

June 29, 2015

Civil society speakers selected for United Nations President of General Assembly's High-level Event on Climate Change

On June 29, 2015, H.E. Mr. Sam Kahamba Kutesa, the United Nations President of General Assembly, held a High-level Event on Climate Change at United Nations Headquarters in New York. 2015 is a critical year for the climate change negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Therefore, the high-level event intended to provide impetus and political momentum for an ambitious climate agreement, by keeping the issue high on the agenda at the mid-point between The Conference of the Parties (COP) 20 in Lima and COP21 in Paris. It also aimed to provide space for showcasing climate action and concrete initiatives, through multi-stakeholder approaches to address climate change.

In his opening remarks, Sam Kutesa, Assembly President, said the well-being of the planet must go hand in hand with development efforts. While science unequivocally pointed to human activity as the primary cause of global warming, it also underlined that there was still a chance for this generation to reverse the current trends and preserve the planet through bold, collective action. "Simply put, it is not too late. But, we must act now. And we must act with courage," he declared.

While the issues to be resolved ahead of the twenty-first Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) were both challenging and at times controversial, a successful outcome was possible with constructive engagement and flexibility of all parties, he said.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that, in many ways, "the stars are aligned as never before", with the world's two biggest greenhouse-gas emitters announcing ambitious actions and the number of national climate laws and policies nearly doubling since 2009. China, the European Union and the United States had "placed their bets" on low-carbon, climate-resilient growth, and the price of renewable energy sources was falling dramatically, with the world using more renewable electric power each year.

The private sector, he said, was integrating climate risk into decision-making, revamping energy systems and calling for a price on carbon, while civil society was demanding action, demonstrating that the world was "hungry" for and capable of taking serious steps to meet the climate challenge. The pace of UNFCCC discussions, however, was far too slow.

"If we fail, we will condemn our children and grandchildren to a future of climate chaos," Mr. Ban said. "If we succeed, we can set the world on course for greater stability, better health and stronger economies for all."

Mogens Lykketoft, Speaker of the Parliament of Denmark and President-elect of the General Assembly for the seventieth session, said the Paris conference was the first real test of translating the world's collective commitment to sustainable development into action.

"We should take action now," said Manuel Pulgar-Vidal, President of the twentieth session of the Conference of Parties (COP20) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and Minister of Peru. "We have already run most of the marathon," he said, emphasizing that, now, it was imperative to "put all the pieces together".

Laurent Fabius, Minister for Foreign Affairs of France and President of COP21, said climate change and humanity's contribution could no longer be contested. The threat was global in nature, which required global action.

One of the selected civil society speakers was 15-year-old Xiuhtezcatl Roske Martinez who said it would take truly united action to save the planet for his generation and those unborn. "Seeing my world collapsing around me pushed me to action," he said, urging people to see climate change as a clear and present danger.

The first panel discussion of the high-level meeting was revolving around "Mobilizing political momentum for ambitious actions on mitigation, adaptation and means of implementation" and the second one discussed "Mobilizing stakeholders for ambitious actions on mitigation, adaptation and means of implementation." Both panels included speakers from Suriname, Kenya, Azerbaijan, Panama, Chile, Mexico, Sierra Leone, India, Japan, Angola, Spain, Germany (on behalf of the G7), Rwanda (on behalf of the African Group), Trinidad and Tobago (on behalf of the Caribbean Community), Maldives (on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States), Guatemala (on behalf of the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean), Australia, Lebanon, New Zealand and Hungary. A representative of the African Union also participated, as did a representative of Action Aid in Bangladesh.

At the end of the first panel Robert Redford, actor and environmental campaigner, said, "Your (politicians) mission is as simple as it is daunting — to save the world before it is too late." He said ignorance was no longer an excuse for inaction. Two degrees was all it took to turn arable land into a desert and the window of opportunity was shrinking, he said, underlining that the time for "climate denial" was over. When leaders meet in Paris in December, the citizens of the world will be watching. "Look, this is it," he said. "This is our only planet. This may be our last chance."

The second panel brought to the fore a question of the transition to carbon-free and resilient economies and that national contributions would need to be increased over time along a clear pathway and with hopes of sending a clear message for a framework on how to fund greener, cleaner economies.

Compiled by Lesya Yurchyshyn, ICW-CIF Representative to the DPI