

New York, 14 March 2013 - Secretary-General's remarks at opening of Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals

The urgency of the global sustainable development challenge is clear.

Despite important progress in improving peoples' well-being, more than one billion people still live in absolute poverty.

Far too many in our world still lack the basics for a decent life.

Inequality and social exclusion are widening within many countries, both rich and poor.

Environmental degradation threatens the welfare of both present and future generations.

Humanity is pressing hard against the planet's ecological boundaries.

In some respects, we are crossing critical thresholds.

But there is good news. There is hope.

We can make extreme poverty history.

We can bring clean water, sanitation and energy to millions and millions of more people.

The Millennium Development Goals and development solutions of the past decades can guide us.

Too often the discussions on sustainable development get stuck in emphasizing trade-offs between growth, poverty and environment.

Now we need to ensure that these important discussions – especially regarding a post-2015 agenda – advance economic, social, and environment objectives in a balanced and integrated manner.

The costs of inaction are simply too great.

Excellencies,

As we begin consideration of the Sustainable Development Goals, we are also nearing the 1,000-day deadline to the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs have united the world and inspired action. We must do our utmost to focus attention and accelerate progress.

The MDGs and SDGs are mutually supporting concepts. Greater progress towards the MDGs will fuel confidence and mobilize support for an ambitious post-2015 development agenda. And the SDGs should accelerate and continue the work begun under the banner of the MDGs.

The eradication of poverty and promotion of health, education as well as economic and social development retain their prime importance. These challenges will need to be addressed in the SDGs.

But the SDGs must go further to integrate more comprehensively environmental sustainability.

The SDGs should contribute to transformative change, in support of a rights-based, equitable and inclusive approach to sustainability at global, regional, national and local levels.

The rule of law and respect for human rights are essential for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and advancing sustainable development. The rule of law and the rights perspective should help guide our post-2015 goals and objectives.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are drivers for sustainable development in all three dimensions. They should feature prominently in any future development framework. Integrating gender equality and women's rights in all development goals will ensure gains in other development priorities, foremost of which is poverty eradication.

Governance, institution building and freedom from violence are also vital elements of this debate. So, too, is the importance of addressing the special needs of least developed countries and the challenges of post-conflict states.

Distinguished Delegates,

The Open Working Group will prepare a proposal on SDGs for consideration by the General Assembly.

You have the responsibility to define sustainable development goals with universal support in order to secure the legacy of the Rio+20 Conference and lay a foundation for a better future.

I am confident that you will successfully meet this challenge.

I commit the full support of the UN system to the intergovernmental process towards SDGs, drawing on the results of the post-2015 processes that we have put in place.

The UN Development Group is facilitating consultations on the post-2015 development agenda in 83 countries. It is also conducting thematic consultations on 11 issues such as growth and employment, food security, inequalities, water and sanitation, governance, and environmental sustainability.

My High-level Panel of Eminent Persons will deliver its report at the end of May.

I trust that the Panel's recommendation will give the Open Working Group much to build on. Indeed all outputs of the various workstreams of the post-2015 process can contribute to the efforts of the Open Working Group.

The United Nations, in the form of the inter-agency technical support team, stands ready to provide all necessary assistance.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I encourage you to be open to hear from the "best and brightest" from the science and policy communities. But I urge you to remember most of all the voices of those not present in these halls – the poor and the most vulnerable around the world.

I would hope that the multiple strands of the post-2015 process, coming together, culminate in 2015 in the adoption of a unified and coherent global agenda.

One balanced, aspirational set of sustainable development goals should lie at the core of such a development agenda. Elaborating the SDGs should be coordinated with the processes contributing to the post-2015 development agenda.

Member States made a promise in Rio – to formulate an ambitious, concise, action-oriented set of sustainable development goals that will address effectively the three dimensions of sustainable development for the benefit of all human beings, both present and future generations.

Now is the time for all of us to deliver together. I count on your leadership and commitment.

Thank you very much.