

THIS WEEK

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Time to listen to climate advice

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has done its job. Now, decision makers must do theirs — and a nascent youth movement is showing them how.

It isn't often that a climate report is this well timed. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) review on climate and land use, released last week (see page 291), has arrived in time for several international meetings on the future of the environment. This August and September, government representatives will gather under the United Nations umbrella in Nairobi, New Delhi and New York City to review progress in protecting biodiversity and mitigating desertification and climate change. The IPCC's latest warnings should turbocharge those deliberations.

Between 2007 and 2016, food production, agriculture, forestry and other human activities related to land use accounted for 21–37% of anthropogenic, or human-caused, greenhouse-gas emissions, the IPCC review says. These emissions could be reduced, it adds, if more land was available to absorb carbon. This could be achievable if more consumers reduced their meat consumption in favour of plant-based diets; more forests were protected and managed sustainably; and soils were replenished with organic content.

But this is as far as the IPCC's authority goes. The panel's job is to describe what humans are doing to the climate. It can suggest how to slow down or reverse these effects, and how humans might adapt to a warming world. The IPCC can make suggestions, but turning these into action is beyond its remit.

When it comes to the role of international political leadership in tackling climate change, the record of achievement leaves much to be desired. But now, because of the IPCC's findings, and with the help of a vigorous youth climate movement — which, unlike adult policymakers, seems to actually pay attention to the IPCC — an opportunity has arisen for real action.

Take the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, representatives of which will gather in Nairobi later this month. A decade ago, the convention's member countries set themselves a 2020 deadline to address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss. Despite the impending deadline, progress has been limited. Delegates will consider extending the deadline and, potentially, setting new targets. But biodiversity is dwindling, in large part, because industrial-scale farming and broader industry is destroying and polluting habitats. As long as these issues remain, an extension is unlikely to make a difference.

At the beginning of next month, it will be the turn of countries belonging to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) to meet in New Delhi. Desertification happens when land in already-dry parts of the world is degraded through the loss of productive soils. Its human causes include over-cultivation, overgrazing, deforestation and poor irrigation.

The UNCCD's member countries will consider a proposal to integrate their work in combating desertification with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals — a move that should be encouraged. This would avoid duplication of effort, and could speed up progress. But, as the latest IPCC report indicates, droughts in dryland regions have been increasing, on average, by slightly more than 1% per year

since 1961. And climate change is making land degradation worse.

Last, but not least, as September draws to a close, world leaders will assemble in New York City for a climate summit convened by UN secretary-general António Guterres, where the IPCC's latest findings will also be considered. As the IPCC report points out, the global mean surface temperature increased by about 0.87°C (with a likely range of 0.75–0.99°C) between 1850 and 2015. Guterres wants leaders to come

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to New York with concrete plans to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 45% over the next decade, and to reach net zero by 2050. But whether they are capable of this — or willing to do so — is an open question.

Combating climate change and desertification and slowing the rate of biodiversity loss are even more difficult to achieve, because each respective UN convention is structured to be independent of the others — unlike the reality of threats to biodiversity, climate change and desertification, which are interlinked.

This is where the IPCC's report also stands out. Its authors come from diverse disciplines — and, for the first time, a majority are from developing countries. They have engaged in detailed conversations and produced a document that integrates perspectives on biodiversity and desertification, as well as food and agriculture, into its analysis and findings. The UN conventions could do much more to adopt such an approach.

YOUNG PEOPLE CARE ABOUT CLIMATE

As each of the UN conventions faces continuing challenges, the IPCC can at least be assured of support from the next generation. It has garnered a following among the growing international youth climate movement. Members keenly absorb every new report, including participants in the school strike for climate, led by Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg.

Thunberg makes a point of namechecking the IPCC and quoting paragraph and page numbers in speeches, as she did in an address to the French parliament at the end of last month.

As government delegates get ready for Delhi, Nairobi and New York, they must prepare to answer why, if children can understand the meaning of the IPCC assessments, adults cannot do the same?

The youth climate movement's members are brave, and they are right. It has been almost three decades since the three UN conventions — on biodiversity, climate and desertification — were agreed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. And it has been 31 years since the IPCC was created to advise decision makers. Yet environmental promises have not been matched by meaningful action.

Younger generations know, perhaps better than the adults, that the world might not have another three decades to prevent climate impacts that will be even more serious than those we face now. Politicians must act now. ■