

## Australia's progress against the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

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I'd like to start by acknowledging that we're on Gadigal country and pay my respects to elders past and present. It's a great honour to be in front of such an illustrious audience and, as we've already heard, the need for the conversation that we're having has never been greater. We wake up to learn that there are over a million people in rental stress in Australia today, a result of unemployment, rental increases and housing stress. And, of course, we live in a world where we can see before us the environmental and climate issues, particularly in northern Australia at the moment with unprecedented fires. We had unprecedented fires on the south coast of NSW in October, never seen before, and we're entering into a summer that will be one of our hottest, the continuing trend of extreme climate.

I was very fortunate that in September 2015, I was sitting in the General Assembly of the United Nations when the Secretary General gavelled the sustainable development goals to the world. They were released at a time when I think the parties, the member states of the UN, had a very strong view that what the world needed was a bold and ambitious plan that was time-bound to 2030. These goals are the Global Goals for 2030 and they were promulgated at a time when the world believed in multilateralism, believed in the global compact to solve some of our biggest issues. I think it's really significant to offer to you the fact that

it was Australia's foreign affairs officials who helped drive many of the very important components of those goals. They're often not thanked for their work and Australia is often not acknowledged as driving the goals, but our foreign officials throughout the UN and around the world were doing exceptional work to play Australia's role, particularly in the insertion of disability into every one of the goals.

Disability wouldn't have been mentioned but for our officials who sought to make sure that we think about disability in the same way we think about anything else under the goals, which I'll describe to you in a moment. And it was also our officials who worked with smaller countries such as Timor Leste to deal with the inclusion of Goal 17, which was for peaceful and transparent institutions. Again, we should be very proud of our officials who were helping those smaller nations to ensure their voices were heard.

So the Sustainable Development Goals', or SDGs', development was very serendipitous. We would not be able to secure this kind of agreement in the world we live in today. I don't need to tell you why. It involves certain personalities on the world stage but also a changing view about the role of the UN and the notion of multilateralism, but was unique at the time. We had come out of the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, which were about lifting half the world out of poverty and the MDGs did very,

very well. They met their targets about lifting the poorest out of poverty around the world.

The SDGs, however, took a different course. They weren't simply the work of the UN thinking about our poorest nations, they were the most widely debated and consulted goals that the UN has ever completed. They included the broadest consultation with every member state, with civil society and, importantly, with business — which had never been at the table for the MDGs and which we now see playing an extraordinary role through the actions of business and the private sector in helping to lift us to meet many of the goals. These goals actually act as a blueprint for a sustainable future. I encourage you to have a look at them. I will leave you with some information about how you can look at them yourself and understand why they're not simply a group of 17 goals with 169 targets that are baffling and impossible to meet. There are actually some very simple truths within the goals which I hope I leave you with a sense of optimism about.

What I find fascinating, following on from Hugh Durrant-Whyte and Hugh Mackay, is that the most success that the goals have achieved to date has come from the work of local communities, local governments and business, and it's been national governments that have actually lost their way and not made these goals a feature of their leadership. It staggers me today to think that our Prime Minister, the leader of our Opposition and many of our state Premiers don't talk about the global goals as a framework and a blueprint for Australia when most of our local governments do, most of civil society does, most communities are uplifting parts of the goals to make a statement about what a prosperous, inclusive, dynamic, sustainable

future could look like by using the goals as their blueprint.

You'll see the work of the goals in communities all around the world but particularly in Australia. I think it speaks to the desire of people wanting to come together as communities and neighbourhoods and using a framework that has a measurement system that tells us we're doing well to actually get on with the work. I keep imploring national leaders to pick up the goals the same way communities have because the language of the goals is about a future that we can all engage with.

Interestingly, recently in Singapore the former New Zealand Prime Minister and former head of the United Nations Development Program, Helen Clark, called for a dramatic stepping up of actions under the goals. She warned that now that we're three years into the program, we're nowhere near on track to meet many of the goals. Climate change targets in particular have been badly missed, the Paris Agreement compromised by those who would seek to walk away and much else that is contained within the goals. In essence, Clark points to the largest disconnect that I could imagine and I think, again, builds on the two Hughs' comments that we're actually living in a time where we're seeing the largest disconnect between the reality of our looming challenges, and they are getting much closer, and how we sustain humanity and our societies with an acceptance of the need to address them. That collision is causing us delay and a potential crisis.

A quick reminder about what these goals are. As I've already said, there are 17 goals under which there are 169 targets. It sounds like a lot but actually they're easy to deploy across a country like Australia. I want to read you something from the 2030 agenda which

sets the tone for how the goals work. Targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. Each government should decide how these aspirational and global targets should be taken and incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies. That's the prescription for national governments. As I said, many countries have done that, many countries, particularly the Scandinavian countries, but others have built these goals into their national aspiration plans for their nations and are working towards meeting them. Australia is not one of those countries, I'm sad to say.

By signing up to the goals, as all member states or almost all member states did, there's an obligation to follow up and review. There'll be review mechanisms that will actually hold governments, national governments and member states to account as to how they're progressing. So what are we dealing with on a macro scale, picking up on the comments already made about what our sustainability challenges are? At a global level, those challenges are, unlike Australia, the rapid population rise. We'll have global population at nearly 10 billion human beings by mid-century, driving a massive demand for food, for land, for jobs, for energy and water, let alone for a sense of community.

The biggest mass urbanisation program in the globe's history is underway. Most of our population growth and movement will be in cities by the middle of the century. You know already about climate change and environmental degradation. These are already harming human and ecological health and are threatening our future in many respects. There is a need to think about how eco-

nomie prosperity and decent jobs fit within the context of these challenges. I think that goes to the question as to what the measurement might be of what prosperity is rather than GDP. Is it gross national happiness, is it about a different kind of function of how we exist as societies and how we will live?

And, most importantly, the SDGs acknowledge that we are an interconnected and collaborative world and that we must connect and collaborate. One of the goals is all about that. Goal 17 talks about partnership, and without partnership none of the other goals can actually be reached. These are all interdependent goals that require a commitment and a belief that doing things will lead to a better outcome and they are all measurable. Many people scoff at a process like this just as they scoff at the United Nation or multilateralism, but I think the critics ignore the very real and positive impact that concrete goals can have on governments, on businesses and on communities.

I've spoken to the chairman of our group, the National Sustainable Development Commission, chaired by John Thwaites, a previous deputy premier of Victoria. John brought us back together as a National Sustainability Council after we were sacked by a particular government when we were first created. We've come back together as a group of volunteers to keep doing the work on our own progress. And John makes the point that, for politicians, the only way other than going to the ballot box that governments can be held to account is to have measurable outcomes. And he points to things like water conservation targets that have been met by governments suffering severe drought consequences or lowering of dams, that without a framework for measurement, things

just don't get done. So having a goal with a plan for the future lends itself to the kinds of work that, at the community level, we want to do but also what we should be doing in our businesses and in our governments.

There are some positive stories to tell. The SDGs, as I said, came out of the success of those Millennium Development Goals and they looked just at poverty, health and education in developing countries and they applied from 2000 to 2015. And during that time, poverty was almost eradicated in the way the then goals were measured in those developing nations. Primary school enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa during that time increased from 60 to 80%, disparities in primary school enrolment between boys and girls were eliminated in those countries at the time. Many gains were made under the MDGs but, as we've heard already this morning, the world is going backwards in a number of areas. Inequality inside countries, within most nations, is increasing. It's a global phenomenon. The top 20 households in Australia now own 62% of total wealth and the bottom 20% of Australian households own less than 1%. It's a staggering figure.

We've gone backwards on climate change and the environment. Conflict remains the biggest threat to human development. Sixty million people are currently displaced across our world, the highest level since the Second World War and we see a national response to that not only in our part of the world but around the world when we think about the discussion of borders and how we treat migrants and refugees. These challenges affect all countries, they affect us and I think it's why the SDGs provide us with an antidote to some of those problems that we can act on collectively because all of the SDGs

are interlinked and they provide us with a framework of thinking about what a more successful world might look like.

I have mentioned the Sustainable Development Council which was created in 2012. At the time, it was supported by a government which believed there was a need to provide an independent assessment of how we were going against our sustainability criteria. Then we were sacked, as I said, and decided that, with the challenges ahead, that we would come back together as a group of volunteers. I'll give you the reference to our website but we stand as a group of people, concerned citizens, if you like — from economics, from climate change, science, the humanities, from education, from politics — wanting to actually share with the general community how we're going on these issues. And our first report was called *Conversations With the Future*, to try to encourage people to use our data to think about that future. And in September 2018, we put a lot of our data up on our website for you to look at that actually tracked Australia's progress against the 17 goals. And we have a very simple vision, which is for a smarter, more inclusive and sustainable Australia, believing that our culture of pragmatic problem solving, particularly when it comes to our young people who are desperate to get involved in this problem solving, should actually unleash the potential and our capability to address the big challenges not just facing Australia but challenging the region that we live in.

I'll give you a little bit of a backdrop as to where Australia finds itself against some of the goals and I'll leave you to have a look at our website so you can read that for yourself. You've already heard that Australia has seen 27 years of uninterrupted economic growth. It's longer than any other advanced economy.

We've had a 29% growth in real household incomes since 2000, although almost no growth since 2012, which might tell you something about those wealth disparity and inequality numbers I've already quoted. Yet when the Council for Economic Development in Australia, CEDA, this year polled the broadest base of Australians ever asked this question about how they felt about their place relative to 27 years of unbroken economic growth, only 5% of Australians said they have been the beneficiaries of that growth, 5%. And 40% of those surveyed, in our representative sample of the country, said that the only people who have benefited from economic growth have been big business, big companies and executives who work within them, 40% of the country.

They're quite extreme numbers and they speak to Hugh's comment, I think, about how, as a society, we look to these big trends and how we feel and it is the case that a much larger cohort of Australians have done well out of economic growth. We know that to be the case, we know that it has done many good things for Australians. But to have 95% of those surveyed say they don't feel that they've had any of that advancement in the same way that the top end of town has tells us how people are feeling. But in the middle of that, where business has done well, business investment in research and development, and I could add education to that, which should help us drive future growth, has actually declined since 2008 and it's getting worse. Collaboration between industry and research and academia could be a lot stronger. We have the capacity to do that but we're not very good at it in a consistent way. Our research is generally funded by industry, lower than the OECD average and

our investment in knowledge-based capital is declining.

Our unemployment is lower today. I'm not going to open up the entire conversation about this but we must all think about underemployment. There has never been a time of greater underemployment than we're suffering today and underemployment in our younger people is at crisis levels. In some parts of the western suburbs of Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide, unemployment for younger people is sitting between 20, 30 or 40% and underemployment — that is the number of people who are doing many jobs just to get by but still don't earn enough income to really have a good life — is growing rapidly in this country.

And our underemployment figures don't collect that data in the way that you hear about the unemployment figures. These are people who want to work more hours, be paid a good wage and want to actually have a good quality of life but feel that the volume of part-time work they're doing on low salaries is not getting them ahead and not helping them advance and they're feeling that pain very deeply.

You already know that the cost-of-living pressures are real. We see that in the energy debate and electricity prices have risen, and while our wages are 25% higher than they were in 2000, as I've already said, there's been no real wage growth since 2012. So the cost-of-living pressures felt by households have probably never been greater and now we're seeing greater pressure coming on with the decline in house prices and house values so people are beginning to feel the stress.

What does that say about our society? We've heard a bit from Hugh Mackay about health. In this country, we've had great gains in life expectancy. We have one of the high-



est life expectancies in the world. It used to be 70 years, and now 82.5 years is the average life expectancy, but a high proportion of Australians are obese, as Hugh pointed to, and our tertiary qualification levels, whilst rising, are not being deployed into our society in the way that they best could be put to work to help solve our issues. Investment in early childhood education and care is low at a time when we should be focusing heavily on early education and our childcare systems. It has almost never been lower. And, as I've already indicated, income inequality in Australia remains relatively high. Our wealth inequality is rising, as I've already indicated, and the Productivity Commission is right to let us know that growth has benefited people not across the full range of incomes. So we've got a very big task ahead of us with reducing that income equality.

A topic close to my heart and to half of this room almost is the gender pay gap. We haven't talked about women specifically here but Australia's gender gap remains substantial and stubbornly at a rate that is hard to shift, despite some good activity in some businesses. And the statistics around violence against women are truly shocking. Sixty-three women have been murdered this year, most in their homes by a previous or current intimate partner, 63 dead women.

Hugh mentioned our health impacts. It is true to say today that violence against women is now a greater health risk factor for women than smoking, drinking or obesity because of the prevalence numbers. One in every two women in this country, half of all women, will experience or has experienced sexual harassment at work or on the street and one in four women will experience or has experienced domestic violence from an intimate, current or previous partner. It's a

national epidemic. Let alone the fact that our superannuation balance for women is 42% lower than for men and we're now seeing the rise of women living on the streets and being very poor in their old age but caring for others.

I could take you through the numbers on the scale of our carbon emissions challenge but I think there are enough scientists and climate experts in the room to know this to be an enormous problem for Australia. We are way off track to meet the 26% Paris targets. We've become much more water efficient, we're doing a lot of good things in the environment but on the essential issue of our carbon management, we have a huge job ahead of us. So, despite a history of really strong economic growth, our children and grandchildren do now face the prospect of being worse off than we were and than earlier generations were and we are at the point of passing a burden on to them of fixing climate change, inequality, gender equality and the like and we're also saddling them with high debt. You've heard about those numbers already, unaffordable housing and an exclusion from our society. What we're not doing is positioning ourselves properly to thrive in this changing dynamic economy.

On behalf of the council that I represent, we think that we can identify trends to do better. We think the goals actually provide the best way for us to do that and that's why we have labelled our report *Transforming Australia*. To achieve our goals, we're going to have to overcome collectively the short-term focus that currently dominates our political landscape particularly, less so in our business world. Our business world is getting better and many businesses now use the Sustainable Development Goals as the measure of their performance for their shareholders,

much more so than national governments. We think we can actually use some of the vernacular — our Prime Minister likes using the vernacular — so we just think we need a fair go for the next generation and not pass on all these burdens and help make this transition and transform Australia.

Hugh mentioned that we need compassion, kindness and respect. I would also add that what the goals give us to do, properly deployed, properly understood, shared amongst our community and particularly led by large institutions including government, will give us a sense of an old-fashioned principle called stewardship. We don't see enough stewardship. We see lots of people claiming to be leaders, claiming to be taking us in some direction, but I think good old-fashioned stewardship, to be a steward of this country, to be stewards of our communities, stewards of our institutions, stewards on behalf of our younger people, is the way in which I like to interpret the goals, underpinned by compassion and kindness and neighbourly aspiration.

So I'll leave it there for the moment. Look at <https://www.sdgtransformingaustralia.com> You can find our full report there. It really is just an SDG progress report. It gives you all the data that you need to know about what's going well, what's not going so well, how you might use the data yourself in your institutions, how you might lobby governments to use this framework to achieve better outcomes given our good economic growth and I commend it to you.

### References

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