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Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 6th Session

Interactive exchange on

“Human rights, the right to development, global governance”

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Venue: Trusteeship Chamber, UN, New York

“Looking back at History:

Building the Post-2015 Agenda on the Foundation of Human Rights”



Keynote Remarks by

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Delivered by

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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends,

As we approach the year 2015, one thing is clear: our current model of development is unequal, unstable and unsustainable.

Despite the enormous progress we have made in meeting the Millennium Development Goals since 2000, we have also experienced the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, and we continue to face economic, political, social and environmental risks that seriously threaten our future.

We need a new paradigm for development that is equitable, sustainable and built on the firm normative foundations of human rights, including the right to development.

We need to look back and remember how the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights - like all the international institutions that were set up in 1945 after the Second World War - emerged not only out of the terrifying experience of total war and genocide, but also out of the desperation of the Great Depression and the massive failures of states to prevent it and mitigate its effects.

Your Excellencies, distinguished representatives,

In 2007, we were engulfed in the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression. A catastrophic economic crisis that our most sophisticated economic models spectacularly failed to predict. An economic crisis that started in the financial systems of the developed countries, but quickly spread to economies across the world.

But this economic crisis was not inevitable; it was caused by our policy choices. Some governments chose to roll back the regulation of the financial sector put in place after the Great Depression to avoid another global financial crisis.

Others chose to roll back social protections that were adopted to mitigate its impacts. Some governments have used the crisis as an excuse for austerity measures that further reduce social protections, precisely at the time they are most needed. Others are still focusing on only a narrow vision of economic growth, ignoring the injustices, inequities and inequalities that are contributing to instability. Some governments are repressing any protest. Governments, together, have failed to agree on the international reforms necessary to address the inequities in global governance, to reverse climate change or to protect economic and social rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Human rights were designed to provide a normative framework to guide our national and international policy choices – a framework codified in legal obligations.

We need to look back at our history - at why the UN General Assembly came together in 1948 to proclaim human rights as a “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”.

They recognised, and indeed experienced, what could happen if there was no normative framework to set out the responsibilities of governments towards their citizens and towards one another. There was a profound realization that governments had responsibilities towards their citizens, to secure both freedom from fear and freedom from want, not only for some, but for all, without discrimination. States also recognised that international cooperation was essential to secure equitable development for all.

That is why states chose to enshrine these responsibilities in the UN Charter, which pledged states to achieve “better standards of life in larger freedom” and to achieve “international cooperation in solving international problems of an

economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion”.

It is also why states chose to set out a normative framework in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reiterated the promise of “better standards of life in larger freedom” and promised to guarantee “freedom from fear and want” without discrimination. This is why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights places equal emphasis on civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights, as well as “a social and international order” in which all rights can be realized. It is why later, many of these principles were reiterated in the Declaration on the Right to Development.

This normative framework has not unfortunately been adequately observed.

Today, we have the added dimension of the climate crisis, yet global talks for international cooperation on climate change are foundering. Commitments are being watered down, even as entire populations of small islands fear for their very survival. The trade talks have been very difficult, as states disagreed even over the basic responsibilities of governments to ensure the right to food of their populations.

What kind of world are we leaving for the next generation?

Many leaders have also abdicated their responsibilities to the current generation. Food, water, healthcare, education, housing and access to justice are not merely commodities for sale to the few, but rather they are rights to which all are entitled without discrimination. The true test of democratic governance is securing freedom from fear and freedom from want for all – as the lessons of the Arab Spring have recently reminded us.

Today, to those at the top, it may appear that the crisis is over – as stock markets reach new highs, property prices escalate ever upward and the wealthy get ever richer. But those at the bottom know better. Those at the bottom see clearly how our model of development is failing. They see only an even more precarious future. They live daily with the poverty and inequalities that are the symptoms of the imbalances and the fragility of a global economy built on a financial house of cards that may well come crashing down again.

With mass unemployment, worsening wages and working conditions, millions of marginalized families are denied access to fundamental human rights: the rights to food, water, sanitation, housing, healthcare. All over the world, you can meet fear in their eyes and desperation in their hearts, because they do not know how they will feed their children tomorrow. And you can see this, not only in the world's poorest countries, but in some of the world's richest cities too, including here in the streets of New York.

This is why people across the world have come out into the streets, to protest against governments forgetting to ensure freedom from fear and freedom from want, without discrimination; to protest against a model of development that makes the rich richer, but leaves the poor struggling for their right to an adequate standard of living.

This is also why people across the globe are demanding that human rights be at the centre of the new development agenda. Around the world, in the 88 national consultations and 11 thematic UN consultations on the new agenda, in which more than a million people have participated, this has been the most emphatic and consistent demand.

People have lost confidence in the dominant economic model.

They are calling for a new paradigm for development, one that places human rights in the centre. But let us be clear: human rights is not about imposing conditionalities in return for aid. It is rather a ‘peoples’ agenda. The same peoples enshrined in the preamble of the UN Charter, and as rights-holders in international human rights law.

And this is a universal demand. Has anyone of you heard an ordinary person complain about the universality of human rights, despite what their leaders may sometimes say? Can you imagine ordinary person to demand to be tortured or starved, to be denied the right to vote or the right to an adequate standard of living?

You can only hear them call louder and louder for human rights.

This has been reflected in all the global consultations, and in the myriad reports produced so far – from the UN Task Team to the Report of the Secretary General, from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network to the High Level Panel report.

I believe it is our duty to respond to this call.

So, what would it mean to put human rights in the centre of the new development agenda?

First, let me be very clear – it does not mean merely confining human rights to the narrative or to a long-winded preamble. Human rights provides a vision, but is more than just a vision; it provides concrete guidance for action.

Equally it does not mean adding a separate, standalone goal on human rights to a long list of other goals. Rather it means building the whole agenda on human rights.

Human rights should be mainstreamed, not quarantined.

Human rights can help us to choose which goals to prioritize in the long list of demands. If human rights are seen as the ultimate aim of development, then we should prioritize goals that reflect these ends, rather than the means of getting there. Human rights provides a common language for priorities on which states have already agreed. It provides a framework for universal goals, that is also sensitive to countries with different levels of development and resources.

Human rights reminds us that development is equally about freedom from want and freedom from fear. Development is about ending poverty and about securing justice and the rule of law. This means addressing freedom from fear with new goals on public participation, access to justice and personal security. It means that economic and social goals must themselves be framed as rights – to food, health, education, water, sanitation and so on.

Human rights standards can also help us to formulate goals more precisely. They set out standards for availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality. The right to education, for example, requires not only access to school, but free primary education, and access to quality education.

Human rights require paying attention to equality and non-discrimination, so that no one is left behind. This means goals should be universal and considered met only when progress is achieved for all. It means challenging the inequalities driven by persistent discrimination, especially the inequalities between ethnic and other social groups that frequently flare into divisive conflict and render our world more unstable. Data must be disaggregated beyond gender and geography - and targets set to reduce inequalities. Marginalized, disempowered and excluded groups, previously locked out of development, must have a place in the new agenda, including women, minorities, indigenous peoples, migrants, disabled persons older persons, youth, children and the poor.

Human rights help focus attention on international cooperation for a more equitable social and international order, so that all rights can be realized, including the right to development. Goals must reflect commitments to eradicating poverty through strengthening commitment on international aid and technology transfer, but also meaningful reforms of global governance. This means reducing existing inequities in global governance and ensuring the coherence of trade, finance and investment deals with human rights standards and principles, including the right to development.

And it would mean ensuring accountability for these commitments – including the accountability of governments, but also of private actors and international agencies. This means ensuring that responsibilities are identified, targets set and progress monitored through a global monitoring body, complemented by accountability mechanisms at local, national and regional levels.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude,

We must remember that the economic crisis was not an accident. Nor is poverty or environmental degradation; these are the result of our policy choices.

It is time to make right choices.

It is time to challenge the concept of development that is unequal, unstable and unsustainable. It is time to build a new paradigm of more equitable and sustainable development, built on the firm foundation of human rights.

I wish you all a very productive debate today. Thank you.