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UN forum notes effectiveness of documentaries in telling stories of sustainability



UNEP Goodwill Ambassador Don Cheadle. UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

17 April 2012 –

A two-day United Nations-backed conference focussed on developing a better global future through the power of storytelling and documentary film ended today, with a call for filmmakers to help bring sustainability issues to life in a compelling manner.

“When we are able to find personal stories that documentaries do very, very well; and illuminate for people the conditions [of] people who are dealing directly with this issue... there’s ways that people come to this that really are effective and touch us when we hear their stories crafted through the careful eye of the documentarian,” said actor and UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) Goodwill Ambassador, Don Cheadle, in an interview for the UN News Centre.

Mr. Cheadle was one of the guest speakers at the conference, ‘*Envision 2012: Stories for a Sustainable Future*,’ which focussed on developing a better global future through building on three key issues: just and sustainable cities; clean water; and green energy.

Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro opened the forum on Monday, noting in her [remarks](#) that the forum’s “documentaries and discussions have a crucial role to play in our effort to transform our economies and place our societies on more just and equitable footing.”

“We at the United Nations believe in the power of film to raise awareness and mobilize the action we need to change the world,” she added.

The conference is a partnership between the Creative Community Outreach Initiative of the UN Department of Public Information (DPI), the Independent Filmmaker Project and the Ford Foundation. It was founded on the shared belief that storytelling and documentary film can be powerful tools in building a better future for all people.

“I think it’s [documentary story-telling] an effective tool and hopefully one of the tools that we’ll be able to use in the quest to draw more attention to the subject matter,” Mr. Cheadle said.

Now in its fourth year, the gathering connected United Nations experts and non-governmental organizations with people working in filmmaking and new media, and enabled them to work together to find new and compelling ways to create momentum for social change.

The acting head of DPI, Maher Nasser, said film has the capacity to encapsulate an issue and galvanize attention, whether through documentaries or fictional, citing the respective examples of *An Inconvenient Truth*, which brought attention to climate change, and *Blood Diamond*, which spotlighted the consequences of the real-life trade in diamonds sold to finance wars.

“But for all the memorable stories captured by the camera lens, many more remain untold – stories that deserve and need to be told,” Mr. Nasser said. “That’s why it’s important to bring together experts and the creative people behind the camera to find compelling ways to shine a light on these untold stories.”

Anchored by the UN’s anti-poverty goals known as the Millennium Development Goals and held at the Ford Foundation's New York headquarters, the event was also aimed at helping build momentum for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as ([Rio+20](#)), being held in Brazil in June.

The Goodwill Ambassador said the issues raised by Rio+20 affect everyone, and warrant everyone’s attention.

“Ultimately, this is an issue that everyone is going to have to pay attention to because, I believe, it’s going to hit home very hard for a lot of people,” Mr. Cheadle said. “But we’d like to kind of get ahead of the curve and not have to wait until things are desperate, and water needs are disproportionate to our ability to get it, so hopefully the things that are brought up in Rio will spark debate, spark discussion, and sort of get the idea rolling a little faster.”

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