

Statement by Ambassador Donald Steinberg
“Sustainable Development Goals: The Route to a Better Life for All”
UN General Assembly Panel on Making the UN Relevant to All People
United Nations Headquarters, April 23, 2019

Honored Guests:

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the role of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in making the United Nations relevant to all people and reinforcing multilateral cooperation. In my 45-year career at the nexus of development, diplomacy, and peacemaking, one moment stands out. In 2013, I was honored to help draft President Obama’s pledge in his State of the Union Address to work multilaterally to eradicate extreme poverty within 20 years.

The President said:

“The United States will join with our allies to eradicate extreme poverty in the next two decades by connecting more people to the global economy; by empowering women; by giving our young and brightest minds new opportunities to serve; by helping communities to feed, power and educate themselves; by saving the world’s children from preventable deaths; and by realizing the promise of an AIDS-free generation.”

Mirrored in statements from the World Bank, United Nations, and many national governments, this pledge was a building block for adoption of the SDGs two years later. The process of drafting the SDGs – led by current UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed and others – was among the most democratic, inclusive, transparent, and spirited in development history.

The process not only brought out the best ideas, but it created ownership among governments, encouraged a spirit of compromise, recognized the SDG’s universal application, and helped engage donors, recipients, businesses, civil society, and the like.

As a global community, we affirmed for the first time that there is no disconnect between the goals of eradicating extreme poverty and improving the well-being of all our citizens. By basing our work to end extreme poverty in women’s empowerment, human rights, conflict

transformation, environmental protection, universal health care and education, sustainable energy, food security, resilient cities, and other SDGs goals, we created an integrated multilateral approach able to address the needs of all countries. Further, the SDG's were both a powerful symbol and an entry point for the U.N. to impact the everyday lives of all people – whether they live in skyscrapers, urban slums, rural villages, or refugee camps.

Regrettably, as with many bold steps forward in the multilateral world, implementation has been uneven, delays have been significant, and backsliding common. While many countries have embraced the SDG fully and committed to share their own SDG assessments with other countries, others have moved the SDGs to the sidelines in their own strategies and foreign assistance programs. At the national level, for example, the United States no longer highlights the SDGs as its goalpost for development assistance, instead adopting a framework it calls, “the Journey to Self-Reliance.” Further, recent studies suggest that governments and even some civil society leaders are backing away from the goal of ending extreme poverty.

In addition, there is a growing concern that the individual SDGs are being siloed and addressed in isolation, which undercuts the basic premise that development requires inter-connected, coherent, all-hands-on-deck action. In particular, the cross-cutting framework on peace, justice, human rights, and effective institutions in SDG 16 must be more forcefully applied to all other goals if the over-all results are to be sustainable, just, and equitable. With the numbers of displaced persons now approaching 70 million and a growing body of evidence showing that conflict-affected countries are not making SDG progress, the links between extreme poverty and an absence of peace, security, and justice has never been clearer or more pressing.

Approaching their fourth anniversary, it is time to move the SDGs from posters on our walls and put them fully back into our global dialogue and development strategies. As we move into the G-20 Summit in Osaka in June, the U.N. General Assembly's High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in late September, and other international forums, we can take four important steps.

First, leaders should commit their countries to provide transparent and inclusive national assessments of SDG progress at the five-year mark in 2020. In particular, countries should identify areas where progress is slow and targets are in jeopardy. The process should highlight that development is a whole-of-society exercise by engaging civil society, the business community, academic institutions, local governments, and other actors in the review process. This approach will be an important next step in providing official space for these institutions within the multilateral architecture. It will also ensure that the SDGs remain the common language and reference point for national development efforts.

Second, leaders should launch aggressive public awareness campaigns in their countries, with senior officials publicly aligning their socio-economic policies and practices with the SDGs. Efforts should be directed in particular at young people through school systems and textbooks. The goal is to build awareness that the challenges we face are inter-connected and that the goals are achievable. Optimism is a force multiplier, and our citizens need to know that the world has already cut the number of people living in extreme poverty by half in the last two decades, along with similar improvements in health, education, water and sanitation, housing, and other living conditions.

Third, leaders should recognize the potential of drawing state, provincial, and local governments into this process. Three-fourths of the world's population will soon live in cities, and in many countries, city governments have primary responsibility and authority for health, education, transportation, and other key SDG goals. Many of them are aligning their policy efforts with the SDGs. New York City was the first city to report its SDG priorities and contributions to the United Nations, and there are now more voluntary local reviews than national reviews. Initiatives such as the C40 Cities network, Climate Mayors, the Global Covenant of Mayors, and Cities for Climate Protection are among the most promising steps in route to SDG implementation.

Just a few weeks ago, the Brookings Institution under the leadership of Anthony Pipa brought together leaders from such varied cities as Accra, Bristol, Durban, Helsinki, Los Angeles, Madrid, Malmo, Mannheim, Milan, Mexico City, New York City, Orlando, Pittsburgh, Quito, and Yokohama

to review SDG implementation, define the value proposition of the SDG's for cities, and maximize collection learning and policy leadership.

Finally, leaders must commit to further incorporate the SDGs into national laws, budgets, assistance plans, and regulations, so the goals are not easily subjected to reconsideration with each new national election or change in political leadership. Just as countries understand that a new government need not review whether it will continue to be a UN member or adhere to its basic conventions, there must be barriers to the tendency of any new government to view the SDGs as reflecting the development strategies of its predecessor and subject to change.

In conclusion, the unanimous adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 was an historic step forward in linking the U.N.-based multilateral system to the interests and concerns of people of all countries, and in building trust in global collaboration and cooperation. We must now reaffirm our commitment to keep the SDGs at the center of our efforts to eradicate extreme poverty; improve socio-economic standards; and allow each global citizen the opportunity to live in a just, equitable, and prosperous society. Thank you.

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As prepared for delivery.