

# UNA \_UK

1 // 2019

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## THE TIPPING POINT?

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PERSPECTIVES

### SAVING THE WORLD

Sanchit Gupta, Giovanna Kuele,  
Arizza Nocum, Demetri Wijesinghe,  
Jacob Ohrvik-Stott, Maria Villatoro

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FEATURE

### 2020: RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ESSAY

### OUR GLOBAL SYSTEM: WORKING FOR ALL?

Minh-Thu Pham

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LAST WORD

### FRIDAYS ARE FOR THE FUTURE

Nirere Sadrach

ISSN 2399-3030



UNA-UK

**The United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK) is the only charity in the UK devoted to building support for an effective UN.**

We believe that a strong, credible and effective UN is essential if we are to build a safer, fairer and more sustainable world. We push for government support for the UN, find ways to make it work better, and demonstrate why it matters to people everywhere.

Our members, supporters and local groups form a powerful network of global citizens with impact in the UK and beyond. In 2020, we will work with partners across the world to call for transformative action on the climate crisis and other grave challenges, as well as concrete steps to make the UN better able to respond to global risks.

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Cover image: Millions of automobile tires dumped in a pile, California, USA. @Jose Azel/Cavan

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UK action  
Stronger UN  
Better world

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# WE NEED TO TALK

2020 must be the year the world turns a corner.

**NATALIE SAMARASINGHE**

**A**re humans among the species now threatened with extinction? That is the question underpinning this issue of UNA-UK's magazine.

This decade began with the fallout from the global financial crisis and failure to tackle climate change at what was billed as a make-or-break summit in Copenhagen. Ten years on, our language has evolved to reflect the urgency of the climate emergency, but our actions are yet to catch up.

Turmoil seems to have infected all regions of the world and all spheres of life.

We are seeing a rise of nationalist sentiment and extremism, of unilateral approaches and attacks on international laws and norms. This is making the environment for decision-making even harder. Just when we desperately need global solutions, international cooperation is being questioned, even undermined in some quarters.

We have been pummelled by political shocks and social upheaval, environmental disasters and man-made crises. And it feels as though we have yet to reach peak uncertainty. Hardly a day goes by at the United Nations in New York, where I am currently on sabbatical, without someone expressing utter disbelief at some turn of events.

I was torn about leaving the UK during this turbulent period for the country. It feels like a time when those

*“In short, the world is a mess. And if the world was a friend of mine, I’d be sitting it down and saying: look, we really need to talk.”*

with an international outlook must stand up and be counted. We must help craft a compelling vision of Britain as a global leader in peace, sustainable development and human rights. At the same time, we must reflect with humility and honesty on our own challenges, on our past, and on our role in the world – as a force for immense good, but also as the cause of immense suffering.

Despite the political fault lines, I firmly believe that there is a clear majority in the UK for far-sighted and principled leadership; for human rights; for a kinder, more compassionate politics; and for a Global Britain whose power and influence comes from its contribution to a safer, fairer and more sustainable world.

But I decided to make the move because the UNA-UK team will continue to make that case vigorously under the excellent leadership of Angie Pankhania; and because the challenges we face in this country are mirrored across the world.

We have just one year left to avoid the worst impacts of the climate crisis. We urgently need to reverse environmental degradation. We need to manage the transition from the largest-ever generation of young people to the largest generation of over-65s, which will take place between now and 2050.

We need to find ways to address long-running conflicts and new forms of violence, as civilian deaths rise, millions are displaced and more people are killed as a result of homicide than war and terrorism. We have to get to grips with rapid changes in technology which are transforming how we live, work and engage with each other. They are also redefining power and security – from cyberattacks to deepfakes, killer robots to data mining.

We urgently need a new social contract to address entrenched inequalities and the growing disconnect between people, governments and institutions. Justified concerns about unchecked globalisation have mutated into a backlash against the very principles that give power to the people, such as human rights, gender equality and social justice.

The 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War next year – and of the Holocaust, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – should serve as a reminder that erosion of international cooperation, of civility and hope, leads to atrocities and war. This time, war could wipe out humanity.

In short, the world is a mess. And if the world was a friend of mine, I'd be sitting it down and saying: look, we really need to talk.

And that is basically what the UN wants to do for its 75th anniversary. Not throw a big party. Not pontificate about its achievements – although we will not, and should not, downplay the huge contribution the Organization has made to almost every aspect of human endeavour.

Instead, we want to launch the biggest-ever global conversation on the future we want, and where we are headed if current trends continue. We also want to crowdsource solutions on how we can close the gap between the two. UNA-UK's Together First campaign will be a key partner in generating transformative and feasible proposals for action.

We want to bring new voices into conversations on global governance, including young people and our critics. Above all, we want to listen and learn.

From January 2020, we will work with partners across the world to hold dialogues in classrooms and boardrooms, parliaments and village halls, on the street and online – in all 193 UN Member States.

The findings will be published online and disseminated through our networks in countries and communities. They will also be presented to world leaders at the official event to mark the anniversary in September next year.

I really hope that all of you will take part. You can start by visiting [www.un.org/UN75](http://www.un.org/UN75) and taking our short survey to ensure your views are counted.

You can also organise a UN75 dialogue – the website has everything you need, including a toolkit for moderators, feedback survey, issue briefings and film material. And you can turn to UNA-UK, which is part of the UK's national UN75 committee, for support.

The world is approaching a number of tipping points – environmental, economic, political and social – but we are not yet at the point of no return. We need your help to change course, and to build a better future together. //

**NATALIE SAMARASINGHE** // Deputy to the Special Adviser on the Preparations for the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations. She will return to her position as Executive Director of UNA-UK after this assignment has ended.

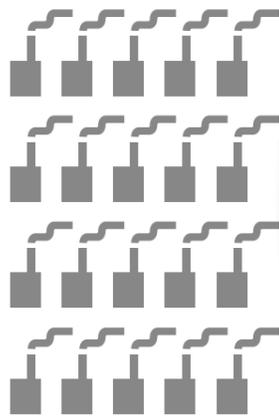


// Bundei Hidreka 31, (left) teaches Rohim Mlniaka, 20, how to make a solar lamp. Hidreka and other solar engineers in Tinginaput, India are passing on their skills to other villagers. © Abbie Trayler-Smith/Panos Pictures/UK Department for International Development

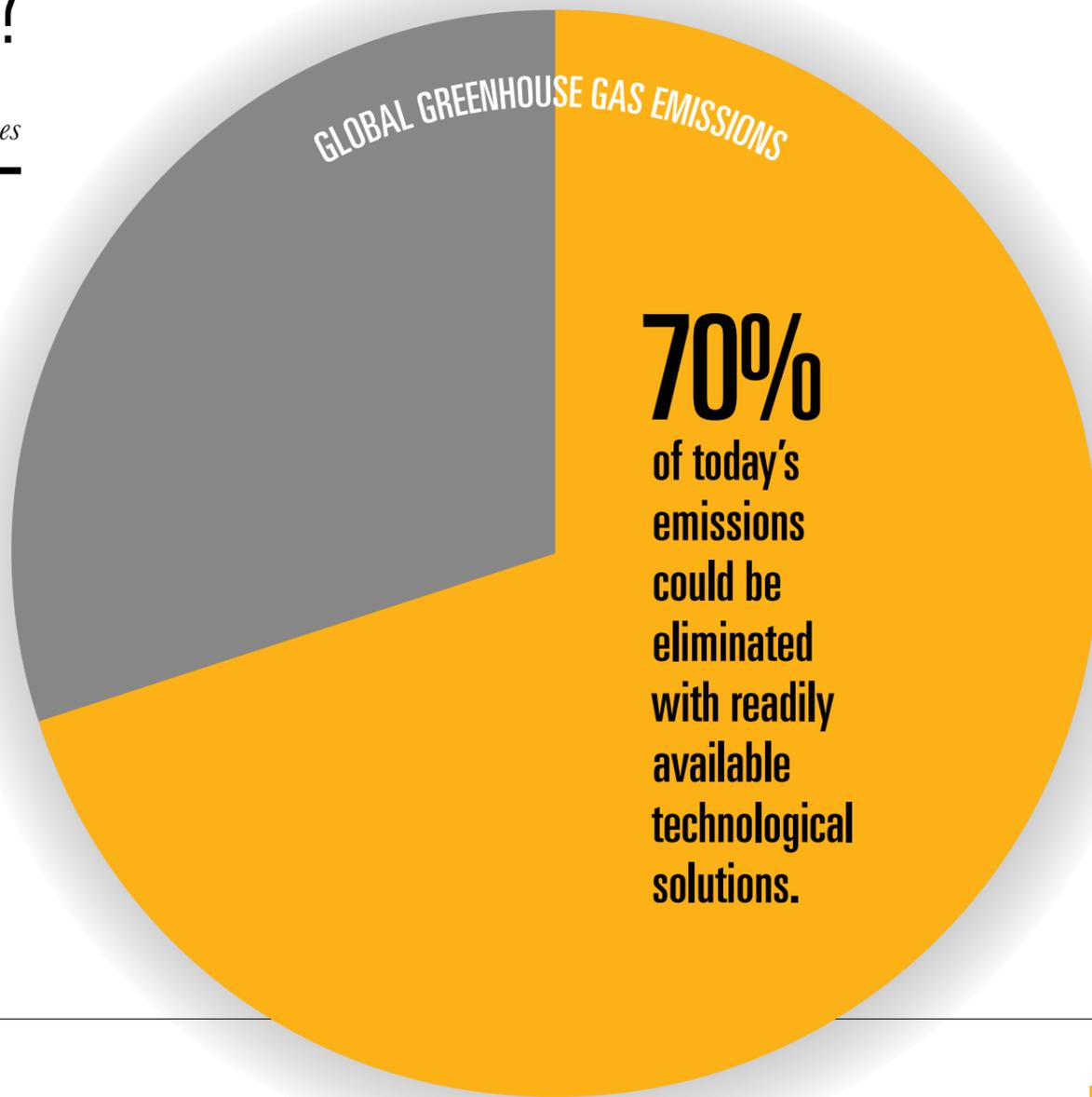
# ON THE BRINK?

UNA-UK lets facts and figures speak for themselves

## Climate



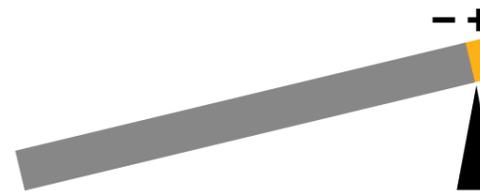
20 COMPANIES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR 35% OF GLOBAL GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS.



One-third of Earth's surface land and nearly three-quarters of our freshwater is used for crop and livestock production.

1,000,000

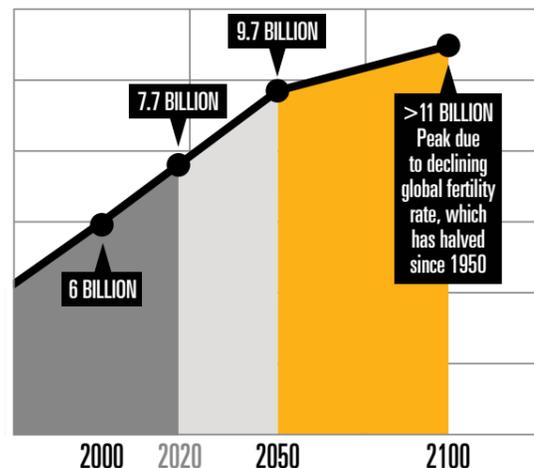
Nearly one million animal and plant species are at risk of extinction.



The shift to a greener economy could create 24 million new jobs globally by 2030. However, 800 million people could lose their jobs to automation by 2030.

## Demographics

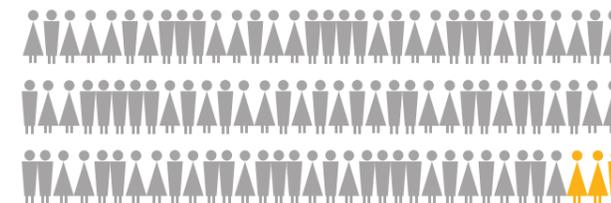
### WORLD POPULATION GROWTH



By 2050, there will be more older people than adolescents and youths (ages 15–24).

NEARLY HALF THE WORLD'S POPULATION USE SOCIAL MEDIA.

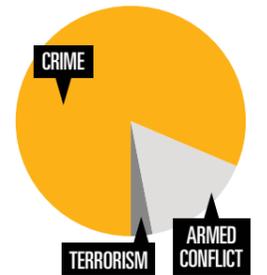
International migrants make up 3% of the global population.



Sources: UN's 75th anniversary "issue briefs" ([www.un.org/un75](http://www.un.org/un75)); Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services; *No time to wait: securing the future from drug resistant infections*, Interagency Coordination Group on Antimicrobial Resistance; Climate Accountability Institute.

## Conflict and Violence

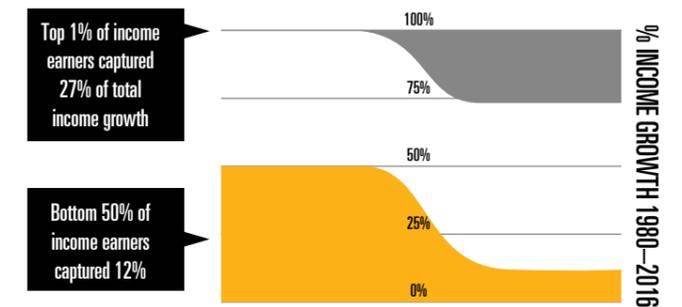
In 2016, more countries experienced violent conflict than at any point in almost 30 years.



In 2017, crime killed 464,000 people. Armed conflicts killed 89,000. Terrorist attacks killed 19,000.

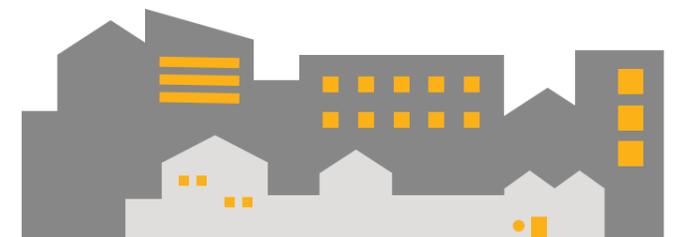
## Inequality

The income share of the poorest 20% of humanity has barely shifted since 1990, despite global economic output more than tripling.



## Urbanisation

Around 55% of the world's population lives in towns and cities. It is projected to be nearly 70% by 2050.



# THREE THINGS THAT COULD SAVE THE WORLD

Between now and 2030, half the world's population will be under 30. We asked some representatives of the biggest-ever generation of young people for their top three global priorities and solutions.



// Members of the Conseil de Développement d'Andohatapenaka (CDA), a Madagascan NGO working on food security, prepare for a visit from the UN Secretary-General in 2016. © UN Photo/Mark Garten

**SANCHIT GUPTA**

Co-founder, MealCare (Canada)

**HUNGER, CLIMATE CHANGE, YOUTH**

First, eradicate hunger. Access to healthy food is not a privilege. It is a right. And still, over 820 million people do not have enough to eat. We cannot hope to save the world if we cannot harness their full potential.

That is what motivated me to create MealCare, a social enterprise that donates surplus food from businesses to community organisations. I'm proud that we have delivered over 25,000 meals, saving homeless shelters more than \$85,000. But such efforts need scaling up if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of "zero hunger".

Second, take climate change seriously. Decision-makers need to stop setting targets for 2050 and instead take action that can be completed before their mandates expire. Young people and activists

can encourage that approach. There are a lot of amazing people working in this space but I believe we need more collective action. And everyone has a role to play. From reducing plastic consumption to campaigning for change, we can have a monumental impact when we act together.

Third, involve youth in decision-making. Millions of young people are passionate about saving the world. Many have already taken action. Recently, I took part in the British Council's Future Leaders Connect Programme, which aims to inspire the next generation of policymakers and global leaders. There were 50 of us from around the world – armed with ideas and know-how. We deserve a seat at the table. //

**GIOVANNA KUELE**

Researcher, Igarapé Institute and Together First representative (Brazil)

**CIVIL SOCIETY, PARTNERSHIPS, STRATEGY**

How can we save the world? Let me give you three words: by working together.

We need to protect and empower civil society. Amidst the rise of authoritarianism worldwide, and a lack of political will from nationalist leaders to advance common goals, the role of civil society is even more important. It is we who keep the pressure on officials to act. It is we who keep tabs on them to ensure desired outcomes. It is we who demand accountability and a voice for the marginalised. But civil society is under attack. We need more people to speak out against reprisals on human rights defenders, and more mechanisms to protect them.

We also need solidarity across communities and sectors, as well as more inclusive and diverse partnerships

at the local, national and international level. When supportive governments and businesses work together with social movements and grassroots groups we can build an unstoppable coalition for the future we want.

Finally, we need to transform mobilisation into social change. We must move from raising awareness and campaigning to taking concrete action – by creating a pragmatic strategy with clear priorities, focused on the most feasible solutions to the most urgent problems. That is exactly what the Together First coalition - co-founded by UNA-UK - is working on. We want to create a crowdsourced 'to-do' list for the international community, backed by a diverse movement of stakeholders. Our plan of action will be ready next year, in time for the UN's 75th anniversary. //



// A UNICEF installation shows the scale of child deaths in conflict in 2018. © UN Photo/Manuel Elias

**DEMETRI WIJESINGHE**

Activist (Sri Lanka)

**ACCOUNTABILITY, RIGHTS, PARTNERSHIPS**

Accountability tops my list. If we are going to change the world – and hopefully save it – we need to have a culture and system in which actions have consequences. This means ensuring that those responsible for the most heinous crimes are brought to justice.

After almost 20 years in existence, the International Criminal Court has only convicted nine individuals. States’ refusal to cooperate with the Court is a huge factor. It is time for the Court to be on par with domestic judicial mechanisms, not secondary to them. This would allow for more consistent prosecution and punishment. Surely the international community – all of us – have a moral responsibility where war crimes and atrocities are concerned?

States need to give greater priority to human rights more generally. We live in a world where economic gain and national interest take precedence over the wellbeing of humanity. This is

incredibly short-sighted. We cannot address the biggest challenges we face, from climate change to protracted conflict, from mass displacement to mass disillusionment with the status quo, without putting human rights front and centre. World leaders need to reconsider their priorities and make a genuine, collective commitment to prevent and protect populations from egregious human rights violations.

And one way to encourage this shift in thinking is by ensuring states aren’t the only ones in the room. At present, the UN is far too state-centric. The people who are most affected by the organisation do not have an adequate platform to voice their concerns. The UN needs to reform its structure to be more inclusive of youth, indigenous groups, private businesses and NGOs. These actors must be offered an equal stake in the UN, so that ordinary people can regain trust in the organisation. //

**ARIZZA NOCUM**

Youth leader, participant in the Kofi Annan Foundation’s Extremely Together initiative (Philippines)

**TECHNOLOGY, EDUCATION, CLIMATE**

Young people have plenty of ideas to make the world safer, fairer and more sustainable. But determining which are most likely to save the world should be done collectively. So let me highlight the three areas I think most need collective action.

First, new technologies. The rapid advances in social media, artificial intelligence, blockchain technology, and innovations across virtually all aspects of life are already changing the world. Yet what remains to be seen is how technology will be used, who will benefit, and whether these rapid advances have a net positive or negative effect.

For instance, social media has changed the way we think, interact, and communicate more swiftly than we imagined, but these platforms have become havens for fake news, polarising content, hate speech, and even criminal activity. With many of them still refusing to accept responsibility for the messages being propagated, the onus is on us to demand

policies and systems that make technology truly beneficial for present and future generations.

Second, the mismatch between the goals of the current education system and the skills demanded by jobs and careers in this decade and beyond. On top of the continuing problem of lack of access to quality education, millions of young people all over the world must now also grapple with outdated education systems that focus on rote learning, boxed thinking, and individual output rather than creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, and social intelligence.

Finally, climate change. If world leaders, top polluters, and the biggest corporations continue to maintain their “business as usual” track, the immediate effects of rising sea levels, the decreasing supply of clean water, and a loss in biodiversity will endanger the lives of millions of people in the most vulnerable locations. We are seeing the consequences and still not acting. //

**MARIA VILLATORO**

Founder, Conquer (El Salvador)

**RESPECT, HUMANITY, INNOVATION**

“Three things that could save the world” – that’s a hard question. A few days ago my grandma asked me an even trickier one: “If I could grant one of your dreams, one of your hopes for your future what would it be?”

Eventually, I settled on this: a world in which every single person’s life is valued and respected. This past June, a Salvadoran man and his two-year-old daughter were found dead in the Rio Grande river. Desperate for a better life for his daughter, this father had taken her on a perilous journey.

Looking at their pictures in the news, one word echoed in my mind: dehumanisation. Dehumanisation is what makes people wonder why their country should welcome refugees. This is why we destroy the Amazon, taking the lives of hundreds of indigenous peoples. This is why we aren’t making headway in addressing the challenges we face. We

ignore people in peril and even degrade those we are trying to help. Unless we treat them as equals, we will never come up with solutions that change their lives, nor they with solutions that change ours.

At the organisation I founded, Conquer, we focus on inclusive innovation, creating and distributing technological teaching tools aimed at breaking the vicious cycle of poverty propagated through an outdated education system. We hope our tools will bring economic empowerment to underdeveloped regions and educate the children who will find the three things that can save the world.

So I hope that each of us will dare to pick one of the many things that are wrong with the world, and try to solve it. You don’t have to become an activist or invent a cure for disease, but it is our generation’s resilience and courage that will change the world. //

**JACOB OHRVIK-STOTT**

Senior Researcher, Doteveryone (United Kingdom)

**DATA, OVERSIGHT, VALUES**

The UN was founded on a promise of peace, development and human rights for all. When Sir Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web, he dreamed of a digital commons underpinned by openness, universality and freedom. Seventy-five years on from the first, and 30 years on from the second, reality seems a far cry from these visions. Action at three levels can revitalise both.

I will focus on tech because tech giants are the “big powers” of our time. Through “surveillance capitalism” – business models that invade privacy by indiscriminately hoovering up user data – have built up unprecedented levels of political and economic power. Meanwhile, authoritarian states use digital technologies to monitor dissidents and impose internet shutdowns. A once-global internet is beginning to fragment, with nations such as China and Russia erecting boundaries to wall off their public from the rest of the net. These trends are compounded by a collective tendency towards technological determinism:

too often we forget that we have the power to shape technology just as much as it shapes us.

How do we change the status quo? Globally, we need to strengthen multilateral governance, creating a space for individual states to protect their citizens whilst ensuring they are held accountable for respecting universal rights and preserving the openness of the internet.

Nationally, governments must do more to understand the public’s values in relation to the web – for instance, the trade-offs between freedom of speech and protection from online abuse, for example – and working with tech platforms to ensure they respect these values.

As communities and individuals, we must hold government and tech companies to account, and engage with emerging models for protecting our collective interests online such as digital social movements and “data trusts”, where personal data is owned and democratically controlled by its members. //

# TRENDS, RISKS AND TIPPING POINTS

Earlier this year, the UN's Global Assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystems was released. One of the press headlines simply read: "We are in trouble." Based on more than 15,000 academic studies by 400 experts in some 50 countries, as well as reports from indigenous peoples, the report warned that nearly one million animal and plant species are at risk of extinction. This alone is a crisis of epic proportions. But it is only one of the pressing challenges we face.

## Grave risks... but also opportunities

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that we have just 10 years to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius and avoid the worst impacts of climate change. This will require us to reach "peak carbon" in 2020. According to the Climate Action Tracker, current pledges under the Paris Agreement put us on course for a 2.4 to 3.8-degree rise – and a future of widespread poverty, water scarcity, hunger, displacement and conflict.

We urgently need to increase our ambition and unlock the benefits of a transformational economy, which the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate estimates could be as much as \$26 trillion dollars over the next decade.

At the same time, we need to address long-standing challenges. One in 10 of us still lives in extreme poverty. One in three of us does not have safe drinking water. At least half the global population lacks access to proper sanitation, to social protection and to essential health services.

We have also not heeded the lessons of the last financial crisis. Global growth is slowing. Markets are volatile. Social mobility is at what could be an all-time low and inequality is reaching equivalent highs. There is lingering public resentment that the banks were saved at the expense of the average worker.

And other issues, too, are emerging that require urgent attention. Rapidly changing communications platforms are one example. They offer great potential in areas such as delivery of services, but pose challenges in relation to privacy, disinformation and hate speech. Automation and A.I. also offer benefits – in terms of productivity, job creation and innovation. But they too come with risks. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development, as many as two-thirds of jobs in developing countries could be lost to automation in the coming years. We must have policies in place to ensure new technologies yield a net gain.

And then there are the big-picture trends, such as urbanisation, ageing populations and migration. As we grapple with the current displacement crisis of nearly 70 million people across the

world, we must plan to support even greater numbers uprooted by the climate emergency and instability. We must also plan to manage – and harness the benefits of – increasing human mobility.

Finally, we must weather transitions in the global political landscape. Power is mutating and shifting horizontally and vertically – between states and regions – and to stakeholders such as cities, companies, and, to a lesser extent, civil society. The world is becoming more multipolar, but also more polarised.

## Overcoming paralysis

What can be done? How can we prioritise challenges to address when everything is urgent? How can the longer-term policies needed to mitigate these risks fit in with election cycles? How can all this complexity be processed, let alone communicated to citizens?

One approach that could help is to focus on "tipping points" – not only the areas where we are close to a point of no return, but also the actions that could help tip the scale back in our favour: the most transformative next steps.

Another approach is to consider risk, particularly "global catastrophic risks". This term refers to the risk of a catastrophe occurring on a truly global and species-threatening scale, usually considered to mean anything that could wipe out over 10 per cent of the world's population, or do a comparable amount of damage. The logic behind focusing on risks is that not only is there a moral imperative to do so, but a global system that is better able to manage risks is also a global system that is better able to *manage*.

UNA-UK's Together First campaign combines these two approaches, and focuses on the tipping points that relate to global catastrophic risks. We are placing particular emphasis on five areas of risk – climate change, ecosystem collapse, new and emerging technology, pandemics and weapons of mass destruction – where we feel our advocacy could make a difference.

In addition we've asked the question: How do you prepare for something you cannot predict? Our view is that you do so by working to ensure the durability of credible systems, which are able to both notice and respond to new risks. This means preserving and strengthening international organisations to create a resilient, capable and "on alert" multilateral system of global governance institutions, able and willing to act promptly and effectively. And so we've added a sixth risk area – unknown risks – to take this into account.

In this feature we outline the six risk areas, and the opportunities to address them that will arise in 2020. //

## CLIMATE

Billions of tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> are released into the atmosphere every year as a result of the burning of coal, oil and gas. Human activity is producing greenhouse gas emissions at record levels, with no sign of a slowdown in sight. If this does not change it will result in drastic consequences for our species and planet, and pose an existential threat to our way of life.

2020's UN Climate Summit in Glasgow gives us the chance to avert, or at least mitigate, catastrophe by coordinating global action to protect our planet.



// Scenes from Great Abaco, Bahamas, after Hurricane Dorian. A Category five hurricane, it swept the Bahama Islands of Great Abaco and Grand Bahama on 1 September 2019. At least 43 people died, making this one of the worst disasters in the nation's history. © UN Photo/Mark Gärten

## EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

Technologies can help make our world fairer, more peaceful and more just – from ending extreme poverty to reducing maternal and infant mortality, promoting sustainable farming and decent work, and achieving universal literacy. But technologies can also threaten privacy, erode security and fuel inequality. Separately, technological advances have seen the weaponisation of bots, drones, livestreaming, cyberattacks, ransomware, and data hacks.

Technology doesn't have a passport and neither must our solutions. Whether it's a legally binding treaty to prohibit lethal autonomous weapons systems (so-called "killer robots") or international cooperation on regulating data, our global system has a vital part to play in ensuring that technology provides a net gain for the world and does not exacerbate existing problems.



// (above) 'David Wreckham' is the friendly robot mascot for the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots – a global campaign working to preemptively ban fully autonomous weapons systems. © Ralf Schlesene

// (left) US Marines coming under fire from a simulated chemical weapons attack. © USAF/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace

## WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Today, we are witnessing the unravelling of the international arms control architecture and a gradual backtracking on established arms control agreements, which for decades enabled global stability, restraint and transparency. The continued existence of nuclear weapons in particular poses an ever-greater threat to the survival of humanity. Global standards around chemical weapons have been eroded, and the UN Security Council has curtailed investigations into their use. Bio-warfare laboratories still contain pathogens that could cause untold destruction.

Make-or-break talks for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a review of the UN's peace and security architecture, and discussions on the future of international cooperation mean that next year will be a crucial year for this agenda.

## PANDEMICS

People are more able to travel around the world than ever before in human history. So too, therefore, are diseases. And nearly a hundred years after the invention of antibiotics, their regular use means that more – and more dangerous – forms of resistant bacteria or “superbugs” are evolving. As the Earth moves towards its population peak the risk of pandemics has never been greater. Meanwhile the tragedy of the 3 million people who die each year from vaccine-preventable diseases is still with us.

Nevertheless, in the eradication of smallpox and the near eradication of polio, global health initiatives have shown our international system at its best. How can we adapt the system to better prepare for, and respond to, current and future challenges? And what lessons could be applied to other areas of global risk?



## BIODIVERSITY

Bee colonies are collapsing. Coral reefs are dying. Rainforests are drying into savannas.

The ecosystems on which our lives and livelihoods depend are deteriorating rapidly. And we are to blame. Human activity has significantly altered a staggering three-quarters of all land, and two-thirds of our marine environment. One-third of the Earth’s surface land is now used for crop and livestock production. The same goes for nearly 75 per cent of our freshwater resources.

Next year world leaders will meet in Beijing to establish a 10-year roadmap to safeguard our world’s biodiversity. If they fail it won’t just impact the wonder and beauty of the world we live in: it will have far-reaching consequences for our production of food and medicine and for the ecosystems of which we are an integral part. The human race itself could join the million or so species this crisis endangers.



// (above) Medical workers help each other get dressed in protective clothing. As part of the Ebola Emergency Response, the Red Cross works with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ministry of Health of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to help stop the spread of Ebola in DRC. © UN Photo/Martine Perret

## UNKNOWN RISKS

In 1945 the UN was designed as a tool to manage interstate relations as the world reeled from the horrors of two devastating wars. While war remains a grave threat – and one that has become existential as a result of weapons of mass destruction – the nature of threats to humanity has changed considerably. New, more complex and more sophisticated threats require imaginative and bold responses, and strengthened collaboration between UN Member States, as well as the private sector and civil society. Institutional boundaries must be also bridged, so that political, human rights, and development partners can work in concert.

The Together First Campaign will use the UN’s 75th anniversary year to advance this conversation, and push for concrete substantive changes to our global system to make it ready for the mid-21st century.

// (left) A turtle swims above bleached coral off Heron Island, Australia, part of the Great Barrier Reef. Rising ocean temperatures threaten ocean biodiversity: when water is too warm, corals expel the algae living in their tissues, causing it to turn completely white. ©The Ocean Agency/XL Catlin Seaview Survey/Richard Vevers

// (above) Night earth observation from the International Space Station. © NASA

# A GLOBAL SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR ALL?

**Minh-Thu Pham** argues that defending the idea of a global system does not have to mean defending all of the ideas that the system supports

At the start of the United Nations' 75th year a crisis in confidence has gripped the institution and unnerved practitioners and observers of global politics. Recently, countries that were among the original founders of the current world order have taken steps to withdraw from multilateral alliances and agreements, and their leaders have made questioning the value of existing global arrangements a core part of their political platforms. After the United Kingdom's referendum on withdrawing from the European Union, the Trump administration came into power and withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal, acted on its threat to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, and started trade wars with competitors and allies alike. Worryingly, their actions have emboldened leaders in many other parts of the world.

The debate about the causes of this crisis has focused on great power politics, the competition posed by rising powers, and the credibility and effectiveness of longstanding institutions like the United Nations. As a result, the conversation about what to do has been centered on ways to reinvigorate multilateralism and its institutions, including through forming like-minded alliances of supporters among Western democracies and having them recommit to multilateralism, as in the case of the recent French-German initiative: "the Alliance for Multilateralism". The answer so far has been to try harder and do more between countries. But much

of the debate has ignored the elephant in the room, which is a genuine concern over whether the rules-based international order has actually been a force for good within countries, or whether the liberal order has been used to export an economic system that has failed so many people, led to vast inequality and power asymmetries, and resulted in the domestic consequences we're seeing – Brexit, Trump, and growing nativist populism. Without the right diagnosis, we risk coming up with the wrong treatment.

Decisions to withdraw from multilateral arrangements are the end result of the growing scepticism among citizens in the West about the benefits of globalisation and, along with it, the international order. This order and its institutions were meant, in the words of its founding document, the UN Charter, "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war ... reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person ... and promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom." Instead, over the last couple of decades, among a large segment of working-class populations in the West, there has been a sense, fair or not, that no matter how hard people worked or how much trust they put in their government, it was near impossible to make an honest living. The so-called losers of globalisation weren't compensated for the loss of jobs as a result of trade or the global economy, and their leaders and public institutions

weren't able to provide adequate safety nets or uphold the social contract.

Much has been written about people who have felt that the system was stacked against them, rigged – or even corrupted – in favour of, and controlled by, forces in far-off places. That sentiment has been exacerbated by the grievances of those who think their historical privilege has been eroded. As has been the case throughout human history, these attitudes can lead some people to be susceptible to nativism and pinning blame on outsiders. Of course, these sentiments have existed for many years, but they have ballooned and now burst into political revolt at the ballot box against the outside forces that are thought to have manipulated the system – against a "rigged liberal order".

Defenders of multilateralism must be clear-eyed about the system itself and find an adequate response to critics who wonder whether the liberal order, its institutions, and "globalists" are partly, or wholly, to blame for unchecked globalisation. Those of us who have dedicated our careers to upholding and defending the international order know that the peace, security, and prosperity that we've seen since the end of the Second World War is a result of the multilateral institutions upholding that order. When countries are talking, trading, and behaving according to a set of understood rules, values, and norms, state behaviour is more predictable and the world is a safer, more secure, and prosperous place. And we

assume that if sceptics better understood international relations and existing and emerging threats to security, they would mostly agree. I don't think the liberal order is wholly to blame, but I do think we need to take an honest look, question our assumptions, and develop an adequate response. That response isn't only a shift in what we communicate – it likely should be a substantive policy change.

It may be that critics are conflating the practice of multilateralism (international cooperation by way of nations coming together to solve global challenges based on understood rules, values and norms) with the economic policies that multilateral institutions, and their Western donors, have supported – neoliberal, market-driven growth strategies that have at times undermined the public sector's ability to provide public goods and services. Rather than empowering governments to provide for the poor or advance democracy, human rights and development, these policies have often promoted privatisation and deregulation within a country, making it harder for citizens to have a say. We have to ask ourselves if the point of global engagement is to set and enforce the rules, norms, and values set out in the UN Charter, or should it also be to persuade countries to adopt a certain economic development pathway? If it includes the latter, what are the guardrails and who should provide them?

One approach to answering these questions is to take a hard look at the



// Blue helmeted construction workers reroute water pipes as part of a World Bank project in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, in 2017. In 2003 the World Bank approved a \$150m loan to Tanzania on the understanding that it would privatise the city's water provision. The UK's Department for International Development paid the free market think tank the Adam Smith Institute \$500,000 to run a pro-privatisation public relations campaign including probably the world's first pro-privatisation pop song. Ultimately the cost of water soared and there was almost no increase in water provision to poorer areas. The British firm who had purchased the water authority were expelled from the country in 2005. © World Bank Tanzania

domestic impact of what the liberal order has supported and enabled, or in some cases, disabled within a country. Have the policies promoted by multilateral institutions made it easier for people, especially those most vulnerable, to succeed? Are they making it more or less likely for citizens to have a say and be heard?

Perhaps multilateralism could be saved if we empowered governments to listen, respond to, and support their constituents – a concerted effort to bring the UN back to "We the Peoples". Those of us who consider ourselves defenders of multilateralism are often experts in international relations and institutions; we have less exposure to domestic politics and policy. But that has to change. We can't continue to defend multilateralism by focusing only on what goes on between countries. We need to do more to address the shortcomings of what multilateral institutions have promoted, particularly through neoliberal economics, by supporting

sound domestic policy that actually prioritises people and improving the ability of domestic institutions to respond and deliver more and better for their citizens. Much of this starts at home – for me, most immediately that means the 2020 elections in the United States and what they mean for American democracy.

Most importantly, defenders of multilateralism and the international order must do more to empower citizens. Otherwise, they will find disruptive ways to do it themselves. //

**MINH-THU PHAM** // Former Executive Director of Global Policy at the United Nations Foundation, where she led strategic initiatives to support the UN. She helped UN member states create, negotiate and implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She also served in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General as a policy adviser. She is now devoting her time to the 2020 elections in the US and democracy promotion.

# 10

## big moments in 2020

Next year could be decisive for the world. We are approaching a number of “tipping points” – planetary, economic, social and political – that have deep implications for the future of humanity. But there is still time to change course. Here are 10 opportunities we should seize.

- 1. UN75 global conversation (January launch).** To mark its 75th anniversary in 2020, the UN will launch the biggest-ever global conversation on the future we want, threats to that vision and how we can overcome them by working together across borders, generations and sectors. Starting in January, the UN will work with partners including UNA-UK to hold dialogues across the world: in classrooms and boardrooms, parliaments and village halls, online and on the streets.
- 2. Beijing+25 – pushing forward on women’s rights (March).** 2020 is the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform on Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference for Women. Together, they cover issues such as human rights and economic power – and remain unrealised. Starting with the Commission on the Status of Women in March, next year holds several opportunities to protect and further this cause.
- 3. Youth plenary – a crucial platform for engagement (April).** The Presidents of the General Assembly and Economic & Social Council will invite young people to take part in a dialogue ahead of the UN’s 75th anniversary. The results will be presented by youth representatives to leaders at the September event to mark UN75. At present, they are the only civil society speakers permitted at that event. UNA-UK is working hard to change that.
- 4. Nuclear non-proliferation treaty – marching orders? (May).** The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) has been pivotal for halting the spread of these weapons. Recent review conferences have made little to no progress. Growing frustration at nuclear-armed states’ failure to uphold their obligations to disarm led to the creation of a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons. 2020’s Review could bring rapprochement, or see the possible collapse of the NPT.
- 5. Banning weapons in populated areas – getting over the line (May).** Armed conflicts are increasingly fought in populated centres, with weapons designed for open battlefields. Here explosive weapons are likely to have indiscriminate effects. Encouraged by the UN Secretary-General and the International Network on Explosive Weapons, dozens of governments will meet in Dublin to adopt a political declaration, potentially limiting the use of some types of weapon.
- 6. Ocean Conference – protecting life below and above water (June).** The ocean absorbs about 30 per cent of CO<sub>2</sub> we produce and over 3 billion people’s livelihoods depend on it. Rising temperatures, acidification and waste threaten its health. In 2020, a major summit will take place in Lisbon. A declaration is scheduled for adoption, with a plan on cleaning the ocean, protecting fish stocks and implementing the law of the sea.
- 7. High Level Political Forum (HLPF) – turbocharging the global goals (July).** In 2020 the decade of action and delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) begins. Next year is the deadline for the first 21 targets (of 169) and over 50 states have volunteered to present reviews of their progress so far. It is likely that the HLPF summit in New York will provide the first clear indication of whether the world is on track to deliver the SDGs by 2030.
- 8. A world summit? Raising ambition for global governance reform (September).** In negotiating the resolution for UN75, states decided to mark the UN’s anniversary with a limited one-day high-level meeting. A “forward-looking” declaration will be adopted. Civil society won’t be given the floor. UNA-UK is calling for states to agree concrete steps to improve global governance and for the event to launch a process of further reform.
- 9. Biodiversity Conference – staving off extinction (October).** In 2019 the UN reported that around one million species are at risk of extinction. The event in Beijing is a meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing. States are due to agree a 10-year plan for ensuring that humans aren’t added to the endangered species list.
- 10. Climate conference in Glasgow – have we done it? (November).** The 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the biggest and most important climate summit since Paris, perhaps ever. To avert catastrophic climate change, carbon emissions will need to have peaked by the end of 2020. States are due to submit plans for reducing emissions to meet 2030 targets.

# WHY I JOINED FRIDAYS FOR FUTURE

**Nirere Sadrach**

Fridays for Future is a global movement that enables young people to demand – collectively – an urgent response to the climate crisis. We are a generation that is witnessing the effects of the climate breaking down. We are also a generation that has the capacity to reverse these effects. We want individuals, corporations and our leaders to take action. We take to the streets every Friday because this fight must be brought to the streets. Everyone must act.

## My typical friday

My typical Friday begins with preparing climate strike messages and moving to strike locations. My role as a coordinator is to ensure continuity of action, that we strike safely in public spaces and high-traffic streets, and that we do so in strategic locations. I take note and monitor public response and reactions towards our individual and group actions.

Some people are happy with what we are doing and give us support or join in. Others attempt to move us on, saying that police will come and arrest us. Then we have to look for another location.

Usually, after about 2–3 hours of action, we engage with the public about why we are striking and start conversations about the messages written on our placards. Many people confront us asking why we are striking. But others want to know more about our work. This approach allows us to share information.

At the end of the day I make climate strike action reports. We use them to monitor reaction and participation. We rely on what citizens are saying to improve on the way we communicate, mobilise and inspire action.

## The effect on my education

I am managing to balance my activism and education, although it is challenging. My lecturers are complaining that I don't attend class on Fridays. I always have to miss Friday group work meetings with my classmates. So I make sure I extend my reading hours and do my class work on time, usually in the night.

Yet despite missing class on Friday, my performance is excellent and soon I will be graduating with a degree in International Business from Kampala International University.

Fighting for climate action is shaping my learning too. Now I am focused on exploring sustainable business practices and have started to research the effect of imported plastics. And I believe that learning will improve my advocacy and understanding of climate issues. I am committed to continuing to learn.

## The rest of my life

My life is devoted to activism. I am always out in different communities creating awareness about the climate crisis. This is important because we have to make people aware. Uganda, just like other sub-Saharan countries, is experiencing disastrous events like droughts, desertification, floods and storms. Increased global temperatures will cripple Uganda economically since we depend so much on agriculture. Climate change has caused social and economic suffering, as well as the breakdown of our diverse ecological system.

In addition to striking, I have started an initiative to increase digital attention towards the climate crisis through writing blogs. I have started a “war on plastic polluters” by noting down the names of every company whose plastic appears in our collections of litter from rivers and other water bodies.

## What my friends think

Many of my friends have joined me in this struggle and many are now part of the Fridays For Future movement in Uganda. I visit many schools, universities and communities, making presentations about the climate crisis and through this I make a lot of friends.

However some people don't get it. They think it is not a good idea to skip school for climate. They say I am wasting my time and pocket money with my activism work. But I will not give up. This is about our future. //

**NIRERE SADRACH** // Environmental campaigner, university student and Coordinator, Fridays For Future – Uganda.

// The author cycles through Kampala City as part of his investigations into companies contributing to plastic waste. He conducts such patrols every weekend. © Nirere Sadrach/Fridays for Future – Uganda



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