



Climate change is more than a human rights issue

UN Trade Forum

Roundup 13 September 2019 (

2000 words

Climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was the official title of the first UN Trade Forum, organized by UNCTAD (the UN Conference on Trade and Development) in Geneva on 9-13 September 2019. But Human Rights High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet outflanked the economists with her address to the Human Rights Council at its opening on 9 September.

[“Fires rage through our forests, and the ice is melting. We are burning up our future – literally,”](#) she declared, and who can blame the media for latching onto this headline? Especially when she added: “The world has never seen a threat to human rights of this scope.”

Hurricane Dorian had devastated two islands in the Bahamas only a week before – posing exactly the challenge UNCTAD was concerned with at its Forum. But the catastrophe story will run and run, for months and maybe years.

The new Four Horsemen of our Apocalypse

The media were listening to Ms Bachelet of course because this was her first address to the ruling council after one year in office. Her speech entitled Climate Change and Global Peace dealt with lots of other problems around the world in human rights. But few will take issue with her warning that “unless urgent actions [...] are taken within the next 10 years to arrest global temperature rise – hunger, famine, mass migration and war will be the order of the day.”

Clueless

And with the UN Climate Action Summit looming only two weeks away – with everyone clueless about how it will turn out, this was the obvious story.

‘Invisible’ marginal states

The United Nations Trade Forum had a less straightforward story: biodiversity is in crisis and the “invisible” marginal small island developing states (SIDS) [are in a dire state but can’t get the aid they need](#). If anything, [they are being punished for their success in delivering high-value services to the rest of the world](#), as the Prime Minister of the Barbados charged.

Nevertheless, the Forum had its own big names (two more Prime Ministers) and even more scientific clout and bad news about climate change and biodiversity.

Ana Maria Hernández, Chair of the IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services), whose report in May told the world one million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction, out of an estimated total of 8 million, and many within decades.

A development, economic, security, social and moral issue

Her message to the UNCTAD delegates from international organizations, governments, NGOs and businesses involved in biodiversity: “The Global Assessment provided strong evidence that the loss of biodiversity is not only an environmental issue, but also, and fundamentally, a developmental, economic, security, social and moral issue as well.”

We have altered 75% of the land and domestic species are in decline

She reminded UNCTAD’s Fifth BioTrade Conference (part of the Trade Forum) on 12 September: “three-quarters of the land surface is now significantly altered by human actions; more than 85% of wetlands have been lost; and only 3% of the oceans can still be described as ‘free from human pressure’.”

25% of domestic species threatened

Worse, local varieties and breeds of domesticated plants and animals are also in decline. “By 2016, 559 of the 6190 domesticated breeds of mammals used for food and agriculture (over 9 per cent) had become extinct and at least 1,000 more are threatened.”

Serious risk to food security

“This loss of diversity, including genetic diversity, poses a serious risk to global food security by undermining the resilience of many agricultural systems to threats such as pests, pathogens and climate change. Not only biodiversity is in danger, also human well-being through lack of food, health, water quality, amongst others.”

Three years in production

This may seem a lot of direct quotation to offer, but it is important to know exactly how she termed it. The eighth IPBES assessment engaged 156 experts and 350 contributing authors over three years and had to deal with more than 20,000 comments in its peer review system.

Five key levers

Unlike the Human Rights Council (unless it extracts an unusual pledge from its member states), the UNCTAD group can do something about it. Many already are. And Hernández argued that five key levers of transformative change could control climate change and “the degradation of nature” recorded by IPBES.

These are:

- (1) incentives and capacity-building;
- (2) cross-sectoral cooperation;
- (3) pre-emptive and precautionary actions in regulatory and management institutions and businesses;
- (4) decision-making in the context of resilience and uncertainty; and
- (5) environmental law and implementation.

Limit speculation

“Reforming trade systems and financial markets, although challenging, is essential to controlling the impact of global economic drivers on nature,” she stated. This could include limiting financial speculation on markets that can affect biodiversity.

Circular economy

The circular economy (reduce, reuse, recycle and recover resources) cuts down on unsustainable production while decoupling economic growth and the deterioration of the environment, Hernández added.

Not for negotiations

As for the New York 23 September meeting, to which the UN Forum is structured to contribute, “[the end result is not going to be a negotiated one](#),” admitted Ambassador Luis Alfonso de Alba, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the 2019 Climate Summit in a 11 September broadcast. That sounds like diplomatic jargon for “it wasn’t worth even trying”.

It will be interesting to see whether Barbados will remain invisible or whether Barbados Premier Mia Amor Mottley will be welcomed In New York to point out, as she did at the prestigious Raúl Prebisch lecture in Geneva, that developed countries had a head start in getting rich by building their industrial base on the wealth taken from people thousands of miles away.

The corresponding bank shutout

Small island states fail to access markets on fair terms and fail to have correspondent banking services because they are simply too small to be seen or to matter to some, Ms Mottley declared. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, many international banks have decided to terminate or limit their correspondent banking services (also known as derisking) to different regions, including small island states, to avoid rather than manage risks

No moral legitimacy or leadership

Ms Mottley described this practice as one “not rooted in moral legitimacy or leadership”. These banks “rely on their might and size as bullies do in a playground” and called on public officials to urge the reversal of this insensitive practice. Like other Caribbean leaders she also criticized the European Union’s anti-moneylaundering program, which penalizes the region by scaring global banks against corresponding with banks in the Caribbean because of the formalities, though few had been suspected of abusing the system.

Talking struggles and successes

The Forum might seem to have run out of intellectual steam in the second half of the week with its Fifth BioTrade Congress on Thursday and Friday. But these was also the occasion for business entrepreneurs to talk about the problems they face on the ground in trying to go green.

Undercut, lower quality deals

So an entrepreneur who was working with local communities to save forests, found that rivals came in and undercut the business by taking lower-quality fruit, and another found that some farmers used the money received to hire workers to cut down the forest elsewhere. Local people are often unaware of biodiversity rules, and government officials can be hostile of restrictions on local practices.

Most projects led by women

Yet others had encouraging stories to tell. João Teixeira, Senior Sustainability Coordinator of Natura Cosmetics in Brazil, found that the ucuuba berry turns out to be three times more profitable for families to harvest than to cut the trunk, which they could sell only once. Its cosmetics programme works with 37 communities, involving 5600 families, totalling 21,000 people and 22 native species. About 70% of the projects are led by women.

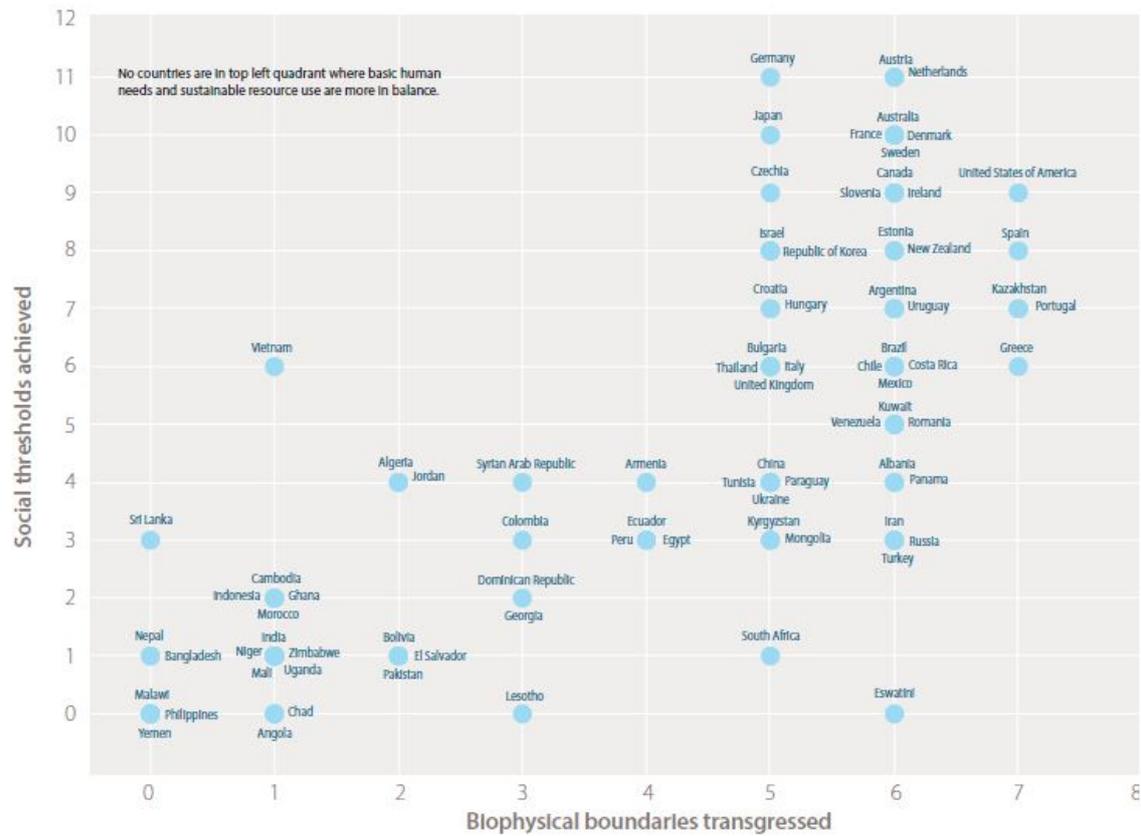
Local processing

More important for increasing local revenues, the projects involve local processing units (18 in all) – a rare situation – so that the producers are not just harvesting and selling raw materials. And the company is happy for them to sell their processed products to other outlets.

Access and Benefits Sharing

Santiago Carrizosa, Global Adviser in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the Access and Benefits Sharing (ABS) programme run with the World Bank’s Global Environment Facility (GEF), reported that 27 biodiscovery projects using genetic resources for sustainable development have been [documented](#) since the 2014 Nagoya Protocol underscoring that “genetic resources are accelerators” of the 2030 SDGs.

Figure 1-9
Striking the balance: no country is meeting basic human goals within biophysical boundaries



First SDG UN Summit since 2015

The Climate Action Summit is followed on 24-25 September in New York by the first [SDG Summit](#) since the UN adopted the 2030 Agenda in 2015. But a scientific panel has warned that trends in four areas are threatening progress elsewhere in the SDGs: “rising inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing amounts of waste from human activity that are overwhelming capacities to process them”.

SDG 2019: 20 actions

[The Global Sustainable Development Report 2019](#), *The Future is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*, appeared on 11 September 2019, the first prepared by the Independent Group of [15] Scientists appointed by the UN Secretary General three years ago. Its Call to Action lists 20 points for interventions “based on the recent scientific literature analysing the deeper systemic interconnections that identify synergies and trade-offs between individual goals and targets” (pages 127-136).

Box 1-2
Interactions among Sustainable Development Goals



The figure above shows the result of a systematic compilation of knowledge about causal interactions among the Sustainable Development Goals, extracted primarily at the target level and using the 7-point scale developed by the International Council for Science (ICSU)²⁶ in terms of co-benefits

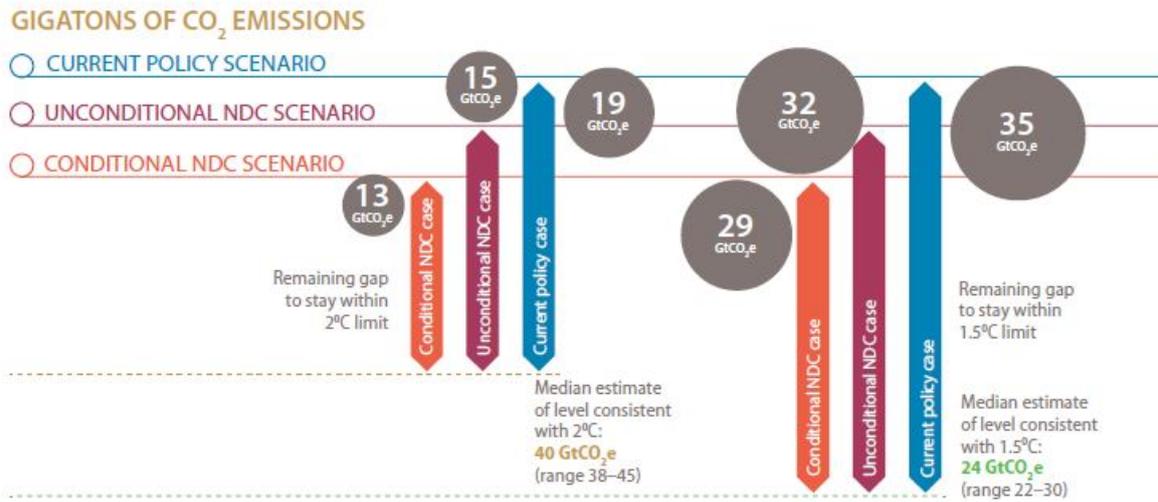
This article gives the Report proportionally more space than you might ordinarily want because it was not presented or discussed at the Trade Forum. A United Nations Foundation summary is [here](#).

The usual suspects

The report covers most of the usual suspects roped into international discussions – production and consumption patterns, growing inequality, access to basic social services, attention to vulnerable groups, changes in food production and habits, particularly to combat malnutrition and obesity, extending electricity to the 1 billion people without it, and reducing the use of polluting solid fuels for cooking (“causing an estimated 3.8 million premature deaths each year”).

Figure 2-13:
The emissions gap: current commitments insufficient to achieve necessary reductions in emissions

Units are gigatons of CO₂ equivalent



Note : NDC scenarios are used to estimate what the total global GHG emissions would be in 2030 if countries fully implemented their pledged contributions. The unconditional NDC scenario assumes countries only implement mitigation-related actions of their NDCs that have no conditions attached. Under the conditional NDC scenario, it is assumed that countries implement both conditional and unconditional mitigation actions of their NDCs.

Table 1-1
Projected distance from reaching selected targets by 2030 (at current trends)

GOAL	WITHIN 5%	5-10%	>10%	NEGATIVE LONG-TERM TREND
 Goal 1		1.1. Eradicating extreme poverty	1.3. Social protection for all	
 Goal 2		2.1. Ending hunger (undernourishment)	2.2. Ending malnutrition (stunting) 2.5. Maintaining genetic diversity 2.a. Investment in agriculture*	2.2. Ending malnutrition (overweight)
 Goal 3	3.2. Under-5 mortality 3.2. Neonatal mortality		3.1. Maternal mortality 3.4. Premature deaths from non-communicable diseases	
 Goal 4	4.1 Enrolment in primary education	4.6 Literacy among youth and adults	4.2. Early childhood development 4.1 Enrolment in secondary education 4.3 Enrolment in tertiary education	
 Goal 5			5.5. Women political participation	
 Goal 6		6.2. Access to safe sanitation (open defecation practices)	6.1. Access to safely managed drinking water 6.2. Access to safely managed sanitation services	
 Goal 7		7.1. Access to electricity	7.2. Share of renewable energy* 7.3. Energy intensity	
 Goal 8			8.7. Use of child labour	
 Goal 9		9.5. Enhancing scientific research (R&D expenditure)	9.5. Enhancing scientific research (number of researchers)	
 Goal 10			10.c. Remittance costs	Inequality in income*
 Goal 11			11.1. Urban population living in slums*	
 Goal 12				12.2. Absolute material footprint, and DMC*
 Goal 13				Global GHG emissions relative to Paris targets*
 Goal 14				14.1. Continued deterioration of coastal waters* 14.4. Overfishing*
 Goal 15				15.5. Biodiversity loss* 15.7. Wildlife poaching and trafficking*
 Goal 16			16.9 Universal birth registration **	

No country is on the right track

It declares: “The currently available evidence shows that no country is on track in reconfiguring the relationship between people and nature in a sustainable manner” (21).

More compact and efficient cities needed

The report also urges “more compact and efficient cities”. But just listing the proposals does not do justice to the depth of the analysis and argument presented for each point.

Figure 1-8
Human activities drive biodiversity loss

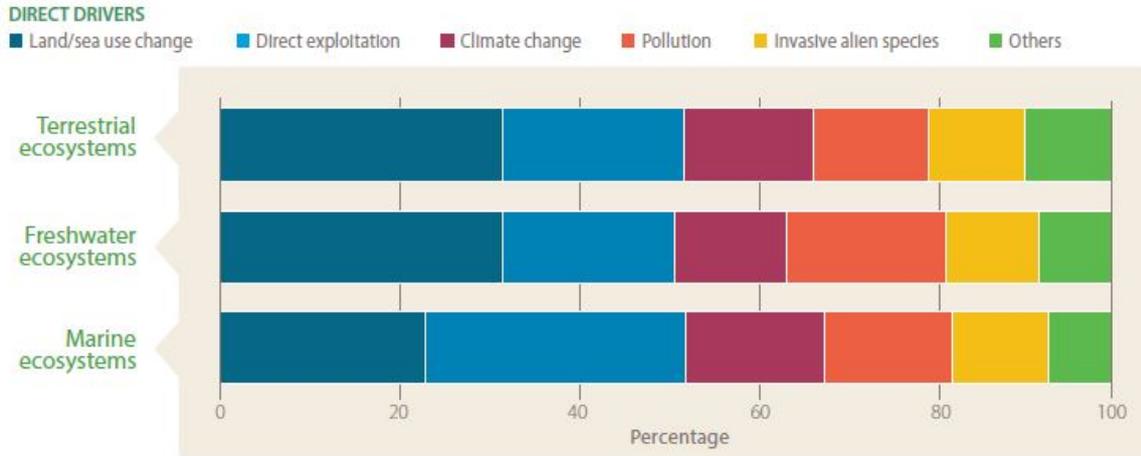
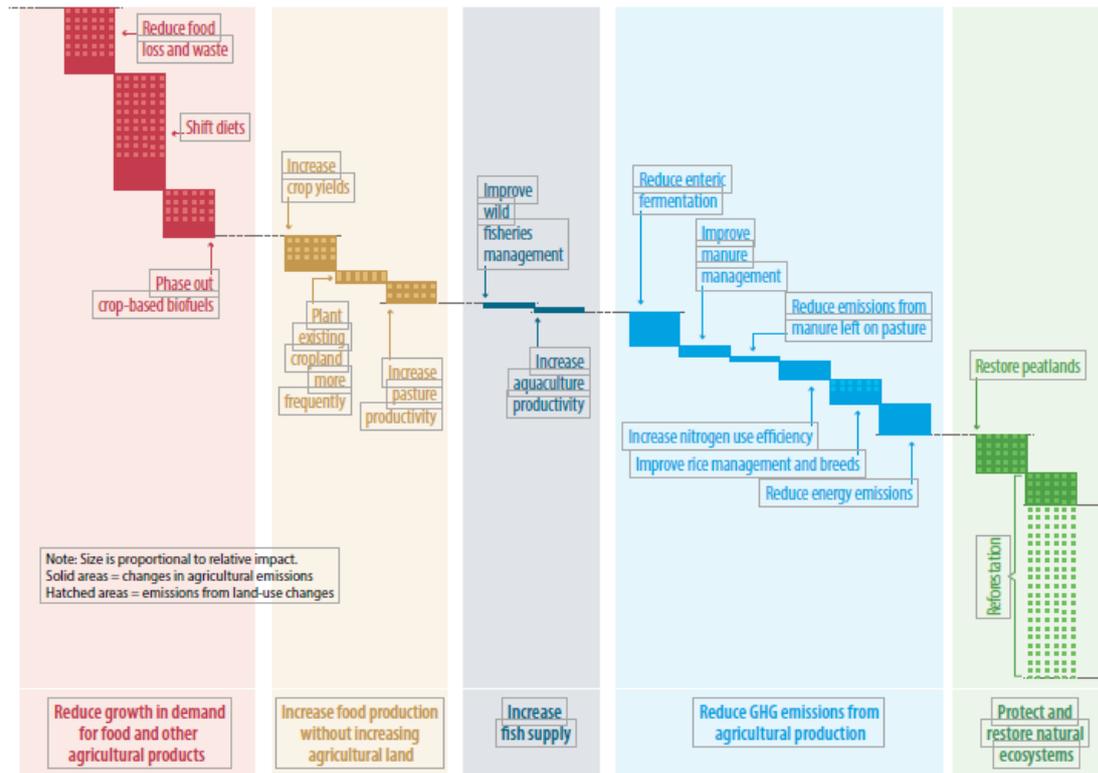
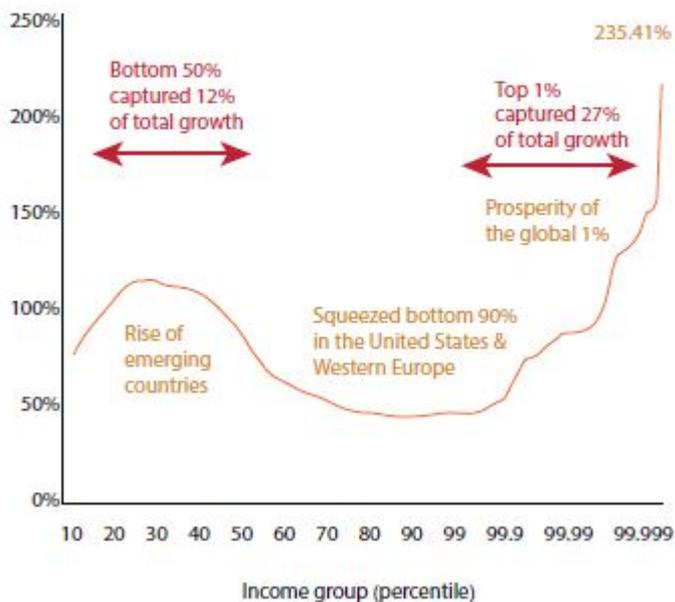


Figure 2-10
Solutions to reduce agricultural emissions



**Figure 1-4:
Global inequality and growth, 1980–2016**



UN sustainability label

The scientists even have a challenge for the United Nations: “The UN could promote a new sustainable development investment label, with clear parameters and guidelines, to encourage and reward investment in industries and financial markets that advance sustainable development and discourage investment in those that do not.”

Switching science priorities

The 200-page report also argues for “shifting current research priorities and supporting innovative approaches to sustainability science, emphasizing cross-disciplinary partnerships, and committing support and resources to scientific institutions, particularly in the global South. Development aid budgets should prioritize boosting scientific capacity and access in the global South. UN Member States, research consortia and libraries should work together to improve cross-border and inter-disciplinary collaborations in science for the SDGs.”



Co-Chair
Peter Messerli (Switzerland)
Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, Switzerland



Co-Chair
Endah Murniningtyas (Indonesia)
National Development Planning Agency (BAPPENAS), Republic of Indonesia

Cochairs of the group are by Peter Messerli, Director of the Centre for Development and Environment at the University of Bern and Endah Murniningtyas, former deputy planning minister of Indonesia.

UNECE Trees in Cities campaign

Expect a number of initiatives to be announced at the Action Summit. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has already promised a [Trees in Cities](#) campaign to be launched then. The argument: “Strategically planted trees can cool the air by between 2°C and 8°C, thereby reducing air conditioning needs by 30 per cent. A single tree can absorb up to 150 kg of CO₂ per year and help mitigate climate change. Trees also help control land erosion, reduce landslides and control surface water, and help mitigate flood damage.”

Useful links

[All PDFs](#) from the UN Trade Forum.

[UNCTAD documents and presentations submitted](#) (requires sign-in).

Bachelet speech to Human Rights Council 9 September 2019 ([LINK](#))

Summary of Prebisch Lecture ([LINK](#)).

Global Sustainable Development Report ([LINK](#))