

**Rt Hon Helen Clark**

***“The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the  
Role of Universities in Achieving Them.”***

**Keynote Address to 21<sup>st</sup> Association of Pacific Rim  
Universities’ Annual Presidents’ Meeting.**

**University of New South Wales, Sydney Australia.**

**10.05 am, Monday 26 June 2017.**

**Thank you for inviting me to address this 21<sup>st</sup> Annual  
Presidents’ Meeting of the Association of Pacific Rim  
Universities (APRU).**

**The meeting’s theme is *“The Future of the Pacific and its  
Societies”*, and how APRU members can respond to issues  
arising from climate change and social inequity. As a citizen  
of the Asia Pacific, a graduate of one of the APRU**

**universities, and one who has focused for decades on issues of equity and environment, this is music to my ears.**

**My speech this morning will comment first on the big and bold 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed by United Nations Member States in September 2015, and then on the vital and varied roles which the major research universities of APRU can play, and already are playing, in advancing them.**

*A. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs*

**In this first part of my speech, I will provide some context around the new global agenda and the obstacles to implementing it, and refer specifically to four of the SDGs which in my view pose particular challenges for the Asia Pacific region.**

Let me begin by making the point that this is a *universal* agenda and set of goals. That makes it fundamentally different from the *Millennium Development Goals* of 2000-2015 which were designed to apply only to developing countries, apart from the partnership goal - which had mixed success. The new agenda makes it clear that sustainable development is a challenge for *all* countries, and that all must step up to it. It is important for the integrity of the process that developed countries do take the agenda seriously, and do not treat it as irrelevant to their circumstances.

It is also a very *broad* agenda – seventeen goals, 169 targets, and 232 indicators. The UN’s membership has embraced it in all its complexity, and many countries rich, middle income, and poor are working hard to implement it. Its *core vision* is that we can lift human development for all without wrecking the environment on which all life on earth depends. But, achieving that will require us to *transform* the

**way in which development has traditionally occurred, and for which we have paid such a heavy price through damage to critical ecosystems, and often through widening inequality too – within and between nations.**

**The new agenda, however, *faces many challenges* – not least a volatile global economy and geopolitics; the perpetuation of extreme poverty with more than 3/4s of a billion people yet to rise out of that; entrenched inequalities; a persistent and growing jobs deficit, affecting youth most severely; widespread environmental degradation; many protracted conflicts and much citizen insecurity - with the consequences seen in the forced displacement of more than 65 million people, many deaths, and much hardship; and the constant threat of spillover of contagious disease because of weak health systems and operations in countries of origin and our high level of interconnectness. The breadth and depth of the obstacles to progress also calls for bringing all the strengths of universities to bear on finding ways of overcoming them.**

*Let me now briefly address four particularly challenging and salient SDGs for the Asia -Pacific region – SDG 10 on reducing inequalities, SDG 13 on climate change, SDG 14 on oceans, and SDG 15 on terrestrial ecosystem challenges.*

**The Pacific Rim region is known for its economic dynamism and rising living standards. In the APEC economies between 1981 and 2013, for example, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty fell from 53.4 per cent to 2.7 per cent -a reduction of almost one billion people. Yet since the early 1990s, the Pacific Rim has also witnessed rising income inequality. Unless effectively addressed, this will increasingly tear away at the fabric of societies. Both poverty and inequalities have to be tackled to achieve inclusive growth.**

**A fundamental premise of the new global agenda is to “leave no one behind”. SDG 10 is dedicated to achieving a**

**significant reduction in inequalities, and across other goals there are targets set on addressing inequalities in access to education, health, energy, water, and sanitation. As well, gender equality is a standalone goal.**

**These goals and targets should be fully embraced by the Asia Pacific. It's worth noting, for example, that the latest *World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report* places only Philippines and New Zealand on the Pacific Rim in the top ten ranked. I have no doubt, however, that if Asia Pacific countries tackle inequalities with the same determination which they have shown in tackling poverty, significant progress will be made.**

**In my view, one of the greatest challenges before the Pacific Rim region now is to move away from what has been its “*grow now, clean up later*” approach to development. That has been the traditional route to development globally, and**

**largely accounts for the peril our planet is in as it nears or tips over its boundaries. The work of Johan Rockstrom of the Stockholm Resilience Centre suggests that three of the earth's *planetary boundaries* have already been exceeded – those for biospheric integrity and for nitrogen and phosphorous loading, and that we have passed the safe operating space for two others – climate change and land system change.**

***Rapid economic growth* in the Asia Pacific has contributed to major deforestation, overfishing, global warming, and pollution of air and waters. The consequences of that are great for human health, *and* threaten the capacity of vital ecosystems to supply the services we need. The spillover impacts for those who dwell on the island nations of the South Pacific are especially severe.**

***The three environmental SDGs speak to these challenges:***

- ***SDG 13 complements the Paris Climate Agreement with targets to combat climate change and strengthen countries' climate resilience and adaptation capacity. While the goal is relevant to all countries and regions, it is particularly salient for low-lying atoll nations for which climate change is an existential threat.***

**The *World Risk Index*, which measures exposure to natural hazards and the capacity to cope with and adapt to such events, ranks four South Pacific states among the ten countries most vulnerable to disasters.<sup>1</sup> While being on the Pacific “Ring of Fire” accounts for some of the risk, the greatest number of disasters in the region’s Small Island Developing States relate to extreme weather events, which can only become more frequent and more intense with climate change.**

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<sup>1</sup> Vanuatu is the country with the highest disaster risk in the world, followed by Tonga, Philippines, Guatemala, Bangladesh, Solomon Islands, Brunei Darussalam, Costa Rica, Cambodia and Papua New Guinea.

**Even if the Paris Agreement is implemented in full, we can expect worsening weather for decades to come. To put that in perspective, one estimate suggests that even if we ceased all greenhouse gas emissions now, which will not happen, the climate would not stabilize for forty years, and then would settle at a higher temperature than normal for previous generations. The super storms like *Typhoon Haiyan* which devastated parts of *Philippines* are to me the face of the future, and we must support countries to build the level of resilience required to cope with such events. The *Green Climate Fund* is a very important mechanism for that, and deserving of major donor support.**

- ***SDG 14* aims to conserve and sustainably use *oceans, seas, and marine resources* for sustainable development.**

**Our oceans provide livelihoods and sustenance. Their**

**biodiversity has intrinsic value. By absorbing heat and carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, they help regulate our climate. Their health matters greatly to us all.**

**For the first time, the United Nations has convened a major conference on *oceans*, focused on SDG 14, which took place earlier this month in New York. Its outcome document, together with the more than 1300 voluntary commitments to action which were made, is seen as a breakthrough in the global approach to the management and conservation of oceans. As always, good intentions will need to be followed through with strong implementation.**

**It is pleasing to note that *APRU is among those who have made voluntary commitments on SDG 14*, undertaking to raise awareness about the problems the Pacific Ocean faces, support capacity building for research and cross-**

**disciplinary collaboration, and build a platform to connect ocean research and experts in the Asia Pacific with policy makers and international organisations. This is very much in line with the suggestions which I will make later in this speech on the role which universities can play across the SDGs.**

- ***SDG 15* aims to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of *terrestrial ecosystems*, sustainably manage *forests*, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss. The Asia-Pacific is home to some of the world's great forests – protecting them is vital for livelihoods, maintaining biodiversity, and tackling climate change.**

**While there is much to do to achieve this goal, there is also quite a lot of momentum on it, particularly on initiatives to achieve *zero deforestation* in supply chains for agricultural**

**commodities. Major partnerships between developing and developed country governments, corporations, small holders, indigenous peoples, and civil society are gaining traction in this area, with the *New York Declaration on Forests* issued at the *UN Secretary-General's Climate Summit* in 2014 being subscribed to by many parties.**

**The *Aichi Targets* set pursuant to the *1992 Biodiversity Convention* are good, but have struggled to make significant progress. One hopes that the strong focus on biodiversity in the *SDGs* might bring renewed and joined-up action on stopping the loss. Research published in the prestigious journal *Science* last year suggests that biodiversity loss is no longer within a safe limit, and that it threatens the planet's capacity to support human life - at the very time when our demands on it are rising sharply.**

***B. The role of universities in supporting the implementation of the new global agenda***

**Let me now set out the ways in which I believe universities can support implementation of the SDGs – and of related agendas: the *Paris Climate Agreement* is closely linked to the SDGs, and**

**so is the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction*. I know that many APRU institutions are already giving substantial support; for example, during the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, I visited one of your members, *Tohoku University*, where there was a collaboration with UNDP in a *Global Centre for Disaster Statistics*, aimed at helping countries get the information they need for disaster-resilient development. In my time at UNDP, we operated on the premise that if development isn't risk-informed, it can't be sustainable development.**

**1. It goes without saying that universities can contribute directly to achieving *SDG 4 on education*, which calls for equal access by 2030 “*for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university.*”**

**That SDG also urges that “*all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and an appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development*”.**

**That speaks to the breadth of the 2030 Agenda – not least to *SDG 16* which calls for the *building of peaceful and inclusive societies which provide access to justice to all, and which have***

*effective accountable and inclusive institutions.* I see a role for universities in building the human capacities to deliver such societies, as well as in building the professional and technical capacities needed to drive the transformation required to achieve sustainable development.

2. The SDG agenda is *complex and heavily interlinked* across goals, calling for new thinking about how the different strands of sustainable development can be advanced simultaneously. It seems to me that a major strength of the large research-based institutions of APRU is their *capacity for cross-disciplinary research* which can tackle the complex interactions between economies, societies, and the environment.

A good example from within your membership – and I am sure there are many – is the appointment by the *University of Sydney* of the world's first Professor of *Planetary Health*. This area focuses on the interaction

**between human and natural systems, and is an exciting way of looking at how humans and the earth's ecosystems can both flourish. Both research and action on it would be a powerful contribution to achieving the SDGs, as will be research across all areas of how we can live, work, produce, and consume more sustainably. The challenge will be for the universities to bring work across disciplines together to chart the way for sustainable development to be achieved.**

- 3. Flowing from the research contribution is the role which universities can play in support of *evidence-based policy-making*. While this is clearly not in vogue everywhere, nor across all fields, my impression from working with governments of all kinds around the world these past eight years is that most want to be able to make decisions which are likely to get the results they want, and are hungry for the information they need to make those decisions. Universities are a**

major source of knowledge, and should be seen as key actors in shaping informed decision-making.

4. Central to the 2030 Agenda is the concept of *accountability* – that progress on the agenda should be *monitored and reported on*. Here too I see universities playing a role, in contributing to the development of national progress reports, national indicators, measurement, and evaluation. This contribution could be made through official processes, independent publications, and/or in support of civil society and other efforts. The objective overall is to keep countries to the commitments they made when agreeing to the new universal global agenda. It is noteworthy that many countries are lining up to present their progress reports to the UN's *High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development* which convenes each July in New York.

**5. The role of *advocacy*: Universities enjoy high status in their countries. They are generally respected for their role in educating future generations, for their research expertise, and for their overall contribution to society. That makes universities powerful *advocates* when they choose to use their voice.**

**The *UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network* was launched by the previous Secretary-General to mobilise global scientific and technological expertise in support of the SDGs. Five leading Australian universities became the first signatories to a commitment which its Australia-Pacific Regional Network developed for universities. They agreed to contribute to the SDGs through their research and education activities, and by having inclusive and environmentally sustainable campuses and programmes.**

**This is powerful role modeling for other institutions of all kinds.**

**The ongoing voice of the universities in advocating for implementation of the new global agenda which works for people and planet will be invaluable.**

***In conclusion:***

**Achieving the SDGs will require very big partnerships across the economy and society. Universities are an indispensable part of those partnerships.**

**When the SDGs were being designed, the *academic community***

***was***

***part of the consultation process.* Now that we have the SDGs, and not least because they constitute a complex, cross-sectoral, and cross-disciplinary agenda, the input of academicians and**

**researchers continues to be needed to inform implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and advocacy.**

**A particular strength of APRU is that it is a network spanning developed and developing countries, and therefore is well positioned to support both *South-South and North-South Co-operation* – among and beyond its membership. It could support other universities to build capacity for contributing to sustainable development, sharing resources, analysing data, and creating and imparting knowledge.**

**Hopes are high for implementation of the new global agenda, notwithstanding the many obstacles in its way. It is therefore highly appropriate that the members of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities are on board with and full participants in the national, regional, and global processes which will drive progress. Individually and**

**together, the prestige, resources, and voice you have can  
make a major difference for people and planet.**