Interview with UN chief Antonio Guterres, September 2020

This transcript and interview are provided as part of the Covering Climate Now collaboration.

Q: You were talking about the transformational measures that you think are needed. As you look at the COVID recovery plans so far, how do you see them? For example, how does the EU plan differ from the US?

Antonio Guterres
Well in the EU there is a commitment to a green pact, and we hope that this commitment to a green pact will have a direct impact in relation to the recovery from Covid. It's still too early to measure how countries will be acting in relation to the recovery from COVID. In the US, there is not a clear government policy aiming at recovery that is in line with the Paris agreement on climate change, but we have fortunately in the United States a very dynamic society, a business community, cities, states, the youth, public opinion, that has been more and more active and we have seen, for instance, the production of electricity based on coal coming down in the United States, not because of government policy, but because it's the normal trend in the market here due to decisions taken by the different actors in that market. So I'm hopeful that, even if different countries have different strategies, I am hopeful that the pressure of the business community that is becoming more and more enlightened on this, of the civil society, of the youth, that that pressure will force governments to move much more decisively in relation to climate action. We absolutely need to contain the growth of temperature to 1.5 degrees, and for that we absolutely need to be carbon neutral in 2050.

Q: Looking at the way that the international community has worked with the coronavirus, they haven’t pulled together on COVID. Can they pull together for the climate?

Antonio Guterres
Well, they need. And I think the failure that was shown in the capacity to contain the spread of the virus, by the fact that there was not enough international coordination in the way the virus was fought, that failure must make countries understand that they need to change course, and they need to act together in relation to the climate threat that is a much bigger threat than the threat of the pandemic in itself. I mean it’s an existential threat for our planet, and for our lives.

And so, I hope and there is an important opportunity in 2020 with the national determined contributions, the commitments of each country that countries will have to review hoping, in my opinion, that we will get to carbon neutrality in 2050, that we will be able to reduce the emissions by at least 45% until 2030, there is this opportunity for countries to come together with these very clear objectives.

If they fail to do so, we'll be in big trouble. Because temperatures are rising very quickly, the last five years we had the hottest five years in history. We have the highest concentration of
greenhouse gases in the atmosphere of the last three million years. The sea level is rising and accelerating in this impact and the expectations that we have in relation to the next five years about storms, about drought and about other dramatic impacts in the living conditions of many people around the world are absolutely terrible. So, it's time to wake up. It's time to understand that we can no longer lose more time doing not enough. Let's not forget that if things will go on as they are, we will come to the end of the century with three to five degrees of increase of temperature in relation to pre industrial levels. And that would be absolutely catastrophic.

Q: Just following on from that, the emissions gap keeps getting bigger. And at the moment we're being warned about tipping points for ice sheets, for sea levels. Things even seem to be happening a bit faster than we had anticipated. Are you worried that we're running out of time, quicker?

Antonio Guterres
We are running out of time, so we need to act very quickly. Because, as you mentioned, things are accelerating because there are several feedbacks that make things even more dramatic. I mean, as the ice cap melts, there is less ice to reflect the sun and so the water gets warmer and if the water gets warmer, we have an acceleration in many other aspects related to climate change, for instance warmer water means that hurricanes become more violent. So, I mean we are seeing here a number of aspects that are enhancing each other to make the impacts of climate change even more dramatic. That is the reason why we need to have a number of transformational measures in relation to energy, in relation to transportation, in relation to agriculture, in relation to industry, in relation to our own way of life, without which we would be doomed. The good news is that we have shown with COVID-19, that we can adapt very quickly. We are living today in a completely different way from what we were one year ago, I mean, my life is not comparable. What I do and what I did is totally different, which means I can adapt very quickly. So, if I show that capacity to adapt because of COVID, there is a very strong reason for us to show the same capacity to adapt, because of the climate change threat, that is a very real one that we cannot neglect.

Q: Would you like to see something like an international ‘manhattan project’ with engineering solutions, some international body that brings that all together with a multi trillion dollar budget. Is that the sort of big vision that we need?

Antonio Guterres
That will be of course interesting, but we don't need to have these kind of things. We need to have each country assuming a number of very clear objectives, first to massively invest in renewables. Today, it's no longer true only that green energy is cheaper than the energy produced by fossil fuels. Today, it is cheaper to build solar plants than to keep running already-existing coal plants in large numbers and these percentage of situations in which this is true is growing very quickly. So, the right decision is to massively invest in renewables and to have a transformational policy in the economy, and that is not only necessary, that is cheaper, that is more profitable, that creates more jobs, that is good in all aspects.
On the other hand, we need to change our mobility. More and more, we need to use systems of mobility that are less dependent on fossil fuels. And there we need massive investments and there it's important to see governments and the private sector doing it in a very meaningful way. We need to look into the industry. There will be lots of bailouts to industry in the Covid. Let's make those bailouts dependent on the acceptance by companies that they will become carbon neutral in 2050. At the same time, lots of taxes are imposed on our income on our salaries. Let's shift taxes from salaries to carbon. Let's put a price on carbon, and that will of course make investors decide differently.

So there are a number of things that can be done by each country. We need to introduce in regulations, namely, the risk management associated with central banks, with the financial system we can introduce climate risks that make those climate risks count, and they have a disclosure of those risks, and that will change the attitudes also of those that decide on investment. So there are lots of things that can be done and that can be transformational. If on top of that it's possible to gather all countries to have a mega project with trillions of dollars. Excellent. But let's not hope for what probably will not happen. Let's make sure that each one of us does what needs to be done and I think we'll be able to succeed.

Here, it's very important to say something. We already have 120 countries committed to carbon neutrality in 2050, but they only represent 25% of the emissions. Now it's with the big emitters that we need to act. And that means the United States, that means Europe, that means China, that means Russia, that means Japan, that means India. And we have been acting very strongly with these countries, in dialogue with these countries, in order to make sure that they stop building coal power plants and financing the build coal power plants by other countries. That they stop subsidies to fossil fuels, and that they have massive programmes of investments in renewables and in other aspects of the green economy. And if the big emitters also understand that they need to commit themselves to carbon neutrality in 2050, I think it's possible to reach our objectives.

Q: You've spoken very strongly to Japan to China to India very recently on coal. Have you heard anything back from them, any feedback? Are you, are they going to change their ways?

Antonio Guterres
I think things are happening. Things are happening. We are seeing the financing of coal power plants abroad being questioned in some of these countries. We are seeing asset managers shifting their assets from coal. I can announce to you for instance that the pension fund of the United Nations has got rid of all its investments linked to coal and this is being done by many others around the world. And we have seen governments understanding that they also need to make in this direction. This is clear in Europe. It is happening by the way in the United States, where the market itself is making power electricity produced by coal going down in a relatively quick way. So I am optimistic about the fact that coal will progressively be phased out, renewables will be increasing, and that fossil fuels will be a smaller and smaller percentage of our economies.
Q: You've warned that the pandemic could push 100 million people into extreme poverty, and it seems to have exposed this great inequality in society across the world. Do you see parallels with climate?

Antonio Guterres
Well indeed. It is the same. The poor people are much more vulnerable to the Covid and the poor people are much more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. And this is true at the level of communities, it's true at the level of countries it's true at the level of families. When one sees the impact of a storm, those that live in the slums of cities in the developing world of course suffer much more than those that live in nice buildings, well built buildings, in rich cities around the world.

So, it is obvious that in all aspects, looking at for instance food security, the drought, that is impacting in the Sahel and in other parts of Africa, or in other, or the (...) of India is having a much more devastating impact on poor people than on rich people and on poor countries than on rich countries. So, it is clear that, as with Covid, climate change is increasing the inequalities. And so, inequality is not only a terrible handicap in relation to climate change impacts, but climate change in itself is contributing to increase inequalities and that is the reason why it is so important to use this opportunity of the recovery from the Covid to build more sustainable but also more inclusive societies, which means to address inequality as something that is absolutely essential. And inequality is not only a question of injustice, or suffering. Inequality is also stupid from the point of view of economic development. If you have more equality in societies, if more people have access to markets, that will boost investment that will boost production that will increase the richness of everybody. And at the same time, inequality is not only a question of wealth or the question of income, you have inequalities because of gender, you have inequalities because of race, you have inequalities affecting discrimination that affect for instance, people with difficulties of different sorts. Now if there will be gender equality, we would make much more progress in the economy, if indigenous populations would be better protected, nature itself will be better protected. If we fight racism effectively I have no doubt that migrant communities, or communities of different origins, will also be able to contribute better to the economy and at the same time be better protected in relation to Covid, or in relation to climate change. If you look at the country where I live now in the US, the Afro-American community has been much more dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 than the majority of the population. So inequality is something that it is our duty to fight, and it is in the interest of everybody to reduce inequality in the world.

Q: People in this pandemic have been sort of yearning to get back to normal. But is that where we should be heading?

Antonio Guterres
Well, I think we should be heading to get back to a new normal. In the sense, normal in our relations. What I must confess is more difficult for me is the lack of personal relations. I like to do interviews but I would like to be with you in the same room for us to discuss. And I'm away from my family. So, I want to go back to the normal relations with my family. But I don't want to go back to a world where biodiversity is being put into question, to a world where fossil fuels receive more subsidies than renewables, or to a world in which we see
inequalities making societies with less and less cohesion and creating instability, creating anger, creating frustration. I think we need to have a different world, a different normal and we have an opportunity to do so.

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