

2019 Annual Pluralism Lecture

How Does Pluralism Advance the Sustainable Development Agenda?



By Amina J. Mohammed

June 11, 2019
Lisbon, Portugal

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About the Centre

Founded in Ottawa by His Highness the Aga Khan in partnership with the Government of Canada, the Global Centre for Pluralism is an independent, charitable organization. Inspired by Canada's experience as a diverse and inclusive country, the Centre was created to advance positive responses to the challenge of living peacefully and productively together in diverse societies.

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By Amina J. Mohammed
Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations

June 11, 2019
The Ismaili Centre
Lisbon, Portugal

About the 2019 Lecture

Many of the most intractable challenges we face today – from entrenched poverty to conflict-driven migration – stem from the exclusion and resentment of groups defined as “the other”. Pluralism represents a choice to see differences as contributing to the common good – an essential foundation for inclusive societies. Addressing inequality and exclusion is key to ensuring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) achieve progress *for all*. Amina J. Mohammed explores the connections between pluralism and global efforts to advance peace, justice and sustainable development.

The Annual Pluralism Lecture provides an opportunity to meet and learn from compelling individuals whose work has made a practical difference in the world. These change leaders reflect on how to build and strengthen pluralist societies.

The 2019 Pluralism Lecture was hosted at the Ismaili Centre in Lisbon, Portugal, in the presence of His Highness the Aga Khan. A video of the Lecture can be watched [here](#). You can read His Highness’s opening remarks [here](#).

About the Speaker

UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed was instrumental in bringing about the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in her role as Special Adviser to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Post-2015 Development Planning. A former Minister of Environment for Nigeria, she has served on numerous international boards and panels, including the Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development, the Global Development Program of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the International Development Research Centre, the African Women’s Millennium Initiative, Girl Effect, 2016 African Union Reform and the ActionAid International Right to Education Project. Ms. Mohammed is an Adjunct Professor in Development Practice at Columbia University.

About the Sustainable Development Agenda

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

Visit: sustainabledevelopment.un.org



Clockwise from top left: H.E. Eduardo Ferro Rodrigues, President of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal, greets Amina Mohammed; Global Centre for Pluralism Secretary General John McNee welcomes Lecture guests; the Lecture audience; the Rt. Hon. Adrienne Clarkson thanks Ms. Mohammed for her Lecture; Ms. Mohammed in discussion with moderator Ricardo Costa; His Highness the Aga Khan delivers opening remarks.

Credit: Sérgio Garcia

Your Highness the Aga Khan,

*Your Excellency, the President of the
Assembly,*

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen:

It is really a great pleasure and a privilege to be here with you to talk about pluralism and its central place in the work of the United Nations and especially in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is also wonderful to be in this Centre, a really beautiful building with its gardens, courtyards and two research institutions that are helping us to bridge the gulf between Islam and western cultures. I thank the Global Centre for Pluralism and the Ismaili Imamat for this opportunity and for all the incredible work that you do to promote pluralism, diversity, inclusion and a better and more peaceful world for all of us.

The tension between unity and pluralism, between the whole and its constituent parts, has been debated by thinkers and philosophers for thousands of years.

Two millennia ago, the Indian emperor Ashoka the Great called for harmonious relations between people of all religions and respect for each other's scriptures.

And at the United Nations, there is a magnificent carpet, a gift from the people of Iran, inscribed with the poem known as Bani Adam, the Children of Adam, by the great Persian poet Sa'adi. Part of it reads:

*"If you have no sympathy for the troubles of
others,
You are unworthy to be called by the name of
a Human."*

At this gathering last year, the religious scholar Karen Armstrong said that the first thing that appealed to her about Islam was its pluralism and the fact that the Holy Quran not only praises all the great prophets of the Abrahamic religions, but accepts them as prophets of Islam. Indeed, pluralism, respect for difference and the ethics of a shared common humanity are features of many of our different cultures and religions.

My own continent, Africa, includes some of the most pluralist societies in the world, with a diversity of tribal, ethnic, cultural and religious groups, and different traditions and people that are divided along urban and rural lines.

Pluralism is in the DNA of the United Nations. The Charter, our founding document, refers to "We the peoples" of the United Nations, who are "determined to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours."

Today, I will not add to the philosophical debate around pluralism. I believe the argument has largely been fought and won – although we must always remain vigilant. But while the theoretical argument may be over, we still have a long way to go before we can say that our world is living up to this promise. In some cases, there are historical and cultural obstacles or a lack of knowledge or understanding; in others, it is a question of political will – and I may even say, today, the generation gap.

What I would like to talk about today is the gap between words and actions, between the ideal of pluralism and the policies and strategies that will enable us to reap its benefits in our daily lives.

I would like to link pluralism to the work of the UN on the ground, around the world, promoting human rights, inclusion and respect for diversity. It is the only way, I believe, that we can leave no one behind and effectively address the global challenges we face and further peace and prosperity for everyone.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends:

In the framework of the UN and our current Global Agenda – the Sustainable Development Goals – we have embedded the principle of inclusion, a word that is largely synonymous with pluralism. In fact, one of the 17 goals is dedicated to building peaceful and inclusive societies. I would say that the two are not separate, but that societies are more peaceful because they are inclusive. We have growing evidence that

greater diversity and inclusion, particularly in relation to the inclusion of women, is correlated with higher GDP, more responsive governments, better bottom lines, greater stability and more sustainable peace and development. But if the business case for inclusion is clear, certainly today we would say that our actions fail to reflect this.

While many leaders may pay lip service to inclusion, the fact is that we are living the consequences of exclusion. Intolerance, exclusion, the need to dominate and a lack of respect for difference are deeply rooted in many of our policies and systems – political, economic and social.

We have created a world in which, according to recent analysis, by 2030, the richest one percent of people could control two-thirds of the planet's wealth. Economic and, in many cases, political power are concentrated in the hands of the few. The rights of women and girls, and of minorities and marginalized people of all kinds, are routinely disregarded. In many cases, those in power hang on by any means for far too long, often, I believe, out of fear of themselves being excluded. Inequality is at extraordinary levels and is growing, both within and between our countries. After a decade of decline, the number of chronically hungry people in our world recently began to rise again, despite there being abundant food for everyone.

We have created a world in which we define security as the enforcement of borders, exclusion of others and amassing of weapons. We see this in the estimated \$1.8 trillion in military spending just last year, a fraction of which would provide dignity and opportunity for the most vulnerable.

We have created a world in which there is growing ethno-nationalism, intolerance, discrimination and violence targeting women, our mothers, our sisters, our grandmothers, minorities, migrants, refugees and anyone perceived to be different or "other". Civic space is shrinking, basic rights are under attack – things we have often taken for granted, activists and journalists are targeted, and misinformation campaigns and hate speech spread like wildfire on social media.

Hate speech is moving into the mainstream in many countries and regions – liberal democracies and authoritarian states alike. Constitutions that are founded on pluralism and respect for difference are undermined as different groups and minorities are attacked.

Access to information is curated individually, so that we are living atomized lives in our own echo chambers, where news and advertising reflect and reinforce our presumed perspective on the world. Unless we ourselves choose to seek out others, we may not be exposed, as we have been before, to alternative viewpoints and arguments that challenge our beliefs.

Attacks on places of worship are some of the most egregious examples of a lack of respect for each other and for our common humanity, and they are rising. In the past few months alone, we have seen horrific attacks on mosques in New Zealand, on churches in Sri Lanka and on synagogues in the United States.

Record numbers of people are on the move around the world, fleeing conflict, drought, poverty and lack of opportunity. At the same time, refugees and migrants are attacked, both physically and rhetorically, with false narratives that link them with terrorism and scapegoat them for many of society's ills.

Millions of women and girls face insecurity and violations of their human rights every day. Violence is used to enforce patriarchy and gender inequality and to police women's role in society. Excluding half our population not only affects our mothers, daughters and sisters; it affects every one of us and distorts our societies and economic systems.

We have created economies that value sometimes dubious or even destructive activities, but place zero monetary value on the daily work that happens in our homes – where the very production and reproduction of the quality of our society occurs.

We see the same devaluing of the foundations of society in our longstanding treatment of our natural environment – our home. Trees are worth more as construction materials than they are standing in the forest. Deforestation, overfishing, climate change and pollution are

causing unprecedented damage to our natural safety net, but they are driven by the logic of economic models and incentives. As a result, we now face an existential crisis as a species and are directly responsible for the threat to one million other species who may be pushed to extinction in the next few years.

The climate crisis is wreaking havoc on some of the most vulnerable countries and regions, while others continue to burn fossil fuels and add to greenhouse gas emissions. No one would light a cigarette today in a room where a child is struggling to breathe, but developed countries are contributing to conditions that are causing droughts and floods halfway around the world, with complete disregard for the rights of others. We have lost sight of our common humanity and our interdependence – on each other and on the planet that gives us life.

I would like to stress that none of this has been an accident. It is the end result of systems that have been built by men – and I am going to underscore men here because if we had had women in charge we probably would not have been in the same mess – largely based on exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, and the prioritisation of short-term profits for a few over the long-term rights and interests of all future generations.

It is clear that we need a fundamental reordering of our priorities and a reorganisation of our economic, political and social systems, if we really are to reap the benefits of inclusion and save ourselves and our planet from further inhumanity and degradation.

Excellencies, friends, ladies and gentlemen:

We are living in troubled times and face many headwinds. The news, however, is not all bad. There is plenty of evidence that global efforts have worked and that further damage to societies and our planet can be prevented and reversed. After all, as I have said just a little earlier, it was, and is, man-made.

As Stephen Pinker has argued, our world is getting better – but not as quickly as we might hope. Much of the evidence that we see for progress is not catching up with the reality of

the challenges and we are, in many cases, just flat-lining. Violence has steadily declined over time and life expectancy is up; extreme poverty is declining and literacy is at historically high levels. There is greater awareness of human rights, and in some countries at least, minorities of all kinds enjoy greater legal protection than ever before.

Let's take the Montreal Protocol on the ozone layer. This international treaty entered into force in 1989, after climatologists discovered a hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica. Since then, the hole has gradually started recovering and projections indicate that the ozone layer will return to 1980 levels between 2050 and 2070. This is global cooperation.

The Millennium Development Goals were agreed by all countries in 2000. His Highness reminded me I was not very pleased with them, but I, in the end, embraced them as the baseline and not the ceiling of where we wanted to go to. They created one of the most successful anti-poverty movements in history. In my country, we benefited from a savings of a billion dollars a year that we were able to put into people's lives. They have helped to lift more than a billion people out of extreme poverty, to make inroads against hunger, to enable more girls to attend school than ever before and to protect our planet. The MDGs generated new partnerships and galvanized public opinion, reshaping decision-making in developed and developing countries alike.

Global pluralism, in the form of multilateralism, achieved these things. And I believe it can achieve so much more.

Since the founding of the UN, there has been wide and growing recognition that major challenges cannot be solved by countries acting alone. As we face a growing number of issues that do not respect national borders – from climate change to spreading conflict and outbreaks of disease – we need regional and global institutions more than we have ever done before, to strengthen our collective response.

But multilateralism may be a victim of its own success. We have stopped seeing it as a priority and an evolving challenge that we need to tend, promote and reinvigorate. We have started taking it for granted. We see this

in societies and communities that are turning inward, forgetting the lessons of the past. Global institutions must hold the line for global values. And to do so in these institutions, as well as our partners, we need to transform – to be fit for purpose in the 21st century.

His Holiness the Pope has spoken of the globalisation of indifference. And I believe that we must replace that with the globalisation of solidarity.

Four years ago, in 2015, as we reached the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals, the UN initiated and coordinated a global conversation about our priorities. All countries agreed that we needed to do better.

This resulted in an agreement by all 193 countries of the United Nations on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – our transformational roadmap for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships over the next 15 years. Already we are four years into that.

This shared agenda reflects an important paradigm shift. The Sustainable Development Goals are human-centred; they are interconnected. More importantly they are universal, integrated, inclusive and mutually reinforcing. No goal stands alone; each goal is inextricably linked with the rest for its full implementation. Although I must say I do take goal five as the docking station for the other 16. It is so important to our humanity.

This reflects the reality of development challenges on the ground, where people living in poverty and hunger are also the most likely to suffer from poor access to quality housing, education, healthcare, water and sanitation. A girl is less likely to attend school, for example, if her parents cannot afford to pay for school supplies, or if she does not have secure housing.

The 2030 Agenda addresses these issues together, tackling their root causes in a much more holistic way. The Sustainable Development Goals were prepared by all countries, requiring contributions from all – including developed and developing countries – and will improve the lives of all, so that in the end no one is left behind.

The emphasis in the 2030 Agenda on inclusion and interdependence, as well as a moral obligation to the most vulnerable members of our society through the principle of "leaving no one behind", offers a counterweight to the forces that are leading to increased polarization, tribalism and social fragmentation. They are a conscious effort to build and replenish the world's democratic infrastructure, our relationships, social contracts and obligations to each other.

The ultimate ambition of the 2030 Agenda is a world that provides dignity for all, well-being and opportunity – qualities that do not come under the Gross Domestic Product measure that we have, but that are finally being recognized as critical measures of successful governance. The introduction of quality of life and well-being considerations into many budgets around the world is an encouraging sign for our human family.

The 2030 Agenda will require shifts in mindsets, to go beyond GDP to how we also measure our well-being. It will require a reprioritisation of economic systems so that they improve lives and make them much more meaningful. The main requirement is the political will and the leadership to push through changes in the governance of our economies and trade systems to make them more inclusive and equitable.

While the SDGs are global, they also reflect both universal values, local and traditional cultural institutions and traditions. To take one example, we can see the values of the Islamic faith, my own faith, reflected in many of the goals which stress environmental justice, nature and the interdependence of things.

The UN itself is changing to support countries as they undertake this ambitious global project, to be fit for purpose. We are reforming, under the leadership of António Guterres, the development system and also peace and security, so that we are better placed to help governments and accompany them in delivering on the 17 transformational goals and targets. From providing access to technical expertise, to reaching global agreement on the financial arrangements that will be critical to success, the UN is at the

heart of efforts to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

We are reforming to ensure more diverse representation, with a new gender parity strategy for recruiting and retaining women staff at all levels, particularly in leadership. We have parity already in our management and are making greater efforts to ensure much more equitable geographic representation, meaning that all persons of the world should be part of the United Nations and be actively represented in the leadership at the country level. We are just months away from achieving parity in our senior leadership for the first time in seven decades. We will be 75 next year. We need to lead by example and demonstrate the importance of diversity and inclusion that reflect the reality of our world.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends:

That is the big picture. But it will only succeed if each and every one of us, individually and collectively, becomes a part of this effort.

Delivering the Sustainable Development Goals must start from every space in which people connect: the family, the community, the workplace, schools and medical clinics, small businesses, media and academia.

It is here that we will need to make the radical shift needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda – a shift in mindsets away from accumulation by a few and exclusion of the many, to a paradigm based in interdependence with each other and with our environment. A shift in policy solutions that are based on mutual gains rather than zero-sum thinking, and a shift from a definition of security based on an ever-increasing stock of weapons and stronger borders, to one that is based on resilient societies and mutual respect for each other and particularly our planet.

This shift needs to start from our education systems. Education is one place where we really need to rethink how that happens for us in our world today. We continue to build schools of bricks and mortar and to teach rote learning uncritically from outdated textbooks. We are preparing our young people for a world that has passed, rather than the use of technology, critical thinking skills, well-being

and the ethic of shared responsibility needed for the world of today and of tomorrow.

While the 2030 Agenda is global and all-encompassing, it will require actions at every level. It particularly needs the leadership and the guidance of faith-based and philanthropic institutions who work with the local, national and regional levels but exist in many international spaces and can bring these together and who can re-instill a sense of our common humanity.

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has written of membership of "a family, a neighbourhood, a plurality of overlapping identity groups, spiraling out to encompass all humanity." This concept asks us to be many things, he says, because we are just that many things.

I am very familiar with these ideas. My personal story is one of multiple identities, from Nigeria to the United Kingdom and back again, from the private sector to government and the United Nations.

I am an African mother and a grandmother, and I have to tell you that my children are Nigerian, British, Syrian – and it goes on, including a Brazilian grandchild. I am also a former government minister, one that I never thought I would be. I always wanted to go home and implement the SDGs, but to be given the Ministry of Environment, which in my country was considered, for want of a better word, "the dustbin lady" – it was really only about waste. But within 18 months, Nigeria produced for the continent the first national domestic green bond and I heard last week that we just had the second and, again, it was over subscribed. So the impossible can become possible. As a former government minister, a survivor of gender-based violence, a faithful Muslim, the granddaughter of a Presbyterian minister and the second-highest international civil servant, I am humbly in the world. I also received a basic education. And I think this is important because often we do not look back in history to see what is it that created the sense of insecurity that we have today – the conflict, the terrorists. But my basic education was in Maiduguri. Maiduguri is a town in the Northeast of Nigeria where today Boko Haram thrives and where Lake

Chad hardly exists, for it is shrinking. And so we see the exacerbation of poverty and climate change.

While Anthony Appiah and I may be the poster children for pluralism, we all embody many different identities. The growth of DNA testing proves this in the most literal way, but it is also true socially and culturally. There is no homogenous culture in our world; there are simply those that are more and less honest about their history. And I am happy to say that our hosts today, Portugal and Canada, are amongst the most honest and I congratulate you for that: this is the kind of leadership that we truly need today.

Portugal, the seat of the Ismaili Imamat, has made many significant contributions to openness, to diversity and pluralism in our world. Portugal's history of discovery, of reaching out and connecting, has a central place in its culture. The Iberian Peninsula was for many centuries a battleground between two of the world's three major religions, and this has left a legacy of interdependence and a deep respect for cultural difference.

I cannot talk of course about Portugal without referencing our Secretary-General, my colleague, my friend, António Guterres – a proud Portuguese citizen, I can tell you that – who never fails to remind us of your country's special and unique qualities, and sometimes on a bad day at the UN, its food! He wants to come home! But this is not just him: I have to tell you that even I look for Nigerian food some days in the UN.

I would also like to mention Canada, host of the Global Centre for Pluralism, as a leader with respect for diversity, honoring the values of pluralism in its institutions, across the entire fabric of its culture. Canada's pluralist national identity is reflected in its approach to welcoming refugees and is fundamental to the relationship between Canada and His Highness the Aga Khan and of course, the Aga Khan Foundation. No society is perfect. Most, if not all, nations have forged their borders through war or conquest, leaving a set of historical injustices that really do challenge our identities. It is how these challenges are confronted that makes clear its values.

Canada's efforts to address their own relationship with the indigenous First Nations people in a spirit of honesty and reconciliation, as difficult as that can be, is one example of this leadership.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Aga Khan Development Network and institutions, for its work on behalf of some of the poorest and most marginalized communities in the world. You combine a strong ethical foundation with respect for the environment and a commitment to supporting societies in which every citizen, every person, regardless of cultural, religious or ethnic differences, can reach his or her full potential, truly showing the strength in diversity.

The approach to supporting all members of a community so that everyone is stronger as a result, exemplifies the words of His Highness the Aga Khan, who once said that pluralism is not simply an asset, or a prerequisite for development, but a vital necessity for our existence. And I agree wholeheartedly. You have been a consistent voice promoting pluralism, inclusion and respect for diversity over the decades. We need you now more than ever. So, if you were just thinking of retiring... no!

I really do thank you for your commitment and look forward to working with you, the Foundation and the Global Centre for Pluralism. And for many of you with whom we have already started with some very, very powerful partnerships, who are in the room today, I hope that we can broaden that base because there is never a time like now to try to take on what seems incredibly impossible with the headwinds that we face. We need to face realities boldly with courage. We need to see the aspirations as doable because we have the means. And in the end, we need to come together to close that gap and we need to continue to give hope to those many who today would be hopeless. It is possible. As Nelson Mandela said, it becomes possible after you have addressed how impossible it is. You make it happen. And I think we can make it happen. So thank you so much for giving me the honour to speak with you today.

Thank you.