

Headline: The world's most urgent mission

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As the world marks the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the landmark Paris Agreement on climate change, a promising movement for carbon neutrality is taking shape.

By next month, countries representing more than 65 percent of harmful greenhouse gases and more than 70 percent of the world economy will have committed to achieve net-zero emissions by the middle of the century.

At the same time, the main climate indicators are worsening. While the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily reduced emissions, carbon dioxide levels are still at record highs—and rising. The past decade was the hottest on record; Arctic Sea ice in October was the lowest ever, and apocalyptic fires, floods, droughts, and storms are increasingly the new normal.

Biodiversity is collapsing, deserts are spreading, while oceans are warming and choking with plastic waste. Science tells us that unless we cut fossil fuel production by 6 percent every year between now and 2030, things will get worse. Instead, the world is on track for a 2 percent annual rise.

Pandemic recovery gives us an unexpected yet vital opportunity to attack climate change, fix our global environment, re-engineer economies, and reimagine our future. Here is what we must do.

First, we need to build a truly global coalition for carbon neutrality by 2050.

The European Union has committed to do so. The United Kingdom, Japan, the Republic of Korea and more than 110 countries have done the same. So, too, has the incoming US administration. China has pledged to get there before 2060.

Every country, city, financial institution, and company should adopt plans for net-zero—and act now to get on the right path to that goal, which means cutting global emissions by 45 percent by 2030 compared with 2010 levels.

In advance of next November's UN Climate Conference in Glasgow, governments are obligated by the Paris Agreement to be ever more ambitious every five years and submit strengthened commitments known as Nationally Determined Contributions, and these NDCs must show true ambition for carbon neutrality.

Technology is on our side. It costs more to simply run most of today's coal plants than it does to build new renewable plants from scratch. Economic analysis confirms the wisdom of this path. According to the International Labor Organization, despite inevitable job losses, the clean energy transition will create 18 million net new jobs by 2030. But we must recognize the human costs of decarbonization, and support workers with social protection, reskilling and upskilling so that the transition is just.

Second, we need to align global finance with the Paris Agreement, and the Sustainable Development Goals, the world's blueprint for a better future.

It is time to put a price on carbon; end fossil fuel subsidies and finance; stop building new coal power plants; shift the tax burden from income to carbon, from taxpayers to polluters; make climate-related financial risk disclosures mandatory; and integrate the goal of carbon neutrality into all economic and fiscal decision-making. Banks must align their lending with the net-zero objective, and asset owners and managers must decarbonize their portfolios.

Third, we must secure a breakthrough on adaptation and resilience to help those already facing the dire impacts of climate change.

That's not happening enough today: Adaptation represents only 20 percent of climate finance. This hinders our efforts to reduce disaster risk. Adaptation and resilience are especially urgent for small island developing states, for which climate change is an existential threat.

Next year gives us a wealth of opportunities to address our planetary emergencies, through major United Nations conferences and other efforts on biodiversity, oceans, transport, energy, cities, and food systems. One of our best allies is nature itself: Nature-based solutions could provide one-third of the net reductions in greenhouse gas emissions required to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Indigenous knowledge can help to point the way. And as humankind devises strategies for preserving the environment and building a green economy, we need more women decision-makers at the table.

COVID-19 and climate have brought us to a threshold. We cannot go back to the old normal of inequality and fragility; instead, we must step toward a safer, more sustainable path. We must make pandemic recovery and climate action two sides of the same coin. The Jakarta Post/Asia News Network

António Guterres is the United Nations secretary-general.

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