LEAPS OF FAITH?

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Hardeep Singh Puri and Jimena Leiva-Roesch

Never measure the height of a mountain until you have reached the top.
Then you will see how low it was.

– Dag Hammarskjöld

THE YEAR 2015 was, in retrospect, a good year for multilateral diplomacy. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change were adopted with great fanfare. A year ago these two outcomes would have appeared unlikely. The cynics among us thought that the 'good old days' of multilateralism were truly over. These two results, however, have reinvigorated traction in the United Nations and reveal that it can be made to chart a constructive course to address the major challenges of the twenty-first century. This at the very least constitutes a win for multilateral diplomacy.

The 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement were conceived and saw the light of day in troubled times. Just two weeks before the COP21 climate change conference, France was struck by the worst terrorist attacks in its recent history. While delegations prepared to finalize the Paris accords, world leaders picked up arms to fight an enemy that cannot be defeated with arms. An ideology cannot be bombed.

In 2015, the core values for which the UN stands were tested as never before. Shortsighted policies and lack of leadership were on display. These resulted in protracted crises and greater instability in several regions of the world.

Syria, Yemen, and Libya are cases in point where we have failed to deliver and protect fundamental freedoms and rights—the very cornerstone of

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Photo: United Nations

Ambassador Puri addressing the UN General Assembly

the United Nations' *raison d'être*. Humanitarian agencies have not been able to cope with an increasing number of crises that ultimately require political solutions based on consensus-building.

During the United Nations Development Summit held in September 2015 in New York, world leaders adopted a new world vision embedded in the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, and on the sidelines of the Summit, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization of Migration (IOM) were sounding the alarm that we have reached the highest number of displaced peoples ever recorded—until 2015, these massive movements had only been seen in the immediate wake of World War II.

Clearly, the UN stands at a crossroads in its 70th anniversary. On the one hand, it was able to forge a shared manifesto on sustainable development, while on the other, it is facing a number of multilayered crises, posing serious new challenges to peace and security.

The Challenge of Climate Change

Climate change presents a formidable challenge even for seasoned negotiators. In this case,

the real enemy is of our own making. Fortunately, Pope Francis has been a leading voice in defining the criticality of the issue. His encyclical on climate change and inequality has made a significant impact even beyond his natural sphere of influence. He has linked the phenomenon of climate change to poverty and inequality.

Pope Francis's message to the UN General Assembly was defiant of the status quo. As he put it in his September 2015 address at the United Nations:

> Economic and social exclusion is a complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offence against human rights and the environment. The poorest are those who suffer most from such offences, for three serious reasons: they are cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded and suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment. They are part of today's widespread and quietly growing 'culture of waste.'

Climate change requires a different kind of multilateral cooperation. It cannot be subdued by sending troops to the frontline but rather by changing current patterns of consumption and production, transforming lifestyles, the core of the energy matrix, and food production. A significant transformation in the way society functions—individually and collectively—is needed to avoid the worst scenarios predicted by science.

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The Paris Agreement

In a standing ovation that lasted several minutes, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change was adopted on the eve of December 12th, 2015. French President François Hollande exclaimed at the end of the COP21 conference:

> in Paris there have been many revolutions over the centuries. Today, it is the most beautiful and most peaceful revolution that has just been accomplished—a revolution on climate change.

After the disastrous consequences of the 2009 Copenhagen COP15 climate conference, the meeting in Paris simply had to succeed. It was the last chance to reassure ourselves that the multilateral system could agree unanimously on a universal framework on climate change. However, COP21

was not just about saving-face against difficult odds.

The French managed to keep ambition high in the text by deciding to limit global average temperature increases to below two degrees Celsius, and by establishing a mechanism that is designed to increase the ambition of national targets progressively over time. Moreover, by the end of the conference, 186 countries—all the major economies as well as those that contribute the least—had presented their "Intended Nationally Determined Contribution," with the intention to reduce greenhouse gases beyond 2020. The fact that all countries were ready to present a reduction of emissions at the negotiation table was the catalyzer of the Paris negotiations.

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Yet, for the Paris Agreement to work, the political momentum that characterized the final days in Paris needs to be sustained over a long period of time, even after the current set of world leaders are no longer in office. This is a tall order. Experience has shown that the enthusiasm of governments wanes fast. For the Paris Agreement to stand the test of time, it will need a titanic effort—particularly from civil society—to hold governments accountable to what they have committed.

The Design of the Paris Agreement

One of the biggest difficulties in the negotiations leading to Paris was the design of a new framework without the firewall between developed and developing countries, while still recognizing differentiation of responsibility and capacity between all the gradients of developed to developing countries to the least developed countries.

Emissions from emerging economies have surpassed many in the developed world at a rapid rate. Diseases from air pollution and other negative impacts have raised concern domestically, pressing for the needed transformation.

The bilateral deals made prior to Paris paved the way for the global agreement. The joint announcements between the major emitters—the United States and China—had a significant impact. They agreed on what would constitute their post-2020 actions on climate change, paving the way for attaining consensus on a global level, but also defining the rules of the new climate architecture.

During COP21, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry confessed that the United States "had learned the lessons of the past" when it had tried to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and failed. The United States opted for an agreement in which "every country on Earth has its own set of national circumstances to consider, its own politics, its own economy, its own capabilities."

The position of the United States has been consistent throughout a number of years. Since 2007, the United States has stated that the new agreement needed to be "flexible" and "global." It argued that developed countries could not foot the bill alone.

The Kyoto Protocol had the famous 'firewall' between developed and developing countries—only developed countries had "quantified economy-wide emissions targets." The Kyoto Protocol was based on the fact that developed countries were responsible for emissions during the last 150 years of industrial activity.

Moreover, even while the international community moved towards the desired flexible design, the U.S. Congress and the Supreme Court appear to be blocking progress. In the midst of COP21, the U.S. Congress chose to approve two measures that would limit "heat-trapping carbon emissions from existing and future coal-fired power plants."

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The Paris Agreement took responsibility off the shoulders of developed countries. It is based on a "bottom-up approach," with each country setting its own emission targets through national plans. Moreover, the quantified goal on finance is not part of the legal component either: it only appears in the decision text. These were all trade-offs made in the end to obtain consensus.

The contradiction between what was approved internationally and what countries are doing at home is not a gap; it is an abyss. This abyss exists not only in the United States, but throughout the world. What is being done under the flag of development is still increasing greenhouse gas emissions—inaugurating coal plants in many parts of the globe and the replacement of large extensions of forests by monocultures—just to cite two glaring examples. These contradictions could make the Paris achievements, and those of us who believe in the multilateral track, look silly; it could also make the Paris climate agreement look like a charade, as the most cynical have called it.

In order for the Paris Agreement to stand the test of time, ambitious action to address this global challenge requires world powers to change mindsets. Established policies for rapid economic growth have to be redesigned to meet the test of longterm sustainable development. A "win-win" situation between growth and sustainability needs to become the norm. This is a particularly challenging goal for emerging economies that are at the tipping point of growth.

Consider in this context the recent speech made by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). He said that "we in the developing world not only have to end poverty and hunger and satisfy the legitimate aspirations of our people for a better life; we have to do so in a manner that is friendly to the planet and the environment." He also underlined the immense responsibility that developed countries have in shifting their "economies onto a sustainable path, follow sustainable lifestyles, and assist developing countries with finance and technologies."

The 2030 Agenda

On September 25th, 2015, the UN's 193 member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is the most ambitious development plan ever adopted by the UN and its member states. This new framework includes a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals that range from poverty eradication and reducing inequality to promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and addressing climate change.

The question that immediately springs to mind is whether we—states, civil society and international organizations—are prepared to address the daunting scale, complexity, and ambition of the new Agenda. Can the 2030 Agenda address some of the emerging peace and security challenges?

The 2030 Agenda calls for a new mindset. It envisions three paradigm shifts that some would call "leaps of faith." However, if these are achieved, the UN would come of age in the twenty-first century. The three transformative shifts in the 2030 Agenda are: universal application; systemic integration; and peace as a centerpiece.

First, *universal application*. The negotiation of the 2030 Agenda included all nations of the world and received the views of over eight million people. This inclusive process has led to a universal approach. Implementation is expected in all countries—a very big leap. Developed countries had previously had the principal role of being donors. They were considered the model of progress. The Global North is

also called upon to implement, measure, and report on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The universality framework should be a model used to tackle peace and security challenges that are interconnected, such as the world drug problem. The outcome to be adopted during the forthcoming Special Session of the General Assembly in April 2016 should focus not only on countries that are suppliers, but also where demand lies.

The second transformative shift is *systematic integration*. The 2030 Agenda calls for a new mindset, by way of integration instead of compartmentalization: the SDGs are an integrated framework. Its design has managed to overcome the problems posed by the 'siloed' structure of the multilateral system. For example, Goal 1 covers poverty eradication in all its dimensions: it goes beyond economic scarcity and addresses what it means to lift someone out of poverty in terms of health benefits, political empowerment, social inclusion, and safety conditions.

The SDGs break with the compartmentalization of the UN by looking at the individual and society holistically. In order to implement the 2030 Agenda, it would be erroneous to break the integrated nature of the framework only to adapt it to the UN's current modus operandi and structures, some of which are clearly outdated. The UN appears to be exerting serious efforts to put its own house in order.

The third transformative shift is *peace*. Peace is at the core of the 2030 Agenda: the omission of peace in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was a glaring mistake. Since the UN structure is typically organized in silos, the peace and security dimension was considered, in the context of the MDGs, as inappropriate for inclusion, even though the Millennium Declaration contains several references to peace.

The link between peace and development is not new: in 1987, the Brundtland Commission concluded that environmental stress is a driver and a result of political tensions and conflict. Then-UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 "Agenda for Peace" explicitly asserted that there can be no peace without development and, equally, that there can be no development without peace.

The 2030 Agenda goes a step further, by including a stand-alone goal (Goal 16) on "peaceful and inclusive societies" as an operational component—and not simply as rhetoric. Targets under Goal 16—such as "reducing all forms of violence and related deaths" and "substantially reducing corruption and bribery"—are to be monitored and reported. Issues of governance that used

to be considered beyond public and international scrutiny now form part of the development framework.

The concept of peace in the 2030 Agenda is not defined by the mere absence of conflict. In a much more ambitious formulation, it but is based on two additional principles: inclusion and prevention.

Prevention means addressing underlying, often longterm systemic issues instead of a list of symptoms. We cannot forget that the ultimate objective of the UN Charter is to "prevent succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Indeed, the Sustainable Development Goals address several known root causes of conflict, such as rising inequality; social, economic, and political exclusion; and the lack of governance of natural resources. It seems that over the past few years the international community has grown accustomed to managing crises rather than addressing its underlying causes and stopping a crisis from emerging in the first place.

To quote the great Indian statesman Jawaharlal Nehru: "the first thing to remember and to strive for is to avoid a situation getting worse and finally leading to a major conflict, which means the destruction of all the values one holds."

According to the latest UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, violent extremists have recruited over 30,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 member states to travel to Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. One of the main drivers is a deep sense of alienation from the current establishment—of being excluded—whose sense of "participation" manifests itself through these physical acts of violence. The focus of the 2030 Agenda is on building "peaceful and inclusive societies;" if implemented, it may counteract the current sense of alienation that is driving this phenomenon.

The current refugee crisis should be seen as one of the first tests of implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Leadership is the most important ingredient to transform the three leaps of faith describe above into reality.

Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement

One of the major criticisms of the 2030 Agenda is that it did not sufficiently highlight the plight of refugees and displaced peoples. Yet, if one looks closely at the entirety of the SDG framework, there is a firm commitment to "leave no one behind." Thus, the current refugee crisis should be seen as one of the first tests of implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

To implement the outcomes it has achieved, the UN must strengthen its capacity to engage with local and international partners, particularly non-state actors. This requires an emphasis on greater cooperation with regional and sub-regional organizations, civil society actors, and the private sector. Most importantly, it must engage its citizens in the solutions. As an example, India's Green Revolution of the 1960s achieved great results by increasing crop yields. However, it had also led to soil erosion, water pollution, disease, and the elimination of biodiversity. The climate change revolution cannot afford a repetition of the same mistakes. The way policies are implemented needs to change. India's green revolution was a top-down approach that paid little regard to the knowledge of farmers and community-based agriculture.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that industrial agriculture is among the top sources of greenhouse gas emissions. The world's population is estimated to increase by more than 10 billion by the end of the twenty-first century. It will be tempting to increase food yields as we have done in the past. Yet the Earth's ecosystem will not be able to sustain this.

In the implementation of national climate plans and the 2030 Agenda's policies—which have a dedicated goal on sustainable agriculture—that empower farmers and support existing knowledge of seeds and soil through innovation and collaboration will need to be formulated.

The response to climate change in the twenty-first century—now that we have the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda—must follow a more humble and ingenious path, one in which people, communities at the bottom, are empowered and engaged in the solution.

No More Silos

The United Nations has comfortably operated in silos for the last 70 years. The UN Charter and the structures of the UN revolve around pillars, which partly explains the fragmentation and silos that exist today. The lack of coordination between the main intergovernmental bodies (i.e. the General Assembly, the Security Council, and ECOSOC) has hindered progress.

Moreover, the governance structure of the United Nations remains stuck with an institutional framework designed for the twentieth century, whilst is now called upon to address the challenges of the twenty-first. In order to live up to the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals, profound systemic issues need to be addressed: from reinforcing the UN's operational activities to Security Council reform and the revitalization of the General

Assembly. The reform of the Bretton Woods Institutions is also part of the overhaul needed.

On the horizon for 2016, the UN will have to make difficult choices. It will have to press on with reforms to its 1945 structure or give up and remain trapped in the old century. There are some positive signs that the UN is taking necessary steps to retrofit its system, two of which can be mentioned as part of this essay's concluding section.

The first is the process of electing the next Secretary-General, which has started to move in the right direction. member states have requested more transparency and a greater role for the General Assembly. The election of the new chief can be a positive force to reinvigorate the UN system.

The second is a series of independent reviews that are currently taking place and which are tasked with assessing the overall health of our multilateral system. This includes the Independent Commission on Multilateralism, which will publish its report in the second half of 2016.

When historians look back at the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, it will be remembered, hopefully, as a renaissance in global affairs rather than an episode of missed opportunities.

In his address to the General Assembly this year, Prime Minister Modi chose to quote the Mahatma: "One must care about the world one will not see." There can be no better dictum to guide us through this period of reform, revitalization, and renewal.