SUMMARY OF THE IMBIZO CONFERENCE
7 – 9 MAY 2001

The Imbizo Conference (held in Stellenbosch from 7 to 9 May 2001) was organised by the Industrial Environmental Forum as an opportunity for representatives from business and industry to get together and discuss emerging environmental issues and progress towards sustainability, in preparation for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. South African companies as well as international companies, and members of international business organisations attended the workshop.

Some of the emerging issues discussed during the Imbizo Conference are as follows:

Sustainable energy generation
Given the dominance in attendance by representatives (nationally and internationally) from the energy industry, it was not surprising that considerable emphasis was placed on sustainable energy generation. One of the questions raised was whether or not nuclear energy will play a more dominant role in energy generation, as South Africa moves away from dependency on fossil fuels and the associated atmospheric pollution. From this perspective, indicators that monitor and compare the types and relative proportions of different energy-generating means, may be worth including in the national core set of indicators. To be useful however, these indicators would have to make explicit the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of energy-generation (for example, hydro-electric power does not produce any significant emissions, but may require damming or modification of rivers).

Other indicators that could be used to assess the sustainability of energy generation include whether energy companies have environmental management systems, and their effectiveness. As one delegate commented, targets must be established not merely to monitor progress towards compliance levels, but to continually improve production methods and stimulate innovation.

Another point to consider is demand management. At present there are 6 billion people on the planet, this figure is predicted to reach 9 billion by the middle of this century. All of these people will want access to electricity, and many will have become accustomed to a regular, uninterrupted supply, which is used to operate many luxury appliances, often with little regard for the environmental consequences. The challenge, therefore, is to manage demand through transparent, cost-reflective pricing and education and awareness-raising, whilst providing for the basic needs for all. Suitable indicators must be sought for this purpose, and may include reflection of externalities in electricity charges, and the extent to which energy-saving devices (domestic and industrial) are used (although in reality it may be more practical to monitor distribution of such devices).

Eskom's achievements to date were discussed, in terms of electrification rates of new housing developments and existing poor or informal settlements. Statistics were available for these, and for the distribution or instalment of energy-saving devices in new homes, indicating that these indicators may be available in South Africa.

Sustainable transport
One of the sessions was dedicated to sustainable transport, and in particular, progress the Ford Motor Company has made in making cars more environmentally friendly. Design features such as lowering fuel consumption (thus lowering emissions), recycling component parts, and gas-fuelled cars were among the many implemented already.

However, much as these changes are needed, and are welcomed by consumers and environmentalists alike, there is still the issue of cost, and many of the more environmentally-friendly designs are far more expensive than the average South African can afford.

The issue of transport and individual mobility in general was raised. As with the above, the existing population and its predicted growth (in size and aspirations) will mean that within the next 50 years, close to 6 billion people will want to own their own cars. At the moment there are approximately 500 million cars on the roads in the world, and the amount of congestion and smog is cause for great concern. If this figure were to be raised tenfold, the problems are unthinkable.

Energy and transport are, within the context of the National Environmental Indicator Programme, drivers of environmental change in many other sectors, and with consequences for various environmental components and various sectors of society. It is recommended that indicators of sustainability are carefully selected for these drivers, so that their impacts are reflected, and changes in the magnitude or direction of the drivers is monitored. Some indicators for the energy sector are suggested above. For the transport sector the following indicators are suggested: the ratio of cars to the population, average age of vehicles, consumption of unleaded versus leaded fuels, and cost and extent of public transport systems and networks. It may also be useful to measure the number of people per vehicle, the extent of congestion, parking availability, and whether incentives are in place for people to use the most environmentally friendly forms of transport.

Alternatively, or in addition, the ecological footprint concept could be used to illustrate the impact of both the energy and transport sectors, separately, or combined with other driving forces of environmental change. This is a powerful means of representing the resources that are used, and the pollutants created, from such activities as food production, energy generation, and transport.

Fair trade

Trade is another macro-influence impacting on developing countries' ability to grow sustainably. Many developing countries, particularly those in Africa are economically dependent on agriculture, and export of agricultural products (many of which are exported in their raw state or only partly processed). In developed countries, US$1 billion is spent per day on agricultural subsidies, making it incredibly difficult for developing countries to compete in a global market, and forcing them to drop their prices, and restricting their ability to grow economically. Africa's resources are also still being exploited by developed countries in a more direct sense; for example, African waters are fished by European companies, thus preventing any revenue from accumulating to African countries.

Indicators are, therefore, also required in this area, to monitor the economic growth of South Africa in a context of international trade and competitiveness. Such indicators may include the extent to which products are processed before exporting, the total cost (and distribution across sectors) of subsidies, and the number and distribution (between developed and developing countries) of exports.

Environmental rights

An interesting presentation was given by Professor Conor Gearty of Kings College London, on the evolution of human rights. He noted that initially human rights were inclined as civil liberties and opposition to the government. At the end of the cold war significant attention was turned to human rights, and it was recognised that capitalism is not enough, that the government has a responsibility to provide certain basic conditions for all citizens. At the same time there was a realisation that with rights come responsibilities, and at present human rights issues focus no longer on the individual, but the context within which the individual operates (for example the community, the family, and the environment). In future, it

is possible that environmental rights may be established, and in the UK the precedent has been set, with procedures in place to assign accountability to certain individuals within a local authority, if they are found to be in breach of environmental rights.

In South Africa, the constitution gives every citizen the right to an environment which is not detrimental to his or her well-being. Environmental rights are defined implicitly in this, in that the environment itself needs to be healthy, in order to provide space, shelter, and raw materials for the populations dependent on it.

In the meantime, however, it may be worthwhile incorporating this concept into the National Core Set of Environmental Indicators, as a measure of the progress in environmental awareness and the value placed on the environment (not necessarily in monetary terms) by the population. This is perhaps more important than monitoring environmental actions, such as extent of recycling, or reduction in resource use, as these may be motivated by economic incentives rather than a fundamental shift in perceptions, understanding, and attitudes. Ideally, the actions should change *because* of the change in attitudes.

HIV/AIDS and the environment
HIV/AIDS is affecting approximately 11% of the population of South Africa, and is spreading rapidly due to the geographical range and mobility of the population, and hence the range of potential sexual partners of an individual. Significant research is required into the links between outbreaks of disease and environmental change, and many initiatives are underway. Of utmost importance is to control the spread of the disease, and ensure a healthy workforce, which can contribute to environmental protection and economic growth.

Public/private partnerships for speeding up sustainable development
An issue which arose during informal discussions, and from an overall impression of the conference than from plenary sessions, is that of public/private partnerships for sustainable development.

Private industries are certainly making progress in leaps and bounds towards more sustainable production. Initially this was motivated from an economic perspective, but the impression gained at the conference was that businesses are actually realising that environmental responsibility makes sense to their customers and employees, as well as their bottom lines. Constant pressure from environmental groups is required to ensure continuous improvement. Insufficient recognition has been given to industries for the progress to date. Some government departments have been slow to respond by offering partnership opportunities (particularly in light of the upcoming Word Summit on Sustainable Development), while others have made considerable progress. Sustainable development in South Africa (as in any other country) can be most effectively tackled in a co-ordinated manner.

Progress by industry to date has included:
- Adoption of Environmental Management Systems
- Adoption of social responsibility and accountability targets, as well as buy-in from customers and employees
- Continuous monitoring and innovation for improvement, away from compliance towards exploitation of new opportunities

Government's role should include:
- Creation of momentum and stimulation of innovation (through incentives or taxation)
- Encouragement of partnerships and networks
- Securing well-functioning markets for environmentally sustainable products