

Secretary-General's address at Columbia University: "The State of the Planet"

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President Bollinger,
Dear friends,

I thank Columbia University for hosting this gathering — and I welcome those joining online around the world.

We meet in this unusual way as we enter the last month of this most unusual year.

We are facing a devastating pandemic, new heights of global heating, new lows of ecological degradation and new setbacks in our work towards global goals for more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development.

To put it simply, the state of the planet is broken.

Dear friends,

Humanity is waging war on nature.

This is suicidal.

Nature always strikes back -- and it is already doing so with growing force and fury.

Biodiversity is collapsing. One million species are at risk of extinction.

Ecosystems are disappearing before our eyes.

Deserts are spreading.

Wetlands are being lost.

Every year, we lose 10 million hectares of forests.

Oceans are overfished -- and choking with plastic waste. The carbon dioxide they absorb is acidifying the seas.

Coral reefs are bleached and dying.

Air and water pollution are killing 9 million people annually – more than six times the current toll of the pandemic.

And with people and livestock encroaching further into animal habitats and disrupting wild spaces, we could see more viruses and other disease-causing agents jump from animals to humans.

Let's not forget that 75 per cent of new and emerging human infectious diseases are zoonotic.

Today, two new authoritative reports from the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme spell out how close we are to climate catastrophe.

2020 is on track to be one of the three warmest years on record globally – even with the cooling effect of this year's La Nina.

The past decade was the hottest in human history.

Ocean heat is at record levels.

This year, more than 80 per cent of the world's oceans experienced marine heatwaves.

In the Arctic, 2020 has seen exceptional warmth, with temperatures more than 3 degrees Celsius above average – and more than 5 degrees in northern Siberia.

Arctic sea ice in October was the lowest on record – and now re-freezing has been the slowest on record.

Greenland ice has continued its long-term decline, losing an average of 278 gigatons a year.

Permafrost is melting and so releasing methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

Apocalyptic fires and floods, cyclones and hurricanes are increasingly the new normal.

The North Atlantic hurricane season has seen 30 storms, more than double the long-term average and breaking the record for a full season.

Central America is still reeling from two back-to-back hurricanes, part of the most intense period for such storms in recent years.

Last year such disasters cost the world \$150 billion.

COVID-19 lockdowns have temporarily reduced emissions and pollution.

But carbon dioxide levels are still at record highs – and rising.

In 2019, carbon dioxide levels reached 148 per cent of pre-industrial levels.

In 2020, the upward trend has continued despite the pandemic.

Methane soared even higher – to 260 per cent.

Nitrous oxide, a powerful greenhouse gas but also a gas that harms the ozone layer, has escalated by 123 per cent.

Meanwhile, climate policies have yet to rise to the challenge.

Emissions are 62 per cent higher now than when international climate negotiations began in 1990.

Every tenth of a degree of warming matters.

Today, we are at 1.2 degrees of warming and already witnessing unprecedented climate extremes and volatility in every region and on every continent.

We are headed for a thundering temperature rise of 3 to 5 degrees Celsius this century.

The science is crystal clear: to limit temperature rise to 1.5-degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, the world needs to decrease fossil fuel production by roughly 6 per cent every year between now and 2030.

Instead, the world is going in the opposite direction — planning an annual increase of 2 per cent.

The fallout of the assault on our planet is impeding our efforts to eliminate poverty and imperiling food security.

And it is making our work for peace even more difficult, as the disruptions drive instability, displacement and conflict.

It is no coincidence that seventy per cent of the most climate vulnerable countries are also among the most politically and economically fragile.

It is not happenstance that of the 15 countries most susceptible to climate risks, eight host a United Nations peacekeeping or special political mission.

As always, the impacts fall most heavily on the world's most vulnerable people.

Those who have done the least to cause the problem are suffering the most.

Even in the developed world, the marginalized are the first victims of disasters and the last to recover.

Dear friends,

Let's be clear: human activities are at the root of our descent towards chaos.

But that means human action can help solve it.

Making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century. It must be the top, top priority for everyone, everywhere.

In this context, the recovery from the pandemic is an opportunity.

We can see rays of hope in the form of a vaccine.

But there is no vaccine for the planet.

Nature needs a bailout.

In overcoming the pandemic, we can also avert climate cataclysm and restore our planet.

This is an epic policy test. But ultimately this is a moral test.

The trillions of dollars needed for COVID recovery is money that we are borrowing from future generations. Every last penny.

We cannot use those resources to lock in policies that burden them with a mountain of debt on a broken planet.

It is time to flick the “green switch”. We have a chance to not simply reset the world economy but to transform it.

A sustainable economy driven by renewable energies will create new jobs, cleaner infrastructure and a resilient future.

An inclusive world will help ensure that people can enjoy better health and the full respect of their human rights, and live with dignity on a healthy planet.

COVID recovery and our planet’s repair must be the two sides of the same coin.

Dear friends,

Let me start with the climate emergency. We face three imperatives in addressing the climate crisis:

First, we need to achieve global carbon neutrality within the next three decades.

Second, we have to align global finance behind the Paris Agreement, the world’s blueprint for climate action.

Third, we must deliver a breakthrough on adaptation to protect the world – and especially the most vulnerable people and countries -- from climate impacts.

Let me take these in turn.

First, carbon neutrality – net zero emissions of greenhouse gases.

In recent weeks, we have seen important positive developments.

The European Union has committed to become first climate neutral continent by 2050 – and I expect it will decide to reduce its emissions to at least 55 per cent below 1990 levels by 2030.

The United Kingdom, Japan, the Republic of Korea and more than 110 countries have committed to carbon neutrality by 2050.

The incoming United States administration has announced exactly the same goal.

China has committed to get there before 2060.

This means that by early next year, countries representing more than 65 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions and more than 70 per cent of the world economy will have made ambitious commitments to carbon neutrality.

We must turn this momentum into a movement.

The central objective of the United Nations for 2021 is to build a truly Global Coalition for Carbon Neutrality.

I firmly believe that 2021 can be a new kind of leap year – the year of a quantum leap towards carbon neutrality.

Every country, city, financial institution and company should adopt plans for transitioning to net zero emissions by 2050 -- and I encourage the main emitters to lead the way in taking decisive action now to get on the right path and to achieve this vision, which means cutting global emissions by 45 percent by 2030 compared with 2010 levels. And this must be clear in the Nationally Determined Contributions.

Every individual must also do their part -- as consumers, as producers, as investors.

Technology is on our side.

Sound economic analysis is our ally.

More than half the coal plants operating today cost more to run than building new renewables from scratch.

The coal business is going up in smoke.

The International Labour Organization estimates that, despite inevitable job losses, the clean energy transition will result in the creation of 18 million jobs by 2030.

But a just transition is absolutely critical.

We must recognize the human costs of the energy shift.

Social protection, temporary basic income, re-skilling and up-skilling can support workers and ease the changes caused by decarbonization.

Dear friends,

Renewable energy is now the first choice not just for the environment, but for the economy.

But there are worrying signs.

Some countries have used the crisis to roll back environmental protections.

Others are expanding natural resource exploitation and retreating from climate ambition.

The G20 members, in their rescue packages, are now spending 50 per cent more on sectors linked to fossil fuel production and consumption, than on low-carbon energy.

And beyond announcements, all must pass a credibility test.

Let me take one example, the example of shipping.

If the shipping sector was a country, it would be the world's sixth biggest greenhouse gas emitter.

At last year's Climate Action Summit, we launched the Getting to Zero Shipping Coalition to push for zero emissions deep sea vessels by 2030.

Yet current policies are not in line with those pledges.

We need to see enforceable regulatory and fiscal steps so that the shipping industry can deliver its commitments.

Otherwise, the net zero ship will have sailed.

Exactly the same applies to aviation.

Dear friends,

The Paris signatories are obligated to submit their revised and enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions with their 2030 emissions cut targets.

Ten days from now, along with France and the United Kingdom, I am convening a Climate Ambition Summit to mark the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement.

Less than a year from now, we will meet in Glasgow for COP26.

These moments are opportunities we cannot miss for nations to detail how they will build forward and build better, acknowledging the common but differentiated responsibilities in the light of national circumstances – as said in the Paris Agreement – but with the common goal of carbon neutrality by 2050.

Second, let me now turn to key question of finance.

The commitments to net zero emissions are sending a clear signal to investors, markets and finance ministers.

But we need to go further.

We need all governments to translate these pledges into policies, plans and targets with specific timelines. This will provide certainty and confidence for businesses and the financial sector to invest for net zero.

It is time:

To put a price on carbon.

To phase out fossil fuel finance and end fossil fuel subsidies.

To stop building new coal power plants -- and halt coal power financing domestically and overseas.

To shift the tax burden from income to carbon, and from taxpayers to polluters.

To integrate the goal of carbon neutrality into all economic and fiscal policies and decisions.

And to make climate-related financial risk disclosures mandatory.

Funding should flow to the green economy, resilience, adaptation and just transition programmes.

We need to align all public and private financial flows behind the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Multilateral, regional and national development institutions, and private banks, must all commit to align their lending to the global net zero objective.

I call on all asset owners and managers to decarbonize their portfolios and to join key initiatives and partnerships launched by the United Nations, including the Global Investors for Sustainable Development Alliance and the Net-Zero Asset Owners Alliance today with \$5.1 trillion dollars of assets.

Companies need to adjust their business models – and investors need to demand information from companies on the resilience of those models.

The world's pension funds manage \$32 trillion dollars in assets, putting them in a unique position to move the needle must move the needle and lead the way.

I appeal to developed countries to fulfill their long-standing promise to provide \$100 billion dollars annually to support developing countries in reaching our shared climate goals.

We are not there yet.

This is a matter of equity, fairness, solidarity and enlightened self-interest.

And I ask all countries to reach a compromise on Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, as they prepare for COP26, to get us the clear, fair and environmentally sound rules carbon markets need to fully function.

I welcome the work of the task force launched in September, with members representing 20 sectors and 6 continents, to develop a blueprint for large-scale private carbon offset markets.

Third, we need a breakthrough on adaptation and resilience.

We are in a race against time to adapt to a rapidly changing climate.

Adaptation must not be the forgotten component of climate action.

Until now, adaptation represents only 20 per cent of climate finance, reaching \$30 billion on average in 2017 and 2018.

This hinders our essential work for disaster risk reduction.

It also isn't smart.

The Global Commission on Adaptation found that every \$1 invested in adaptation could yield almost \$4 in benefits.

We have both a moral imperative and a clear economic case for supporting developing countries to adapt and build resilience to current and future climate impacts.

Before COP 26, all donors and the Multilateral and National Development Banks should commit to increase the share of adaptation and resilience finance to at least 50 per cent of their climate finance support.

Early warning systems, climate-resilient infrastructure, improved dry land agriculture, mangrove protection and other steps can give the world a double dividend: avoiding future losses and generating economic gains and other benefits.

We need to move to large-scale, preventive and systematic adaptation support.

This is especially urgent for small island developing states, which face an existential threat.

The race to resilience is as important as the race to net zero.

Dear friends,

But we must remember: there can be no separating climate action from the larger planetary picture. Everything is interlinked – the global commons and global well-being.

That means we must act more broadly, more holistically, across many fronts, to secure the health of our planet on which all life depends.

Nature feeds us, clothes us, quenches our thirst, generates our oxygen, shapes our culture and our faiths and forges our very identity.

2020 was supposed to have been a “super year” for nature but the pandemic has had other plans for us.

Now we must use 2021 to address our planetary emergency.

Next year, countries will meet in Kunming to forge a post-2020 biodiversity framework to halt the extinction crisis and put the world on a pathway to living in harmony with nature.

The world has not met any of the global biodiversity targets set for 2020. And so we need much more ambition and greater commitment to deliver on measurable targets and means of implementation, particularly finance and monitoring mechanisms.

This means:

- More and bigger effectively managed conservation areas, so that our assault on species and ecosystems can be halted;
- Biodiversity-positive agriculture and fisheries, reducing our overexploitation and destruction of the natural world,
- Phasing out negative subsidies -- the subsidies that destroy healthy soils, pollute our waterways and lead us to fish our oceans empty.
- Shift from unsustainable and nature-negative extractive resource mining, and to broader sustainable consumption patterns.

Biodiversity is not just cute and charismatic wildlife; it is the living, breathing web of life.

Also in 2021, countries will hold the Ocean Conference to protect and advance the health of the world's marine environments.

Overfishing must stop; chemical and solid waste pollution – plastics in particular -- must be reduced drastically; marine reserves must increase significantly; and coastal areas need greater protection.

The blue economy offers remarkable potential. Already, goods and services from the ocean generate \$2.5 trillion each year and contribute over 31 million direct full-time jobs – at least until the pandemic struck.

We need urgent action on a global scale to reap these benefits but protect the world's seas and oceans from the many pressures they face.

Next year's global conference on sustainable transport in Beijing must also strengthen this vital sector while addressing its negative environmental footprint.

The Food Systems Summit must aim to transform global food production and consumption. Food systems are one of the main reasons we are failing to stay within our planet's ecological boundaries.

At the beginning of 2021, we will launch the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration focused on preventing, halting and reversing the degradation of forests, land and other ecosystems worldwide. The Decade is a rallying cry for all who want to tackle the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change with practical and hands-on action.

The International Conference on Chemicals Management will establish a post-2020 framework on chemicals and waste. According to the World Health Organization, sound chemicals management could prevent at least 1.6 million deaths per year.

2021 will also be critical in advancing the New Urban Agenda. The world's cities are fundamental frontlines on sustainable development – vulnerable to disaster yet vectors of innovation and dynamism. Let us not forget that more than 50 per cent of humankind already lives in cities – and this number will reach almost 70 per cent in 2050.

Next year, in short, gives us a wealth of opportunities to stop the plunder and start the healing.

One of our best allies is nature itself.

Drastically reducing deforestation and systemically restoring forests and other ecosystems is the single largest nature-based opportunity for climate mitigation.

Indeed, nature-based solutions could provide one third of the net reductions in greenhouse gas emissions required to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement.

The World Economic Forum has estimated that business opportunities across nature could create 191 million jobs by 2030.

Africa's Great Green Wall alone has created 335,000 jobs.

Indigenous knowledge, distilled over millennia of close and direct contact with nature, can help to point the way.

Indigenous peoples make up less than 6 per cent of the world's population yet are stewards of 80 per cent of the world's biodiversity on land.

Already, we know that nature managed by indigenous peoples is declining less rapidly than elsewhere.

With indigenous peoples living on land that is among the most vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation, it is time to heed their voices, reward their knowledge and respect their rights.

Let's also recognize the central role of women.

The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation fall most heavily on women. They are 80 per cent of those displaced by climate change.

But women are also the backbone of agriculture and key stewards of natural resources. They are among the world's leading environmental human rights defenders.

And women's representation in national parliaments has been linked directly to the signing of climate action agreements.

As humankind devises strategies for natural resource governance, environmental preservation and building a green economy, we need more women decision-makers at the table.

Dear friends,

I have detailed an emergency, but I also see hope.

I see a history of advances that show what can be done – from rescuing the ozone layer to reducing extinction rates to expanding protected areas.

Many cities are becoming greener.

The circular economy is reducing waste.

Environmental laws have growing reach.

At least 155 United Nations Member States now legally recognize that a healthy environment is a basic human right.

And the knowledge base is greater than ever.

I was very pleased to learn by President Bollinger that Columbia University has launched a Climate School, the first new school here in a quarter of a century – congratulations. This is a wonderful demonstration of scholarship and leadership.

I am delighted to know that so many members of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network are with us today as special guests – university presidents, chancellors, deans, faculty and other scholars.

The United Nations Academic Impact initiative is working with institutions of higher education across the globe. The contributions of universities are essential to our success.

Dear friends,

A new world is taking shape.

More and more people are recognizing the limits of conventional yardsticks such as Gross Domestic Product, in which environmentally damaging activities count as economic positives.

Mindsets are shifting.

More and more people are understanding the need for their own daily choices to reduce their carbon footprint and respect planetary boundaries.

And we see inspiring waves of social mobilization by young people.

From protests in the streets to advocacy on-line...

From classroom education to community engagement...

From voting booths to places of work...

Young people are pushing their elders to do what is right. And we are in an university.

This is a moment of truth for people and planet alike.

COVID and climate have brought us to a threshold.

We cannot go back to the old normal of inequality, injustice and heedless dominion over the Earth.

Instead we must step towards a safer, more sustainable and equitable path.

We have a blueprint: the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

The door is open; the solutions are there.

Now is the time to transform humankind's relationship with the natural world – and with each other.

And we must do so together.

Solidarity is humanity. Solidarity is survival.

That is the lesson of 2020.

With the world in disunity and disarray trying to contain the pandemic, let's learn the lesson and change course for the pivotal period ahead.

Thank you.

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-12-02/secretary-generals-address-columbia-university-the-state-of-the-planet-scroll-down-for-language-versions>