

UNA _UK

1 // 2021

THIS IS ONE DEGREE

ESSAY

CLIMATE CHANGE: COURAGE TO HOPE

Abdulla Shahid, President of the
UN General Assembly

BRIEFING

CODE RED FOR HUMANITY

Including hopes for COP26
by youth activist Nisreen Elsaim

PERSPECTIVES

ECOCIDE, ACTION GOVERNANCE, RISK

By Jojo Mehta, Daniela Tejada,
Arthur Lyon Dahl
and John Gittings

LAST WORD

INTERVIEW

Leah Namugerwa
Fridays for Future Uganda



ISSN 2399-3030



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Cover image: [mack2happy/istockphoto](https://www.istockphoto.com/author/mack2happy)

UNA-UK magazine is published by UNA-UK

Editors // Natalie Samarasinghe and Enyseh Teimory

Advertising // info@una.org.uk

Disclaimer //

Opinions in UNA-UK magazine do not necessarily reflect the views of UNA-UK, the United Nations or contributors' organisations.

Design and layout // designbysoapbox.com

A limited number of copies are printed, using vegetable-based inks on 100% recycled chlorine- and acid-free paper. When you are finished with the magazine, please recycle it or, better yet, pass it on to a friend.

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THE ULTIMATE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION

Even our best-case climate scenario will lead to mass loss of life. But inaction is tantamount to genocide.

NATALIE SAMARASINGHE

Floods, crop failure and desertification. The spread of diseases such as dengue and malaria. At least 14% of the world's population exposed to heatwaves, 130 million people to drought and 270 million to water stress. More than five million excess deaths per year from extreme temperatures alone.

Some 570 cities – including Miami, Rio, The Hague, Alexandria, Hong Kong and Osaka – in danger from rising sea levels, risking 800 million lives and \$1 trillion in economic damage. Over 140 million people displaced within their borders each year. Climate pressures fuelling conflict, crime and extremism.

This is the best-case scenario we can hope for now. It is predicated on radical and immediate action to slash emissions, reach net zero by 2050 and limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C by 2100. Six years ago at the UN climate conference in France, small island states pushed for this target to be included in the Paris Agreement. Their pleas went unheeded. It is listed only as an aspiration.

Since then, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that if we overshoot by just half a degree – the actual target agreed by governments in 2015 – an extra 62 to 457 million people will be at risk. And even that scenario remains off track. Our current trajectory puts us on course for 2.7°C heating if – and only if – every

single country meets every commitment it has made. If they do not, we may have to contend with large swathes of our world becoming uninhabitable (see The Facts on pages 6–7 for more statistics and sources).

The latest IPCC report, released in August 2021, warns that we have already changed the climate in ways that cannot be remedied for centuries, maybe millennia. As we note in our Briefing on pages 10–14, whatever we do now, the ocean will continue to warm; glaciers will continue to melt.

I am not sure how to prepare my daughters for their future. Their privilege means they are not yet suffering directly, but it is only a matter of time. Wildfires and heatwaves are no longer confined to “countries over there”. Political instability and disruption to food supply no longer seem like distant threats. Only the first half of the COVID-19 mantra applies: nobody is safe.

Indigenous and coastal communities face being wiped out. Entire countries could succumb to their “watery graves” as Abdulla Shahid eloquently warns on pages 8–9. Those of us in the West already tolerate an obscene amount of suffering in poorer countries, as well as in our own communities.

If genocide is defined as deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about a group's destruction, is our inaction tantamount to complicity? There is

already momentum around expanding the definition of atrocities in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to include ecocide (see Jojo Mehta on page 15).

The UN Human Rights Council recently recognised the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and appointed a new Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Climate Change. The move will boost efforts across the world to strengthen environmental legislation, address gaps in protection and improve access to justice.

It will also provide an additional tool to challenge governments and companies that fail to take action on climate change, pollution and nature loss. At present, we struggle to deal with single incidents, such as the devastating oil spill off the coast of Sri Lanka earlier this year. We have yet to tackle the legal implications of sea level rise on maritime boundaries, let alone climate refugees.

And we are already grappling with violations of long-established rights – from the rights to life, housing, food and health to horrific attacks on environmental activists. According to Global Witness, last year was the most dangerous on record, with 227 activists killed. In South Africa, grandmother Fikile Ntshangase was murdered for campaigning against a coal mine. In India, journalist Shubham Mani Tripathi was shot after exposing sand-mining deals.

Over half of these attacks took place in just three countries – Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines, with indigenous peoples disproportionately represented. Only one killing took place in a rich country: Regan Russell was run over whilst protesting outside a slaughterhouse in Canada. But reports of intimidation and harassment abound in all regions. The right to protest is under threat in all parts of the world, including in the UK.

The climate crisis is fundamentally about human rights. While it demands that we break new ground in terms of legislation, it is rooted in our larger struggle against inequality and injustice. This is evident from the uneven distribution of climate vulnerabilities within and between countries; from the historical responsibility for emissions that

colonial powers bear; from the environmental crimes committed against the poor in authoritarian states (and in some democracies); and from the sheer inability of ordinary people to challenge the actions of multinational companies.

Given its existential nature, the climate emergency is arguably the greatest human rights challenge we face. We certainly need to treat it as such. A just transition to net zero isn't an optional add-on to reducing emissions. It is essential if we are to make the case for drastic climate action to those who fear they will lose out – and to the politicians who hide behind them. It is essential if we are to avoid further suffering.

We need to stop tolerating unacceptable levels of harm in other parts of the world. We need to get serious about

adaptation and burden sharing. We cannot pretend that aid absolves us from taking responsibility – whether that's exporting our emissions to developing countries or expecting them to host the vast majority of displaced persons.

COP26 in Glasgow needs to deliver on emissions. But however tricky, broader legal and human rights issues also need to be tackled soon, whether that's at the Stockholm+50 conference next year or through follow-up to the UN Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda* report (see pages 20–21).

We already have blood on our hands. How much more can we live with? //

NATALIE SAMARASINGHE //

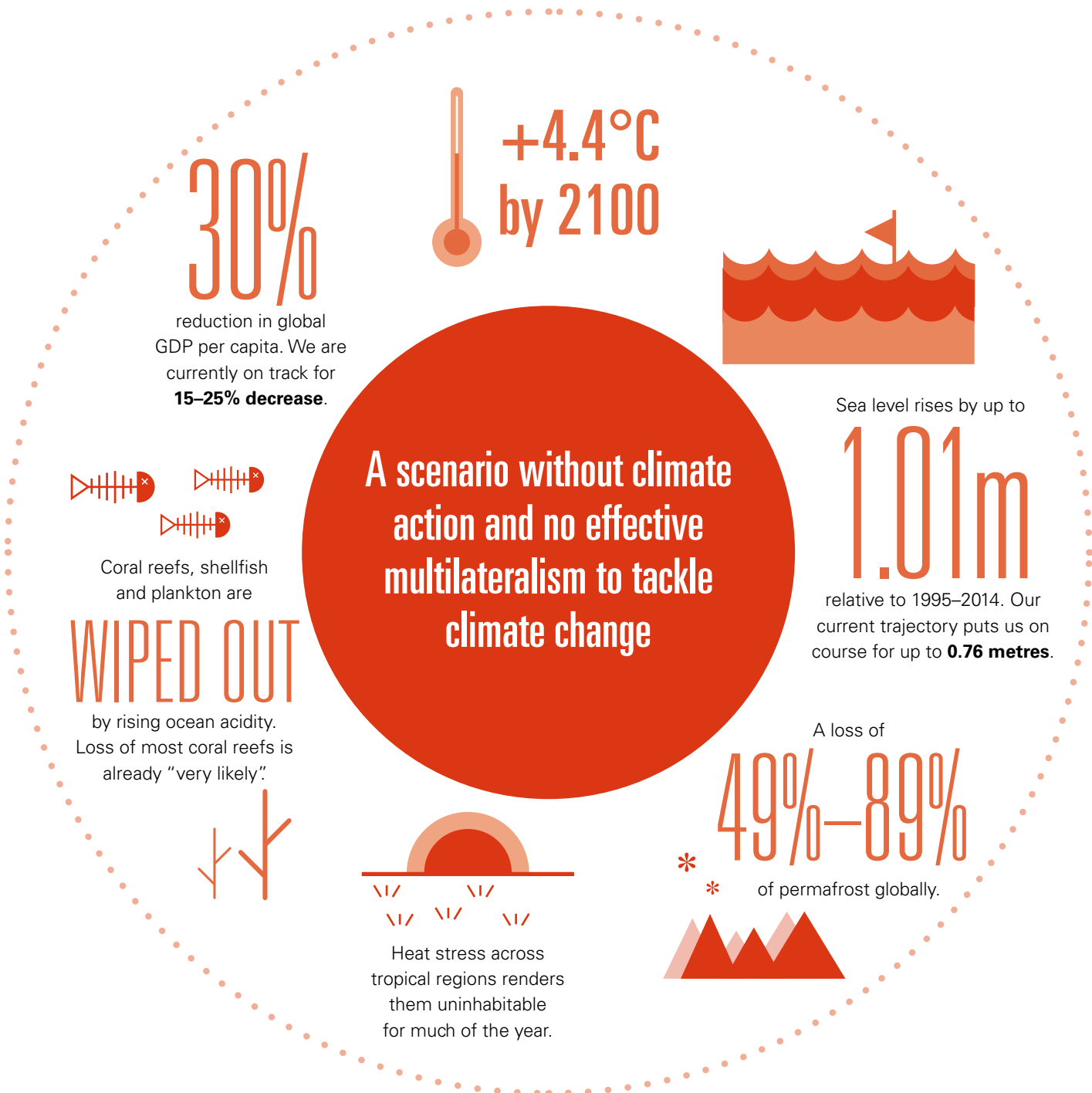
Natalie Samarasinghe is Chief Executive Officer of the United Nations Association – UK.

// Two women stand by the remains of a house destroyed by rapid river erosion in Bangladesh in 2018. © SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Stock Photo



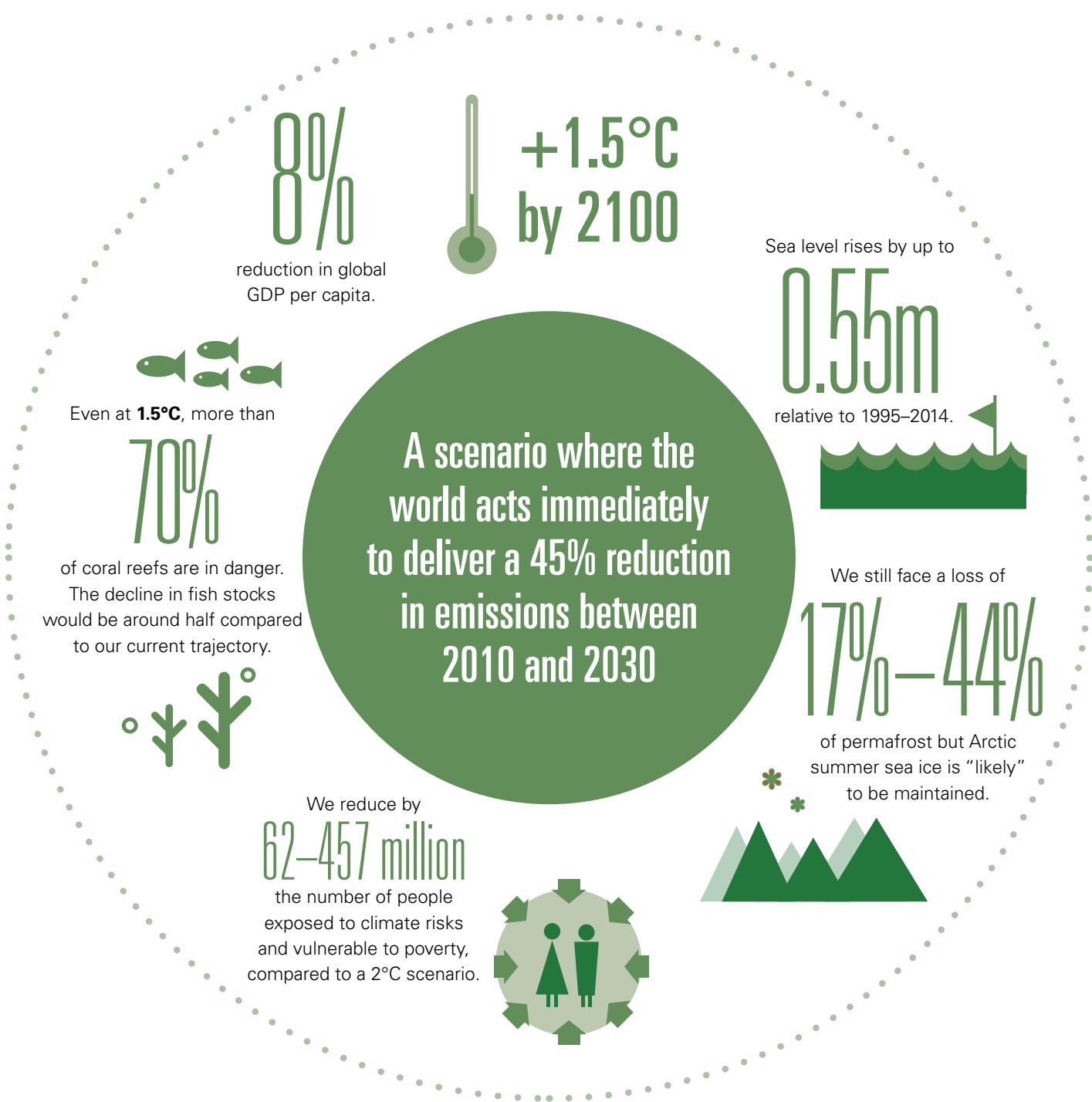
BREAKDOWN OR

In September 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres published *Our Common Agenda*, a major report that draws on data from across the UN system, as well as ideas crowdsourced through public consultations to which UNA-UK contributed. The report sets out the stark and urgent choice facing humanity: breakdown or breakthrough. Below we present two scenarios for climate change. Even if countries meet all their current commitments to reduce emissions, we would be heading for a 2.7°C increase in global temperatures.



BREAKTHROUGH?

Adapted from *Our Common Agenda* – Report of the Secretary-General © 2021 United Nations (www.un.org/common-agenda), with additional statistics from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (2019) and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research.



THE COURAGE TO HAVE HOPE ON CLIMATE

Abdulla Shahid

I come from the Maldives, an archipelagic country that is barely two metres above sea level at its highest point. Year after year, our policymakers and diplomats exhaust themselves making appeals to the conscience of the international community, asking them to finally act against climate change, and rescue us from a watery grave.

We have watched our peers from small island developing states make similar appeals and witnessed their growing frustration at the glacial pace of climate action. At the same time, the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has vindicated what we have been saying for decades. Prolonged hurricanes, wildfires, drought, unpredictable and frequent weather events, all show that climate change is not a distant threat but a crisis on our doorsteps.

I did not choose ‘hope’ as the theme of my Presidency of the General Assembly because I am naïve about the gravity of the issues confronting us. Nor am I indifferent to the anger and concern of the many climate heroes who justifiably continue to ring alarm bells, pointing to the scientific data and the consequences of our inaction.

I chose hope because that is what will rescue us from complacency and cynicism. Hope is what we need to act.

Let us consider a key lesson from the ordeal of COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, the entire world was in a state of panic. Hospitals were flooded. Doctors and nurses were overworked, exhausted and often on the verge of collapse. Entire economies were brought to a standstill. No viable vaccines were in sight, and health authorities warned there may not be any for years to come.

We could have resigned ourselves to fate and let the pandemic take its course, leaving a trail of human misery, death, and economic destruction in its wake.

Instead, we chose hope. We trusted in science and acted on the conviction that if we harnessed our collective ingenuity and resources, we could solve the challenge of the pandemic.

That attitude gave us solutions. Within two years, we have developed and begun the rollout of several viable vaccines. Countries have begun to beat back the virus. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

Yes, serious issues remain in terms of vaccine accessibility and distribution – and I intend to address these at the General Assembly early in the new year – but the point remains that hope, and action built on hope, has delivered solutions. Humanity demonstrated that it has the ingenuity and tools to quickly overcome one of the greatest challenges it has faced in the last century.

Climate change should be no different.

Sure, we can point to the doomsday reports and the many, many signs of alarm. These are not meritless, and we would be foolhardy to ignore them. But

we should never use data to signal it is time to throw in the towel.

I firmly believe that if we act in that same spirit of hope as we did for COVID, with the same sense of urgency, we can successfully roll back the threat of climate change.

And unlike the pandemic, we have had decades to prepare, to deliberate, to argue, and to innovate. As a result, we know that we have the capacity and resources to implement the solutions we need.

Consider the commitment by wealthy countries to provide \$100 billion in climate finance annually from 2020. As of 2019, climate financing from developed countries to developing countries stood at \$79.6 billion annually. Yes, they fell short of reaching the \$100 billion target, but they are moving ever closer. Moreover, the issue is not lack of money but how it is prioritised, meaning the goal is in sight and achievable.

Military expenditure is one area of spending that many believe could be redirected to climate finance. The same can be said for any number of sectors, industries or luxuries.

The end argument is the same: as a planet, we have more than enough wealth to address climate finance. But up to this point we simply haven’t been willing – politically, economically or personally – to take the steps needed, to fundamentally change how we live and exist on this planet. We have the power to change this.

The same argument applies to renewable energy and phasing out fossil fuels. We have the technologies available to completely power the planet on renewable energy. We just need to make the

“Hope will rescue us from complacency and cynicism. Hope is what we need to act.”



// Waste disposal, Maldives. © Westend61 GmbH/Alamy Stock Photo

political and resource commitments required to get past the threshold.

In fact, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) reports that we have the potential to make two thirds of our energy output based on renewable sources by 2050, which would get us on track to meeting our net-zero targets.

Not only are solar and onshore wind sources energy efficient and available – they are cheap. IRENA's *Renewable Power Generation Costs in 2017* report found that solar and onshore wind are now the cheapest energy sources available. Meanwhile, estimates by Stanford University and others have put the cost of transitioning to renewable energy at \$6.8 trillion per year; a third of the annual \$17.7 trillion price tag for our business-as-usual energy system.

Nor does the argument for renewables end with the cost. By backing green technologies and sectors, we can create up to 18 million new jobs by 2030 according to the International Labour Organization.

In the long run, by investing in our collective ability to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and avert climate catastrophe,

the world stands to gain a net economic benefit of between \$127 trillion and \$616 trillion by 2100, according to a major study by the Beijing Institute of Technology with other organisations in China, Sweden and the US.

I do not recite these facts and statistics with a misguided sense of optimism that merely listing them will convince policymakers to act. I am only too aware of the decades of inaction and shortsighted decisions that have failed to address – and exacerbated – the climate crisis.

I am listing these figures because focusing on what is still possible will give us hope. And hope is what will give us the will to act.

Action begets hope. It is a cycle that will result in positive momentum and a complete change in mindset, which is what this world needs.

Frankly, the world has had enough of doom and gloom. Chastising people for their shortcomings is not what rescued us from the worst of the pandemic, or the many global challenges before that. While it may make for entertaining news headlines, such approaches will not deliver us

from the climate crisis. Hope and solutions-based approaches will. We must focus on what is possible, what is achievable, and come together to apply the many innovative tools at our disposal.

Now is the time for the world to act in the spirit of multilateralism. As the most representative body on earth, the United Nations must play a pivotal role in this task.

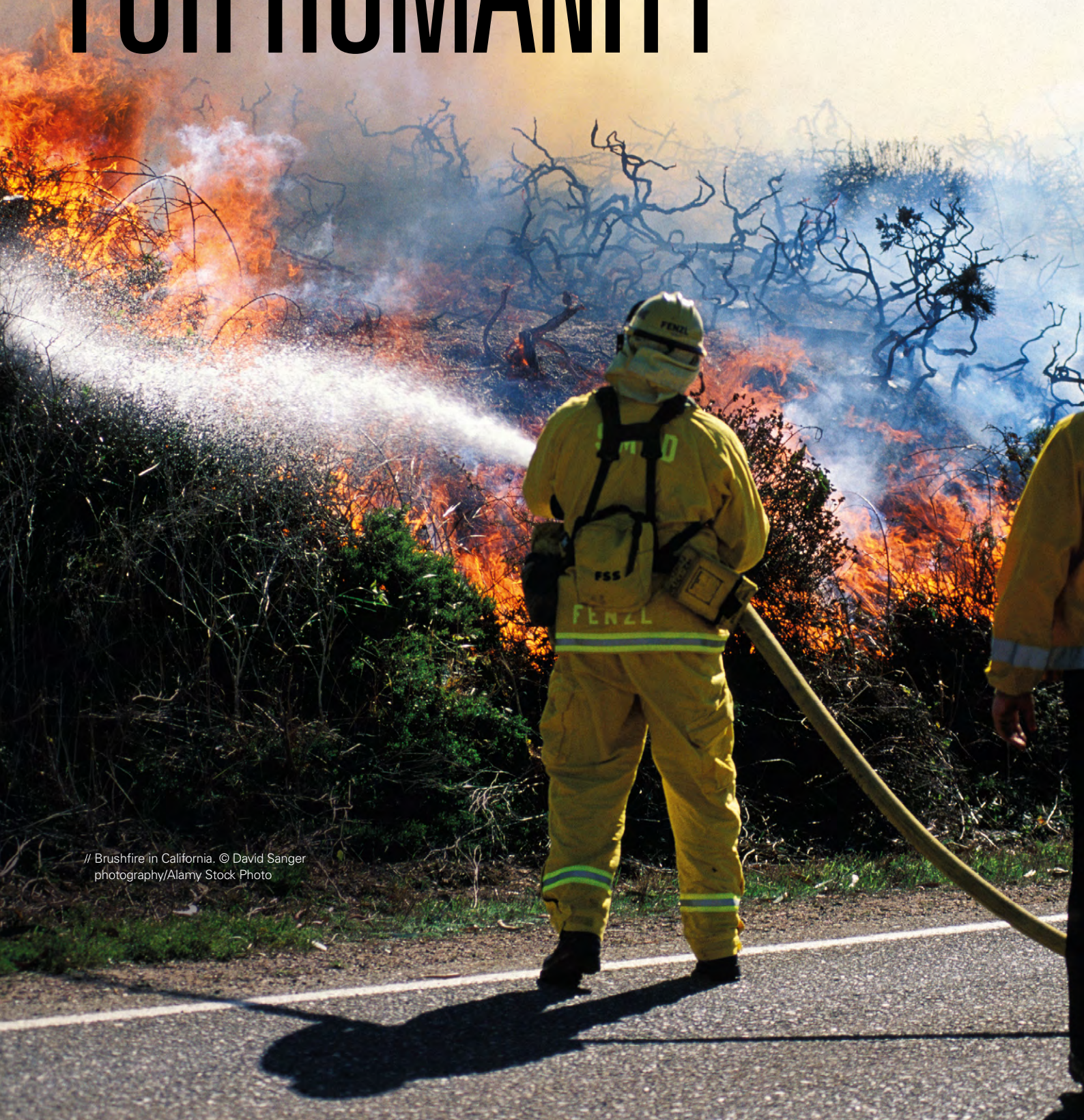
As President of the General Assembly, I will convene a High-Level Climate event in the lead up to COP26 in Glasgow, where I will reiterate the messages I have outlined above, emphasising the power of hope in meeting our climate goals.

My message is simply this: we have the capacity to deliver on climate. We know the science, we have the resources, and the blueprints for what we must do are right in front of us. Let us have the courage to take the first step and embrace hope. And let us use the momentum from that hope and work towards meeting our climate targets with renewed conviction. //

H.E. ABDULLA SHAHID // President of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Maldives.

CODE RED FOR HUMANITY

As the impacts of the climate emergency are felt by ever more people, what can we expect from the UN climate conference in Glasgow? Our briefing provides an overview of the latest IPCC report, the Paris Agreement and prospects for COP26.



// Brushfire in California. © David Sanger
photography/Alamy Stock Photo

Human activity is changing the climate in unprecedented ways, some irreversible. This was the headline message of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – the first major review of scientific evidence since 2013 and the Panel’s most emphatic statement that human activity is heating the atmosphere, ocean and land.

The report notes that global surface temperatures have increased by more than 1°C compared to pre-industrial levels. They have even breached 1.5°C – the aspirational target set out by the Paris Agreement on climate change – at certain points over the last years, such as during the 2016 El Niño.

These increases have affected many of our planetary support systems in ways that cannot be remedied for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The ocean will continue to warm and become more acidic. Glaciers and polar ice will continue to melt.

Extreme weather has already claimed millions of lives. *The Lancet* recently featured a study of 43 countries that attributed almost 10% of global deaths between 2000 and 2019 to excess mortality arising from abnormally hot or cold temperatures. The real figure is likely to be higher, when factors such as climate-fuelled conflict, disease and food disruption are taken into account.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the IPCC report “a code red for humanity”, and said we must halve emissions in the next few years to reach net zero by 2050. This will be a priority for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference to be held in Glasgow from 31 October to 12 November 2021.

FROM RIO TO PARIS

Almost 30 years since the UNFCCC was adopted in Rio de Janeiro, we are on course for 2.7°C heating by the end of the century – risking hundreds of millions of deaths and a drop of 15 to 20 per cent in global GDP per capita. Patricia Espinosa, UNFCCC Executive Secretary, has compared our situation to “walking into a minefield blindfolded”.

The UNFCCC was created in 1992 to prevent “dangerous” human interference with the climate system. It marked an important moment in terms of international recognition of climate change as a major global threat, and the need to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations.

Given their past and current contributions to CO₂ build-up, the Convention put the onus for emissions cuts on industrialised states. It also called for financial support to help developing countries mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. A system of grants and loans has since been set up through the UNFCCC and is managed by the Global Environment Facility.

Today, there are 197 parties to the UNFCCC: the 193 UN Member States; the State of Palestine; the Cook Islands and Niue; and the European Union. Every year, they conduct climate change negotiations – the largest being the Conference of Parties (COP) which is hosted by a different country each time.

In 1997, the third conference (COP3) adopted the Kyoto Protocol, which saw 37 rich countries take on binding emissions cuts. Developing countries argued that taking on limits would impede their development and be detrimental to

their populations. They pushed for the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”, which holds that states’ differing contributions to environmental degradation, as well as their particular circumstances, must be taken into account when determining what action is expected of them. This remains a key consideration in negotiations today.

While Kyoto was significant as the first binding international emissions agreement, it had limited effect. While the (mostly European) states bound by its targets exceeded them, much of their success was due to the collapse of polluting industries, the outsourcing of emissions to developing countries where products are manufactured and, to a lesser extent, the 2008 financial crisis.

Meanwhile, emissions from emerging economies rose rapidly during this period, with China overtaking the US to become the world’s largest emitter in 2006–2007 (although its per capita emissions remain far lower). The US itself never ratified the Protocol and Canada withdrew at the end of the first Kyoto commitment period (2008–2012).

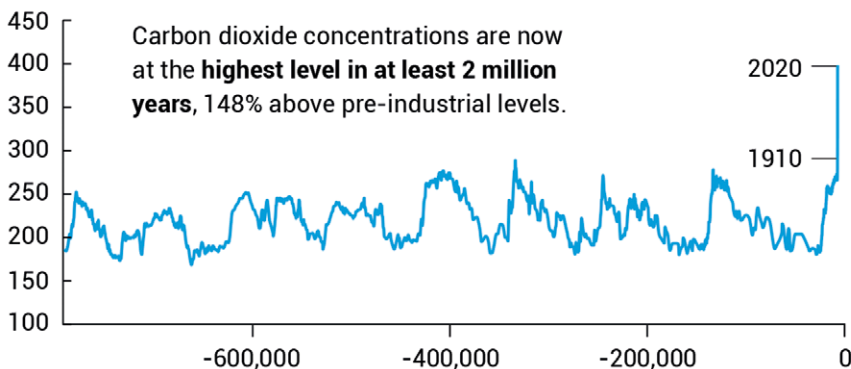
These tensions soured discussions on a successor to Kyoto. In 2009, the UN took a gamble by positioning that year’s COP in Copenhagen as the now-or-never moment for a new treaty. The conference ended in disarray, with a weak outcome document that was merely “noted” by the parties.

PARIS IN A NUTSHELL

- Limit global temperature rise to 2°C, with 1.5°C included as an aspirational target (Article 2)
- Peak emissions and achieve carbon neutrality (Article 4)
- Binding commitments by all parties to define, implement and report on a Nationally Determined Contribution (Article 4)
- Conserve and enhance sinks and reservoirs of emissions, such as forests (Article 5)
- Voluntary cooperation among parties to allow for higher ambition and support sustainable development (Article 6)
- Enhance adaptive capacity and resilience, including through national adaptation plans (Article 7)
- Address loss and damage associated with climate change, including extreme weather events and slow onset events such as desertification (Article 8)
- Finance, technology and capacity-building support to developing countries (Articles 9, 10 and 11)
- Education, training, public awareness and access to information (Article 12)
- Transparency of implementation, including through self-reporting and and international technical expert review (Articles 13 and 15)
- A “global stocktake” to take place in 2023 and every five years thereafter (Article 14)

Trends in atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration over 800,000 years

Mean carbon dioxide concentrations globally
parts per million (ppm)



Source: United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2020.

Subsequent meetings set their sights on 2015 for states to adopt “a protocol, another legal instrument, or an agreed outcome with legal force” that is applicable to all parties from 2020. Alongside this, there was a continued push to engage countries – in particular the largest emitters, developing as well as developed – in mitigation pledges.

Finally, at COP21 in Paris, parties to the UNFCCC reached a landmark agreement by which all countries agreed to take action on climate change. The Paris Agreement commits states to keeping global temperature rise to below 2°C. A number of states pushed for a lower target of 1.5°C, which is reflected in the document as an aspiration. The Agreement also aims to increase countries’ ability to deal with the impacts of climate change, including through financing and technology.

Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the Agreement does not contain binding emissions cuts for states. Instead, it requires parties to put forward ‘nationally determined contributions’ (NDCs) that they must report on regularly. In addition, it provides for a global stocktake to assess collective progress. The first one will take place from 2021 to 2023.

The Agreement entered into force in 2016, after meeting the threshold of ratification by 55 countries that account for at least 55% of global emissions. As of 24 October 2021, only five of the 197 parties to the UNFCCC have not ratified it: Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. Earlier this month, Turkey became the last G20 country to ratify the Agreement. While the UNFCCC classifies Turkey as an industrialised nation, Turkish lawmakers were keen to stress they see themselves as a developing country.

GLASGOW: GREAT EXPECTATIONS?

Hosted by the UK in partnership with Italy, COP26 was postponed in 2020 due to COVID-19. One year on, around 120 world leaders and 25,000 participants are expected to travel to Glasgow – although participation by civil society, especially from the Global South, is likely to be lower than usual (see Adriana Abdenur and Maiara Folly online).

Raising ambition will be a central objective – especially around keeping global temperature rise below 1.5°C and peaking emissions in the next few years. The UK Prime Minister has called for action on “coal, cars, cash and trees”, asking countries

to accelerate the phase-out of coal and switch to electric vehicles, encourage investment in renewables and curtail deforestation. Common timeframes for emission-reduction commitments has also emerged as a key issue.

As the impacts of 1°C temperature rise are felt across the world, adaptation is likely to be more prominent than at previous COPs, with a focus on protecting and restoring ecosystems and building defences, warning systems and resilient infrastructure. Finance will also be in the spotlight as countries continue to grapple with the fallout from COVID-19. Rich countries have yet to deliver the \$100 billion per year they have pledged in climate finance, while developing states argue that this amount is but a fraction of the West’s true carbon debt. Island nations in particular have raised concerns about what will happen if and when they are no longer able to adapt to climate change, and face huge losses of lives, livelihoods, lands and cultures.

One of the most contentious issues is likely to be carbon markets, which allow countries to trade or offset their emissions for a price. Rules were supposed to be agreed at COP24 in Katowice in 2018. Instead, the issue was pushed to COP25 but negotiations broke down. This year, there is enormous pressure to forge agreement, which brings with it the risk of inadequate or damaging rules. More broadly, the so-called Paris Rulebook, which contains the detailed rules needed to make the Agreement operational, needs to be finalised.

Many leaders will probably pay lip service to the importance of fair and inclusive climate action, and a just transition to net zero. But Glasgow is unlikely to deliver much progress on a human rights-based approach to climate change, as key issues related to justice, job security, migration and conflict are not on the table. There is an opportunity to pick them up at the Stockholm+50 conference next year – the 50th anniversary of the first UN conference on the human environment, as well as through follow-up to the Secretary-General’s *Our Common Agenda* report (see our briefing on the report at www.una.org.uk).

Perhaps wisely, COP26 has not been billed as a make-or-break moment but as a crucial milestone in our quest to avert climate catastrophe. However, with COVID-19 joining a confluence of crises and a steady drumbeat of extreme weather and dire warnings, the sense of urgency is all too real. //

THE EVIDENCE MUST PREVAIL IN GLASGOW

Nisreen Elsaim, a Sudanese climate negotiator and Chair of the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, shares her hopes for COP26.

We often say there is consensus on the science of the climate crisis. But I've seen governments try to negotiate the science.

When we were negotiating the Paris Agreement, many least-developed countries called for it to set a target of limiting global heating to 1.5°C. Even now, at just over one degree, we can see devastating impacts across the world – especially for the poorest and most vulnerable. However, some governments would not accept that and the Agreement ended up endorsing a 2°C target.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report published in 2018 made clear what a huge difference that half a degree will make, and it was questioned so much that there was actually a negotiation session on the report at the 24th Conference of the Parties (COP24) to the UN Framework on Climate Change in Katowice, Poland. This is the biggest issue we face in climate diplomacy: that scientific evidence is treated as something political, something you can negotiate. But you can't. You can negotiate agreements, finance, projects. But you cannot negotiate science.

Now here we are, three years on and the UN Environment Programme has published an emissions gap report that shows we are still not even close to meeting the two-degree target. And the IPCC's latest report made clear that things are getting worse.

So the to-do list for COP26 in Glasgow is quite long. There are many topics where we need a turning point – topics which affect our livelihoods and communities, and the growth and health of our countries. For instance, we need to make headway on the processes for averting, minimising and addressing loss and damage associated with climate change impacts. We urgently need to convert warm words on financing – for action on climate empowerment, and for the gender action plan. We need an agreed definition for what climate finance is in the first place.

We also need a breakthrough on the three mechanisms set out under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement on “voluntary cooperation”. The first would involve a country selling overachievement of its pledges (e.g. emissions cuts, reforestation or

renewables) to countries that have fallen short. The second would create a new international carbon market, overseen by the UN. The third involves “non-market approaches”, for example, climate cooperation through development aid. Some believe that these mechanisms will help to raise ambition and spread finance, expertise and technology. Critics believe they would undermine the Paris Agreement.

G20 countries need to pledge – and deliver – more. We cannot wait for 2050 to reach zero. We need to make \$100 billion a year available. We realise the many challenges of the geopolitical situation. But we know the UK has the ability to influence countries and we are relying on this.

And we hope COP26 can be a turning point for the inclusion of young people. Right now, it's hard to see that – with visa and accommodation challenges as well as COVID restrictions. Many countries lack vaccines. Quarantine will create logistical and financial issues for young people and participants from developing countries.

For people like me, climate change is not a choice. It is a reality. It is not a way to gain prestige or have a powerful position. It is an obligation arising from the impacts I have seen and from the dire predictions on the future.

So there is a lot riding on Glasgow. I really hope this will be the year we make it, because if we break now, I don't know how long it would take us to recoup. We would lose valuable time. Young people will lose faith and could start taking different measures. We must succeed. //

“You can negotiate agreements, finance, projects. But you cannot negotiate science.”

CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that “unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, limiting warming to 1.5°C will be beyond reach”. We asked climate activists from different regions and sectors for transformative solutions.

// Children collect coal in India.
© Joerg Boethling/Alamy Stock Photo

JOJO MEHTA

is Co-Founder (with legal pioneer the late Polly Higgins) & Executive Director of Stop Ecocide International, which operates at the intersection of legal developments, diplomatic traction and public narrative, acting as a facilitator and communications hub for global progress

ECOCIDE AS AN INTERNATIONAL CRIME

Ecocide is a word to articulate what is happening to our planet.

Etymologically, it means “to kill one’s home”. It’s a concept that brings together the many ways in which different habitats and natural systems – including our climate system – are being severely harmed and rolls them all into one word.

And once we grasp that encapsulating concept, an immediate moral response arises: this cannot continue.

Over the last two years, a global movement has been gathering momentum on addressing ecocide through international criminal law. In December 2019, supported by a nascent advocacy group now known as Stop Ecocide International, island nations Vanuatu and the Maldives became the first states to call for the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to include ecocide – creating personal, individual criminal responsibility for key decision-makers. The Statute states that the Court’s jurisdiction “shall be limited to the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole”, which it lists as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.

Both countries are already experiencing the impacts of this existential threat, while being among those who bear the least responsibility for climate disruption. Their call sparked a conversation which is rapidly gaining traction on the international stage.

Interest in criminalising ecocide is now a matter of public record at parliamentary and/or government level in at least 15 countries – via motions, resolutions, parliamentary questions, petitions, white papers or full proposals of law: Bangladesh, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Finland, France, Luxembourg, the Maldives, Netherlands, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, the UK and Vanuatu; as well as at the European Parliament, the Nordic Council and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Support for an international crime of ecocide has come from voices including Pope Francis, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, primatologist Dr Jane Goodall, activist Greta Thunberg and musician Paul McCartney.

This June, a panel of top international criminal and environmental lawyers drafted a legal definition of ecocide. Convened by the Stop Ecocide Foundation, the panel was co-chaired by internationally renowned UK barrister Philippe Sands QC and Senegalese jurist Dior Fall Sow. It produced this concise definition:

“Ecocide” means unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts.*

The definition has received a warm reception in media and political spheres, and been welcomed by

pragmatists and activists alike. The first threshold for the crime addresses the likely level of harm, while the second addresses the illegality or disproportionality of the conduct. The language is firmly based in legal precedent, drawing notably from the Environmental Modification Convention (known as ENMOD), the Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians during war and the Rome Statute itself. At the same time it makes a bold move towards ecocentricity (nature-centred) by criminalising acts likely to severely harm “any element of the environment”, which does not necessarily have to include harm to humans.

As indigenous cultures around the world acknowledge, humanity’s well-being is deeply bound up in that of nature – without healthy ecosystems, human health cannot be sustained. The fires, floods, droughts and diseases of the last two years have made it clear that the living systems nourishing human civilisation cannot be recklessly damaged without consequence. The recent Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (AR6) spells out the science with stark clarity.

Ambition and goodwill are not adequate to create the necessary action

Indeed, policymakers, investors, insurers and CEOs are all aware that profound systemic changes are needed if we are to move into a safe operating space for humanity. Ecocide law has the potential to support such changes, levelling the playing field for solutions – regenerative farming, renewable energy, circular economy – while providing a guardrail and guidance framework to ensure best practice. Beyond that, it has the potential to shift cultural assumptions and our understanding of our place in, and responsibility towards, the natural world.

While we cannot expect a new category of international crime to fix all our environmental woes – or even to prevent all ecocides – many believe it will have a strong normative effect that is conspicuously missing at present. Without a “hard stop” parameter acting as a kind of health and safety law for the planet, it’s hard to see how Paris Agreement targets or Sustainable Development Goals can reasonably be approached. It’s abundantly clear that ambition and goodwill are not adequate to create the necessary action.

Stop Ecocide estimates that within 4–5 years countries could be ratifying this amendment to the Rome Statute. In the light of increasing climate impacts and a growing urgency to find concrete and workable solutions at scale, this simple legal approach could prove to be a key missing piece to create the bridge to a liveable world.

It may be just in time. //

*The full commentary and core text can be found here in multiple languages: www.stopecocide.earth/legal-definition

DANIELA TEJADA

is Communications Director at Count Us In, which aims to mobilise a billion people over the next decade to take practical steps that, when aggregated, will make a significant impact in reducing carbon pollution and challenge leaders to act boldly to deliver global systems change

THE POWER OF INDIVIDUAL ACTION

According to the Carbon Disclosure Project, just 100 companies account for over 70% of global emissions. So is personal action really worth it? Is it fair?

Absolutely. As citizens, we have the power to reduce our own carbon footprint. If millions of people did the same, it could reduce global emissions by as much as a fifth. And our power does not end there. What we do – or don’t do – can drive wider change by influencing the decisions of business and political leaders. We buy from those companies. We vote for those politicians. Our lifestyle choices matter to them.

Whether it’s swapping petrol cars for clean alternatives, cutting back on meat or eating local produce, when we take action in our own lives, we aren’t just reducing our personal emissions. We’re signalling to markets and businesses that we care about shifting to zero-carbon transport and to affordable and sustainable farming. By taking action together, we can pressure those in power to deliver bolder solutions.

In many areas, thanks to brilliant technologies and the support of governments, progress towards a cleaner future has already been made. But it needs to be accelerated – and we can make this happen. Take transport. In 2016, the International Energy Agency predicted an end to petrol engines by the 2070s. Now, based on consumer and industry trends, it is likely to happen in 2040. Last year, electric vehicle sales surged by 43% (vs 6% in 2019) and availability of charging improved by 89% globally. Technology gets things started but “we the people” make them commonplace.

That is the force behind the growing global movement Count Us In, a community of people and organisations taking practical action on climate change. We offer people everywhere the chance to

choose from 16 high-impact, practical steps – ranging from cutting food waste, to switching your energy and walking and cycling more – that they can take in their own lives to reduce their carbon pollution and challenge leaders to act more boldly.

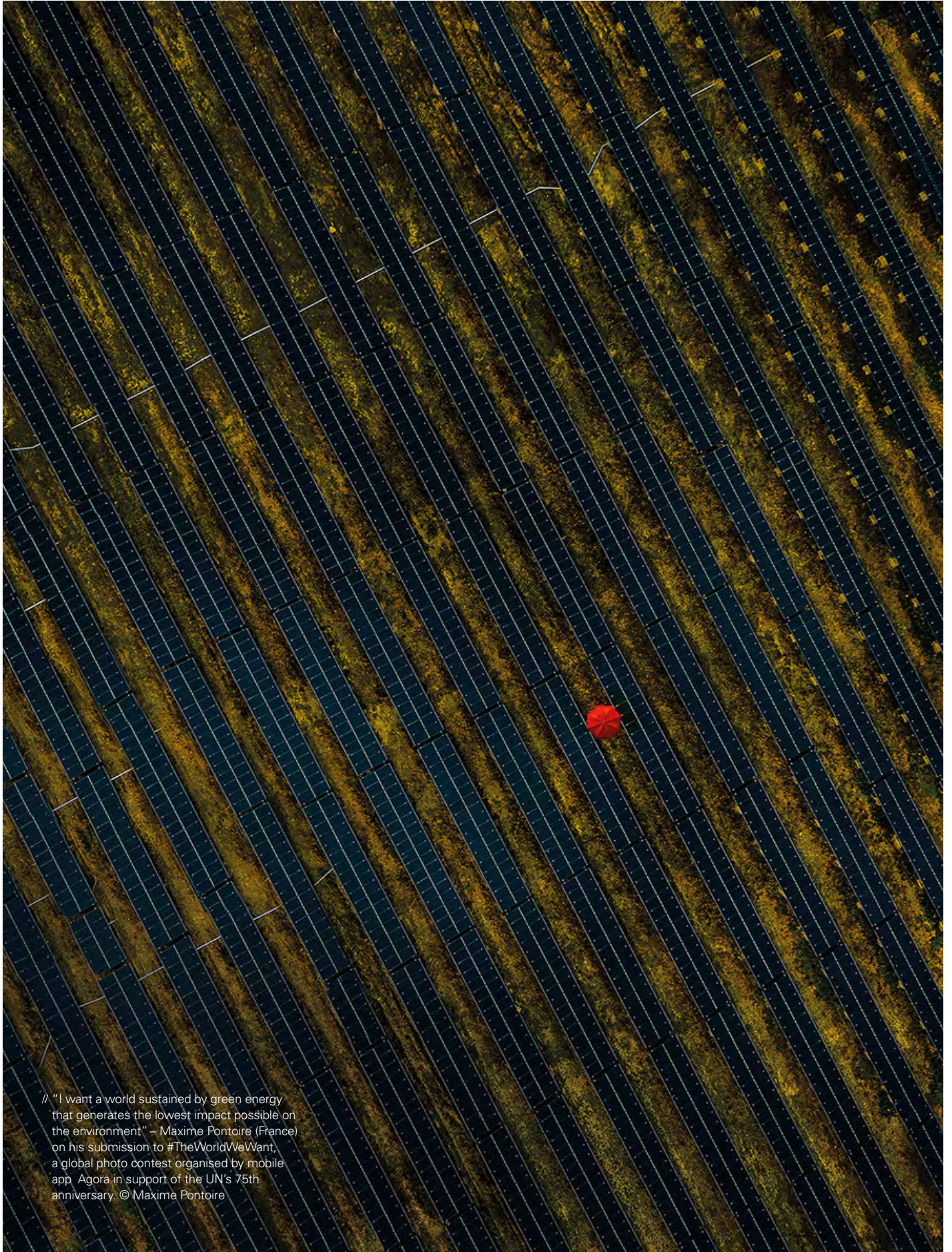
In the spirit of adding up to something bigger, Count Us In has set up an aggregator that counts the steps taken by every person and the resulting carbon reductions. It also links to an ecosystem of partner platforms, combining and synthesising their data to show the collective impact of citizen climate action worldwide. This quantitative visualisation is a testament to individual action, showing that seemingly small lifestyle choices matter and can lead to action by policymakers, businesses and others.

The climate emergency is here, now, and it affects us all. And so, we must all do our part. Whatever your choice, by committing to take a step in your own life via Count Us In, you’ll be joining a global movement that is helping to drive the individual and the systemic solutions required to protect what we love from climate change before it’s too late. Joining is simple:

1. Commit to taking a step that works for you at www.count-us-in.org – you’ll see the impact of your individual actions.
2. Keep it up and let us know how you get on – your effort will be counted as part of the Count Us In movement.
3. Bring your friends, family and others along – climate action is more fun and more impactful when we use it as a multiplying force!

Can we count you in? //





// "I want a world sustained by green energy that generates the lowest impact possible on the environment" – Maxime Pontoire (France) on his submission to #TheWorldWeWant, a global photo contest organised by mobile app Agora in support of the UN's 75th anniversary. © Maxime Pontoire

ARTHUR LYON DAHL

is President of the International Environment Forum, a Bahá'í-inspired professional organisation for environment and sustainability, and a former senior official at UN Environment Programme

STRONGER CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

COP26 should adopt an action plan with specific goals for the next five years, and major milestones for 2030. Like the Sustainable Development Goals, these should be universally applicable but with common but differentiated responsibilities, leaving no one behind. There should be specific targets for governments, cities, businesses and civil society.

Governments sign up to promises, but seldom deliver. COP26 should create a mechanism to document each government's agreed commitments, and then report regularly on their progress, or lack of progress, creating moral pressure to meet their obligations.

Previous COPs have failed to advance because the consensus rule allows any country to hold everyone hostage to protect national interests at the expense of the common good. The COP should finally adopt rules of procedure with some formula for majority

voting balancing multiple criteria to ensure just decisions in the common interest.

The UNFCCC should be given a legislative function to negotiate and adopt substantive measures for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The urgency of the climate crisis means that free riders and those that wilfully deny the reality of climate change to defend short-term vested interests should no longer escape from any recourse or sanction under international law.

The COP should create a mechanism to determine loss and damages from extreme events associated with climate change and to assign liability to states and corporate entities, including shared responsibility for collective impacts, in accordance with scientifically documented historical and present emissions of greenhouse gases since climate change became common knowledge. //



// "The world I want is moving towards safe, clean and renewable energy sources" – Georgios Kossieris (Greece) on his submission, taken in The Netherlands, to #TheWorldWeWant, a global photo contest organized by mobile app Agora in support of the UN's 75th anniversary. © Georgios Kossieris



// Children fetch water in Taiz, Yemen. Seven years of conflict, combined with – and exacerbated by – climate change have resulted in the world’s largest humanitarian crisis. Over 11 million children are in need of sustenance and medical supplies. Water shortages have been weaponised.
© Akram Alrasny/Alamy Stock Photo

JOHN GITTINGS

Journalist and author who was assistant foreign editor and chief foreign leader writer at *The Guardian* from 1983 to 2003

RESPONDING TO THIS WAKE-UP CALL

COVID-19 is a warning that the world faces more than one existential risk. As well as pandemics and the climate crisis there is the ever-present threat of a nuclear weapons catastrophe. All three are interrelated.

Climate change contributes to habitat loss and species displacement, increasing the opportunities for viral transmission. As we have seen in the past year, pandemic mitigation diverts resources and attention from climate change mitigation. Meanwhile, the production and maintenance of nuclear weapons not only carries a heavy carbon footprint and monopolises vast sums of finance but poses an inherent risk that, by accident or miscalculation, the weapons will be used. The Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* now identifies nuclear weapons and the climate crisis as

“existential threats to humanity”, with the pandemic as a wake-up call.

In the past, warning signs for these catastrophic threats have been visible but ignored, or acknowledged without leading to adequate action. States prioritise short-term gains over long-term insurance. This can only be overcome by concerted international measures.

COP26 should create a new programme to investigate the linkages with other existential threats and feed the results into policy formulation. Faced with a perfect storm of risk, we need a unified response, bringing together different international agencies to cooperate rather than compete for resources. This should make use of existing research which can also anticipate other existential threats before they emerge – when it may be too late. //

10

big ideas for a sustainable future

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has said: “We are waging a suicidal war against nature [and] risk crossing irreversible thresholds and accelerating crises that could take centuries or even millenniums to reverse.” His visionary report, *Our Common Agenda*, put forward a number of ideas on how we can protect our climate, our environment and our planet for all people – now and in the future. Here are 10.

1. **More ambitious climate plans**, including no new coal after 2021, shifting fossil fuel subsidies to renewable energy and providing a package of support to developing countries. This includes delivering the target of \$100 billion every year and allocating 50 per cent of climate finance for adaptation and resilience, as well as technological and capacity-building support.
2. **An international carbon price floor**, as proposed by the International Monetary Fund; complementary measures to GDP that account for the environment; and verifiable targets for financial actors that shift their entire portfolio away from high-emission sectors to a climate resilient and net zero economy, along with timelines to implement their pledges.
3. Universal adoption of the **International Labour Organization Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All**. All countries – and companies – should implement the guidelines as the minimum standard to ensure progress on decent work for all as well as on people-centred climate action.
4. **Biennial meetings of the G20, UN and international financial institutions** to discuss inter alia, coordination on long-term and innovative financing, a Sustainable Development Goals ‘investment boost’, more flexible research and development incentives, and resolving long-standing weaknesses in the international debt architecture.
5. An **emergency platform** that would be triggered automatically in global crises of sufficient scale and magnitude. The platform would bring together leaders and experts from different sectors, provide mechanisms for surge capacity, have focal points to engage with existing response arrangements, and identify ways to make the international system crisis-ready.
6. **UN Special Envoy for Future Generations** to represent the interests of those yet to be born and support long-term thinking and foresight, including through a Futures Lab that would support future impact assessments and anticipatory decision-making, convene foresight and planning experts, and regularly report on megatrends and catastrophic risks.
7. **A Declaration on Future Generations**. The interests of younger and future generations are increasingly being considered by national courts, particularly in the context of climate change and the environment. An international declaration could specify duties to succeeding generations and develop a mechanism to share good practices and monitor how governance systems address long-term challenges.
8. A dedicated **United Nations Youth Office** to support the Envoy on Youth, lead high-level advocacy and facilitate coordination of youth matters within peace, sustainable development, humanitarian issues and human rights. The youth envoy will also prepare recommendations for more meaningful, diverse and effective youth engagement in UN decision-making processes.
9. **A Trusteeship Council for the global commons**. Set up to support decolonisation, the Council suspended its operations in 1994. It could be repurposed as a multistakeholder body to tackle emerging challenges and act on behalf of future generations, issuing guidance on governance of the global commons, delivery of global public goods and managing global public risk.
10. **A high-level, multi-stakeholder “Summit of the Future” in 2023** to advance ideas for governance arrangements, with potential tracks including: management of global public goods and major risks, sustainable development and climate action beyond 2030, and future generations – as well as a new agenda for peace and a global digital compact.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE

Days after she celebrated her 17th birthday by planting 700 trees, we spoke to Leah Namugerwa – a climate activist and team leader for Fridays Future Uganda – about her hopes for the upcoming UN climate change conference (COP26) and the importance of individual action.

The majority of people still are not aware of climate change and some don't seem to mind – they just live each day as it comes. Governments, meanwhile, tend to choose profits over the safety of humans, over the ecosystem and biodiversity. They give us false hope. We keep thinking, after this pledge, something will be done. But it seems like we are waiting for the worst to come.

Young people have shown the world that we can get things done – at times better than adults. The world is changing very quickly and we are used to managing this pace of development. That's why organisations should have youth representatives on their governing bodies, that's why young people should be involved in climate negotiations. We understand the needs of young people. We have the biggest stake in the future.

Individual climate action plays a critical role in achieving structural change. It is an end in itself and also inspires collective action. I do weekly shore clean-ups with my team members at Fridays for Future. Every time we show our faces, we see other people joining in. We have noticed that it has changed their behaviour in terms of littering and polluting the lake.

'Birthday trees' is a project I started when I turned 15, after realising that deforestation was a major cause of the landslides in Bududa. I thought I should do something, instead of crying to the government for solutions. So instead of cutting a cake, I planted 200 trees. The next year, it was 500. And now, for my 17th birthday, I planted 700 trees with my friends – it was actually fun!

Imagine if everyone made this their birthday custom: we could restore the lost glory of our amazing forests. Anyone who can't plant in their own countries should contact me. I will plant on their behalf. I also want to bring in companies and organisations – and everyone who interviews me. I expect you to plant after this!

My hopes for COP26? Fast and consistent action. I don't want empty promises or policy agreements like in 2015. I want governments to say how they are going to force immediate action: how they are going to accelerate phasing out fossil fuels; how they are going to increase implementation of renewable energy; and the roles of countries, companies and individuals in prioritising climate action. We have seen a lot of writing, a lot of speaking. This time round, we need to see all of this applied for the well-being of our planet.

It's not too late. There is still hope. We don't have to give up just like that without fighting. Adults need to have the discipline to put more pressure on policymakers, to boycott harmful products, to have the audacity of treating this crisis as a crisis, and to know their responsibilities to nature.

I want everyone to know: you have the ability to bring about positive change. The climate crisis is truly a nightmare. I'm living a nightmare. I'm feeling the consequences. This is what I carry with me, everywhere I move. I feel like everything depends on me, everyone is counting on me. So I want everyone to have that mindset: your future depends on you so do something about it! //

Inspired by this interview, UNA-UK has made donations to the Eden Reforestation Project and called on its members – and staff – to plant trees in their communities.

To support Leah's tree planting
in Uganda, follow her on
Instagram: [namugerwaleah](#)



// Leah planting a birthday tree
in August 2021. © Leah Namugerwa

TAKE CLIMATE ACTION

Visit una.org.uk to read, listen and watch more climate content, take action in your community and add your voice to our campaigns.

