

We are past pledging and politicking: the way forward in 2019

A letter from Joyce Msuya,
Acting Executive Director of UN Environment

Where we stand

It's been an eye-opening past few months.

Last October, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report saying that we must quickly and drastically reduce our climate-warming emissions. A few weeks later, UN Environment's Emissions Gap Report concluded that, in order to avoid a catastrophic rise of more than 2°C in global temperatures, countries will need to triple their emissions-reducing commitments. But it is clear, limiting temperature increases to 2°C is simply not enough. We need to increase our climate actions five-fold to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C, or risk triggering extreme, adverse climate impacts.

Time is running short. We are past pledging and politicking. We are past commitments with little accountability. What's at stake is life, and society, as the majority of us know it and enjoy it today.

The good news is that we have hard evidence that taking bold environmental action does not limit economic growth; in fact, the opposite is true. Some of the most important solutions to the climate crisis – and to biodiversity loss, and to so many other challenges – will come from innovation. And we have proof that well-crafted policies can kick-start innovation and help to diffuse critical new technologies at a pace and on a scale that would have seemed impossible just a generation ago. Indeed, every day, we are seeing more promising examples of positive action – from emissions-free tuk tuks, to cutting-edge alternatives to single-use plastic, to new climate-smart ways of managing our forests and farmlands. Moreover, in recent weeks, tens of thousands of young people have taken to the streets calling for stronger climate action.

And we have some important opportunities on the horizon. Later this year, heads of state will announce their stepped-up commitments at the Secretary-General's climate action summit. Next year, in Beijing, we will have the chance to reframe our relationship with the natural world and, in Bonn, we will have the opportunity to forge a new and ambitious approach to managing our chemicals and waste. Today, we stand on the eve of the Fourth UN Environment Assembly, which will bring together the world's environment ministers, together with leaders from civil society, academia, business and media.

We have an excellent roadmap to follow in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals, which together define a vision of 2030 towards which we all can strive. As UN Environment's Sixth Global Environmental Outlook makes clear, it is time for us to truly give shape to the fundamental transformations that will be required to sustain human life – transformations in our food systems,

>>>

energy systems, waste systems, economic systems – and indeed our value systems. We must help people everywhere grasp the enormous scale of the transformation that will be required, while also awakening them to the many opportunities inherent in that shift.

If we focus on just the next few years, there are three complex environmental challenges that we must tackle with courage and resolve: addressing climate change, stopping biodiversity loss, and awakening the world's consumers and producers to the reality of their environmental footprints. Around each of these challenges, we have seen the emergence of a network of dedicated practitioners who are deeply engaged in finding innovative and effective solutions. But too often we see that the people working on one of these challenges are not aware of the progress that has been made – or the lessons that have been learned, or the battles that have been fought – in the others. We tend to see these three areas as separate challenges, but in terms of the actions required to tackle them, they are nearly one and the same.

We need to break through the echo chambers that have built up in distinct environmental spheres, and come together to find solutions that deliver the sort of transformational and systemic changes that humanity requires. We need to move from working on issues to taking on systems, and thinking about how we can fundamentally change them to ensure a healthy future for our children and grandchildren.

Opportunities

The question, of course, is how to do this. How do we address climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable consumption and production in a way that cuts across silos and delivers far-reaching impact?

There are numerous ways to approach this challenge, but we see five big opportunities that are critical entry points for systemic change. Each of these opportunities has a strong link to the health of our climate, and each irreversibly integrates the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development.

It's clear that we need to transform the way our economies work, and the way we value the things that we consume. By “decarbonizing” our economies, we will be able to break the link between growth and increased resource use, and put an end to our throwaway consumption culture. We can achieve these aims by embracing “**circularity**”: reducing waste, reusing materials and redesigning how we create value from products and services.

Second, it is time for a **New Deal for Nature** that fundamentally resets our relationship with the planet. There are four critical pieces of this puzzle: acknowledging the value of our forests, oceans and other natural capital in our financial accounts; informing all of our infrastructure decisions with environmental considerations; transforming the way we produce and consume food, to minimize waste and make our diets more sustainable; and driving a new global effort to protect and restore our wildlife and wild places, as well as the many benefits that those resources provide to human beings. Part of our work on nature must include helping to determine what will replace the Aichi Biodiversity Targets after their 2020 deadline expires and how to place people at the centre of the solution.

Third, by 2050, an estimated 68 per cent of the global population will be living in urban areas, up from just over 50 per cent today.¹ We need to fundamentally rethink how our **cities** function – from waste disposal to clean mobility to urban planning. Smart and sustainable urban planning represents a tremendous opportunity to reduce the strain we put on the planet, while also improving the quality of life of billions of people, especially in low-income countries, which will account for 90 per cent of the predicted urban growth.²

Fourth, the world needs to embrace **clean cooling**. Having access to cooling is not a luxury; it underpins the ability of millions to live in health and comfort. Cooling solutions are essential to everyday life. As temperatures rise, the demand for air conditioning and refrigeration is set to skyrocket. Indeed, the energy consumption of the cooling and heating sectors could multiply 33 times before the end

»»

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018), <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>

² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014), <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/publications/files/wup2014-highlights.pdf>

of the century.³ We must be ready to meet the growing demand for cooling with smart, accessible technologies that improve people's lives without harming the planet.

And finally, we need to see a near-total shift to **renewable sources of energy**, which have the power to transform lives and economies while safeguarding the planet. Sixty-six per cent of all of the electricity produced around the globe still comes from dirty fossil fuels.⁴ By 2050, that figure must fall to the single digits, while energy from renewables needs to skyrocket. We must urgently reduce barriers to the uptake of solar, wind and other sources of renewable energy, while supporting governments, individuals and companies everywhere to make smart choices in how they source their power.

If we are able to drive systemic change across these areas, then we will contribute to lifting people out of poverty and building a safer, healthier and more equitable world. Because by protecting the planet – as we have seen on so many occasions – we are also protecting its people.

Pathways

The role of UN Environment is more critical than ever, and the UN reforms now underway demand a strengthening of our delivery models and a renewed drive for results. We are becoming, and we must continue to become, an even more effective organization, one that is able to respond nimbly to the fluid and pressing demands of environmental leadership.

We have the **power to convene** Member States, civil society groups, businesses, citizens and other stakeholders – even when those parties may be at odds – to find solutions to our common challenges. Let us exploit this power. We have the ability to **diffuse knowledge and innovation** by highlighting on a global level the most compelling, effective and replicable environmental policies and practices, no matter their source. Let us accelerate this work. In line with our mandate and drawing on our substantial body of science, we can be a powerful **advocate for action** on pressing environmental challenges. Let us make it our imperative to speak up. And finally, we **showcase on a global stage** those Member States and partners that demonstrate exceptional leadership on behalf of the environment. Let us shine even more light on the many bold and positive actions that we see around us.

In all of these ways, UN Environment seeks to demonstrate what works and accelerate the replication of the most promising breakthroughs. We find the solutions, then strive to bring them to scale as urgently as possible. In all of our areas of work, UN Environment follows five pathways, which we have found to deliver the most tangible results:

The first, of course, is **engaging people**. UN Environment communicates directly with citizens around the globe – both within and outside the environmental community – to inform choices, inspire action and shift social norms in support of the environment. We always strive to ensure that we bring people along with us in every step of our work.

Second, in our work with governments at all levels, UN Environment supports and showcases science-informed **policies** that have the potential to transform humanity's relationship with our environment. We also host global **platforms** – from the UN Environment Assembly to international financial networks to multilateral environmental agreements – that catalyse coherent and systemic action on behalf of the planet.

Third, UN Environment strives to identify data-driven **political solutions**, while always respecting the principles of neutrality and transparency and adhering to our essential commitment to sound science.

Fourth, UN Environment works hand-in-hand with **partners** in the public sector, the citizen sector and the private sector. Our partners include academic institutions, civil society organizations, faith-based groups, and communities around the world.

>>>

³ UN Environment (2018), http://conf.montreal-protocol.org/meeting/workshops/energy-efficiency/presentation/briefingnotes/briefingnote-a_importance-of-energy-efficiency-in-the-refrigeration-air-conditioning-and-heat-pump-sectors.pdf

⁴ The World Bank (2014), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.FOSL.ZS>

And cutting across all of our work, we at UN Environment always strive to maintain a sense of positivity. We do our best to call people's attention to the many incredible opportunities at hand, even while awakening them to the size of the challenges that lie before us. In so doing, we aim to inspire people to action through hope rather than fear.

A Call to Action

And there is certainly reason for hope. Every day, more voices are joining the call for transformative change for the sake of humankind.

We need to act with urgency, but also with coherency and with agency. In everything we do, we must ensure that our laws work for both people and the environment. Our aim must also be to instill in people everywhere a sense of responsibility for their actions as well as a sense of possibility to make smarter choices. Our goal should be to awaken citizens across the globe to the social and environmental costs of their actions. By changing their value systems – and providing them with sustainable alternatives – we can inspire people everywhere to shrink their environmental footprint.

And UN Environment is here to support our Member States, partners and other stakeholders as you make the kinds of changes that our planet needs. We can work with you to identify the solutions that work best for your context; we can connect you with people who have already been down that road; and we can support you as you navigate any obstacles you encounter along the way.

We at UN Environment are your partner in this journey to 2030 and beyond, as are our brother and sister agencies within the United Nations system. Now, perhaps more than ever in recent history, we must show our steadfast resolve to embrace and sustain our system of environmental governance, and multilateralism more broadly. Of course, we may often disagree, but let our discussions be informed by science and evidence, not by political posturing or rivalries. And let us never turn our backs on the debate.

As the days tick down to the opening of the Environment Assembly next month, all of us – whether we are government officials, non-profit leaders, business leaders, community leaders, or members of the global public – must ask ourselves just how much we, as individuals and as organizations, are ready to do to support the global effort to get our planet back on the right track.

And specifically for the Environment Assembly, let us all work together to craft solutions with resolve, that transform our level of ambition. Let us strive for resolutions that demand that all of us – UN Environment, our Member States, our partners in civil society and the private sector, our citizens – make the kinds of changes that humanity needs to thrive.

In Nairobi next month, and in New York in September, let us all prove that we are ready to hold ourselves to account. Our scientists have calculated that we need to increase five-fold, our ambition on climate change.

So, I challenge you, as our window of opportunity gets smaller by the hour:

What does ambitious climate action look like for you?

For climate, for nature, for consumers?

For people, for planet, for posterity?

What are you ready to bring to the table?