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**UN Director's speech for the plenary session of the SDG forum,
Belgium**

***Reignite, refocus, rebuild: transforming SDG implementation in
challenging times***

1. Opening

Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here representing the United Nations. Thank you for having us and for being a strong ally of the SDGs through thick and thin.

Let me begin with a stark reminder: *only 18% of the Sustainable Development Goals are currently on track*. Even more troubling—another 18% have regressed. These numbers are not just statistics. They are a wake-up call.

We are living in a time of profound global disruption. Fragmentation is deepening. Resources are stretched thin. Geopolitical tensions are rising. And amidst it all, the world is grappling with overlapping crises—from conflict and climate change to widening inequalities.

I know many of you feel the weight of these challenges. You're not alone. There is a growing sense of fatigue, even disillusionment. The promise of the SDGs can feel distant when the headlines are filled with setbacks.

But today, I want to speak not only about the challenges we face, but about the pathways forward. About how we can do more with less. About why the SDGs still matter, perhaps now more than ever. Today, I am sharing with you a call to reignite, refocus and rebuild. To transform SDG implementation in these challenging times.

The SDGs, let's not forget, were never just a checklist. They are a blueprint for dignity, resilience, and shared prosperity. And while the road ahead is steep, it is not impassable.

2. The challenge: limited resources, waning momentum

But let's be honest about the scale of the challenge.

We are facing a widening SDG financing gap - estimated in the trillions. At the same time, Official Development Assistance is shrinking. In some cases, it's being redirected away from long-term development toward shorter-term domestic priorities.

This is not just a matter of numbers. It's a matter of political will.

When governments cut ODA, they are making a choice. A choice that signals a retreat from global solidarity and investment in our common future at a time when it is most needed. And this is happening against a backdrop of growing political fatigue. Multilateralism is under strain. National interests are increasingly prioritised over global commitments. The spirit of cooperation that underpinned the 2030 Agenda is being tested like never before.

And it's not just leaders who are losing faith.

People - ordinary citizens, communities- are beginning to question whether the SDGs are real objectives, or just rhetoric. For many, the goals feel too abstract, too distant. And when promises go unfulfilled, trust erodes.

This is the moment we risk losing not just momentum, but belief.

And yet, this is also the moment when leadership matters most.

3. The opportunity: why the SDGs still matter

Even in the face of these daunting realities, we must remember what the SDGs represent: a unifying vision, the glue that sticks the global community together. They are the most comprehensive and inclusive global development framework ever agreed upon, a shared language that transcends sectors, borders, and ideologies.

In a world that often feels divided, the SDGs remind us of our common humanity. They are not just policy goals - they are a moral compass and essentially a global peace plan. A call to action that says: *we are in this together*. And together, we must act.

We need to recommit to this vision, not just in words, but in deeds. Through inclusive, equitable partnerships that bring together governments, civil society, the private sector, and communities. Partnerships that are rooted in trust, mutual respect, and a shared sense of purpose.

As Peter Taylor, the Director of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) recently put it: *"We need to find new global solidarities to get behind them... and use what we've learnt to make sure what comes after 2030 is fit for purpose."*

This is not just about salvaging a framework. It's about shaping a future that works for everyone.

And the good thing is that we don't need to reinvent the wheel. The SDG wheel offers us an integrated approach - a way to tackle the interconnected crises of our time. Climate change, inequality, health, education, peace...they are not separate challenges. They are deeply linked. And the SDGs help us see those connections, and act on them holistically.

And let's not forget: the SDGs are not just global- they are local. They are as relevant in Brussels as they are in Bamako. They can and must be tailored to the needs, priorities, and aspirations of communities. Because real change happens when global ambition meets local action.

This is where initiatives like **Local2030** come in. As the UN's platform for supporting and accelerating the localisation of the SDGs, Local2030 brings together local governments, grassroots organisations, and global partners to turn ambition into action—on the ground, where it matters most. It helps communities align their priorities with the global goals, while respecting local contexts, cultures, and capacities.

Because ultimately, the SDGs will only succeed if they are owned locally. When a mayor sees them as a roadmap for inclusive urban planning. When

a community leader uses them to advocate for better health services. When citizens see their lives reflected in the goals.

4.Strategic pathways forward

In this section, I'll focus on 4 subtopics: 1) prioritising synergies, 2) innovating financing, 3) empowering participation, and 4) strengthening data and learning.

A. Prioritise synergies

So where do we go from here? How do we reignite and refocus?

We need to be strategic. We need to be bold. And we need to be smarter about how we work.

First, we must prioritise synergies. The 17 SDGs are not 17 silos, as I mentioned before, they are deeply interconnected. That means we must focus on interventions that deliver across multiple goals at once. Take, for example, investing in girls' education, a goal where Belgium's leadership is particularly strong (many of you will remember that this topic was at the forefront of the Belgian presidency of the Council last year). Girls' education is not just Goal 4. It improves health outcomes. It drives economic growth. It advances gender equality. It strengthens communities. One investment - multiple dividends.

This is the power of systems thinking. We must encourage governments, donors, and development actors to identify and scale what we might call "synergy drivers"—those catalytic actions that unlock progress across sectors. Whether it's sustainable food systems, universal social protection, or clean energy access, we need to double down on what works across the board.

By doing so, we can maximise impact even in a context of limited resources. We can move from fragmentation to coherence. From isolated efforts to integrated solutions.

B. Innovate financing

In addition to prioritising synergies, we must innovate how we finance sustainable development.

The scale of the SDG agenda demands more than traditional aid. No one doubts this. We need to unlock new sources of capital and rethink how we mobilise and deploy resources.

That means exploring blended finance models that combine public and private investment to de-risk sustainable ventures. It means scaling up green bonds to fund climate action, tapping into diaspora remittances as engines of local development, and considering digital taxation to ensure that the digital economy contributes fairly to global public goods.

But innovation in financing is not just about mechanisms - it's about mindsets. We must engage the private sector not only as funders, but as partners. Here, Belgium, through the work notably of Enabel, has a strong experience in promoting public-private partnerships in third countries in projects that align commercial and development goals that it can share with others.

The SDGs are not just a moral imperative - they are a market opportunity. Investing in sustainability is investing in stability, in future markets, in human capital.

And we must also leverage regional cooperation. No country can do this alone. By pooling resources, sharing expertise, and aligning strategies across borders, we can achieve economies of scale and accelerate progress.

C. Empower participation

Third, we must empower participation and see it not as a luxury, but as a necessity. It is what gives the SDGs their legitimacy, and what makes implementation effective. When people are part of shaping the decisions that affect their lives, outcomes are stronger, more sustainable, and more just.

Building on the idea of localisation that I presented before, we must strengthen local ownership. Communities are not passive recipients of development - they are agents of change. From rural villages to urban neighbourhoods, people must be supported to lead, innovate, and hold institutions accountable.

This means promoting inclusive governance, through citizen assemblies, youth councils, and the leadership of indigenous peoples and marginalized groups. These are not symbolic gestures. They are essential to ensuring that policies reflect real needs and lived experiences.

And we must support civil society - as watchdogs, as innovators, and as connectors. Civil society organisations are often the first to respond in crises, the closest to communities, and the most persistent in pushing for equity and justice.

As Belgian singer Stromae reminds us in “*Formidable*”, there is power in being seen and heard - even in our most vulnerable moments. His lyrics echo the experience of many communities who are invisible in decision-making processes. But when we truly listen - when we create space for those voices - we build the empathy and solidarity that sustainable development requires.

D. Strengthen data and learning

Fourth, we must strengthen data and learning.

To make smart decisions, we need better data. That means investing in data systems that are disaggregated, real-time, and accessible - so we can target resources where they’re needed most, track progress accurately, and adapt strategies quickly when things aren’t working.

In this sense, the work of **UN Global Pulse**, the Secretary-General’s innovation lab, is a powerful example of how we can strengthen data and learning to accelerate SDG progress. Global Pulse is pioneering the use of real-time, disaggregated data to better understand human well-being and assess the effectiveness of policy responses. Through its network of Pulse Labs, it develops high-impact analytical tools and promotes data-sharing partnerships across the UN system, governments, academia, and the private sector

But data alone is not enough. We also need a culture of adaptive learning, one where data is not just collected, but translated into action, and where learning is continuous, adaptive, and inclusive. One that values transparency, shares what works -and what doesn’t - and encourages

experimentation. Development is not linear. It's complex, and we must be willing to learn, unlearn, and evolve.

And also, we must humanise the SDGs. Behind every target is a person, a family, a community. Let's use storytelling to bring the goals to life - through lived experiences, local innovations, and success stories that inspire action. Through initiatives like **“Beyond Numbers: A New Approach to Impact Storytelling”**, UN Global Pulse is reimagining how we communicate change - using participatory storytelling to humanise data, break down silos, and amplify the voices of communities often left out of traditional reporting frameworks.

Because when people see themselves in the SDGs, they believe in them. And when they believe, they act.

5. Reinvigorating hope

In the face of daunting statistics and global uncertainty, it is easy to fall into despair. But we must resist that pull. Because this is not a moment for resignation - it is a moment for determination. A time to shift the narrative from scarcity to creativity, from fear to possibility.

Yes, the challenges are real. But so is the progress.

Across the world, communities are advancing the SDGs in bold and unexpected ways. In Rwanda, universal health coverage has dramatically reduced maternal mortality in the last 20 years. In Bangladesh, solar energy cooperatives are lighting up rural villages. In Belgium, youth-led initiatives are driving climate action.

So let us hold onto that hope- not as a passive feeling, but as a call to action.

Let us recommit. Let us collaborate. Let us innovate.

6. Closing

I'm reaching the end of my speech and would like to invite you all to imagine the world we could live in by 2030 if we acted boldly, together.

A world where every girl has the chance to learn and lead. Where no one goes to bed hungry. Where communities are resilient to climate shocks, and

economies are built on inclusion, not exclusion. A world where the SDGs are not just aspirations - but realities.

This vision is within reach. But only if we choose it. Only if governments, private sector, civil society, choose it, and work for it. Fund it.

So today, I want to thank all those who are already doing just that. The partners who stay the course. Belgium for organising this forum. The communities who lead with courage. The youth who refuse to give up. The civil society actors who hold us accountable. The innovators who show us what's possible.

In these challenging times, we are called to **reignite our ambition, refocus our efforts, and rebuild our systems** - to transform how we implement the SDGs, not despite the challenges, but because of them.

The SDGs are not just goals - they are a promise. Let's keep it.

Let's walk this path together - with courage, with creativity, and with hope.