From: Inger Andersen  
Sent: Thursday, December 31, 2020 10:29 AM  
To: Broadcast-UNEP  
Subject: Monthly Letter - December

Dear colleagues,

As I write my last letter of 2020, I do so in continued solidarity with all those in the UN family that are suffering as a result of COVID-19. This is a year that will stay in memory for generations to come. If nature sent us a message in 2020, then Black Lives Matter and the global uprising against racism, was a reminder of just how much we have failed as a society to deliver social justice, dignity and equality for all. And even as we heard encouraging news on the vaccine front, an extraordinary set of extreme weather events including hurricanes, floods, wildfires, melting glaciers and rising temperatures, are telltale signs of the challenges that lie ahead. Most recently, as many of you might be aware, negotiators at the World Trade Organization failed to reach a deal by the year-end deadline to cut the subsidies that have helped decimate the world’s fish stocks. In short, more disappointing news for our oceans.

What I am most proud of in 2020
I admit it is hard to find a silver lining in what has been a year of struggle. But something that cannot be ignored is the impressive way UNEP has risen to the challenge. I am proud of how swiftly we moved to the virtual workspace and continued to keep UNEP’s virtual doors wide open. In my interactions with so many of you, I saw resilience, courage, commitment and a drive to keep going. I am proud of how we came together to define our response to the pandemic and ensured our continued relevance through the strategic COVID-19 response. I am proud that in such uncertain times, our decisions were guided by compassion and by the need to take care of all personnel.

I am proud of how we demonstrated that multilateralism is as strong and relevant as ever, organizing no fewer than three virtual CPRs and 16 sub-committee meetings. I am proud of how we consistently delivered strong science, ensured it had a solid voice, and reached millions through outstanding outreach. I am proud that we found new avenues to work closely with the multilateral environmental agreements that we host. I am proud that we went the extra mile in delivering on most programmes and projects even as the pandemic threw timelines into disarray. I am proud that we deepened existing partnerships and pivoted to craft new ones to deepen impact. I am proud that we dared to imagine how UNEP could seize the endless possibilities offered by the digital transformation that is being turbo-charged by the pandemic.

But I am also proud that despite the unwelcome challenges of the year, we took time to look at the future. And I am so proud that we came together to craft a new medium-term strategy that is a true blueprint for how we can solve the three planetary crises – the climate crisis, the nature and biodiversity crisis, and the pollution and waste crisis.

And, finally, I am most proud that in doing all of the above, we never forgot that we are here to serve “we the peoples” and to leave no one behind.

It would be impossible for me to list all the progress we have made in 2020. But my huge thanks and appreciation to all for the stellar progress we have made, the flexibility you have demonstrated and the hard work that is so clear in the countless strategies, reports and programme updates that pass through my inbox. I am humbled by the honour of leading this team, and I look forward to working with you all in the year ahead.
The Emissions Gap Report: a “warning letter from Santa, on behalf of the planet”
A few words on December. In the run-up to the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement, we at UNEP, continued to hold up the mirror on just how far off track we are in reaching the goals of the Paris Agreement and limiting global temperature rise to well below 2°C Celsius. According to the 2020 Emissions Gap Report, emissions continued to grow for the third consecutive year, hitting 59.1 GtCO2e. i.e. six-times the world’s coal-fired power plants. While we can expect up to a 7 percent decline in emissions in 2020, the pandemic has done little to limit the climate catastrophe. To the Washington Post, I made the point that while COVID-19 is truly tragic, there is hope with a vaccine. On the other hand, there is no vaccine for the planet. But all hope is not lost. Far from it. The “Net-Zero club” is growing. Around 126, countries accounting for 51 per cent of emissions, have adopted or are considering net-zero targets by 2050. Add the new incoming US administration to this club and we have captured 63 percent of the world’s emissions. But as I said to the Huffington Post, 2021 could be the last, best chance to secure a livable future. Our success will depend to a large extent on how countries are able to translate these commitments into promissory notes, or the nationally-determined contributions to be submitted next year ahead of the delayed COP26 and how we use the unprecedented stimulus packages to invest in a green recovery. Huge thanks to the UNEP-DTU team, the Science Division and the Communications Division for the remarkable effort. With close to 1400 articles published in 85 countries and 23 languages, we have ended the year on a strong note. Bravo!

At a fireside chat on sustainable recovery for people and planet at the Conference of Montreal, I called for the G20 which is responsible for 78 per cent of global emissions to step up to the plate and show solidarity, because at the end of the day, it is the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries that will bear the burden of climate catastrophe.

The Production Gap Report: doubling down on fossil fuels
As governments inject trillions into economies, we are at a critical juncture: lock in fossil fuel energy systems or transition to a cleaner future. According to a special issue of The Production Gap Report, published by leading research organizations and UNEP, countries need to reduce fossil fuel production by 6 per cent each year between 2020 and 2030. Current plans however, put us on track for an average annual increase of 2 per cent. Despite the climate crisis, countries continue to double down on fossil fuels. Importantly, the Report offers a worthy read on steps that governments can take today to encourage a just and equitable transition from fossil fuels. My thanks to Niklas Hagelberg and the Divisions for their work on this important piece.

Champions and Young Champions of the Earth
While the science continues to raise alarm bells, we were also reminded that there are many amongst us on the frontlines of environmental degradation that continue to inspire and fight for change. This past month, UNEP announced the Champions of the Earth and Young Champions of the Earth. This cohort of inspirational trail blazers and young environmentalists reminds us that we have in our hands the solutions, the knowledge, and the technology to limit climate change and avoid ecological collapse. It is time for us all to act for nature. I was particularly honoured to celebrate the accomplishments of Prof. Robert Bullard through the Lifetime Achievement Award. For decades, Prof. Bullard has reminded us that the burden of environmental degradation is felt disproportionately by people of colour and disenfranchised communities. I joined Champions Mindy Lubber and Dr. Fabian Leendertz to discuss the need for climate action on Al Jazeera. My sincere appreciation to Daniel Cooney and the Communications Division for this massive undertaking and a special shout-out to the multimedia team for a series of
beautiful and thought-provoking videos that do tremendous justice to our Champions. Please check out our [youtube channel](https://youtube.com) to see these.

**Green recovery in Africa: AMCEN**
At the Eighth Special Session of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN), I congratulated Ministers for the Africa Green Stimulus Programme that aims to fuel green post-COVID economic growth. I called on international solidarity and domestic realignment of resources to fund the green recovery. Updating Ministers on the upcoming Fifth UN Environment Assembly, I said that the virtual session will approve an ambitious Medium-Term Strategy and Programme of Work and Budget, which will enable us to continue strengthening UNEP, so it can deliver better, and more impactfully. I also stressed how remarkable it is that even as many other global meetings have been postponed, UNEA will have a voice in just a couple months. My appreciation to the Africa Office for their hard work in delivering a unique and virtual AMCEN.

**The Human Development Report 2020: A “planet-adjusted” Human Development index**
I was pleased to join Achim Steiner, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, and a host of distinguished panelists at the launch of UNDP’s 2020 Human Development Report (HDR). It is great to see how the HDR has evolved over the years. For the first-time, the Report examines how humanity can navigate the Anthropocene or the age of humans, to reveal how our impacts on the Earth interact with inequalities across societies. I made the point that a "planet-adjusted" human development index is critical. As our planet heats up, developing and integrating new measurements is vital to making peace with nature and building a more equal world. My thanks to the team including Steven Stone, Pushpam Kumar, Merlyn Van Voore and Corneli Pretorius for supporting the HDR process.

I hammered home the role of nature in a [recent opinion piece](https://telegraph.co.uk) in the Telegraph where I said, investments in nature and climate are, at heart, investments in our own prosperity.

**Looking to 2021**
As we navigate the new normal in 2021, I see 5 important areas of focus for us.

- One, to make UNEP fit-for-purpose and “MTS-ready”, as I discussed with the SMT at a [retreat](https://example.com) in December. This means a myriad of things to significantly elevate our game. I look forward to discussing this in details in January at the Townhall. Meanwhile, you can review the SMT 2020 Report and the MTS readiness plan [here](https://example.com).
- Two, it is increasingly clear that inclusive multilateralism is the only way to solve the challenges we face, even as international cooperation has been tested this year like never before. The ask for us as international civil servants? To recreate the leadership and solidarity that made it possible for us to arrive at the Paris Agreement five years ago and to infuse it with newer features that are critical to realize the promise of a networked and inclusive multilateralism.
- Three, we need to do whatever we can to influence stimulus spending. Members of the G20 are spending 50 per cent more in their stimulus and rescue packages on sectors linked to fossil fuel production and consumption, than on low-carbon energy. Based on science, good economics and smart policy options, we can contribute to making this shift.
- Four, even as we continue to support negotiations or seek to make progress on global agreements or sticky clauses, it is clear that action on the ground cannot be put on the back burner. UNEP has an important role to play as countries, businesses and communities take meaningful climate, biodiversity or pollution reduction action;
ensuring that such action is not just a “project,” but that such action is sustainable, and irreversible and thus truly “shifts the needle.”

- And finally, but certainly not the least, sharpening our publications – their relevance and reach – in line with the overarching MTS priorities and strengthening our communications so that we continue to amplify our messages and ensure that all of UNEP sings in one tune.

**Season’s greetings and taking care**

And finally, as we wind down this unusual year, seasons greetings to all colleagues! We are living through something that we could never have imagined a year ago and it has taken a toll on colleagues, families and friends alike. I hope you are able to take a break from work to spend some quality time with your loved ones.

For many of us, the holiday season will be different and difficult.

As I sign-off for the year, I am reminded that another year has gone by with our former colleague Niloufar Bayani languishing in jail. I will continue to call for her release and my thoughts remain with her and her family.

I wish all of you and your families a safe and healthy holiday season and new year.

I look forward to 2021, and thank you for the great, great work that you have done in 2020.

Inger

By the way you can follow what I am up to on twitter: @andersen_inger