition* to sustainable development. If we want sustainable development, we cannot have blinders on. Sustainable development must be founded upon policies that govern and promote a stable and well-functioning international economy, one that does not intensify and propagate inequality, one that promotes economic development for all. This is the critical first pillar. Next, the green transition to sustainable development must strengthen social development through adequate social protection and an inclusive approach, sharing the fruits of sustainable development. This is the critical second pillar.

With strong and stable societies grounded in a well-functioning international economy, the global community then has the basis for protection of the environment, which is the critical third pillar of sustainable development.

The background notes for this conference reaffirm that unprecedented international cooperation will be needed to attain what the world needs from Rio+20. The task now is political.

On behalf of the people your governments represent, the challenge is to find the political will to chart the course and embark on the transition to sustainable development, a journey that—if it's done right—will trigger a new wave of *green* industrialization and become a new paradigm of development for us all.

I hope that this relaxed environment at Greentree and the program of discussions chaired by your peers can help you all find the political will to rise to the challenge.

Let us do everything in our power to prevent that famous “lack of political will” from once again standing in the way of sustainable development and the formulation of a new paradigm for development.

The Brandt-Report, 30 years ago, said: “We must try to lift ourselves above the day-to-day quarrels or negotiations to see the menacing long-term problems. We see a world in which poverty and hunger still prevail in many huge regions; in which resources are squandered without consideration of their renewal, in which more armaments are made and sold than ever before, and where a destructive capacity has been accumulated to blow up our planet several times over.”

All of these issues are still relevant today, 30 years later. Now is the time to turn his vision for a better world for all into reality.

Thank you