

# Sustaining Social Development in the 21st Century



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**Since the Millennium Development Goals were set, the world has made progress in reducing poverty, improving health and expanding education. Yet with humanity facing multiple crises, our societies are in need of transformation.**

Two thousand and fifteen is 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 efforts, 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 MDGs, 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 and 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. In my view, there are five challenges we must urgently address to sustain social progress in a changing landscape:

## Challenges in a Changing World



### Widening Wealth Inequality

Inequality is rising rapidly due to wealth and asset concentration, as profits are increasingly made through financial channels and rent-seeking rather than in the real economy. The problem encompasses limited access to basic social services and inequality of opportunity. These rising disparities could alter the political and social fabric of our region. One must be concerned that they could intensify tensions along the fault lines of ethnicity, religion, geography and gender, and exacerbate discrimination against women and girls.



### Precarious Jobs and Lives

While many parts of Asia are upbeat and modernizing, in other parts jobs are precarious and the conditions that create secure and meaningful lives are elusive. With “Factory Asia” producing cheap goods for the world market, “the right to work” often sacrifices rights *at work*. The informal economy is expanding while even formal-sector work is becoming increasingly casual, flexible, outsourced and unregulated. In Thailand in 2010, informal employment accounted for 63 percent of total employment, in the Philippines 75 percent and so on. This has real implications for workers, most of whom are women and migrants from low-income countries, in terms of security of employment, working conditions and health and safety.

In addition, the world faces a humanitarian emergency. Wars, conflicts and persecution have forced more people than ever before to flee their homes and seek refuge and safety elsewhere. This situation is likely to worsen further amid our leaders' inability to work together to stop conflicts and to build and preserve peace in too many places.



### Changing Demography

Rapidly changing demographic trends are affecting employment and well-being. The challenge is how our economic systems can accommodate the youth bulges appearing in many countries. Between 2012 and 2020, almost 1 billion young people are expected to enter the job market, making employment generation urgent. Young people are three times more likely than adults to be unemployed, and many more are trapped in jobs where they are objects of exploitation. This leaves them marginalized and disillusioned, increasing their vulnerability and exposure to the criminal economy, including human trafficking, as well as political radicalization.

In countries with rapidly aging populations, on the other hand, the challenge is how care will be provided and how societies can prepare. It is also about how to design cities for greater accessibility for the aging and those with disabilities; it is about our social protection systems, our care services, opportunities for healthy aging and the participation in the community and workplace. Unless both the public and private sectors invest in the care infrastructure, women in their productive years will be expected to carry the burden. Yet extended family support systems are under stress because of migration, urbanization and the increasing need for two incomes in the household.



### Managing Our Ecosystems

Climate change and threats to our ecosystems are perhaps the most important long-term challenges facing humanity, affecting every person, irrespective of country or income. We must therefore leave a smaller carbon footprint as we reduce poverty and expand shared prosperity. This requires a paradigm shift in the ways goods are made, food is grown, energy is generated and cities are designed. It means that industrialization and urbanization need to rely less on fossil fuels to keep global temperature from rising more than 2 degrees Celsius.

Asia, as the most disaster-prone region of the world, has a particularly large stake in the well-being of the planet. In fact, 75 percent of global disaster fatalities occur in Asia. Coupled with economic shocks, disasters can wipe away years of development gains, increasing social and political vulnerabilities. In this "new normal," a major shock such as the recent financial crisis or a natural disaster can quickly become a cascade of crises. In such a world, we need more than economic growth to seriously address new risks. We need to build resilience into the fabric of how society functions.



## Weak Governance in an Interdependent World

Our destinies are linked in the globalizing world. We breathe the same air; we pollute the same air. Contagious diseases like MERS or Ebola do not need a passport. Terror, transnational crimes, human trafficking, the trade in arms and drugs do not heed borders nor recognize nationalities. Our institutions and governance systems are not designed to respond to these emerging transnational risks.

In several countries, the deterioration in the quality and credibility of institutions, illustrated by corruption, identity-driven indifference to the well-being of their people and institutional capture by powerful interests, is likely to constrain equitable social progress. Yet, trust and accountable governance are essential elements of human well-being, social cohesion, stability and development.

## The Sustainable Development Agenda: Action to Transform Our World

We know that the world we have is not what it should be. Our world is facing multiple challenges and crises, and many of our systems are at breaking points, overwhelmed and unable to prevent emergencies and respond effectively. Today, however, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to prevent new problems, to find solutions to our multiple vulnerabilities and to renew our world to be what it can be. We agree that to do this, we need transformative change affecting all sectors of our societies, our governance systems and our partnerships.

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 be considered met unless 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 multistakeholder, 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, 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 now, we can leave a better world for our children, their children, and generations to come.

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