

## UN Summits Week: 23-27 September 2019

World leaders convened at UN Headquarters in New York to consider key issues related to “action for people and planet” during the opening of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Inside the halls of the UN and outside on the streets of not only New York, but cities around the world where protests were held, the verdict of the people was clear: leaders are failing to address the environmental and development emergency that the world is currently facing. There was general agreement that the incremental steps announced during the week are unlikely to address the crisis, which requires deeper, more fundamental change.

The week started off with the Climate Action Summit, on Monday, 23 September, convened by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. This one-day meeting aimed to boost ambition and accelerate actions to implement the Paris Agreement. Its aim was to challenge states, regions, cities, companies, investors, and citizens to step up action in nine areas: mitigation; social and political drivers; youth and public mobilization; energy transition; climate finance and carbon pricing; industry transition; nature-based solutions; infrastructure, cities and local action; and resilience and adaptation.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit, which was also the first meeting of the High-level Political Forum to convene under the auspices of the UNGA since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, took place on 24-25 September, to follow up and review progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs, with just over a decade left to the target date of 2030.

On Thursday, 26 September, the High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development, the first such dialogue since the adoption of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) in July 2015, discussed how to accelerate progress in the implementation of the AAAA and financing the 2030 Agenda, through energizing growth and tackling challenges in the global economy, encouraging public and private investment to align with the 2030 Agenda, and promoting new and innovative initiatives that target gaps in financing sustainable development.

The week ended on Friday, 27 September, with the High-level Midterm Review of the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway, which

discussed progress made in addressing the priorities of small island developing states through the implementation of the SAMOA Pathway.

### A Brief History of the UN Summits

The four Summits followed up on key areas that have been on the UN’s agenda for decades. Three of the Summits were mandated by UN Member States to assess progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD3), and the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States. The Climate Action Summit was convened by UN Secretary-General António Guterres “to boost ambition and ramp up actions” on climate change.

**Climate Action Summit:** In December 2015, parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted the [Paris Agreement](#), calling for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to be implemented by parties from 2020 onwards, with the overall goals of:

- holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels;
- increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production; and
- making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low GHG emissions and climate-resilient development.

In a [decision](#) adopted in Paris (Decision 1/CP.21), UNFCCC parties agreed to convene a facilitative dialogue in 2018 to take

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stock of collective progress towards the Paris Agreement's long-term goals, to inform the updating of NDCs by parties before 2020. This process, called the Talanoa Dialogue, concluded in December 2018. The resulting [Talanoa Call for Action](#) found a significant gap between the ambition shown by countries in their NDCs, and the efforts needed to achieve the Paris Agreement goals.

In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [released](#) the Special Report on [Global Warming of 1.5°C](#), warning that 1.5°C of warming will have major impacts, including on food security, ocean ecosystems, and extreme weather, with significantly higher impacts in a 2°C warming scenario. To limit global average temperature rise to 1.5°C, the Special Report found that anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will need to drop by 45% by 2030, and fall to net zero by 2050.

In 2018, UN Secretary-General António Guterres announced plans to hold the Climate Action Summit, to boost ambition and rapidly accelerate action to implement the Paris Agreement. The Summit was informed by the Talanoa Call for Action and the findings of the IPCC Special Report, along with preparations conducted by governments and others under nine thematic coalitions established by the Secretary-General. The Summit, meanwhile, will inform the Santiago Climate Change Conference (COP 25), which will be held in December 2019, in Santiago, Chile.

In preparation for the Summit, Climate Weeks were held in [Africa](#) (Accra, Ghana, 18-22 March 2019), [Latin America and the Caribbean](#) (Salvador de Bahía, Brazil, 21-22 August 2019), and the [Asia-Pacific](#) (Bangkok, Thailand, 2-6 September 2019). A [meeting](#) to assess progress of the nine coalitions towards the Summit was also held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), on 30 June and 1 July 2019.

**SDG Summit:** The SDG Summit is the first session of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) to convene under the auspices of the UNGA since the September 2015 adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the 17 SDGs and 169 targets. The HLPF was established in July 2013 by UNGA resolution 67/290 as the main forum for the global follow-up and review of sustainable development issues within the UN. The UNGA resolution calls on the HLPF to meet under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) every year, and under the auspices of the UNGA every four years, at the level of Heads of State and Government, 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; and
- have a focused, dynamic, and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges.

Four HLPF sessions have taken place under the auspices of ECOSOC since the 2030 Agenda was adopted, most recently in [July 2019](#).

**High-Level Dialogue on Financing for Development:** The [Addis Ababa Action Agenda](#) (AAAA) was adopted in July 2015, at the [Third International Conference on Financing for Development](#) (FfD). The Addis Agenda called on the UN

Secretary-General to convene an inter-agency task force (IATF), which includes major institutional stakeholders and the UN system, to report annually on progress in implementing the FfD outcomes and the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and advise the intergovernmental follow-up on progress, implementation gaps and recommendations for corrective action. The [IATF](#), which comprises over 50 UN agencies, programmes and offices, regional economic commissions, and other relevant international institutions, meets each year and produces an annual Financing for Sustainable Development Report, which informs an annual Forum on Sustainable Development under ECOSOC, also called for in the AAAA.

The annual Forum includes one day for a special high-level meeting with the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Trade Organization, and the UN Conference on Trade and Development, and additional institutional and other stakeholders depending on the priorities and scope of the meeting; and up to four days to discuss the follow-up and review of the FfD outcomes and the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Its intergovernmentally-agreed conclusions and recommendations are fed into the annual meeting of the HLPF under ECOSOC. In addition, the AAAA mandates that a High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development of the General Assembly will be held back-to-back with the HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly every four years. The 2019 High-level Dialogue was the first convened since the adoption of the AAAA. The Addis Agenda also calls on Member States to consider by 2019 the need to hold a follow-up conference.

**High-Level Mid-Term Review of the SAMOA Pathway:** The [Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States \(SIDS\)](#), held from 1-4 September 2014 in Apia, Samoa, adopted the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action – or [SAMOA Pathway](#), covering the years 2014-2024. It also established a [SIDS Partnership Framework](#), designed to monitor progress of existing partnerships, and stimulate the launch of new, genuine, and durable partnerships for the sustainable development of SIDS. In 2017, UNGA resolution [72/217](#) called on Member States to convene a one-day high-level meeting to review progress on the implementation of the SAMOA Pathway, at its five-year mark.

A number of preparatory meetings took place in 2018, including in the [Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea \(AIMS\) region](#) (in Mauritius, from 23- 25 May 2018); the [Caribbean region](#) (in Belize from 6-9 August 2018); and the [Pacific region](#) (in Tonga, from 19-21 June 2018). An [inter-regional meeting](#) (in Samoa, from 30 October - 2 November 2018), and a [SIDS Global Business Network Forum](#) (in Mauritius, on 21-22 May 2018) also took place.

### Report of UN Summits Week

**Climate Action Summit:** The UN Climate Action Summit, an initiative of UN Secretary-General António Guterres to encourage increased ambition to address climate change, was attended by over 65 Heads of State and Government, in addition to leaders of sub-national governments and the private sector. The opening ceremony was followed by thematic sessions, interspersed with general statements by Heads of State and Government. Thematic sessions focused on:

- Plans for a Carbon Neutral World;
- Climate Finance;

- Powering the Future from Coal to Clean;
- Unlocking the Potential of Nature in Climate Action;
- Towards a Resilient Future;
- Small Island Developing States;
- Live, Work and Move Green;
- Cutting GHG Emissions Now with Cooling and Energy Efficiency;
- Adapting Now:
- Making People Safer;
- Least Developed Countries (LDCs);
- People Centered Action Now; and
- Economy Moving from Grey to Green.

National and sub-national governments and private sector representatives made a number of commitments and announcements throughout the day, including:

- Commitments to double contributions to the Green Climate Fund by France, Norway, the Republic of Korea, and Sweden, and climate finance pledges from countries, including the UK, Qatar, Spain, and Singapore. Philanthropic organizations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, also made commitments.
- National plans, including for climate neutrality by Germany and Slovakia (by 2050) and a reduction of emissions by Denmark (70% reduction by 2030, compared to 1990), and the Netherlands (95% by 2050, compared to 1990). The Russian Federation announced its ratification of the Paris Agreement.
- Commitments by sub-national governments, including by Montreal, Canada, to reduce emissions by 55% by 2030; by Maine, US, to become carbon neutral by 2045; and by Surabaya, Indonesia, to launch a climate-friendly transport initiative.
- Ambitious plans by vulnerable countries like Djibouti, Fiji, and Seychelles to achieve 100% renewable energy, and to strengthen adaptation efforts.
- Commitments by private sector actors, including by the power company Ørsted to become carbon neutral by 2025; and a call by asset managers overseeing USD 34 trillion to phase out fossil fuel subsidies.

President Sebastián Piñera Echeñique, Chile, the host nation for the 25th meeting of the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP 25) in December 2019, said 30 countries have committed to carbon neutrality by 2030, and more than 60 have committed to increasing ambition in their NDCs.

For more details, see the [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#) coverage of the Summit.

**SDG Summit:** On the opening day of the SDG Summit, UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued a global call for a decade of action to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. The opening session of the Summit on Tuesday afternoon adopted the HLPF political declaration ([A/HLPF/2019/L.1](#)).

A “fireside chat” on the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR 2019) followed. Presenting the report, Peter Messerli, Co-Chair of the independent group of scientists who authored the GSDR 2019, warned the Earth system is approaching tipping points which may be “irreversible or even unmanageable.” He listed the six “entry points” identified in the report, a focus on which can accelerate action:

- human well-being and capabilities;
- sustainable and just economies;

- food systems and nutrition patterns;
- energy decarbonization and universal access;
- urban and peri-urban development; and
- the global environmental commons.

Following statements on behalf of groups of Member States and participating states, six “leaders dialogues” took place:

- **Megatrends impacting SDG achievement:** This session included discussions on issues such as climate change, demographic changes, economic growth, economic and financial shocks, equality, extreme poverty, education coverage, and gender equality.
- **Critical entry points for accelerating the achievement of the SDGs:** Critical entry points described by the Heads of State and Government included: fighting poverty and inequality; achieving sustainable cities and communities; promoting sustainable consumption and production; political commitment; financing; public administration systems; improved data collection; access to justice; and women’s rights.
- **Measures to leverage progress across the SDGs:** These included: a “systematic change in thinking,” particularly in finance ministries; addressing climate change and protectionist policies; ensuring better financing for middle-income countries (MICs); providing social assistance for households; providing employment; stemming illicit financial flows (IFFs); awareness raising to change mindsets and stimulate action by governments; and harnessing the transformational potential of SDG 5 on gender equality.
- **Localizing the SDGs:** Speakers highlighted the importance of localizing SDGs by building local ownership; addressing structural challenges, such as data limitations; including women and youth in decision-making; making adequate resources available; and recognizing the critical role of local governments, which act as first responders to which people can turn for predictable and accessible support.
- **Partnerships for sustainable development:** Speakers highlighted the mutual responsibility of governments and stakeholders; and the need for: addressing the root causes of vulnerability; public-private partnerships; an online voluntary commitment platform; enhanced impact assessments; gender equality; meaningful and transformative partnerships to translate ambitions into action; strengthened international cooperation; and a UN treaty on business and human rights.
- **2020-2030 vision:** Speakers discussed: the 21 SDG targets with a 2020 deadline, including on biodiversity and natural resource management; the need for additional finance on concessional terms; the role of robust partnerships with all stakeholders; addressing wealth concentration; ending fossil fuel subsidies; meaningful participation of marginalized groups; and the need to step up ambition as we enter “the decade of delivery.”

For more details, see the [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#) coverage of the SDG Summit.

**FfD Dialogue:** The High-level Dialogue on FfD sought ways to accelerate progress in the implementation of the AAAA and financing the 2030 Agenda. The opening session was followed by four interactive dialogues:

- **Putting public resources to work for more equal, sustainable societies, including by combatting IFFs:** This session discussed, among other things: international action

on tax avoidance and evasion; tax collection; addressing fair contracts and concessions on natural resources; recuperating IFFs; regulating cross-border financial flows; and adequate regulation of the private sector.

- **Financing the SDGs and climate action against rising debt burdens:** This session discussed, among other things: zero-interest loans, or loans that are linked to sustainable development criteria; “debt for sustainable development and climate action” swaps; legal frameworks to encourage the private sector to invest in a more socially and environmentally sound manner; capacity for public debt management; and using vulnerability indices as graduation criteria for countries.
- **Moving the money to fill the climate action and SDG financing gap:** This session considered, among other things: mobilizing private finance; getting more value out of investments; greening global finance; public-private partnerships; prioritization; blending; financial inclusion, including through digital technologies; carbon taxes; the need for scalability; techniques and tools to move trillions of dollars towards filling the climate action and SDG financing gaps; and the importance of better regulatory structures and investor education.
- **Announcements and new initiatives:** Governments described national and global initiatives, including: Saint Lucia’s Country Financing Roadmap, which seeks to diagnose challenges and produce an action plan to overcome them; an initiative by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Islamic Development Bank, aimed at combating cholera in 29 member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; plans by Denmark to double climate-relevant official development assistance; and a public campaign, spearheaded by filmmaker Richard Curtis, aimed at empowering people to ensure their pensions are no longer invested in fossil fuels, tobacco, and supply chains that employ child labor.

During the closing, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed called for the drive and commitment demonstrated during the day to be built upon and go further, and said the next FfD Forum will aim to rally policymakers to tackle systemic challenges in all areas of the AAAA.

For more details, see the [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#) coverage of the Dialogue.

**SAMOA Pathway Review:** The opening segment of the High-level Meeting to review progress made in addressing the priorities of SIDS through the implementation of the SAMOA Pathway was followed by two multi-stakeholder dialogues:

- **Progress, gaps, and challenges:** This session discussed, among other things: gaps in finance, including difficulties in accessing available and affordable funding; the devastating effects of natural disasters; the long-term benefits of investing in resilience; holding big emitters accountable; disaster risk reduction (DRR) and management including through the Sendai Framework for DRR; efforts to reduce the reporting burden on SIDS; and the need for strong institutions to enable SIDS to recover sooner and better after disasters.
- **Priorities, solutions, and the way forward:** This session discussed, among other things: helping SIDS “build back better” in the aftermath of disasters; partnerships; the need for concessional funding and special trade treatment for MICs in

the Caribbean; “debt for climate adaptation swaps” to fund resilience; and the potential of the blue and digital economies to drive economic growth, development, and employment.

A political declaration was adopted during the closing, recognizing progress in areas such as social inclusion, gender equality, peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive societies, as well as in making communities safer. At the same time, it urges international action in a number of areas, including finance, capacity, and institutions.

For more details, see the [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#) coverage of the SAMOA Pathway Review.

### A Brief Analysis of UN Summits Week

*I sit in one of the dives*

*On Fifty-second Street*

*Uncertain and afraid*

*As the clever hopes expire*

*Of a low dishonest decade*

September 1, 1939, by W.H. Auden

Emotions flew high during UN Summits Week—both on the streets of New York, as youth protests rallied hundreds of thousands against climate change, as well as within the hallowed halls of the United Nations, which are more accustomed to measured diplomatic debate. The tone was set by 16-year-old youth activist Greta Thunberg at the Climate Action Summit on the first day, as she admonished a General Assembly of the world’s most powerful.

“How dare you!” she rebuked them. “People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

Thunberg’s reprove appeared to pierce the formal choreography of UN events, reverberating to the end of the week, when the fate of the world’s critically vulnerable was discussed during the review of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway on Friday. “How many times must we spend taxpayer’s money to come here and to hear the same thing over and over?” asked Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados. “The charter that created this institution promises us that each would have the opportunity for our values to be respected. Well, isn’t the first value the right to life?” A select list of world leaders, whose commitments were considered worthy through an intensive selection process, then presented their initiatives.

During the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Summit on Tuesday and Wednesday, however, leaders relapsed into reading generalized statements. Despite a stark warning by the scientists who prepared the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report that the international community is even regressing on some SDGs and seems to find it easier to contemplate the end of humanity than to change socio-environmental and economic systems, some observed that the six “leaders dialogues” were formal and meandering, only sporadically addressing the topic at hand.

While some observers attributed this to difficulties in corraling Heads of State and Government to address any one topic, others noted that the Financing for Development (FfD) Dialogue on Thursday seemed to manage this with far more success. Experienced moderators kept leaders and experts on point during the interactive dialogues, and the discussion actually demonstrated progress, moving beyond the usual acerbic accusations that mark multilateral negotiations on finance, to a more realistic and balanced discussion on how to channel the money to the right place.

This analysis provides an overview of the week, incorporating key observations and contemplating interlinkages. Statements made during the week were replete with references to the need for a “decade of action” and “accelerated action.” This analysis considers whether the best efforts of the world’s most powerful leaders could bring this week were good enough to address the deep crisis we find ourselves in.

### ***UN Climate Action Summit***

*Into this neutral air*

*Where blind skyscrapers use*

*Their full height to proclaim*

*The strength of Collective Man,*

*Each language pours its vain*

*Competitive excuse:*

*But who can live for long*

*In an euphoric dream;*

*Out of the mirror they stare,*

*Imperialism’s face*

*And the international wrong.*

This was a Summit with a difference: unlike the other events this week, which were mandated by Member States, the Climate Action Summit was organized at the behest of UN Secretary-General António Guterres. The initial imperative to hold the Summit—to urgently increase the ambition of the 2020 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in line with the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 1.5°C report—was perhaps somewhat stymied by the timing. Some key actors, including the European Union and China, were not yet ready to announce what they plan to do in 2020 with their NDCs, because domestic procedures were still underway (discussions within EU Member States in the case of the former, and on the next national Five-Year Plan in the case of the latter). The word on the street was that the focus on NDCs therefore received some push-back from Member States.

In any case, the Secretary-General was determined to push for ambition, and instructed Member States to “come with plans, not speeches.” A fairly intensive process followed to pick the most ambitious commitments in each of nine areas identified (climate finance, energy transition, and resilience and adaptation, and others). In a concerted push for ambition in advance of the Summit, the Secretary-General set several benchmarks for national ambition: stop building new coal plants by 2020; shift taxes from people to carbon; stop subsidizing fossil fuels; and announce plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Before the Summit, stories circulated in the media that countries that continue to support coal would not be invited to speak at the

Summit. “Only the boldest and most transformative actions [will] make the stage,” UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, was quoted as saying.

Each of the national and sub-national leaders who took the floor at the UN General Assembly Hall did announce new, existing, or forthcoming commitments. Those with a small share of emissions, but a big stake in the final outcome, led the way: SIDS for instance, made a collective commitment to move to net zero emissions by 2050 and to 100% renewable energy by 2030 (contingent on assistance from the international community). By the UN’s count, 77 countries, 10 regions, and 100 cities committed to net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Chile reported that 70 countries pledged to boost their NDCs by 2020. France, Norway, the Republic of Korea, and Sweden announced a doubling of contributions to the Green Climate Fund, raising its replenishment to around USD 7.4 billion that can be used for projects to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts in developing countries, while other countries also pledged to increase their climate change spending. Corporate leaders also took to the stage to at least partially renounce their fossil fuel addiction: for instance, the Asset Owner Alliance, a group of the world’s largest pension funds and insurers, responsible for directing more than USD 2 trillion in investments, committed to transitioning to carbon-neutral investment portfolios by 2050.

In the final tally, however, the outcome is unlikely to fill the “emissions gap,” between the existing levels of ambition, and what is required to keep warming within 1.5°C or “well below” 2°C temperature limits; or the “finance gap” between the tens of billions currently available, and the trillions that are needed. To begin with, many of the “big emitters” and large economies were conspicuous by their absence from the stage: the US, Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil, to name a few. Several countries that are building new coal power plants—including Japan and South Korea—also failed to meet the Secretary General’s ambition criteria.

Secondly, as many observers pointed out, what was on offer is too little too late: incrementalism is unlikely to bring about the fundamental and urgent transformations that are needed to avert the climate crisis. This was acknowledged by Guterres in his closing statement, where he made a plea to governments to stop “subsidizing a dying fossil fuel industry, building more and more coal power plants, denying what is plain as day, that we are in a deep climate hole and to get out of it we must first stop digging.”

As global attention now turns to the UN Climate Change Conference in Santiago, Chile, some observers wondered how the commitments made at the Climate Action Summit will translate into the NDCs. More critically, civil society in some of the countries that announced longer-term pledges, such as carbon neutrality commitments in 2050, have questioned how these will be translated to national action, pointing to the gulf between the pledges and current action on the ground to implement them. Given the brevity of political cycles, they worry that governments will simply continue to kick the can down the road.

### ***SDG Summit***

*There is no such thing as the State*

*And no one exists alone;*

*Hunger allows no choice*

*To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.*

As the world approaches the 2030 deadline for the SDGs and the first stocktaking under the UNGA approached, alarm bells began to ring. The SDG Progress Report released by the UN in July indicated that progress on the Goals was insufficient. Among other things, poverty rates are not falling fast enough; the world is facing a “global learning crisis”; progress on decent work and economic growth is “slow and uneven”; income inequality is on the rise; climate change is disrupting national economies and affecting lives; and official development assistance (ODA) is decreasing. “We are not yet on track and must step it up,” Guterres told the HLPF at its meeting in July 2019. He invited governments to “kickstart a decade of delivery and action.”

The 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report launched at the SDG Summit brought even more sobering news: some trends for specific SDG targets are not even moving in the right direction, with gains being reversed or stalled. Four trends, in particular, were highlighted: rising inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss, and the increasing amount of waste from human activity. The report further warns that some of the trends “presage a move towards the crossing of negative tipping points, which would lead to dramatic changes in the conditions of the Earth system, in ways that are irreversible on time scales meaningful for society.”

Once again, the voice of youth sought to bring home the reality for global leaders: “Leaders of the world, you made a bold commitment in 2015,” said SDG Youth Leader Trisha Shetty. “But you are failing. We need a dramatic change of course in 2020. This is make or break for the planet.”

As many speakers observed, however, the planet isn’t functioning as one—the tides of nationalism are clearly against the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. “We must regain the trust of the people and respond to perceptions and experiences of alienation and instability generated by the current model of globalization,” Guterres told world leaders at the opening of the Summit.

The media blitz that accompanied the Climate Action Summit dimmed considerably for the SDG Summit. Some voiced concerns that the SDG Summit was overshadowed by the Climate Action Summit. Whether or not “Summit fatigue” was already setting in, one participant noted the energy seemed more dissipated, and the crowds were thinning. “At UNGA, it’s all about politics,” she said. “It’s about big, media-worthy statements.” The “leaders dialogues” were not dissimilar to the HLPF general debates that take place in July every year under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), said another observer, with the only difference being that Heads of State and Government were the ones delivering prepared statements, rather than ministers.

Will the Summit’s results lead to accelerated action? An acceleration action platform created by the UN in May 2019 has recorded over 100 commitments from governments, the private sector, international organizations, and civil society, towards the implementation of the SDGs. Some of them appeared to be recycled from the Climate Action Summit (such as carbon neutrality pledges). Others included pledges, such as the UK’s announcement of GBP 515 million for education in Africa and the doubling of the UK’s funding to the UN Peacebuilding Fund.

The commitments, it is hoped, will keep coming. A “decade of action and delivery for sustainable development” was launched by Guterres in his opening statement. The Political Declaration, which was consensually agreed as early as July 2019, also establishes “an annual moment to highlight inspiring action on the Goals” during the UNGA each September. The Secretariat has indicated that this will include a “temperature check” on SDG progress, showing “what’s working and what’s not, of where we need more action and who we need more action from.” While not everybody will appreciate naming and shaming, such accountability may be necessary to bridge the gap between words and action on the SDGs, described as the “guiding light” to create a more sustainable society by the Prime Minister of Iceland, and the “first line of defense against the existential challenges facing humankind” by the Group of 77 and China.

### *FfD Dialogue*

*And helpless governors wake  
To resume their compulsory game:  
Who can release them now,  
Who can reach the deaf,  
Who can speak for the dumb?*

The FfD Dialogue aimed to review progress on the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA). Above all, it sought ways to fill the USD 2.5 trillion “finance gap” that is needed to reach the USD 5-7 trillion needed annually, to implement the 2030 Agenda. The funds exist, participants were told, they are just in the “wrong place.” One expert told the audience that of the USD 269 trillion in financial assets invested worldwide, less than USD 1 trillion is invested for impact—social or environmental—beyond financial return.

The format of the Dialogue differed from the two Summits: experienced moderators invited focused inputs from Heads of State and Governments, ministers, and experts.

Bill Gates, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, set the tone. There are signs, he said, that ODA is at risk due to softening economic growth, rising debt risk, and strains to multilateralism. While the biggest portion of revenue to implement the SDGs will have to come from domestic revenue, in particular from equitable taxation, he called for a reality check about the gaps that private sector financing can and cannot fill. From 2012-2017, for instance, less than 8% of mobilized blended finance went to low-income countries, of which only a small proportion was allocated to the health and education sectors.

A large proportion of the finance that is in the “wrong place,” participants were told, is due to illicit financial flows (IFFs) and lack of adequate regulation of the private sector, which allows corporations to shift profits among tax jurisdictions. Prime Minister Imran Khan, Pakistan, was brutally clear in his assessment of the situation: rich countries lack the political will to address these flows because they gain from them. Dag-Inge Ulstein, Minister of International Development, Norway called IFFs a “systematic injustice to those left behind,” and urged world leaders to take a “strong moral stance” in abolishing financial secrecy.

Aid was never meant to be the way for developing countries to prosper, said President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, Ghana.

While Africa is rich in mineral resources, he noted that existing global rules and regulations allow multinational corporations to take the region's profits with impunity. He called for strong institutions and the rule of law to address unbalanced contracts and ensure Africans get their due in the contracts they sign. Another expert pointed to cross-boundary regulations that make profit shifting legal, and called for "making the legal, illegal."

The impact of debt on attaining the Goals, particularly in countries most affected by climate change, was raised by many countries. "We are constrained in financing the SDGs since we have to prioritize resources for development and keep borrowing at commercial interest rates to rebuild from the consequences of climate change," said Prime Minister Gaston Browne, Antigua and Barbuda. Proposed solutions included "debt for climate action swaps" (a proposal for this by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has been endorsed by Guterres). Some leaders emphasized the dilemma faced by SIDS that graduate from least developed country to middle-income country (MIC) status, resulting in the loss of concessional financing, leaving them with little help to deal with climate impacts. They called for the graduation criteria to be revised to take into account climate vulnerability. Others called for zero-interest loans, or loans linked to sustainable development criteria.

The technical ideas being discussed are all well and good, said Prime Minister Ralph Gonzales, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, but the problem is political. "Why are countries that made pledges not delivering on them?" he asked "Why all those difficulties in accessing the money that is available? We need serious political will from development partners."

The global community will have a chance to show that it has ramped up that political will—and produced some positive change for developing countries—when it gathers in April 2020 for the next annual check-up on FfD under ECOSOC.

### ***SAMOA Pathway Review***

*Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.*

Friday brought a fresh burst of urgency to the week and to the streets of New York. Protestors gathered for the now regular "Fridays for Future" climate protests. Inside the UN, as leaders gathered to review progress on the SAMOA Pathway, frustration at the slow pace of progress, despite exponentially rising threats, was clearly evident.

The crisis facing SIDS hit home as speaker after speaker drew attention to the "diabolical" situation of "emergency" that SIDS face due to sea level rise, ocean acidification, and heightened natural disasters. Actor Jason Momoa said humanity is oblivious that entire islands, "at the front lines of the climate crisis, are drowning into the sea due to emissions by first world countries." Michael Higgins, President of Ireland, said the situation that SIDS face is "the most dramatic demonstration of the precipice to which we have come."

Yet, 25 years after the Barbados Programme of Action recognized the special case of SIDS, said Prime Minister Mia Mottley,

Barbados, they are still struggling. "We have come to this point of time with a selfishness that is unparalleled," she said.

The chasm between what was being done, and what needs doing, was stark throughout the day. While better access to ODA and concessional funding to help islands "build back better" were the incremental steps being discussed, the root cause of the problem—greenhouse gas emissions due to fossil fuel use—were not fully confronted. "The time has not yet come for change, and we all know why," said Peter Eriksson, Sweden's Minister for International Cooperation. "We can do many good things, invest in clean energy and plant trees, but we all know there is a flood of oil, coal and gas. Every minute, every day, every week of the year, the flood is running."

Despite the scale of the emergency, some leaders believed they were not being taken seriously. "We are relegated to a Friday," said Gaston Browne, Prime Minister, Antigua and Barbuda. "Where are our developed partners?" he asked. "We are thankful for those who are here, but disappointed by those who are not."

The issue of finance to address the impacts of climate change, particularly in SIDS that are MICs, was raised once again in this meeting. "There is a rising level of indebtedness in the SIDS," said Mukhisa Kituyi, Secretary-General, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. "The continued use of debt instruments in climate finance raises concern." He proposed the conversion of bilateral and multilateral debts into funds to address environmental and economic shocks. Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway, agreed that graduated countries should be eligible for ODA when their economic base has been destroyed by a natural disaster.

While the Summits earlier in the week included announcements of new initiatives and ideas, one delegate remarked that the SAMOA Pathway review felt more like a "repetition of problems" rather than any new initiatives or commitments on the table. Governments did adopt a political declaration but were hard-pressed to find much progress to report. According to one source, the declaration's mention of the IPCC's 1.5°C Special Report was a win, given the controversy on giving it sufficient recognition under the UNFCCC. "This isn't really progress," said the observer.

Prime Minister Mottley voiced the sentiment felt by many: "How many more times must we spend the taxpayers money to come here and hear the same thing over, and over, and over?" she asked.

### ***A Birds' Eye View***

*Defenseless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.*

The linkages between the four high-levels events were clear: the SDGs cannot be achieved without addressing climate change;

the need for finance will continue to increase if climate change is not addressed, and the SDGs are not achieved, and, at the same time, the amount of finance available may continue to shrink, unless radical changes are made to the global economic system. Finally, vulnerability to climate change, which can severely reverse development gains, cannot be solved only through finance or adaptation action. While there is broad recognition that more systemic “transformative” change is required, global leaders continue to skirt the issue, rather than define specific, measurable actions and implement them.

Many participants felt the time for talk without action has passed. The strong presence and views of youth at each of the Summits heightened the sense of emergency, and a more acute sense of intergenerational responsibility. However, the nature and depth of transformative action that is required is clearly challenging in the face of rising nationalism, as many speakers observed over the course of the week. “Our global community continues to be split, and at a time when the world does not have the luxury of time,” said Mottley.

It can only be hoped that to regain this trust, the global community realizes that, as the European Commission’s Frans Timmermans said, “Globalism is enlightened patriotism.”

Auden’s poem, written on the eve of World War II, expresses the anguish, frustration, and helplessness of humanity, “composed of Eros and dust,” watching a catastrophe unfold. We have been on the brink before and witnessed the horrors that follow. The UN was created as a result of those horrors, to according to its Charter, to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.” A future catastrophe can be avoided if our leaders lead, if countries act together, and if every country, province, city, village, and individual plays their part.

### Upcoming Meetings

#### Santiago Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 25):

The Santiago Climate Change Conference, which will feature the 25th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 25) to the UNFCCC, the 15th session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 15), and the 2nd session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 2), will convene along with meetings of the UNFCCC subsidiary bodies. The pre-session period will be from 26 November - 1 December 2019. **dates:** 2-13 December 2019 **location:** Santiago, Chile **www:** <https://unfccc.int/santiago>

#### 2020 ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development

**Follow-up:** The FfD Forum was called for as part of the outcome from the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD3), which concluded with the adoption of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA). **dates:** 20-23 April 2020 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** <https://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffdforum/>

**2020 Ocean Conference:** The 2020 UN Conference to Support the Implementation of SDG 14 (UN Ocean Conference) will convene on the theme, “Scaling Up Ocean Action Based on Science and Innovation for the Implementation of Goal 14: Stocktaking, Partnerships and Solutions.” The conference is expected to adopt an intergovernmental declaration on science-based and innovative areas of action,

along with a list of voluntary commitments to support SDG 14 implementation. **dates:** 2-6 June 2020 **location:** Lisbon, Portugal **www:** <https://oceanconference.un.org/>

**HLPF 2020:** The Forum meets annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council for eight days, including a three-day ministerial segment. During the meeting, Member States are expected to present their voluntary national reviews (VNRs), which aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. **dates:** 7-17 July 2020 (to be confirmed) **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>

For additional meetings, see <http://sdg.iisd.org>

### Glossary

AAAA	Addis Ababa Action Agenda
COP	Conference of the Parties
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
GHG	Greenhouse gas
FfD	Financing for Development
GSDR	Global Sustainable Development Report
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IFFs	Illicit financial flows
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LDCs	Least developed countries
MICs	Middle income countries
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
ODA	Official development assistance
SAMOA	SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNGA	UN General Assembly