

2018 SESSION OF THE UN HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM (HLPF)

ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Opening of the Ministerial Meeting of HLPF and the High-level Segment of ECOSOC

Keynote Address by UNDP Goodwill Ambassador Michelle Yeoh

DATE: 16 July 2018

LOCATION: CR-4, UN Headquarters, NY

TIME: 9:00-10:00 A.M.

SPEAKING TIME: 9:45 A.M. (exact time TBC)

DURATION: 10 min or less

FULL SPEECH TEXT

(THEME: Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies)

Madame President Chatardova, Excellencies, it's an honor to address you this morning in my role as Goodwill Ambassador for the UN Development Programme.

As we all know, sustainability of a society is both an individual and a collective responsibility.

More than ever, the United Nations needs the support and contributions of all global actors: the convening and policy making power of governments, the business decisions of the private sector, as well as the commitments and understanding of citizens.

While Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals are an ambitious blueprint for governments, there will be no impact on the ground unless each and every one of us, as individuals, makes a conscious choice to change our habits. To change the way we consume. The way we live. And the way we imagine and plan for our future.

Governments can assist this transition by advancing policies that help citizens become more conscious about their choices, and make the transition towards sustainable development affordable, fair, and economically viable.

Business can support and speed up this transformation by offering products and technologies that accelerate change.

As an actor and UNDP Goodwill Ambassador, communication is my job. I thus strongly believe in the power of united voices and the impact of individual and collective action. Governments need to listen when their citizens speak up and demand change.

Take for instance Goal 6—to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”.

We cannot continue as usual. Signs of water shortages are widespread. Around 700 million people in 43 countries suffer today from water scarcity, with a third of the world’s largest groundwater systems already in distress.

Water availability is also affected by pollution. Most problems related to water quality are caused by intensive agriculture, industrial production, mining and untreated urban runoff and wastewater. Take cotton, for example: it covers only 3% of arable land, but uses 24% of insecticides and 11% of pesticides on this planet.

Yet, while we read about water shortages and pollution in the news, we aren’t always conscious of the fact that we, as consumers, are part of the problem.

But we can also be part of the solution.

One way to do that is to be mindful of the water footprint of the products we buy, be it the water required to grow our food, to grow feedstock for animals for meat production; or the water required to produce the clothes we wear.

For example, more than 10,000 litres of water, on average, are needed to produce 1kg of cotton, which is just enough to make one pair of jeans.

Similarly, bold actions on all levels of society are required to move forward in transitioning to a low-carbon economy.

If we are to achieve Goal 7—to “ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all”—we need to implement energy efficiency programs and invest in renewable energy resources.

Businesses can accelerate the transition to an affordable, reliable and sustainable energy system, whilst significantly reducing their carbon footprint and saving a lot of money at the same time.

While governments play a key role towards creating these important changes, the role of citizens can be just as impactful. We as individuals have the collective power to demand climate neutral solutions and products. We can shape a carbon neutral economy by the purchasing choices we make.

Imagine what this could mean for life in cities. “Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” is Goal 11 with good reason. Cities are home to over half of the global population and produce approximately 75 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions. By 2050, six billion people will live in cities.

Think of the positive impact that six billion people could have by changing their habits and making the right choices.

This leads me to the critical importance of empowering citizens to help us achieve Goal 12 to “ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.”

Today, we have around 3.2 billion people in the global middle class. By 2030, this number is likely to increase to 5.4 billion, leading to increased consumption and further straining our resources.

As the global middle class continues to expand, consumption of products with negative environmental and social consequences is growing with it. In many parts of the world, overconsumption is already showing its negative impact, leading to unsustainable life patterns and inflating our ecological and social footprints.

This brings me to a particular industry, one that's closely intertwined with our daily lives, the choices we make and the message we send: the fashion industry. Overconsumption runs rampant in this sector, which has been growing exponentially over the years, causing major damage to the environment.

If it sounds like a futile area to focus on, it is not.

The garment industry is an area where government policies matter but individual choices and demand also have a major impact.

A sustainable society needs to have consciously dressed citizens.

On that note, I would like to inform you that I will present you a movie I have produced with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the United Nations Television in Geneva at 12:00 later this morning in this same room.

The short film shows how making a society sustainable is possible with simple and practical solutions. But it cannot be achieved without informed citizens, progressive businesses and supportive governments.

The video also demonstrates the benefits of looking for solutions using both nature and technology. For example, we can use trees to make clothes in a sustainable way. But to do

that, we also must be mindful of Global Goal 15, which calls on us to protect the delicate balance of our ecosystem, fight deforestation, as well as halt land degradation and biodiversity loss.

Let's focus on action, and show how informed citizens, smart businesses, governments and the right technologies can make a difference.

In conclusion I would like to say: it is up to us to make the right choices, as governments, businesses and citizens, in the name of a healthy planet, and sustainable and resilient societies. Let's take the future in our hands, starting from this very room.

Thank you.

###