**The past, present and future of the SDGs  
Talk to students at Sophia University, Japan, 12 Sept 2022**

1. It is wonderful to be back with you students at Sophia University. I engaged with a similar group at your university last year already. Japan is very special to me in so many ways and I truly cherish this opportunity.
2. I was in New York in July at the High Level Political Forum. I heard a great deal of analysis, reports from the 44 countries, from all over the world, presenting their VNRs. What I have to say to you today draws from this visit to New York.
3. The SDGs are deeply threatened. The confluence of war, COVID-19, climate change impacts are threatening the very survival of humanity. Since the pandemic 93 million people have been pushed back into extreme poverty, 147 million children missed in person instruction and education, health services have been disrupted, anxiety and depression have increased exponentially, life expectancy has been lowered globally, routine health care disrupted, TB, malaria and HIV have increased.
4. War has disrupted the lives of 100 million people displaced from their homes. One quarter of humanity live in conflict affected countries. War in Ukraine has led to a crisis in food, fuel and fertilizer prices. Supply chains are reeling, financial markets are in turmoil, aid has shrunk, trade is deeply impacted, food security is in jeopardy and foreign investments declining.
5. The climate emergency is upon us. We are all feeling the palpable impact. CO2 emissions are predicted to rise by 14% by 2030. Floods, extreme weather, drought, forest fires have become daily images that we are seeing in our news channels.
6. So where are we in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda - a wonderful blueprint for a better world by 2030 with its ambitious goals, targets and indicators structure?
7. A sizeable number of countries – often classified as least developed countries – have yet to find the formula for achieving sustained and robust economic growth. A much larger group of countries faces the challenge to build more just and inclusive societies where all people can thrive, irrespective of such circumstances as ethnicity, social status, gender, age, disability or other vulnerabilities. This is the essence of the call in the 2030 Agenda to ‘leave no one behind’.
8. We have been starkly reminded of entrenched inequalities by the pandemic notably, in the vulnerabilities of different social groups as well as the stark inequalities in access to life-saving vaccines and therapeutics across countries and regions (highlighting the linkages between SDGs 3 and 10). Not clear if action is being taking to mitigate such inequalities on a sustained basis in the years and decades ahead.
9. Besides reducing inequalities, environmental sustainability is the other imperative of ‘building back better’. There are a few aspects to this, the most urgent of which are tackling climate change (as called for in SDG 13) and halting biodiversity loss (as called for in SDGs 14 and 15).
10. Recall that, soon after the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015, governments adopted the Paris Agreement on climate change to tackle what has become an existential threat to many nations and communities. Thus, in devising COVID-19 recovery plans, governments and all other actors must be seized by the imperative to move national economies and the global economy towards net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by midcentury.
11. Tackling climate change must go hand in hand with ensuring fairness and equity. Thus, ensuring a fair sharing of the costs and benefits of dramatic transformation is crucial to being able to implement ambitious measures aimed at achieving net-zero economies at the earliest possible date this century.
12. Halting biodiversity loss and beginning to restore nature is another aspect of environmental sustainability which requires urgent attention, not only to achieve SDGs 14 and 15 but also as a contributor to tackling climate change through so-called “nature-based solutions”.
13. Let me turn to the summary of the 44 countries which presented their VNRs this year.
14. This year’s reviews provide a stark illustration of the setbacks forced by the COVID-19 pandemic; the outbreak and continuation of conflicts; and the ongoing triple environmental crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.
15. They referred speak to the serious impact of the pandemic on education, health care, gender equality, and the economy. For many countries, the pandemic exacerbated issues of poverty, unemployment, unsustainable debt, widening inequalities, and inflation.
16. At the household level, many families saw their incomes reduced.
17. Countries with large service sectors and those that depend heavily on tourism or oil imports suffered most.
18. VNRs also highlight the pressing challenges of food insecurity and climate change. Some countries reported an increase in droughts and floods, a reduction in biodiversity, erratic rainfall trends, and locust swarms that have decimated crop yields and affected the livelihoods of rural communities.
19. Across all countries, women, young people and children were the most vulnerable. Some countries reported a rise in early marriage and dramatic increases in gender-based violence. Many women, especially mothers, left the labour market during the pandemic as the care burden escalated.
20. Many young people the world over now face even greater challenges in accessing education, training and jobs, with increasing levels of anxiety and related mental health issues.
21. Let me share some of the main messages I derived from the HLPF:
22. First, today’s complex and multiple challenges are a threat for the SDGs. But they offer an opportunity for renewed multilateral action and search for new innovative solutions.
23. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequalities between and within countries. It reminded the world that without adequate and universal healthcare coverage supported by proper healthcare systems, there can be no sustainable development.
24. Third, increased flows of public and private finance are needed to bridge the financing gap and deliver on the promise of the SDGs. Reforms must be urgently pursued in international finance, debt and taxation architecture, with all countries and stakeholders taking an active role.
25. Fourth, education is a human right and a common public good, not a privilege. Education is a crucial investment in social inclusion and economic development. The upcoming Transforming Education Summit in September will address several obstacles that hinder the achievement of SDG 4.
26. Fifth, no country has achieved gender equality. Women and girls continue to face multiple forms of discrimination world-wide, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.
27. Sixth, to Build Back Better, the needs of women and girls must be addressed more comprehensively. This includes eradicating violence against women, implementing national gender budgeting as well as ensuring access to technology and decent jobs.
28. Seventh, engaging local authorities is essential for an inclusive implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. National and local Government should work together.
29. Eighth, ensuring vaccine equity and producing vaccines in developing countries is critical to economic recovery. Currently, a very low number of the African population has been fully vaccinated -- representing only 19% -- which is far below the recommended WHO target of 70% which was to be achieved by mid this year.
30. Ninth, we need clear action for the protection of our oceans and seas that are informed and guided by ocean science and better investment in ocean research. Comprehensive ocean action also requires deep engagement of local communities -- from policy elaboration to action and data collection and leveraging multilateral partnerships.
31. Tenth, a synergetic agenda is needed to effectively address global deforestation, land degradation, biodiversity loss, poverty eradication, food insecurity and climate change through a “whole-of-society” approach.
32. This is what I learned in New York. But the atmosphere was not of gloom and doom. There was optimism and hope that if we get together we can get the SDGs back on the trajectory we want.
33. I had the privilege of moderating the town hall meeting on the theme of the HLPF and a panel on the SDG Summit in September 2023.
34. The town hall meeting had a continued air of optimism on SDG implementation despite our grim times. A number of countries stressed the need for community-based and faith-based action at the country level. Many spoke of the need of putting science in the service of the poor and the need for focus on those goals and targets which would give the greatest co-benefit to other goals and targets. We need to establish priorities at the country level. If I were to identify the most urgent transformation needs, as expressed in the GA Hall, these were health, agriculture, water, energy and digital transformation.
35. Of course, the HLPF is looking forward to the SDG Summit in 2023. All the architects of the SDGs were part of the panel I moderated. They emphasized the need to focus on implementation and action. And renew the commitment to the SDGs. To accelerate its implementation. In this context the SG's “Our Common Agenda” came up for discussion.
36. The Secretary-General’s Our Common Agenda lays out a series of proposals for consideration by UN Member States as elements of a roadmap for accelerated SDG and 2030 Agenda implementation. The proposals cover a broad range of areas spanning 12 ‘commitments’: (1) leave no one behind; (2) protect our planet; (3) promote peace and prevent conflicts; (4) abide by international law and ensure justice; (5) place women and girls at the center; (6) build trust; (7) improved digital cooperation; (8) upgrade the United Nations; (9) ensure sustainable financing; (10) boost partnerships; (11) listen to and work with youth; (12) be prepared.
37. The first proposal under “Leave no one behind” is for a “renewed social contract anchored in human rights”. In describing that contract, an emphasis is placed on concerns of youth and future generations, and several other proposals speak directly to engaging youth in the UN’s work and building consideration of the interests of future generations into international decision-making.
38. The Secretary-General spells out his vision of what is needed to strengthen governance of “our global commons and global public goods”, including the Earth’s climate system and oceans as well as global health, the global economy and scientific knowledge.
39. Some key elements of the Secretary-General’s proposals on governance of global public goods and the global commons include:
40. **Global health -** The Secretary-General calls for a global vaccination plan to be rolled out urgently to try to bring the pandemic to an end. As part of preparedness, he calls for action to promote vaccine and other pharmaceutical products and health technology production in low- and middle-income countries. He also encourages further consideration of means to facilitate technology transfers, including commitments to voluntary licensing in cases where public funding has been invested in research and development.
41. **Global economy** **that works for all** - The Secretary-General has often noted with alarm the failure of the international community to rally behind a global vaccination drive. He also notes the fragility of global supply chains in the face of the pandemic-induced stresses. Further, he emphasizes that per capita GDP has proven a highly imperfect indicator of vulnerability to the economic impacts of the pandemic, not to mention those of climate change. I hope this call for going beyond GDP is heard and acted upon.
42. Among specific initiatives proposed by the Secretary-General:
    1. A Biennial Summit at the level of heads of State and Government between the members of the G20 and the members of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General and the heads of the international financial institutions “to work towards a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient global economy”.
    2. Forming a “‘last mile alliance’ to catalyse and elevate policy action to reach those furthest behind as part of efforts to achieve the Goals”.
    3. On development assistance, a shift away from heavy reliance on GDP to determine access to concessional finance and support, introducing also indices of vulnerability to external shocks and systemic risk criteria.
43. **Healthy planet -** The Secretary-General has enumerated a series of measures needed to address environmental crises, including:
    1. Climate change mitigation: Parties to the UNFCCC and other stakeholders need to “present more ambitious 2030 national climate plans and deliver on concrete policies and actions aligned with a net-zero future”,
    2. A solidarity package to support developing countries: beginning with meeting the US$100 billion commitment, with half devoted to adaptation and resilience building; aligning multilateral bank portfolios to the Paris Agreement; technological support and capacity building; negotiation of a new post-2025 climate finance goal,
    3. Financial actors to make concrete commitments to net-zero: All G20 financial actors must “set verifiable targets that cover their entire portfolios to shift them away from high-emission sectors to the climate resilient and netzero economy, along with timelines to implement their pledges”,
    4. Recognize and address the growing threat of territorial loss, population displacement and involuntary migration posed by climate change and nature degradation.
    5. A strong global post-2020 biodiversity framework with adequate provisions for financing nature conservation in developing countries;
    6. Transformation of the global food system to ensure that, in the face of ongoing climate change, it is able to provide healthy food security to the world’s growing population while reversing its devastating impacts on biodiversity;
    7. Universal recognition of the right to a healthy environment.
44. Let me conclude with the following thoughts: Societies are deeply divided across the globe today, and it is hard to conceive how a societal consensus can emerge around the sometimes difficult actions that need to be taken – from decarbonizing our economies to changing our high-consumption lifestyles in the advanced and emerging economies to redistributing wealth, income and opportunities to the benefit of those people who have been until now left behind in the pursuit of shared prosperity. But our survival and prosperity depends on these fundamental changes.
45. The 2030 Agenda and Paris Agreement provide our blueprints, Our Common Agenda provides elements of the roadmap. We have come together in a spirit of caring, compassion and coordination to realize our dreams for the future we want.