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Climate discussions before and beyond COP26

The 76th General Assembly and Security Council meetings show that persistence pays off

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Every year, the UN General Assembly commands worldwide attention, and heads of state and government, UN staff, activists, the private sector, and experts use this to draw attention to topics they deem important for global attention. Climate change - its impact and mitigation - was, next to COVID, a main issue for many participants. The Irish, who held the Security Council (SC) presidency during UNGA, used all three points - the global attention, climate as a main topic during the UNGA and their presidency of the SC - to hold a Security Council meeting on "Climate, Peace and Security", a controversial topic in the SC, to pressure Russia and China.



UNGAmble on climate

During this year's UNGA, climate was on everyone's mind and three main points came up again and again across different events by representatives of states, activists, UN staff, representatives of the private sector and experts: (1) Divest from fossil fuels to lower emissions and reach carbon neutrality; (2) more funding is needed to adapt and to prepare for impacts of climate change, especially in the global south which is hit hardest and is the least able to react; and (3) an immediate shift is needed from discussing climate change and its impacts to actions and mitigation efforts which prevent further deterioration.

The newly sworn-in President of the General Assembly, Abdulla Shahid (Maldives), set out his five rays of hope – how he calls his thematic focus points: recovering from COVID-19, rebuilding sustainably, responding to the needs of the planet, respecting the rights of all, and reforming the United Nations. These areas, he noted, spoke to the most pressing challenges of the time. Within this framework, he is planning over the next year both, a climate conference and a related high-level thematic debate on climate. Furthermore, Secretary General (SG) Antonio Guterres had six main points in his UNGA76 opening speech, where he set out the measures to address climate change the most clearly. How deeply climate change has been engraved into the international agenda was also demonstrated by 148 representatives of countries and observers who addressed it in their speeches.

More initiatives, more action?

The [SDG Action Zone](#) took place for the third time this year and brings high-level officials from the UN, grassroots organizations, government officials and business leaders together to “highlight the ecosystem-wide solutions, plans, and investments needed to positively impact people's lives and the future of our planet”¹. One of the three days of the SDG Action Zone was dedicated to climate, and several events took place which are intrinsically linked to climate change such as the [Food System's Summit](#) and the [High Level Dialogue on Energy](#).

The call to move away from fossil fuels reverberated throughout the SDG Action Zone's day on climate. Gonzalo Muñoz, one of the two

[High Level Climate Champions for Climate Action](#)

who was nominated by Chile, the planned last host of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP), for his two-year term comes from the private sector where he focused on Chile's recycling industry and the circular economy. He urged again and again throughout his slot at the SDG Action Zone, to rely on science as climate change is the biggest catastrophe facing humanity and reiterated that the limit of global warming of 1.5C over the next decade was out of reach without immediate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions².

The baseline for these discussions was the countries' commitments stated in the Paris Agreement. To date, 191 Parties out of 197 Parties³ have ratified the agreement, yet by October 2021, only one country, the Gambia, is on track to fulfill its obligations to curb global warming at 1.5C by 2030 as per the Paris Agreement⁴. However, it was also made clear that more than the current commitment is needed and expected to be presented at the COP26 in Glasgow.

The science behind climate change has existed for decades, and so has the bickering between nations. All agree that climate change needs to be tackled and carbon emissions have to be reduced, however, who is supposed to reduce emissions more remains the point of contention. Developing countries argue that developed countries have emitted more greenhouse gases over time. They say these developed countries should now carry more of the burden, as they were able to grow their economies without restraint. Indeed, the United States has emitted the most greenhouse gases of all time, followed by the European Union. Currently, China and India are now among the world's top annual emitters, along with the United States⁵. Concerns about a growing economy are understandable, however, rising sea levels as well as increased droughts, flooding, and wild fires, all around the globe beg the question what is more detrimental for a country in the long run, an economy that has to be restructured to a green economy or continued natural disasters?

When it comes to climate change – and SDGs in general – implementation of national commitments often fall equally onto the national and local level. One of these local initiatives is

[Race to Zero](#) which was featured at the SDG Action Zone during UNGA. It mobilizes actors outside of national governments to join the [Climate Ambition Alliance](#), which was launched at the UNSG's Climate Action Summit 2019. Eight German cities have signed up to it and work together with another 725 cities, 31 regions, 3.067 businesses, 173 of the biggest investors, and 622 Higher Education Institutions worldwide to achieve "a healthy, resilient, zero carbon recovery that prevents future threats, creates decent jobs, and unlocks inclusive, sustainable growth."⁶

These 'coalitions of the willing' who push themselves to fulfill the commitments of the Paris Agreement and work on changing their sector, industry, or area, to find innovative solutions for mitigation and adaptation to climate change are indispensable in the fight against climate change. For the 'not-so-willing' parts of society, actions and commitments by the state – on the national and international level – are essential as they obligate them to take steps in this direction. All of these actions and initiatives however, come at a cost.

Where does the money go?

Muñoz therefore urged to shift the climate finance debate from the hundreds of billions to trillions. Especially, as strong domestic preference continues to exist with 76% of finance being raised and spent domestically in 2017/2018 globally, and with the 38 OECD countries raising the majority of funds. Overall, mitigation activities averaged about USD 537 billion per year, accounting for 93% of climate finance tracked during that period. Within the mitigation activities, renewable energy generation investments remained the largest area of climate finance, reaching an all-time high of USD 350 billion in 2017.

Climate adaptation finance has also gained momentum in 2017/2018, increasing 35% to an annual average of USD 30 billion from 2015/2016, although adaptation still accounts for just 5% of tracked climate finance based on available data. Additionally, USD 11.9 billion, the remaining 2% of total 2017/2018 climate finance, provided funding for projects and activities contributing toward both mitigation and adaptation outcomes⁷. This stems from the growing

recognition that adaptation and mitigation activities are interdependent and must be addressed holistically.

Since these numbers were published in November 2019 and showed an especially steep upward trend in investment in renewable energy, it is devastating that from January 2020 to March 2021, globally, more money was spent on fossil fuels than renewable energy. Many countries lack the financial resources to make the transition to clean energy and a sustainable way of life that could reverse climate change.⁸ Hence, the abovementioned domestic spending preferences are – again – understandable, but impede the goal of reducing carbon emissions globally. Overall, the world is on the right track to fight climate change, but much more could be achieved in a shorter time frame, if nation states would cooperate more.

Climate and Security – Turning up the heat

Just as the SDG Action Zone drew attention to the issue of carbon emission, Ireland used its presidency of the Security Council (SC) during UNGA to draw attention to the topic of Climate and Security by convening a High-Level Open Debate on that subject during UNGA. The debate was chaired by the Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin, who also mentioned the topic during his UNGA speech and ensured maximal attention to this controversial topic within the Security Council. The SC is deeply divided regarding whether the connection of climate to security should be a topic of the SC.

The first time the SC discussed climate change thematically was at the ministerial-level open debate on the relationship between energy, security and climate on April 17, 2007. Only on July 20, 2011 did the SC take up this topic again when then SG Ban Ki-Moon and Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Program at the time, briefed the council. Since 2011 the topic was on the council's agenda about once a year until 2020. From then on, it has featured much more prominently.

From the beginning, China and Russia insisted that the topic did not fall under the jurisdiction of the SC and argued that other parts of the UN system are not only better equipped to deal with the topic, but it is clearly within their mandate.

Britain and France, however, are staunch supporters of having the SC deal with this issue and state that it falls under the SC's peacekeeping, conflict mediation and conflict prevention work. The United States has changed sides on this topic to align itself under the Trump administration with Russia and China, and has under President Biden changed back to the side of France and the UK. Non-permanent members fall on either side of the debate.

What mechanism do already exist?

All current council members, permanent and non-permanent, share the view that the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC) is the primary international mechanism for dealing with the mitigation and adaptation challenges of climate change and that efforts to reduce carbon emissions must be significantly stepped up. Furthermore, in 2018, the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) jointly established the "[Climate Security Mechanism](#)" (CSM) to harness information and analysis on the linkages between climate change and security and to integrate this lens into the organization's prevention, peace building, and adaptation. The CSM works closely with a large number of UN agencies, funds and programs, UN peace operations, as well as with partners outside the UN system and shows how cross-sectorial work in the UN can be done.

Another mechanism, is the **Group of Friends on Climate and Security** which Germany and Nauru co-founded. Initially consisting of 27 UN member states, the Group has more than doubled in size since its establishment in August 2018. As of May 2021, it consisted of 57 member states — representing all five UN regional groups (the African Group, the Asia-Pacific Group, the Eastern European Group, the Western European and Others Group, and the Latin American and Caribbean Group) — and the EU. Ten current Security Council members — Estonia, France, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, Niger, Norway, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the UK, and the US — belong to the Group. The Climate-Security Mechanism (CSM) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are permanent observers. The goal of the Group is to inform policy on climate change's security effects, to heighten public awareness of these effects and

to strengthen the UN system's efforts to counter them.

During 2019 and early 2020, Germany and several members of the SC were working on establishing an "**Informal Expert Group of Members of the Security Council on Climate and Security**" to facilitate more systematic engagement by the Council on climate-related security matters. Russia and China were critical of establishing the group and emphasized that the group had no formal standing as a subsidiary body of the Council, noting its informal nature and the fact that its formation did not have the support of all Council members. The group is now able to support the willing members of the SC to emphasize the importance of addressing climate and ecological changes in its resolutions as the SC had done in the Lake Chad basin, Somalia, Mali, the Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq and Cyprus. With Iraq and Cyprus being the first two countries outside of Africa who have issues linked to climate change and SC resolutions concerning this issue.

With CSM, the Group of Friends on Climate and Security, and the Informal Expert Group of Members of the Security Council on Climate and Security established since 2018, the UN system and the SC have been moving into a clear direction of anchoring the topic in the SC so that binding SC resolutions can be established. This, however, will not be possible, as long as China and Russia insist that climate and security is outside of the SC's mandate. With holding this High-Level Open Meeting at a time when attention on the work of the UN is extremely high, pressure has been put on Russia and China to reconsider their stance.

As Prime Minister Micheál Martin said in the media stakeout after the debate that the essence of diplomacy is to pursue and persevere discussions so that the paradigm is changed and it is possible to move forward.⁹ In this light, UNGA was a success for people working on mitigating and adapting to climate change and also the members of the SC who want to see the climate and security topic in the SC.

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- ¹ #SDG Action Zone 2021, (2021). Available at: <https://sdgactionzone.org/about/>
- ² SDG Action Zone, (2021). The Big Picture. Available at: <https://sdgactionzone.org/the-big-picture-climate/>
- ³ UNFCCC, (2021). The Paris Agreement – Status of Ratification. Available at: <https://unfccc.int/process/the-paris-agreement/status-of-ratification>
- ⁴ Climate Action Tracker, (2021). Available at: <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/>
- ⁵ Maizland, L. (2021). Global Climate Agreements: Successes and Failures, Council of Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/paris-global-climate-change-agreements>
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- ⁷ Buchner, B. et al. (2019). Global Landscape of Climate Finance, Climate Policy Initiative. Available at: <https://climatepolicyinitiative.org/publication/global-climate-finance-2019/>
- ⁸ UN News, (2021). The trillion dollar climate finance challenge (and opportunity). Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1094762>
- ⁹ UN Web TV, (2021). Michael Martin (Ireland) on Climate and Security – Security Council Media Stakeout. Available at: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k13/k139w91g99>

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