Thinking and Acting Locally and Globally on Common Social, Economic, and Environmental Goals
Remarks as prepared for delivery
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Thank you, Ambassador Bliss, for that introduction and for the invitation to be here today, and thank you to Ed Elmendorf and Stephen Mosely, the co-chairs of the UNA-NCA Sustainable Development Goals Task Force. It's a pleasure to be here.

It is also fitting to be participating in today's program with Ambassador Elizabeth Cousens – I was privileged to be her partner while I was at USAID and she led the US during the negotiations of the Open Working Group at the UN, which developed the goals and targets that except for a few tweaks are the Sustainable Development Goals; and I was further privileged to succeed her when she left government, to take the baton and continue on the path of active and constructive engagement by the US that she forged as I led the US in the intergovernmental negotiations this year as the UN sought consensus on a final agenda. We owe her a great deal for her leadership in the success of the global goals.

And, as you know, we did achieve a consensus. Just four weeks ago President Obama joined more than 150 of his counterparts from across the world in adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This remarkable consensus emerged from an unprecedented inclusive and transparent process, with the active involvement of the general assembly in developing these goals over a period of years. And this included not just member states – also experts and academics, civil society, businesses, and other stakeholders. The Secretary General called it the most inclusive process in history.

So the global commitment that the 2030 Agenda represents, a political consensus among 193 member states to end extreme poverty in this generation while seeking to live sustainably and in
peace – this reaffirms the hope inherent in the founding of the United Nations 70 years ago, and stands as a positive reaffirmation of the promise of the multilateral system. The Summit, and all the public attention on these goals (celebrities, pop stars, concert in Central Park, soccer players posting videos of “dizzy goals, etc), represents a politically optimistic moment and opportunity in the midst of other tensions, conflict, and instability happening in the world.

And while these are global goals, they are goals that reflect core American values and priorities: ending poverty and want, protecting basic human rights, and securing freedom for all.

That is by design: the US played a very active role in these negotiations to shape its outcome. The reason is simple – as President Obama said at the UN during the adoption of the goals, “development works.” We recognize that our investments in sustainable development around the world and at home are investments in our own prosperity and security.

We know the world achieved significant progress during the time of the Millennium Development Goals (which these SDGs succeed), achieving more than 50% reduction in extreme poverty; more than 50% reduction in preventable child deaths; getting the same number of girls as boys to attend primary school worldwide.

No one presumes the MDGs were the sole cause of this progress, but our experience with the MDGs demonstrated the power of global goal-setting. It’s clear they helped governments, NGOs, private sector, and other stakeholders get on the same page; that they made it easier for the world to collectively follow its progress by driving data collection, analysis, and standardized monitoring; and that they served as the basis for mobilizing action and innovative partnerships that we take for granted today, initiatives like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria, and GAVI, the vaccine alliance.

Take, for example, the Child Survival Call to Action. By 2012, we recognized the world was not making sufficient progress on meeting MDG 4, to reduce the deaths of children around the world in their first 5 years of life. So we came together to draft an action plan – the
Child Survival Call to Action, spearheaded by India, Ethiopia, the United States and UNICEF, eventually joined by 173 other countries and 400 organizations. The US doubled down on its investments in 24 countries, and six of those priority countries have now achieved MDG 4 – an extraordinary turnaround. It is estimated that some 500,000 children’s lives were saved in the following two years.

The new global goals go further than the MDGs – we now seek to end extreme poverty, end chronic hunger, end preventable child and maternal deaths. Achieve an HIV/AIDs free generation. Focus on the quality of education, not just access.

The SDGs are not just MDG 2.0, however. They take the focus of the MDGs on human development and, with their focus on sustainability, add economic and environmental dimensions. The way I see it, the MDGs were perhaps the cornerstones, a first order of business focused on developing countries; the SDGs, by contrast, represent a comprehensive foundation for sustainable development that is relevant for all countries. The SDGs include key development priorities like climate change; sustainable energy; environmental sustainability; and inclusive economic growth. Among other things, they also expand and strengthen a focus on gender equality and incorporate the critical importance of good governance, justice, and peace and security to successful development, much of which was missing in the MDGs.

While this takes us to 17 goals (where the MDGs had eight), the addition of all these areas is a significant step forward. It both deepens and broadens the ambition. It also better reflects the evidence that has shown development to be complex, and progress often integrated. While the Agenda’s targets may appear to be standalone objectives, housed in sector-specific goals, they all both depend on and influence many other parts of the framework. To address malnutrition, for example, we now recognize that we must work through school systems; account for parents’ economic incentives; and address the availability of, access to, knowledge about, and the behavioral elements of using healthy, nutritious products. This focus on integration breaks down the siloes of the MDGs and forces those pursuing the goals to avoid making trade-offs
that prioritize progress on one goal at the expense of poor performance on another.

This is also a set of goals that every country, regardless of level of development, is voluntarily endorsing. These are goals to be universally applied. As the President remarked when he committed the United States to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, “all of our nations have work to do...Here in this country, the wealthiest nation on Earth, we’re still working every day to perfect our union, and to be more equal and more just, and to treat the most vulnerable members of our society with value and concern.”

The inclusivity and transparency of the process; the public attention being focused at the outset; the integration across the agenda; and this embrace of universality all mark an evolution and draw fundamental differences between the SDGs and the MDGs. So it’s a pleasure to be here today as the conversation gets underway in earnest about implementation, and as we explore the link between these global goals and local action. I’ll share just a few reflections about the goals that may help get the conversation started.

First, the global goals consciously acknowledge the importance of action at the sub-national level. Indeed, we have an entire goal on cities, goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. By 2030, we can expect another billion and a half people to be living in urban areas. As stated in USAID's Policy on Sustainable Service Delivery in an Increasingly Urbanized World, which was published in 2013, because cities are the engines of economic growth, accounting for 70 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) we need to ensure that safe, sustainable cities improve the livelihoods of those who dwell within them and those who depend on the economic activity they generate.

The MDGs were set as global aggregates. The SDGs, however, account for countries setting their own benchmarks and contributions towards the goals. This allows for greater differentiation, which can translate into greater differentiation at the sub-national level.
So it’s very interesting to see efforts like OneNYC in New York City. A local vision of the SDGs, the city's OneNYC plan was developed with locally-focused goals and initiatives that join economic and environmental sustainability with social inclusion. It is a major sustainability plan that attempts to link up with international goals in a comprehensive way. As key staffers who helped develop OneNYC say, “The way to meet the SDGs globally is to meet them locally.”

And as we’ve looked to implement the goals in the US, it means we have engaged and benefited from the leadership of the Domestic Policy Council as well as the National Security Council.

Second, the focus on universality and inclusivity moves us beyond aid, beyond a traditional donor/recipient dichotomy, to a framework of shared responsibility and collective action. It provides a strong expectation of country and local leadership owning their own social and economic development. And it makes clear that this chapter of development cannot just be about what national governments spend, but has to harness the connectivity and resources of businesses, philanthropies, NGOs, faith communities, citizens, and communities themselves.

It is an approach reflected in the consensus that was reached at the Third Financing for Development conference in Addis Ababa in July, which showcased multi-stakeholder partnerships as well as efforts to catalyze significant increases in domestic and local revenue, so countries can increase their own resources to invest responsibly in public services and other development needs. One that also reflects our focus on the importance of innovation, science and technology, and the power of data to accelerate our progress. This is truly a modern approach, one that now serves as the roadmap for the global community to follow.

So as the global goals take hold you might anticipate expansion or new application of models such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), which is a network of the world’s cities taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; the almost 80 cities in the network are in a mix of developed and developing countries in all regions. The Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities is another initiative
that engages local governments that cross developed and developing country lines.

Finally, the focus on indicators and evidence through the global goals provides for accountability and the engagement of multiple stakeholders, including civil society and citizens themselves, in holding local and national leaders accountable for the commitments made to the goals. But that focus on evidence also goes beyond accountability to provide a platform for sharing and application of lessons learned about successes and failures that crosses boundaries in interesting ways.

This is reminiscent of Lessons without Borders, an initiative started by USAID in 1994, six years before the advent of the MDGs, which was focused on bringing some of the best practices being implemented by USAID to bear on America’s most pressing problems. Lessons without Borders provided a chance to share experiences from domestic and international programs to find out what works best and develop cost-effective solutions to common problems. In just one example, by adopting social marketing techniques from Kenya, immunization rates in the city of Baltimore went from 62% to 96%, among the highest rates in the US at the time. I'm not suggesting that we restart Lessons without Borders tomorrow, but the new global goals provide us the impetus to think about how we use the political moment to leverage the lessons being learned anywhere in the world and apply them to our own domestic context as appropriate.

As someone who negotiated this outcome, I recognize that the new goals are imperfect, and I know only too well their foibles. But they do give us an opportunity to think and act locally in a way that links to the global aspirations that they capture on common social, economic, and environmental goals. It’s one where we should take full advantage; now that we have this consensus, and start exploring those links as we implement it and make it real. I look forward to today's conversation. Thank you - and onward to 2030.