

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK  
• STEPHANIE GRANOT

‘Is this seat taken?’ I keep going, sure that the woman next to an empty chair in the UN’s packed media room is about to say that her colleague will be right back. But Mary from Sudan gestures me to sit and goes back to Facebook. I’m so grateful to have somewhere to dump my heavy bag that I ignore my husband’s reminder to keep an eye on my stuff and go get coffee for Mary and me.

If they gave awards for buzzword-of-the-year, surely Sustainable Development would take 2015’s first place by a landslide (pun intended). The not-so-catchy environmental catchphrase that’s been gaining momentum since its inception at Brazil’s ‘92 Earth Summit blasted off this year and is the reason behind today’s crowded newsroom. The first three days of the 70th session of United Nations General Assembly are about to be entirely devoted to the Sustainable Development Summit that Pope Francis is kicking off any minute. An unprecedented number of world leaders are gathering to formally adopt a sweeping 15-year global plan to end poverty, reduce inequalities and protect the environment.

Titled the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” the plan lists 17 ambitious goals, known as the SDGs, or global goals. When they go into effect this January, they will replace the partially met Millennium Development Goals. As its title implies, the new agenda is intended to encourage earthlings to master the concept of sustainable development – developing our world while sustaining resources for future generations – by the year 2030.

An admirable idea, but I can’t help feeling cynical in the buzzing news room. Sure it’s the pope’s first visit to the UN and it’s not every day of the week that all 193 member nations actually agree on something. But even if I believe the UN’s motivations are pure, I’m trying – on behalf of planet Earth – to set aside my disgust at all the prejudice and hypocrisy that the UN slings Israel’s way. It’s still impossible for me not to question the competence of this organization, capable of so breathtakingly sabotaging itself, most recently by putting Saudi Arabia – heavyweight contender for the world record in human rights violations – in charge of a key UN Human Rights panel earlier this month.

THE MEGA-MONITORS up front roll 3-2-1 ON THE AIR and spring to life with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon welcoming the pope. I do my best to look absorbed, so diligently doodling all over my press release that when Mary leans over to ask “Do you know where the ladies’ room is?” I almost knock my coffee all over her laptop trying to cover my artwork. I’m surprised to see that most of the 300 or so people in the room look about as interested as I am, even though many of them traveled halfway around the world for this. I direct Mary to the bathroom and look up at the monitor.

“We have reached a defining moment in human history,” Ban is telling the General Assembly, “We have a big, bold agenda before us. It is a roadmap to ensure peace and heal our planet for the benefit of this and future generations.”

Ban finishes to a standing ovation from the GA and I can hardly believe my ears. The crammed newsroom is being infused with the low but unmistakable sound of John Lennon’s “Imagine.” My eyes meet those of a big, white-haired Russian in his early 60s getting up a table away. I can tell he’s thinking the same thing I am: this whole thing can’t be too promising if they’re trying to subliminally brainwash their way to some good press. But Mary and I have some fun snapping selfies and anyway it’s time for a break.

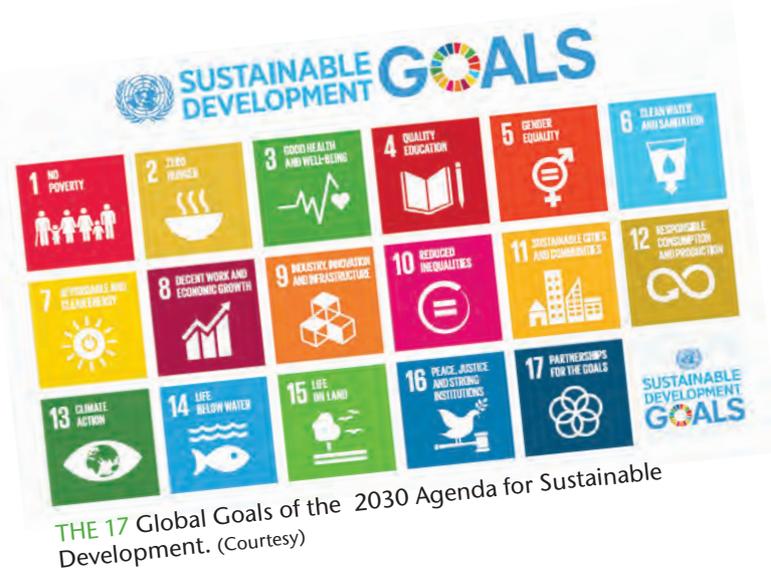
“In my country we are much more concerned with migration issues than climate control.” I’m back from my Dunkin’ Donuts run and conversing in

# The other

At the UNGA Sustainable Development Summit, a skeptic finds new meaning in an old saying:  
It’s not what’s on the table that matters,  
It’s who’s on the chairs



UN SECRETARY GENERAL Ban Ki-moon hosts German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Bono, musician and human rights activist, at the Private Sector Forum on September 26. (Courtesy UN)



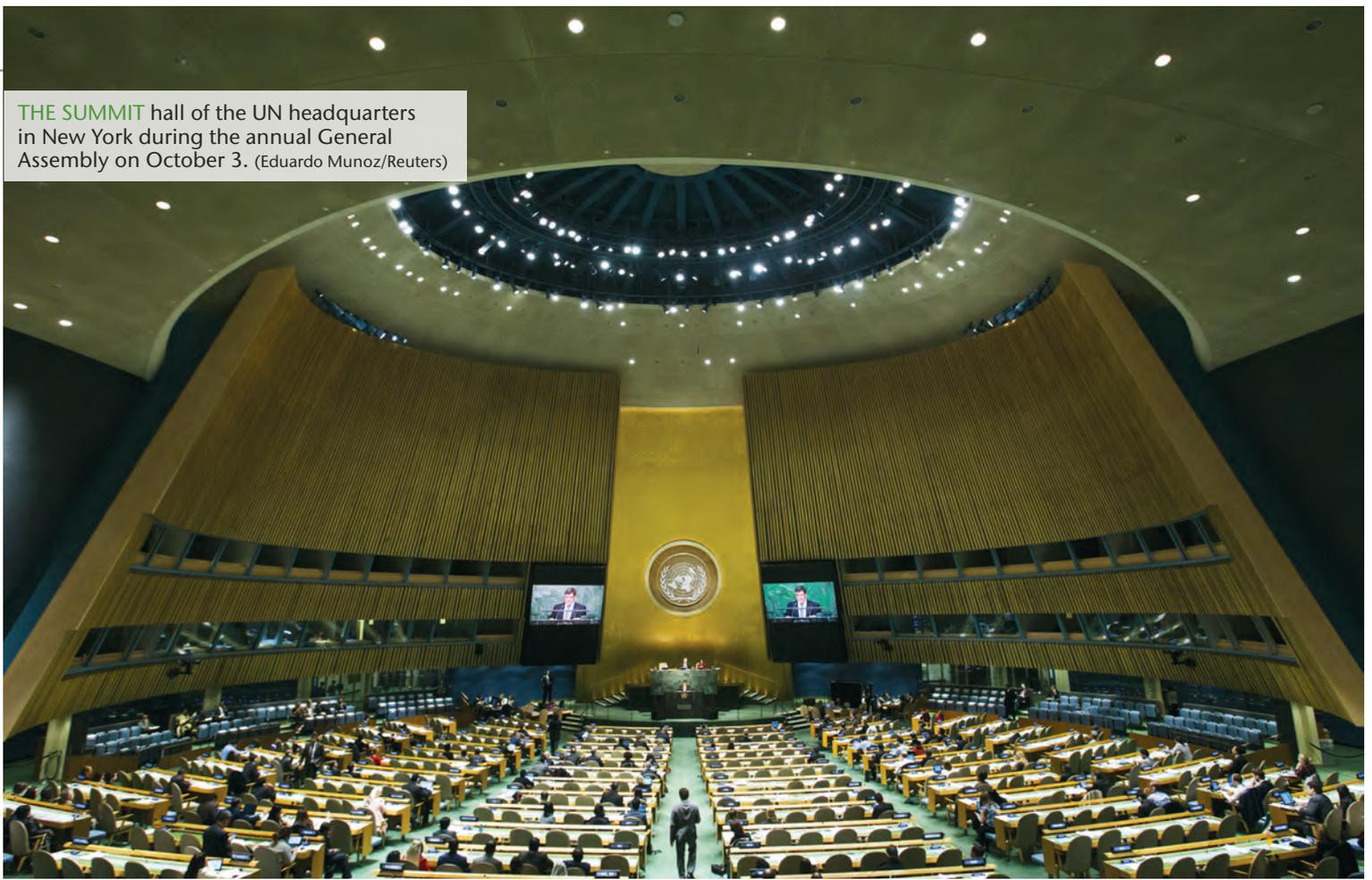
THE 17 Global Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. (Courtesy)

the security line with Peter, a chatty, lanky German reporter. He suggests I attend Wednesday’s meeting “Strengthening Cooperation on Migration and Refugee Movements in the Perspective of the New Development Agenda.” It’s taken me most of Day 1 to realize that there are two parallel schedules running here.

Inside the General Assembly Hall, heads of state take turns delivering speeches with their country’s take on the Sustainable Development agenda. Simultaneously, meetings on specific SDGs are being held in UN conference rooms, some attended by celebrities and private sector leaders, such as Bono, Bill Gates, and Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg. Gangly Peter from Germany is talking about one of these meetings. I tell him I’ll try to attend and before we part ways, I make sure

# UN

THE SUMMIT hall of the UN headquarters in New York during the annual General Assembly on October 3. (Eduardo Munoz/Reuters)



to mention the meeting where Ambassador Gil Haskel, director of Israel's MASHAV, will be talking about the program's work with African women at the community level.

"Israel is proud to have been an active partner in this historic process," I say.

The meeting "Tackling Inequalities, Empowering Women and Girls and Leaving No One Behind" takes place in the cavernous Trusteeship Council chamber. Haskel explains that MASHAV is the Hebrew acronym for Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation. "The year 2015 will ever be remembered in human history as the year of sustainable development," says Haskel. "Israel is proud to have been an active partner in this historic process."

He emphasized Israel's strong support for gender equality, placing it at the very heart of human development, and described Israel's role in establishing the Africa Center for Transformative and Inclusive Leadership.

"The objective of ACTIL is to spread empowerment to African women through the creation of wealth at the household and community levels by transferring high-end agro-technological skills to women entrepreneurs," explained Haskel. He stressed the importance of education and policy in creating equal opportunities for women, and extended an offer from Israel to share its resources.

I wonder if there's another tiny little country out there that does so much for so many and gets a kick in the head for thanks. But the focus of this summit is not supposed to be political so I banish the sour grapes and go hear Global Goals speeches by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Prime Minister Perry Christie of the Bahamas.

The speeches will go until midnight, but when it gets dark the news crews start wrapping their coverage of the summit's first day. Reporter-cameraman pairs dot the Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, some in elaborate African garb or silk saris. Most of the foreign news teams are working in skeleton crews until the general debate part of the GA starts Monday. When I leave the UN for the day,

the scene, with New York's East River in the background, makes me think of Noah's Ark.

DAY 2 dawned as beautiful as Day 1, one of those all-too-rare but perfect New York days. On my way to the UN, I help Julio Sanchez, correspondent for *La Economist* - *The Economist*, Mexican style - persuade the SWAT team to get help for a wounded pigeon that had been kicked by some diplomats rushing up the block. Some Environmental Summit, I think to myself. The world is doomed.

Once you get through Hollywood-like security, the summit is a surreal free-for-all of famous faces walking around, and takes on an almost campy vibe as faces become familiar. When the gentleman ahead of me at the café passes me my latte, I am shocked to realize he is the president of Finland (equally shocking is the fact that I now recognize the president of Finland). It doesn't matter how big a fish you are back home, this weekend you're just another head of state in line for coffee. Ho hum.

I walk over to a young man wearing a tutu outside in the plaza. I introduce myself and fight the urge to tell him NY Fashion Week was last week. He tells me his name is Mihhel, he's a Youth Delegate from Finland, he's wearing the traditional garb of an indigenous people in Finland, and he's very excited to be here changing the world. I ask him if he thinks the sustainable development goals are achievable. "Maybe not entirely," Mihhel answers in perfect English, "But if you don't set goals you never get anywhere. Even half would be a big improvement."

Later I pass two guys on a bench speaking what sounds like a cross between Arabic and Russian. I stop and ask where they're from, and whether they are press or delegates. They exchange looks. One of them takes a long, slow drag on his cigarette, tells me they're Turkish bodyguards, and asks where I'm from. I tell him I'm writing for an Israeli magazine and ask if they ever heard of sustainable development. They both start laughing, tell me its bull\$#@t and ask about the Tel Aviv club scene. Despite their cynicism, the body-

guards are eager to hear what Israel is like.

IT'S GRADUALLY dawning on me that there's a whole other UN here, one that seems to bode much better for the future of mankind than the one taking turns at the podium.

A sense of optimism is pervading the summit. Even Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani make encouraging speeches. Only Rami Hamdallah, prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, spews venom from the podium. But I tell myself that rhetorical exhibitionism is usually inversely correlated with desperation, and I don't let it ruin my day.

Sunday continues the perfect weather. While we wait for US President Barack Obama to arrive, I have a sandwich with Stella from Korea and Gabrielle from Peru on the grass outside the media room. Both express guarded optimism about the global goals. Obama arrives about 2:30 p.m. and takes his turn at the podium, making a speech in line with everyone else's and committing the United States to financially back the new agenda.

I ask Louis, a press officer from Canada, "Doesn't it ever seem to you like nothing ever changes?" He tells me that change is slow but apparent, and asks me where we threw the recycling when I was a kid. I'm about to tell him we threw it in the garbage, but I see his point.

It's the last night of what I've begun to think of as the Sunny Summit, as much for the mood of optimism and solidarity as for the great weather. Tomorrow, when the GA starts the general debate, it's supposed to rain, which I suspect will accurately reflect the far less amicable mood likely to take hold.

I exchange information with Julio and Mary and the rest, and wonder if things would be different if "the other UN" that's here this week replaced their countrymen inside the General Assembly. As the saying goes, it's not what's on the table that matters - it's who's on the chairs. ■

To learn more about the Global Goals go to <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>