

Opportunity I: The Global Goals and Expo 2020 Dubai

NADIA VERJEE: I do fundamentally believe that Expos are about human progress. And in the current context, we design human progress around a global framework that is called the Sustainable Development Goals.

Well, what does it mean? What does it mean when you talk about the sustainable development goals and how do you make it accessible to the individual walking through the door, the school child, the businessman, all encompassing message that really resonates with everybody?

NOON SALIH: This is Nadia Verjee, the Chief of Staff to Her Excellency Reem Al Hashimy, the Minister of State for International Cooperation and Director General of Expo 2020 Dubai. Nadia also runs Expo's Program for People and Planet.

NADIA VERJEE: Given that we were hosting an Expo in 2020, and we were talking about the decade of action and the decade of delivery, what outcomes we wanted to drive from this Expo, Opportunity was sort of a catch-all that really fit.

NOON SALIH: Opportunity: one of the three main sub themes of Expo 2020 Dubai. Like the other two themes - Sustainability and Mobility - it has its own pavilion, named: Mission Possible. And beyond the physical structures, Opportunity travels far and wide across the Expo site, intersecting with a great many other ideas and conversations.

This is why, Nadia explains, the United Nations' sustainable development goals, or SDGs for short, were the perfect expression of what Opportunity means for Expo 2020.

NADIA VERJEE: We've been able to see to that idea here at Expo, where this has been the first place ever to bring together everybody along the value chain, over an extended period of time to push forward a collective discussion around the impact of climate change, around water, around food security.

Once we decided that the SDGs was going to be the subject matter for Opportunity, we needed to design our anchor pavilion of opportunity around the SDGs.

NOON SALIH: In the first of this two part series about Opportunity at Expo 2020 Dubai, we discover how, in a period of six months, the Global Goals for a brighter, more prosperous future came to life and inspired action by potentially thousands, if not millions of people.

I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

MAHER NASSER: People always refer to the SDGs as the United Nations sustainable development goals adopted at the UN in 2015, but actually the process started three years before. In 2000 world leaders adopted what is called the Millennium Declaration, which was later reformulated to say by 2015, we have eight Millennium Development Goals to achieve. What is going to happen after that? What is it going to be the post 2015 development agenda?

NOON SALIH: This is Maher Nasser, the Commissioner General of the United Nations Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai.

MAHER NASSER: When the 17 sustainable development goals were adopted by world leaders in 2015, it wasn't an agenda that was produced by academics or politicians. It reflected what people wanted to see, what people thought were the priorities of what needed to be achieved in the next 15 years.

Discussion started at the United Nations.

NOON SALIH: This was a process of consultations and dialogue that involved a million people around the planet.

Even though the goals were spearheaded by the UN under the guidance of Deputy Secretary General Aameenah Mohammed, they don't belong to one entity.

MAHER NASSER: The level of challenges that we're facing, from climate change to the pandemic to rising inequalities, cannot be met by one country or two alone. It has to be through cooperation. You need partnerships between governments, between private sector, between communities, civil society and individuals.

NOON SALIH: The guiding principles to achieving the 17 interlinked sustainable development goals are mapped out in a charter known as Agenda 2030: the most comprehensive global plan of action to date to eliminate poverty, achieve gender equality, and protect the planet.

MAHER NASSER: And some of them are cross cutting. You cannot really end poverty without reducing inequalities. Or ending gender-based discrimination without giving women full place at the table of leadership, not in government only, but also in the private sector, and in society.

NADIA VERJEE: And so how do you begin to sort of level the playing field? We understand what the challenges are that face us today, but we have a choice.

There's a journey towards opportunity and the journey could really be framed around creating access to basic needs for everybody on this planet.

MUSIC

NADIA VERJEE: My boss always tells us hope is not a method. And so really understanding how to go beyond, it's really beginning to draw upon the actual physical things that we can do to demonstrate that it is possible, that it is actually mission possible.

NOON SALIH: This was the intended purpose of Opportunity at Expo 2020 Dubai: to put words into action.

MAHER NASSER: For us to be able to communicate, we need to be where the people are. And Expos gather people who come to see other countries, and come to see each other and meet and learn.

NADIA VERJEE: But also that Expos are about just a wider group of people who ordinarily would not have had access to these conversations and would not necessarily feel empowered in the same way.

MUSIC

MAHER NASSER: The UN has been participating in World Expos from the early '50s until now. With different Expos, there are different themes. So, last Expo in Milan, the theme was 'Feeding the Planet'. This Expo, the theme is, of course, Connecting Minds, Creating the Future, which is also related to the sustainable development goals. It's related to the Agenda 2030 and our presence in the Opportunity Pavilion speaks to the same theme.

NOON SALIH: Inside the Opportunity pavilion sits the UN Hub. It's a space where various exhibitions and events are hosted to reflect the SDGs.

NADIA VERJEE: The SDGs are normally something that happens in the corridors of the United Nations every September when the General Assembly meets, but never before was there a dedicated space for the six months where the world could really talk about innovation and transformative change.

NOON SALIH: The UN dedicates a whole week for the SDGs, during its Global Goals Week.

But this is the first time in history that the Global Goals Week is hosted outside of the UN Headquarters in New York. Instead, it took place as one of the 10 thematic weeks under Expo 2020's People and Planet Program.

NADIA VERJEE: It is significant that it's outside the UN because it's not only the UN's agenda, it's the global agenda. But then really linking that to why Dubai and why Dubai Expo 2020? It's because 192 nations are represented here, it's because we have international organizations and businesses.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: Drawing people into the Opportunity mission and getting them to embrace the SDGs required creativity. The message had to be engaging. This is, after all, a World Expo.

NADIA VERJEE: I mean, this is a giant site. It is twice the size of Monaco. There's a lot going on, so distilling all of that down in a way that people can really remember was something that we were very keen on. What we did was try to find a really fine balance between education, entertainment, but also purpose.

NOON SALIH: Take for example, the SDGs challenge that visitors were invited to complete.

MAHER NASSER: They were given the opportunity to collect stamps for the different SDGs. There were SDG stations throughout Expo and people were going around, "oh where do I get SDG two, SDG three.."

NOON SALIH: And then there's the world's to-do list.

MAHER NASSER: The to-do list is like post-it stickers: “what do we need to do to end poverty? What do you need to do...” And you will, you still see those across Expo. We also promoted the ActNow campaign.

NOON SALIH: Where visitors at Expo can digitally pledge to some simple but impactful actions for climate and sustainability.

MAHER NASSER: From reducing single-use plastic to pledging to use public transport rather than driving, that eventually if you add up multiple, multiple times, then they make a difference.

NOON SALIH: In fact, up until the time of the recording of this episode, almost 350,000 of these actions have been logged in by visitors at Expo alone. Altogether with the virtual pledges coming in through the ActNow app, there are more than 5 million so far.

NADIA VERJEE: We had an entire layer of programming through the Program for People and Planet that really tackled issues. But what we did differently was that we brought everybody together along the value chain.

In the same room we put the youth climate activist with the policy maker. We put the academic with the business person, and there what we saw was a more flourishing, meaningful conversation. And we begin to see the fruit of that over the six months that has led to new forms of cooperation, new types of partnership, and just new discussion in the room.

NOON SALIH: It's in these synapses of human interaction that Opportunity presents itself. Whether it's during one of the theme weeks at Expo, or a function by one of the participating countries, or an activation at the Opportunity pavilion itself, the main message is constant: any one person, one business, one nation can make a difference.

NADIA VERJEE: We've highlighted change-makers, these incredible people who are finding solutions in their local context, but that are scalable, that are replicable, that these different ideas actually have legs. And that one by one, by one, when you add them all up together, you can begin to start a movement.

NOON SALIH: This is best represented through the Global Best Practice Program, an initiative by Expo 2020 Dubai to highlight real world solutions to the world's biggest challenges. It's an extension of the Bureau International des Expositions' Best Practice Area into a program that sets new standards and best practices in pursuit of the Global Goals.

NADIA VERJEE: What we decided to do at this particular Expo was to link that Best Practice back to our purpose, which was really around innovation and solution finding. But we really rallied the cause around small steps and big impact.

NOON SALIH: The idea is that by sharing these innovations with one another that change makers across the globe could be inspired to adopt and adapt them, to meet their own communities' needs.

NADIA VERJEE: We had our 50 Global Best Practice winners come to the Expo for an assembly where they gathered and they shared. It was so inspiring. It was one of our highest, most highly watched programs online.

It really leaves you with the sense of possibility, a sense of inspiration, and that young people, mostly young people, have this incredible power to change.

MUSIC

MAHER NASSER: How do we really ramp up the implementation of the SDGs? Lessons learned from what works, what doesn't work?

The trend is that we are moving in the right direction.

NOON SALIH: Even though it doesn't always seem like it, the percentage of people living below the poverty line is lower than it used to be. Today, one in 10 people around the world live on less than about two dollars a day. In 1990 this was the case for more than a third of the world's population. And there have been other positive strides too.

MAHER NASSER: We have also seen increases in education attainment, girls enrollment, maybe a modest increase in women's representation in parliament.

NOON SALIH: But even so, by around 2019, the milestones for achieving Agenda 2030 were not quite on track.

MAHER NASSER: And then comes the pandemic. It has pushed hundreds of millions of people back into poverty. For the first time, the number of people going to sleep hungry or food insecure increased. Children's education attainment was impacted and of course, public health.

NOON SALIH: The other major challenge facing the entire planet, and often in the most vulnerable corners of it, Maher says, is climate change.

MAHER NASSER: You can't wish away a storm or a drought or the rising sea levels. You have to take concerted and concrete action.

NOON SALIH: This notion of 'action' became sort of the mantra behind the Opportunity theme at Expo 2020 Dubai.

MAHER NASSER: What we need to do in the remaining nine years, and that's the call of the Decade of Action, is that we know how to do it. We have the agenda. What we just need to do is to really bring the political will back on board and overcome the challenges. It's not about talking about it now. It's time to do it.

MUSIC

NADIA VERJEE: The international participants and the countries, when they were thinking about what theme they wanted to be represented under, the overwhelming majority chose to be represented under Opportunity, because it was so broad and so all encompassing of their priorities and their objectives, of what they wanted to achieve out of the Expo, but also how they see themselves.

MAHER NASSER: There's one common theme that you will find if you visit every single national pavilion - and I have - which is that people there who are from that country are proud to present their country.

NOON SALIH: And with that is a common vision: the opportunity of a brighter, more sustainable 2030 that, if achieved, can help give future generations the headstart they deserve to lead lives in dignity.

MUSIC

MAHER NASSER: Average humans live 70 years, 80 years in some countries. But we have often aspired to leave a better place for our children. If we achieve the SDGs and work towards them, we are going to be doing that.

NADIA VERJEE: Of course it's our collective responsibility as the United Nations, as nations, as government, to look at really what the lessons are that we've all learnt.

NOON SALIH: It's also up to the 192 participating national pavilions, Nadia says, to really reflect on the SDG takeaways at Expo and think about how to build upon them in their home countries.

But at a much more micro level, there is power in individual action too.

NADIA VERJEE: Everybody has a responsibility to inform themselves and to have sort of almost a fact-based worldview. But then everybody also has a responsibility to turn that information into knowledge.

There is no prescriptive solution to what change means. Once you have that greater awareness and you feel ignited and empowered by the knowledge that you have, I think everybody can be an agent of change. And then really making the steps that you want to make in your life to be an agent of change for the global commons, for greater humanity, for people, and for the planet.

NOON SALIH: In the second episode of this series on Opportunity at Expo 2020 Dubai, take a tour of the Mission Possible pavilion and meet some of the inspiring voices that built it up, designed its journey, and reflect its purpose. That's next, on Inside Expo.

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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