Governments, UN agencies, and the international community generally focus on economic policies and indicators in their programmatic efforts to achieve sustainable development. While we do not deny the importance of economic policies and measures, the purpose of this statement is to advocate for governments, UN agencies, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to address psychosocial factors as significant, complementary dimensions associated with and necessary for sustainable development.

Recalling Principle 1 of the 1992 Rio Declaration:

Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

We offer the following recommendations concerning the importance of psychosocial well-being, psychosocial empowerment, and mental health to the achievement of sustainable development.

I. PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

We welcome the recognition in the Zero Draft of the Rio+20 Outcome Document of the limitations of the GDP as a measure of a society’s well-being. To complement the GDP, we offer psychosocial well-being as an important complementary indicator. There is a considerable body of psychological research, including research in the fields of Social Psychology and Positive Psychology, which demonstrates empirical relationships among psychological well-being, social well-being, optimal functioning, positive human growth, and development. At a recent high level meeting in New York, the Mission of the Royal Government of Bhutan at the United Nations in New York highlighted the usefulness of well-being in its “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) Index (http://www.un.int/wcm/content/site/bhutan/pid/4106) among other indexes such as the Happy Planet Index. Nobel Laureate economists, international experts, and UN member states like France, Great Britain, and Japan have initiated efforts to complement the GDP as the measure of national wealth with a measure that quantifies well-being alongside economic strength. The recently released World Happiness Report, coedited by leading economists John F. Helliwell and Richard Layard and the Earth Institute’s Jeffrey Sachs, provides further support for the viability of including such measures. On the WHO website as of October 2011, mental health is defined as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

Therefore, we urge governments to call for indicators of “psychosocial well-being” in the Final Outcome Document of Rio+20. We also recommend that governments support Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index, indexes of psychosocial well-being included in the 2010 UNDP Human Development Report, and related indexes being explored by governments such as France, Great Britain and Japan as measures of sustainable development.

II. PSYCHOSOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Provide Access to Productive Employment and Decent Work

Research in psychology indicates that being engaged in decent work promotes psychosocial empowerment by developing a sense of resourceful members of their families, communities and society reduces marginalization and poverty (thus advancing MDG#1). We urge governments to create meaningful jobs for all ages of the population and to increase and strengthen opportunities for ownership, optimism, and efficacy/confidence in one’s ability to be effective. Empowering people to be productive and training about entrepreneurship and income-generating activities, life skills development, and equal access to primary, secondary and higher education, particularly for youth, as important pathways to decent work and the achievement of sustainable development.

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III. MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

An extensive body of psychological literature increasingly confirms the role that poor mental health plays in development. This research includes contributory factors such as conditions of isolation, environmental stressors, unemployment, lack of education and economic opportunities and resources, inadequate access to health and mental health care and other social services, especially in rural areas. These multiple stressors interact to cause anxiety and depression which lower psychosocial well-being and have negative impacts on the ability of individuals to cope, thereby resulting in their inability to be effective as contributing members of their community and society in achieving sustainable development.

Implement the Social Protection Initiative

We urge governments and the international community to implement the Social Protection Floor Initiative, including access to mental health care within primary health care, to take care of basic human needs of all vulnerable groups. We propose that an effective Social Protection Floor would provide for basic needs of vulnerable sectors of society, which would then be enabled and empowered to strive for psychological and psychosocial well-being.

IV. HUMAN RIGHTS, SOCIAL EQUALITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR ALL

Social and economic disparities affecting individuals, groups and communities, are violations of their human rights to survival, protection, development, and social participation, and are key factors negatively affecting sustainable development. We welcome reaffirmation by governments of "our determination to free humanity from hunger and want through the eradication of all forms of poverty, and strive for societies which are just, equitable and inclusive for economic stability and growth that benefits all ("The Future We Want" – Zero Draft of the Outcome Document #2).

Promote Human Rights Learning in all contexts and across all age groups. We urge governments to put human rights at the center of their framework for sustainable national development and to review and replace those laws, policies, programmes and practices at all levels that discriminate against individuals on the basis of their gender, age, race, ethnicity, color, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, rural/urban/suburban residence and other categories of social identity. Psychological and social science research demonstrates that social inequalities prevent people from developing their capacities and contributing as productive members of society.

The Zero Draft Document for Rio+20 acknowledges the diversity of the world and recognizes that all cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind (#16). We urge governments to create public awareness and to educate all levels of society about these diverse contributions. We also urge governments to provide ongoing human rights learning for all members of society, especially individuals and groups living in poverty, to foster their vitality, resilience and activism to alleviate poverty conditions as social injustices and to advocate for positive social and economic changes in their own lives and the lives of others, thus moving more successfully toward sustainable development.

IV. PROGRAM EVALUATION

Sustainable development strategies and programmes that are implemented need to be evaluated on all dimensions mentioned above, inclusive of psychosocial well-being, empowerment, mental health care and social protection, human rights and social justice to ensure their effectiveness and to determine the degree to which the policies they are intended to address have had the desired effects in achieving sustainable development.

CONTACT:

Corann Okorodudu, EdD, SPSSI UN Representative, Interim Chair, Psychology NGOs Accredited at the United Nations. Email: okorodudu@rowan.edu Phone: USA (1-609) 330-0576

Mary O’Neill Berry, PhD, IAAP UN Representative, Email: mberry@sirota.com Phone USA (1-914) 373-9364

Judy Kuriansky, PhD, IAAP UN Representative, Email: DrJudyK@aol.com Phone USA (1-917) 224-5839

Peter Walker, PhD, ICP UN Representative, Email: nucriw@attglobal.net

Deanna Chitayat, PhD, APA UN Representative, Email: dchitayat@aol.com

Janice Bloch, IAAP Professional Affiliate & Interns: Emily Dow, APA; Christina Kirkman, APA; Fahad Rahman, APA; Jeannette Raymond, IAAP; Emily Lawson, IAAP; Alicia Cho, IAAP