

Snippets from 74th UN General Assembly 2019 Part II

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There is much to write about the 74th UN General Assembly. Aside from the speeches in the big hall during which, Heads of State/Government or representatives (mainly Foreign Ministers) line up to articulate aspects of their respective foreign policies, the 74th UNGA had 2 additional Summits: first one was on climate. The second was on sustainable development.

I did not attend the summit on climate though an important issue of our time. Bahrain was adequately present though. Dr. Mohamed Mubarak Bin Daina, Chief Executive of the Supreme Council for Environment had attended. Desertification is becoming a problem in West Africa as in other places. Many conflicts and suspicions of groups of people by others is emanating from a climatic problem like this. The drying up of Lake Chad has resulted in lack of jobs for many.

As a kid, there was a particular fish that was caught in Lake Chad, dried and distributed to southern Nigeria that provided nutritional support. It was means of livelihood for many young people around Lake Chad. Today, the Lake cannot support many young men around it since it is now about 10% of what it used to be. Studies are showing that many unemployed youths are turning into being foot-soldiers for Boko Haram. Well, Nigerian governments, supported by international entities have been aiming at replenishing the Lake. I believe President Buhari would have repeated the calling of attention to this problem at the 74th UNGA. So far, little has been achieved. And some are making money out of efforts to solve the problem.

The Atlantic Ocean has claimed much of the Lagos that I knew as a kid and all reports suggest that it is a matter of time, Lagos may face the sinking fate of Jakarta in Indonesia. Some so-called investors got together and claimed that building Eko Atlantic City would solve the problem of Lagos. They got former Americo-British Heads of Government on a media blitzkrieg to support their claim. Well, the jury is still out.

All the wealth from oil could have been used to address the desertification threat on Nigeria from the Sahara Desert. But my compatriots rapaciously turned the blessings of nature from being endowed with fossil fuel into a curse. They authoritatively stole and rather than even invest in the country, including ensuring planting of trees to reduce desertification, they simple starched away the proceeds of their loots in offshore places as we now know from the Panama and Paradise Papers. And they don't pay taxes to the Nigerian purse. So, desertification has been fuelling conflicts among pastoralists and farmers all over West Africa and Nigeria in particular. Many of the unemployed youths from different parts of Nigeria continue to move into unplanned Lagos as motorcyclists providing transportation given the dearth of infrastructure. Their presence in huge numbers is becoming a problem when compounded with so many graduates who are unemployed in Lagos. But this time bomb is better left for another day.

A lot of international efforts have gone into addressing climate change and other environmental problems driving mankind into chaotic disaster. The latest was the Paris accord under US President Obama. But President Trump pulled the US out of this hard earned agreement. So, it was no surprise that he didn't think the Climate Summit was worth his attention.

However, President Trump's speech, at the opening of the UN's talk-shop, commanded very high attendance. It was important for all weaker countries to listen. Who really cared about deciphering the accents of many Presidents from Africa or elsewhere. They largely got fewer audience. Need I say that the world is built on inequality?

I chose to watch a reasonable portion of the live streaming of President Trump's speech using my smartphone. He was more presidential in the delivery. Will he or will he not meet the Iranian President who initially had complained about delay in the US Government issuing him Visa under the UN HQ Agreement and had stated that he may not attend but finally showed up. I cannot swear that they did not meet. In diplomacy, you never know details of what happens behind closed doors. As my Liberian friends would normally quip: "you no inside, you no know".

However, I will rather be less ambitious and share on aspects of my stay in New York as Bahrain made me part of humanity's annual pilgrimage to the United Nations. This pilgrimage is ostensibly in the quest for peace and development. I say ostensibly because many go there for other things and not quest for peace and development.

The Bahrainis, as should be the case for all countries, are much interested in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is a UN Agenda to ensure better lives on planet earth by 2030. Bahrainis use SDGs as guide for state planning and policies. For them, it is not just a UN mantra. In actual fact, HRH Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the Prime Minister of Bahrain, not only named his Foundation after Sustainable Development, he gives bi-annual prizes on sustainable development. This prize of \$200,000 was first won by a Burkinabe organisation, followed by a Brazilian one and the 3rd recipient was Prof. Anna Tibaijuka of Tanzania who was UN Under-Secretary-General for Habitat. The fourth winner of the 2018 version was none other than Ban Ki-moon who received the award in Manama, Bahrain last year.

In effect, I joined my Bahraini friends to attend the General Assembly Summit on SDGs. This was my first event. It was a full hall with many Heads of State and/or Government in attendance. I don't remember seeing the tall President from Nigeria though. But I saw his official photographer.

I had, been involved with Bahrainis and other international friends under the leadership of Sheikh Hussam bin Esa Al Khalifa, in preparing for the second session of the Bahrain Visions Forum (BVF). The BVF was held over sumptuous lunch at the Delegates Dining Room on the 4th Floor in the UN Building. I will save the information on the elaborate security arrangements at the UN even to get to the dining room for another day. The event was held on September 26, 2019 from 13:00 to 15:00.

The event brought together about 150 participants, including Foreign Ministers of UN member states, to listen to Minister Al Mutawa, the Bahrain Cabinet Affairs Minister as he presented the speech of HRH, the Prime Minister of Bahrain.

Bahrain, pulling its weight during 73rd UNGA, had sponsored the declaration by the UNGA of April 5 of every year as International Conscience Day. This resolution passed overwhelmingly without dissent. The speech of HRH, the Prime Minister of Bahrain understandably stressed this important achievement and linked it to the theme of the 2nd session of the BVF. The theme was to explore the values that are necessary to make progress on the 17 SDGs. This is strategically important for humanity. If we can know the positive values that make countries like Bahrain move forward, then we can share with laggard countries. However, I hasten to note that sharing such need not result in positive impact. As they say, you can take a horse to the river but you cannot force it to drink.

The Foreign Minister of Bahrain Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Khalifa in his opening remarks at the BVF detailed the efforts of Bahrain in meeting challenges of the country on SDGs. He also shared information on their achievements on the SDGs.

What are the SDGs?

1. End Poverty in all its form Everywhere
2. End Hunger, Achieve Food Security and Improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well-Being for all at all Ages
4. Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All
5. Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls
6. Ensure Availability and Sustainable Management of Water and Sanitation for All
7. Ensure Access to Affordable, Reliable, Sustainable and Modern Energy for All
8. Promote Sustained, Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth, Full and Productive Employment and Decent Work for All
9. Build Resilient Infrastructure, Promote Inclusive and Sustainable Industrialization and Foster Innovation
10. Reduce Inequality within and Among Countries.
11. Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable
12. Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns
13. Take Urgent Action to Combat Climate Change and Its Impacts
14. Conserve and Sustainably Use the Oceans, Sea and Marine Resources for Sustainable Development
15. Protect, Restore and Promote Sustainable Use of Terrestrial Ecosystems, Sustainably Manage Forests, Combat Desertification, and Halt and Reverse Land Degradation and Halt Biodiversity Loss
16. Promote Peaceful and Inclusive Societies for Sustainable Development, Provide Access to Justice for All and Build Effective, Accountable and Inclusive Institutions at All Levels
17. Strengthen the Means of Implementation and Revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

Jonathan Granoff, President of the Global Security Institute, in his capacity as moderator outlined the importance of some values for SDGs. These included: honesty, accountability, the rule of law, and reliance on empirical facts arising from science.

Nobel Laureate in Economics and Director of the Center for Sustainable Development, Prof. Jeffrey Sachs had been requested to lead a discussion on values that are essential for meeting the SDGs. But rather than speak on this, he addressed himself to climate change and the impact of environmental problems on the gulf region, coastal low lying areas etc, stressing the need to bring the earth's temperature down if we are to avoid catastrophe. This is a very important problem. But the Prof set himself a different question than he was asked. I guess one is entitled to do that if you are a Nobel Laureate, Adviser to many countries as well

as to the current and the two immediate past UN Secretaries-General. Ordinary mortals like myself would have been described in untold words.

However, the former Prime Minister of Norway, H.E. Kjell Bondevik, entered the debate stressing the importance of values that should guide action. He pointed to the need to act on SDG 16 as value but emphasised respect for human dignity as a crucial value. Many more speakers added views along these lines. The Foreign Minister of Hungary would like to see mutual respect by all countries whether big or small. The Foreign Minister of the UAE noted the import of Bahrain in the gulf region. He informed, (using many examples), that Bahrain has always been a trailblazer in the gulf region. He would like to see concerns on climate change and SDGs addressed beyond mere lip services to both.

The summary of the report of the Secretary-General on performance on the SDGs shows that many people are being left behind and will most likely be left behind in years time if efforts are not doubled.

The international pressures towards the realization of SDGs are on even if countries and UN Agencies could do more. I understand that big Western investors, including pension funds are beginning to push for a so-called double bottom line from companies seeking investment: profit and positive impacts of their investments on economic, social and governance issues.

It is hoped that appropriate values and individual as well as collective conscience could make a difference towards a better life for the majority of people on our planet.