

21 September 2015

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Mogens Lykketoft,
President of the 70th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine**

Peace, justice, dignity

Solidarity, cooperation, tolerance.

Values dear to many religions.

Values at the core of the United Nations.

Values which can help transform our world for the better.

Dean Kowalski, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

It is a great honour to be here in one of New York's most iconic places of worship. And a true privilege to speak to the congregation of such an inclusive church.

Only five days ago, I began my term as President of the United Nations General Assembly.

It is a position that I could never have imagined myself in, some 55 years ago, as I walked into the offices of the UN Association in Copenhagen to inquire as to the UN's work on disarmament, development, human rights and international cooperation.

It is a position of great responsibility, as I will preside over the assembly of the UN's 193 member states as we celebrate the UN's 70th anniversary and as we prepare to take some ground-breaking action to bring us closer to the vision of the UN Charter, to a world of peace, human rights and social progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as President of the General Assembly, it is clear to me that sadly we are a long way from achieving that vision.

Consider for a moment the world in which we all live:

A world where over 180,000 men, women and children died as a result of 42 conflicts last year where 59 million people were forced to flee their homes as a result of conflict and other humanitarian crisis,

A world where over 800 million people continue to struggle in extreme poverty while 92 individuals hold more wealth than over half of humanity.

A world of increasing demand on finite natural resources and where political and economic inaction is edging us ever closer to catastrophic climate change.

In such a world, the case for a new global deal of economic, social and environmental transformation becomes both a moral and a practical one.

In relation to poverty, to me, it is morally unacceptable that people right across the world face the injustice of abject poverty, because of where they grow up or who they are governed by that millions of people are denied a fair chance at life because they are born with disabilities or are part of a specific group that women and girls, one half of humanity, continue to face obstacles in many aspects of life because of persistent gender stereotypes and misogynistic laws or policies.

And it is clear that these realities are also contrary to our own longer term interests. Evidence repeatedly shows a direct link between poverty, marginalisation and discontent, which in turn can lead to conflict, violence and mass migration. It is also proven that the full participation of women in our economies and in decision making at all levels helps societies prevent and recover from conflict, delivers better educational outcomes for children and higher economic output. And it is widely acknowledged that the more empowered and independent people are, the less pressure there will be on public services and public expenditure.

In terms of our economy and our environment, it is morally unacceptable that we persist with an economic model that creates vast gulfs in wealth, income and opportunity a model that depends on patterns of production and consumption, particularly in western societies, which are massively depleting our natural resources and a model that will lead to climate change affecting those who did not cause this unnatural change more than those who did.

And it is clear that these outcomes are not in the interest of broader societal progress. It is increasingly accepted that economies function better with less not more inequality. It is also accepted that, on current projections, we simply cannot meet the needs and aspirations of 7 billion people if we, in the West, continue to consume as we do, and if those enjoying greater prosperity in the global south, seek only to emulate us. And it is equally clear that far from limiting our possibilities, a shift to a more sustainable and inclusive economy can bring enormous economic opportunities and better social outcomes.

Finally, in terms of peace and conflict, to me and I'm sure to all of you, it is morally indefensible that somehow, in the 21st century, we continue to bear witness to horrific conflicts and violence borne of failed governance, divisive politics, geopolitical power struggles and the rise of extremist ideologies. It is also indefensible that western countries dither as a mere 2% of the total Syrian refugee population arrive at their borders – refugees

who are entitled to protection without discrimination and it is equally indefensible that the global institutions tasked with preventing and resolving conflicts, and with protecting the human rights of those affected by them, seem incapable to fulfilling their mandates.

And from human suffering to lost generations, from infrastructural and environmental destruction to instability in the global economy, there is little doubt as to the incredibly harmful impacts which conflicts and violence have on the rest of society.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is, no moral, rational or economic justification for persistent poverty and inequality for a lack of action to protect our planet for the deadly wars and violent extremism we see before us today.

Change is possible, transformation is a must.

It can be done. And it must be done.

And in the year ahead, the United Nations has the opportunity to take some important first steps in that direction.

This Friday, world leaders will descend on New York to adopt the Sustainable development Goals. – 17 fundamental objectives which all countries – rich and poor – will commit to achieving over the next fifteen years. The crucial importance of these goals cannot be overstated. For they represent a major breakthrough for multilateralism, a major departure from old ways of thinking, and a new global consensus on the types of changes needed to bring about the transformation needed.

In December, leaders will again come together, this time in Paris, where agreement must be reached on an ambitious deal to adequately and comprehensively address climate change.

Elsewhere, there are of course no easy solutions to the conflicts that grip our world today, but there is always scope for greater efforts. A renewed effort is needed to bring an end to some of the worlds most destructive conflicts, particularly those in and around Syria. In the meantime, all countries must stay true to their international commitments to those fleeing war and persecution.

Ladies and gentlemen, over the coming year the UN can take some major steps towards a better and fairer world. But for transformation to happen on the scale required, action is needed from all quarters.

Today our interdependence and inter-connectedness is such that actors from all parts of the world and all sectors must work together to implement the Sustainable Development Goals, to avert climate change, and to bring an end to senseless conflict and violence.

From concerned citizens to informed NGOs, from progressive businesses to religious leaders and faith-based movements, from academics and thought leaders to small organisations in villages and towns around the world, we must all play our part.

And leaders must also step forward.

This coming Friday I will welcome His Holiness Pope Francis in the General Assembly. He is a leader that has already stepped forward with a remarkable strength with the demand for peace and tolerance, a social development with no-one left behind, and a future lifestyle that is sustainable for people and planet – all the basic ideals of the United Nations

World leaders should follow the outstanding example of Pope Francis with his moral message on climate, and his demand for more equality and more compassion.

Ladies and Gentlemen, to conclude, let me remind you of the words of the poet, Anatole France who once wrote that:

‘To accomplish great things, you must not only act but also dream, not only plan but also believe’

Let us all therefore both dream, and believe in a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

Let us place the values of peace, justice, dignity of solidarity, cooperation and tolerance, at the heart of everything that we do,

Let us act now to transform our world for the better.

I thank you and wish you all a very pleasant day.