

Keynote address of Her Majesty the Queen of the Belgians

Seventh International Conference on Sustainable Development Columbia University, New York, 25th of September 2019

“Needed: Transformative Thinking to Achieve the SDGs”

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As an Advocate for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, it is a pleasure to take the floor at this Seventh International Conference on Sustainable Development.

This week, a series of high-level meetings and summits are taking place here in New York. It is four years since the adoption of Agenda 2030. This, then, is the perfect opportunity to take stock of where we stand, and where we need to be by 2030. We have a little over 10 years to complete the Agenda and to achieve the SDGs. The stakes are high.

The main message is a sobering one: progress is too slow. In some areas it is even reversing. The recently published Global Sustainable Development Report is just the latest to highlight the inadequacy and relative inertia of the global response. Urgency should become our motto. This is why UN Secretary General António Guterres is launching a Decade of Ambitious Action - to ensure we achieve the SDGs by 2030.

However, a few iconic actions will not be enough. We need to transform. Radically and much faster. We need to transform the way we build, the way we consume goods, energy and transportation. We need to change the way we use resources, the way we produce food, the way we treat the oceans and life on the planet.

Several recent analyses point to the fact that we could probably achieve the SDGs more efficiently by pursuing policies that target several of them simultaneously. For instance, by focusing on food, health and agriculture collectively, rather than individually. In terms of policies, the links and synergies between some of the SDGs are well understood. Others are less obvious. We need innovative policies to exploit these synergies. We must also have dynamic, ongoing assessment of their efficiency, their cost-benefit ratio and their possible drawbacks. Trade-offs need to be evaluated. And replicability will also be key, whether it is at the individual, company, regional or global level.

At the same time, we must be aware of what the Secretary General has called the “inclusion imperative”. We need to make sure that no one is left behind, that growing inequalities do not become an obstacle to the implementation of change.

But, above all, Ladies and Gentlemen, we must transform the way we think. We need to develop a long-term view and genuine solidarity, both with the most vulnerable and with future generations. Throughout my tenure as an SDG advocate, I have made it a point to listen to the voices of children and young people, for they are the voices of the future.

The broad mobilization around the SDGs in recent years has been encouraging. Many people are now aware of them, in both developed and developing countries. BUT WE NEED ACTION. Young people, in particular, have efficiently mobilized around the climate issue and we are seeing this translated into both changing attitudes and policies. But we cannot afford to be complacent. Many more people still need to be reached, and many remain to be convinced.

We must LISTEN to the people in the field; they know their communities well. Efficient communication and information customized for its targets and transmitted through personalized channels will remain key in the coming years. For people's education, their jobs, their sensitivities all affect the way they think. It is important to move away from simplistic assertions. The issues are complex. We need respectful dialogue and mutual understanding.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Global challenges need global solutions. Multilateral cooperation, and multi-level partnerships are crucial. But we need more research and constant evaluation of these networks and their results. How do the different initiatives connect? How do they interact? What measurable change do they produce collectively? How can the various actors improve the way they share useful experience and best practices, or avoid known traps? How can they be reassured that they are on the right track? What is their multiplier effect?

On the other hand, many people, feeling a lack of ownership, are still unable – or even unwilling - to do anything with the information available. Communications and information about the SDGs should demonstrate the accessibility of change. Let us empower individuals, as well as organizations, to bring about real transformation. For instance, by producing practical and readily accessible tools to assist them in deciding what contributions they could make, according to their means and needs. After all, there is still a big gap between the concerns of the middle classes and those of the people directly impacted by poverty, disease, illiteracy, inequality and climate change.

The SDGs were conceived as a coherent agenda, and progress needs to be achieved on all fronts. The transformation agenda will rely heavily on changes in the private sector. Numerous companies are making conscious efforts to implement the SDGs. But they are still a minority. These companies are transforming their production and distribution processes, their product lines, their financial offers and, in the process, their public image. Many acknowledge that a major driver of these changes is the need to retain customers. And younger customers, especially, have new attitudes and expectations. At the same time, companies want to attract a new generation of potential employees, who likewise have new attitudes and expectations.

Of course, we are not starting from scratch. Corporate social responsibility has been with us for many years. But it is clear that the urgency and the magnitude of the changes that have to be implemented NOW are of another order. Changing the mindset is key, so I take a keen interest in the way business schools integrate the SDGs into their curricula. Hopefully, the managers of the future will think and work differently. Partly because they are younger, of course, and partly because they will have learned to see sustainability as an essential component of their activities, rather than just a green add-on. But also, because they will have to.

Governance, too, has an important role to play. While building on the progress achieved over the last decades, an acceleration is needed of the rhythm of implementation of concrete actions, in a long-term perspective. And, equally importantly, investing more in human capital will prepare the citizens of tomorrow to deal with new challenges.

Finally, it is obvious that education around the SDGs will remain a key entry point. Quality education is a goal in itself, but education about and for the SDGs is vital if we want to develop new ways of thinking. As an SDG Advocate, I have made it a point to engage systematically with university students and their professors. Besides integration of the SDGs into educational curricula, integration of the SDGs into daily life is also essential.

As members of the young and educated generation, Ladies and Gentlemen, you have a key role to play. You can be the best messengers for the global agenda. You are aware of its potential, its urgency, and its complexity.

Albert Einstein once said that genius is about making complex things simple. Given that Agenda 2030 is often criticized for being too complex and complicated, some genius would indeed be welcome. In the meantime, we need people like you - students, academics, researchers and practitioners. You are excellently equipped to contribute to the implementation of the goals and the achievement of real progress.

We need YOUR help and cooperation. NOW.