

CLARA

Climate Land Ambition and Rights Alliance

1 October -- “Climate Week” in New York has wrapped up. For months, UN Secretary General António Guterres pushed on countries to come forward with pledges of new action in both mitigation ambition and finance. He reportedly even conditioned head-of-state access to the General Assembly ‘main stage’ on whether or not a country was indicating aggressive new climate action. Guterres repeatedly called for no new coal plants to be built after 2020.

For CLARA – an international alliance concerned with rights, ecosystem restoration, and regenerative agriculture and agroecology – the most notable feature of the Climate Action Summit was the much higher profile given to land-sector actions, which as a workstream of the overall summit are called ‘Nature Based Solutions’.

In the end however country commitments across the various summit workstreams fell short. The actions announced – some new, some not -- won’t do nearly enough to close the gap between current levels of nationally determined ambition (which will result in at least three degrees [3°C] of global warming) and the more ambitious 1.5°C pathways that the science tells us we need, now – and that the Paris Agreement requires.

Here CLARA analyzes some of the most significant commitments from last week’s Summit, with special emphasis on commitments coming out of the ‘Nature Based Solutions’ workstream. Three ‘top-line’ responses:

- ✓ Some progress was made in highlighting the paramount importance of protecting primary forests – an understanding that these ecosystems, with their high levels of biodiversity and greater resilience in the face of climate change, are irreplaceable and should be protected. The ‘30 x 30’ Initiative – to protect/restore 30% of the earth’s terrestrial surface by 2030 – got further traction. Yet no government announced a plan suggesting indigenous rights as a climate solution, despite increasing evidence that securing land rights for local communities and indigenous peoples is *the* most important factor in preventing forest loss. (The one head of state who mentioned indigenous peoples -- President Ivan Duque Marquez of Colombia – did so only in the context of IP participation in environmental service markets.)
- ✓ While many countries promoted how many new trees they intend to plant, none came forward to say, ‘we have undertaken a review of all national policies and perverse incentives that promote forest destruction’. At a rhetorical level, the importance of biodiversity was mentioned quite a bit – but overall it is clear that policy-makers still have a very weak grasp on the interrelated nature of the climate and biodiversity crises. They just aren’t willing to reign in their extractive industries (logging, mining, commodity agriculture), or reduce the high levels of consumption that drives deforestation.

- ✓ Support pledged to the Green Climate Fund is on track toward \$10B in ‘replenished’ funds – but some of the announcements were merely new packages of existing financial commitments, and anyway the rich countries aren’t coming anywhere close to the \$100B in annual support that was to materialize by 2020.

At the end of the ‘Climate Action’ day, Secretary General Guterres summarized the new pledges. 77 countries committed to net zero by 2050. 70 countries said they’d boost their ‘nationally determined contribution’ (NDC) by 2020. A group of world’s largest asset owners, with \$2 trillion under management, committed to move to carbon free investment portfolios by 2050, while the multilateral and national development banks in the International Development Finance Club indicated their intention to mobilize \$1 trillion for climate action by 2025. Several countries – with leadership from Costa Rica – said they were committed to the ‘30 x 30’ target for conservation and restoration, coming together in a [‘Global Campaign for Nature’](#).

The rising anger and frustration of a younger generation, combined with the strong performance at the Summit from the most vulnerable island nations, were still not enough to create a meaningful shift away from ‘business as usual’ approaches. Countries indicated what they were willing to do, but that is much less than what needs to happen. We hope the challenge issued by activist Greta Thunberg will be remembered, as she dares national leaders to address the crisis at a level commensurate with the threat felt today by small island states, youth, and indigenous peoples on the front lines of climate change.

Below is a list of some of the more important land-sector-related announcements made during Climate Week. The full list can be found at www.un.org/climatechange.

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- ✓ His Excellency Carlos Manuel Rodriguez, Minister of Environment and Energy, Costa Rica called for an end to *all logging* in primary forests. CLARA and its members have also made this call. Momentum toward this goal is found in the creation of the new "Forests for Life Partnership", involving the United Nations Development Program, Global Wildlife Conservation, Wildlife Conservation Society, World Resources Institute, and CLARA member Rainforest Foundation Norway. In announcing the partnership, Joseph Walton from the World Conservation Society commented that “there is no climate solution that does not have intact forests at the heart of its strategy.”
- ✓ Norway announced a *de facto* ‘new price floor’ for forest carbon as part of its new agreement with Gabon – doubling it to \$10/ton. That price is not a formal ‘offset’ price, since Norway will immediately retire the carbon credits thus generated. If other countries were to pursue this approach – not expecting REDD+ mechanisms to be used to offset action in other sectors – then the new price would be significant, insofar as a much greater swath of tropical forest could be protected using that \$10/ton figure. Norway also increased its funding for the REDD+ implementation fund. However, our Norwegian colleagues believe their government could have gone much further, since some of their announcements pertained to disbursements of previous commitments. Still, future leadership in the ‘Nature Based Solutions’ workstream is likely to come from Norway and Costa Rica.

- ✓ No country made significant new commitments in agriculture, although one regional and one private-sector initiative should be noted. Central American countries announced a 2030 goal of having 10 million hectares of land sustainably managed in ‘climate-resilient landscapes’. (The governments still couldn’t bring themselves to talk about indigenous rights, however.) The private-sector commitment that went the furthest came from French company Danone. Danone recognized that the industrial farming model is broken, and spokesmen from the company repeatedly emphasized the importance of biodiversity as a part of *regenerative agriculture*. Danone representatives spoke on a number of panels at various events during Climate Week; leadership from others was less conspicuous. See comment from CLARA member ActionAid [here](#). Danone took the lead with eighteen other companies to step up alternative farming practices in an initiative called [OP2B](#) – “one planet, business for biodiversity.” Meanwhile, the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and several donor countries announced a plan for adaptation and climate resilience designed to reach 300 million smallholder farmers. Announcements of any sector re-orientation toward agroecology, however, were not forthcoming.
- ✓ The Secretary General announced combined pledges from countries to plant 11 billion trees. CLARA tracked announcements and came up with a slightly higher figure. Ethiopia and Turkey each said they intended to plant 4 billion trees; Kenya 2 billion; New Zealand 1.8 billion; and Pakistan a further billion. Pakistan’s initial NDC submission, however, indicates that those trees will be developed in ‘plantations’ – which is not the same, from carbon or biodiversity perspectives, as restoring native forests. In fact, announcements of tree planting may not be a ‘nature-based solution’ at all, if forests that could be restored are instead being transformed into monoculture tree plantations. See CLARA member GFC’s [commentary](#) on this topic.

CLARA is happy to note that world leaders appear to have ‘wised up’ somewhat in relation to geoengineering and the false solutions associated with (for example) bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS). We hope this is due to an improved understanding amongst policy makers of the contribution that ecosystem protection and restoration can make toward meeting the mitigation challenge, and thus greater attention to ‘Nature Based Solutions’. But, it’s also clear that many conversations about geoengineering – given the controversy surrounding them, and their continued association with the fossil fuel industry – have just moved behind closed doors.

Finally – about those ‘[net zero](#)’ figures. CLARA would have liked more pledges happening within 2020, 2025, or year 2030 timeframes. A variety of mitigation pathways toward ‘Net Zero’ at 2050 are possible. If we immediately moved into ‘high-ambition’ mode, allowing forests to re-grow and using other natural climate solutions to meet the mitigation challenge, we might get to 1.5 degrees without ‘overshoot’, as is explored in considerable detail in both the [One Earth Climate Model](#) and also the 2018 CLARA report [Missing Pathways](#).

But if ambition isn’t increased – or ‘false ambition’ is pursued through monoculture tree plantations, REDD+ offsets, or expanded use of bioenergy – then by 2030 we will have already

exceeded the 1.5°C threshold. CLARA reiterates the essential *moral* obligation of minimizing overshoot at 2030, since there is absolutely no certainty that we will be able to 'pull carbon out of the atmosphere' at the volumes required, in the time required, at a socially-manageable price. Better to pursue action now.

If this year's horrible hurricanes and overall weird weather is any indication, we simply cannot let the climate system push toward two degrees of warming. Too many ecosystems will unravel at that amount of warming, as will societies that have developed under a cooler and more stable climate regime.

Young climate activists have realized this. They are pushing us forward as a result. In the end Ms. Thunberg is right in asking national leaders, 'how dare you?' bring pledges to the Climate Action Summit that don't square with what the science is telling us.