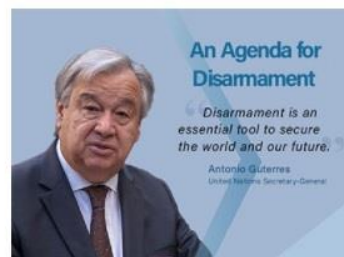


OPINION



Photo: The UN Secretary-General will convene this Summit to launch bold new actions to transform the way the world produces and consumes food, delivering progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Credit: Food Systems Summit.



Why We Care



By Ramu Damodaran

The writer is Chief, United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) hosted in the Department of Global Communications. This OpEd first appeared in the UNAI Weekly Newsletter – January 8.

NEW YORK (IDN | UNAI) – Graffiti is terse but truthful and even if I failed in identifying the specific trigger for a carefully executed scrawl on a boulder by the water in New York, that read “Beware of Locals,” it resonated with lessons the last 75 years of the United Nations, and the very last one in particular, have offered, that there is no purely “local” any longer and that those who see themselves as insulated from or immune to the world beyond are eminently bewareable.

As I paused to read the inscription, a startled deer raced past me, its fleeting feet capturing memory of a lyrical painting I had once seen of the Persian gazelle which so enriches the beauty of its home province of Zanjan in Iran.

Zanjan is also home to the university that hosts its name, the UNAI SDG hub for Goal 15, geared to the protection of life on land and to biodiversity. Soon after assuming its hub role, the university established a site for education and research to promote the conservation of the globally diminishing gazelle population.

And that in its turn serves the communications priorities the United Nations has set for itself in 2021, authored in the Department of Global Communications, where UNAI is housed, led by Under Secretary-General Melissa Fleming.

Looking at the six defined priorities underscores both the truly global nature of communication today, reflected in the change made by Secretary-General Guterres to the Department’s name as it now stands from the earlier quaint one of “public information”, and the realization that the successful political and diplomatic tackling by governments of issues before the United Nations requires agile and informed communication to and from their peoples, a role that institutions of higher education in particular are so well equipped to do.

Thus the very first priority, that of “mobilizing for the planet” comprehends subjects as diverse as carbon neutrality, dwindling biodiversity and the perilous waters in our oceans, even as more than half the world’s nations failed to submit upgraded commitments by year’s end to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, straggling behind the schedule of accelerated climate ambitions set out in the Paris Agreement.

Zanjan’s work on biodiversity has been cited; for SDG 7 on ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, the Energy Policy and Development Center (KEPA) of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens is the UNAI hub; the green energy investments forums that it hosts each year are informed by the expectation of Secretary-General, Guterres, that the world will see a number of meaningful plans on dramatically reducing emissions during the next decade, and on reaching carbon neutrality by 2050.

It has noted a number of possible initiatives proposed by Professor Dimitrios Mavrakis of KEPA including energy efficiency in building construction, up to Smart Zero Energy level, using sustainable green energy approaches to combat energy poverty, enhancing local access to natural gas and renewable energy sources, access to liquefied natural gas in remote or isolated areas, its use in land and maritime transportation and off-grid power generation as a bridge to zero CO2 emissions target in 2050, and the electrification of shorter maritime routes.



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This last links clearly with [SDG 14](#) on “life below water” for which the University of Bergen is UNAI’s hub; the ocean produces more oxygen than the tropical rain forest on land combined,” as Scientific Director Lise Øvreås reminds us; one of humanity’s great challenges is the need for more sustainable ways of producing food and medicine, and we know that the ocean can provide this,” notes Rector Olsen, adding “however, we also know that we know very little about the ocean.

This is why we need to look at what role universities can play in raising ocean literacy. The resolve of the university is evident with the efforts in the [SDG Bergen](#) initiative and its partnerships with the University of the South Pacific and the University of the West Indies to create a global ocean alliance.

“Fight inequality, stand for inclusion” is our next communications priority, sharpened by the impact of COVID 19. Education, and the internationalization of its opportunities, is clearly pivotal to this; a global survey of college and university leadership conducted by the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) and Santander Universidades concluded that just “37% of respondents considered their institution ready for COVID-19.

Most important for institutions have been faculty training, technology needs, maintaining academic standards, emergency financial assistance for students, and mental health support. Universities indicated that they expected decreases in institutional revenues, student enrollment, projects with business and industry, investment in infrastructure, and fund raising.

On the other hand, they anticipated increases in financial support for students, investment in infrastructure, continuing education, programs supporting student employability, and programs supporting entrepreneurship.

In terms of internationalization, respondents commented that their focus during this year would be partnerships, e-mobility or virtual mobility, internationalization at home. There appears to be an emerging broader perspective on internationalization. A higher number of institutions indicated that they were focusing on addressing temporary needs rather than restructuring or reinventing. A focus on short term and superficial appears to be above long term and substance.” The coauthor of the report is Dr. Fernando León García, the President-elect of IAUP and the President of Mexico’s CETYS University which is the UNAI hub for the unlearning of intolerance.

A third priority is realizing [gender equality](#), in particular ensuring that COVID-19 does not “wipe out a generation of progress” on this front. As Dr. Padmini Murthy of UNAI member New York Medical College notes in an article co-authored with Jonathan Ogulnick in the recently published “[Technology and Global Public Health](#)”, “throughout human history, women have always faced a set of societal issues targeted directly at them and, unfortunately, as we move into a globalized, technological era, the issues that women face evolve concurrently with technology.”

Technology, and education as instrument in its emergence, will also be central to two major United Nations events in 2021, the [Food Systems summit](#) [September] and the [Sustainable Transport conference](#) [May 5 to 7 in Beijing], for which our communications “will be designed both to educate and to motivate, building a global movement of implementation.” As Elizabeth Mkandawire of the University of Pretoria, the UNAI hub for the SDG on hunger, notes in an [article](#) in the UN Chronicle, “reducing the impact of a food crisis will also require understanding that food systems are unique to specific contexts.

For example, we have a broad understanding of the global food system, but limited information on the unique opportunities the African food system offers for averting a food crisis. The Food Systems Research Network for Africa ([FSNet-Africa](#)) project, a consortium led by the University of Pretoria, is an example of an inclusive research network that draws on partners from across several countries and continents to generate evidence to inform policy decisions for transforming the African food system. FSNet-Africa is a research excellence project funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) through the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) – United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) partnership.”

On sustainable transport, before *Uber* emerged as common vernacular, Professor Kazushi Sano of the Nagaoka University of Technology, UNAI’s hub for [SDG 9](#) on industry, innovation and infrastructure, co-authored a study that argued “that shared taxi is a suitable public transportation solution for low demand rural areas in Japan. The study found that male users’ predominant concern is delay whereas female users primary concern is about gender difference when selecting shared taxi.”

Human rights is the sixth, and overarching priority, particularly at a time when racial discrimination and hate speech have been so much in evidence. As Anne-Marie Grey, Executive Director of USA for UNHCR [notes](#) in the UN Chronicle, “as countries around the world grapple with the pandemic and take steps to design and deliver remote care, learning and livelihood solutions, no one should be left behind. Reliable mobile and Internet connectivity is critical to ensuring that all people are able to access the economic and social benefits of the digital revolution.

“By bringing to bear this new human right, citizens of this world can be agents in their own progress, with dignity and self-reliance. Ensuring access to affordable and usable Internet connectivity is both achievable and transformative, and the private sector and partners at the national, regional and local levels who share this bold and ambitious vision to ensure access for all can play a powerful role in making it happen.

“To recover from this global health crisis, and to build back better for the future, we must do more to promote and protect economic, social, cultural and human rights. We all have the right, regardless of our country or community, to be part of a connected society, and have access to technology that enables us to build better futures for ourselves, our families and the world.”

Ourselves, our families, our world. Emblematic of the three W’s that pilot the priorities. What – the narrative the United Nations seek to lead. Why Care – because nothing is local. What Now – the transformation of communication into action as “we strive to position UN content as a source for accurate, trusted information issued for the global public good, (leading) efforts to fight the scourge of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.”



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Twenty years ago, visiting the town of Hovione in Portugal as the country's Prime Minister, António Guterres remarked "I know that several decades ago, Eng. Ivan Villax started in a small laboratory in a cellar. From that small laboratory to what we see here today, there are decades of hard work, of competence, of intelligence which, put to work towards an ideal, assured the building of this enterprise.

"I feel this is an example to be followed as it demonstrates that it is possible, in Portugal, to achieve the best there is in the World and to have things for which we can be proud from every angle. Such as the matters related to technological capacity, innovation, optimization of management, to all those equally important matters of safety and training in social conscience and of belonging to a community. Many firms tend to function isolated from the community without realizing the importance of being part of it."

An importance you, our community, affirm each day through your scholarship and your communication, and for which we will remain in your debt in this, our eleventh year together, as we rebuild Enterprise Earth. [IDN-InDepthNews – 09 January 2021]

Photo: The UN Secretary-General will convene this Summit to launch bold new actions to transform the way the world produces and consumes food, delivering progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Credit: Food Systems Summit.

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