

Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator and Chair UN Development Group, remarks on “The Sustainable Development Goals: Building a better future in Myanmar”

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It is truly a great pleasure to be here this afternoon at Yangon University, a university that is famous throughout Asia, and one that has produced many of Myanmar's past and present leadership, including General Aung San, its first Prime Minister U Nu and the UN's Secretary General U Thant, who graduated from this university in 1929 and at the age of 20!

I am also very happy to be here in Myanmar on my first programme country visit as the UNDP Administrator, and also at this very auspicious time in Myanmar's history. Many of us around the world watched with great hope, and excitement, when the first civilian government in Myanmar in more than 50 years took office last year.

Myanmar is experiencing a triple transition from war to peace, military rule to democracy, and from a closed to an open market economy. But there is in fact a fourth dimension to this transition. The shift from exclusive, often unsustainable development to more inclusive, more sustainable development.

Despite being blessed with significant natural resources, and having a strategic geographic location between India and China, many development challenges remain. The price of internal conflict and past policies has been high and in particular when measured in terms of poverty and livelihoods.

Myanmar's Development Profile/Context

By economic indicators and metrics, Myanmar remains the poorest country in ASEAN, and one of the poorest in Asia. Myanmar is classified as a LDC (least developed country) and is ranked 145th on the UNDP Human Development Index.

As a nation, more than a quarter of Myanmar's people still live in poverty, and poverty rates in rural areas are double those in urban areas. Income

disparity is high and growing, with an increasing divergence between urban and rural areas. For example, the proportion of people living in poverty is 17% in Yangon Region, but more than 70% in Chin State.

In recent years, Myanmar has been one of Asia's fastest growing economies, largely due to significant increases in Foreign Direct Investment (mainly in oil and gas, and other extractive sectors). Growth is expected to be 7.5% in 2017, among the highest in Asia. However, despite these impressive growth rates, employment generation has not kept pace. Growth that is not inclusive and fails to create wider economic benefit for ordinary people will result in growing inequality.

Myanmar has also seen big increases in Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the last few years. In 2017, Myanmar is expected to receive \$2 billion in ODA, representing a 450% increase in the last 5 years.

So, given this development context, what are the prospects for more inclusive and sustainable development in Myanmar?

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development/SDGs

Overcoming the country's low levels of human development is a national priority.

Under the Millennium Development Goals, Myanmar performed rather poorly in terms of inclusive and sustainable development, mainly because of economic policy choices, sanctions, and isolation from global markets.

There was some progress on MDG 3 (gender equality), MDG 6 (HIV) and MDG 7 (Environment) but less progress on MDG1 (poverty reduction) and MDG 4 and 5 (child mortality, maternal health).

Building on the MDG experience, in 2015 all UN Member States, including Myanmar, adopted a new development paradigm, the visionary 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs can be seen as an integrated and indivisible package. That means that for development to be sustainable, we need to take a look not only at economic growth, but also at social well-being and environmental sustainability. And unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are universal and apply to all countries, rich and poor: it is a global consensus on what is needed for development to succeed at both local and global level.

In this sense, the SDG agenda is similar to the government's 12 Point Economic Policy. Both feature policies that integrate economic, social, environmental and governance issues.

For example, the top objective in the 12 point plan is to “support national reconciliation;” the corresponding SDG - Goal 16 - is focused on achieving “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.”

This holistic and long-term view that frames both the Myanmar’s economic plan as well as the SDG’s allows them to formulate solutions that can achieve transformative results rather than just GDP growth.

The approach is perhaps most apparent in the powerful commitment of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. SDGs are not about global or national averages: leaving no one behind means we must address the most deprived segments of each society. Unfortunately, despite progress on reducing the numbers of people globally living in poverty, in many regions (including Asia) the number of poor, marginalized and excluded remain too high. This also holds true for Myanmar.

So could the SDGs, and the 2030 Agenda, provide Myanmar with a new framework for investing in a more inclusive and sustainable development path?

All countries are facing challenges to achieving the SDGs. Many people in extreme poverty live in remote communities and belong to marginalized groups. Access to adequate education, healthcare, electricity, safe drinking water and other critical services remains elusive for many of the poorest because it is unaffordable, because they do not have access to these services, or because of their gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, place of birth or status.

For those who were able to climb out of poverty, they often face disruptions or reversals in progress due to natural disasters, economic slowdowns, food insecurity and environmental degradation.

The ambition to leave no one behind therefore demands new ways of working, with greater emphasis on empowering the poorest.

Let me share with you five key changes, drawn from lessons learned, that may also prove relevant to you in achieving the SDGs.

É *First*, continued investment in data and evidence ó disaggregated by gender, region, ethnicity, age, etc. - is needed to enable better identification of people who are left behind. This is what it will take to enable countries to formulate policies which ensure inclusion and build resilience and to monitor progress towards the SDGs.

The UN system has been working closely with the Central Statistical Organization to strengthen their capacity to collect and analyze data,

UNFPA supported the Government's 2014 national census, and UNDP and the World Bank are jointly supporting the Myanmar Living Conditions Survey.

É *Second*, our programming principles need to explicitly target excluded and marginalized groups. The 2016 Human Development Report entitled "Human Development for Everyone", highlighted that addressing technical and financial barriers to inclusion is not sufficient. Ensuring that no one is left behind also requires strengthening the voice of the marginalized.

The UN in Myanmar has been prioritizing the most marginalized segments of society which is emerging as a central theme of the UN Development Assistance Framework that will guide our work for the next five years.

- *Third*, investment in prevention and preparedness in fragile and conflict-affected settings is critical as more than half of the world's poor live in these countries.

UN agencies, including UNDP, are actively supporting the peace process and promoting social cohesion to help Myanmar emerge from 70 years of civil war. The UN system has also worked for many years to enhance Myanmar's capacity to prepare for, and respond, to natural disasters, given that Myanmar is a country facing such high risks. This is a core pillar of UNDP work in Myanmar, where it has supported the government to develop the Myanmar Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction (MAP-DRR).

É *Fourth*, we need to support countries to transition to more inclusive, green economies with durable and sustainable growth, which will benefit poor communities and populations and enable people to rise out of poverty and "critically - stay out."

For example, only half of women participate in the labor market. By enabling their entry into the formal labour market, Myanmar could generate its own brand of economic growth driven by a "gender dividend"

É *Fifth*, and finally, we need to invest in people's health, education and living conditions as well as in social protection floors, which transform countries' development paths by reducing poverty and social exclusion and protecting people against the shocks that push them into poverty.

The UN has been helping to monitor the quality of investments to ensure that decent work, social and pro-environment outcomes are considered. This is part of the UN's commitment to prioritize all the SDGs related to basic services (the "People" SDGs) as a key component of its work with national development institutions with a specific focus on health, education, nutrition/food security and social welfare.

The SDGs represent a noble and ambitious agenda. For governments, they represent an opportunity to show leadership, mobilize and work alongside all segments of society – including civil society and the private sector. To enable their contributions, action is needed to promote an enabling policy environment, and protect the neutral, safe and vibrant spaces that allow for civic engagement.

Successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda also requires us - the whole UN system - to come together to support countries in an integrated way, while identifying ways to improve our way of working.

This is the *raison d'être* of the UN Development Group (UNDG) in this new era: a partnership of over 30 UN entities that pool their expertise and operational capacities to help deliver on the promise of the SDGs.

In line with the Secretary-General's vision for the UN, "integration" also means better connecting our efforts across the peace and security, human rights and development pillars of the organization. The overall emphasis is on the principle of "prevention" - prevention of natural disasters, conflicts, human rights abuses, and economic and financial shocks.

In reflecting on the SDGs I would like to offer three guiding principles, which I believe are essential in how the UN can support Myanmar to achieve the SDGs:

1. The need to pursue an integrated approach versus "cherry-picking" priority areas: we stand ready to assist government planning and policymaking entities such as the Development Assistance Coordination Unit (DACU) to identify synergies and trade-offs to determine those development interventions that will yield benefits across several SDGs (e.g. SDGs on water and sanitation will have positive impacts on SDGs on health)
2. The critical importance of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first: here the UN can work with government and other development institutions in Myanmar to better understand and address inequalities in all their forms; and
3. The imperative of risk-informed development: to mitigate the adverse effects of natural disasters, economic crises and conflict. In this regard, I note the strong conceptual linkages between the 2030 Agenda and the new Secretary-General's agenda on sustaining peace. Both agendas have Member States firmly in the lead and the UN is committed to working in a

more unified, efficient and effective manner to support their implementation.

The SDGs in Myanmar – the role of young people/youth

It is great to see so many young people here today. Myanmar has a large youth population: those under the age of 30 make up 55% and therefore Myanmar has much potential to benefit from this -demographic dividend-

To do so, one million new jobs are needed to ensure employment for Myanmar's youth population in the next four years. This requires targeted investments in health, education, job training, and entrepreneurship incentives.

To create a conducive environment, UNCDF is implementing Expanding Financial Access (EFA), a programme that provides a full range of affordable, quality, effective and responsible financial services to medium and small enterprises, small-scale farmers, women-led enterprises, youth, poor and low-income clients. Its goal is to contribute to increasing formal inclusion in Myanmar from 30% to 40% by 2020.

Youth are, of course, partners for change in the implementation of the SDGs and the UN is already working together with youth in many of our programmes here in Myanmar. For example, over 15,000 young people are participating in an innovative social messaging tool called U-Report that was launched a year ago by UNICEF. This provides a forum to amplify the voices of young people from across all communities to speak out and respond on issues that matter to them such as street harassment, human trafficking, and employment. The U-Report initiative allows decision makers to hear your voices.

National youth policies can help maximize the contributions of young people. The UN team in Myanmar has been working with the Government to develop a National Youth policy which should be finalized this month. This process has engaged young representatives from all States and Regions, ensuring that policies on youth are informed by the ideas and hopes of youth from a broad spectrum of society.

With regards to peace, several youth groups are working to add their voice to Myanmar's peace process, assisted by the Government, the UN system, and others. These are led by young people themselves. The State Counsellor hosted a discussion with youth on the peace process, as well as education and employment.

And you will be proud to know that Myanmar has contributed its youth and skilled personnel to the UN (in addition to the former Secretary General of the UN of course!) through the UN volunteer programme. In the past ten years, over 400 Myanmar nationals have served as international UN volunteers around the world. I encourage you all to think about working with the UN as a way to serve humanity both here in Myanmar and beyond or if not with the UN then in the spirit of the UN Charter.

In conclusion, let me stress that for the first time in history all countries are guided by one common development agenda. This is a unique opportunity to put the whole world, including Myanmar, on a more prosperous and sustainable development path. I encourage you to be part of this exciting journey.