

SDGs & Philanthropy “Challenges and progress of environmental philanthropy as a key player for the SDGs achievement”, Velux Foundation, Sunday, 3.15 pm, 17 Sept 2023, CR11, UN, New York – Speech by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG’s Special Envoy for the Ocean

Ladies and Gentlemen

Warm greetings and gratitude for the opportunity of addressing you all today.

I am going to spend the next five minutes setting out what ocean-related action the world is taking to address the triple crises of global warming, biodiversity loss and pollution. I’ll then spend the following five minutes talking about what I see as philanthropy’s place in the strengthening of that action.

UN diplomats are rightly criticized for our overuse of acronyms, but please allow me one that will recur throughout my remarks today: SDG14. The fourteenth Sustainable Development Goal sets out to conserve and sustainably use the ocean’s resources, and I’ll be taking it for granted that you all have a cursory idea of SDG14’s targets covering such topics as marine pollution, ocean acidification, protection of marine ecosystems, and the ending of overfishing and harmful fisheries subsidies.

Anybody who is paying attention must be aware we exist at a pivotal time for our species. The triple crises are an existential fact. Evidence for that abounds: the atmosphere and the ocean are heating at alarming rates, planetary boundaries are being crossed, biodiversity (think life) is atrophying, and you’ve all heard the calculation that following our current path, there’ll be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050. As Secretary-General Guterres has said, we have been at war with Nature itself, and the time has come for us to make peace.

My daily mantra is: there can be no healthy planet without a healthy ocean, and the ocean’s health is currently measurably in decline. That said, I have come to believe that we will effectively overcome two of the main causes of that decline, namely marine pollution, particularly plastic pollution, and harmful human activities related to the fishing industry. We should by the time of SDG14’s maturation in 2030, have the frameworks in place to control, if not to completely eliminate those two travesties against Nature.

But correcting the course of ocean acidification, ocean deoxygenation and ocean warming is more pernicious battle, due to the long-term effects of what we’ve been putting into the planet’s atmosphere. Make no mistake, there is one central cure for the damage being done to the ocean’s health, and that is rapid reduction of anthropogenic greenhouse gases in the Earth’s atmosphere. In short, we must stop burning fossil fuels!

While we grapple with powerful forces to make up on the shortfalls in our implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, we can take great heart from the fact that there has been of late, a wave of international consensus in support of correcting the course of our relationship with Nature.

Starting in Nairobi in February last year, with the UN Environment Assembly's decision to begin negotiations for an internationally binding treaty to control plastic pollution, we have been witnessing a remarkable run of hard-won multilateral agreements, all of which have positive impacts on SDG14's prospects for realization.

Happily, the International Negotiating Committee established to realise the plastic pollution treaty is now working on a text that will come under the spotlight in Nairobi this November.

In Montreal last December, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (that's basically all of us), after a drawn-out process that crossed continents to overcome Covid's challenges, came to a remarkable international consensus and adopted the Global Biodiversity Framework. This was a massive step forward for SDG14, especially through its agreement to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030.

And then, along with its other welcome provisions in favour of good governance of the High Seas, the recently adopted BBNJ Treaty (okay let's call it the High Seas Treaty) also gave a major boost to the Framework's 30% target, through its introduction of Area Based Management Tools that point towards the establishment of large Marine Protected Areas in the High Seas.

Meanwhile SDG14 still labours under the 34% over-fishing statistic reported by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) for assessed global fish-stocks. One in five fish are estimated to be caught illegally. But with every new signature of FAO's Port State Measures Agreement, we come one step closer to eliminating illegal fishing.

And at the same time, work on the elimination of harmful fisheries subsidies continues to make steady advances at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), with ratifications of last year's WTO decision on illegal fishing gathering momentum, and negotiations on subsidies leading to overcapacity moving in the direction of adoption at the WTO Ministerial in February 2024.

Following on from the massive support SDG14 received from the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon last year, we are now building towards the third UN Ocean Conference to be held in Nice in early June 2025. These conferences were brought into existence to support the implementation of SDG14, filling an otherwise empty space.

And so, all in all, I tip my hat to the international community for what it's done over the last two years to get the frameworks in place for us to make peace with Nature. When it comes to implementation, scale must not daunt us, for failure is just not an option. The healthy planet mantra is undeniable, and the demand of intergenerational justice is that we dedicate ourselves to reversing the decline.

The call to action to those countries that have yet to ratify what we've agreed to is, "please do so without further delay". Only then can our agreements come into force, enabling us all to then get into the critical business of implementation. To any of you with influence on government in your own countries, the catch cry is, "Ratify and implement!"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Where does philanthropy fit in this global struggle to overcome the triple crises of global warming, biodiversity loss and pollution, and how can philanthropy truly make a difference in advancing progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG14?

The first point to make is that philanthropy has a much-needed role to play in achieving the SDGs. The SDGs are a universal blueprint, agreed to by us all back in 2015, and every facet of society has a stake in their success or failure. We all have ownership of them, we all have a duty to stay faithful to their implementation, and to contribute to them to the best of our abilities as individuals, corporations and foundations.

Given the broad socio-economic coverage of the SDGs, I believe the great majority of philanthropies have missions that are affirmed by the SDGs. Thus you could say there is a fundamentally symbiotic relationship between the SDGs and the missions of most philanthropic funders.

The United Nations is a Member State organisation, in effect representing the governments of the day in its 194 Member States. Back at home and internationally, most Governments are open to cooperation with entities which support their own priorities and help them meet international commitments. A case in point would be the Waitt Foundation's commitment to assisting Small Island States formulate their Sustainable Ocean Plans.

Here I make the point that in most cases philanthropy is independent of government. But to varying degrees, philanthropy can strongly influence government. This might be in the form of funding advocacy for a variety of policy positions that a government is considering or should be considering. Such funding might cover the review of legislation, policy think-tanks, the public awareness efforts, and social

media campaigns. Here one might think of supporting national progress for the ratification and implementation of the environmental agreements to which I've alluded. Other issues that spring to mind in this regard might be a moratorium on deep sea mining or the establishment of marine protected areas.

A further point of beneficial difference is that philanthropic funders can deploy capital wherever they think fit. They can invest in work that governments, UN agencies, and other funding bodies would not fund, because it is not yet mainstream. Over the years, I've observed so many examples of work at the edges, in time becoming the prevailing work at the centre, and in many cases it was philanthropic funding that made the work at the edges possible. The old adage says, "If you want to observe change, go to the edges," so I salute those who are putting orthodoxy's feet to the fire by testing the boundaries. It was not many years ago that the deepest parts of the ocean were thought to be devoid of life of any substance, but today our often under-funded marine scientists have unveiled a vast menagerie of bewildering life flourishing in the depths.

Philanthropy has another advantage, it has staying power. Most philanthropic foundations don't operate on 3 or 5-year funding cycles and can stay the course for however long is required to meet mission goals. The CEO of a large international philanthropy told me recently that the challenge comes when philanthropy steps back. He said it's important to have either solved the problem at hand, or to have an alternative solution to ongoing funding, with the transition structured early into investment planning.

Philanthropy has convening power. The combination of high-profile founders, significant capital, and a track record of impact can be very effective in bringing key stakeholders together around a table, even at very short notice. As we work towards next steps in SDG14 implementation, that convening role extends in my case to cooperation with a philanthropy that will contribute to the costs of a global meeting we're putting together to address ways to help stakeholders eradicate humanity's 34% overfishing record.

Philanthropy can be flexible in how it deploys capital. It can offer grants (tied or untied), contract work with specific deliverables, or the pooling of funds through so-called "collective philanthropy." The Global Fund for Coral Reefs is a case in point, or the Blue Nature Alliance with its consortium of philanthropic funders combining to build a US\$125M fund to deliver on protection of 5% of the ocean by 2027.

Increasingly, philanthropy is also leading the way in Impact Investing – deploying high risk capital that delivers a commercial return as well as positive ESG impacts. Here I have witnessed philanthropic investments in early-stage companies developing alternative fish meal and alternatives to plastic products, in the process de-risking these investments for other investors to follow.

And then, in the work to meet the targets of SDG14, many a representative of a Small Island Developing State has extolled the assistance they've received from philanthropy, citing nimbleness of decision-making and access provided to leadership, to institutions and to funding.

On behalf of them all, I applaud philanthropies' contributions to the advancement of the SDGs.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many of the SDGs palpably depend on philanthropy for any chance of achievement by 2030. Here I'm reminded of something that was written some two thousand years ago, "To whom much is given, much will be required."

I've already referred to intergenerational justice and I leave you with the thought that what is required of us is that we leave the world in a state in which our children and grandchildren inherit the continuity and are able to spend their days in the fullness of life.