



Carnegie Mellon University  
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**Hearing: "The Sustainable Development Goals and Recovery from the Covid 19 Pandemic: Implications for U.S. Policy"**

Good morning, Chairman Castro, Ranking Member Malliotakis, members of the subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and how they relate to recovery from the Covid 19 pandemic. It is a real honor to be here. At this time, I would like to submit my prepared statement for the record and, for the remainder of the time, summarize the main points.

Today, I address why the SDGs matter, the need for greater U.S. leadership on the agenda, and offer specific policy recommendations given the impact of Covid on development, and especially on socioeconomic conditions around the world and here in the United States. In short, implementing the SDGs can help maximize the impact of U.S. foreign assistance. If also applied at home, they can help make real the promise of a U.S. government that delivers to all its people and is a credible global leader on development.

My comments draw on my background as a social scientist, my experience working in non-profits including overseas, my years at USAID and as U.S. Ambassador to the UN's Economic and Social Council, and most recently, my work at Carnegie Mellon.

### **Why the SDGs (Still) Matter**

Let's begin with what the SDGs are and are not. This 21<sup>st</sup> century framework for a more peaceful, prosperous planet with sustainable, resilient, and inclusive communities was adopted in 2015 by all member states at the United Nations and runs through 2030. With 17 top line goals that cover issues ranging from eradicating poverty, addressing climate change, and creating more inclusive societies, this framework represents a paradigm shift in how we think about sustainability and development. Often referred to as the "UN SDGs," they are actually not some alien creation or UN phenomenon. The U.S. government played a critical role in shaping the agenda and in generating substantial international support which, as I will detail in a moment, has borne fruit. While not always well known, the agenda lives and breathes in many corners of this country and the globe.

The SDGs challenge us to see the world in a much more interconnected manner. Topics or issues that previously may have been regarded as highly silo-ed, technocratic, or even apolitical—such as health systems or transportation—when looked at through the lens of the SDGs can be seen in their complexity, having many dimensions affecting communities often very unevenly.

I am especially keen on the SDGs because they help refresh how we approach human rights to include greater focus on socioeconomic rights as was originally envisioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Like the UDHR, and in contrast to the SDGs' predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which only applied to the global south, the SDGs are universal. The SDG framework attests to the fact that development happens everywhere and reflects a far more complex and far-reaching conception of sustainability that includes climate, of course, but goes well beyond environmental issues. To create a sustainable world, violence and corruption must be reduced, inequality must be tackled, access to justice must expand, and people must not be bought and sold.

Let's also be clear eyed about the heightened relevance but also urgency of the SDGs for this era. The 4 Cs—Covid; climate; conflict; and corruption—all make the SDGs more, not less, relevant as an organizing and operational framework. Internationally, numerous reports suggest that Covid (and conflict, namely Russia's war in Ukraine) have dramatically rolled back gains in many parts of the world on life

expectancy, poverty, and food security. The world is in a much more precarious state than when the SDGs were adopted in 2015 yet they are more needed and time-sensitive than ever.

I have detailed this uneven recovery for the last several years, as part of my work on the SDGs, with teams of students and colleagues and support from The Rockefeller Foundation and the Packard Foundation. We have looked at the impact of Covid relief and recovery packages on a number of social justice needs such as food insecurity not in the global south but in Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and Toronto. While there is no doubt good news at the national level regarding cuts in child poverty, in these cities, we find that recovery is far from just—those farthest behind have fallen even further behind. The Covid relief funding has not yet driven the paradigm shifts we had hoped for in terms of building back better.

### **The Biden-Harris Administration and the SDGs**

Where is the Biden-Harris administration on the SDGs? While it is not hostile to the agenda, as was its predecessor, the general consensus among most experts is that it is not playing the role of champion that the Obama-Biden administration played in shaping, negotiating, and ultimately adopting and advocating for them. Instead, support has been uneven. There are, however, occasional bright spots.

Last week, the Deputy Administrator of USAID was touting private sector engagement as a means to achieve the SDGs. Earlier this year, for example, at a university-wide conference on the SDGs at Carnegie Mellon, the Deputy Secretary of Energy spoke eloquently about the SDGs. One can find mention of the SDGs on occasion in statements on food insecurity issued by the Department of Agriculture. References to specific SDGs appeared in the G7 communiqué, no doubt reflecting the work of some SDG champions inside and outside government. Perhaps most importantly, while there are relatively rare explicit references to the SDGs, there are many policies adopted by the Biden administration that elegantly align with the SDGs even if that fact has not been articulated. Let me detail one early one: the Executive Order (EO) signed on the first day of the administration establishing the Equitable Data Working Group.

The portrait of a country that emerges from aggregated data often masks deep inequities. Disaggregated data, for example, by race, gender, and ethnicity tells another story. We see the contrast clearly in the significant drop in life expectancy among native American communities since the pandemic began. We see this contrast also in Washington DC's pre-pandemic disaggregated data on life expectancy for African American males, figures below that of countries the World Bank labels as "developing." If the ethos behind the SDGs is to Leave No One Behind, then disaggregated data is fundamental to this quest. The Biden EO on equity, as it is called, and the disaggregated data it mandates in the United States is critical to leaving no one behind. This approach to data should be standard in our country and in all our global development work. It links directly to the "localization" or the locally-led development agenda currently championed by USAID.

In several respects, though, the administration is missing opportunities to lead. The world communicates about the SDGs through Voluntary Reviews. Assessing where we are is the way to hold us accountable. Carnegie Mellon, my university, has pioneered a Voluntary University Review to assess how our education, research, and practice aligns with the SDGs. Many other universities have followed suit. Cities are engaging in Voluntary Local Reviews including New York which pioneered this idea, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Orlando as well as the state of Hawai'i. Mayors from around the country are talking to their colleagues around the world aligning their city plans with the SDGs and finding value

added by using this common framework. The private sector has also robustly gotten on board. The federal government should harness these pockets of activity across American society and create partnerships in the service of the SDGs at home and around the globe to deliver on our global development priorities. To date, this has not happened.

The Voluntary Reviews were conceived as national level projects led by national governments. To date, over 342 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) have been presented with some countries reviewing their progress multiple times. When you look at the nearly 200 flags from just about every single member state of the UN that has filed a VNR, it is striking how widespread this norm to report has become, even if on occasion merely performative. And yet, what flags are missing? Who has never conducted a VNR? Yemen, Haiti, Myanmar, South Sudan, and the United States. Whatever your opinion of the UN, the SDGs or VNRs, that's an odd list for the United States of America to be on.

Indeed, diplomats from around the world puzzle over why the United States has not taken more of a leadership role on the SDGs. Our allies—indeed the American public according to one survey—would warmly welcome a more robust presence on this agenda, and our adversaries take comfort that, at the national level, the US is to date largely missing in action.

### **Policy Recommendations**

How do we measure commitment? There are numerous metrics: funding and other resources of course; senior leaders appointed to key positions, and those same leaders showing up to discuss issues in important fora; the launching of various initiatives; delivering national strategies; the use of the President's and other principals' time. When it comes to the SDGs and harnessing the framework for impacting a more just recovery from Covid, the United States is lagging. What's needed to change that?

First, we should join all our peer countries, indeed the vast majority of the world, and commit finally to issuing a VNR. Congress should require that the executive branch report on SDG progress in 2023 and then periodically through 2030. To enable the VNR, the administration should appoint senior leaders that have responsibility for advancing the SDGs across federal agencies and have them show up at important multilateral convenings such as the annual High Level Political Forum to help coordinate collective action on the Goals. That did not happen this past July in New York.

The administration should also establish an interagency process to advance the agenda, and Congress should help ensure that this process is launched. The SDGs pertain to our domestic context as well as our diplomatic and global development agendas. While not a perfect process, I can point to at least one existing issue that brings domestic and international agencies together, in that case to combat human trafficking and modern slavery. That cross-cutting approach was prompted by Congressional action, and one especially dedicated, long serving HFAC member, Representative Chris Smith. Just as we have the President's Interagency Task Force and the Senior Policy Operating Group to combat trafficking, we need an interagency mechanism for the SDGs. Note also that targets and indicators to combat human trafficking appear in several different SDGs and ought to be reflected in the annual Trafficking in Persons report to Congress. Indeed, all the various executive branch reports to Congress on numerous initiatives ought to do the same.

More than that, fund the work! Invest in building a world—including in this country—that experiences a just recovery from Covid. When sensible efforts to invest in recovery from Covid come before Congress,

fund them and require that they align with the SDGs. Create platforms that enable the policy work as I have suggested including through the bipartisan bill that would establish an office at the State Department that elevates the role of cities in diplomacy since they are often at the forefront of SDG work. Speaking of diplomats, we need ambassadors in place; AFSA reports that 20% of ambassadorships are not filled—either unconfirmed or not yet nominated. Congress should also be asking ambassadors to report back on their efforts to engage the SDGs in the countries in which they serve. In terms of global development, the US ought to join numerous other donors that make up the OECD-Development Assistance Committee in fully aligning and integrating USAID funds, programs, missions, and strategies with the SDGs. Currently, USAID is an outlier by not doing so.

The possibility of using the SDGs to pivot to a new way of working domestically and internationally to build back better and recover from Covid is tantalizing. New methods should include data-driven, human-centered program design shaping foreign assistance as well as elevating local voices. Internationally, that would be a significant change to the dominant supply-side modalities, in which Congress plays a big role, supporting specific types of institution building, such as central election commissions. Such work will undoubtedly continue, given support here and among the U.S.-based NGOs that receive the funding. At a minimum though, demonstrably demand-driven foreign assistance ought to supplement this older business model in order to better deliver to populations by listening and responding to the multitude of their needs, informed by disaggregated data.

For these recommendations to be robust, we need to educate the federal work force that the SDGs are not (again) some UN imposition, and that the US was very much a part of their creation. Congress and the administration ought to also support educational efforts to support and partner with the next generation that is literate, indeed fluent, in implementing the SDGs since this agenda and a new way of working, including with innovative technologies, will need to extend far beyond 2030.

While next year, 2023, will mark the halfway point to 2030, it is not too late for the US to increase leadership on the agenda. In fact, it is vital that it do so. The United States ought to show up in force—the executive branch, Congress, and the many active SDG leaders from across America—at the SDG Summit (with heads of state conducting stock taking) in September 2023 at UNGA followed by the Summit of the Future.

### **The Continued Strategic Relevance of the SDGs—Geopolitically and Domestically**

If observers are not swayed by moral or normative arguments, or the claim that the SDGs contribute to best practices in global development, let me make the argument from a geopolitical standpoint. It relates to the struggle of democracy versus authoritarianism, something I have spent the better part of my professional life dealing with, as among other things, a Russia scholar. (I was privileged to testify before Congress as far back as 2000 about the dangers posed by Vladimir Putin.)

HFAC is well aware of the heightened role that China is playing at the UN and in many settings around the world. To cede the SDG agenda to China is to miss the power that the agenda has in advancing and refreshing how we engage in human rights. The SDGs have rights woven through the framework. With the help of Congress, we need to explicitly place our domestic and international development efforts within this framework and make it more difficult for China to dominate the global development agenda. As my colleagues and I stated in the 2021 Freedom House-CSIS-McCain Institute Task Force Report on a new strategy to advance democracy and combat authoritarianism, the SDGs ought to have been part of

the first Summit for Democracy. The SDGs and many American subnational leaders on the SDGs ought absolutely to be a central part of the second Summit for Democracy showcasing how decentralized democracy is addressing some of the biggest challenges of our time. Ahead of the second Summit, the US should also join the over 40 countries and numerous bilateral donors supporting the cluster of the SDGs that center on building peaceful, just, and inclusive communities (“Pathfinders”).

Finally, not only do we need to deliver for all Americans but when we do, it actually bolsters our efforts and our credibility to advance development around the world. Yet currently, in several American cities and communities, people are without clean drinking water, still more people are living without sanitation, and millions in this country are experiencing heightened food insecurity. That is not the example we should be setting globally on sustainable development.

Let me close by saying whether you are focused on combating corruption, ending human trafficking, fighting climate change, ending poverty, advancing inclusive economic growth, increasing access to justice, or reducing inequities, the good news is that we have a framework in place, the SDGs, that can help address these issues. The SDGs can help create a plan of action for the world to recover in a just way from the numerous knock-on effects of Covid. The bad news is that we are instead falling behind on delivering action on the SDGs. Forging this just international recovery from Covid is important for the United States, and the roles that Congress and the Biden administration can play internationally and at home cannot be overstated. These dynamics, like the SDGS themselves, are interconnected. In short, the stakes are high, and the moment is right now to call for elevated U.S. leadership on the SDGs as a blueprint for recovery.

Thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to your questions.