

Speech given by Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson Iceland's Minister for Foreign Affairs at the UN General Assembly 2018

Madame President,

The United Nations has played a critical role in promoting peace and development for all. Most indices, measuring human development tell a positive story - a story of our shared success. It is a story we should tell more often.

Technological advances and social and economic progress, we never envisioned, have become a reality. This gives us hope that mankind can once again prove that no challenge is too big to overcome - that we are right to dream big.

But dreams will only come true with hard work and determination. And our common goals will only be achieved through international co-operation and by accelerating the pace of progress significantly. The United Nations is the most important platform we have for this vital co-operation.

Iceland is a small country with high ambitions. A gender equal world is one of those. We have a solid record as one of the most gender equal countries in the world. This only happened through the hard work of women pioneers who changed our politics and our law to empower all women in Iceland. In good cooperation with a few good men, of course.

More needs to be done at home, but we stand ready to share our experience with other states. Gender equality is a master-key to unlocking sustainable development in all countries in line with the goals of Agenda 2030.

Another goal of ours, is to make sure that future generations will thank us, you and me, for having worked hard to save them from the worst consequences of climate change. In the Arctic, Iceland sits in the front row witnessing disappearing ice-caps and changing ecology. In the drier parts of the globe, desertification continues and causes serious challenges for people's livelihoods.

There is no doubt in my mind that climate change is fast becoming the single most serious challenge to global peace, security and development. While technology will be a big part of the solution with electric cars and renewable energy fuelling our economies, we will also need to nurture our soil and restore our land in fighting climate change.

This is reflected in the ambitious new climate strategy of the Government of

Iceland, put in place to meet our Paris Agreement targets for 2030 and make Iceland carbon neutral by 2040. Already, all electricity and heating in Iceland is produced from renewable resources. Our plan aims to phase out fossil fuels in transport and increase afforestation and restoration of wetlands.

We join a coalition of other countries that have already put such plans in place because, again, the only way forward is through co-operation. High-income countries must do their share to reduce emissions and help low-income countries adapt to the effects of climate change. In the end, our reaction to climate change has more to do with self-preservation than self-sacrifice.

Sustainable development, with particular emphasis on the oceans, climate and energy, and social and economic development will be among the guiding principles of Iceland's chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2019 to 2021. The Council has shown remarkable leadership in promoting sustainable development and practical co-operation in the High North and could be used as a model for other regions of the world, as local actions can drive global change.

Madame President,

Iceland is firmly committed to Agenda 2030, with its inclusive and bottom-up approach to development. It is a key policy priority for our government with a strong ownership and participation of both the private sector and civil society. We look forward to the upcoming Iceland's Voluntary National Review in 2019 and are hoping for a constructive feedback - encouraging us to do better.

Healthy oceans and sustainable fisheries will remain at the core of Iceland's foreign policy. To reach our goal on healthy oceans, all nations must join hands. The Convention on the Law of Sea and its implementing agreements provide a tried and tested framework for the work ahead. Through our experience, we have learned that the most effective approach to conservation and sustainable use of marine resources is the regional approach. This should also be the main approach in the new BBNJ-implementing agreement, currently being negotiated.

In the field of marine resource management, we stand ready to share our expertise with others. The same applies to gender equality, green energy and land restoration, all of which are a part of the UN training programmes in Iceland. Almost 5.000 experts from 100 countries have been trained since the first program was established almost forty years ago.

This has been made possible because this knowledge was fostered by Icelandic institutions and private companies, not least within the fishery and energy sectors. Development, trade and business can and should go hand in glove in implementing Agenda 2030, and we are pleased to note that the UN is taking concrete steps in making such partnerships stronger, bringing energy, innovation and know-how into national and global efforts.

In the past few decades we have also seen incredible advances in medicine. These advances have enabled us to live longer despite increasingly unhealthy lifestyles.

Yesterday, we vowed to actively co-operate for the prevention of non-communicable diseases and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

One neglected issue is neurological disorders, including spinal cord injuries, that affect a billion people worldwide. The Nordic countries are working towards a common research database on neurological disorders to facilitate medical advances in this area. We encourage others to do the same as, yet again, co-operation will be key to success.

Madame President,

Earlier this year, Iceland took a seat on the Human Rights Council for the first time. It was a proud moment for us, joining the Council at a time when Iceland celebrates our nation's 100 years of sovereignty and the 70 years anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We believe that human rights express the core purpose of the United Nations. Advancing the dignity and equality of all human beings must be our fundamental goal. Only that way can we attain peace, security and sustainable development for all societies. We firmly believe that upholding human rights is in the interest of every state.

The Human Rights Council should be the standard bearer for respecting, protecting and promoting human rights around the globe. Its member states must be willing to improve human rights in their own backyard - so our criticism does not fall on deaf ears. We will strive for improving the Human Rights Council through dialogue and co-operation.

Our priorities also revolve around promoting women's human rights and safeguarding our children's rights and freedom from violence. We will work to advance the human rights of LGBTI individuals and, lastly, focus on the connection between climate change and human rights.

Iceland's history underlines that the prosperity and well-being of nations is, to a large extent, dependent upon protecting and promoting the rights of our citizens – including civil, political, economic and cultural rights. As a part of our commitment to human rights, Iceland's new development cooperation strategy will incorporate a human rights-based approach. This means that further steps will now be taken to ensure that our development strategies and projects are formulated, implemented and evaluated with human rights at the forefront.

Madame President,

It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. The United Nations is the heart of international co-operation but, to reach our common goals, more efficient and effective United Nations is what is called for.

Iceland strongly supports the reform agenda of the Secretary General, making our organisation, which was built in a different era, fit to meet the challenges and

opportunities of the 21st century. We should continue to seek ways to reform the Security Council, its working methods and membership. It should not be held hostage by narrow national interests when our house is on fire. We need to show more unity.

Despite the progress we have made in every field, there are still difficult conflicts to be resolved. Even today, in the year of 2018, we are witnessing the use of chemical weapons, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, forced migration and other horrors, which should be echoes from a distant past - not everyday news.

The Syrian war has left the country in ruins, over 400.000 people dead and almost half the population displaced. A political solution continues to be the only viable path towards winning the peace. In Yemen we are witnessing a conflict that is fast becoming the worst humanitarian crisis in the world and there seems to be no end in sight as regional powerhouses continue to fuel the fires of war.

The issue of Western Sahara remains unresolved and the same applies to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The disregard for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia remain a wound in the European security architecture. We witness the mounting challenges in Venezuela and continue to receive reports on horrors committed against the Rohingya population in Myanmar. We must act and make full use of the tools available to hold those responsible to account, including before the International Criminal Court.

All these conflicts become even more disconcerting when we consider that almost 250 million children are being affected - casting a long shadow into their future. These conflict-stricken areas and other emergencies are also driving the greatest refugee crisis since the end of the Second World War and call for a co-ordinated response, which we hope the Global Compact for Refugees will be able to deliver.

Madame President,

The multilateral system, the very foundation of prosperity and peace, is under strain from new and challenging political agendas where simple answers are provided to complex questions - favouring strongman politics over diplomacy, free trade, democracy and human rights.

We need to stand by our convictions and principles, both at home and abroad, while addressing some of the legitimate grievances of our citizens. Iceland has been increasing its contributions to UN programmes and funds. We will continue to support the United Nations and stand by its founding values and principles.

Madame President,

December 1st 2018 marks the centenary of Iceland's independence and sovereignty. This period has been characterised by rapid economic growth and social development - giving birth to a society that scores high on almost all development indices.

One could be tempted to say that this success was all our own making and fortune, but that would be far from the truth. The bedrock of our independence and success has been the international rule-based order with its open market, free-trade, multilateral institutions, liberal democracy and international co-operation.

This foundation should never be taken for granted and it falls on us, the member states of the United Nations, to make sure the future generations can enjoy the same benefits.

Thank you, Madame President.