



The UN Sustainable Development Goals Summit and the Climate Action Summit, New York, 23-25 September 2019

KEY FINDINGS

The United Nations (UN) High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 24-25 September 2019 is a one-and-a-half-day event that for the first time since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) takes place under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (GA). This special event, called the SDG Summit, will be a litmus test for the 2030 Agenda. Ending a four-year review cycle of all 17 SDGs, the Summit will enable a first assessment of the progress achieved so far and the challenges ahead. So far, there has been a lack of political leadership and guidance at the international level. Alarming trends in the areas of climate (SDG 13), biodiversity (SDG 15), inequality (SDG 10) and hunger (SDG 2), mean that we must move beyond speeches towards concrete commitments and actions.

Given the deterioration of the multilateral system since 2015, the EU has a key role to play in leading by example and by forging ambitious coalitions for action. Leading by example also means advancing SDG implementation in Europe. The new Commission taking office provides a window of opportunity to finally launch an EU-wide SDG implementation strategy. To be successful, such a strategy should not be disconnected from budgetary and sectoral decisions, a risk that has been noted at the national level.

The day before (23rd September) the UN Secretary-General (SG) will hold a Climate Action Summit, mirroring the 2014 Summit just a year before COP21 in order to generate political momentum. While political leadership fails to respond to the growing anxiety around climate impacts and the popular demand for climate action, the Summit aims at strengthening global climate ambition. It intends to do so by providing a political space for countries and their leaders to step up and announce more robust and ambitious plans, as well as launching international sectoral coalitions which will give a vision of what a carbon neutral world would look like. The Summit will also serve as a key moment for mobilization of global climate activism towards more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) next year.

A brief history of the UN HLPF

The decision to create the HLPF was made in 2012 at Rio+20. Although the negotiation of the SDGs was launched at the same time, the HLPF came into existence before their final adoption. Yet, when the 2030 Agenda came into force it established the HLPF as its follow-up and review platform. The HLPF meets once a year in July under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In addition, every four



years starting in 2019, the HLPF will meet in the form of a Heads of State Summit under the auspices of the UN GA. The 2019 meeting marks the end of a four-year cycle in which progress on all SDGs was reviewed.

The first three HLPFs, held between 2013-2015, mainly served as a review platform for the outgoing Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and as preparation for the post-2015 development agenda. Since 2016, the HLPF has become the main multilateral arena for following-up and reviewing progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Each year the HLPF has an overarching theme and reviews a set of SDGs, it also invites countries to present their progress. These overarching themes, which have not always given prominence to the environment (except in 2018), have been: Ensuring that no one is left behind (2016); Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world (2017); Transformation towards resilient and sustainable societies (2018); and Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality (2019). The annual July edition of the HLPF comprises two segments. The first of which is a technical segment that involves a thematic review of a limited number of SDGs. The level of these talks has been quite general in past years. In the second part of the Forum, the political segment, countries are invited to present their progress towards achieving the SDGs. Since the beginning of the HLPF, 142 countries have presented so called Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). So far, this exercise has been mostly used to give countries an overview of policies contributing to the SDGs, while they have only rarely launched debate on policy reforms. Only very few countries have presented a financing plan for SDG implementation. On the upside, this exercise has contributed to creating a common language for shared challenges and has the potential to delve into the range of existing solutions in the future.

Discussions around the annual political declaration have been heated and have mostly focused on three contentious issues. The first of these is the diverging interpretations as to whether the heart of the 2030 Agenda is to leave no individual or no country behind. The G77 preferring the latter formulation which corresponds more to a classical development approach, and the EU preferring the first, seeing the agenda as a paradigm change towards a universal approach. A second issue also concerns the very definition of development. China tries to push the concept of win-win cooperation, which the EU and other countries oppose because it represents a solely economic vision of development. As a third issue, the negotiations around the ministerial declaration have on occasion led to the necessity of a vote due to a reference to foreign occupation.

Main messages from the July HLPF session

“The credibility of the multilateral system lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda,” said María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the GA¹. It is therefore worrying that many SDG goals are off track and that some trends are going in the wrong direction.

This is the case of **SDG 10** on reducing inequalities, one of the six SDGs under review this year. The UN Statistics Division reported that inequality continues to rise even as the incomes of most countries are growing². This means that growth does not reduce inequalities, dedicated policies are required. Although the bottom 40% of the population have seen their income grow faster than the national average in about half of countries, they account for less than 25% of the overall income or consumption³. For a long time, the debate about inequalities has focused on those at the bottom of the income pyramid. It is therefore noteworthy that the Secretary General’s report also lists the increasing income concentration at the level of the top 1% of earners as a significant concern. Rising income inequalities in high and middle income countries is also listed as a challenge in the independent 2019 Sustainable Development Report⁴. A key message from the forum is that SDG 10, as a new goal that was not discussed as such by the international community before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, is not yet getting enough attention. During the discussions around SDG 10, Matthew Martin, from Development Finance International, observed that the majority of countries ignore SDG 10 in their development plans. He also noted that SDG 10 lacks a home within the UN and suggested to appoint an SDG 10 focal point within the system.

SDG 13 on climate change is also among the goals that are most off track and for which trends are currently going in the wrong direction (see later section on the Climate Action Summit). In his special report, the UN SG made it very clear that failing to respond to the threat of climate change would compromise the achievement of other SDGs, as well as stressing them even further. Between 1998-2017, direct economic losses from disasters were estimated at around \$3 trillion, while geophysical and climate-related disasters claimed around 1.3 million lives. As a result, the HLPF sent out the message that better synergies between the SDGs and climate action would benefit the success of both agendas.

Serious concerns were also raised during the review of **SDG 4** on ensuring quality education where experts spoke of a global learning crisis. According to 2017 figures, over 50% of children and adolescents lacked minimum skills in reading and mathematics. Barriers to a quality education are especially high for girls in areas of conflict. Rapidly changing technologies and professional opportunities are also challenging education systems that are not always able to adapt fast enough. The future of work was also addressed in the review of **SDG 8** on inclusive growth and decent work. During these discussions, it was reported that in 2018, 8% of the world's workers lived in extreme poverty. In 2016, 4 billion people were not covered by any social protection scheme.

Concerning **SDG 16** on peaceful societies, the UN SG's report noted the disturbing rise in attacks on civil society. 431 human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists were killed between in a year, between 2017 and 2018 in 41 countries. Latin America and the Caribbean took an important step forward, given that the region is one of the most affected by these issues, by adopting the Escazu Agreement in 2018, the first environmental human rights treaty. This agreement, which develops Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio declaration and is close in its objectives to the Aarhus Convention, is the first treaty to mention specific provisions for the protection of environmental human rights defenders⁵. This treaty still needs to be ratified, and it is worth noting that even Chile, host of the COP25, has not yet signed the treaty.

For **SDG 17** on means of implementation, the only goal reviewed every year, the picture is mixed. Global climate finance flows increased by 17% in the 2015-2016 period compared with the years 2013-2014. Bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) in support of biodiversity increased by 15% between 2016-2017. These two trends are encouraging, but insufficient given the alarming results presented by the IPCC⁶ and the IPBES⁷ reports this year. The SDGs are universal and have yet to be achieved by any country. The 2030 Agenda is also a development agenda, but by no means is it only a development agenda. In this sense, it is worrying that net ODA flows went down by 2.7% between 2017 and 2018 for a total of \$149 billion. In comparison, annual remittance flows to low and middle-income countries are likely to reach \$550 billion in 2019. Aid to Africa fell by 4%. The share of ODA going to humanitarian emergency relief fell by 8% despite an intensification of conflicts and an increase in disasters. The EU contributed to the forum with a joint synthesis report on the support given by the EU and its Member States to developing countries. The presentation of this joint report is an important signal that the EU is committed to this Agenda. In future, such a report could better reflect shortcomings and challenges, and also address how the EU aims to be exemplary in terms of domestic implementation.

The UN SG in his speech at the July's HLPF signalled that the SDGs are high on the UN leader's agenda. He called the current situation and the lack of progress "upsetting", especially with regard to rising inequalities and failing climate action. He also described the 2030 Agenda as an "inclusion imperative", highlighting the efforts needed to ensure that women, refugees, human rights defenders and other groups are able to benefit from SDG progress. In that context, he asked governments to step up efforts for the global compact for migration. He called for more investments, for keeping up with financing commitments in the context of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the climate fund⁸.

A better understanding of synergies and trade-offs between goals is also something on which the July HLPF reflected. These interlinkages are often ignored in policymaking and also not very well reflected in the way that the HLPF has reviewed SDG progress.

Main issues at stake in the SDG Summit

Issue 1: leadership & guidance for the remaining 10 years of SDG implementation

The world is not on track to achieve the SDGs. Although extreme poverty and child mortality rates continue to fall, this positive trend has, however, slowed down. At its current rate 6% of the world population will live in extreme poverty in 2030, missing the eradication of poverty target⁹. Much greater efforts are needed to reach the climate and inequality goals as previously discussed. Another concern is that some SDGs that were undergoing long-term positive trends are now experiencing setbacks. For the third consecutive year, hunger is on the rise again. New solutions are needed to respond to this worrying trend while also addressing the massive decline in biodiversity and the SDG 2.2 target to promote sustainable agriculture. The world's footprint has expanded rapidly, with a 254% increase in material consumption over the last fifty years. In the two years between the adoption of the SDGs and 2017, worldwide material consumption went up from 87 billion tonnes to 92.1 billion tonnes. Without further action, global resource extraction could rise to 190 billion tonnes in 2060¹⁰.

Regarding the multilateral system, the UN SG's report admits that there has been a deterioration since 2015, hindering SDG implementation efforts. Furthermore, the intensification of conflicts with developing countries hosting over 85% of the 68 million displaced people in 2013, along with the over 150% increase during the past twenty years in direct economic losses from disasters, have put pressure on already unstable systems, compromising the achievement of the SDGs.

Providing leadership and guidance on these pressing issues is one of the HLPF's mandates that it has not yet fulfilled very well. The first SDG Summit under the auspices of the UN GA should change that. There is a need for SDG champions. In its resolution from March 2019, the European Parliament (EP) stressed that the Union "should renew its commitment to being a global frontrunner in implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs". Given the low ambition of political declarations to date, the EU has a role to play in continuing to advocate an ambitious interpretation of the Agenda, not only through its diplomacy but also through leading by example.

Providing guidance is the objective of "leaders dialogues" around which the SDG Summit will be structured. The dialogues will focus on six topics:

1. Megatrends impacting the achievement of the SDGs
2. Accelerating the achievement of the SDGs: Critical Entry Points
3. Leveraging progress across SDGs
4. Localizing the SDGs
5. Partnership for sustainable development
6. 2020-2030 Vision

These six topics were inspired by the UN SG's Special Edition of the annual statistical SDG progress report and the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR). The GSDR was prepared by 15 scientists appointed by former UN SG Ban Ki-moon in 2016. The GSDR identifies six critical entry points for major transformations that need to be accelerated, that will be a basis for discussion in the leaders dialogue. The report will be officially launched during the SDG Summit, but according to earlier drafts the necessary transformations identified in the report will be: human wellbeing and capabilities; sustainable economies; energy decarbonization and access; food and nutrition; urban and peri-urban development; and global commons¹¹. The GSDR also identifies potential levers of change which will be discussed during the Leaders dialogues to accelerate progress. The levers of change identified in the GSDR (draft version) are: strong institutions, economy and finance, behavioural and collective action, and science and technology. There are no real surprises in these findings and the question at the SDG Summit will actually be whether countries

and other actors will produce firm commitments in one or several of these areas. The final version of the GSDR will be officially launched on 24th September at the opening of the SDG Summit.

Issue 2: Acceleration actions

This year, the negotiations around the political declaration, coordinated by the Bahamas and Sweden, have avoided the usually contentious issues. Thus, the declaration will be adopted by consensus at the opening of the SDG Summit. The latest draft version of the declaration is quite concise. Although not revolutionary, it serves as a reminder of the ambition of the SDGs and calls for voluntary actions. It probably follows the logic of the UN SG's Climate Action Summit, which asks countries not to come with speeches but with action plans. To date the HLPF has functioned as more of a review platform than an action platform. The SDG Summit, at least in its preparation, tries to inverse this trend by calling for voluntary actions in its political declaration and by inviting countries and other actors to register these SDG acceleration actions before, during or after the Summit. Whether countries, businesses and other actors will follow through with this intention will be a critical criterion of the success of the SDG summit. SDG acceleration actions can be registered on the SDG Summit's website and it is rather encouraging to see that selection criteria have been put in place to value only additional efforts, by considering only actions that aim to scale up existing initiatives or introduce new ones. This might avoid the easy option of recycling existing initiatives, a logic that too often characterizes the voluntary national reviews¹² and also the European Commission's communication¹³ on the SDGs.

In future, the UN could go even further in calling for initiatives for specific cross-cutting SDG challenges or targets that are particularly far from being achieved.

Issue 3: HLPF review and reform proposals

The HLPF was created to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development; follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments; enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels; have a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda; and ensure the consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges. The 2019 HLPF is also an opportunity to review whether the HLPF has delivered on these mandates so far.

In a survey organized by the UN, respondents signalled that although the HLPF has delivered in many areas including thematic and country reviews, the HLPF as a platform for partnerships, the promotion of UN-wide coherence and coordination, there remains room for improvement, especially concerning a strong science-policy interface and the provision of political leadership and guidance¹⁴. The UN GA could come up with ideas for the HLPF to go beyond its follow-up and review mandate. Future HLPFs should provide concrete recommendations on how to achieve more rapid transformative change through legal initiatives, policy, budgetary and fiscal innovations.

With the hopeful emergence of concrete commitments from countries and other actors during the SDG Summit, a critical question for future HLPFs will be how to evaluate the added value of SDG actions and how to track their progress. An assessment of the commitments of different countries and actors would be useful to see whether they add up to what is needed to fill the SDG gaps¹⁵. Furthermore, to improve the added value of the HLPF it should focus on cross-cutting issues¹⁶, such as the critical entry points that will be discussed during the leaders dialogues.

The role of other stakeholders and parallel events

The 2030 Agenda and the HLPF are often regarded as particularly inclusive and open to contributions from non-state actors. It is true that the participation modalities are quite progressive compared to other processes, although their critical and active role could still be enhanced. A civil society event has been

announced for the evening of 24th September. **Major groups and other stakeholders have been able to provide input for the political declaration**¹⁷.

Every year, a **Local and Regional Governments' Forum** is organized. Cities such as Helsinki, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles and New York presented Voluntary Local Reviews¹⁸. The third report on the localization of the SDGs was published this year and is a useful resource for cities that are exploring ways to join the SDG dynamic. Although States have signed the Paris Agreement and committed to regularly report on their progress via VNRs, some cities position themselves as frontrunners. The positioning of US cities like Los Angeles and New York is also a way to distance themselves from the Trump administration and its decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement and other multilateral commitments. A high level Local and Regional Governments' Forum is scheduled in the afternoon on 24th September at the margins of the Summit.

There is also an annual **SDG Business Forum**. This year's SDG Business Summit will take place on 25th September in parallel to the official SDG Summit. Big companies are increasingly vocal about the SDGs. In the context of the G7, 30 large companies have promised to invest \$1 billion in projects to fight against inequality and signed a statement that described rising inequalities as the "defining challenge of our time"¹⁹. Among other topics, the Business Summit will address sustainable financing and discuss ways to scale up action, which is so far insufficient, despite numerous initiatives and the driving role of the UN Global Compact.

According to UN estimates, in the context of developing countries alone, achieving the SDGs requires an additional \$2.6 trillion annually²⁰. The UN SG A. Guterres announced the launch of the CEO alliance "Global Investors for Sustainable Development" on 23rd September at the margins of the UN GA high level week. This alliance is developed by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). It will develop an action plan and report its first results in 2021²¹. Representatives from the banking sector will also be in New York to launch the principles for responsible banking on 22nd September²². These principles aim to align the signatories from the financial sector with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. At the EU level, 200 CEOs from European companies called on the new Commission's President to create a new deal guided by the SDGs. In this request the SDGs are presented as a compass that could help navigate turbulent waters and difficult times for multilateralism, partnerships and joint visions²³.

Ideally, future HLPFs should follow-up on these commitments and assess how they add up compared to requirements and contribute to SDGs that have been left behind, such as climate action, biodiversity, inequality and sustainable consumption and production patterns, including in the food system.

SDG progress and challenges in the EU context

According to the global ranking produced by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)²⁴, the EU is doing better than the rest of the world in terms of poverty eradication; it is also very well placed in terms of social protection, health and well-being. In the 2019 edition of the ranking, the three top placed countries are Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and there are seven EU Member States in the top 10. As the Commission's reflection paper "Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030" points out, these achievements are fragile and challenges are looming. There are some rather alarming passages in this paper regarding the cost of inaction, particularly in the areas of climate, biodiversity and social cohesion. The decline in the fight against inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, is also mentioned. And the reflection paper also notes Europe's very poor performance in the areas of sustainable consumption and production, and the protection of the oceans²⁵.

Since 2017 Eurostat has published an annual SDG progress report. According to its 2019 edition, the strongest progress over the past five-year period in the EU has been made towards SDG 3 "good health and well-being", SDG 1 "zero poverty" and SDG 8 "decent work and economic growth". Unfortunately, there have also been a number of setbacks²⁶. Table 1 gives an overview of the indicators for which the five-year trend

shows a significant movement away from the sustainability targets. This table can also be read as a snapshot of some of the major unsustainable loopholes in the European social and economic model.

Table 1: List of indicators with the strongest movements away from sustainability targets, according to the 2019 Eurostat Monitoring report

SDG	Indicator	Trend (last five years)
SDG 4	Underachievement in reading, maths and science	↓
SDG 5	Gender gap for tertiary educational attainment Inactive population due to caring responsibilities	↓
SDG 7 and 13	Reduction of final energy consumption	↓
SDG 8 and 1	In work at-risk-of-poverty rate	↓
SDG 9	Share of rail and inland waterways in total freight transport	↓
SDG 11	Settlement area per capita	↓
SDG 15	Grassland butterfly index	↓

Source: Sustainable development in the European Union - Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context - 2019 edition

For some SDGs there is a mixed picture. SDG 10 on inequalities for example shows positive progress when it comes to the reduction of inequalities between countries. But in relation to inequalities within countries, all the indicators are red, which signifies moderate movement away from sustainability targets. This means, for example, that the shrinking share of income going to the bottom 40% of the population is not only a short-term (five years) but also a long-term (fifteen years) trend. SDG 15 on “life on land” stands out with a majority of indicators showing moderate or significant movement away from sustainable levels.

The EU response

When the SDGs were negotiated, the European Council pushed for a “transformative” and “ambitious” post-2015 Agenda²⁷. Since then, the EU has made limited progress in implementing the SDGs, and has mostly invested in “stock-taking” and in laying out possible scenarios for further action. In November 2016, the Commission released a “package” of three communications. Two were related to the external implementation of the SDGs (a new European Consensus on Development²⁸ and building blocks for new EUACP relations after the Cotonou Partnership Agreement²⁹), while one communication (on the “next steps for a sustainable European future”³⁰) focused more on the internal dimension of SDG implementation. Although this communication mapped out how the Commission’s 10 priorities cover the SDGs, it did not take the opportunity to identify gaps and provide guidance on an ambitious implementation of the SDGs.

The Council and the EP asked the Commission to raise its level of ambition, calling for an analysis of the distance that still needs to be travelled if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030, as well as for an implementation strategy. The Commission took time to respond. It finally released a reflection paper in January 2019. A multi-stakeholder platform was invited to contribute to that process³¹. The Commission’s

reflection paper “Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030” outlines three possible scenarios of making use of the 2030 Agenda to advance sustainable development in the context of European politics:

Scenario 3 proposes to focus efforts on the Union’s external action, thus reflecting the classic narrative of the SDGs for development, and assumes that little further action is needed at the domestic level given the EU’s good position in the SDG rankings. The paper highlights the inherent risk in this scenario of losing credibility and leadership on sustainability issues.

Scenario 2 mainly consists of a mainstreaming approach: it is up to Member States and the various Commission Directorates-General to integrate the SDGs into their activities, without binding guidelines. This scenario would be a slightly improved status quo, suggesting some areas for improvement while remaining rather vague: for example, it proposes that some SDGs guide discussions on the post-2020 growth strategy and that progress on these SDGs should be monitored by the European Semester³². The main advantage of this scenario is that it is intended to be operational through sectoral approaches; its main disadvantage is its vagueness and the fact that it does not provide a solution to bring about better coordination between States and the Union, or for better policy coherence.

The most ambitious scenario is Scenario 1. It is the one that would require the greatest amount of additional effort. It proposes a transversal strategy for the implementation of the SDGs with concrete targets and deadlines and consistent monitoring at the European and country levels. This option has the most advantages: an ambitious strategy could give a positive vision for Europe, and send out a strong signal at the international level. In this scenario, Europe would take on a leadership role, which has been lacking at the international level. Its disadvantage is its complexity. It will take time for countries to agree on concrete targets. This scenario would be transformative, provided that it constitutes Europe’s strategy for 2030 and the basis for the priorities of the new Commission. In this scenario it would also make sense to orient the Multiannual financial framework (MFF) towards the 2030 Agenda and to instigate a mid-term revision of the MFF that assesses progress made towards the SDGs as suggested by the EP³³. Integrating the principle of “sustainability first” into Better Regulation Agendas and giving a follow-up mandate to the Commission’s Multi-Stakeholder Platform are also elements of this scenario.

The paper also identifies policies that contribute to the SDGs and that should be strengthened (e.g. the circular economy, the transition to a sustainable food system, etc.) as well as a number of means of implementation (taxation, policy coherence). However, some ideas are missing, for example a real strategy to reduce negative impacts on third countries, or a coherent decarbonization strategy in the medium term, as noted by the IEEP and the Think 2030 coalition³⁴.

A report by the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC) sees the SDGs as an opportunity to shed light on the risks ahead³⁵. To overcome these risks the report calls for new measures of progress beyond economic growth. Furthermore, it identifies the risk of overlooking the intersections between environmental and social policy, and recommends that the allocation of the costs of the transition should be carried out in a just manner; and that economic and political space for citizen-led initiatives should be ensured, in the field of energy or resource management for example. The report also highlights the need to reinvent Europe’s social contract to tackle the rise of precarious work. A debate is also needed about the sustainability of fiscal systems that require adaption to demographic change, digitalization, new forms of labour, etc. The report also suggests that fiscal sustainability also means that all public spending must be aligned with long-term societal objectives, such as the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement (something that seems evident in theory but in practice is often ignored). Disregarding the outsourcing of unsustainable practices and relying too heavily on individual responsibility and technological solutions, which are important but insufficient levers for change, are also listed as risks in the report.

Responses from Member States

“Europe’s approach to implementing the SDGs: good practices and the way forward”³⁶ is the first study that compares SDG implementation processes and governance mechanisms in all EU Member States. One of its main findings is that most EU countries have launched new strategies, coordination mechanisms and stakeholder participation processes for SDG implementation, but that these mechanisms and processes must be made operational now, and that strategies should be linked to national budgets. Regarding monitoring, many countries have revised their indicators in relation to the SDGs but only very few, namely Finland and Germany, have gone as far as organizing an independent progress review. The study also reviews initiatives launched by parliaments. An increasing number of parliaments have set up special committees or initiatives related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Challenges remain when it comes to overcoming the silo mentalities of Committees, and more tools could be created to scrutinize and monitor the advancement of the SDGs across all policies.

UN SG Climate Action Summit 23 September 2019

The day before the SDG Summit, the UN SG organizes a Climate Action Summit. This Summit is organized in a context in which global emissions are reaching record levels and show no sign of peaking. The last four years were the four hottest on record, and winter temperatures in the Arctic have risen by 3°C since 1990. Sea levels are rising, coral reefs are dying, and we are starting to see the life-threatening impact of climate change on health, through air pollution, heatwaves and risks to food security. Science has never been clearer. The Earth is getting warmer and the time to act is fast running out. This is the last window of opportunity to keep average global temperature rise within the 1.5°C threshold. The Paris Agreement calls on the world to keep global temperature rise to well below 2°C above preindustrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. Last year’s IPCC Special Report on 1.5°C was unequivocal that achieving this goal requires ratcheting up of ambition at all levels and across all sectors. The latest analysis shows that if we act now, we can reduce carbon emissions within 12 years and hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C and even, as asked by the latest science, to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. While public outrage is getting louder and a state of climate emergency is both becoming evident and declared as such by a number of leaders and vulnerable countries, most governments are not taking the necessary steps to engage both their country and constituents on a path towards structural economic transformation.

2020 is a critical year for climate ambition because the Paris Agreement requires countries to provide an updated Nationally Determined Contribution and a 2050 Long Term Strategy. This is the first litmus test for the legitimacy of the 5-year ambition mechanism of the Paris Agreement to fulfil its promise. Because of a lack of ambitious political leadership post-COP21, in particular since the United States have announced their intent to leave the Paris Agreement and have worked around the globe to weaken global climate governance, the UN SG has felt compelled to play that role and invite Heads of States and Governments to address the issue in New York on 23rd September on the margins of the UN GA. Over the next year, world leaders will set the tone for raising climate ambition since they are expected to revise their climate plans – a.k.a NDCs – in 2020. The Paris Agreement also invites countries to communicate their long-term strategies by 2020. These strategies are central to closing the emission gap as they set a long-term vision that will guide national planning and frame policy priorities for the next decades. The Climate Action Summit is the last major gathering of world leaders before 2020 and it is vital that it sends a strong political signal towards enhancing ambition, both near and long-term, in line with the overall goal of achieving net-zero emissions in the second half of the century.

More specifically, the Summit will focus on two parallel dimensions:

1. enhance political will towards a higher level of national mitigation and adaptation ambition by 2020 to reduce the existing gap in limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C;
2. scale up climate action by all stakeholders through the launch or strengthening of international coalitions and initiatives, consistent with the overall objectives of the Paris Agreement, recognizing that affordable, scalable solutions to leapfrog to cleaner, more resilient economies are now available.

This Summit is fundamentally different than that organized by UN SG Ban Ki-moon in 2014. Then, the objective was to galvanize civil society and actors in the climate sphere (from business to cities, etc), demonstrate that economically viable solution existed and that the missing link was political will. It was therefore pushing the ball in the court of governments calling them to draft an NDC, while reassuring them that public expectation was high, and that private sector was able to help/support them. NDCs have been formulated; and prior to Paris, the momentum from the number of NDCs mattered more than their actual individual content – with over 180 NDCs success was reached. In 2019, five years later the world has changed: the objective is now to ensure that structural transformation is on the way and thus the most important piece is the consistency between countries actions and short term commitments, and their overall long-term development perspective. This is a new era, that of delivery, where ambition lies not in setting targets but in demonstrating in a credible fashion that they are consistent and can be (over)achieved.

Organization and political expectations

UN SG A. Guterres called on all leaders to come to New York on 23 September with concrete, realistic plans to enhance their NDCs by 2020, in line with reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 45% over the next decade, and to net zero emissions by 2050. To be effective and credible, these plans cannot address mitigation alone: they must show the way toward a full transformation of economies in line with sustainable development goals. They should not create winners and losers or add to economic inequality; they must be fair and create new opportunities and protections for those negatively impacted, in the context of a just transition. At the Summit and in the diplomatic efforts prior to it, the UN SG intends to explicitly tell the world that the scope of the expected economic and societal transformation requires profound and structural change. Marginal adjustments just won't do, worse they can lock-us in high carbon trajectories for the future.

The Summit will bring together governments, the private sector, civil society, local authorities and other international organizations to develop ambitious solutions in six areas (or tracks) that have been identified by the SG and for each of which a couple of countries have been asked to take the lead – sometimes with the support of UN institutions – in building both transformative initiatives as well as political coalitions to implement them:

- **Finance:** mobilizing public and private sources of finance to drive decarbonization of all priority sectors and advance resilience – *France, Jamaica and Qatar supported by the World Bank;*
- **Energy Transition:** accelerating the shift away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy, as well as making significant gains in energy efficiency – *Denmark and Ethiopia supported by SE4ALL (Sustainable Energy for All);*
- **Industry Transition:** transforming industries such as Oil and Gas, Steel, Cement, Chemicals and Information Technology – *India and Sweden supported by the World Economic Forum (WEF);*
- **Nature-Based Solutions:** Reducing emissions, increasing sink capacity and enhancing resilience within and across forestry, agriculture, oceans and food systems, including through biodiversity conservation, leveraging supply chains and technology – *China and New Zealand supported by UNEP;*

- **Infrastructures, Cities and Local Action:** Advancing mitigation and resilience at urban and local levels, with a focus on new commitments on low-emission buildings, mass transport and urban infrastructure; and resilience for the urban poor – *Turkey and Kenya supported by UN-Habitat*;
- **Resilience and Adaptation:** advancing global efforts to address and manage the impacts and risks of climate change, particularly in those communities and nations most vulnerable – *Egypt and the UK supported by UNDP*;
- **Mitigation Strategy:** to generate momentum for ambitious NDCs and long-term strategies to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement – *Chile as President of COP25 supported by Patricia Espinosa as Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, Achim Steiner as Administrator of UNDP and Paul Polman as Vice-chair of the Global Compact*;
- **Youth Engagement and Public Mobilization:** To mobilize people worldwide to take action on climate change and ensure that young people are integrated and represented across all aspects of the Summit, including the six transformational areas – *Marshall Islands and Ireland supported by the UNSG's Envoy on youth*;
- **Social and Political Drivers:** to advance commitments in areas that affect people's well-being, such as reducing air pollution, generating decent jobs, and strengthening climate adaptation strategies and protect workers and vulnerable groups - *Peru and Spain supported by ILO, WHO, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs*.

Moreover, the UN SG has made unambiguous and repeated calls to countries to adopt concrete measures on climate action including discontinuing new coal plants by 2020, ending fossil fuel subsidies and introducing carbon pricing, but it's unlikely to generate any substantial new dynamic. Some leading countries, likely Small Islands Developing Countries (SIDS) or Least Developed Countries (LDCs), will announce a revised NDC or submit their strategy towards carbon neutrality by mid-century. It is also expected that a greater number of countries – more than fifty - will announce their intent to update their NDCs in 2020, while some others make financial pledges to the Green Climate Fund in view of its replenishment conference to be held in France late October.

Conclusion

The first SDG Summit is a window of opportunity to provide the 2030 Agenda with the political leadership it deserves. Critical success criteria for both Summits will be whether or not some leaders position themselves as SDG and climate champions and whether the levers of progress discussed will lead to concrete commitments and open pathways for structural transformation. The world is not on track to achieve the SDGs and the commitments of the Paris Agreement. The format of the Climate Action Summit and the call for acceleration actions at the SDG Summit show that the UN leadership is aware of the alarming state of affairs and the need for change. Non-state actors have started to announce new initiatives and hopefully States will follow. The UN will then need to assume a role in keeping track of these promises and assessing their added value.

On climate, although countries are currently considering what their best effort could be, many are still waiting for the biggest emitters to come forward, and in particular industrialized nations. In this context, EU's commitments will be scrutinized and will set a baseline for others to come forward. Even if EU MS are not in agreement yet on reaching full carbon neutrality by 2050 and thus won't be able to announce it at the Summit, it's critical that MEPs reaffirm the vision laid out by the Commission in June, confirm that the new Commission is ready to follow through and reassure partners on the willingness and ability to assert EU's climate leadership next year.

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