
You have gathered to look back at seven decades of cooperation between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations and, crucially, to look forward to the continued role of civil society in securing a sustainable future.

I’d like to thank Cyril Ritchie, the President of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, and the Vice-President of the Austrian liaison office, Wolfgang Beiglböck, for the kind invitation to be here with you this afternoon.

Let me also thank the Con Moto String Quartet for the wonderful music. It’s quite an act to follow.

The United Nations has a long-standing relationship with civil society.

Your umbrella organization, CoNGO, has been immensely helpful in fostering and nurturing that dialogue and cooperation between the United Nations and civil society.

Cyril already mentioned several examples of successful cooperation between non-governmental organizations and the United Nations.

That cooperation is a vital thread that runs through every single area of work we are collectively engaged in, whether in places we have never been or locations closer to home.
Before coming to Vienna, I was the spokesman for the Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon. On many, if not most, of the trips with the Secretary-General around the world we had the chance to witness first-hand the amazing work done by civil society, often in challenging circumstances.

Here in Austria, civil society has set a wonderful example of compassion and solidarity in helping the refugees and migrants who have arrived in recent weeks, supplementing and complementing the work of the Austrian authorities. The huge concert and rally the centre of Vienna just this past Saturday was a moving manifestation of that.

And of course civil society, whether organised or spontaneous, is offering a helping hand on this in other countries too.

The Secretary-General, my old boss, consistently stresses the need for active non-governmental organizations. Indeed, he has called civil society the “oxygen of democracy”.

At an event earlier this year in Ireland, the Secretary-General highlighted the need of working together with a functioning civil society and other partners when it comes to reaching our common goals of universal peace, sustainable development and respect for human rights. His main message was, and I quote him:

“No country, no matter how powerful or resourceful, can do this work alone. The United Nations cannot do this work alone. All actors need to join hands as before – Governments, business, civil society.” [end of quote]

Indeed, only by complementing each other’s efforts can we truly make a difference.

Of course, non-governmental organizations do not only play an important role in supporting the United Nations in all its diverse activities. At the same time they – you - also monitor our work closely and highlight whenever we fail to deliver.

As we mark the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, it is natural to take stock. In 2015, the United Nations and those who work with it can analyse and spotlight its achievements and failures - what went well and where we could have done better.

As we all know, the United Nations grew from the ashes of World War Two and has helped shape the world we live in today. So we mark seven decades of the United Nations existence with pride.

Not least because we can look back at an impressive track-record:

Using the language of the UN Charter, “We the peoples” of the United Nations were able to bring peace to many places.

With the Millennium Development Goals, “we the peoples” were able to lift 700 million people out of extreme poverty and cut the number of people suffering from hunger nearly by half. In fact, the World Bank said just today that less than 10 percent of the world population will be living in extreme poverty by the end of this year.

“We the peoples” also agreed on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

“We the peoples” of the United Nations have helped fund the World Food Programme, which together with the Food and Agriculture Organization, feeds 80 million people every year and works to help prevent hunger in the future.
Over the past decades, the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, took care of tens of millions of refugees around the globe, safeguarding their rights and well-being. And of course their work, with non-governmental partners, is more needed than ever.

“We the peoples” also concluded numerous treaties regulating topics as diverse as outer space, maritime security and trade.

All this was possible because it was done jointly.

Because it was done together.

But you and I know there have been setbacks, errors and awful failures.

This is a time when we evaluate our shortcomings and learn from mistakes.

We remember Rwanda. We remember Srebrenica. We remember Sri Lanka. We recognize past failures and have taken action to prevent similar future disasters.

The number of simultaneous conflicts we face today is truly alarming.

Syria’s abortive Arab Spring was followed by four dark Arab winters with little hope for change.

Of course, Ukraine is a major preoccupation in this Yemen, Libya, South Sudan, Mali, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo; the list goes on and looms large. People are dying. People are going hungry. People are on the move. They all need our attention.

Islamic State or Daesh, Boko Haram, Al Shabab, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups grab headlines and take lives with shocking brutality.

Crises come in many forms. Having successfully cut HIV rates in Sub-Saharan Africa and averted millions of deaths from malaria, we faced a new health crisis last year in West Africa.

Close to 11,000 people have died from the deadly Ebola crisis, the tragedy of refugees and migrants dying at sea or in sealed trucks, the international drug trade, organized crime and the rise of violent extremism all show the urgent need for a collective response, for a unity of purpose.

That is why 2015 is a time for global action, and why we must seize the chance to change the course of history and chart the future, a sustainable future in which we can end extreme poverty and injustice and tackle climate change.

This brings me back to the actual topic of your discussions today: not just charting but also securing that sustainable future, and your role in that.

It was indeed a landmark moment when world leaders from the 193 UN Member States adopted a new sustainable development agenda, valid for the next 15 years, which will guide all our actions to secure a sustainable future.


Sustainable Development Goals. SDGs. Global Goals for Sustainable Development.

It seems we are already in danger of overloading on terminology
At heart, of course, it all means we must focus our collective efforts to guarantee a decent standard of living for everyone today and tomorrow without compromising the needs of future generations. A life of dignity for all, in harmony with our planet.

As well all know, the new goals will replace the Millennium Development Goals from January 1st next year. They build on the success of the Millennium Development Goals, which helped more than 700 million people escape poverty.

The eight Millennium Development Goals, adopted in 2000, aimed at slashing poverty, hunger, disease and gender inequality, and improving access to water and sanitation by the end of 2015.

We have made great strides. But yet every four seconds a child dies of preventable causes and there are still 800 million people suffering from chronic hunger. We must do more.

The new agenda aims to do just that. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals go much further, addressing the root causes of poverty and the universal need for development that works for all people.

And one of the key words here is universal. The Millennium Development Goals rightly focussed largely on the developing world. The new Goals acknowledge that all countries and all people around the globe are deeply interconnected with each other and therefore apply universally.

Another huge difference, as you know very well from your own involvement, is how the new Goals came together.

To make this new agenda as inclusive as possible, it was formulated not by a group of civil servants behind closed doors, but in an open dialogue involving Member States, civil society, academia, young people and the private sector worldwide.

This was done through various formats.

A total of 8.4 million people participated in the MYWorld survey – a global online and offline survey that asked individuals what they thought would make the most difference to their lives. The results were given to the Secretary-General and global leaders as they were discussing how the post-2015 development agenda should look.

Global thematic and regional consultations with civil society organizations and the general public on topics ranging from governance to education and health, accompanied intergovernmental negotiations.

There is always room for scepticism about the process or indeed the outcome but I think we can justifiably say these new Goals belong to all of us, the people.

The next big step is how we implement the Goals. It is an ambitious, comprehensive, all-encompassing agenda, requiring political will and an enormous drive to realizing it.

In Addis Ababa in July, governments, civil society and the business sector negotiated a new global framework for financing the Sustainable Development Goals. A package of more than 100 concrete measures that draw upon sources of finance, technology, innovation, trade and data was agreed. The hard part is of course making this happen.
Some say we’ll never raise the funds needed. We say it is our duty to push as hard as we can and to succeed, with your help.

We at the United Nations look forward to a continued strong partnership with civil society organizations as we set about implementing the new goals. Raising awareness is a crucial part of the equation. We have already seen the positive impact of the Project Everyone initiative. The 17 icons for the goals themselves and indeed the overall logo and initiative are the result of collaboration between the United Nations and civil society. Your continued role in spreading the word, explaining, encouraging and cajoling will be both helpful and important.

Yes, cajoling. Non-governmental organizations will have an important monitoring function, too. Holding governments accountable for achieving the goals, which must be implemented nationally. Governments on the other hand need to make sure that civil society has the freedom to operate and access to sufficient funding. Civil society is also an important partner when it comes to responding to emergencies. I mentioned already the vital role the local population and local civil society partners are playing in taking care of exhausted refugees and migrants.

But also other disasters around the world have shown that emergencies can only successfully be managed if national authorities, the international community, civil society and the private sector work hand in hand. The recently released World Disasters Report from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has one of its launches here today, about now in fact, and it highlights the role of local actors as the key to humanitarian effectiveness.

Non-governmental organizations proved to be an essential part of the response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. And we all know the initial shortcomings there were in the institutional response to this health emergency. A special fund did however enable individuals, corporations and civil society organizations to directly support UN entities engaged in the Ebola outbreak response.

And we also all know that non-governmental organizations are essential in representing the diverse interests of the population, including its most vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Last but certainly not least, as I have seen for myself many times, each of your constituent organizations and many more besides, big and small, are carrying out work, projects, campaigns and other activities that will continue to contribute significantly to achieving these new global goals.

Indeed, your role in securing a sustainable future is indispensable. Let us join forces to realize this ambitious but vital new agenda. Let us use our respective strengths and skills, complementing, coordinating and enhancing. As we do so, let us all remain open to constructive criticism while keeping our eye firmly on the main target. This positive spirit will guide all our actions over the course of the next fifteen years as we seek to make this world better for all.

Thank you.

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