

2025 Newman Lecture
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We are in a world of worries.

And it is certainly worrying to watch the TV news these days.

The screen fills with images that are hard to look at and hard to forget. In Gaza, children dying of starvation and crying in the rubble of bombed out buildings. In Ukraine, residential apartments hit by drones and families mourning their dead. And climate linked disasters: raging wildfires in Los Angeles and floods in many parts of Australia causing untold hardship.

It's a bit overwhelming. And some nights I just want to turn the news off. To look away.

But from my experience, **hope** is a far stronger driver of solutions than fear or despair. A burning platform may capture attention but fear often paralyses.

Hope sets you on the path to doing something that will make a difference.

The importance of collaboration and diplomacy

I find the greatest hope when people come together to create solutions. After all that is why human species has survived so successfully over thousands of years. We have survived not because of physical strength, but because of our ability to collaborate.

Today, in a world of nuclear weapons, climate change, and global pandemics, collaboration is not just useful — it is essential. International organisations like the United Nations and the World Health Organisation are modern global extensions of our evolutionary capacity to cooperate.

This is why **diplomacy** is important. Diplomacy is essentially collaboration at scale, across nations and groups. It's the extension of our evolved cooperative instincts beyond kin and tribe, to whole nations.

And it is why President Trump's world perspective where the United States must "win" and others "lose" is so damaging. Why the US exit from international organisations and agreements like the WHO and the Paris Climate Agreement will hurt all of us, and in the long run will backfire on the USA.

There is reason to believe diplomacy and global cooperation for sustainable development can work.

Ten years ago, in 2015, all countries of the world signed up to two major diplomatic agreements: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which sets out the Sustainable Development Goals ("the SDGs") and the Paris Climate agreement.

Never before had leaders come together and agreed such an ambitious agenda for sustainable development and climate action.

Indeed, the SDGs Agenda has been described: “as important a document in the early 21st century as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was in the mid 20th.”

The SDGs are 17 goals for promoting economic prosperity, social justice and environmental sustainability - with targets under each goal to be achieved by 2030.

Someone described them as a “To Do List” for a better world.

The Paris Climate Agreement was also made in 2015. It set a goal to limit global warming to well below 2°C and an aspiration to limit warming to 1.5° C.

For the first time the Paris Agreement set a long-term goal for the world to meet net zero emissions in the second half of this century. And it also contained a provision for countries to prepare long-term low greenhouse gas emission strategies.

There is some cynicism about these global agreements. Some, like President Trump, argue they interfere with national sovereignty presumably making America less great. Others say they don’t go far enough and there is no mechanism to enforce compliance.

It’s true – they don’t go far enough. But in a dangerous world of competing priorities, they are the best thing we have.

And they do mobilise change. Since the Paris Climate Agreement, we are seeing a global transformation towards renewable energy for example.

Since 2015, investment in clean energy has surged worldwide, with the world now investing almost twice as much in clean energy as it does in fossil fuels. China, once seen as the world’s biggest polluter, has become the largest investor in renewables.

In 2015 in Australia, just 14% of electricity came from renewable energy. In 2025 it is 43%.

And we continue to see improvement across most of the Sustainable Development Goals, albeit much too slowly.

SDG4 is Education for All. Since 2015, 109 million more children entered school with completion rates rising for all levels. Global completion rates for upper secondary school reached 60 % up from 53% in 2015.

SDG6 is Clean Water and Sanitation - the share of the global population using safely managed drinking water rose since 2015, from 68% to 74% and safely managed sanitation coverage increased from 48% to 58%.¹

Conflicts are making it harder to achieve Sustainable development

However, despite these achievements, progress in achieving the SDGs has slowed in the past few years and the world is a more dangerous place than it was in 2015.

¹ Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025 United Nations

The two trends are connected. Seven of the eight poorest countries in the world are in conflict zones. Global conflicts and increased geopolitical tension are making it more difficult to achieve sustainable development. Funds that would otherwise have gone into education and health are now going into making weapons.

The United Kingdom has announced that it will reduce its official Development Assistance Budget from 0.5% of GDP to 0.3% by 2027 to help fund an historic increase in defence spending. The USA has announced the shut-down of USAID and in Australia a proposed increased in defence spending will inevitably put pressure on our modest overseas aid budget. The overall cost of the United Nations and its operations is around \$46 billion per year compared with the \$2.4 trillion spent worldwide on the military.

Geopolitical balance is changing

And the geopolitical balance of the world is fundamentally changing.

The United States and Europe dominated the world economically and militarily for the three hundred years from 1700 to 2000.

But no longer.

In 1950, Europe and the USA, the “West”, controlled 57 % of global GDP while Asia represented just 19%. By 2023, Asia’s share had grown to 47% while Europe and USA represented only 32%. China has overtaken the USA in total GDP and is the leading trading partner for much of the world, including Australia.

This economic shift is also affecting global diplomacy and international relations. The BRICS grouping of countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa have overtaken the G7 in total output. And the BRICS is being expanded further with new member countries including Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

We are in a multi-polar world with multiple centres of power. President Trump and his “Make America Great Again” base are hankering for a return to the world immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the USA saw itself as the single world leader. But MAGA are pushing against the tide of history and against the wishes of most of the rest of the world.

In a multi-polar world what we really need is global cooperation and multilateralism in which we pursue the common good and solve the real challenges we face such as sustainable development and climate change.

Pope Leo XIV expressed this at St Peter’s Basilica in June this year:

The commitment to building a safer world, free from the nuclear threat, must be pursued through respectful encounters and sincere dialogue, to build a lasting peace, founded on justice, brotherhood and the common good. No one should ever threaten the existence of another. It is the duty of all countries to support the cause of

peace, initiating paths of reconciliation and promoting solutions that guarantee security and dignity for all.

The role of Universities and SDSN in global cooperation

Diplomacy and global cooperation don't only happen at a formal national level through government diplomats.

Universities and knowledge institutions have an essential role to play in global cooperation to meet the great challenges of climate change, sustainable development and peace.

Through cutting-edge research, they provide much of the new knowledge and innovation that is needed. Through their educational activities, they provide future leaders with the skills needed to understand and implement sustainable development. As trusted institutions committed to inclusion, truth, and social justice, universities are uniquely placed to help convene all stakeholders to work together to solve the pressing problems of the age.

And it is in the DNA of universities to have an international outlook and collaborate with universities around the world. Our researchers collaborate, our educators collaborate, and our students from many different countries come together to learn.

In 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University created the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) to mobilize the world's universities and knowledge institutions to play their role in supporting sustainable development and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.

Shortly after, Monash was appointed the regional centre for SDSN for Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific and I was appointed its regional chair. Monash was chosen because we are a university with an international focus and a strong purpose to meet the challenges of the age.

SDSN and Monash Sustainable Development Institute were actively involved in the negotiations at the United Nations that influenced the make-up of the Sustainable Development Goals.

And we made a difference!

We successfully advocated for a dedicated SDG for sustainable cities.

Originally an urban SDG was not on the agenda. However, we argued that by 2050 two thirds of the world's population, 6.2 billion people, will live in cities, and it is in cities where the SDGs could be won or lost.

SDSN mounted an #urban SDG campaign with partners including UN Habitat, and UCLG, the global network of cities local and regional governments. We partnered with high-profile mayors to champion the cause including Michael Bloomberg, then Mayor of New York, and Eduardo Paes the Mayor of Rio de Janeiro.

In Australia I actively lobbied Mayors from Australian cities including Melbourne's Lord Mayor to come out in support of an urban SDG. This helped gain the Australian Government's support.

By mobilising city leaders, academic experts and citizens we convinced the General Assembly and were able to achieve a dedicated global goal for cities. SDG11, Sustainable Cities, is now used as a benchmark around the world.

Now, researchers at Monash Sustainable Development Institute led by Associate Professor Shirin Malek Pour are collaborating with colleagues in Europe and Asia to influence the next stage of the Sustainable Development Goals – the Post 2030 Agenda.

Another story illustrates how universities can influence global deliberations, this time the Paris Climate Agreement.

In the lead up to the Paris climate conference SDSN convened the global **Deep Decarbonisation Pathways Project** with research teams from 15 countries representing more than 70% greenhouse gas emissions. The aim of the project was to see how major emitting countries like Australia could decarbonise by 2050. A key aim was to convince the Paris conference that deep decarbonisation was possible.

Climateworks Centre, here at Monash, along with Professor Frank Jotzo of ANU were chosen to do the Australian deep decarbonisation pathway.

The project was the first to find that Australia could reach net zero by 2050 while maintaining economic prosperity. We demonstrated that Australia could achieve this through four steps:

1. ambitious energy efficiency in all sectors halving the energy intensity of the economy
2. decarbonising electricity by replacing fossil fuel-based generation with renewable energy
3. using that decarbonised electricity to replace fossil fuels in transport, buildings and industry and
4. reducing non-energy emissions in farming and land use and tree planting.

The DDPP was groundbreaking because it brought together leading research groups from the major emitting countries in a **collaboration** to show that deep decarbonisation could be achieved across the world. This had not been done before.

SDSN published a joint report in 2014, including Climateworks' work, in the lead up to the 2015 Paris Climate conference. It was shared with key players including the Obama administration and the Chinese Government.

We now know that the DDPP played an important role in achieving two of the key outcomes of the Paris Climate Agreement: net zero emissions in the second half of the century and the provision for countries to prepare long term climate strategies.

Role of young people and students

University students can and should play a key role in international collaborations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Agreement.

I have seen Monash students be global changemakers.

Ten years ago, a student-led idea at Monash University sparked the creation of what has become one of the world's largest youth networks dedicated to sustainable development. SDSN Youth, launched in Paris in 2015, now connects thousands of young people in over 100 countries to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has empowered young people with training, mentorship, and leadership opportunities, influenced global policy, and created tangible impact worldwide.

The idea for SDSN Youth was driven by a young Monash Arts student, Sam Loni.

Sam had good reason to be interested in global affairs. When he was a boy, his family escaped from Iran as his father was threatened with imprisonment by the regime. They fled to Pakistan and after some years, Sam and his family came as refugees to Australia.

I talked to Sam about what we were doing with SDSN, and he said why don't we set up an SDSN Youth organisation - "Afterall half the world's population is under 30".

Sam and fellow Monash students drafted a proposal for a regional youth network in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific and held a workshop in Melbourne.

The next challenge was pitching the idea on a global stage. With Monash's financial and strategic backing, Sam and another Monash student, Jemma Green travelled to New York to present to the SDSN Leadership Council, chaired by Professor Jeffrey Sachs.

It was quite a daunting task as the Leadership Council included former Presidents and government Ministers, corporate CEOs and leading scientists like Johann Rockstrom. Some of them were sceptical. They weren't sure a youth-led network would fit within SDSN's complex global structure. But Sam and Jemma were persistent, confident, and clear about the value young people could add.

Their efforts paid off. In June 2015, SDSN Youth was officially launched in Paris, with Sam elected as its first Global Coordinator. Other Monash students also took on leadership roles in the emerging global network.

In a decade, SDSN Youth has grown into a global movement that has involved 40,000 young people in over 100 countries. It has created national and regional networks and initiated some remarkable projects like the **Vatican Symposium**, an annual gathering at the Vatican of young leaders and experts from around the world discussing and generating solutions for the most urgent issues of humanity.

Sam Loni and colleagues at SDSN Youth, working with education experts from Harvard, Monash and other universities, initiated an amazing program - the **Global Schools program**. This equips teachers in primary and secondary schools with the knowledge and resources to integrate sustainable development into everyday teaching. Working in over 90 countries, it has trained thousands of educators and provided classroom materials that bring the SDGs to life across subjects — from science and geography to literature and civic studies.

There are many ways in which **you** can become involved as changemakers for a better world. I don't expect everyone to set up a global organisation like Sam Loni. But there are many opportunities to experience the world and collaborate on finding solutions to our common pressing problems.

Monash provides the wonderful opportunity of the Global Immersion Guarantee which takes you to another country to learn from local leaders how they are working to address key sustainable development challenges.

How many of you have done the program or intend to do it?

I hope that this is just a start and many of you will see the importance of life-long leadership across cultures to achieve sustainable development. This is so important for Australia. Two thirds of our trade is with Asian countries. 23 of the 30 closest countries to Australia are developing countries. Our safety and security depends on peace in our region and peace depends on sustainable development, collaboration and multilateralism.

When I was 18, I spent a year as a foreign exchange student in the USA which included time in Cleveland, Ohio and at an African American school in Georgia. It gave me a lifelong passion for international relations and global governance.

Financing for Development

Last month I attended the United Nations Financing for Development Conference in Seville, Spain and next month I will be in New York for the meeting of the SDSN Leadership Council and conferences linked to the meeting of the UN General Assembly.

These conferences are tackling two of the biggest challenges in global development today:

- how we find the finance that is needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in low-income countries, and
- how we reform global governance and the United Nations to promote peace in the context of a multipolar and divided world

A statistic I heard at the Financing for Development conference still haunts me:

“Three billion people live in countries that spend more on debt repayments than on education or health.”

This means children are missing out on education because of the level of debt repayments in their country. Most developing countries are facing a debt crisis.

Last year Pope Francis commissioned the Jubilee Report on tackling the debt and development crises. The report led by Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz recommended that reform of the Global Financial Architecture is urgently needed and found *“The overwhelming problem with the current Global Financial Architecture is that most low-income countries (LICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs) pay an inordinately high cost of capital, much higher than paid by the high-income countries.*

In some cases, it is more than three times as high as we pay in wealthy countries like Australia.

There are solutions that were proposed at the Seville Conference including increasing the lending capacity of Multilateral Development Banks, debt swaps and raising international taxes on areas like shipping and aviation.

But the challenge will be getting global agreement on these recommendations and getting wealthy countries like USA and Australia to properly fund them.

Global Governance and the United Nations

Another big issue is reforming global governance to promote peace.

Next month in New York I will be participating in a conference on *Reform of the United Nations Charter* convened by SDSN.

The United Nations is more vital than ever. The world faces conflicts, environmental crises, and disruptions beyond the capacity of national or regional solutions. The case for stronger global governance is overwhelming.

The United Nations was established 80 years ago for a very different world. The permanent members of the UN Security Council were the victors in World War 2: the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union (now Russia), China and France. Any one of these permanent members can veto decisions of the Security Council which has rendered the Security Council useless in most conflicts. The Security Council is not representative of the world of 2024. For example, India the world’s most populous country is not even represented.

The challenge now is to implement meaningful reforms that match the needs of our times.

The SDSN has proposed some reforms for the UN and global governance that I would like to leave with you tonight to consider.

In reforming the UN system, the SDSN believes that the key is to give more power to UN institutions and make them more representative.

We have recommended strengthening the UN system by ensuring that it is properly and reliably financed through a new system of international taxes – for example, on international shipping, aviation, and financial transactions – rather than just the contributions of individual governments.

We should also make the UN institutions more representative of the world of 2024 rather than the world of 1945, when the UN was established. India, the world's most populous country and the third largest economy, should become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. We also recommend procedures to override a veto in the Security Council by a super-majority – perhaps three-quarters of votes.

Another core recommendation of the SDSN is to introduce a UN Parliamentary Assembly as a new chamber alongside the UN General Assembly (UNGA). The UN General Assembly gives each member state one vote, with the power of that vote in the hands of the executive branch of each government. A UN Parliament would represent the peoples of the world rather than the governments.

Initially the new UN Parliamentary Assembly could be constituted by representative members of national parliaments, upon principles of representation established by the UN General Assembly.

Finally, we support the establishment of a new UN Council of Youth and Future Generations as a UN General Assembly subsidiary body. A UN Council of Youth and Future Generations can strengthen the UN's activities in training and empowering young people and provide a vital global voice of youth to today's complex challenges.

Young people have the greatest stake in achieving sustainable development by mid-century and securing a world of peace and social justice. Young people also have special perspectives and skills that will be vital to the success of sustainable development.

I look forward to a day when a UN Council of Youth and Future Generations gives young people a real say in global governance. And perhaps one of you could be Australia's representative on the Council of Youth and Future Generations.

I really look forward to that.