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Open Working Group of the Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals United Nations

**Statement by Anders B. Johnsson
Secretary General**

Distinguished co-chairs,
Delegates,

I am very pleased today to help provide a parliamentary contribution to your reflection on the next generation of Sustainable Development Goals.

Since this session focuses on questions of food security and sustainable agriculture, as well as water and sanitation, I will try to situate my remarks in that context to make some larger points on the post-2015 agenda and its attendant SDGs.

A recent report by Oxfam found that “land acquired [by foreign investors] between 2000 and 2010 has the potential to feed a billion people, equivalent to the number of people who currently go to bed hungry each night. But the sad fact is that very few if any of those land investments benefit local people or help to fight hunger. Two-thirds of agricultural land deals by foreign investors are in countries with a serious hunger problem. Yet perversely, precious little of this land is being used to feed people in those countries, or going into local markets where it is desperately needed. Instead, the land is being left idle, as speculators wait for its value to increase and then sell it at a profit, or it is predominantly used to grow crops for export, often for use as biofuels.”ⁱ

Of course, food *in*security has many roots: questions about commodity markets, patent rights, land title, subsidies, access to finance, and discrimination – especially against women – also play a part. Yet, nearly all of these issues point to a perverse system that runs counter to what we know to work best from a sustainability standpoint: small holder farming, local food production and consumption, low impact organic agriculture and so forth.

Beneath this surface, there are core questions of equity, access, and power and how they condition our economies. They were part of a debate the IPU held at its recent 128th Assembly in Quito, Ecuador, on the limits of growth and on the possibilities that a focus on human *well-being* may present for the new development agenda and the SDGs. Let me discuss briefly two key messages from the outcome of our meeting, the Quito Communique, which is available in the room.

The first message is that we need to rethink our growth-centric economic model of development and that we need new measurements of progress to complement Gross Domestic Product. While material growth is very clearly necessary to lift billions out of poverty, how we go about promoting growth will make all the difference: the prevailing growth model is flawed, because it depends almost entirely on ever growing and artificially propped up consumption in a planet where resources are ultimately finite.

The efficiency-seeking green economy will help us out of this impasse only if it manages to bring consumption under control. For this to happen, we need a new incentive system: one that values sharing and distribution of wealth and resources, like land for small holders, over concentration; one that values solidarity, as we often find in farming communities, over corporate-driven competition; one that values the rights of all to a decent livelihood over the entrenched interests of the few or the more influential. To get to this vision, governments will need to show the way with appropriate legislation and regulation. As we learned the hard way from the economic and financial crisis, markets are not entirely self-regulating.

In short, we need a new economy that is focused on *well-being*: an economy that does not depend almost exclusively on resource-intensive material consumption but on things like education, health, culture, leisure and an overall sense of us living in harmony with nature and with other human beings. If we keep our sights close to this goal, we will still grow as individuals and as communities, but not in ways that undermine the environment or the social contract that binds us as human beings.

The cultural shift that this economic model entails – a sort of “less is more” philosophy - should inform all our policies for sustainable development at both national and international levels. Developing countries of course desperately need “more”, but we need to work with them to make sure that, from the start, their trajectory will be sustainable. A “happy medium” will need to be reached both between and within countries, in which, to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, there will be “enough for everyone’s need but not for everyone’s greed.”

The second message that came out most forcefully from the Quito assembly is that there can be no development without democratic governance. Democratic governance, and by extension the rule of law, hinges on participation, transparency and accountability. From our perspective, it is both an end in itself and a means to all other goals.

It is an end because participation is not a luxury but an entitlement and a key dimension of well-being: being well fed cannot compensate for being left voiceless or excluded. Whatever is said or done on behalf of the people must be open to scrutiny, so that people can trust their institutions to work for the common good. Democratic governance is also a means to development because, as the case of food clearly illustrates, who decides what for whom, and *how* decisions are carried out, can dramatically alter the outcome. We will not get the SDGs right without democratic governance in the mix. This is also strongly suggested by recent authoritative reports and consultations.ⁱⁱ

I talked at the outset about land, but similar arguments for fair access and representation also apply to water. As it says in the issue brief for this session, “people must be able to participate in decisions on water and sanitation that affect their lives.” In the final analysis, access to water and related issues of pollution and overexploitation are political questions: is water a public good, and if so, how should it be managed so that all can benefit? The way we settle such fundamental questions of “water democracy”, as some call it, will affect all other policies to preserve and share this vital resource for agriculture, industry and human development.

Delegates,

When the MDGs were first drawn up in the year 2000, they were hailed as an ambitious but realistic project. But as we approach the year 2015, the MDGs scorecard is a mixed one. I would argue that part of the reason is that, except for one or two indicators, democratic governance was left out of the MDGs framework.

But now we know better. A democratic governance goal that can adjust to different country circumstances and apply to all three pillars of sustainable development *is* doable. Over the last decade or so, we have learned many ways to assess progress in this field and across the board. A key institution of democratic governance is of course parliament: so we are developing a set of indicators to help assess their performance in fostering participation, transparency and accountability. We plan to offer those indicators also for your consideration.

When we asked the members of parliament who came to Quito, if they would support democratic governance among the SDGs, both as a stand-alone goal and as a cross-cutting dimension, the overwhelming majority of them said, yes. The report of that survey can be found on our Web site. A similar response can be seen from the *My World* survey, where citizens at large have placed “an honest and responsive government” as a top priority for the new development goals.

Beyond numbers and reports, there are of course actions that we need to remember: the man who sacrificed his life in protest over his basic right to operate a small business, and that in so doing sparked the Arab spring; the young people who started the Occupy movement to protest a financial sector that had run amuck; the Indignados that expressed the frustrations of countless unemployed in the face of

institutional paralysis – all of this tells us that people around the world are ready for real change.

Let's not let them down.

Thank you.

ⁱ *Our Land, Our Lives* – Oxfam, October 2012

ⁱⁱ *A Regional Perspective on the Post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda*

An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development – Sustainable Development Solutions Network, May 2013

Global Thematic Consultation on Governance and the Post-2015 Framework- Pan-African Parliament, Johannesburg, February 2013