

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

--

REMARKS AT OPENING OF THE MINISTERIAL SEGMENT OF THE HIGH-LEVEL
POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

13 July 2021

One year ago, we came together at this Forum amidst immense uncertainty in our world.

The COVID-19 crisis had already taken over 200,000 lives and left the global economy in freefall.

Since then, the pandemic has taken 4 million lives and devastated the global economy.

It continues to inflict profound suffering, especially on the most vulnerable people.

While some countries plan for recovery, the pandemic is gathering pace in others.

As my latest report to this Forum indicates, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Global GDP decreased by an estimated 4.6 percent in 2020.

By February of this year, 36 low-income countries were either in sovereign debt distress or at a high risk of falling into such distress.

The equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost in working hours – about four times the number lost in 2007–2009.

The pandemic has pushed a further 124 million people into extreme poverty. Nearly one person in three around the world could not access adequate food in 2020 – an increase of nearly 320 million people in one year.

Two in three students are still affected by school closures. Many, particularly girls, may never return to school, contributing to a surge in child marriage and an increase in child labour.

Violence against women has risen to shocking levels, with reports doubling and tripling in some places.

An added burden of unpaid domestic and care work is squeezing women out of the labor force.

And the underlying structural challenges to the SDGs, including the climate crisis and growing inequality, have become even more dangerous.

Carbon dioxide concentrations are now at the highest level in 3 million years – 148 per cent above pre-industrial levels.

Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented and alarming rate, with one million species at risk of extinction. Every year, we lose 10 million hectares of forests.

Inequality remains at unsustainable levels. The net worth of some 2,500 billionaires increased by over \$5.2 billion per day during the pandemic, while 4 billion people are still without any form of basic social protection.

And all the while, conflicts and crises have left one percent of the world's population forcibly displaced.

Excellencies,

This High-Level Political Forum is intended to assess progress on the 2030 Agenda. But we must face facts.

Rather than progress, we are moving farther away from our goals.

Global poverty is now expected to be at 7 percent by 2030 – only marginally below the level in 2015.

And with the global temperature increase already at 1.2 degrees, we are on the verge of the abyss.

I continue to believe that we can and must turn this around.

We have the knowledge, the science, the technology and the resources to do so.

We have some inspiring examples of transformative change, including during this pandemic.

What we need is unity of purpose; effective leadership from all sectors; and urgent, ambitious action.

To end the pandemic everywhere and get the SDGs back on track, I am calling for decisive action in 4 key areas.

First, everyone, everywhere, must have access to COVID-19 vaccines, tests, treatments and support.

The development and roll-out of vaccines, including through the global equity mechanism, the ACT-Accelerator and its COVAX facility, is offering hope.

But there is uneven access to these tools, especially vaccines, around the world and within countries.

A global vaccination gap threatens us all because as the virus mutates, it could become even more transmissible, or even more deadly.

Pledges of doses and funds are welcome – but they are not enough. We need at least eleven billion doses to vaccinate 70 percent of the world and end this pandemic.

The world needs a Global Vaccination Plan to at least double the production of vaccines, ensure equitable distribution through COVAX, coordinate implementation and financing, and support national immunization programmes.

To realize this plan, I have been calling for an Emergency Task Force that brings together the countries that produce and can produce vaccines, the World Health Organization, the ACT-Accelerator partners and international financial institutions, able to deal with the relevant pharmaceutical companies and manufacturers, and other key stakeholders.

Right now, it is essential to fully finance the ACT-Accelerator and support the \$50 billion investment roadmap, to be led by the IMF, the World Bank, the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization, to end the pandemic and secure a global recovery.

Second, we need urgent, ambitious climate action, including on finance.

A promising movement for carbon neutrality is now taking shape.

By next month, countries representing more than 65 per cent of harmful greenhouse gases and more than 70 per cent of the world economy will have committed to achieve net zero emissions.

But we are still struggling to hold the global temperature increase to the 1.5-degree target of the Paris Agreement.

If COP26 in Glasgow is to be a turning point, we need all countries to commit to achieve net zero by mid-century, and to present Nationally Determined Contributions aiming at a cut in global emissions by 45 per cent by 2030, compared to 2010 levels.

Developing countries also need assurances that their climate ambition will be met with financial and technical support.

That means delivering on the \$100 billion that developed countries agreed to mobilize annually for mitigation and adaptation by 2020.

We need a clear plan to fulfil this pledge and establish an essential level of trust in multilateral climate action.

We also need to accelerate the transition from coal, oil, and gas to renewable energy by adding green jobs and reducing inequalities.

While public finance is key, large scale private finance is also essential.

And we need all financiers to commit to no new international funding for coal, by the end of 2021.

Third, we must heed the lessons of this crisis and invest in more equal and inclusive societies.

This calls for every country to provide a foundation of opportunity for all – by expanding access to universal health coverage, social protection, quality education and digital connectivity.

We need to focus on the transformative impact of shifting power dynamics, through ambitious measures for gender equality and gender-balanced leadership in all areas, and targeted steps to ensure women's economic inclusion. There can be zero tolerance towards any form of violence against women.

Every national recovery plan should include significant investment in the care economy and infrastructure. This will alleviate the burden of unpaid care work, enabling women to join the labour force, while creating sustainable, green jobs.

We need a dedicated focus on employment and decent work – boosting the availability of jobs and training for young people; improving labour conditions and rights; and supporting people in the informal sector.

We need to invest in lifelong education and re-skilling, to enable a smooth transition to sustainability and take advantage of the potential for job creation.

Fourth, and underpinning progress in these three areas, is financing for development.

In advanced economies, fiscal stimulus packages have reached nearly 28 percent of GDP. In middle-income countries, this figure drops to 6.5 percent; in least developed countries, to 1.8 percent.

Many developing countries cannot afford to invest in response or recovery, because of crippling interest payments and reduced opportunities to raise taxes.

By delaying a strong global recovery, this liquidity crisis could end up costing the world trillions of dollars and create new geographical hotspots of poverty and deprivation.

Solidarity and self-interest dictate that advanced economies should extend an economic lifeline.

I welcome the steps that have been taken by the International Monetary Fund, the G20 and others, including the new round of Special Drawing Rights, the Debt Service Suspension Initiative and Common Framework for Debt Treatment.

But we need more. Help must be extended to all vulnerable middle-income countries and small island developing states that require it.

In the long term, we must also consider a reformed, and more equitable, international debt architecture.

Taxation is one of the most powerful tools for governments to finance sustainable development. I welcome the historic agreement by the G20 on a new international tax architecture. But governments should also consider a form of solidarity tax linked to COVID-19, to reduce extreme inequalities.

Taxation should also be used to accelerate the shift to sustainable and circular economies.

Excellencies,

We are at a pivotal time – for people, societies, economies, and our planet.

We need to mobilize together to face this crisis. This High-Level Political Forum can help turn the tide.

I commend the 42 countries that are presenting Voluntary National Reviews this year, despite challenging circumstances.

The entire United Nations family is at your disposal as your steadfast partner on the ground.

The early benefits of our reforms to the UN Development System, anchored in empowered and independent Resident Coordinators, have been evident during the COVID-19 crisis.

But to ensure our integrated support to every developing country that requires it, the RC system must be funded adequately and predictably. I appeal to all States to take bold decisions to secure this in the ongoing General Assembly review process.

Let us renew our determination to build a strong, sustainable and inclusive recovery from the pandemic, and to take decisive action together to defeat the climate crisis and keep the promise of the 2030 Agenda.

Thank you.