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The United Nations Climate Action Summit

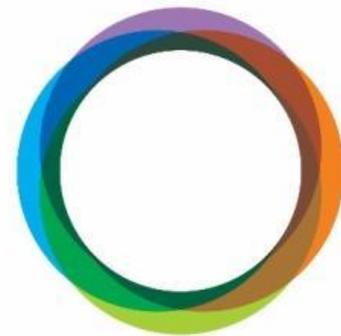
 Introduction

 The Climate Action Summit

 BRICS countries at the Climate Summit

 Outcomes of the summit

 Final remarks



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Introduction

The 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 74) took place in New York, in September 2019. The kick-off for the UNGA 74 was a one-day Climate Action Summit held by Secretary-General of the United Nations. The high-level event aimed to mobilize the international community to tackle the climate change and strengthen commitments under the Paris Agreement before the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) in December.

In its 31th edition, the Socio-environmental Radar analyses The United Nations Climate Action Summit. The edition provides an overview of the Climate Summit, including the statements made by the BRICS countries and the summary of final results and developments.

The Climate Action Summit

The United Nations (UN) Climate Summit, held on September 23rd, 2019, brought together government leaders, international organizations, members of civil society and representatives of private sector in response to the urgent need of action on the climate change. The summit took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and was hosted by the UN's Secretary-General, António Guterres.

The Climate Summit opened a week of 74th session of the UN General Assembly. The summit itself was held with a variety of pre-events such as a Youth Climate Summit¹. This historic event invited young people from around the world to open up a dialogue, giving them the chance to provide solutions to tackle the climate change. One key focus of the Climate Summit was youth and mobilization as tool to empower young people and engage them better in decision-making processes around climate action. In addition, the civil society, and especially

¹ Youth Summit: https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/assets/pdf/youth_climate_summit_pr_20190921.pdf

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

the youth participated in a global Climate Strike², which gathered millions people together to demand action on the Climate Summit.

The main goal of the Summit was to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, on the basis of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement that was adopted in 2015 at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC. The agreement forces countries work to limit the increase of global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius. The target of the Summit was to direct way towards actions that can limit the temperature increase even to 1.5 degrees Celsius. A report released last year by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) showed significant advances on human health and global ecosystem if the global warming is managed to limit to 1.5°C³. Thus, the latest IPCC report was a boost to gather international community together to cooperate to ensure sustainable climate future.

Moreover, the world's leading climate science organizations published a new high-level report on 22nd of September to broadcast latest information for the Climate Summit⁴. It consists of: updates about climate around the world, current trends in emissions, comparison a number of tools to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and estimates of different future climate outcomes. The main aim of the report was to kick-start the discussion by highlighting the world's present state and future objectives as dealing with global warming.

The theme of Climate Summit 2019 was "A Race We Can Win. A Race We Must Win". The Secretary-General, António Guterres summoned participants to come out with concrete plans, not with charming speeches. The action-oriented meeting was constructed around nine selected areas: finance, energy transition, industry transition, nature-based solutions, cities and local action, resilience and local adaptation, mitigation strategy, youth engagement and public mobilization, social and political driver⁵.

Therefore, distribution of a wide range of issues gave a baseline for selected countries to present national strategies including enhancing their Nationally Determined Contributions

² Climate protests sweep the world: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-49753710>

³ IPCC, 2018: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_Low_Res.pdf

⁴ Latest climate science by the Science Advisory Group of the UN Climate Summit: <https://urly.fi/1nce>

⁵ The Climate Summit 9 interdependent tracks: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/climate-action-areas.shtml>

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

(NDCs); implementing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent by 2030; and, in addition, preparing carbon neutrality plans for 2050. One further focus of the summit was on climate finance and sustainable economic development specifically on bringing together members of private and public sector. Overall, the summit provided a platform to showcase new research findings and to raise political ambition and relevant discussion in order to meet global climate needs.

Crucially, the summit beforehand was seen as a chance for international community to step up before the United Nations Climate Change Conference hold in Madrid, Spain in December 2019, that will be the 25th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP25). Beside the attention toward the COP25, the main focus was on the Paris Agreement. Reports and studies are showing that, despite of the agreement, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase annually. Therefore, the United Nations Climate Summit agenda included to push global players for collective efforts to meet requirements of the Paris Agreement in the ahead of Conference in Madrid.

BRICS countries at the Climate Summit

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres invited every head of state to the Climate Summit along with other representatives from societies at large. The state leaders were required to showcase their strengthened national climate plans under the Paris Agreement. The deliverables from governments were reviewed before the summit and only a number of countries were allowed to speak on the stage. The selection criteria stressed the transformational impact, advance of sustainable development, innovation of solutions and the implement-ability which takes in to account measurablesness and implementablesness.

The summit's structure excluded a number of countries from speaking because of the lack of new climate commitments. These countries included large economies such as the United States, Australia, Brazil, Japan and South-Africa. Thus, the Climate Summit had representants from three BRICS countries: Russia, China and India.

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

The Russian Federation was represented in the summit by Special Presidential Representative on Climate Issues, Ruslan Edelgeriyev. He announced that on September 21, 2019, Russia had adopted the Paris Agreement and is becoming a full-fledged participant of the climate convention. The Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, gave a final approval for the Agreement on the same day of the Climate Summit. In the context of the Paris Agreement, Edelgeriyev spoke about Russia's past and future reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. His speech on climate contributions included the use of low-carbon technology and the global role of Russia's boreal forests. The climate advisor also emphasized the importance of transnational cooperation to achieve more determined results of climate action.

India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, took the stage during the summit's opening ceremony. He highlighted the action urgency and called for a comprehensive transformation across different areas on human behavior in order to support structural changes. Hence, the world needs more ambitious climate policy than it has accomplished so far, as Modi stated. Modi presented India's National Determined Contributions and talked about the increase of renewable energy actions obtained by bringing the renewable energy capacity to 175 gigawatts by the 2022, and to 450 gigawatts later on. Moreover, he stressed the changes in transport sector through e-mobility and development in use of biofuel. Also, India's water conservation actions were mentioned shortly. At international level, he stressed the campaigns such as International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure which he exhorted other states to join as well. Finally, he encouraged other states to join the ban of single-use plastics. He concluded his speech by announcing India's action to install solar panels on top of the UN building as an example.

China's representant the State Councilor and Special Representative of President Xi Jinping, H.E. Mr. Wang Yi reassured China's commitment to the Paris Agreement. Wang focused on the contribution of an effective international cooperation as a key to reach the targets of Paris Agreement. In order to underline the common responsibility of all nations, he asked to pay attention to special needs of developing countries. In addition, he said that the most developed countries should take the leading role in reducing emissions and financially support the developing countries to build climate resilience with the different capabilities. He called the developed countries to direct US\$ 100 billion in climate finance by 2020. In his speech, Wang

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

noted China's latest action on cutting the CO2 emissions and the implements in green and low-carbon development. He stated that China will meet as required the NDC's under the Paris Agreement. As part of the work, China will continue to build Belt and Road Initiative and development the nature based solutions. Also, China pledged to give stronger support for international cooperation that is needed to fight against the global warming.

Outcomes of the summit

As a result of the one-day Climate Summit, a number of new initiatives were announced alongside with uplift of the existing practices in order to tackle the climate change. The core of the outcome was the ability to enhance knowledge, strengthen international dialogue and capacity to stress the engagement of climate change actions and policies.

At the closing speech, Secretary-General Guterres highlighted some of the landmarks taken to fulfill the shared climate goals⁶. Such were the European Union and 65 countries committing to net zero carbon emissions by 2050; the Nature-Based Solutions Coalition led by China and New Zealand making more than 150 new commitments to cut carbon emissions; 70 countries announcing to boost their National Determined Contributions by 2020; new initiatives promising to conserve 30% of Earth's land and waters by 2030 and countries pledging to plant more than 11 billion trees.

The BRICS did not represent clear common will during the summit. Many of the major greenhouse-gas-emitting countries, including China and India, made a very few announcements with actual concreteness. Among other issues, the China's representant, Mr. Wang Yi, addressed the need for developed countries to mobilize \$100 billion for the developing countries in order to build the climate resilience. Guterres stressed the same issue during his final speech by saying that the implementation of this would put forward the climate justice between the developed and developing countries.

At the same time, an inspiring lead was taken by small island states. These small economies committed to carbon neutrality by 2050 and to move to 100% renewable energy by

⁶ Closing remarks on Climate Summit by António Guterres: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1yiCiyK5Ro>

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

2030. Alongside the small states, the cities were in the center of taking action as a total of 2000 cities committed to integrate the climate change in the center of their decision-making and urban planning, also more than 100 cities pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050. In addition, a new initiative "Action Toward a Climate Friendly Transport" was created to help cities to be planned in a way that minimizes the need for transport in the urban areas.⁷

Along with the public sector, more and more actors from private sector committed to work under the targets of the Paris Agreement. These include well-known brands with high market capitalization such as Nestlé, Electrolux, L'Oréal and IKEA. The financial sector also presented new climate pledges for the future. Such are the Climate Investment Platform to mobilize \$1 trillion in clean energy investments by 2025 in 20 least developed countries; the Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance to make investments with the goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees; a group of development banks guiding \$1 trillion into climate projects by 2025 and more than 130 banks collectively launching new principles for responsible banking in the frame of the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals⁸. The steps taken by participants on the private sector were concrete signals towards the transition to green economy.

To conclude, the summit can be considered as a step forward to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement. The summit's participants showed a clear ambition, but as a consequence of the varying level of contribution from different countries, there was an increase in the growing role of non-state and sub-state actors. For example, cities, business and financial sectors and NGOs showed their abilities to be the forerunners in preventing the catastrophic effects of climate change. The outcomes of the summit will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter.

Final Remarks

Originally the COP25 was supposed to be held in Brazil but soon after the President Jair Bolsonaro won the elections last year, Brazil withdrew from hosting the conference. The change between today's atmosphere where Brazil was blocked from speaking on the Climate Summit

⁷ Summit announcements and commitments: www.un.org/en/climatechange/assets/pdf/CAS_main_release.pdf

⁸ Banks commit to climate change and sustainability: <https://url.yfi/1ncd>

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

and the earlier commitment to show leading role on fight against climate change by hosting the COP25, is a massive turn on Brazil's climate politics.

The day after Climate Summit, on September 24th, Bolsonaro gave the opening speech⁹ on the UN General Assembly. In his speech, he said that his government shares a high interest to protect the environment and sustainable development in Brazil. In despite of the speech, Brazil has been on the spotlight of climate news following deforestation and record-breaking forest fires in the Amazon. In addition to this, the discrepancy between the government's promises and actions, the block from speaking at summit are causing the weakening of Brazil's role in the international climate arena during a critical time.

The announcements delivered in the Climate Summit are meant to show that there is common will to increase financial and political commitments despite of the complexity of climate change and disagreements between national interests. The collective pledges made on global, national and local level will play an important role to limit the rise of global temperature in the future.

The highlights of the decisions show the significant contrast between the small and large actors on the summit. In advance, there were certain expectations towards the major emitters, including India and China of the BRICS countries. These countries had a momentum to take stance and global responsibility to contribute to the Paris Agreement goals. However, the ambition of the BRICS was slightly modest, and the role of India and China was especially criticized by the international media (ex. The Economist, Time, The New York Times). The lack of the commitments by states increased awareness toward the non-state actors, and even individuals like the teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, who gained global attention with her speech on the Climate Summit.

It is known that the BRICS countries produce a high percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, therefore it is fundamental for the global success to limit the impacts of climate change by the BRICS. This would also increase the relevance of the BRICS in an international

⁹ Speech by Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro at the opening of the 74th UN General Assembly: <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/en/speeches-articles-and-interviews/president-of-the-federative-republic-of-brazil-speeches/20896-speech-by-brazil-s-president-jair-bolsonaro-at-the-opening-of-the-74th-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-september-24-2019-photo-alan-santos-pr>

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

political system in an era where global political structures are changing and challenging, such as the role of the United States in climate governance. In November 2019, the US started a formal withdrawal process from the Paris Agreement.

If the BRICS aim to increase their global political and economical importance, they should consider being forerunners in at least certain areas of the strategic global governance. At the same time, the US but also the European Union found challenges to lead the transition towards carbon neutral economies, which provides for the BRICS the momentum to contribute and gain new roles in global climate governance. This would enable to challenge the existing status quo and to increase the significance of the BRICS countries individually, but as well as a consortium of states. The global summits such as the Climate Summit would be those stages where the BRICS could underline their common will and statements.

Moreover, the BRICS countries could stand out and challenge their roles as traditional developing nations and move towards a new era where growing developing nations contribute to global policy shaping through their examples. This could be a game changer also for global targets to reach the Paris Agreement, targets that would be challenging indeed to reach without the increasing role of the BRICS countries. The BRICS can do this individually, as Russia did by ratifying the Paris Agreement just before Climate Action Summit, or like China, that is the global forerunner in carbon neutral energy transition. Also, the BRICS could shape the policies together towards the goals supporting development of the developing nations.

All in all, the Climate Summit 2019 showed the role and the importance of the UN and international cooperation on climate change as the summit gathered different sectors of society together on the same table. The Climate Summit as a whole proved that there is no denial of climate change, but there is, however, a tendency to refuse to response fast enough to the climate crisis. The host of the Climate Summit, António Guterres, said in the final speech: "much more is needed to reach carbon neutrality by 2050 and keep temperature rise to 1.5 degrees by the end of the century." Given the outcome of the summit and the latest research¹⁰, there is no time to waste and urgent changes are needed more than ever before. This will step up the 2019

¹⁰ BioScience: <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biz088/5610806>

The United Nations Climate Action Summit

United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) and shift the pressure on Madrid, where the climate pledges and actions will be evaluated again.

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The United Nations Climate Action Summit

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The United Nations Climate Action Summit

Radar Socioambiental

O Radar Socioambiental é uma publicação mensal com foco em notícias ambientais relacionadas aos cinco países do bloco BRICS. A cada mês um tema é escolhido e notícias sobre o assunto serão publicadas.

Website: <http://www.bricspolicycenter.org/programas/plataforma-socioambiental/>

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Apoio



The United Nations Climate Action Summit

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