Meeting the Challenges of a Changing World

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As director of The Earth Institute of Columbia University, renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs spearheaded a university-wide effort to engage over 850 scientists in sustainable development. Today, as Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on the Sustainable Development Goals, Sachs is working to establish a far larger network of universities, with the goal of using their collective expertise to solve some of the world’s most pressing problems.

Limits to growth
I was a freshman in college in 1972. That year, a book came out called *Limits to Growth* about the challenge of harmonizing our aspirations for getting richer with the fact that the Earth’s natural resources are finite. I was assigned the book as a college freshman, so the issue has been on my mind since the earliest days that I began studying economics.

Economics is about how we use our resources—including our natural resources, our brain power, and the goods we produce in our factories. The goal of economics is to determine how to best use our resources and technology so that everyone is able to benefit from them. Human-induced climate change is a central challenge in that quest. It’s caused by how we are using our natural resources, notably fossil fuels and forests, and its consequences could be disastrous unless brought quickly under control. I don’t think it’s possible to be concerned about the big questions of economics without also being concerned about climate change as one of the most important challenges we face.

A central focus
In my work, I try to address the challenge of climate change in everything I do, whether it’s in economic development, advising governments, working on poverty issues and public health, or supporting the United Nations in its development activity. From 2002 to 2016, I was director of The Earth Institute at Columbia University. We developed new initiatives, programs, and degrees, from PhD programs and an undergraduate major in sustainable development to projects around the world that involved researching the changing climate, helping governments cope with climate change, fighting disease, and taking on other related challenges.

The Earth Institute has gotten lots of students interested in these issues, and it also has gotten faculty from different parts of Columbia University speaking with each other much more than they otherwise might have. The university has become deeply engaged in a global effort to promote sustainable development.

Sharing the knowledge
As director of The Earth Institute, I loved the idea that I could benefit from the incredible knowledge of people who have spent a lifetime studying a particular phenomenon and who can provide the real low-down on what’s happening and on all the debates as to what’s known and what isn’t known. Universities have unique capabilities in tackling the problems and challenges of sustainable development.

Now, as Special Advisor to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, I’m promoting the concept of university engagement in sustainable development around the world. The goal is to collect the best thinking and the best data—the best evidence—and to synthesize it, offer practical solutions, and share those insights worldwide. It is exciting to have hundreds of scholars working alongside each other on challenges like extreme storms, global warming, disease spread, new epidemics, and fighting poverty.

Priority number one
All projections show that if we continue with business as usual, it will not only be costly, it could well be catastrophic. The sea level could well rise by several meters, affecting coastal cities all over the world. Some parts of the world could become uninhabitable, affecting hundreds of millions of people. The global food supply could be profoundly damaged, because many crops are heat-sensitive or sensitive to droughts or floods. I don’t view addressing climate change as a choice, but as a necessity: If we’re interested in our survival—which we must be—and if we’re interested in the wellbeing of our children, and our children’s children—which we must be—then the control of human-induced climate change has to be an utmost priority.
Promising strategies
What my engineering friends tell me is, thank goodness that we have some wonderful alternatives to our current fossil fuel-based economy. We have increasingly lower costs for renewable energy, smarter electric vehicles, and new business models for car sharing—all of which point to our ability to transition, for example, from the internal combustion engine era of the 20th century to the electric vehicle era of the 21st century. Electric vehicles could be charged by wind power, solar power, and other zero- or low-carbon energy sources, at very low cost.

Many promising strategies are right in front of our eyes, but there are several reasons we don’t necessarily jump on them. One is simply that most people aren’t aware of all the alternatives. We’re also very wary of change. There’s a kind of inertia that makes us tend to want to continue on the trajectory we’re on. This is especially true of industries that have a big stake in maintaining the status quo.

A lot at stake
I grew up in Detroit when the oil and auto industries were the titans of America. They ran the show, and one couldn’t imagine a more powerful combination. They were at the core of American business and power. The oil-and-auto-mobile combo played an historic role, and it made a lot of money. It made a lot of people very rich, so I understand the motivation to want to keep things the way they have been. But we have to adapt, because the safety of the planet and the safety of our young people require it.

I’m actually pretty optimistic. I think the young people whose lives are really going to be affected are going to stand up and say, “We have a big stake in this, and we have a big voice. We have a lot of votes, and we’re not going to let these dinosaur industries ruin our future.”

A worried world
The Paris Climate Agreement was signed by all 193 members of the United Nations. Every one. Now President Trump has declared his intention to pull out, but I bet we’re actually going to stay in. In fact, I’m not just betting on it, I’m fighting for it. We still have three years to fight this political battle so that we don’t pull out.

Interestingly, when the President of the United States announced his intention to pull out, not one single other country joined the U.S. Even the other big oil-exporting countries remained. It’s not that other countries are necessarily more altruistic or even more forward-looking. It’s that all over the world, people are already feeling the effects of higher temperatures, more heat waves, droughts, floods, more extreme storms, and forest fires, and they’re worried. That’s why we have near-universal agreement, because people all over the world know that something isn’t right.

Making a difference
There’s a great deal that young people can do. For those of you who have reached age 18, vote. Get out there and get involved. We are a democracy, and when people get out to vote they make the difference. Second, study these problems, understand the issues, take classes. Take a MOOC. Go online and find a free course that can help you gain knowledge about our Earth and about climate change. And when you get to college, make sure that your college or university is actively engaged in researching and teaching about these subjects and in being a good global citizen. I believe that universities should be divesting from their holdings of the fossil fuel companies that are lobbying against needed change. Students can play an important role in pushing universities to divest and act in a responsible manner.

A time for greatness
Many students ask me, “What should I study?” and my answer is, “Study what interests you, but keep your eye on sustainable development, because it needs expertise from all different professions.” When you become an expert, you can also play a vital role in educating friends and family and in telling your congressional representative, “Look, these are the facts. You need to know them.”

So much mess has been left for young people to clean up, but that means it’s an opportunity for many great things to be done: new apps, new technologies, machine learning, new renewable-energy systems, new business models. It’ll be a time of great innovation that I think will be very exhilarating and exciting from a career point of view. So follow your interests, but think about ways to use your knowledge, talents, and energies to contribute to the public good. There’s nothing more exciting or rewarding than making a contribution toward a better world.