

The 2030 Agenda: our answer to the naysayers

The Global Goals are the key to addressing the challenges we face, from climate change to rising nationalist sentiment



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I am delighted to present the 2019 edition of *Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming our world*. The overarching theme for my presidency of the General Assembly has been ‘making the UN relevant for all’, and I commend the United Nations Association – UK for producing this publication. It serves to communicate the work of the UN to a broad global audience, and to convey fresh thinking and perspectives to policymakers in New York and around the world.

In 2015, world leaders made a promise: to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want, and to heal and secure our planet. They also pledged to leave no one behind as we seek to build a safer, fairer and more sustainable world. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Goals (SDGs) are our action plan for making this promise a reality.

We are now approaching the end of the first cycle of implementing the SDGs, and the final decade for delivering them. We have made commendable progress on issues such as extreme poverty, child mortality, unemployment and access to electricity. In our efforts to catalyse further action, we must not lose sight of these gains. They must be part of our narrative so that our stakeholders know: progress is possible.

But deep challenges and disparities continue to exist. A staggering half of the world’s population still lacks access to proper sanitation, healthcare and social protections. It is still the case that if you are a woman, an older person, a person with disabilities, a refugee or migrant, from a rural, minority or indigenous community, or from a small-island developing state, then you are less likely to have benefited from our efforts to date, and more likely to suffer discrimination, exclusion or abuse.

◀ Children playing before school starts in a remote village in the Oriente rainforest, Ecuador. Reducing child mortality is an aspect of the SDGs where significant global progress has already been achieved. In Ecuador, the infant mortality rate was almost halved in the period 2000-2014

The structural causes of these inequalities, meanwhile, are yet to be addressed. I often refer to the 2030 Agenda as something very close to a ‘global Green New Deal’. The missing element is a vision for reshaping global governance.

And we must also contend with the risks posed by the climate and environmental crisis, by narrow nationalism and extremism, and by the rapid transitions we are undergoing in demography and technology.

This is our operating context. So we must ensure that we use every opportunity we have to turn the tide. This July’s High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development is an important milestone as we prepare for key meetings this September:

- the HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly (SDG Summit), attended by heads of state and government;
- the Secretary-General’s Climate Action Summit;
- the High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage;
- the High-Level Dialogue on Financing for Development; and
- the High-Level Midterm Review of the plan of action for small island developing states.

These meetings cannot be talking shops. States must not go through the motions. They are a crucial opportunity not just to make progress on the Goals, but also to push back against the challenges we face.

Strengthening multilateralism: making the UN relevant by delivering for all

The adoption of the SDGs marked a high point for multilateralism. They were the product of the largest and most inclusive consultation in UN history. Similarly, their achievement needs to involve all of society. The commitment to ‘leave no one behind’ means engaging stakeholders, as well as reaching the most vulnerable.

The future of humanity – and of our rules-based international system – rests on this commitment. Through it, we have acknowledged that the gains of the past seven decades have not been shared

equally. We have reaffirmed that we cannot overcome the challenges we face – or leverage the opportunities we have – without harnessing the full potential of all the world’s people.

We cannot push back against those questioning the value of multilateralism without delivering on this commitment. From soaring inequality to human rights abuses, the factors fuelling xenophobia, extremism and unilateralist rhetoric are all addressed by the 2030 Agenda.

The best way to demonstrate that multilateralism works is to generate, through the SDGs, tangible benefits to people’s lives. It is our answer to the naysayers. It is the hope we can offer to the disillusioned, the reassurance we must give to those who have lost faith in our capacity to deliver.

We must use the key meetings this year to review the evidence we have gathered and identify the most transformative next steps to be taken by stakeholders from all sectors. And we must draw up clear plans on how to put them into practice.

Eleven years to deliver, six days to make it count

We have just 11 years to keep the promises we made through the 2030 Agenda. We have just 11 years to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. The six days from 23 to 28 September 2019 must put us on the right track.

This is the moment to make strategic choices together. We cannot succeed unless we massively scale up partnerships. Not as an afterthought, but as an integral part of our plans. We must move forward our long-standing discussions on how we engage with those on whom we rely, on those who are counting on us. Political leaders must inspire the ambition and multifaceted contributions of their societies: youth, civil society, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, the private sector, local governments – all those who have a stake in the 2030 Agenda.

I urge heads of state and government to accelerate their efforts to drive progress, and rally others. Every meeting this year is an opportunity to make our vision for humanity a reality. Let’s use them. ●