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**Meeting the Environmental Challenge**

Remarks to “Creating a Workable World” Conference  
University of Minnesota Humphrey School of Public Affairs  
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I am delighted to be participating in this very important dialogue about the role of the United Nations (U.N.) in addressing today’s pressing global challenges. Thank you very much to the organizers for inviting me to be here today to discuss the role of the U.N. in the environmental arena.

It is an opportune year to be having this important conversation, as 2015 will be looked back on as a landmark year in international environmental policy as a result both of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the U.N. General Assembly in September, and the successful conclusion of the Paris Climate Agreement in December.

This year also marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. Environmental issues were not yet on the international agenda at the time the U.N. was founded. Nonetheless, the U.N. has evolved with the times, and environmental issues and related sustainable development challenges have become central to the work and purpose of the U.N. This trend began with the U.N. Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, and gained

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momentum with the original “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, with the “Rio+20” Summit in 2002, and most recently with the landmark U.N. Conference on Climate Change in Paris in late 2015.

### ***Global Environmental Challenges***

The main reason that environmental issues have risen steadily on the international agenda in recent decades is the growing urgency of addressing major environmental threats such as climate change. To cite some sobering statistics from UNEP’s Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-5) report and other sources, models indicate that without a decisive policy response, greenhouse gas emissions could double over the next 50 years, leading to rise in global temperature of 3°C or more by the end of the century. Four independent analyses show that 2000-2009 was the warmest decade on record and 2014 set a new record. Climate change threatens to have dire human and economic impacts, including a growing frequency of extreme weather events such as floods and hurricanes, diminished agricultural productivity, and threats to human health such as increased heat waves and the spread of mosquito-borne diseases.<sup>2</sup>

Environmental issues more generally are taking a large and growing toll on human health. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), as much as 24% of global burden of disease is linked with environmental degradation.<sup>3</sup> Air pollution is among the main causes of premature deaths and health problems, especially in children. WHO has recently increased its estimates of the health toll from air pollution. The latest WHO data concludes that indoor and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.who.int/quantifying\\_ehimpacts/publications/preventingdisease/en/](http://www.who.int/quantifying_ehimpacts/publications/preventingdisease/en/).

outdoor air pollution is responsible for 7 million deaths annually (1 in 8), a number which may exceed those from malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS combined.<sup>4</sup>

There are many other global environmental threats. For example, the planet's biological diversity is threatened by endangered species and degraded ecosystems. For example, approximately 20 per cent of vertebrate species are under threat, and the world unfortunately failed to reach the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010.

### ***From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals***

The Member States of the United Nations have just finalizing a new framework for what is being called “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda” that was adopted in September at the UN General Assembly in New York. The SDGs are comprised of 17 goals and 169 associated targets that cover a wide range of topics, including education, energy, food security, and gender. Several of the SDGs target environmental challenges directly, including goals on climate change, on sustainable consumption and production, and on ecosystems.

The 2030 agenda recognizes that social, economic, and environmental progress are inextricably linked and that we can't have one without the other. Importantly, the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be applicable to all countries, a principle known as “universality.” This represents an important departure from the earlier Millennium Development

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/air-pollution/en/>

Goals, which applied only to developing countries. Importantly, President Obama told the U.N. General Assembly that he was committed to implementing them here in the United States.

Goal 12 of the SDGs is to “Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns.” Towards that end, Target 12: 1 calls on countries to implement the 10 Year Framework of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10 YFP) that was adopted at Rio+20 in 2012. UNEP hosts the secretariat for the 10 YFP out of our office in Paris, and is heavily involved in the 10 YFP’s core programmatic areas: Sustainable Lifestyles and Education, Consumer Information, Sustainable Public Procurement, Sustainable Tourism, Sustainable Buildings and Construction, and Sustainable Food Systems.

### *Climate Change*

In late November, the United Nations Conference on Climate Change convened in Paris under the umbrella of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted at the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 when the first George Bush was President; it was ratified by the U.S. Senate.

The ultimate objective of the Convention is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations "at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system." In particular, parties earlier agreed to limit the increase in global temperature to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees F) by 2100.

But meeting this goal presents a large challenge. After more than two weeks of painstaking negotiations, governments adopted the Paris Agreement on climate change on December 12. This landmark accord represents a new, universal, climate architecture in which each country, developed and developing alike, will make a contribution that it defines by setting its own plan, called its “Intended Nationally Determined Contributions” (INDCs). This is a departure from the provisions of the earlier Kyoto Protocol, in which only developed countries were required to make concrete greenhouse gas emissions reduction commitments. This “bottom-up” approach is based on transparency and accountability. Importantly, the agreement also contains provisions aimed at ratcheting up ambition over time as the scientific and technological context continues to evolve.

### *Partnerships for the Planet*

Recent years have seen growing use of innovative multistakeholder initiatives and partnerships aimed at overcoming the “least common denominator” problem that often jeopardizes the effectiveness of international environmental agreements. For example, UNEP hosts the secretariat of the Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles (PCFV), which was launched at the “Rio+10” World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 as a public-private partnership to promote the phasing out of lead in gasoline, particularly in developing countries. A decade later, that goal has largely been achieved, and a similar partnership has been created to work on phasing out the use of lead in paint.

Along similar lines, UNEP’s *en.lighten* initiative was established in 2009 to accelerate a global market transformation to energy efficient lighting technologies. More than 1 billion people are

already utilizing more efficient lighting in part due to the initiative. Both the PCFV and *en.lighten* these initiatives have successfully engaged the private sector in their work, which has been one of the keys to their success.

### ***Looking Ahead***

As has been noted by previous speakers, the current period can be seen as both the best of times and the worst of times. On the positive side, 2015 was notable for the adoption of critically important new international goals and frameworks that will shape the global environmental agenda for decades to come. On the more worrisome side, the problems motivating countries to come to the negotiating table have become acute and urgent, leading to human suffering and ecological impoverishment.

The adoption of the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement give us a strong foundation on which to build as the world turns to the critical task of implementing these far-reaching and ambitious accords. The task for the future will be to harness growing public awareness of the magnitude of the threats to build political will for the far-reaching transformations in policies and practices needed both to protect people and ecosystems today and to preserve the planet for future generations.

Thank you very much for your attention.

