

Headline: None of us is safe until all of us are safe

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Content:

Dear Nadya: Where do we start? That's the urgent question you pose in your letter to the UN secretary-general (The Jakarta Post, Nov. 11, 2021). And after so many false beginnings, the trepidation many of us felt as world leaders convened for COP26 this month reminds us it can be a paralyzing question, too.

You begin your letter by discussing the series of "incremental global disruptions" that have upended our lives this pandemic year. I found your phrase lingering in my mind long after I put your letter down. Perhaps it was so striking because "incremental" is how friends have described the onset of COVID-19 symptoms as the virus spread through their respiratory systems. How it first became laborious to climb stairs, then eat, then speak, and breathe.

There is, of course, a parallel in the complacency that characterized some of the world's COVID-19 responses and the global response to the climate emergency, as well as in the man-made systems at the heart of both crises. If stone is bone and water blood, as Mama Aleta Baun says, what will humans be in this body earth? Viruses or white blood cells?

We are at an "inflection point," the secretary general said recently, poised between breaking through to a greener, fairer, more sustainable future; and a breakdown that leads to a winner-takes-all world in perpetual crisis. I can't help but hear echoes of the pandemic in that phrase "inflection point"—it evokes the curves epidemiologists warned us to flatten.

The most frightening thing about "incremental global disruptions" is that they are only incremental for so long. How long before those curves arced skyward? Likewise, the differences in the effects of a 1.5-degree Celsius temperature rise in global temperature and a 2.7-degree rise are exponential.

We are on a "catastrophic pathway," a UN World Meteorological Organization report published in October warns. Governments' current plans to cut emissions are insufficient to avert climate change that would lead to "endless suffering," the report's authors say, especially "among those who have contributed the least to the emissions in the atmosphere."

Therein is the injustice you cite. As you say, the pandemic was far from being a "great equalizer" and same is true for the climate crisis. I doubt your neighbors who lost their homes in Jakarta's floods experienced the deluge as incremental. Yet so many world leaders have languished like the fabled frog in water as the temperature slowly rises.

I agree that when faced with a crisis of such magnitude, a good place to start is with what feels closest. And it is precisely because your generation inherited a crisis that young people are leading calls for climate justice. You are correct, too, to point out that it is often indigenous people who are the sharpest end of these injustices.

The UN in Indonesia works closely with indigenous communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis, including in Sumatra and Kalimantan. Among other initiatives, UN agencies are improving access to education for people in rural communities to ensure we leave no one behind, and supporting indigenous-led responsible forest management in collaboration with the government of Indonesia.

Yet, we can and must do more. I am committed to exploring your suggestion of intercultural exchange programs between indigenous and urban youth.

Because even as COVID-19 worsened inequalities, it has put our interdependence beyond doubt. The pandemic writ large the notion that none of us is safe until all of us are safe. It reaffirms the value of multilateralism. And it reminds us that at history's darkest moments, we have always come together to rebuild. It is imperative that all of us raise our voices to join people like you in calling for a new greener social contract that leaves no one behind.

Your letter's central question speaks of humility and intention. It fills me with hope and it's the most important question there is. Where do we start? We start with you.

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The writer is UN resident coordinator.

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