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UN Climate Speech / 05 Mar, 2020 Climate Crisis Needs Truly Collective Response: UN Climate Chief



UN Climate Change News, 5 March 2020 – In an address to the mainly young audience at the College of Europe, Warsaw Campus today, UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, Patricia Espinosa, called for a truly collective response to climate change, which she described as the main struggle of the present generation, and a struggle that affects all future generations.

Ms. Espinosa said the optimism and sense of common purpose that in the early 90's led to the creation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and subsequently the 1997 [Kyoto Protocol](#) and the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#), have never been more important than today given the current climate crisis. She added:

“Climate change doesn't care if we're left wing, right wing, or in the centre. It doesn't care who is prime minister of what country, whether you were born in this generation or the last, what your race is, or how much money you make. It's coming all the same. It's already here. And it's a global emergency.”

The UN's top climate official pointed out that 2020 is the year that countries need to submit new or revised national climate action plans, which are only submitted every five years. This makes 2020 highly significant in terms of concrete action. She said:

"2020 must be the year we collectively show—through concrete action—that we are truly committed to build a healthier, safer, more sustainable and resilient future for all people."

Speaking of the immense damage to the planet, business and the economy due to a decade-long rise in natural catastrophes with direct links to climate change, she stressed:

“We need to slash emissions as soon as possible. At the very least, we must be carbon neutral by 2050. There is no separate path, there is no alternate universe. This is what we must do.”

Patricia Espinosa called on all segments of society to work together to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement and she cited some reasons to be optimistic, including the recent major pledges of climate action from business and industry leaders, as well as announcements from some governments of enhanced climate action plans.

Acknowledging the immense power of youth to take up this great generational challenge, Ms. Espinosa concluded by urging the young people in the audience to get involved in driving the transformational change needed to fight climate change.

"My message to you is simple: Don't wait for change to happen—help drive it. Governments see this influence. Youth are changing the parameters of the discussion and legislation in some nations already reflects it. Keep that momentum going."

Patricia Espinosa called on young people to influence not only governments, but businesses as well, making use of their purchasing power to support companies with climate-friendly policies. "One of the strongest tools at your disposal to create change—your money—is likely sitting in your pocket", she said.

Read the full speech here:

I begin with two quotes.

The first:

"The danger of global warming is real enough for us to make changes and sacrifices, so that we do not live at the expense of future generations."

The second:

"Growth is the engine of change and a friend of the environment. Today, an unprecedented era of peace, freedom and stability makes concerted action on the environment possible as never before."

The first quote is from Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of Britain—one of the first world leaders to warn of the dangers of global warming. It was given in 1990 at the Second World Climate Conference in Geneva.[\[1\]](#)

The second is by George HW Bush, former President of the United States.

His quote is from 1992—the year the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—the UNFCCC— was opened for signature at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

I cite these quotes not for politics, but for their message of unity; specifically, unity of common purpose in the face of a significant global challenge.

Most of you weren't around in 1992, but for those of us who were, it was an optimistic time; a time when we began to see the true value of multilateralism—what the world was promised

could happen following the end of the Second World War with the creation of bodies such as the United Nations.

For example, in 1992:

The Montreal Protocol, an unprecedented global agreement to protect the ozone layer was in its early implementation stages.

Russia announced it would stop aiming nuclear weapons at targets within the United States, ultimately leading to reciprocity from the United States and, later, a formal end to the Cold War.

In February of 1992, the Maastricht Treaty was signed, creating the European Union.

1992 was also the year this campus was established, part of the College of Europe—a College linked to the establishment of the European Union and its predecessors; a place where Europe's future leaders could live and study together.

This sense of unity and optimism also inspired the earliest global meetings on climate change, eventually leading to—in addition to the UNFCCC—the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and the Paris Agreement in 2015.

Together, and for more than 30 years, they've represented the world's collective response to climate change. Our journey has not always been easy, but it has always depended on multilateralism, unity, and hope.

Yet, we are still in the early stages of this journey.

And there are warning signs on the road ahead.

Science shows that the impacts of climate change are already here and worse than we thought. The global political landscape is shifting as well.

Today, multilateralism faces significant challenges. Voices of unity are challenged by voices echoing some of humanity's worst instincts and threatening to repeat some of humanity's worst mistakes.

But never have multilateralism, unity and common cause been more important than today—especially for climate change.

Addressing global climate change is this generation's great struggle—a struggle that threatens future generations.

Consider the following:

Each day, 360,000 children are born on this planet. That's 130 million per year—about the same population as my home country of Mexico.[\[2\]](#)

In the time it takes me to give this speech—approximately 20 minutes—5,000 babies will have been born.

If we think the impacts of climate change are bad now, imagine what will happen to these children if we don't get our collective act together.

It's like sending a baby off to begin its life journey on a raft in the middle of a hurricane...and a lot of kids will be lucky to even get a raft.

Is *this* to be our legacy? Is *this* the best we can do?

Some say yes. Instead of saving the raft from the hurricane, their solution is to simply change the conversation—to focus on politics, protectionism and profit.

Climate change could care less about those things.

Climate change doesn't care if we're left wing, right wing, or in the centre. It doesn't care who is prime minister of what country, whether you were born in this generation or the last, what your race is, or how much money you make.

It's coming all the same. It's already here. And it's a global emergency.

The facts back this up.

In 2019, hurricanes, wildfires and floods **cost the world \$150 billion**. Losses for business and the economy are only expected to increase, because of a decade-long rise in natural catastrophes with direct links to climate change.[\[3\]](#)

Not coincidentally, Planet Earth registered its second-hottest year on record in 2019, capping off a five-year period that ranks as the warmest such span in recorded history. In addition, the 2010s will go down in history as the planet's hottest decade.[\[4\]](#)

In just over one year, we've had three specialized Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Reports – one on achieving the 1.5C goal, one on land and one on oceans and the cryosphere. Here's a quick summary for all three:

The oceans are acidifying, the soil is degrading, crops are becoming less nutritious, desertification is spreading, the ice caps are melting and we're destroying biodiversity.

Ladies and gentlemen, that's the hurricane. We created it. But we can and *must* do better.

If the 1990s was the decade of optimism, the 2020s must be the decade of action.

It means we must act now.

It means nations must complete and implement the Paris Agreement.

It means they must also raise their climate ambition—and by ambition I'm talking about increasing ambition with respect to mitigation, adaptation, capacity building, and finance for developing nations.

It means recognizing that governments can't do it on their own. We need all people and all segments of society on board.

It means we need the left wing *and* the right wing. It means we need governments *and* industry. It means we need cities *and* regions. It means we need both young *and* old. It means that instead of arguing, we need to link hands through the generations and come up with solutions.

But we'll never get there if we're divided. We'll only succeed by working together.

So, let's look at where we stand, where we're going, and why 2020 is such an important year.

The Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015. But it did not come complete: its operational details still needed to be worked out over time.

Much work is done. The bulk of its operating guidelines are in place. But crucial work remains, and it must be completed in 2020 for nations to implement it and to get on with boosting their climate ambition.

2020 is also the year when nations must submit new or revised national climate action plans. These plans must be much more ambitious than they currently are. Why? They're submitted only once every five years.

If nations delay, it will be too late. We can't wait another five years. The window of opportunity will likely be closed by then. And we're already headed in the wrong direction.

The Paris Agreement calls for temperatures to be stabilized at 2C and as close to 1.5C as possible by the end of the century.

Today, we know that 2C is not good enough. The science is very clear: we must do everything we can to move towards 1.5C as rapidly as possible.

But we're on track to more than double that number.

We need to slash emissions as soon as possible. At the very least, we must be carbon neutral by 2050. There is no separate path, there is no alternate universe. This is what we must do.

That means transformational change—change in our economies, changes in the ways we live, travel, work and consume. It's the only way to build a healthier, safer, more sustainable and resilient future for all people.

2020 must be the year we collectively show—through concrete action—that we are truly committed to doing it.

Yet, as the events of recent weeks have shown us, unexpected challenges can arise—and issues we could never have anticipated may impact our work.

The Coronavirus fits the definition of unexpected. It is impacting people, societies and markets, and it is proving difficult to contain. We've seen stock markets fluctuate and many international meetings—including climate change ones—have been reconsidered.

So, in a year when we already faced an incredible amount of work, we have this new challenge. We will continue our work—technology offers many alternatives—but the greater point is that the unexpected can always impact even the best plans.

That's why it's doubly important that we tackle climate change with the utmost urgency – *because we don't know what is coming tomorrow*. And if we delay work to address climate change, new challenges—different ones—will arise and make our collective jobs more difficult.

Now, before you start thinking those kids on our metaphorical raft are doomed, let's look why we have reasons to be optimistic.

Consider news in just the last three months.

Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager with more than \$6.8 trillion under its control, announced that it has joined Climate Action 100+, a \$41-trillion investing pact that is pushing many of the world's largest emitters to act on climate change.

Shipowner associations representing more than 90 percent of the global merchant fleet recently announced they'll create a

\$5-billion research fund to help develop more environmentally-friendly fuels and propulsion systems.

Microsoft set a new ambition among Fortune 500 companies, pledging to remove as much carbon as it has emitted in its 45-year history.

We also see some positive momentum with respect to those national climate action plans I spoke about earlier.

114 countries have already announced they will enhance their national plans. And 121 countries have committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

We have seen encouraging signals from the leadership of the EU, including its proposed law—formally introduced yesterday—to make it a legal requirement for the EU to be carbon neutral by 2050.

We are hopeful that the EU's Green Deal will translate into clear action to allow the EU to be at the forefront of our global collective efforts to address climate change.

The decisions by EU, and the ambitious implementation of those decisions, can and should have a significant impact.

It has support. People *want* leadership on climate change. We see it in the streets, on social media and we saw it at COP25.

Again, the numbers back this up.

The European Investment Bank recently completed its second climate survey. Its findings show a clear willingness to address climate change.

For example, 64% of Europeans surveyed said they're prepared to opt for public transport for environmental purposes over driving. In fact, just five days ago, Luxembourg made all its public transport—all buses, trams and trains—free.

Back to the survey—52% of those Europeans surveyed said they intend to invest in green funds in 2020. 70% said they intend to or have already switched to a green energy provider.

I recognize that surveys are not science and that intentions are not actions. But it does give a glimpse of the appetite *and* willingness for change.

Europeans are not alone.

I told you that 52% of Europeans surveyed said they intend to invest in green funds in 2020. That number is 86% in China.

I told you that 70% of Europeans surveyed say they intend to or have already switched to a green energy provider. It's 94% in China.

So, the appetite for change is not restricted to Europe. By the way, the numbers for Europe and the United States are, for the most part, similar.

Ladies and gentlemen, people want their leaders to take stronger action on climate change. And, in 2020, political and business decisions must reflect it.

So, what is your role? Those of you in this room?

My message is simple: *Don't wait for change to happen—help drive it.*

Many of you are young—not yet part of the workforce. But, as we've seen, age is no restriction to climate action.

Youth played an incredible role in 2019 with respect to demanding more climate action. They've resonated with people throughout the world.

Governments see this influence. Youth are changing the parameters of the discussion and legislation in some nations already reflects it.

Keep that momentum going. As I already mentioned, this is the year nations submit their national climate action plans. Focus your efforts on ensuring leaders reflect our climate emergency in those plans.

Influence businesses as well. Identify where companies are failing on the climate front, but also talk about incentives—how you may use your purchasing power to support them in the future if they change. Don't forget that one of the strongest tools at your disposal to create change—your money—is likely sitting in your pocket.

At the same time, don't forget that the world is not black and white. We are not going to end our dependence on fossil fuels tomorrow. You may be young, but you're not naïve: doing so would not only be impossible, but would result in overnight economic collapse on a global scale. Instead, we must make a rapid transition as rapidly as possible.

This transition must be a *just transition*. Many people work in the fossil fuel and energy industries. They also have lives and families. Some of them are yours. Throwing them out of work overnight helps nobody.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let's not leave that child adrift on the raft before our time together is finished. So, before I end my remarks, here's one more number to consider. That number is 50 per cent.

Roughly 50 per cent of the world's total population is comprised of children 18 and under.

That gives me hope. Why? It's about what I was just talking about: the power of youth.

Who is leading the conversation on climate change? Youth.

Who is leading the calls for significantly more action? Youth.

Who are visible in the streets and social media? Youth.

You are the next leaders of Europe; the ones to take up this great generational challenge. And while it can sometimes feel overwhelming, remember that the future is never predetermined.

It's entirely within your power to make sure that child and that raft never hit that hurricane. You can help them reach the shore—and make it a shore that is cleaner, greener, healthier and safer than it is right now.

But you can't do it alone. We need to work together. That's what unity is about. On a larger scale, that's what multilateralism is about.

We need you to uphold those values. We need you to be the leaders you came here to be. We need your ideas, your input and your solutions.

Your generation, my generation.... *future generations* depend on it.

Thank you.

[1] [Source](#)

[2] Source: [World Atlas](#)

[3] [Source: CNN](#)

[4] [Source: Washington Post](#)