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The Secretary-General's Agenda: Indispensable for Sustainable Development

By Jeffrey D. Sachs

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Global sustainable development and security are deeply interconnected, a fact that is increasingly recognized by world leaders. Sustainable development signifies the challenge of combining economic development with environmental sustainability. When sustainable development fails and a region falls prey to extreme poverty, disease, hunger and environmental crises, the resulting disarray may lead to violence and even war. No one can doubt that conflicts, such as in Darfur and Somalia, reflect, in large part, extreme poverty and environmental degradation. Peace and security in such places must be achieved hand in hand with poverty reduction, disease control, food security and environmental sustainability.

The dual challenge of security and sustainable development will intensify in the coming years, especially as climate change, rising global populations and increasing degradation of critical ecosystems further threaten lives and livelihoods. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the broader United Nations system are poised to play an indispensable role in addressing the interconnected challenges of security and sustainable development. As he remarked recently to the UN Economic and Social Council, "development for all is central to the UN mission. Together with security and respect for human rights, it represents our core aspirations for a peaceful and better world".

Over the 15 years since the 1992 Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, world leaders have adopted vital goals regarding poverty reduction, health and environmental sustainability. Yet, despite these shared objectives, very few goals have made the needed transition from words to action, even after the remarkable international political mobilization in 2005 behind the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the world during the administration of Secretary-General Ban will be the achievement of these shared goals. Success will open the way to peace and to a profound betterment of the human condition, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable among us.

The MDGs that resulted from the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 and the commitment to mitigate climate change under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 are the most central and prominent among the agreed objectives. But many other crucial goals have also been set, including the commitment to slow the loss of biodiversity under the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity and various specific commitments to control AIDS, malaria and other killer diseases. Today, the fundamental task facing the United Nations, and indeed the world, is not to set new development goals; instead, it is to ensure the sound and science-based implementation of existing goals, the success of which is vital to human betterment, perhaps even survival. Admirably, Mr. Ban has repeatedly emphasized his determination to use the good offices of the Secretary-General to help achieve these global objectives.

There are several compelling reasons for the UN system to promote a powerful sustainable development agenda:

- Issues concerning sustainable development are urgent life-and-death challenges for the poorest people, and lack of progress among the fast-growing populations of the poorest countries will only heighten the

security risks for the rest of the world.

- Globally agreed goals like the MDGs are in fact achievable if they are pursued with steadfastness, good organization and global leadership.
- Security and peacekeeping goals will be unachievable unless security measures (e.g. peacekeepers) are combined with poverty-reduction measures (provision of increased access to water). The new Peacebuilding Commission was established for this reason.
- The legitimacy of global governance depends on complementing the security agenda of the major powers with the sustainable development agenda of weaker countries.
- The United Nations has unparalleled scope for bridging eminent professional communities focused on the challenges of security and sustainable development.

The term "sustainable development" has often been interpreted to suggest a focus on the environment. While environmental sustainability is central to human well-being, a more integrated policy view of the term should also include an emphasis on poverty reduction and health. To that end, the world has set a clear agenda of bold yet achievable goals for sustainable development.

Poverty reduction. The MDGs are the overarching framework for tackling extreme poverty, as agreed by all UN Member States, and have become the organizing principles for almost all major development programmes. However, there are several other key internationally agreed development goals. Two notable intergovernmental agreements are the Monterrey Consensus of the 2002 International Conference on Financing for Development and the final Outcome Document of the United Nations 2005 World Summit. The World Trade Organization's Doha Round of negotiations also has an important development component, broadly perceived as an indicator of the commitment of developed countries in fulfilling their promises of advancing sustainable development.

Public health. There are several crucial health goals, including targets in the fight against AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, which have been agreed on in special conferences and sessions of the General Assembly, as well as in the MDGs. The World Health Assembly has adopted many important health goals in recent years, while international efforts are coordinating in the fight against newly emerging diseases, such as avian flu and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Environmental sustainability. The key environment agreements include the three Rio Conventions (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification), as well as the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and various other treaties. Additional goals and timetables were also set in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. MDG 7 also calls for ensuring environmental sustainability.

Several major UN initiatives have reached outside the UN system urging leading experts to study the agreed objectives and in some instances outline pathways to achieve them. For example, in the span of almost three years, the UN Millennium Project convened some 300 experts from around the world, culminating with the presentation of 14 volumes and an overview report to describe the practical investments needed to achieve the MDGs; most of its key recommendations were adopted at the 2005 World Summit. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which will issue its fourth assessment report, *Climate Change 2007*, brings together worldwide expertise and has identified some clear steps towards mitigation of climate change. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment similarly brought together international experts in a groundbreaking analytical process, which revealed the enormous and risky human interference, vis-à-vis many of the major ecosystems and ecological processes, and also pathways out of environmental danger.

A major lesson of the past decade is that implementation of internationally

agreed goals requires a sound plan of action, a committed core team of thoughtful and practical leaders, who are able to advance implementation even when circumstances evolve and political attention is diverted, and a concerted coordination among a large number of involved institutions, stakeholders and Governments. At this critical juncture, Secretary-General Ban is in a unique position to help propel such a global effort. His early public commitment to the priorities of sustainable development offers an opportunity to align the remarkable array of stakeholders, eminent experts and organizations needed to implement practical action around shared international goals.

The MDGs have already proven to be very effective as a global organizing principle. UN agencies, Governments, civil society organizations, foundations and even private businesses are increasingly mobilizing around actions to achieve these development goals. Of course, much more will be needed to ensure their success, but the key lesson is that similar mobilization will be necessary around other globally agreed goals, e.g. for climate, disease control and biodiversity conservation, if they are to succeed.

The year 2007 can and should be a time of great progress in sustainable development. The MDGs are at their halfway mark to the 2015 target deadline and can succeed with reinforced support. The parties to the UN Framework Convention have announced their determination to enter into negotiations for a climate agreement to cover the period after 2012 when the Kyoto Protocol expires. Member Governments are committed to specific progress on disease control, such as AIDS and malaria targets for 2010, and seem determined to back up words with actions. New measures need to be taken to meet global objectives to slow the loss of biodiversity by 2010, and success can be achieved this year in protecting both terrestrial and marine ecosystems. These challenges are clear and success can underpin peace and well-being for generations to come.

Biography

Jeffrey D. Sachs is the Director of The Earth Institute, Quetelet Professor of Sustainable Development and professor of Health Policy and Management at Columbia University, and is currently the Special Advisor to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on the MDGs. From 2002 to 2006, he was Director of the UN Millennium Project and also served as Special Advisor to former Secretary-General Kofi Annan.



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