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71st session of the General Assembly

Statement by H.E. Peter Thomson, Informal Briefing on the Series of “High-level SDG Action Events”

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I took Office, I committed to the upholding the highest levels of ethics and transparency.

Consistent with this undertaking, as well as resolution 70/305 on the Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly, which encourages Presidents of the General Assembly to periodically brief Member States on their activities including official travel, I have convened today’s meeting to provide an update of the recent trips that I have undertaken, and an overview of the High-Level SDG Action Events that I will be holding during the remainder of my term.

Given the priority focus for the 71st Session of driving a universal push for meaningful progress in implementing each of the 2030 Agenda’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals, most of my trips and engagements have been planned in order to maximize the opportunities for me to promote all 17 of the SDGs around the world, and to build momentum for their achievement.

To date, these efforts have generated a good deal of interest and enthusiasm from those I have met. There is a palpable sense of momentum building around the SDGs. One need only look back to last week’s highly successful Preparatory Meeting for The Ocean Conference, to see this in action.

The Prep Meeting for the Ocean Conference saw some 25 side-events convened, numerous Ministers and delegates attending from capitals, and over 1000 individual civil society representatives registering to participate. Even the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s Annual Hearing, which was held immediately ahead of the Preparatory Meeting, was even dedicated to the topic of ‘Preserving the Ocean, safeguarding the planet, and ensuring human well-being in the context of the 2030 Agenda’.

This high level of interest, participation and engagement in the Preparatory Meeting – from across Governments, international organisations, civil society, the private sector, and the scientific and academic communities – was a clear demonstration of the global momentum that is building around SDG 14 implementation, with the Ocean Conference, 5-9 June being the ultimate judge of that.

For my part, broadening awareness of the Ocean Conference as humanity’s only universal plan to save the Ocean, has been a constant priority throughout the 71st Session, including during my overseas engagements. I have consistently used all available platforms to encourage key stakeholders to

participate in the Conference, to support the Call for Action, and to come to the Conference armed with strategic partnerships and other game-changing voluntary commitments to announce. This includes during my January visit to Davos for the World Economic Forum, my meetings in Rome and Monaco in November including with the International Hydrographic Organization, International Atomic Energy Agency, and Oceanographic Institute and Scientific Centre, my engagements during the COP22 Conference in Marrakech, and in my keynote address to the Budapest Water Summit in November.

Indeed, to build further on this momentum, later today I will be travelling to Bali for the World Oceans Summit, and in March I will be going to Fiji for the Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Ocean Conference, where support for the Conference is expected to be cemented.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will recall that in my letter dated 8 February, I set out the details of a series of five High-Level SDG Action Events that I plan to convene during the 71st Session.

These events are being organized to provide positive opportunities to advance momentum on the SDGs towards key action areas that will drive implementation on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The themes of these events have therefore been selected because of their central importance to driving cross-cutting SDG implementation, in order to support the work of other SDG-related fora, and to avoid duplicating the SDGs that will be receiving dedicated attention during the High-Level Political Forum in July.

Indeed, two of the events that will be held will focus on key Means of Implementation for the 2030 Agenda, while the other three events will address critical enablers of sustainable development. Each of the events will include a special focus on leaving no one behind and advancing gender equality.

First, climate change.

On 23 March, I will be convening a High-Level Meeting entitled ‘Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Agenda’, in collaboration with the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The event will bring together Member States, the UN System, experts and other stakeholders to ramp up action on climate change, and to highlight the deep interlinkages between climate action and sustainable development, including the importance of innovation and technology, sustainable finance, and sustainable consumption, production and use of energy. Given the cross-cutting nature of the SDGs, the event will also serve to push momentum on other key SDGs, including SDG7 on energy, and SDG14 on the Ocean.

This High-Level Meeting will build upon my recent engagements with leaders of Government, science and academia, industry, civil society, and the private sector, at the COP22 Conference in Marrakech, the

7th Session of the IRENA Assembly in Abu Dhabi, and at Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week in January. It will also build on the work of my Special Advisor, Ambassador Dessima Williams, at the UN Conference on Transportation, held in Turkmenistan last year.

Second, SDG financing.

To promote global discussions on sustainable financing and means of implementation, on 18 April I will convene an SDG Financing Lab. The event aims to bring together Finance Ministers and other senior representatives, with leaders from the financial and private sectors, civil society, and academia, to examine ways to leverage private and public financing for the SDGs, including through regulatory measures, policy frameworks, public-private partnerships, and financial instruments. It will also look at ways to promote sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all as part of global efforts to end poverty and achieve the SDGs.

To build understanding and engagement for this event, my office has been cooperating closely with the newly formed UN Group of Friends of Finance, and I have already convened a series of dialogues at the UN to facilitate Member State engagement with key financial stakeholders, including UNEP on greening the financial system, the German Sherpa of this year's G20 meeting, and with the World Bank Group on sustainable development financing.

The SDG Financing Lab will also build upon Ambassador Williams's engagements at the World Bank-IMF Annual Meetings in Washington in October, her discussions on poverty eradication at ESCAP's SDG Week in Bangkok in November, and on my Special Envoy, Ambassador Macharia Kamau's, participation at the first UN World Data Forum in Cape Town.

For my part, I have been consistently raising the importance of sustainable SDG financing throughout my engagements with decision-makers across the world, including with the OECD and DAC in Paris in November. I have asked Ambassador Williams to raise this again with DAC members during the OECD SDG week in Paris in April, and I intend to discuss it with the Ministers of Finance, Economics and Planning attending the joint UN ECA and African Union meeting in Dakar in March, and during the spring meetings in Washington of the Bretton Woods Institutions that I intend to participate in.

Third, Innovation and Connectivity.

On the shoulder of the Science, Technology and Innovation Forum, I will be convening a 'High-Level Event on Innovation and Connectivity' on 17 May. The event will bring together leading innovators from around the world with Member States, UN, and civil society leaders, to explore ways to harness the power of technology to solve critical challenges in support of SDG implementation.

This event builds upon discussions I held two weeks ago in Silicon Valley, where I met with leaders of major innovation and technology companies, including Google, Facebook, ZPrize, Instagram and AirBnB, and where our discussions made clear the extent to which exponential innovation of technologies will transform our societies and properly handled, will help achieve the SDGs.

The Innovation and Connectivity event is being designed to stimulate a global discussion on driving innovation, technology sharing, towards support of SDG implementation.

The role of disruptive and innovative technologies will also feature as a key cross-cutting theme in each of the other SDG Action events, as part of our discussions on scaled-up solutions. The need for better understanding of the ethics involved will not be ignored, some of which were raised at the World Innovation Summit on Health attended by Ambassador Williams in November.

Fourth, education.

I will convene a High-Level Event on Education in partnership with key SDG 4 stakeholders. This event will raise the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education as a pre-requisite and driver of opportunity, employment, equality, peace, and prosperity for all. It will also look at ways to raise public awareness of the SDGs through education, including through its inclusion on the curricula of every school around the world – a matter which I have already written to all Heads of Government to encourage. It will also consider ways to engage University students as our next generation of innovators and policymakers.

As advised in my letter to Member States, the latter was to have been on June 22, but in deference to Ramadan and some of the key participants we are currently looking for a suitable time in the first half of July.

In the lead-up to this High-Level Event, my Special Advisor, Ambassador Dessima Williams, has been travelling to key events around the world to drive greater awareness of SDG4, and of the importance of helping to raise ‘SDG literacy’ through educating young people on the SDGs. This includes speaking at the Education 2030 Steering Committee meeting, hosted by UNESCO in Paris last December, and at the Education World Forum in London in January. Next month, Ambassador Williams will travel to Ottawa to speak at UNESCO’s Week for Peace and Sustainable Development on the role of education.

To support this effort, I have also been using my trips to engage with University students on the SDGs, where possible, including delivering lectures to University students in Quito and Marrakech last year. Ambassador Kamau has similarly addressed University students in Utah.

And finally, sustaining peace.

As you are aware, on 24 January I convened a High-Level Dialogue on ‘Building Sustainable Peace for All’. This event brought together the Presidents of the Security Council, ECOSOC, Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission, and the Secretary-General, to build global understanding of the synergies of conflict prevention, sustaining peace and sustainable development, as well as to generate political support for SDG16 as both an enabler and driver of all 17 SDGs.

My Office will continue to look for opportunities to work with the Peacebuilding Commission and other intergovernmental arms of the UN during the 71st Session, to improve collaboration and coordination for sustaining peace and sustainable development.

Excellencies,

The signature events being convened during the 71st Session are, of course, being supplemented by a dynamic program of mandated events that will be held throughout the rest of the Session, and which will provide further opportunities to promote the SDGs, drive the formation of action alliances, and push for momentum in SDG implementation.

On 3 March I will hold a mandated High-Level thematic discussion for World Wildlife Day. On 22 March, I will convene a mandated working-level dialogue to discuss ways to improve integration and coordination of the UN's work on water-related goals and targets. In August, I will convene the mandated High-Level Meeting on UN Habitat. This meeting will build on my engagements at the HABITAT III Conference in Quito in October where, among my many engagements, I met with mayors and local authorities from around the world to discuss their role in driving SDG implementation in our rapidly urbanizing world.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

Whether it has been during my meetings with the International Organization on Migration in Geneva, the FAO, WFP and IFAD in Rome, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, and Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Vienna, or indeed my upcoming visits to Africa, my team and I have been working consistently to build global momentum for SDG implementation.

It is effort from which we can begin to see dividends. Momentum is building, collaboration and partnership between wide-ranging stakeholders is strengthening, and the wheels of implementation are beginning to turn.

Further details on each of our High-Level SDG Action Events will be made available through the SDG Action Event webpage on the OPGA website, as they come to hand, and I strongly encourage all Governments to be represented at these events at the highest possible levels, and by the most relevant agencies.

And in the meantime, I look further to continuing to work close with you and your delegations to maximize the outcome of these events, and to ensure success in our broader effort to drive a universal push for implementing the 2030 Agenda.

I thank you.