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○ United States
NEW YORK – Great social change occurs in several ways. A technological breakthrough – the steam engine, computers, the Internet – may play a leading role. Visionaries, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, may inspire a demand for justice. Political leaders may lead a broad reform movement, as with Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Our own generation urgently needs to spur another era of great social change. This time, we must act to save the planet from a human-induced environmental catastrophe. Each of us senses this challenge almost daily. Heat waves, droughts, floods, forest fires, retreating glaciers, polluted rivers, and extreme storms buffet the planet at a dramatically rising rate, owing to human activities. Our $70-trillion-per-year global economy is putting unprecedented pressures on the natural environment. We will need new technologies, behaviors, and ethics, supported by solid evidence, to reconcile further economic development with environmental sustainability.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is taking on this unprecedented challenge from his unique position at the crossroads of global politics and society. At the political level, the UN is the meeting place for 193 member states to negotiate and create international law, as in the important treaty on climate change adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. At the level of global society, the UN represents the world’s citizenry, “we the peoples,” as it says in the UN Charter. At the societal level, the UN is about the rights and responsibilities of all of us, including future generations.

In the past two decades, governments have come up short on
solutions to environmental threats. Politicians have failed to implement properly the treaties adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit. Ban knows that strong government action remains vital, but he also recognizes that civil society must also play a larger role, especially because too many governments and politicians are beholden to vested interests, and too few politicians think in time horizons that extend past the next election.

To empower global society to act, Ban has launched a bold new global initiative, for which I am grateful to volunteer. The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network is a powerful effort to mobilize global knowledge to save the planet. The idea is to use global networks of knowledge and action to identify and demonstrate new, cutting-edge approaches to sustainable development around the world. The network will work alongside and support governments, UN agencies, civil-society organizations, and the private sector.

Humanity needs to learn new ways to produce and use low-carbon energy, grow food sustainably, build livable cities, and manage the global commons of oceans, biodiversity, and the atmosphere. But time is running very short.

Today’s mega-cities, for example, already have to confront dangerous heat waves, rising sea levels, more extreme storms, dire congestion, and air and water pollution. Agricultural regions already need to become more resilient in the face of increased climate volatility. And as one region in one part of the world designs a better way to manage its transport, energy needs, water supplies, or food supplies, those successes should quickly become part of the global knowledge base, enabling other regions to benefit rapidly as well.

Universities have a special role to play in the new UN knowledge network. Exactly 150 years ago, in 1862, Abraham Lincoln created America’s “land-grant” universities to help local communities to improve farming and the quality of life through science. Today, we need universities in all parts of the world to help their societies face the challenges of poverty reduction, clean energy, sustainable food supplies, and the rest. By linking together, and putting their curricula online, the world’s universities can become even more effective in discovering and promoting science-based solutions to complex problems.

The world’s corporate sector also has a significant role to play in sustainable development. Now the corporate sector has two faces. It is the repository of cutting-edge sustainable technologies, pioneering research and development, world-class management, and leadership in environmental sustainability. Yet at the same time, the corporate sector lobbies aggressively to gut environmental regulations, slash corporate-tax rates, and avoid their own responsibility for ecological destruction. Sometimes the same company operates on both sides of the divide.

We urgently need far-sighted companies to join the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. These companies are uniquely placed to move new ideas and technologies into early-stage demonstration projects, thereby accelerating global learning cycles. Equally important, we need a critical mass of respected corporate leaders to press their peers to cease the anti-environmental lobbying and campaign-finance practices that account for the inaction of governments.

Sustainable development is a generational challenge, not a short-term task. The reinvention of energy, food, transport, and other systems will take decades, not years. But the long-term nature of this challenge must not lull us into inaction. We must start reinventing our productive systems now, precisely because the path of change will be so long and the environmental dangers are already so pressing.

At the Rio+20 Summit this past June, the world’s governments agreed to adopt a new set of goals on sustainable development for the period after 2015, to build upon the Millennium Development Goals’ success in reducing poverty, hunger, and disease. In the post-2015 era, the fight against poverty and the fight to protect the environment will go hand in hand, reinforcing each other. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon
has already initiated several global processes to help establish the new post-2015 goals in an open, participatory, and knowledge-based way.

The Secretary General’s launch of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network is therefore especially timely. Not only will the world adopt a new set of goals to achieve sustainable development, but it will also have a new global network of expertise to help achieve those vital objectives.

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1. Commented

Nirmalan Dhas 27 September 2012

It is time that the best minds of the human species linked up and calculated the time frame within which technological changes aimed at achieving a sustainable global civilization must be completed. These changes demand massive amounts of resources and if we drag our feet by the time we decide to make these changes there will not be enough resources left. The cut off point for Business As Usual can and must be calculated.

They can also identify systems that are vital for the support of human life, and work on the task of reconfiguring
2. We need to create a long-term sustainable economy on a global level, while concurrently resolving truly global environmental issues. Is there to be a big, visionary, awe-inspiring long-term goal toward which we, as humankind, are working. The Global Solutions Network needs to incorporate a bigger vision so that the entire planet is able to improve economically while simultaneously working toward environmental crisis resolution.

Kate Popova 19 September 2012

According to the author style, while reading I could foresee each next sentence. At the beginning, the author did not mention that with the release of the book The Limits to Growth in 1972 were opened new horizons for the world. The Limits to Growth was a study by the Club of Rome, which is a group of experts from around the world, who predicted that the Earth's resources would be depleted by the end of the 21st century. Since then, the world is viewed differently. This logic is applied today and from, the comes my conclusion that we need to create a long-term, sustainable, global economy. A global culture of tolerance, that is vital for the freedom of thought and expression and for the implementation of a new and different form of government. People should be able to participate in the formulation of the study of the dynamics that are required to achieve progress. But unlike the past, this progress must be sustainable.

Nirmalan Dhas 19 September 2012

Humancy desperately needs now world model based on System Thinking, System Dynamics, Cross-sectoral analysis IO- W. Leontief model, Life Cycle Analysis, Optimization and Mathematic, Digital Economy. These perceptions can interact with one another to generate forward motion. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network needs to incorporate a bigger vision so that the entire planet is able to improve economically while simultaneously working toward environmental crisis resolution. The network may generate a global culture of tolerance that is vital for the freedom of thought and expression and for the implementation of a new and different form of government. People should be able to participate in the formulation of the study of the dynamics that are required to achieve progress. But unlike the past, this progress must be sustainable.

Timothy Williamson @contractingcorp 8 September 2012

The ball is in your court...let's see how you play.

5. The goal, dream, or plan must be so large that its projected completion date is well beyond 25 or 50 years. The innovation and creativity that such a long-term project would require would also provide the new technologies and new sciences we need to solve our environmental issues, while creating new jobs in high tech industries globally.

John McKechnie 2 September 2012

Like the dream of putting a man on the moon in the space race of the 1960's spurred the US economy, and drove the innovation and creativity that gave us the technology we enjoy today, so too with a big dream or vision for the entire world.

6. Commented

Abiola Oyebanjo @com/atience64 31 August 2012

We are no longer isolated, independent states existing in our own little sandboxes - we need eachother to grow, prosper, and even survive. We also need to know where we are going, where we want to be. We need a long-range plan. Is not planning basic to everything we do?

7. Commented
A Global Solutions Network by Jeffrey D. Sachs - Project Syndicate

3/26/13

Having a vision of this depth, with this level of long-term commitment, would give strength and purpose and drive to the global Solutions Network.

J St. Clair @@jaestclair 24 August 2012

the same group of elites that lead to all the mess until june 2011

1. Commented

Zsolt Hermann 23 August 2012

I agree with both Terry Sullivan and A.T.
The ideal global human society would be modeled on nature, where the local communities can govern and sustain themselves. Like individual organs doing their jobs in the most optimal way.

On the other hand today in our interconnected, interdependent world we cannot fully sustain ourselves, there is no individual or local society that could become self sufficient.

So over the local communities there is a need for global integration, coordination information flow, not in the form of the direct governance, deciding, instructing the local communities, more like providing the necessary information, like a data bank local communities can always turn to in case they have problems, questions.

Additionally an effective constant information network connecting all elements of the global system is crucial since the whole globe is a single ecosystem, thus for any decision, action each element has to take into consideration the whole system, otherwise we will keep running into the same problems we face today.

I think that we might best follow the example of nature. Large global economic strategies will not do. We need localized economies, small regional projects, much more diverse, self sufficient, semi autonomous communities in order to create the resilience that we will need to avoid global collapse.

Almost half the food that is produced in the world is spoiled in transit. Subsistence agriculture means very little waste, i.e. twice as much food!

1. Commented

Terry Sullivan @Sullivan Terry 22 August 2012

Development, the way we now it, is unsustainable in the long run unless is engineered to be sustainable. Please visit:

1. Commented

Daniel Samsic 22 August 2012

Give people the tools and resources they need to take care of themselves. Big projects should involve environmental stabilization, and protection from large predatory economic and political interests.

http://world-at-a-crossroads.blogspot.com

12. Commented
A. T. @aepxc 22 August 2012

Seems well-meaning but misguided. Past breakthroughs have never really been the outcome of coordinated Grand Projects reaching for outsize, multifaceted goals. Likewise, most breakthroughs and visionaries were closer to riding/crystallising already occurring groundswells than they were to generating them.

Most of the problems facing the world today seem intractable only because they are part of a long cycle – they have been brought about by very deep-seated and fundamental principles of current socio-economic organisations. They remain unsolved because we are still unsure about whether the short-term disruption necessary to solve them is worth the long-term benefits.

Mark Pitts 24 August 2012

Agreed. Good insights.