

RT10

Welcome Address

Dr Jan Kees Vis

President, RSPO

The Honourable Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam- Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Singapore,

Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador at large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

Your Excellencies,

Chairs, Speakers and Delegates,

Members of the media;

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Good morning to you all. Welcome to Singapore, welcome to Sentosa Island. And welcome to RT10, the tenth Roundtable Conference on Sustainable Palm Oil organised by RSPO.

Some weeks ago, I listened to a presentation by Johan Rockström, Director of the Stockholm Resilience Centre. He called his talk: "The Big Picture: Earth Resilience for Global Development".

The Stockholm Resilience Centre uses science to investigate the state of the planet. The message Professor Rockström had for us, was not pleasant. For example: in 1955 there were very few deviations from the local average temperature anywhere on the planet. And the deviations that were found were small. Fast forward to 2011 and there were many deviations almost all over the world. And they were much larger.

Some are beginning to refer to our era as the Anthropocene. This is because the impacts of humans on the planet are beginning to affect the great forces of nature.

Many indicators are red:

- atmospheric carbon dioxide
- northern hemisphere average surface temperature
- concentrations of nitrous oxide and methane
- ozone depletion
- climatic disaster events
- depletion of ocean ecosystems
- loss of tropical forests and woodlands
- percentage of land area that is domesticated
- species extinction.

This is what the Economist said about the Anthropocene: “When reality is changing faster than theory suggests it should -- a certain amount of nervousness is a reasonable response”.

It certainly makes me nervous.

Professor Rockström emphasised that the rise in man’s prosperity coincides with about 10,000 years of an unusually stable climate. Before that, temperature swings were much greater. The stable 10,000 years led to the emergence of very productive agricultural systems, which in turn made the industrial revolution possible.

But human intervention is destabilising the climate. For millennia, natural fires in dipterocarp forests were linked to El Nino. These fires were good for the forest, helping it regenerate. But large scale deforestation is breaking that relationship, turning El Nino from a regenerative into a destructive force.

Things may be bad, but Professor Rockström believes we have a small window of time to make things better. He says a great transformation to global sustainability is necessary, possible and desirable. This will prevent us reaching the tipping point from which damaged natural systems

will never recover. Or what he and his colleagues refer to as “transgressing safe boundaries”. He talks about resilience, adaptability and transformability. But there is little time. We only have decades to turn things around, not centuries. That makes it our responsibility, today, now.

How do we change our behaviour to make sustainability possible?

In recent months, people at the Sustainable Food Lab and Unilever have worked with sustainability and competition strategist Eric Lowitt. We helped on a chapter on the global food system in his new book, called “The Collaborative Economy”.

Mr Lowitt’s argument is clear. He says we can’t rely on the competitive market to protect our natural resources. We have to collaborate rather than compete. He sees a need for more, and new, collaboration in three areas:

First. Departments within companies must learn to collaborate - across procurement, R&D, marketing...

Second. We must collaborate with strategic suppliers in our value chains - by sharing R&D and jointly developing new ways to reduce the environmental footprint and improve social conditions.

And third – we must collaborate with competitors to develop farmer training, industry-wide standards and measurement tools.

Mr Lowitt argues that collaboration is never easy and does not come naturally to those in business. For decades the thinking in business has focused on competition, and keeping regulators at bay. Yet, a business cannot prosper on a planet that is on the brink of collapse.

Collaboration is the new competition.

In this room today we are all collaborators – or potential collaborators. That is why we are here – to collaborate for our own benefit.

Here in RSPO we hold collaboration in high esteem and it is one of our founding principles. From our humble start in 2004, we have always worked in our multi-stakeholder way, in Standing Committees, Working Groups and Task Forces, and of course in our Executive Board.

This way of working is going through another test as we review our Principles & Criteria. You will have heard much about that in the pre-clusters yesterday. This RT10 is part of the second round of public consultation on the review of the Principles & Criteria. I hope we make good use of it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for coming and I wish you a very successful conference. A conference of collaboration -- towards a brighter future for us, and our children.

Thank you.