

# OurPlanet

United Nations Environment Programme

March 2015



## Time for Global Action



Tommy E.  
Remengesau, Jr.  
The Future  
We Want

Ephraim Kamuntu  
A Critical  
Crossroads

Oyun Sanjaasuren  
Opportunity for  
Change

Frans Timmermans  
A Transformative  
Agenda



UNEP

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# OurPlanet

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# Achim Steiner

## Reflections



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**Achim Steiner**

*United Nations Under-Secretary-General and  
UNEP Executive Director*

The “paradigm shift” from our prevailing business-as-usual modus operandi to sustainable development is now approaching its apex with the finalization of the Sustainable Development Goals this September. The SDG process, a shift that has been evolving for decades, has been gathering greater momentum in recent years as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have drawn to a close, and governments, civil society, business, and many others, have begun to identify ways of building upon the many successes of the MDGs, and filling the gaps that they did not fully address.

Adding to the momentum has been the specter of climate change, reminding us that no strata of our system—economic, social or environmental—can continue on its current trajectory without escalating adverse consequences to mankind. As the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report and UNEP’s *Emissions GAP Report 2014* make clear, continued emissions of greenhouse gases will increase the likelihood of widespread and profound impacts affecting all levels of society and the natural world. Linking the SDGs, and ultimately policy, with climate mitigation will help countries build the

energy-efficient, low-carbon infrastructures of the future and achieve transformational change that echoes the true meaning of sustainable development.

The proposed 17 goals cut across all of the most critical social, economic and environmental issues of our time. Therefore, if effectively implemented, they can guide our current systems through the next stages of the transition to more equitable, inclusive and peaceful societies. To do so the SDGs should make a point of departure from the MDGs on two critical fronts—integration and universality. By noting the socio-economic and environmental interlinkages between and within goals, integration can better ensure that social, economic and environmental balance is not sacrificed to short-term economic ambitions.

Take the misnomer of “cheap oil” as an example of how short-term thinking can undermine longer-term development goals. It is tempting to see the recent decline in oil prices as an incentive to increase fossil fuel consumption. To do so, however, would be grievously misleading for two reasons. First of all, evidence



## *UNEP estimates that up to US\$6 trillion a year is needed until 2030 for countries to improve their energy, transport, water and urban infrastructure—the building blocks of sustainable development.*

people into urban poverty as they leave small farm holdings and degraded ecosystems that can no longer sustain them. And at regional and global levels, migration can create global labour markets, but can also lead to exploitation and rising inequality.

Underlying all of these considerations, of course, is the issue of governance and accountability. We need strong institutions and rule of law to ensure that policy is effectively, consistently and transparently implemented.

This is a momentous year for humankind, as two critically important processes are set to dictate the future development trajectory of the planet. The post-2015 agenda will be finalized in September, and will hopefully highlight the imperatives of integration and universality to the successful realization of the SDGs. A universal climate change agreement is set to be reached in Paris in December. The new agreement is far more than an appendage to the SDGs. Without a robust and realistic accord that can be adequately financed through public and private capital flows, many future development gains will be eroded as the escalating impacts of climate change wreak havoc on our natural world, and therefore, by proxy, on our economies and societies.

The challenges of inequality, poverty, economic instability, environmental degradation and climate change have been identified. The SDGs and a new climate change agreement are being designed to provide the solutions. But the means of implementing these solutions are to be found primarily in the financial realm. We need to reform public expenditure and capital flows for the purposes of greening our economies, developing cleaner technologies, building new infrastructure, and for climate change resilience

and mitigation—only then can we respond to the sustainability challenge.

UNEP estimates that up to US\$6 trillion a year is needed until 2030 for countries to improve their energy, transport, water and urban infrastructure—the building blocks of sustainable development. How will we finance this when we are spending US\$700 billion on fossil fuel subsidies, money that could finance more resource-efficient economies and sustainable development?

Fortunately, we are starting to see the concept of an inclusive green economy maturing in both industrialized and emerging economies, as evidenced, in part, by the increase in the issue of green bonds, the value of which rose by over 300 per cent between 2013 and 2014.

Strong political leadership and corporate support can set us on the right course to an inclusive, equitable and peaceful future. The alternative business-as-usual trajectory, on the other hand, will see us on course to a future in which 1 per cent of the planet's 10 billion people hold 50 per cent of global wealth and resources, pushing our planetary boundaries beyond their capacity to sustain us.

With a full commitment to sustainable development and to a new climate change agreement, we could reduce poverty levels to 3 per cent, achieve sustainable growth, restore social, environmental and economic capital, and put in motion the efficient and equitable management of our planetary resources.

The choice is ours. The science is irrefutable and the facts undeniable. The only question that now remains is whether we are mature enough to act on the information before us. ▲

suggests that we must keep 60 to 80 per cent of known fossil fuel reserves in the ground if we are to have a chance of keeping temperature rise under 2° Celsius. Secondly, if the true costs of fossil fuels were factored into the cost of each barrel of oil in terms of biodiversity loss, human health and climate change impacts, the economics would look very different. One-time easy access to fossil fuels led us to structure our economies on the back of a resource that is now costing us dearly. The SDGs should be designed to safeguard against such short-termism by highlighting the complex interlinkages between society, economy and environment.

Universality is another concept that lies at the heart of sustainability. For example, globalization is an economic issue with universal applicability, affecting different people in different ways, while inequality is both social and economic and is increasingly igniting conflict and sparking social protest across the world.

Migration is a universal issue affecting many countries, especially developing ones, with rural and urban divides driving swathes of

# Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr. The Future We Want

*Environmental health, food security and economic prosperity are the very essence of sustainable development*



**Tommy E.  
Remengesau, Jr.**

*President of the  
Republic of Palau*

This year is a critical one for our planet—it is the year we, as a global community, will collectively agree on a post-2015 development agenda and adopt a set of Sustainable Development Goals in efforts to ensure a future for our children. It is also the year the world will agree on an ambitious and durable global regime to address the issues of climate change and help put the world on a path towards a low-carbon economy. It is with great honour that I offer our vision of “the future we want” on behalf of the traditional leaders and the people of the Republic of Palau and fellow islanders. It is in our best interest, not only as islanders but as a human community,

would have never survived the journey—and the same holds true today. It is with this value of respect that our local traditional chiefs, without any institutional knowledge of the science we have today, developed conservation practices that have led our people to live in harmony with the environment. This is the heart of our culture, as depicted in the Palauan flag: a full yellow moon against a deep blue ocean. The combination of the moon and the ocean is a metaphor for nature’s balance and harmony.

When resources were under threat, the chiefs declared a “Bul”—what today we refer to as conservation moratorium. Reefs would be deemed off limits during spawning and feeding periods, or when fish stocks had become depleted, so that the ecosystem could replenish itself and marine life would remain abundant and in equilibrium. The customary rules in Palau are simple: think about tomorrow; take what you need from the environment and no more.

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