UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
68TH SESSION

GENERAL DEBATE

STATEMENT BY

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Please check against delivery
Mr President,
Secretary-General Ban,
Dear Colleagues,

1 I warmly congratulate Your Excellency Mr John Ashe on your election as President of the 68th General Assembly, and wish you success during your term.

Mr President,

2 Over the last decade, the world has experienced a string of crises. Development has slowed and confidence in the global economic system has been shaken. There are signs of recovery but growth remains anaemic and uneven. Unemployment is high in many countries, particularly among the young. This has exacerbated problems like increasing poverty levels, widening income gaps, social instability and a decline in public trust in governments and institutions. Extreme poverty remains a major concern in many parts of the world.

3 Violence and conflict are as great a threat to global stability as poverty. The international community must respond firmly to such threats. In this regard, Singapore welcomes the unanimous adoption of UNSC Resolution 2118 on the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria. We strongly condemn the use of chemical weapons under any circumstances, which constitutes a violation of international law. We remain deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Syria, and hope that Geneva II will be convened quickly to find a political solution to end the conflict and violence. We also offer condolences to the government and people of Kenya over the brutal attacks in Westgate Mall— a painful reminder of the need to remain vigilant against terror. All countries must unite against violence and terror in order to create an environment in which sustainable development can be pursued.

4 The global eco-system is also under stress from the transnational effects of human developmental activities. Human progress has come at the expense of environmental degradation and climate change. Deforestation, desertification of land and transboundary pollution of the sea, land and air, degrade our quality of life and threaten human civilisation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POVERTY ERADICATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

5 We cannot go on with business as usual. We need to re-think and re-tool our economies and societies, and place poverty eradication and sustainability at the centre of our development agenda. The President’s choice of “The Post-2015
Development Agenda: Setting the Stage” as the theme for this year’s General Assembly is therefore particularly timely.

6 The 1987 Bruntland Commission of the UN defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This should remain our guiding principle as we negotiate the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

7 The UN has a critical role in the evolution of the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Only the UN, with its universal membership and access to global data, has the standing to establish a new global development agenda that is inclusive, effective and adaptable. The UN has adopted an inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach to gather the views of member states and harness the energy from civil society. Several mechanisms, including (i) the High Level Political Forum, (ii) the Open-ended Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, in which Singapore is participating actively, and (iii) the Working Group on Sustainable Development Financing, have been set up. We strongly encourage the UN to demonstrate leadership and weave these strands of discussion into a single, clear framework. This will allow member states to focus their attention and prioritise their resources to meet the critical challenges.

SINGAPORE’S APPROACH TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT

8 Singapore understands very well the importance of poverty eradication and sustainable development in securing a country’s future. When we became independent in 1965, we faced daunting challenges. To uplift our population, which only had a small number of skilled workers and graduates, the government focused on education and skills development. To create jobs and alleviate poverty, we also gradually moved our industries up the value chain towards higher-skilled and innovation-focused sectors. Given Singapore’s land and resource constraints, sustainable development was a necessity, not just a slogan. At 700km², Singapore is slightly bigger than Manhattan but smaller than the five boroughs of New York. To ensure that our city state remained liveable, we had to ensure that our policies on housing, infrastructure, transport and the environment were well-integrated into a long-term and holistic vision.

9 Over several decades, we have managed to pursue growth whilst preserving a good living environment. For instance, despite being densely populated and highly urbanised, our greening efforts have resulted in more than 50% of Singapore being covered by vegetation. The Singapore Botanic Gardens, founded in the 19th Century, is the only city botanic garden in the world to include a tract of original, primary rainforest. Despite our rapid development, we have managed to preserve much of our biodiversity; one of our nature reserves, Bukit Timah, contains more
plant species than the entire North American continent.

10  We have also developed creative solutions to overcome some of our resource constraints. Take the example of water. Singapore now imports more than 40% of our water needs. To meet our drinking and industrial needs, we use a variety of methods, including collecting water through reservoirs, desalination of seawater, and cutting-edge membrane technology to reclaim waste water into high-grade, ultra-clean water, which we call NEWater. When Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon visited Singapore in March 2012, he was impressed enough by our water management to make a toast with NEWater, rather than wine, calling NEWater “something far more valuable – the elixir of life”.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

11   Let me now turn to the Post-2015 Development Agenda and suggest three priority areas.

12  First, we should learn from the example of the Millennium Development Goals. We should avoid being prescriptive. As each country is unique, countries should be allowed to exercise flexibility in which goals they choose to prioritise and how they will achieve them. The new global development roadmap should have poverty eradication and sustainable development at its centre and should converge around a single clear set of practical and quantifiable goals. We should keep to this outcome-based approach, and not forget that the core purpose of the Post-2015 Development Agenda is to improve the lives of our people. Today, 1.2 billion people still live in extreme poverty. This is a staggering figure.

13   Second, we should emphasise urban management and the intertwined issues of water and sanitation. According to UN Habitat, more than half of the world’s population live in urban areas. By 2050, 7 out of 10 people will live in urban areas. Many cities are already under strain. More than 2.5 billion people lack access to basic sanitation and another 800 million do not have safe drinking water. 2,000 children die every day from diarrhoea. This crisis will be exacerbated as more people move to crowded cities where the infrastructure cannot grow fast enough to support them. Singapore tabled a resolution in July which was adopted by the General Assembly to designate 19 November as World Toilet Day. We hope that this will encourage countries to take a close look at how the nexus of urbanization, water and sanitation can be better managed.

14  Third, it is important for the views and concerns of small states to be incorporated in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Small states form more than half of the UN’s membership. Many, especially Small Island Developing States
(SIDS), are among the more vulnerable members of the UN family. Singapore identifies closely with our fellow SIDS countries’ urgent concerns. The Third SIDS Conference in 2014 will be an important milestone, and Singapore has participated actively in all the preparatory meetings so far. At last year’s inaugural Conference on Small States, which was organized by the Forum of Small States (FOSS), Secretary-General Ban agreed that small and vulnerable states deserve special attention. Singapore will continue to work with the members of FOSS to share the perspectives of small states and ensure that our views are factored into the evolution of the new global development roadmap.

SHARING SINGAPORE’S DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCE

15 Although Singapore is a small country, we will continue to play our part in assisting other countries in poverty eradication and furthering the agenda for sustainable development. We established the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) in 1992 to share our development experience with our friends - both our successes, and our mistakes. We believe that technical assistance and capacity building is more effective in creating the right conditions for growth.

16 More than 80,000 government officials from 170 countries have received training under the SCP in diverse areas like sustainable urban development, water management and human resource development. To support our engagement in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, we will develop and customise new programmes on sustainable development and climate change that meet the needs of SIDS and least developed countries.

17 Singapore has also been working with other governments to promote sustainable development internationally. In 2007, Singapore and China embarked on a joint project to develop the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City, which is envisioned to be a city that will be “socially harmonious, environmentally-friendly and resource-efficient”. This will become a model for sustainable urbanisation in China. By 2020, the Eco-City is intended to be a low-carbon green living environment about half the size of Manhattan which will house around 350,000 people. Singapore will also continue to share our experience in sustainable urbanisation, through Singapore-led events such as the biennial Singapore International Water Week and World Cities Summit.

18 The only way to secure our collective future is through poverty eradication and sustainable development. The next two years will be critical for the world as we embark on an ambitious journey to map out the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The UN must play a leadership role. Singapore is committed to, and will work closely with member states, to achieve this.