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71st session of the General Assembly

Opening remarks by H.E. Peter Thomson, UN Foundation Private Dialogue on the Global Agenda

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning to you all.

Thank you, Kathy and the UN Foundation for the invitation to speak today. I am constitutionally averse to breakfast meetings, so my presence here today is evidence of the high regard I have for the UN Foundation.

I am especially pleased to be able to support the efforts of so many distinguished thought leaders dedicated to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

The breath of actors gathered here today is impressive, as is your depth of commitment to sustainable development. We are in this together and the time for implementation is upon us, so let's roll up our sleeves.

We are in the midst of critical times. We seem trapped in cruel interminable conflicts. Persistent levels of extreme poverty and growing levels of inequality shame our societies. Humanity on the move, fleeing conflicts and lack of opportunity, the effects of over-population and climate change present the world with an unprecedented challenge in the form of refugees and migrants; a challenge that goes to the very heart of Westphalian order.

Where do we go from here? Do we simply take selfish comfort in our personal circumstances? Do we deny that climate change is a reality? Do we kid ourselves that reality is not going to catch up with us if inequalities widen further and billions of people are incapable of securing a decent standard of living for themselves and their families? Do we imagine that we will be immune when the effects of plague, famine and war kick in?

Or do we take stock and stand instead for a better future? One in which sustainable development has produced sustainable peace, in which people live in harmony with nature and one another in a well-governed, fully serviced societies, steeped in respect for the basic human rights of all citizens.

The latter is the path chosen by world leaders with their adoption in 2015 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Paris Climate Agreement. Taken together these agreements provide us with a universal masterplan to transform our world for the better.

When I think about how fast the last seven years of my life at the United Nations in New York have flashed by, it is daunting to realize that the culmination of the 2030 Agenda is just 14 years away.

The sense of urgency compelled by that timeline coupled with the fact that the stakes are so very high, gives great purpose to this morning's dialogue.

My message to the 71st session of the United Nations is that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are not the preserve of national planning agencies or multilateral apparatchiks. I see the 17 SDGs through the eyes of my grandchildren and therein lies my conviction that each and every goal must be understood as a right and responsibility of every human being on this planet. Sadly, the majority of humans remain unaware of the existence and the vital importance to them of SDGs.

Seen in this way, the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda becomes a responsibility for every one of us. So, what I am doing for my part?

As President of the 71st session of the General Assembly, I have established a high-powered team committed to seeing meaningful progress on each of the 17 SDGs by the end of the 71st session.

To do so, we are proceeding along three distinct tracks.

In the first place, we are working to ensure maximum outcome from mandated GA processes, whether they relate to the UN System's response to the SDGs, the GA's own role in follow-up, or the UN's overall engagement with SDG stakeholders and partners.

Secondly, we are lending our voice to boost initiatives that can catalyze implementation of each of the SDGs. We are dedicated in this regard to outreach, inclusiveness, and strategic partnerships.

And third, we are seeking to advance signature initiatives on matters we believe will lay foundations for on-going processes of implementation of the SDGs between now and 2030.

These initiatives will focus on bringing the SDGs to classrooms around the world; on maximizing the tools we use to tackle poverty and create shared prosperity; on building towards a game-changing conference on Oceans next June; on creating momentum around the concept of sustaining peace and its links to SDG 16; on further strengthening the movement for gender equality; and on making the shift to a sustainable financial system.

Let me dwell for moment on that latter point, given that it is one of the thematic focusses today.

It is often said that to finance the SDGs we need to move from billions to trillion. And that in developing countries alone there persists an estimated \$2.5 trillion annual funding gap.

Clearly, challenges remain in filling that gap, but opportunities are growing.

The various actors in this arena – many represented in this room – are increasingly acting responsibly and wisely. What we need to do now is go wider, deeper, and faster.

First, governments – who have an indispensable role in raising public finance and attracting private finance – must strengthen their taxation systems, meet their international development assistance commitments, deliver better governance and provide clear policy incentives to green the global financial system.

Second, institutional investors – such as pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, and capital and bond markets – must scale-up green investments, enhance responsiveness to the public and responsible shareholders, and prioritize sectors in critical need of investment to achieve the SDGs.

And third, businesses – which provide 60 percent of GDP and 90 percent of jobs in developing countries – can play a more constructive role in realizing sustainable growth while also realizing a profit.

Over the coming months, the SDG implementation team of my office will be working with all relevant partners to see what levers need to be pulled on these issues. In doing so, we will be giving particular focus to reshaping global finance to meet the needs of sustainable development.

Such reshaping will require changes to financial technology; building of key capabilities within the financial community; and the development of common methods, tools and standards to enable sustainable development priorities to be measured and incorporated into financial practice.

I look forward very much to working with many of you on these initiatives.

In closing, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, as I said at the outset, we are in the midst of critical time for our world.

We cannot continue down the paths of unsustainability and expect things will turn out well for humankind. This is a time for governments, for the United Nations and multilateral institutions, and for the business community to show true qualities of leadership.

In 2015, world leadership laid down the masterplan for a sustainable way of life for our species on this planet. Leadership is now required to give action to words, to turn good intentions to good deeds. Today's leadership lies in meaningful partnerships. Let's see what we can do this morning to stimulate such partnerships and lay some solid pieces in the mosaic of our path to sustainability.

I thank you.