



# BEYOND OPPORTUNISM

THE UN DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM'S  
RESPONSE TO THE TRIPLE  
PLANETARY CRISIS



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# THE CHALLENGE

Humanity is facing an existential threat. The interlinked and cascading effects of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution – a Triple Planetary Crisis<sup>1</sup> – are exacting a heavy toll on individuals, communities, and economies and imperilling life on our planet. Although the scientific community has collectively sounded the alarm<sup>2</sup> on the rapid degradation of planetary resources, manifest ecological overload, as well as the erosion of the ecological foundations of our economies, the international community is still not doing enough to mitigate these impacts either as individual or collective threats.

The UN Secretary-General has put the United Nations on an emergency footing, calling for an unequivocal, resourced, and coordinated response to avert largescale economic, human, ecological calamities. He has described the wanton disregard for the environment as senseless and suicidal.<sup>3</sup> For the head of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), nothing less than a wartime plan will do.<sup>4</sup> This report finds that the UN will require important changes if it is to nurture and accelerate new approaches development, well-being, and growth that will live up to the challenge of the Triple Planetary Crisis. The Organization requires a bold, principled strategy for UN Country Teams and Resident Coordinators that will empower them to do more than seize opportunities, but to create them and lead the charge for change.

# THE OPPORTUNITY

In March 2021, the UN Development Coordination Office (UNDCO) gathered the United Nations Resident Coordinators (RCs)<sup>5</sup> for a deep dive into the Triple Planetary Crisis. Over 20 UN entities and inter-agency mechanisms involving over 100 UN staff were involved in its preparation, execution, and follow-up. The purpose of the deep dive was to assess the multidimensional impact of the nature-climate-pollution crisis and identify tools and mechanisms that UN Country Teams can use to support a multidisciplinary approach to tackling the associated challenges at the country level.

This deep dive comes three years after the reform of the UN Development System which resulted in a reconfiguration of the UN presence at the country level, the principal legacy of which is a dedicated, independent, and empowered system of RCs in 131 countries and a new global development coordination entity within the UN Secretariat, UNDCO.

Delivering progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and positioning the development system to deliver on prevention was the reason, ambition, and challenge of these reforms. The key question is whether the reforms have improved the UN's capacity to effectively slow or reverse the environmental damage, which could risk the realization of the global Goals, and, if not, what more can be done.

The United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) and Institute for Natural Resources in Africa (UNU-INRA) were commissioned to supply this analysis and engaged RCs and UN experts to solicit best practices and document the constraints experienced by RCs on the ground specifically in relation to the Triple Planetary Crisis. The analysis and recommendations contained in this report draw on the Resident Coordinator deep dive and in-depth interviews carried out in early 2021.

# THE TRIPLE PLANETARY CRISIS

The three connected environmental challenges that are the focus of this report (climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution) have roots in the misallocation of capital, value, and incentives resulting in deficient economic and development planning at the national level in both developed and developing countries. These environmental challenges interact in ways that multiply risk and, if coordinated action is not accelerated, will derail progress to realize the global 2030 Agenda. Biodiversity loss alone could jeopardize close to 80 per cent of the SDG targets. In 2019, climate change contributed to extreme weather events that caused at least USD 100 billion worth of damage. By 2050, cumulative damage from climate change and associated environmental degradation is projected to reach USD 8 trillion, reducing global GDP by 3 per cent, with disproportionate effects on the poorest regions.

The scale and pace of non 'green' growth has been greater and faster than the capacity and commitment to restore, renew, and replenish ecological resources, trends that are likely to accelerate in the pandemic recovery period. The continued burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and drawing down of ecosystem goods and services will soon have impacts too large to manage by current or future generations. Increases in population, rapid urbanization, and a damaging anthropogenic-led growth powered by fossil fuels are taxing a rapidly dwindling carbon budget. The marine, agricultural, terrestrial, and freshwater ecosystems are all choked by plastic pollution and under pressure from overexploitation. While the story of degradation and depletion is uneven across the globe, the rapid pace of decline in some regions is alarming. Soil and water pollution is creating a toxic mix that is impairing food systems and the ability to feed the communities of today and tomorrow. The policy recalibrations sought by the Secretary-General will require abandoning the take-make-waste approaches, heavy carbon dependencies, and growth models that have contributed so greatly to the liabilities, damage and risks faced today.

What must fundamentally change is the way these threats are approached: rather than in isolation, they must be treated as highly interconnected phenomena that interact with other socioeconomic factors, notably, widespread and worsening inequalities. Climate change does not impact food systems alone; it contributes to land degradation and hastens productivity and biodiversity loss. Biodiversity loss will, in turn, weaken agricultural systems and render them vulnerable to climate change, pests, and pathogens. Dependence on fossil fuels is not only reducing air and drinking water quality, but also exacerbating soil erosion, endangering food systems, human health and security.

Globally, 1.2 billion jobs depend directly on a stable and healthy environment. Livelihoods in agriculture, fisheries and forestry, as well as tourism and pharmaceuticals sectors, all rely on natural environmental processes.<sup>6</sup> The paradox is that those least prepared and resourced to adapt to these new realities are often those that are the most dependent on ecosystem assets. Unless growing scientific awareness gives concrete form to expressions of solidarity, fragile and developing economies will struggle to revitalize, adapt, and source new knowledge to counter the multiple biophysical changes they are living through, and to form coalitions and partnerships to improve their development options.

As global economies grow, so too does their ecological footprint. This is largely because the global community has been unable to comprehensively step away from unsustainable, cheap fossil fuel-based growth and consumption. Harmful subsidies (that lead to inefficient waste management and production) are only abandoned at great political cost that, combined with a lack of incentives for greening the global economy, are likely to lead to ever greater exploitation of natural resources in forestry, energy, mining, and agricultural sectors.

The Triple Planetary Crisis is inherently a crisis of economics, power and justice. Scaling down 'ecological destruction' and fixing the 'broken state of the environment' (to paraphrase the Secretary-General<sup>7</sup>) requires new norms, bolder commitments, and a willingness to implement them. A better toolbox is needed, but also a sober assessment of the differentiated responsibility and capacity to act in service of the environment and of future generations. It will not be enough to promote nature-sensitive solutions that promise new economic opportunities if the institutions, agents, and instigators of change do not also address power and information asymmetries such as the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens across nations and within societies. The challenge is intergenerational, intrastatal and intrasocietal (i.e. groups within States). Women, for example, feature prominently in energy poverty or climate injustice narratives, but are often forgotten in the planning of massive deployments of renewable technologies, seriously limiting quick, global, inclusive climate action.

Plans for green recoveries the world over aim at delivering a future dissimilar to our past.<sup>8</sup> While these investments are still largely insufficient considering the much-altered state of the planet, they perhaps signal that we are progressing beyond the view that investments in nature represent a prisoner's dilemma. We know that the gains from radical investments in nature are both individual and collective, as are the costs of inaction. More importantly, the costs of inaction greatly outweigh the benefits that might be thought to accrue to defectors and free riders.

It is only natural then that the UN should mobilize now to erect protective bulwarks that will slow the pace and magnitude of environmental decline and marshal resources to support green, nature-based recoveries. The Organization is uniquely placed to call on and support countries to make the individual decisions that will ensure the integrity of our common home. Never has it been more important for the UN to exercise leadership and make use of its leverage.

# UN SYSTEM OUTLOOK

Senior UN leaders are impatient for change. They are not the only ones. The majority of over 1.2 million people surveyed worldwide by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the University of Oxford – the People’s Climate Vote, the largest ever survey on climate to date – believed that they were living through a climate emergency.<sup>9</sup> An overwhelming majority of the 1.3 million people surveyed in the UN75 process saw climate change as the biggest global concern.<sup>10</sup>

In his vision statement to the General Assembly, the Secretary-General stated that the Triple Planetary Crisis should be the UN’s top priority, requiring a massive investment in adaptation and resilience, climate financing to accompany the SDGs, and a renewed commitment to implementing the obligations under the Paris Agreement.<sup>11</sup> This requires that climate be integrated more deeply and consistently across the UN’s programming, from peace and security to development to humanitarian operations. It also means taking advantage of the 2018 UN reform process, harnessing the structures now in place to improve cohesion across the system, building regional strategies, improving decision-making, and bolstering the capacity of UN field offices.

Translating that broad vision into reality is one of the principal tasks of the reformed RC system. RCs are adept at orchestrating change, influencing policy, coordinating people and data, and responding to crises. They have been at the forefront of the UN’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, rallying UN capacity to support government response and recovery. Properly equipped, RCs can capitalize on this unique moment – as the world’s economies mobilize unprecedented funding to recover better – to steer COVID-19 recovery investments toward a greener, more inclusive and sustainable future.

The UN is staking a great deal on COVID-19 recovery plans and the ability to ‘green’ development through a coordinated socioeconomic and health crisis response. UNDP has adapted its Climate Promise Initiative, launched in September 2019 that aims at enhancing National Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, to ensure that COVID-19 recovery integrates climate action and principles of just transition and green economy.

The Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE) has set up a Green Recovery Support Programme<sup>12</sup> with initial capitalization from Germany, that works closely with RCs to make economic recovery planning a steppingstone for green and inclusive economic transformation to address the root causes of the Triple Planetary Crisis.<sup>13</sup> UNEP has adapted and launched a range of initiatives – at least five different funds have been adapted to support nature-based solutions and green recovery.<sup>14</sup> UNEP’s overall drive aims to link recovery efforts with a clean energy transition and nature-based solutions. Acknowledging that all too often food systems activities undermine biodiversity and are responsible for significant greenhouse gas emissions, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is working with international financial institutions to re-direct existing loans to focus on more resilient food systems, building in lessons from both the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks.

The current pandemic represents a synchronized collapse of social protection and health systems. It has arrested economic activity that has put livelihoods at jeopardy from Toronto to Timbuktu. Over the last year, the UN has taken stock of its blind spots to ensure that the Organization and the people it serves put resilience at the core of recovery. The next section tests this assumption of readiness, building on the views of RCs in the field.

# PURPOSE, PARTNERSHIPS, AND POLYCENTRICITY: THE VIEW AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL

The 2018 reform of the UN Development System was meant to increase the flexibility of agencies to respond quickly with contextualized solutions to new challenges on the ground, reinforce national ownership of development, and ensure governments have access to a neutral, impartial, and empowered UN representative through the RC.<sup>15</sup> The expectation was that agencies that make up the development system would be prompted to rethink business models and place greater value on upstream and interconnected policy advice if convened and coordinated more effectively at the country level.

RCs noted several encouraging changes which, taken together, signal that important steps are being taken toward meaningful, transformative change. This begins with the recognition by UNDCO that the Triple Planetary Crisis constitutes a complex, multifaceted policy agenda at the nexus of several highly technical strands of policy and research, which could not be assumed a priori to be comprehensively intelligible or actionable by RCs or their offices. Making use of their global convening power, UNDCO, together with agency specialists, curated a peer-to-peer exchange amongst RCs that helped identify gaps and constraints and fostered greater awareness and commitment to tackling the Triple Planetary Crisis.

These conversations were preceded by several important structural changes, absent which they likely would not have been possible. The 2018 reforms made the SDGs the beating heart of UN development activities and this alone, many observed, is transformative. Following on from this, Country Teams have attempted to transition from mere information-sharing forums to joined-up accelerators for policy change at the country level.

The Common Country Analysis (CCA) was also identified as a valuable tool that supports meaningful cross-agency analysis and the development of joint SDG narratives at the country level. The CCA makes it easier to establish priorities and identify cross-border challenges that require multi-country cooperation, and provides an important basis for joint planning with the host government.

These welcome changes notwithstanding, the UN Development System may yet struggle to make meaningful progress on the Triple Planetary Crisis for reasons of principle and practice, as outlined below.

**1. It is still a “new topic”:** while RCs have been grappling with aspects of the Triple Planetary Crisis for years, some elements of it are fairly new, as is the ‘systems approach’ to the study of complex, interlinked phenomena – both require substantial expertise. The empirical links between issues like biodiversity, climate change and socioeconomic change (e.g. livelihoods, displacement) exist in speciality domains that fall outside a typical RC’s background. “How are we supposed to provide expert advice when the issues are so new to us?” one UN colleague asked. Even the so-called “deep dive” was seen as just scratching the surface of the complex issues related to climate, pollution, and biodiversity and did not expose RCs to a sufficient number of disruptive, tested, and replicable policy options or “game-changing opportunities” that could make a difference in their engagement with government, civil society, and the private sector in a country setting. Speaking to their limited capacity to engage with the private sector, one RC observed: “the discussion with the private sector requires a degree of specificity and precision that I am simply not equipped to provide.”

**2. A dispersed evidence base:** information related to the Triple Planetary Crisis exists in widely disparate locations and formats, often linked to specific programme areas rather than shared across the UN family. An RC suggested that sophisticated analysis is both the UN’s strength and its weakness. “When I have an opportunity to carry a message, I don’t have the data I need; I need more than an aggregate picture if I am going to be useful [in-country],” said one UN official. The impetus within the system is to collect and aggregate data to provide a view of global trendlines that can support the normative guidance the UN provides. However, aggregated analysis is rarely operationally relevant at the country level because it lacks contextualization. It is not sufficiently sensitive to local, sociopolitical, and economic realities – an important limitation for RCs who serve as the first port of call for government actors. The lack of disaggregated data affects more than advocacy efforts. It also makes it exceedingly difficult to assess country progress in many SDG areas and consequently mobilize focused coalitions to induce systemic and behavioural change. The lack of both financing and capacity for subnational data collection was seen as inhibiting the development of targeted, impactful actions at the country level.

**3. Short-term results vs long-term interests:** UN Country Teams tend to plan in four-to-five-year periods, aligning programmes with government priorities that often track political cycles. This can mean the UN is locked into static deliverables even when the situation changes dramatically (e.g. a major cyclone in Bangladesh or the 2020 explosion in Beirut). But it also means that UN Country Teams struggle to build a longer view into the UN’s planning. Climate-driven risks are typically framed in multi-decade terms, often highlighting large-scale catastrophic risks that will materialize in the longer term. While many RCs are aware of these risks, the shorter-term planning cycles and more immediate political imperatives of their government counterparts mean that climate-sensitive approaches are often more reactive than anticipatory or preventive.

**4. Silos:** while the reforms have created greater synergies across agencies, the UN remains deeply siloed and projectized in its approaches to climate and nature issues. This limits an RC's capacity to speak authoritatively on nexus themes that require multidisciplinary perspectives, such as the Triple Planetary Crisis. Some of this is the result of funding structures and differentiated relationships with donors, but some is also the outcome of deeply engrained patterns across the UN agencies and their partners. "What we have now is the language of nexus and coordination," one UN expert noted, "but the reality is agencies continue to programme based on their separate objectives." In the area of climate, pollution, and biodiversity, the vision of common, joined-up delivery has yet to take hold in the UN family, despite widespread acknowledgement that single agency offerings pushed out at the country level will not result in solutions that match the scale of the crisis. An emphasis on brand protection and visibility at senior levels in UN entities results in jockeying for place and position at the country level. This, combined with a fear of high transactions costs, has made some governments more reticent to engage the UN at the country level, fearing that the specific development advice they seek will be diluted by efforts to reflect all agency thematic priorities in the solutions offered by the UN.

**5. Competing priorities:** across the system, RCs are being asked to take forward ambitious programming with multiple areas identified as "top priorities." Especially in fragile and conflict-prone settings, this can mean environmental issues are seen as second-tier priorities for government and other partners, or only become priorities when they are linked to major events (e.g. disaster response). The Secretary-General's lucid analysis<sup>16</sup> of the shortcomings in peacekeeping operations echo concerns from the field in the development system: tasking RCs to find and pursue solutions to the complex, multifaceted challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution – absent a clear political engagement strategy and tailored country analysis with realistic transition options – is comparable to the so-called Christmas tree mandates in peace operations. There is a resulting tension between the description of the Triple Planetary Crisis as the highest priority for the UN system and the day-to-day crises facing many RCs and their partners in-country.

**6. An intergenerational mandate hard to operationalize:** RCs struggle to operationalize normative guidance on the Triple Planetary Crisis. There is a perceived disconnect between the mandate given in New York by Member States, and domestic appetite for transformative nature-sensitive climate action, particularly in settings where rapid economic growth and employment are immediate priorities. The result is that the Secretary-General's marching orders are, at times, misaligned with domestic priorities and appetites. Concretely, there is concern that the work carried out at the country level to support more ambitious NDCs will only result in lip service to the global climate cause, or indeed could feed into the kind of carbon-heavy growth that could work against climate goals. This has left some RCs unclear about their role given that that bulk of financing for climate action will need to come from private sources, subsidized by public finance, incentivized by public regulation, and enabled by public advocacy. One RC argued that what was needed were more "science advocates, able to go beyond the blandest of advocacy paragraphs." Some go further and argue that the UN has a moral duty and

intergenerational mandate to push for fundamental change, even if unpopular with host governments. “I’m in a country watching the lungs of the world being destroyed and don’t feel I can do something about it,” said one RC. Others believe their leverage lies in their ability to convene and provide space for deeper discussions and advocacy by others. The United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (Cooperation Framework<sup>17</sup>) is meant to ensure that the newly impartial and empowered RCs are responding to a planning framework that better reflects country priorities and country needs. One RC, reflecting on the need to align UN Country Team support with national development priorities, noted that “where the environment is concerned, local priorities and needs may be contributing to the problem, not the solution” and in these cases, the cooperation framework – given it is a negotiated document with the government – might not provide the flexibility required to meet the UN’s ambitions.

**7. Influencing the direction of recovery:** RCs are often confronted with governments that see green technology and green jobs as a burden rather than an opportunity. Especially (but not at all exclusively) in developing countries, there is a sentiment that societies must catch up, even if that means increasing carbon emissions in the short term while promising longer-term reductions. “We struggle to make strong economic arguments for green economies, even though it is clear that there is no contradiction between being pro-environment and pro-employment,” said one RC. There is a sense that this dynamic will worsen in the post-pandemic period, as governments of large and small countries look to jump-start their economies by any means possible. Complicating the task further is the perception of the UN presence in-country as predominantly focused on governance, peace and security – it is not seen as a key actor on climate, making it difficult to change mindsets and advance robust arguments for the counter-cyclical investments needed for a green recovery. The multiplicity of small projects may not help this perception, nor position the UN to dispel these views. “There are 350 projects in my country, and none of them are going to deliver the seismic change [on the Triple Planetary Crisis] we require,” remarked one RC. While the Secretary-General is thought to be active and vocal proponent on climate action, this perception does not consistently carry through to Country Teams.

**8. National frameworks:** despite now having regional strategies in place, much of the UN’s programming and engagement remains constrained by national boundaries. UN programming is planned with national counterparts, while analysis and reporting (including on the SDGs) is based on national data. The impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, however, are regionally and globally driven, often with highly localized effects that are difficult to capture with a national-level framing of issues. Indirect impacts too – such as migration and demographic shifts can be difficult to capture in national development plans or reflect in joint plans with national authorities.

9. **The challenge of relevance:** senior UN leadership has been clear about the scale of the crisis and the consequences of apathy. Unprecedented effort is needed to engage, mobilize, and incentivize changemakers, from government to academia and civil society. RCs noted that large investments were made in 2020 to establish or feed into new processes – a strategic investment from a limited pool of staff. Several observed that the UN Development System needs to shift gears in 2021, redoubling efforts to engage governments, philanthropic trusts and foundations, local influential think tanks, and civil society. “The risk is that UN Country Teams become a side-show while others take the driver’s seat and lead the way in implementation. If this happens, we will witness dramatic and rapid extinguishing of the UN’s relevance on these topics,” one RC remarked. A number of organizations outside the UN system are investing in local solutions to the Triple Planetary Crisis, from The Ashden Trust to the newly launched Bezos Earth Fund. The challenge for the UN is articulating a unique comparative advantage and clear value-added, and also finding ways of synchronizing the Organization’s investments alongside others.
10. **The need for diplomacy:** the UN was described by a respondent as “predominantly a system of technocrats, when what the UN development agenda needs is more active diplomacy.” Diplomacy was defined as the ability to identify the right information, at the right time, into the right entry point, and the most effective way to drive a process towards change. The critical acceleration that is needed will not be achieved unless a greater focus is placed on a different skill set that supports operationalization of data, analysis and normative guidance. Asked about their role in-country, an RC replied: “my role is not to dwell on the technical, but to be a good broker of knowledge.” The UN’s approach to human resources management may be overvaluing a technical skill set at the RC level at the expense of the soft skills that one typically finds in the diplomat’s toolkit, since RCs do not set policy, but rather need to be effective spokespeople with a convincing narrative that speaks to both opportunities and trade-offs. This would require access – when needed – to deep technical expertise in the UN Country Team from within specific UN entities. This expertise could be complemented by support from an established group of experts outside the Country Team that would offer additional technical capacity and strategic communications support.

# TEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

The following ten recommendations reflect common messages from UN RCs across the system and attempt to address the above challenges.

## 1. ESTABLISH A SPECIALIST TRIPLE PLANETARY CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

Some RCs would benefit from permanent local advisory capacity dedicated to the Triple Planetary Crisis, but most simply require ad hoc access to a dedicated and defined team of specialists to: (a) prepare an initial set of localized policy options, and (b) reinforce RC engagement at key moments to take advantage of specific windows of political opportunity or help RCs create them. Parallels have been drawn to the effective support the UN provides for elections in fragile settings (e.g. Malawi), surge capacity at critical inflection points, the support PAGE provides to RCO economists, as well as the utility of the Peace and Development Advisor programme.<sup>18</sup> The Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) approach adopted by the UN Development Group in 2015 to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the country level offers a good starting point and a model for the type of country-focused, cross-agency missions that could strengthen RC capacity. Topic-specific MAPS teams could be assembled on topics identified as crucial for UNCTs, Results Groups, or the RC. However, lessons of previous MAPS missions should be integrated in the design of the Triple Planetary Crisis Response Team. The duration of missions, for example, must allow for adequate assessment and advisory support – past MAPS missions (typically five days) were found to be too short to be effective.<sup>19</sup> The Triple Planetary Crisis Response Team must be able to equip RCs with tailored economic and ecological transformation advice supported by a communications, advocacy, financing and partnerships action plan that goes beyond the simple repetition of global slogans. This will allow RCs to inject new policy narratives into national debates at the most strategic moments.

## 2. DEVELOP COUNTRY-SPECIFIC SOLUTIONS SENSITIVE TO POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REALITIES

Governments may not have the time, resources, or inclination to produce detailed development scenarios that account for the benefits and trade-offs of a nature-sensitive economic transition. Country-focused scenarios developed by the Triple Planetary Crisis response team, working with trusted local partners, should feature more prominently in the UN Country Team engagement strategy on the Triple Planetary Crisis. These scenarios should adopt a political economy lens to understand, map, and communicate trade-offs and benefits to incentivize behavioural and systems change (e.g. articulating a debt-sensitive green agenda, or providing actionable strategies in low climate literacy environments). The scenarios will clarify the rewards for early action on the Triple Planetary Crisis and the spillover benefits that accrue to a country over time in respect of its development objectives and existing inequalities. Importantly, contextualized scenarios provided to RCs will create efficiencies by removing the need for them to search, deconstruct, and reassemble global data sets and best practices with the limited human resources currently available to them.

### 3. INVEST IN THE BUSINESS CASE

This generation has a moral obligation to address the environmental and ecological crises devastating communities. But the moral imperative alone will not be sufficient to move government and industry to action. A clear business case will need to be made to secure change in the short-term and the UN has not consistently demonstrated a capacity to prove its case at the country level, i.e. the ability to explain the central place of nature in a business value chain, an explanation that starts with science but translates to the language and praxis of business. RCs play a key role in translating messages at the country level, including with the private sector, ensuring it is understood that environmental change is a reality, and the UN can provide solutions that will not penalize economic ambitions. Country Teams must deliver analytic products that inspire confidence and act as a rallying point for action. Currently, the Organization is missing an opportunity for influence because its collective offer is viewed as either too scientific (i.e. indigestible) or too fragmented (agency mandate-oriented) at the country level, but certainly lacking in a strong economic underpinning. Developing a compelling business case that shows the economic benefits of green growth, as done in some of the PAGE partner countries, will certainly require deeper engagement with economists across the UN, as well as with the private sector and academia to provide RCs with the required industry and economic expertise.

### 4. CONSOLIDATE DATA FOR MULTI-LEVEL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

The triple planetary crisis presents a challenge of scales: a global set of phenomena manifest in regional dynamics that have national and highly local effects and vice versa. Rising temperatures may cause erratic rainfall in one part of a country, changes in water tables in another, and salinization of coastal farmlands in a third. RCs are typically bound by national-level frameworks and national data, sometimes also receiving more localized information through UN agencies. Missing from this is a framework to bring together different sources of data, a place where regional dynamics can be cross-referenced with local information. The UN's recent work on cross-border programming offers some good examples of how to bring together disparate forms of analysis and data, including the recently-launched regional Global Opportunities for Sustainable Development Goals (GO4SDGs) initiative. These efforts should be built upon to create a more holistic picture of the regional and local effects of climactic and environmental changes on ecosystems across boundaries.

### 5. RESOURCE AND SCALE-UP FORESIGHT EFFORTS

The UN has begun investing in predictive analytics and foresight capacity. The predictive analytics work spearheaded by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the Sahel – an inter-agency/inter-pillar project now under the leadership of the UN Special Coordinator for Development in support of United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) – is notable in this regard.<sup>20</sup> The approach involves both analysis of trends and future goals, and a look back (back-casting) to determine what needs to be done differently today to achieve a more sustainable future. Foresight methodologies such as those employed by UNHCR in the Sahel, the UNU's work on new technologies<sup>21</sup> and global governance,<sup>22</sup> UNEP's Foresight Unit, the UN High-Level Committee on Programmes Foresight Network,<sup>23</sup> and UNDP's Internal Future's initiative<sup>24</sup> can and should be scaled to address climate and ecological futures across the UN system. Foresight approaches create an environment that supports policy prototyping efforts which, paired with adequate programme development/preparatory finance, such as that provided by the Joint SDG Fund, can test interventions linked to scenario-based planning. Both foresight and prototyping activities are likely to draw in local collaborators outside the UN and encourage cross-pillar work in Country Teams.

## 6. COORDINATE PRIORITIES AROUND COUNTRY TYPOLOGIES

The expectations of UN Country Teams and RCs are ambitious. Convening RCs by country typologies (shared characteristics) will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the targeted interventions that are likely to take root and that can support both short- and long-term change. In practice, this means bringing together countries that share similar feature sets (constraints and capacities), or shared ecosystems, to ensure that tailored solutions for specific country contexts cross-pollinate to similar country settings. This is especially important given the policy trade-offs that will arise when addressing the Triple Planetary Crisis. Trade-offs are part of the inevitability of development. Multiple options must be weighed to strike the right compromise when making decisions where natural resources are concerned. Trade-offs often occur when faced with enhancing one ecosystem service to the detriment of another. Understanding the synergies, co-benefits and trade-offs in one country setting should substantially contribute to identifying the most cost-efficient and cost-effective climate actions in similar country settings and possibly at the regional level.

## 7. BETTER SUPPORT RCs IN TAKING RISKS

While the UN's senior leadership urges rapid, uncompromising action to address the Triple Planetary Crisis, RCs can be reluctant to take major risks, in part because they have few tools to push hard with governments that may not share the UN's environmental agenda, but also because support from the top has not always been forthcoming. A clear message is needed from senior UN leadership that RCs will have the necessary political backing to dare a different tone and approach in-country. The Secretary-General's senior managers' compacts can be used to establish that support. The senior managers' compacts are a key element of the UN accountability system, enshrining commitments to the reform agenda and setting out the parameters by which senior managers will be assessed on their effective use of financial and human resources, commitment to diversity and sustainability, and implementation of oversight body recommendations. The Secretary-General has stressed that the compacts are not only contracts between him and his senior managers, but also between senior managers and their staff and between the Organization and Member States. The senior manager compacts should be explicit about the support for science- and nature-based solutions to the Triple Planetary Crisis and acknowledge explicitly that Country Teams and RCs will receive the support required to ensure these solutions reach local policymakers. Individual policy dialogues with RCs, capturing both what they are doing and what they need to effectively engage their government counterparts may go some way in balancing messages and risk. If the UN is to stick to the science, some messages will be uncompromising and uncomfortable – and its ambassadors and front-line representatives will need backup.

## 8. USE RESULTS GROUPS TO ENSURE INTEGRATION DELIVERS

Enormous effort has gone into improved integration across the UN system, with the triple humanitarian-development-political nexus providing a broad set of principles to encourage cross-pillar work. The message from RCs, however, is quite clear: too much of this is lip service and not enough is geared at actually delivering on common objectives. "We all agree to work together in principle, but on the ground, every agency is still doing its own thing," one RC noted. The establishment of common "results groups" within the UN country frameworks was identified as a singularly useful way to bring agencies around a set of shared programmatic objectives. Building on good examples from results groups in particular settings, a set of models could be created for broader use across the system.

The main goals should be to orient the entire UN around a common set of measurable objectives and programmatic deliverables, with the Triple Planetary Crisis meaningfully included in them, and then, provide the relevant incentives and visibility to reward joined-up efforts that cater to country needs, not agency strengths.

## **9. DEVELOP AND USE A CRISIS PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS TOOLBOX**

The pandemic has drawn attention to the need for the multilateral system to be more prepared for global crises, and it is likely that the Secretary-General will unveil new crisis preparedness capacities under his Common Agenda later this year. The Triple Planetary Crisis should feature prominently in these new preparedness initiatives, including specific steps to resource surge deployments (specialists), envoys (senior intermediaries), and financial instruments that fund in parallel. Efficiencies should be sought at all levels to free resources that can be repurposed to engage more effectively both nationally and regionally. RCs and Country Teams need to be resourced, encouraged, and capacitated to do the same, reaching out to new partners that may have trusted and established relationships with governments that surpass the UN's assets. PAGE has demonstrated that strategic partnerships with local intellectual partners can not only bolster capacity to address this crisis, but help ensure that policy advice is heard and acted upon.

## **10. CULTIVATE AN INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE FOR THIS MOMENT**

The UN is staffed with outstanding technical experts, leading communications specialists, and effective diplomats. Ensuring that this diverse cadre of international civil servants is effectively engaged in authoring solutions and modelling behaviour, through their activities and operations in-country, tailored to this moment is of utmost importance. For this to happen, performance management, talent cultivation and hiring strategies will likely need to adapt to fit the needs and evolving priorities of the Organization. They must take account of the value placed on staff 'failing fast', investing in innovation, and breaking with business-as-usual approaches from administration to diplomacy. It also requires a greater focus on the mechanics of successful diplomacy, as well as an acknowledgement that diplomacy is a skill set that is learned by putting its mechanics in practice.

# OVERARCHING CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As countries across the world work their way out of a devastating pandemic, there is a unique opportunity to make a strong push towards a green recovery that marks the beginning of low-carbon, resource and energy efficient, nature positive, job-rich and socially inclusive growth. This is potentially a transformational moment after decades of reliance on fossil fuel-driven production and consumption. While intentionality matters, the road to a green recovery will not be even and it will challenge most economies, especially those with limited fiscal space and heavy debt burdens.

The scale, impact and depth of the Triple Planetary Crisis will necessitate a range of solutions that combine fixing the upstream macroeconomic enabling environment and downstream projects that restore and build degraded environments and ecosystems. Solutions will need to be tailored and will depend on contextual realities, including the extent of environmental degradation and a whole host of other transition imperatives related to finance, capacity, leadership, knowledge infrastructure, technologies, and other inputs so critical to forward momentum. While knowledge gaps remain, enough is already known to warrant bold action for comprehensive, integrated approaches to mitigation and adaptation.

## **BALANCING DEVELOPMENT, MITIGATION, AND ADAPTATION**

Many developing countries are wrestling with hard choices as they work to mitigate and adapt to the harmful impacts of climate change and pursue low carbon transitions. Recovering from COVID-19 is a herculean task for most economies, but more so for fossil fuel-dependent countries in the developing world, many of which are facing high carbon market risks because they do not set the price of fossil fuel but are exposed to risks associated with hydrocarbons (e.g. market pricing, stranded assets, exogenous shocks). These countries – often referred to as price-takers – are sensitive to the risks of energy markets but unable to control either the market or investments.

Greater attention must be paid to the incentives and multiple vulnerabilities of countries trying to exit a position of dependence on fossil fuels. An equity-based transition will acknowledge that it matters how you get to a low carbon transition, and not only on how fast you travel to get there. Developing countries who have seen their fiscal space shrink – the result of both low oil prices and demand – will have little room for high-speed mitigation given that many are still in the throes of a disruptive economic fallout.

Several innovative solutions exist that can help with industry and broader socioeconomic transitions, from nature-based solutions to new financial instruments, such as green debt swaps. Making the case for these solutions is the first challenge. Implementing them at the right time, right pace, and in the correct way, is the second challenge. Neither novel financial instruments nor nature-based solutions represent a panacea to the climate, pollution, and environmental challenges we face and there are risks that both fail if not supported with the right mix of resources, knowledge, and capacity to tailor them to local, contextual realities.

## **GREEN RECOVERY IS POLITICAL ECONOMY SENSITIVE**

To realize the ambition of a green recovery, political actors need to have relevant, critical resources on hand (knowledge, skills, financing). The success of green transitions will ultimately be determined by those able to best deploy these resources.

At the same time directing energy and other systems towards green development and recovery is not political economy neutral. There will be winners and losers.<sup>25</sup> Multinational corporations might take advantage of their advanced knowledge of market dynamics and decide on which investments to make or not make, ahead of governments, especially in developing countries that may lack the knowledge infrastructure to make informed decisions or engage in large-scale contract negotiations. For instance, in some developing countries, early State producers of natural gas may be motivated to maximize returns and extract this resource, at least temporarily eschewing environmental sustainability concerns. The same could be said for oil palm, soy and 'hard to abate' sectors, such as manufacturing and steel industries, which are likely to benefit from continued support given that the products manufactured are considered essential for short-term and medium-term economic growth.

Even as the market is becoming the major arbiter in rendering hydrocarbon resources unviable, there is still a risk that countries dealing with large-scale economic disruption may be tempted to accelerate their economic rebound by designing regulatory and tax incentives to appeal to the extractives and fossil fuel industries. Only if the political economy of recovery receives more attention will solutions to the Triple Planetary Crisis support local development objectives.

## **INVESTING IN SCIENCE AS A MEANS TOWARDS 'RATCHETING UP' MITIGATION AMBITION**

In some regions of the world, where the impacts of the Triple Planetary Crisis are most virulent, investment in science is relatively low. Yet, science is an important driver in enabling green industrialization, identifying viable options for climate-smart agriculture, supporting new technologies related to the production of green hydrogen, and the type of energy mix that will help disincentivize the use of fossil fuels. Without cutting-edge science and technologies options, the scale of change and transformational outcomes sought will be difficult to realize. Understanding how scientific capacity relevant to the Triple Planetary Crisis is distributed, ensuring it is widely accessible, and ratcheting-up collaboration between innovation communities at the nexus of research and industry in both developed and developing countries – a global commons of innovation for the Triple Planetary Crisis not unlike the scientific collaboration induced by the search for a COVID-19 vaccine – will improve the speed and likely prospect of mitigation and adaptation across regions.<sup>26</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the crucial role that States play in meeting a crisis of global proportions. But States did not meet this crisis alone. A network of State and non-State actors supported the development and delivery of vaccines at an unprecedented rate and scale, demonstrating the vital importance of collective responses. The Triple Planetary Crisis presents an even greater – existential – challenge for humanity and will require radical changes in the way we approach development, well-being, and growth. UN Resident Coordinators perform a crucial role in our multilateral system's response to this crisis, helping to bolster national-level actions that can coalesce into meaningful changes at the global level. This paper has identified some of the common obstacles facing RCs as they work to meet this challenge, but also some of the good practices and models that could help them become even more effective actors around the world.

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