

**Remarks by Ambassador Elizabeth Cousens, U.S.
Representative to ECOSOC, for the US/Canada/Israel Team,
10th Session of the SDG Open Working Group, on
Consolidation of Focus Areas: Gender Equality and Women's
Empowerment, Education, Employment and Decent Work for
All, Health and Population Dynamics**

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Thank you very much, Mr. Co-Chair. Our team will speak to all of the issues in this session, concluding with gender.

First, education. Our team strongly supports a dedicated goal on education that reflects the experience of the MDGs and improves on them. That means emphasizing equitable access, quality education, and learning outcomes across our targets in order to give girls, boys and also adults the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to lead lives of dignity and opportunity.

We know how crucial it is to invest in human capital for the prosperity and health of our societies; we know how vital education is for the growing number of young people around the world – which makes a strong set of well-crafted education targets essential. All individuals should have access to and be able to transition successfully through the education spectrum, achieve universal literacy and numeracy, gain the skills and knowledge to meet the demands of the changing labor market, and lead fully empowered lives.

We see potential in a number of the targets in the Co-Chairs' document, especially equitable access to quality education at all levels, higher rates of completion for girls and boys, especially secondary education for girls, and effective learning outcomes including literacy, numeracy, and relevant job skills. All of these targets could use further sharpening, however, in order to be precise enough to have traction. We urge the Co-Chairs to incorporate reference to standards-based learning outcomes. The lack of attention to quality of education and educational outcomes is widely recognized to be a limitation of the MDGs that a next generation of goals should overcome.

We also encourage targets that speak to distinct stages of the learning spectrum, especially those proven to be the gateway to greater opportunities. We would thus emphasize targets that address early childhood development, foundational skills for learning, and 21st century skills. We suggest targets such as increasing the proportion of children able to participate in early childhood programming; ensuring that every child regardless of circumstance completes primary school able to read, write, and count well enough to meet minimum learning standards; ensuring that every child regardless of circumstance has access to secondary education, with emphasis on retention rates for girls with standards-based learning outcomes for all; and the number of young and adults, women and men, with transferable 21st century skills, including technical and vocational, for work life and future learning.

Much of this could be accomplished through refinement of the targets you have. And in all of these areas there is substantial research that shows how vital, as well as viable, these steps are. By contrast, we do not think a target on the content of educational curriculum is necessary or helpful, as national and local authorities will need to make these judgments for themselves.

Let me turn briefly to employment and decent work for all – clearly of fundamental importance to our agenda and an area of universal relevance where, like other goal areas, we all have work to do. I will just make a few brief points now, as we will later address decent jobs and employment in relation to a goal on inclusive, sustainable and job-rich growth later this week.

Any employment-related targets should be based on evidence that they are likely to stimulate the kinds of policies, investments and actions that will generate decent job opportunities. We, therefore, see promise in areas such as promotion of small and medium enterprises through creating an enabling business environment and boosting entrepreneurship; increasing the percentage of the working age population engaged in productive employment; increasing the participation of women, youth, and underrepresented or vulnerable groups in decent and productive work; protecting fundamental rights at work and eliminating gender-based and other forms of labor market discrimination. Targets such as these would be a powerful contribution to an inclusive growth goal that would underscore the reason growth matters and for whom it matters.

Next, health. Our team strongly supports a dedicated goal on global health. This must encompass securing the gains of the MDGs and addressing any unfinished business, as well as going further to address key transformative health issues for all people with the overall objective of ensuring healthy lives for all. We should prioritize health issues where we have the potential, truly, to vanquish major killers. We, therefore, see great potential for

targets on ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic and creating an AIDS-free generation, eliminating preventable child and maternal deaths, and preventing and treating communicable diseases including malaria, tuberculosis, and neglected tropical diseases – these diseases are a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in the developing world, especially in Africa, and we need to be serious about finishing the work of MDG 6.

Regarding child and maternal deaths, over 6 million children die each year from largely preventable causes, and maternal survival has a profound impact on newborn and child survival. Maternal health is vital to the health of families, to their socioeconomic prospects, and to vibrant communities and countries generally. And there is already a solid global consensus for maternal and child health, with over 170 countries committing to end such preventable deaths with quantifiable targets by 2035.

We should also explore targets on emerging global health priorities where we can make substantial progress, such as reducing premature morbidity from non-communicable diseases. We additionally need to consider how to reflect core drivers of positive health outcomes, like universal health coverage. Universal health coverage also relates to social protection floors that we have addressed earlier.

I see my light is blinking, but I beg your indulgence for a few more minutes. This group should also give serious consideration to outdoor air quality. We note that this isn't currently listed in the Focus Areas document, but outdoor air pollution is now ranked among the top global health risks, with responsibility for an estimated 3.7 million premature deaths worldwide.

Overall, we need to focus on either key health outcomes or essential drivers of them. Some of the areas in the Co-Chairs' document are less persuasive. While important, they may make more sense among a menu of possible approaches or instruments to reach targets – for example, dissemination of health knowledge, affordable vaccines, eliminating harmful practices, or tackling environmental causes of disease – rather than as targets themselves. We would also reinforce the links between health targets and other potential goals and focus areas, especially water and sanitation, food security and nutrition, gender equality – to which I'll turn in a moment – and clean energy. We will need to keep these in mind as we design our full framework of targets and goals.

Let me conclude, then, with gender equality and empowerment. Women and girls around the world continue to face profound inequalities in every area of life, in every country, and in both public and private spheres. Reversing that reality, and ensuring that women and girls can participate on an equal footing with men and boys in their economies, societies, communities and families, would be among the most transformative goals we could set in

the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Women lack equal access to productive assets and decision-making; the healthcare that is uniquely vital to their needs, indeed, often to their survival, is too frequently out of reach; and they remain unacceptably vulnerable to violence. These are global problems that need global solutions. We, therefore, strongly support a dedicated goal on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, alongside inclusion of strong gender equality targets across other relevant goals, as we have said previously.

We further see considerable potential for targets that go further than the MDGs, including: prevent and eliminate all forms of sexual and gender-based violence; end early enforced marriage; promote equal rights to productive assets and resources, including the right of women to own and inherit property, sign a contract, register a business or open a bank account; promote equal participation in decision-making in public and private institutions; and end discrimination against women in all its forms. Because gender equality will contribute to progress in every sector, we see potential for gender-specific targets in a wide range of focus areas as well.

We would underscore the particular importance of an emphasis on women and girls in an education goal. And we also reinforce the imperative that you have of gender-disaggregated data that will show us how well women and girls are doing against the goals and targets we set. Again, we cannot emphasize enough the transformative importance of this goal area.

Let me flag that we want to keep the perspective of child protection high in this regard. We will come back to this later but flag here that we see a target on eliminating all forms of violence against children as a powerful component of a peaceful and safe societies goal. We also see significant potential in a target on strengthening vital statistics including birth registration under a governance or institutions goal.

Finally, speaking on behalf of the United States, let me emphasize that sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights must be a target in this agenda, relevant especially to gender equality and health, but also crucial for all economic empowerment and wider prosperity. The evidence is overwhelming that gender equality and women's meaningful empowerment is inextricably tied to promoting women's human rights, including their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality. This is not just about access to services; it is about a fundamental right. Women must be able to control their own reproductive decisions, including determining the number, timing, and spacing of their children. This is essential to reducing maternal and child mortality and to enabling women to participate fully in their families, professions, and communities. Women die every day due to preventable childbirth

and pregnancy related problems. This is unacceptable and our agenda has a chance and an obligation to change that.

Thank you very much, Mr. Co-Chair.

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