

Accelerating Social Development in the 21st Century



Noeleen Heyzer

Former Under-Secretary-General
United Nations

Economic and social change must deal holistically with extreme inequality and social exclusion, decent and productive work, the care economy and environmental sustainability.

Two thousand fifteen was a milestone year for member states and peoples of the United Nations — a year of global action for inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. It invites us to look at what we have achieved and what remains to be done in promoting social progress, social inclusion and social justice.

Twenty years ago, the World Summit for Social Development was held in Copenhagen. The leaders gathered there agreed that we must place human beings at the center of our development efforts. The member states pledged to make the conquest of poverty, the goal of full employment and the fostering of social integration our overriding objectives. This consensus has

helped shape our development pathway to the present day.

The objectives of Copenhagen have since then propelled policies and actions at the national and international levels, including the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Also, by 1995 member states understood that sustainability must be an integral part of development, recognizing that to secure social progress we must give due attention to the nature and quality of economic development as well as environmental protection.

Progress has been made. A smaller proportion of the world's population lives in extreme poverty since the millennium turned. More people live longer and healthier lives. We have seen important advances in health

and education. The Asian region has already achieved the MDG on reducing extreme poverty. It is also an early achiever on other goals, including access to safe drinking water, gender parity based on school enrollment and reducing the prevalence of HIV and tuberculosis. In addition, Asia has exceeded the MDGs due largely to the “Asian miracle,” which generated shared prosperity through the developmental role of the state and the market investing in people-centered development, creating middle-class societies by reducing poverty and addressing inequality through job-led growth. Quality health care and better education have been instrumental, while technological and social innovations have helped to build productive industries.

However, despite our achievements, Asia-Pacific countries still account for the bulk of the world’s deprived people, including more than 60 percent (or 763 million people) of those living in extreme poverty; nearly 70 percent of underweight children under the age of 5; and more than 70 percent (1.74 billion people) of those without proper sanitation. It is clear that despite the MDGs, there is still great deprivation and insecurity. Hence, the MDGs are unfinished business in Asia and the Pacific, and we are in a race against time to achieve this basic human development agenda.

Our world has changed since the MDGs were adopted in 2000 and will continue to change by 2030. We are becoming more urban, more middle class, older, more connected and mobile, more interdependent, more vulnerable to shocks and more constrained in our resources and planetary boundaries. The path ahead is neither easy nor does it require simply doing what we’ve done before.

This post-2015 development agenda presents a historic challenge to the international community and national institutions. It is a call to action to transform our world by:

Committing to a universal approach, with solutions that address all countries and groups

Integrating sustainability in all activities, mindful of the economic, environmental and social impacts

Ending poverty and addressing inequalities in all areas, agreeing that no goal or target should be considered met unless it has been met for all social and economic groups

Ensuring that all actions respect and advance human rights, in full coherence with international standards

Addressing the drivers of climate change and its consequences

Expanding our global partnership for means of implementation to maximum effect and full participation, including issue-based coalitions

Anchoring the new compact in a renewed commitment to international solidarity, commensurate with the ability of each country to contribute

We need to rethink the way we implement development. This requires more than a new toolbox of policy measures. The economic and social transformation we seek must deal holistically with extreme inequality and social exclusion, availability of decent and productive work, the care economy and environmental sustainability. These are the priorities of human sustainability and social development in the 21st century. However, this agenda for renewal will only succeed in giving people meaningful, secure and dignified

lives if there is bold leadership, mindset change and moral courage at every level of society to ensure implementation and accountability. We cannot go on doing business as usual and expect different results. If we get it right, we can leave a better world for our children, their children and generations to come.

Adapted from her keynote address during the 2015 International Symposium for Social Development, International Consortium for Social Development, Singapore