

UN/Austria Symposium
“Space Applications for Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate Action”
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SPACE & INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AS CRITICAL TOOLS FOR A BETTER FUTURE

Distinguished speakers, dear participants, colleagues, friends,

Despite this unprecedented situation and without the pleasure of seeing you all in person, I am honored that so many of you have joined this 26th edition of the United Nations / Austria Symposium.

The UN/Austria Symposium is one of the long-standing activities that we organize annually. We are more than grateful to our valued partners for their support and great collaboration over the years.

“The happenings in recent months underline the consequences of disrupting nature by human activities.”

The selection of this year’s theme is a no-brainer - **we are at the beginning of the decade of action to revert a catastrophic scenario**. And while the decision about this Symposium was taken before the start of the pandemic, the happenings in recent months underline the consequences of disrupting nature by human activities.

Our ever-growing need for land and material is exerting strong pressure on the already struggling nature to cope.

We are destroying valuable habitats for species which might not exist anywhere else on the planet with biodiversity suffering from an incredibly high rate of loss.

Around one million species are under threat of extinction as we erode the very foundations of our origins and of our security, health, economy and livelihoods.

And as humanity is increasingly extending its presence to places previously untouched, we often risk encountering fauna and flora, as well as bacteria or viruses, unknown to humankind.

But we cannot do this forever. Becoming so detached from nature that we only care about our consumption and needs can be catastrophic. And COVID-19 is a serious warning.

This global pandemic has already cost many lives, millions of jobs, and billions of dollars to adopt measures aiming at preventing further spread of the virus.

We are living through a global crisis not seen for decades. The suffering, death, and economic and social disruption only underlines what we have known for long - we are pushing the natural world to its limits, bringing upheaval on ourselves.

And the pandemic has also manifested severe inequalities - not only between nations but also within them with those most in need, suffering the harshest ramifications.

And it has also shown us **how damaging failure to prepare and act is**. Warnings about a pandemic-like situation were circulating around the world for years - with little to no response.



"Hesitation is not an option anymore."

Does this remind us of something?

A certain parallel can be drawn in the way we treated these warnings and the way we act in the climate emergency. As bad as the situation caused by COVID-19 is, **the damage and disruption caused by climate change are likely to be even greater.**

Current predictions are very grim. A wide-ranging UN climate report shows that climate change is already having a major effect on all aspects of the environment, as well as on the health and wellbeing of the global population.

Global heating is showing no signs of slow down. The last decade was the warmest ever recorded with its last 5 year capturing the infamous records for annual global average temperature.

Extreme weather events are becoming ever more frequent and their damages are also breaking previous records. Droughts and wildfires are wreaking havoc from the polar regions to the equator. And shortages of food and water are becoming ever more frequent, especially hitting developing nations.

Yet, at a time when the consequences are no longer a matter of if, but how severe they will turn out to be, our ambition to address and reverse climate emergency is falling behind the pledges of the Paris Agreement and the cries of the newest science.

The current unprecedented state of affairs should therefore serve as a wake-up call. **Now is the most appropriate moment to re-think the way we treat our planet.**

We need to build back better as damaging the Earth, its biodiversity, climate, the oceans will only lead to further destruction of ecosystems and livelihoods.

Hesitation is not an option anymore. If we fail to act now, the consequences will be harsh, the costs extremely high, and damage to the planet, environment and all living beings irreversible for decades if not centuries.

"More than ever before, countries must embrace global cooperation."

More than ever before, countries must embrace global cooperation – no country alone, no matter how wealthy and technologically developed, can fix the broken climate on its own. Just like with COVID-19, only by working together we can address this great challenge.

Unfortunately, this is in no way a guarantee. Around the world, we see signs of unilateral instead of multilateral actions, decisions and policies. But poor coordination will lead us nowhere. It will only exacerbate the existing inequalities, delete the gains already achieved and lead to a worse rather than better situation overall.

The **United Nations**, as an organization with a global reach that brings together more than 190 countries, **strives to facilitate cooperation** not only between its Member States but also vis-à-vis non-state stakeholders.

Its unique convening power has been crucial in addressing a wide range of crises in the 75 years of its existence. And the situation is no different with climate change – the ultimate challenge facing our generation.

Responding to the inadequate ambition and insufficient action to reduce emissions of greenhouse gasses, the UN Secretary-General convened a global Climate Action Summit in the fall of 2019, aiming to scale-up action, raise attention about the worsening climate crisis and to forge new pathways to support the achievement of global frameworks, especially the Paris Agreement.



One of the most vocal messages was the reiteration of the need to **involve all stakeholders and ensure their full participation in raising ambition for climate mitigation and adaptation.**

The voice of political leadership was led by more than 70 countries, committing to deliver more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions, but went hand in hand with a strong commitment by the private sector and youth.

Overall, the Summit delivered new multi-stakeholder initiatives recognizing that risks and benefits of climate action must be shared and that transitioning to a net-zero GHG emissions economy should leave no one behind, underlining what we've highlighted earlier.

It is thus of great importance that we gather here this week, even if virtually, to explore **what more can be done in building bridges and making sure that what we do in space individually, locally or nationally matters globally and benefits everyone.**

"The space sector can serve as a role model for international cooperation."

And I believe it is safe to claim that when it comes to international cooperation, the space sector can serve, in a sense, as a role-model. For decades, countries, joined by commercial and other stakeholders, have been able to overcome political, cultural, societal and economic hurdles in calling for knowledge and new solutions for a better life on Earth.

Pooling resources and knowledge, conducting joint missions, and agreeing on mutual and open data-sharing policies have taken us to places unthinkable six decades ago when the industry was being born.

Research conducted in and from space has in many areas proven to be the game-changer.

We now much better understand who we are, where we belong, how we came to be not only as a civilization but also as living beings, and where we are heading.

We also know a lot more about our planet. Through sustained, reliable and timeless observation of Earth, space infrastructure has unlocked virtually limitless access to data and information.

This consistent, high-resolution, and broad-scale monitoring has allowed us to begin to understand historical patterns and evolution of climate variables in an unprecedented way.

"Without satellites we would be blind."

Without satellites, we would be essentially blind. In some respects, they complement other methods and tools, but in many ways, they offer a unique contribution. To put this into perspective, **more than half of the internationally agreed Essential Climate Variables are dependent on remote sensing.**

And since we know that well-informed and multi-stakeholder decision-making towards climate action requires the sharing of the same diagnosis for the causes, effects, and evolution of climate change, the importance of space activities is truly extraordinary.

And their role is also manifested greatly as an integral part of the solution. The use of space science and technology, data, services and applications extend to virtually all sectors of human activities, many relevant to climate action. We have heard many concrete examples from our great speakers over the past two days.

Reduction of emissions from industry and transportation sector, identifying best locations for solar and wind farms or unlocking precision agriculture methods - a shortlist of what can be done from space and just a glimpse of many topics covered during the sessions.



But let us not rest on our laurels. Identifying how space benefits society is only one part of the story. **These gains must be made much broadly available.** While it would seem legitimate to assume that owing to such extensive applicability space assets are utilized at their maximum potential, that is not yet the case.

More than a hundred nations are lagging behind with limited or non-existing activity in space. But there is every reason to be positive about the future. Rapid technological progress, declining costs of satellite and launch vehicle manufacturing and operation, and especially international cooperation are shaping the contemporary space industry.

"The UN has an important role to play in bridging the space divide between countries."

The United Nations has an important role to play in bridging the "space divide" between countries. The Office for Outer Space Affairs seeks solutions and has exemplified the approach of facilitating partnerships, networking and cooperation exceptionally well.

Being a broker of international cooperation for space and non-space community is a mission which the Office has successfully carried out since its inception.

Bringing non-spacefaring nations into the space community, enabling students to turn their ideas into research, training individuals and teams to use satellites to save lives, improve food and water security, and accelerate global efforts towards sustainable development as such. Just a pinnacle of achievements through the projects and programmatic activities under the leadership of UNOOSA.

Much of what has been done in recent years would not be possible without the great support of our partners.

It is precisely partnerships, networking and cooperation that have enabled us to make a real difference in the world. And we are collectively looking into new solutions on how to benefit the society even better than before.

In this regard, the Space Climate Observatory cannot be omitted in any discussion regarding space and climate action. A rather novel effort of global space agencies and other partners has a great potential to facilitate access to space benefits.

Promoting and enhancing science communication, improving users' access to data, information, products and services adapted to their needs and promoting and conducting research and technological development based on these needs. Just a reiteration of the objectives the international partners including UNOOSA have agreed on under the SCO declaration.

SCO carries great potential and will be instrumental in the global efforts in this decade of action. We collectively need to focus on solutions that will make the greatest impact on the world, and SCO represents a fantastic platform for such purpose.

I am very proud of the work that has been done and grateful that we, as space community, are not slowing down.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am sure many of you have recently seen images of clear skies over cities which are typically covered with smog and pollution, clear shallow waters around cities which are hubs for marine traffic, or wildlife returning to locations where they have not been spotted for dozens of years.

In some places, emissions of different gases and pollutants have dropped in specific cases by up to 50 percent, not only benefiting the environment but saving tens of thousands of lives that would be lost due to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.



This is the world that we should envision to achieve in the following decades. But not as a result of a global pandemic, but as a result of a joint effort of stakeholders from west to east, from north to south, from individuals to communities to whole nations, from countries big and small, developed and developing, from start-ups to corporations, from local to national to international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

*We need to consider climate risk
in all decision-making.*

2020 will certainly stand out as a year of a major transformation. And it is up to all of us to **ensure that the post-Covid recovery phase is dominated by science, technology and innovation.** We need to consider climate risk in all decision-making.

Science is telling us that we are losing the race – but it is also telling us that it is not too late. Fortunately, we are running a marathon.

When future generations turn the pages in history books, let us work together to not let them see destruction, despair and agony, but a great example how one crisis can be used as the opportunity to start anew – to become a better shepherd to the only home we have, at least for the time being. The moment is now to change the way we have behaved and treated our planet.

One thing is certain – human talent, ingenuity and ability to adapt can do miracles. What is required from all of us is responsibility, dedication and ambition to make our societies more resilient, more sustainable and more equal than ever before.

While we have a long way to go before the benefits of space are universally available, I would like to assure our Member States, UN entities as well as other stakeholders, that UNOOSA will do everything possible to make it happen.

And it is with pleasure that I inform you that at UNOOSA, **we are currently developing a dedicated Space for Climate Action Initiative** to institutionalize our contribution through an even better targeted and tailored approach.

With this initiative, we aim to support regional and national actions essential for resilience, adaptation, and mitigation in local contexts, while also supporting international coordination and cooperation which is essential for mitigation.

It underlines and builds upon the importance of creating connections, bringing the knowledge out and overcoming the lack of expertise and capacity in dealing with an unprecedented threat.

I would hereby like to invite you to stay tuned for new developments and plead for considering your support once the project is up and running. As I already said, the long history of partnerships between UNOOSA and space stakeholders is what makes a real difference in the world.

*"The greatest threat to our planet is the belief
that someone else will save it."
- Robert Swan -*

This is a “make-or-break moment” for the health of our planet, and we must all get involved. The biggest cost will come if we do nothing.

I am astonished how much talent, knowledge and ideas have been brought to the virtual table during this 26th Graz Symposium. I can only encourage all of you to continue your amazing work and do even more – as one space community.

To conclude, let me quote a British historian, activist and explorer Robert Swan who often said: "The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it."

Thank you.