

**Remarks by Ambassador Elizabeth Cousens, U.S.
Representative to ECOSOC, for the US/Canada/Israel Team,
10th Session of the SDG Open Working Group, on
Methodology and Consolidation of Focus Areas: Poverty
Eradication and Promoting Equality**

Elizabeth Cousens

U.S. Representative to ECOSOC

New York, NY

March 31, 2014

AS DELIVERED

Thank you, Mr. Co-Chair, and thanks to both of you for this latest iteration of Focus Areas and possible target areas, and for continuing to guide our discussion in such constructive and substantive ways.

As we have said before, we will all need to show intellectual flexibility to look at goal and target areas individually and also at balance across the entire framework. Like others, we are happy to work on the basis of the clusters you have laid out in the agenda out of practicality. It will be important as we go forward to distinguish between those areas that will make strong goals, those that make better targets, and those that are better as indicators – the last crucially important but not one of our jobs here to elaborate.

We hope that within and across Focus Areas, we are able to identify target areas with the greatest potential for transformative and enduring impact, especially those that address persistent impediments to development, and those that focus on the most vulnerable in all our societies.

To do so, we must ensure that our discussion and judgments remain based on evidence. Each of us should be prepared to offer evidence and data to explain why a particular target area will be transformative and critical to development progress. We should seek to reflect cutting-edge knowledge, practice, and trends, and we welcome the advice and support of the Secretariat and other experts to this end.

Both goals and targets matter. Goals are the headlines. Targets will drive action. We need to identify targets that can drive action at multiple levels and from various stakeholders. We need to build concrete targets on the strong intellectual foundation we have created during the stocktaking phase.

We also share the view of Benin on behalf of Least Developed Countries that targets need to be quantifiable, and we further appreciate your emphasizing in your introduction that targets should be “adjustable” as science changes and as countries raise their level of ambition.

We should also identify and prioritize target areas that promote multiple goals.

We will not engage in substance now, since this is not the time, but would just make two points in relation to comments from other delegations.

We have heard some delegations reinforce that our work is guided by the Rio+20 outcome, which of course it is. It is important to emphasize that our work is also guided by the outcome of the High-level Event on MDGs last September, the Millennium Declaration – and we appreciate Benin’s reminding us of this earlier – and the tremendous body of practice, analysis, and evidence built up since 2000 in our efforts to achieve the MDGs and other internationally agreed development goals.

We also took note of a reference to “Peaceful and Safe Societies” and “Governance” – currently clustered on the last day – as the “odd man out” because they are the one Focus Area not otherwise clustered. We would like to reiterate the point everyone has made that the clusters have no inherent significance. More fundamentally, we would like to remind colleagues and underscore for the record that many teams have called for these issues to be reflected in two goal areas, not one, as we will continue to do this week.

First, let us underscore that for us, poverty eradication is a foundational imperative of this agenda. We have consistently emphasized the importance of taking up the unfinished business of the MDGs, and we believe that the eradication of extreme poverty, in particular, should be at the moral and political center of our work.

Poverty is multi-dimensional and therefore should be reflected across the whole framework of goals and targets in various ways, in addition to having a dedicated goal. You will hear us come back to this throughout the week. A strong poverty goal is also one essential way to reflect our commitment to reducing inequalities which we will also come back to throughout the week in relation to other Focus Areas and possible targets.

Let me speak briefly to the linkage with economic growth that we will address more centrally on Wednesday. All evidence shows the necessity of inclusive and sustainable economic growth for poverty eradication. We would not have been able to lift hundreds of millions out of extreme poverty since 1990 without growth in the global economy and in

particular in major developing economies. Ninety percent of extreme poverty reduction in the past decade is attributable to inclusive and sustained economic growth. Connecting more people to the global economy – through, for instance, financial inclusion, greater access to markets, and the environments that promote decent and sustainable employment – is therefore critical.

We see substantial potential for common ground around target areas like eradicating extreme poverty and reducing the percentage of people in each country living below their country's national poverty line. The latter would be a powerful way to operationalize our commitment to reducing inequalities and lifting the floor for the most vulnerable.

When we look at successful poverty alleviation efforts around the globe, we also see strong evidence of the transformative potential of targets related to social protection floors that can reduce vulnerabilities, promoting access to property and productive assets for all women and men (particularly women), and increasing resilience to and reducing deaths from natural and man-made disasters. Both social protection and access to productive assets are equally critical to poverty reduction. Both provide a buffer for the most vulnerable, and access to the services and opportunity necessary to achieve and spur growth.

We don't see resilience or risk reduction under Focus Area 1 but believe it deserves consideration as we have heard from many other colleagues, including Nauru on behalf of AOSIS this morning. Shocks hit the most vulnerable the hardest and efforts to reduce loss of life or damage to critical infrastructure must be part of this agenda, or our gains will be too easily reversible.

We also welcome the Co-Chairs' emphasis on evidence-based, high-quality, timely, disaggregated data and hope that we could perhaps have a dedicated discussion about this which we believe has significant potential, including as a key element of means of implementation and global partnership.

Turning to equality: tackling inequality– which is rising in all our societies – and addressing exclusion is fundamental to our task. Tackling the unfinished business of the MDGs must mean improving on the MDGs, including insisting that the achievement of any goals or targets “leaves no one behind.” A post-2015 agenda must empower all people with the means to be agents of their own destiny.

We need to address aspects of inequality and exclusion across our entire agenda – for example, when we speak about gender equality, this is one of the most transformative priorities we could set in order to reduce inequality in general.

We have already spoken about the value we see in a target on reducing the number of people living below national poverty floors, which is a critical vehicle to shrink inequality.

We are also attracted to the proposal we have heard in various forms about requiring that any target will not be considered met unless it is met for the lowest quintile of any given population.

We are less convinced by a standalone goal on inequality. This could lead us to a sterile debate that economists have been having for generations and that we are unlikely to resolve here. We see much greater practical potential and concrete impact in addressing inequality through goals and targets related to poverty eradication; equal access to productive and other assets; social protection floors; gender equality; elimination of discriminatory practices, policies, and laws; and job-rich and inclusive growth. These types of measures will be a much more concrete way to hard-wire real action to reduce inequalities into our agenda.

Thank you.

###