

Climate breakdown

Last call for action

FIFTY years ago yesterday, the United Nations, at the urging of Sweden, held the first-ever international environmental conference. *The Guardian* called the Stockholm conference, held at the city of Folkets Hus at the site of a prison and a theatre specialising in farces, "the beginning of a long and slow struggle to find and agree global solutions to these newly understood global environmental problems". It has certainly been a long and slow struggle. It wasn't until 20 years later that the leaders of the world would agree to meet in Rio to kick off the UN climate summits, the most recent of which was COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland. Between Rio and Glasgow, the world's climate summits have been, like the site of the Stockholm conference, both a prison of man's folly, greed and neglect (to use the headline of the *Daily Mail* of the day) and a theatre of farces. Here is why.

To begin with, global leaders do not understand the magnitude of the climate problem we are dealing with, Katherine Hayhoe, chief scientist for the Nature Conservancy and professor at Texas Tech University, tells *The Guardian*. Perhaps this is why much of the national plans submitted to the climate summits have been focusing on adaptation to limit damage to the planet. Small wonder, zero-carbon emission is of recent vintage. Adapting to climate change is an excuse to continue with business-as-usual greenhouse gas emissions. "Our infrastructure, worth trillions of dollars, built over decades, was

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built for a planet that no longer exists," warns Hayhoe. Be alerted, she says, we are about to wipe out 10,000 years of our civilisation.

If that is not enough, here is more. There is a gaping gap between the pledges submitted to COP26 and what policies and measures are being implemented by governments around the world.

The signs that point to the gaps are all around us. If climate scientists are right, the Earth is heading to being at least a 2.7°C-planet, not the one under 2°C as promised by COP26. Some are even preparing us for a 3.6°C Earth. If this comes to pass — it will, if we continue with our folly, greed and neglect of the planet — nothing less than catastrophe awaits us. In short, an uninhabitable planet. This is the view of three former executive secretaries of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, parent treaty to the Paris agreement, Michael Zammit Cutajar, Yvo de Boer and Christiana Figueres. They issue their warning in *The Guardian* thus: "The further climate change progresses, the more we lock in a future featuring more ruined harvests, and more food insecurity, along with a host of other problems including rises in sea level, threats to water security, drought and desertification. Governments must act against climate change while also dealing with other pressing crises." The hope is that this 50th anniversary of the Stockholm conference, planned for this week, would push governments around the world to act before it is too late. Making climate change promises is one thing. Getting them done is another. Is there a need for motivation? Here is one from Deloitte. If the world acts now to rapidly achieve zero emissions by mid-century, it would benefit the global economy by US\$43 trillion over the next 50 years. Almost US\$1 trillion a year. But shouldn't leaving behind a habitable planet be a better motivation?