



**Inaugural Statement by the President**

**His Excellency Mr. Robert Rae (Canada)**

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues,

It is a profound honor for me to be elected President of the Economic and Social Council for the 2024-2025 session.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to Ambassador Paula Narvaez of Chile for her outstanding leadership of ECOSOC during this year. I have had the opportunity to learn a lot from Paula and witness her commitment to strengthening this Council, and it has been a real pleasure to sit on the bureau with her.

Paula set clear priorities and focused our collective attention on key issues around the future of work and artificial intelligence, and I look forward to building on this success. She was also open to contributions from all, and it helped to make ECOSOC a true "House of the People", an approach that I will do my best to pursue.

I also appreciated the attention she gave to the situation in Haiti, which is of great concern to all members of the Council, and which continues to require our full attention and commitment. And I am pleased to inform you that I will remain Chair of the Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Haiti.

I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of our outgoing members of the Bureau, Croatia, Kazakhstan and Tunisia, and to extend a warm welcome to Costa Rica, Poland and Nepal as new members of the Bureau.



I am really happy to be able to participate with such friends in all our work. For me, it's a source of joy.

There is no question, colleagues, that this is a critical moment for the United Nations. Everyone knows it, we feel it.

We are now halfway through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and we still need to get more than 80% of the Sustainable Development Goals back on track. And then, unfortunately, on issues like food insecurity, nutrition, malaria prevalence and greenhouse gas emissions, we have regressed.

That's the bad news, we shouldn't be afraid to say it, but there's good news too, and for me the good news is that we know very well that with a better effort on our part, we can at least make sure that there will be no more backsliding.

Our methods of evaluating progress have improved, and that is important. A recent figure shows us that, for many SDGs, more than half of the people left behind are in just five countries, meaning we can focus our attention and look for positive solutions.

Most indicators show not bad news, but good news, i.e. progress when comparing the 2015 indicators. We can also learn more from successful countries and encourage much more dialogue on how to get there. I hope that the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) process will help us do this.

Against the backdrop are profound global challenges.

But in the face of any challenge, we must remain strong, we must remain resolute, we must remain courageous, and full of determination. We can't give up. Our efforts must continue, and we must redouble them for us to succeed.

New unresolved conflicts and worsening humanitarian crises are testing the architecture we have built to maintain peace and security and protect the most vulnerable.



A sluggish economic situation and an uneven recovery from the pandemic have pushed millions more people into extreme poverty and hunger, deepening inequality and sowing instability.

Globally, we have also seen a shrinking space for civil society engagement, despite the fact that the complexity of the global challenges we face cannot be addressed by governments alone but requires the involvement of all stakeholders.

Barriers also persist with regard to the equality of women and girls and their full participation in all spheres of public and private life.

SDG 16 directly speaks to the need for a strong commitment to building institutions committed to the rule of law, the recognition of rights and the end of impunity. The absence of these things in turn leads to corruption, gang rule and violence, and the depreciation of human life itself.

Climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution affect us all, but hit our colleagues in developing countries who are on the frontline the hardest. And they are often not at the source of our problems.

These threats interact with each other.

Their impacts, as we know, are getting worse.

They know no borders.

Global warming is in fact truly global, even today in Canada we have the experience of wildfires that destroy villages, cities, and human life, as we see in Alberta.

These threats challenge us to think not only of ourselves, but also of others. No one should be left behind. It's a phrase we repeat every day, but it must be emphasized that it's a real thing. As the Secretary-General often says, solidarity is necessity. We have no choice but to seek solidarity and put it at the center of our decisions and our activities.



This will require an extraordinary and collective effort on the part of each and every one of us to get back on track. But our history shows us that this effort is possible. We've done great things before, and we can do it again.

In addition to the work we will do together in ECOSOC, in our regular calendar of meetings on the status of women, the rights of Indigenous peoples, the rights of people of African descent, the VNR process, and the High-Level Political Forum, we have other moments ahead of us to accelerate our efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Summit of the Future in September, the Third United Nations Conference on Landlocked and Developing Countries in Botswana in December and the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Spain in the summer of 2025, to name a few, there are many more, they are all cornerstones to achieve our goals. Let's seize them, together.

Colleagues,

We are the embodiment of our commitment in Article 1(3) of the Charter, "*to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character*".

This is our job, and the charter has told us what to do.

We know very well that these problems are at the heart of our other problems at the United Nations, the problem of peace, the lack of security, they all go together. But we in ECOSOC are an essential part of the work of the United Nations and we will contribute to that work.

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to share Canada's three priorities for our Presidency, which we will seek to further together with all members states.



These priorities are guided by the theme for the 2024-2025 session, to advance sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs.

For me, the SDGs are all around us, they are totally part of everything that we do. And we need to keep reminding ourselves of what they are. In fact, the children who are going to school today, even in this city, but also around the world, know the SDGs better than we do – by heart – because we are starting to teach them and include them and get everyone to understand them.

**Our first priority, I propose that we deal, continue to deal, in some special way, with the crisis of displacement. The crisis of displacement of people that we see around the world – because of conflict, because of climate change, and because of deep inequalities.**

That means promoting better managed migration systems and adherence to the international protection of those tens of millions who are forced to the very margins of existence.

When we say no one left behind, that means the most needy, those who are most marginalized, who are most at the edge. Those are the people we must not leave behind.

There are more people who are forcibly displaced, and are on the move, than at any point since 1945. While many people are able to access safe migration pathways, others, including vulnerable migrants and refugees, can face threats to their well-being and the harshest of conditions.

Neighboring states are being pushed to the limit in their efforts to serve their own population and the arrival of the displaced.

It's so important for us to realize that when people are displaced, first they go to somewhere else in their own country, or second, they go



to their neighbor. And we need to understand, despite all the political rhetoric that you may hear in many, many Western countries, that most of these people are in the developing world. And developing nation states are being forced to take on the care and feeding of these tens of millions of people without adequate support from the rest of us. And that is something that we must change. We must change this.

We need to ensure that the rights of those on the move are protected, that they're supported by regular migration and by refugee protection pathways. But we also need to do, as I said, to make sure that there is predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing.

We need to understand as well that when you lose your home and have nowhere to go, you lose your job, you lose your work, and your children have difficulty getting educated. And the lack of education, every month we lose, every year we lose, for kids in school, is something that is going to set them further behind.

So, we have to recognize the human cost of not doing enough.

**Second, I want to continue and build on the work of Paula [Narvaez] on Artificial Intelligence.** And we will have a special discussion on this.

There are now many parts of the UN who are now actively looking at AI. And they might ask "well why are you doing this as well?". And I will tell you why because the big concern that we need to have about AI – it must become something that is equally accessible to each and every person.

It is not a rich man's game, although if you look at stock market reports, rich men are making a lot of money out of the expansion and investment in this technology. But access to it is critical for every



person in the world. It can also help us to achieve the SDGs, to measure them, to help us get there, and help revolutionize work.

But only if we make it happen. Companies won't make it happen on their own. We must provide the incentives and we have to provide the opportunities. We need to shine a spotlight on the need to bridge the digital divide and to make sure that those who were left behind in the digital revolution are not left behind in the AI revolution.

Digital technology is a common good, developed by all and accessible to all.

We are the UN body responsible for policy guidance in the field of economic and social affairs, so we have our own role and our own contribution to make.

The ITU, the Global Compact on Digital, all the elements that are taking place, they all have their role, we have one too.

We are not fighting for turf. Our voice is the one that says, whatever else these entities do, the one word that needs to always be in front of them is equality. If these technologies are only being developed for wealthy countries and are only accessible to wealthy countries the rest of the world will be left behind and all that we saw that happened since the pandemic and, frankly, that has been happening in other areas of our lives will be compounded by artificial intelligence.

**Third, we will seek to deepen engagement between this Council and international financial institutions** to address gaps in financing for development *and* for fragile and conflict-affected countries.

Our first job is to get people together, and to make sure we turn up where they are, and that they turn up where we are. That it is not seen as an exceptional event for us to show up at World Bank



meetings, and that it is not seen as an exceptional event for them to show up at our meetings. It is essential.

We need to better understand the work that they are doing. Some of it is very positive. Some of it is beyond what they were doing a few three years ago. Some of it is getting better.

But we also need to understand that the GA and ECOSOC itself are vital, open places. We are the houses of the people, houses of member states, and member governments. And this is a place where issues of debt, burden of high interest, and the way to create a better way forward must be discussed and debated.

Often in my life, you'll be surprised to hear to his. Often, I have been told to stay in my own lane, and in bureaucracy we hear this phrase all the time.

Well, our lane is set out in the Charter, and I suggest you have a look at Chapter 9 of the Charter. Chapter 9 of the Charter starting with section 65 is very generous and it is very clear. It makes clear that our lane is the health and wellbeing of the people in the world, our lane is the global economy. Global finances can also be our lane because they affect the global economy, climate change is our lane because it affects everything else.

And we have to make it clear that the people of the world demand to participate in the decisions which are affecting them.

We see inequality growing, we see the gap between wealth and poverty growing, we see the amount of extreme poverty growing, they are all things that concern us directly, it's our job.

There will be other themes that we will seek to weave through in discussions throughout the year. I just want to mention a couple. First one is gender equality.





Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right – which by the way is set out in the charter – equality between men and women is set out in the charter. It is a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. All the evidence tells us, science tells us, that we will not get anywhere near the 2030 Goals or the Goals that will have to go beyond 2030 without the full and equal participation of women.

The economic empowerment and meaningful inclusion of women and girls in decision-making is key to achieving sustainable economic growth and development.

Every crisis, can be better resolved, every goal can better reached with the participation of women.

Equality is core to our central notion of dignity, the dignity of each person, of every being.

From time immemorial the world's greatest thinkers, not just thinkers from Western Countries, from Europe or North America, but the world's greatest thinkers have reminded us that equality, freedom and solidarity and dignity go together, and that if we take away one of these we are all cheapened by that.

They are also the foundation of peace, development, and human rights. What we all know in the UN system as the nexus. We all know what that is. But it's important to remind people outside the UN system that it's peace, development and human rights. They go together. That's our central core, if we put them together, we can succeed.

Our diversity is our strength and I talked earlier about the dignity of people, and dignity of difference, and how we do our business in this council is important, we must do it in a way that is truly and deeply inclusive.



And here again I want to pay tribute to Paula [Narvaez]. Many of you might not know, she regularly meets with civil society in one big zoom call but in between those calls she is meeting with dozens and dozens of people.

The only source of access for many people, the disabled, those who are getting older, those who are frail, those who are need, those who are not being represented. They come to us, and they come to the President. And I want to assure you that they can come to me too.

The work of this council will continue in the same way and in the same fashion as Paula Narvaez did it. To include people, to include civil society, and to include all member states who wish to have a meeting, who wish to engage, or raise an issue.

As you can perhaps tell colleagues, I am really looking forward to this year and to this job. We have a very ambitious and busy session ahead of us. I will count on your constructive and proactive engagement and all your help.

Colleagues on the bureau, we all know we are going to be busy but all of you: I will be coming to you from time to time to help us, to facilitate, to help solve a problem, to help deal with an issue, and I hope very much that you will be able to respond to that call.

I will do my very best to preside over this Council in a manner which is open and transparent. I will listen, learn, engage, and respond to the issues we face together.

My door will always be open to you.

Finally, I asked my daughter, and my two grandsons and my son-in-law to come today, they were in New York. When we talk about future generations. You will recognize that my hair gives it away, I have grandchildren, I have 6. When people talk about future generations, and I think about their lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and for



some of them into the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. We always must be thinking about what we are doing and how it will affect them. For Indigenous People in Canada, we have what we call the thinking of 7 generations, what will happen with the generations down the way.

We are planning a Pact for the Future and a Summit of the Future. Not to deal with the grievances of the past, but to think of what the better world is that we can build. I know we can do it. I know we can do better, and I know with your help and assistance we can do it together.

Thank you.