A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET

NARRATIVE FOR 2021 CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

AUGUST 2021
This is a pivotal year to restore balance with nature, tackle the climate emergency, and get ahead of the pollution crisis, while ensuring no one is left behind. We are facing existential threats to our planet and to humanity. People’s lives and livelihoods are at risk and we must act now. We must make this year the beginning of a decade of action, transformation and restoration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement and build a sustainable and prosperous world that benefits everyone, everywhere.

As we reboot the global economy following COVID-19, the choices we make will either secure human, economic and environmental health for generations to come, or reinforce old patterns that have destroyed nature. A green, sustainable and fair COVID-19 recovery is critical to setting the world on course toward a 1.5°C pathway that will also create jobs, empower women, reduce inequalities and improve health and food security, benefiting people, planet and prosperity.

Solutions exist that are affordable, practical and realistic and many of them can help resolve more than one problem. By cutting emissions, for example, we can reduce air pollution, restore productive land and create green jobs. By rethinking our food systems, we can protect nature, tackle climate challenges, and address people’s health and well-being, nutrition and food security.

Finance is needed to build a green and sustainable world. It will take resources to invest in sustainable solutions, and developed countries need to provide assistance to developing countries to ensure a global recovery, progress and prosperity. It is in everyone’s interest to make sure no one is left behind.

In its mission to improve the lives of people everywhere, The UN is leading the way and to tackle the intertwined challenges we are facing globally and on the ground. Key international conferences this year on climate change, biodiversity, transport, food systems and energy can – and must — propel us on the path to sustainability and tackle growing inequalities: the achievement of the SDGs.
As the world is responding to end the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 will be a make-or-break year in the global effort to restore balance with nature, tackle the climate emergency and get ahead of the pollution crisis while attaining more equal and inclusive societies. People are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

COVID-19 recovery must start with access to vaccines, it must be green, it must be sustainable and it must ensure that no one is left behind. We need sustained action, starting now, to get us on track and secure the well-being of people and our planet.

The active engagement and support of communities and all stakeholders, including civil society organizations, can help us repair and rebuild our relationship with nature.

2021 is the year to ensure that the trillions spent on recovery and economic stimulus measures will be aligned with the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, and agendas to address chemicals, waste, and food systems.

More governments, more businesses, and more financial institutions are realizing that their survival and future depend on accelerating action on climate change.

The world is now adding renewable energy capacity at record levels. More finance is being invested in renewables, and energy efficiency is increasing. This clean, renewable energy must benefit all people and meet the needs of the 800 million people who still lack access to electricity.
THE CLIMATE IMPERATIVE

- We are facing a climate emergency. Fast action now is needed to prevent the most severe disruption from climate change. 2021 is the year we need to build a truly global coalition committed to net zero emissions — including countries, cities, regions, businesses and financial institutions. Many have already committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, and we need all those commitments to be backed up with concrete plans and immediate actions to deliver them.

- The UN has been at the forefront in helping countries and communities respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. The UN development system is stepping up its capacity to provide integrated policy advice to governments and broker partnerships to massively increase action to ensure it can help countries seize the opportunities in the transition to a sustainable future.

COVID RECOVERY

- The improved transport of people and goods in a manner that is safe, affordable, accessible, efficient, and resilient while minimizing the environmental footprint is critical for building sustainable societies.

- The transition to a circular economy that reduces, reuses and recycles materials could create 6 million jobs by 2030, while playing a crucial role in fighting climate change and improving health and well-being.

- Nevertheless, of the US$ 1.9 trillion of COVID-19 recovery spending announced by the world’s 50 biggest economies by the end of 2020, only 18 per cent could be considered green.

- A healthier planet requires a systems-based approach to contain future pandemics that encompasses preparedness, detection and response and working to improve prevention, monitoring, control and containment.
THE CLIMATE IMPERATIVE

- By 2030, we must cut emissions globally by 45 per cent to limit climate change to 1.5°C and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. We are not on course to do either and we cannot wait to ramp up the pace. We are in a code-red emergency.

- This is the year to walk the talk. Countries need to submit ambitious new action plans, the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement, well ahead of the COP26 Climate Conference in Glasgow.

- Subsidies to fossil fuels must shift to supporting renewable energy, and developed countries must lead in announcing plans to phase out coal — by 2030 in OECD countries, and 2040 in all other countries.

- We need a radical transformation of the entire financial system to respond to the need for low carbon and sustainable development. Ensuring that developing countries have access now to public finance to recover from COVID-19 and climate change impacts is absolutely necessary - especially for least developed and climate vulnerable countries. It’s in everyone's best interests.

- Developed countries promised at least US$ 100 billion annually to support climate action in developing countries. This commitment must be met, and half of all climate finance must flow to enable a major breakthrough on resilience and adaptation to protect the most vulnerable.
New statistical systems that go beyond GDP can help decision makers understand the value of our forests, wetlands, drylands and other ecosystems - and incentivize investments in green opportunities.

While economic losses linked to extreme weather events like flash floods and prolonged droughts have been increasing, early warning systems have significantly reduced the loss of life. But one in three people are still not adequately covered by an early warning system.

Women and girls, who make up 80 percent of those displaced by climate emergencies, are all too often excluded from decisions that can build resilience and help overcome crises disasters. They must be meaningfully included in relevant decision processes.

Investing in inclusive, sustainable economies could yield a direct economic gain of US$ 26 trillion through 2030 compared with business-as-usual. This could produce over 65 million new low-carbon jobs by 2030.

Reducing methane gas emissions by as much as 45 per cent by 2030 can help avoid nearly 0.3°C of global warming by the 2040s and would also, each year, prevent 255,000 premature deaths, 775,000 asthma-related hospital visits, 73 billion hours of lost labour from extreme heat, and 26 million tonnes of crop losses globally.

Reducing the production and consumption of hydrofluorocarbons, used as coolants in air conditioning, by more than 80 per cent over the next 30 years, as called for by the Kigali Amendment, can avoid up to 0.4°C of global warming by the end of this century.
Restoring balance with nature, addressing the climate and pollution emergencies, and securing the well-being of people everywhere are intertwined challenges that need to be tackled through multilateralism and cooperation.

2021 is the start of a decade to agree — and begin to deliver — on a new biodiversity framework. It is also the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration and Decade of Ocean Science. Together, these efforts will help catalyze action to reach many of the climate and SDG goals by supporting a nature-friendly climate and food systems transition including freshwater and forests. At the same time, we must help communities and economies to recover from environmental degradation.

The world will come together to move this urgent agenda for sustainability forward at major 2021 conferences and events leading up to COP26 in Glasgow, including the the Food Systems Summit, the High-Level Dialogue on Energy, the Biodiversity COP15, the Desertification COP15 (postponed to May 2022) and the Second Global Sustainable Transport Conference, all advocating for solutions — global and local — along with actions that are mutually reinforcing.
A path to a sustainable economy exists — driven by renewable energy, sustainable food systems, nature-based solutions, resource efficiency and moves towards an economy that reduces, reuses and recycles resources.

Growing famine risk and food insecurity underscore how urgently we need food systems to deliver to all. Yet unsustainable agricultural practices eat away at people's livelihoods while contributing to climate change, biodiversity loss and land depletion.

Sustainable agriculture can help address more than one challenge. While agriculture contributes to climate change, it can also be part of the solution to climate change and biodiversity protection, as well as meeting key SDGs, such as Zero Hunger. Nature-based solutions can help address almost a third of all emissions, transform food systems, and build adaptation and resilience. By combating deforestation and reversing deforestation, we can mitigate climate change, reduce the risk of future pandemics, and support lives and livelihoods.

New energy compacts can show how countries, cities, businesses and others are planning to increase access to clean, renewable energy and accelerate an inclusive, just energy transition in line with the Energy Dialogue’s 10-year action plan.

Innovative technologies and ensuring internet connectivity for all are critical in ensuring a broad-based recovery that create better job, health and education opportunities.
Investments in a sustainable ocean are not just good for the ocean, they are good for business, and good for people. Investing US$ 2.8 trillion today in offshore wind production, sustainable ocean-based food production, decarbonization of international shipping, and conservation and restoration of mangroves would yield a net benefit of US$ 15.5 trillion by 2050, or a return of five times on the investment.

The solutions that we need require strong international cooperation. One country cannot solve any of these challenges alone and what happens in one country affects all. The resources and technologies that are needed to solve these urgent problems must be shared universally. Implementation of joint initiatives, such as those launched at the 2019 Climate Action Summit, provide a basis for the way forward. Public and private finance needs to be mobilized to make these solutions available for all.

The implementation of solutions also requires the full participation of all sectors of society, including all levels of government, business and finance, youth, women, academia, science, and NGOs.