Statement by

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Just a few weeks ago, world leaders adopted a bold and exciting new agenda for development that promises nothing less than to end poverty, inequality, hunger and undernutrition by 2030, while also tackling the issue of climate change.

This global consensus is a testament to the fact that governments can come together to articulate what needs to be done to secure our future. This is a tremendous achievement, and the SDGs are all the more impressive for having a timeline of only 15 years.

But the 2030 deadline underscores the urgency of the situation. Simply stated, the pace of destruction that has resulted from our unsustainable manner of living on this planet means that we no longer have the luxury of setting more modest goals with longer horizons. We must solve these problems swiftly, efficiently and sustainably.

Agriculture, and more broadly, rural development, are relevant for all the SDGs, and achieving the SDGs with the 15-year timeline will require putting rural people, particularly small-scale farmers, front and center. The women, men and children who live in the rural areas of developing countries represent three quarters of the world’s poorest and most undernourished people. They confront the challenges of poverty, hunger, and often conflict and the impact of climate change, on a daily basis with very limited resources. The majority lack access to even the most basic infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, markets, schools, healthcare, and financial services. Building their resilience, and transforming rural areas so that they offer economic opportunity and a decent and dignified living, are prerequisites to achieving the SDGs. This will require investment, not only in rural businesses but in securing rights, addressing inequality and exclusion, empowering women and providing opportunities for young people.

The benefits of investing in rural transformation are crystal clear. When rural people are able to build decent and dignified lives at home, they will not be forced to cross deserts and oceans in a desperate search for better lives and livelihoods. Our cities need rural areas to grow food and maintain the ecosystems that contribute to clean water and air. And all citizens benefit when there is a flow of goods, services, money and information between rural and urban areas. Indeed, it is time to do away with the “urban/rural” dichotomy and recognize – as the SDGs do – that we all succeed or fail, survive or not, together. We all live in the urban-rural nexus, on which our food, our health and our future depend. Development efforts must reach rural and urban people alike.
The good news is that there has never been a better time for agriculture. With the world population currently just under 7.4 billion and expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, agriculture is a growth industry. Most poor rural people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Investing in agriculture in developing countries is the single most effective method of improving food security, nutrition and income for the world’s poorest people while also stimulating broader economic growth.

Successful small farms lead to more vibrant rural economies, resulting in local demand for locally produced goods and services and spurring the growth of non-farm employment in services, agroprocessing and small-scale manufacturing. This, in turn, leads to a dynamic flow of economic benefits between rural and urban areas so that nations have balanced and sustained growth.

Importantly, by transforming rural areas into hubs of economic activity, we make them more attractive to young people. Young people are more likely to make the decision to migrate than older adults, other factors being equal. And in too many parts of the world, youth unemployment and underemployment are unacceptably high. Although today’s young people are more educated than ever, their prospects for employment look bleak when one considers that an estimated 600 million young people will be competing for around 200 million jobs over the next decade.

It is imperative that rural areas offer young people a range of attractive employment options that help channel their energy and creativity into reviving and sustaining their communities. We will need our young people to take their rightful place as the entrepreneurs, farmers and leaders of tomorrow, but this requires ensuring that they have opportunities to develop their skills where they live, in urban and rural areas alike.

As we work to achieve the SDGs, we must give special emphasis to empowering rural women. Women are increasingly the farmers of the developing world, but they have significantly less access than men to services, markets and assets. And rural women often lack authority in their homes, organizations and communities.

When you invest in a man, you invest in an individual, but when you invest in a woman you invest in a community. There is compelling evidence that women’s education, health, nutritional status and decision-making power have a significant impact on the health and nutritional status of children. Women are the primary caregivers in rural households, and when women earn money, they are more likely than men to spend it on food for the family. More than half of the reduction in malnutrition between 1970 and 1995 is attributable to improvements in women’s status and education.

Of course, achieving the SDGs by 2030 will require high-level commitment by governments around the world to good governance, accountability and results. The international community has a role to play in ensuring that its development investments are inclusive, empower the poor and disenfranchised, and do not marginalize the very people we most need to reach. Developing country governments also have a role to play by investing in the rural space and in agriculture, by introducing policies that enable poor people to invest in their businesses, and by clamping down on corruption, tax evasion and illicit outflows.

Achieving our ambitious goals will require stronger and more inclusive partnerships with agricultural producers and the public and private sectors. These partnerships need to build equitable relationships between organized small-scale producers and private companies, supporting inclusive and sustainable food systems. Governments can provide national strategies and an enabling environment. The private sector lends expertise and market access. Small-scale producers invest their labour, resources and knowledge.
Indeed, the main players in achieving the SDGs must be poor rural people themselves. Ultimately, development is not something we do for people, but what they do for themselves. Poor smallholders are not waiting for handouts; they are waiting for a supportive environment and equal access to resources and services, so that they can invest in their businesses with the prospect of making a profit, feeding and educating their families, and living dignified and fulfilling lives. It is our job to create that environment and ensure that poor people have the tools for success. They have shown that with those tools in hand, they can help build a better future for all.