

Human rights and the 2030 Agenda: empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

Keynote speech by Mary Robinson – Geneva, 16 January 2019

Excellencies, Madam High Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen, friends,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be back in Geneva for this timely discussion on the crucial linkages between human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals.

My first message is to encourage the Human Rights Community to speak out forcefully on the urgency of linking the IPCC's recent report on global warming at 1.5°C and the SDGs. The IPCC report actually defines the boundaries of sustainability within which the SDGs must be implemented.

To its credit, since 2004 the Human Rights Council has passed a significant number of resolutions on the negative impacts of climate change on human rights, most recently on the rights of women and the rights of the child. My foundation has been involved in encouraging these resolutions because it was so important to have a people centred, rights-based approach to tackling climate change.

Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015, the Human Rights Council swung in to action. The Council adopted several resolutions highlighting the connections between economic, social and cultural rights and the SDGs, and tasked its subsidiary bodies and special procedures with including attention to the SDGs in their ongoing work.

UN special procedures have produced numerous thematic and country visit reports to assist in these efforts. They include important recommendations to guide SDGs strategies with a human rights based approach. In their thematic reports, special procedures have rightly emphasised that SDGs implementation strategies must be consistent with states' obligations in international human rights law and have stressed the need to ensure participation and the use of disaggregated indicators and data to reach the most vulnerable and those who are left behind. They have also called for new instruments and new commitments to support the implementation of the SDGs. I am grateful to Dr Christophe Golay and the Geneva Academy for updating me on the extent of these important recommendations.

I agree with the Geneva Academy and other experts who point out that the main weakness of the 2030 Agenda lies in its accountability framework, based on voluntary national reviews and peer-reviewed

guidance. UN human rights mechanisms should see this as a call for action and take further steps to share the results of their work with monitoring mechanisms established by the 2030 Agenda, and by including in their own work insights from the monitoring of the SDGs. In a similar way, the UPR system of the Council needs to be linked more closely to the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and help to strengthen it.

What we need is ‘joined up’ governance in this whole process. That includes in part, better cross analysis and exchange between the submissions of governments under the UPR and their relevant voluntary SDG national reviews under the HLPF.

My second message is that as we are nearly a third of the way through the duration of the SDGs, the High-Level Political Forum this July is a key moment to measure progress to date. We should use this opportunity to assess how the world is measuring up on goals pertaining to education; decent work and economic growth; inequality; climate action; peace and justice; and partnerships.

I have spent the best part of the last two decades advocating for responses to climate change that are grounded in human rights – ensuring that those who are the most vulnerable and marginalised

are able to participate in decision making. Initiatives like the Climate Vulnerable Forum have shown that bold and inclusive leadership is possible, offering salutary examples to the rest of the world, particularly the wealthy industrialised nations who bear the greatest responsibility for our climate crisis.

This rights-based approach is equally applicable when working towards *all* of the SDGs, in order to guarantee participation, non-discrimination and accountability.

In the same way - as we've witnessed - that national and international efforts to mitigate against climate change can infringe on human rights; activities in pursuit of development can be just as problematic, in some cases resulting in grave human rights abuses.

And, just as is the case with climate change, it is always the most marginalised and vulnerable who are disproportionately affected. This includes indigenous peoples, minority religious or ethnic groups, the poorest in society and women.

When dams flood the ancestral lands of indigenous peoples, mining pollutes local water supplies, and infrastructure projects displace

impoverished communities, development efforts are being prioritised at the expense of the realisation of human rights for all.

Furthermore, uneven development progress has contributed to widening inequalities, both between and within countries, with wealth and opportunities increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few. These rising inequalities create winners and losers, catalyse social unrest, deepen divides and increase xenophobia – all major concerns for the realisation of rights.

Human rights and SDG implementation must be mutually reinforcing. Achieving the sustainable development goals will contribute significantly to the realisation of human rights, including importantly through the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions. A human rights-based approach, with the attendant features of participation, accountability and non-discrimination, is essential if the 2030 Agenda is to be realised in a way that truly does ‘leave no one behind.’

Crucially, this means implementation of the goals at national level must be rigorously measured and monitored, along similar lines to the Council’s UPR process.

I urge all states and other actors to make use of the synergies between human rights and the 2030 Agenda, by integrating development reporting with human rights reporting, and by working closely with rights holders, national human rights institutions and equality bodies to ensure transparent and effective approaches.

My final message is that for these processes to be meaningful, they should be fully participatory. Everyone is entitled to active, free and meaningful participation in their own development and must be recognised as key actors and decision makers who are able to make their own choices. Participation is both a means and a goal, and it is important to measure and consider *development processes*, rather than simply development outcomes.

Yet we know discrimination and inequality play a significant role in creating uneven development outcomes for different sectors of society, with many people facing barriers to development due to discrimination based on sex, ethnicity, religion, political opinion, social origin or disability, among others.

Governments in many parts of the world are failing to provide essential services, including access to healthcare, education, quality

housing, sanitation or drinking water with little accountability. Populations are routinely denied access to information and justice. This must change. Human rights norms and institutions constitute a bulwark against incoherent and unequal progress towards the SDGs and should be used as such.

Business also has a vital role to play in achieving the SDGs. Just think of the development progress that can be achieved if all businesses improve the treatment of workers and avoid adverse impacts on communities by undertaking effective due diligence consistent with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

I have seen in my own work with the B Team of Business Leaders who have committed their companies to have Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, that the private sector can be a positive force in helping achieve climate justice with just transition. But business leaders must also speak up for a regulatory environment that protects all human rights - one that holds them accountable for their actions as well. They must also do more to be transparent and accountable about their own activities, including their roles in partnerships to implement the SDGs.

We, The Elders, have a particular focus on SDGs 3, 5 and 16, and we will be keen to work closely with all actors - including the special procedures of the HRC, with governments and with the wider human rights community to further highlight the connections between realizing rights and achieving sustainable development.

Progress towards the SDGs means protecting against some of the forces that are most threatening human rights today, including climate change, but also how we treat refugees and migrants, and respond to terrorism and violent extremism.

This is why it is so important to support an effective, inclusive multilateral system. The United Nations is an indispensable actor, and everyone in this room has a responsibility to defend it against the malign forces of nationalism, isolationism and cynical self-interest.

The English poet John Donne wrote four centuries ago that “no man is an island”. Today, when climate change poses an existential threat to hundreds of thousands of people living in small island states and other vulnerable communities, his words are more than a metaphor.

We will only tackle climate change and other development challenges through solidarity and through protecting human rights for all. The SDGs are a vital way to do this. I hope that in our continuing discussions today we can identify practical, achievable and inclusive ways to further the 2030 Agenda and deliver a prosperous, just and sustainable world to our children and grandchildren.