

Headline: Climate accountability now

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DUBLIN — It has been 30 years since world leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro and agreed on a set of measures to start global mobilization against human-caused climate change, and to meet the imperative of a more sustainable development model. Their Rio Declaration affirmed that “human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.”

Today, tens of millions of people who were not even born in 1992 are suffering the worst of the climate crisis. In a world already plagued by economic inequality and social injustice, COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated the policy failures of the past three decades. Political leaders have not lived up to their previous commitments.

To overcome inertia, policymakers everywhere would do well to listen to those on the front lines of the climate crisis who are demonstrating real leadership and innovation. Among them are Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, the mayor of Freetown in Sierra Leone, and young activists like Elizabeth Wanjiru Wathuti from Kenya, and Mitzi Jonelle Tan from the Philippines, with whom I discussed future challenges at Project Syndicate’s “Generation Green” event last month.

One of Rio’s strongest legacies is the creation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The UNFCCC has been the key multilateral body in the international community’s effort to strengthen the political consensus on climate action through annual Conference of the Parties (COP) summits.

At COP26 in Glasgow last November, there was some progress toward strengthening the 2015 Paris climate agreement’s nationally determined contributions to emissions reduction, closing the gap in financing for climate adaptation, and ending the use of coal. But these advances were nowhere close to sufficient, given the existential threat posed by rising emissions and temperatures.

That is why 2022 must be the year of accountability, with all major emitters delivering on the promises of the so-called Glasgow Climate Pact. That declaration maintained a lifeline for limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, relative to pre-industrial levels, as agreed in the Paris accord. All countries at COP26 promised to step up their ambitions and revisit their emissions reduction targets as soon as this year. In concrete terms, those who still have not set Paris-aligned 2030 targets should do so by COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt this November. It is particularly important that wealthy G20 economies do so, because they are responsible for most global emissions.

Climate finance remains another critical part of the puzzle. It has been over a decade since rich countries pledged, at COP15 in Copenhagen, to provide \$100 billion annually to support developing countries in their mitigation and adaptation efforts. That target has never been met. In the interests of global trust and goodwill, rich countries must follow through on this commitment this year.

COP27 will be held by an African country, on the shores of the Red Sea. Africa is the continent most vulnerable to climate change, despite its negligible contribution to the problem. I hope to see Africa speak with one voice to ensure that COP27 advances the region’s concerns on adaptation, finance, and loss and damage (L&D;—the acknowledgment that countries are suffering climate effects beyond their ability to adapt.

COP26 left unfinished business on L&D, because the United States, backed by the European Union, postponed the creation of a new financial mechanism to rebuild communities in the aftermath of climate-related disasters. COP27 thus represents a major opportunity to achieve a breakthrough among country representatives who have committed to holding further discussions on the issue.

An effective L&D fund is increasingly important for climate-vulnerable states. At COP26, the Scottish government and the Belgian region of Wallonia took the first step by pledging \$2.7 million and \$1 million, respectively, for L&D; (with matching funds from philanthropic organizations).

Another encouraging development is the deal concluded by South Africa, the EU, the United Kingdom, the US, France, and Germany to support South Africa's "just transition" away from coal. This needs to be built upon and emulated.

The spirit of multilateralism that animated the Rio summit and its outcome remains indispensable today, even though the geopolitical climate is fraught with tensions, mutual suspicion, and weak institutions. As my fellow Elder Ban Ki-moon told the "Generation Green" audience, "We all have a part to play in addressing the climate crisis — especially those with the power needed to bring about change."

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