



**Renewing the Commitment to Multilateralism:  
A High-level Dialogue of the Presidents of the General Assembly,  
ECOSOC, the Security Council, and the Human Rights Council**

**October 31, 2018, 1:15-2:30 pm, ECOSOC Chamber, UNHQ, New  
York**

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in association with the Center on International Cooperation

Statement by H. E. I. Rhonda King

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to begin my contribution to this very important discussion this afternoon by placing on the table three perspectives, side by side, on the state of our world today.

During the opening segment of the General Debate of Leaders' week, the Secretary General, Mr Antonio Guterres painted a bleak and commonly held perspective of our times.

*“Today,” he said, “world order is increasingly chaotic. Power relations are less clear.*

*Universal values are being eroded.*

*Democratic principles are under siege.*

*The rule of law is being undermined.*

*Impunity is on the rise, as leaders and states push the boundaries at home and in the international arena.*

*We face a set of paradoxes.*

*The world is more connected, yet societies are becoming more fragmented.*

*Challenges are growing outward, while many people are turning inward.*

*Multilateralism is under fire precisely when we need it most.”*

Steven Pinker, who, in his book *Enlightenment Now* looks at the historical sweep of history and its causes, endeavors to show that

*“this bleak assessment of the state of the world is wrong. And not just a little wrong – he claims, wrong wrong, flat-earth-wrong, couldn’t-be-more-wrong.”* Steven Pinker *“presents a different understanding of the world, grounded in fact and inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment: reason, science, humanism, and progress. Enlightenment ideals, he tries to show, are timeless, but they have never been more relevant than they are right now.”*

Bill Gates calls *Enlightenment Now* his new favorite book of all time”.

Historian, Yuval Noah Harari, on the other hand, in his book recently released book *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* offers us an explanation for the bleak assessment and lays out the challenges that we must tackle.

He claims that

*“Humans think in stories rather than in facts, numbers, or equations, and the simpler the story, the better. [...] In 1938, he claims, humans were offered three global stories to choose from: the fascist story, the communist story, and the liberal story. The Second World War knocked out the fascist story, and from the late 1940s to the late 1980s the world became the battleground between just two stories: communism and liberalism. Then, he claims, the communist story collapsed, and in 1998 the liberal story remained the dominant guide to the human past and the indispensable manual for the future of the world – or so it seemed to the global elite.*

In 2018, Harari suggests, we are down to zero stories.

He sees three defining issues of our time: the first is **climate change**, the second is the possible disruptions accompanying accelerating technological change and the advent of **Artificial Intelligence**. The third

is **nuclear threat**. Harari also agrees that these are global threats that are in need of a global solution.

I believe that the world is a dynamic place in which change is constant, progress ebbs and flows. In the absence of a unifying ideology today the story of human progress is worth contemplating in earnest and, according to Steven Pinker, it is a truly heroic story which goes something like this:

*“We are born into a into a pitiless universe, facing steep odds against life-enabling order and in constant jeopardy of falling apart...*

*Yet human nature has also been blessed with resources that open space for a kind of redemption. We are endowed with the power to combine ideas recursively, to have thoughts about our thoughts. We have an instinct for language, allowing us to share the fruits of our experience and ingenuity. We are deepened with the capacity for sympathy --- for pity, imagination, compassion, commiseration.*

Pinker believes, and I agree, *that we will never have a perfect world, and it would be dangerous to seek one. But he also believes, and I also agree, that there is no limit to the betterments we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing.”*

Allow me now to look at the knowledge we created during the recent journey to the adoption of the Agenda 2030, one of the greatest successes of modern multilateralism.

To do so I turn once again to yet another book: *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals*. By our former colleague the esteemed Macharia Kamau, along with Pamela Chasek, and David O'Connor

The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this book claims, and many agree,

1. Changed the way that UN multilateral sustainable development negotiations are conducted
2. Created a new development paradigm
3. Set in place the first intergovernmentally negotiated set of sustainable development goals

### **Context: Twenty-First-Century Challenges**

- Terrorism
- Violent ethno-political conflicts
- Rise of separatist movements
- Economic dislocation destabilizing the world order

- Weakened role of the US as the sole superpower and the UN
- Shift in balance of power with emergence of new global players such as the BRICS
- Pervasive threats to security, widespread poverty and hunger, financial and economic crises, climate change, organized crime, drug trafficking despite attempts at multilateral solutions.
- Increasing role of nonstate actors in solving global problems

**Result:** existing multilateral governance system appeared outdated in terms of both the distribution of power among the states and its state-based nature.

**Goal of Post 2015 Development Planning:** integrate economic growth, social justice and environmental concerns by putting sustainable development at the heart of a practical universal agenda.

Negotiating process resulting in the Copenhagen Accord made it clear that open, inclusive and transparent effort was necessary move the process along. With trust in the process eroded, realization that business as usual would not work for achieving the future and ensuring that no one was left behind.

**We shifted from the traditional way of negotiating**

- Consensus decision-making model
- North-South or Cold War lens

- Conducted along bilateral or group lines
- Breaking down:
  - complexity and diversification of interests within groups of countries
  - difference in priorities among countries
  - impact of technology with more done in less time

## ENTER Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals

(OWG) A New Approach. Here we saw:

- a) Importance of mutual learning and discussion before negotiations begin
  - Create a shared knowledge base
  - Ensure collective learning for common understanding of issues
  - Achieved through a “stocktaking phase” “...to create a common space, based on scientific evidence, and allow everyone to have the same terms of reference and understand the concept of sustainability and what it really means for people, planet, global prosperity and security
  - Depoliticize technical issues: issues bigger than parochial national interests
- b) Maintain integrity of UN system: member-state driven



- c) Widen participation given changing world which included NGO actors
- d) Democratize the process: seat sharing system introduced which broke down traditional group coordination along political lines leading to formation of new alliances

Result: Increased trust, greater cohesion, common sense of purpose, receptiveness to new ideas. Process restored faith in multilateralism.

## INGREDIENTS:

### Role of the Co-Chairs

- a) Set aside country affiliations
- b) Commit to the process and to the agenda at hand
- c) Get to know the players: their priorities, interests, fears and resources
- d) Be approachable to all parties at all times
- e) Deliver on promises: everyone given a voice while respecting preeminence of member states
- f) Maintain open, inclusive and transparent process

Result: Where trust is engendered in the co-chairs, there is trust in and commitment to the process

## Strategic Approach

- a) Iterative process: repeating rounds of analysis bringing the desired outcome closer with each analysis
- b) Use of a single negotiating text (holding the pen by the co-chairs)
- c) Exposure to events outside of the OWG and relevant discussions within the UN: further educating the OWG
- d) Limit use of contact groups: loss of control and participatory nature

## Intergovernmental Negotiations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (IGN)

- Introduction of new actors as some OWG participants reassigned
- New actors desire to move to zero draft quickly, the traditional way of negotiations
- OWG participants naturally introduce OWG process: flexibility, discussions across group lines
- Importance of continuity with at least one OWG co-chair in place for the IGN
- Recognition of member-state driven interest paramount with respect to means of implementation
- Developed/Developing country divide reintroduced with financing discussions

- Common purpose prevailed

## Lessons of the OWG

- Recognition that negotiating processes do matter
- Language is important: goal of inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process
- Leadership matters: sense of comfort and trust in leadership enables innovation and creativity
- Process must be managed: introduction of stocktaking sessions
- Level playing field key to building trust and common goals: seat-sharing troikas
- Taking the process outside of the “negotiations bubble” – awareness of side events and relevant discussions in other places within the system
- Importance of continuity
- Receptiveness to NGOs

Result: Renewed trust in multilateral process, precedent set for efficient and inclusive negotiations.

*Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy* ends its retrospective thus

*“The 2030 Agenda, the seventeen SDGs, and the 169 targets are a direct reflection of the process used to create them. The process was universal,*

*integrated, and represented the rich and the poor, governments and non-governmental stakeholders, those concerned with each of the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic development, social development and the environment), as well as peace and security.”*

I don't have answers but I have optimism based on my unyielding faith in the human capacity to reimagine its world. I also have faith in the collective wisdom of this august body, when it works it works well.

We need clarity, we need leadership, we need vision.

Harari begins *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* with these words: “In a world deluged by irrelevant information, clarity is power.”

Clarity is made all the more difficult to achieve since the media is the least trusted institution in world today, this was confirmed by Richard Edelman in his 2018 survey.

I would like to pose a few questions to the room this afternoon:

- How damaging is rhetoric to multilateralism? There is the old adage what you think on grows, so if this rhetoric is very damaging can we not remedy it with more dialogue and by making more

statements in support of multilateral engagement and what is still possible?

- Beyond just rhetoric: how can we all remain strongly committed to critical/landmark global agreements? Later I will share in more concrete terms what we are trying to do in ECOSOC!
  
- Are we being too alarmist about the perceived threat to multilateralism? Is the threat to multilateralism real or is it just part of the ebb and flow of geopolitical dynamics?
  
- Is multilateralism absolutely dependent on one or two powerful countries' engagement? Should we not look elsewhere for solutions? More south-south cooperation?
  
- And lastly and most importantly, do we still believe in the ideals and purposes set forth in the UN Charter?

