

► THE SDGs AND 'OUR COMMON FUTURE'

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The People Around the World (PAW) 2020 Conference on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is witness to the thriving academic environment at the University of Saskatchewan on global sustainability issues. Scholars from colleges across campus participated as they ushered in 2020 and the 'Decade of Action'. Under the helm of the United Nations (UN), the 17 SDGs cover the years from 2015 to 2030, and the 2019 report informs that while some goals are on track, others are lagging behind. Recognizing 2020 as the decade to revitalize the SDGs, institutions and individuals are being called upon to take action in order to meet the 2030 goals.

The past 50 years of sustainable development paves the path for governments, academia, and individuals to applaud the achievements and rise to the challenges of Agenda 2030. The SDGs were developed with a wide range of pursuits, enabling each of us to identify with at least one SDG. The PAW 2020 keynote speaker inspired me by extracting several SDGs and bringing them down to a personal level of commitment. I reflected and concluded that a good majority of us do this naturally, such as increasing our recycling habits and reducing water consumption. We may also take action on larger aspects, such as home modifications by investing in insulated windows or solar installations. What was truly inspiring to me was how the speaker kept adding to the list as soon as one goal was incorporated into his repertoire. Deciding not to restrict myself to an initial set of goals, and to truly accelerate sustainable

development actions with our future generations especially in mind, I decided to add the goal of using my voice, resulting in this dialogue.

From my perspective, the launch of the 1987 book 'Our Common Future' was a pivotal moment, and two key concepts still ring true today: firstly, sustainable development requires meeting today's needs without compromising that of future generations' ability to meet their needs, in other words, 'Do No Harm'; and secondly, sustainable development is not a static issue or a quick fix, but one that is informed by science and academic research, thus the need to remain dynamic and to 'Build Back Better'. COVID19 is a prime example of the inter-generational and dynamic impact on our society from the global to the local level.

With a finite number of resources available to any governing body, inclusive institutions are critical to sustainable development. Acemoglu and Robinson¹ showcase their research in the book 'Why Nations Fail'. While recognizing that there are numerous factors contributing to a nation's failure, such as geography or culture, they argue that the lack of inclusive political institutions is the common thread in the failure of nations. They define inclusive political institutions as having a broad distribution of power and participation, inherent checks and balances, the rule of law in place, and the ability to regulate economic institutions and activity, including raising taxes and providing public services and goods. Inclusive political institutions lead to inclusive economic institutions, which are ones that secure property rights, law, and order, functioning markets, and are open to the new entry of

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Against the backdrop of limited resources, an inclusive political institution is an enabling factor for wide participation in the attainment of sustainable development solutions, from the planning to the recovery stages. Universities are important institutions, especially when they can harness local knowledge and build capacity. Effective programmes to improve outcomes for vulnerable community members should stress participation and engagement. Academic research has the added value of looking at issues over a longer time span and in a more systematic manner, in comparison



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with media or politics, and enriches policy makers access to a variety of perspectives and insights. Research across academic disciplines is another area of potential value, and collaboration between researchers in disciplines such as policy, health, education, economics, and engineering can benefit those who are most needful, so that 'no-one is left behind'.

While international institutions and global policy may seem distant, the SDGs may be seen as a puzzle built of individual pieces, and each of us has a place to fill. Academic scholarship into one or more SDG contributes to a systematic and methodological approach over the long term, going beyond reactions to short-term events, and providing decision-makers with valuable insights when developing sustainable development policies.

As the UN marks its 75th Anniversary in 2020, and in today's world more than ever, it calls for a rise in cooperation amongst nations, strengthening partnerships, and participation from all sectors of society, coupled with a reduction in conflict and weak institutions.² Inherently, the SDGs provide a window of opportunity for policy coherence, cascading from a global institution to an individual level, and across nations, to secure 'Our Common Future.' We are all in this together as we witness the impact of events reverberating throughout our communities and inter-generationally.

References

¹ Acemoglu, Daron, and James Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. Crown Business, 2012

² UNECOSOC (United Nations Economic and Social Council), *Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals*, Report of the Secretary General, High Level Segment: ministerial meeting of the HLPF on Sustainable Development, E/2020/xxx, Advanced Unedited Copy.

