

76 United Nations General Assembly
Speech by
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Mr. President, excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen,

As we gather to discuss the state of global affairs, today's challenges may seem overwhelming and almost impossible to overcome.

However, as an optimist and a strong believer in multilateral cooperation, I have for the past five years stressed in my message to the General Assembly the importance of seeing the world of opportunity, the potential of our cooperation. My message today is no different: we cannot let global challenges divide us. On the contrary, we must for all sake unite.

We have our work cut out for us. Around the world, calls for human rights, peace, and stability are too often ignored. And the threat of climate change is no longer a distant phenomenon: it is here, and it is intensifying.

But only together, can we respond and recover. To build a more just and peaceful planet for all of us, we need all nations united, our United Nations.

Mr. President,

While in most developed countries we are turning a corner in our fight against the COVID-19, same cannot be said about all of the world. It is critical that we work together to ensure that vaccines reach all countries and peoples – rich and poor – and as soon as possible. Not only is this a fundamental matter of global solidarity, but also in the interest of us all.

Iceland is firmly committed to play its part. We have already contributed 1 billion Icelandic krona to the COVAX initiative and have started vaccine sharing through the same mechanism.

If anything, the pandemic has taught us that we are stronger together than apart. It has also exposed the dangers of isolationism, disinformation, and distrust.

These lessons should not go to waste. It is critical that we demonstrate the strength and the honesty needed to learn, both from our successes and our failures, to better prevent, prepare, and respond to future crisis of this magnitude.

Mr. President,

While the consequences of the pandemic have been disastrous for our world, the effects of climate change are bound to be even worse.

The science and the signs are clear and sobering, and the plans are already in place. We need to respond now and honour our commitments from Paris as we set our eyes on Glasgow.

For our part, Iceland's ambition is to go beyond the Paris commitments.

This includes a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by more than half by 2030, complete carbon neutrality by 2040 and becoming fossil-fuel free by 2050.

All of Iceland's electricity and close to 85% of Iceland's total energy consumption comes from renewables. We aim to close the gap with electrification of transport and green hydrogen and e-fuels for heavy transport and machinery, fishing, shipping and aviation. Our long-term energy policy also focuses on substantially increasing energy efficiency and multiple use of energy resources.

Capturing and binding carbon is also an important pillar of our efforts, where we use both tried and tested nature-based solutions and innovative technologies. Iceland is home to the world's largest plant that extracts carbon dioxide directly from the air and turns it into rock through the so-called Carbfix method. This technology has been developed out of the geothermal energy industry and will be applicable in many corners of the world to capture and store CO₂ as solid-state rock.

Focusing on our own homework, however, is not enough. High-income countries must support lower income ones to advance their climate ambitions too. I am pleased to share that Iceland's contribution to international climate finance has more than doubled from 2018.

But Iceland's main contribution in the fight against climate change will continue to be our knowledge and experience in the use of green energy solutions. This is a global crisis, and we must rely on each other's expertise and knowledge.

Iceland is ready to play its part. As a Global Champion for Just and Inclusive Energy Transition, Iceland actively promotes the goal of achieving sustainable energy for all. Iceland has for decades contributed to this global agenda, through

research, training, sharing of experience, and cooperation. As a Global Champion, we are now scaling up our efforts even further.

Mr. President,

The health of the World Oceans - our Blue Planet - is increasingly under pressure. Climate change, mismanagement, and pollution are leading to food insecurities, an alarming fall in biodiversity, and depletion of natural resources.

We must take concrete steps to make regional and international cooperation on Ocean Affairs stronger. And we must base our actions on the best scientific advice and the Law of the Sea – the very constitution of the Ocean.

Much can be learned from successful regional cooperation. The Arctic Council is a great example, which brings together governments, indigenous peoples, science, and various stakeholders to share knowledge and shape policy and action.

During Iceland's recent chairmanship of the Council, a special emphasis was placed on protecting marine and coastal ecosystems, resulting in a regional action plan to address marine litter in the Arctic. A small but important step in the right direction. Iceland is also among the group of countries pushing for a global agreement to fight marine plastic pollution.

Nature is firmly on our agenda in the coming months, including at the COP meetings on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification, as well as the UN Ocean Conference. Ecosystem restoration, both on land and in the oceans, is yet another pressing global issue that must be tackled in unison by the international community. We need to connect the dots and focus on stronger commitments and more robust implementation.

This is the Decade of Action. The time to act is now.

Mr. President,

In recovering from the pandemic, we cannot revert to business as usual. We need to do better, and build a greener, bluer, and more equitable and sustainable future. The groundwork has already been laid with the 2030 Agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals are our global compass, and the Decade of Action reminds us of the urgency at hand.

Iceland is committed to promote SDG implementation at home and abroad. The Global Goals guide our growing official development assistance, under the overarching objective of poverty reduction and a strong focus on human rights, including gender equality, rights of children and LGBTI.

Recognising the essential role of broad ownership and involvement for development success, Iceland is also supporting private sector partners and civil society in their development and humanitarian work, making full use of their strength and know-how. Without the participation and inclusion of the private sector we will not achieve our goals.

Iceland's own experience speaks volumes about the value of inclusiveness and equality for sustainable development, particularly the importance of working for gender equality for economic and social progress.

Advances have been made globally, but there is still a long way to go. Gender parity is too far off, gender-based violence is rampant, and millions of girls are

married off as child brides. Men and boys must join forces with women and girls to advance gender equality globally, from the locker rooms to the halls of power.

Overall, human rights and liberal democracy - enabling people to share thoughts and ideas freely - are essential drivers for sustainable development, along with free trade and open markets. Including everyone, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, or race, means more hands and minds pushing for social and economic progress for all.

Mr. President,

Building back better requires greater respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and gender equality - the critical cornerstones for a better and more just future.

Indeed, investing in development, peace, and human rights will, at the end of the day, always be less expensive than having to address the dire consequences of poverty, war, and injustice.

Regrettably, today's conflicts, humanitarian and political crises are too often rooted in lack of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

This year, we have witnessed a ruthless military coup in Myanmar, where democracy and civil rights have been done away with altogether. The situation in Afghanistan is highly troubling, with reports of attacks, serious violations of international humanitarian law, and human rights abuses, including push back against women's rights. The Taliban and other parties must respect international

law, seek an inclusive political settlement, and ensure humanitarian access and safe passage for all, or else be held accountable.

In too many places, we have seen a serious decline of respect for civil and political rights. We need to stand by those who risk their lives and liberties every day for calling out these injustices and engaging in an open, democratic debate. We have a collective duty to promote and protect the human rights and freedom of all.

The role of the Human Rights Council has never been as important as now. We need to engage in an open dialogue on how to correct the course and head towards greater respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, everywhere and always. The run-up to the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration for Human Rights in 2023 should be used to reinvigorate our collective commitments to human rights.

Iceland is firmly committed to continue actively promoting and defending human rights. We have therefore decided to run for a seat on the Human Rights Council for the term 2025-2027.

Mr. President,

The complexity of modern conflicts and crises continues to grow with the marriage of emerging factors, such as climate change, cyber threats and disinformation, and the old foes of authoritarianism and tyranny.

While encouraging steps have been taken to preserve and build peace, including in Iraq and Libya, the overall trend is nothing short of disappointing.

This year's surge of violence in Palestine and Israel underlined the importance of finding ways to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process. Its current stagnation will only serve to deepen existing disagreements and feed senseless extremism.

Finding political solutions to the situations in Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and now Afghanistan is also essential, as military might alone can never deliver peace and stability.

The same holds true for Russia's persistent and unlawful violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia, which continues to undermine regional stability.

The UN's role in pursuing diplomacy and providing humanitarian and development assistance is indispensable. We are all responsible for creating and safeguarding the space for diplomacy and humanitarian work.

Still, the Security Council carries special responsibilities on behalf of the wider UN membership. The Council needs to act with greater foresight based on a broader view of security, and we welcome its recent deliberations on cyber security, climate security and the pandemic. At the same time, it is about time that we instil new life in the Security Council reform discussions, which need to become more substantive, and results focused.

Prevention needs to be our highest priority, given human cost and long-term implications of conflict, instability, and tensions. Safeguarding the key agreements that brought us out of the wasteful arms race of the Cold War, not least the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, is particularly important.

Mr. President,

There is no international platform that compares to the United Nations. No other body can bring together different nationalities, religions, and political views - literally under one roof.

It symbolises humanity's greatest aspirations and represents a beacon of hope, not least for those stricken by conflict, poverty, inequality, and discrimination.

The UN Charter and international law need to continue to be our lodestars. Without them, we will be lost and swayed by those seeking narrow national interests and zero-sum games.

But, to stay relevant, it is critical that the UN evolves with the times.

We need more transparency and openness within the UN system and among Member States.

And, perhaps most importantly, we need to bring the UN closer to the people of the world.

The UN75 Declaration provides us with a strong vision and framework for the future. I also welcome the Secretary-Generals report on Our Common Agenda on present and future challenges,

Mr. President,

Today's challenges may seem overwhelming, seen from the perspective of individual nations acting alone.

Still, united in hope and will, and by delivering on our commitments, we can meet these challenges and deliver on the promises set out in the UN Charter to safeguard peace, human rights, and development.

Our future depends on it.

Thank you.