

THE 2019 DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD LECTURE

Leadership for the
Decisive Decade



Christiana Figueres

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*This is the text of the annual
Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture by Christiana Figueres
delivered virtually at Uppsala University on 17 September 2021*

The Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture is organised by Uppsala University and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations. It is given in recognition of the values that inspired Hammarskjöld personally and as Secretary-General, particularly compassion, humanism and a commitment to international solidarity and cooperation. Each year, the lecture is offered to an outstanding international personality who, in significant and innovative ways, contributes to a more just, peaceful and environmentally sustainable world through their contributions to politics or research.

Leadership for the Decisive Decade

Christiana Figueres

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

We are gathered to once again celebrate the undaunted spirit of Dag Hammarskjöld. If he were with us today he would be one of the world's staunchest leaders in addressing climate change, rallying us all to tackle the toughest challenge humanity has ever faced, and doing so at scale and on time.

There is no precedent in human history for the kinds of sweeping transformations science is calling us to make this decade. So succeeding is no small feat. But out of his deeply rooted humanist conviction, Dag Hammarskjöld would be reminding us of our collective human capacity to safeguard the wellbeing of all life on Earth, and our shared responsibility to leave the world a better, not a worse, place to live for those who come after us.

I will not deluge you with boundless climate change data, but we must at least recall some of the terrifying impacts we have seen in just the past two months:

- Massive flooding in Central Europe, Nigeria, Uganda, China and India, killing hundreds and robbing thousands of their livelihoods;
- More than a million people facing starvation in Madagascar's worst drought in decades;
- Over a hundred wildfires raging in the United States, Southern Europe and North Africa;
- Siberian forests going up in smoke; and
- Greenland's massive ice sheet melting in a heat wave of over 20°C.

Any one of these extreme weather events would be evidence of climate change; taken together in the same time period they are evidence of climate chaos. So how did we get here?

Since the last ice age some 12,000 years ago, humans have developed civilization as we know it today thanks to the stability of Earth's ecosystems, which cradled our life and supported our expansion. During the era known as the Holocene, humans flourished but nature reigned. We were thriving recipients of a stable, favourable environment, unique in the history of the planet.

But around 1950 the situation dramatically changed. We moved from being the recipients to being the direct cause of transformations in our natural environment, and not for the better. We now exercise such control over the environment that we have catapulted the planet and ourselves into a new geological era known as the Anthropocene: a human-shaped epoch where the pen of history has passed from nature to humans.

In just 70 short years, ignoring all the scientific warnings we were given about the dangers that would ensue, we have substantially altered Earth's atmosphere, land and oceans in many ways, to the extent that we are literally living ourselves out of our life-providing environment. This is the most perilous moment in human history. It's Code Red for humanity.

That is the clear message from the latest scientific report, which is categorical in warning us of looming, radical changes in the life-supporting earth systems that have so far been keeping us safe. Those tipping points, scientists explain, could start a domino effect of unprecedented turbulence that would be irreversible for nature and catastrophic for human existence.

Our planet will of course continue on her evolutionary path, started 4.5 billion years ago, but the knock-on effects of those tipping points would render many parts of our globe uninhabitable to the human race, with all the attendant economic, social, health, political and even international security consequences this would entail.

Facing this stark reality with our eyes wide open, we must make an immediate choice. Most of us can feel deep in our bones that transformational change is needed, and science has made abundantly clear what that choice needs to be. To

protect ourselves we have to protect 1.5°C as being our maximum global average temperature increase.

That means we have to make two things happen this decade:

- We have to cut our global greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030; and
- We have to safeguard all remaining healthy ecosystems, regenerating those we have depleted.

If we don't meet this dual challenge, we basically condemn ourselves and our descendants to a world of ever-increasing climate chaos, spiralling destruction and deepening human misery. However, if we do choose to cut our emissions by 50% by 2030 and act decisively to protect nature, we open the portal to a world that not only averts the worst of climate change, but is actually a much better world than we have right now: with better public health, more liveable cities, more efficient transport, and more productive land.

This is when Dag Hammarskjöld's invincible spirit enters the stage as our guiding light. Now is when we must be guided by his firm conviction that humans can determine a correct moral path and work together to follow it. Now is when we must begin to change the unfolding story of the Anthropocene from one of destruction to one of repair and regeneration – against all apparent odds.

Drawing great strength from Hammarskjöld's spirit, we must stand tall in his humanism and unwavering faith in human ingenuity, reminding ourselves of the individual and collective agency of human beings, because carving a better future does not happen on its own. We have to be intentional, purpose driven, frankly downright stubborn about our objective.

And there are many reasons for optimism. I will address only three:

1. The changes we need are already underway;
2. The market is already accelerating them;
3. We are entirely capable of enacting them, and doing so on time.

First, the changes are underway. Millions of people from all walks of life, driven by solidarity for their fellow human beings as well as their own self interest, have already been dedicating their lives to ensuring a better future for all of us. Thanks to their undaunted efforts, and even despite extraordinarily well-funded and

orchestrated obstruction, 131 governments have now pledged to be at net zero carbon by 2050, covering 75% of global emissions. Thousands of companies have committed to the same goal, and a growing number are even increasing that level of ambition by preparing to be at net zero emissions by 2040 – ten years earlier than the date established by the Paris Agreement. Eighty-eight nations, including the G7 countries, have committed to being Nature Positive by 2030, and more than 900 businesses support a Nature Positive future.

The finance community has understood the tectonic nature of the shifts we need to precipitate. Capital is rapidly moving away from fossil fuels and into solutions. Around half the world's assets under management have pledged to reach net zero carbon across their portfolios, including giants like Blackrock and Vanguard. Under the Asset Owner Alliance, asset owners with \$6.6 trillion in assets have committed to net zero portfolios, and called for radical reform in global carbon pricing to drive further investments in carbon reductions. Meanwhile, almost a trillion dollars of green bonds were issued in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, double the figure of the year before.

These commitments vary in their robustness, but together they send a powerful signal: we are not ever going back to a high emissions trajectory. The near and long-term future plans of these governments, businesses and financial institutions are now being decided, and the investments being made are radically different to what they were just two or three years ago.

Yes, there is still a long way to go to translate these commitments into real emissions reductions, and many, including myself, are frustrated that we are not seeing enough action now, but they do determine the unequivocal direction of travel. The challenge that remains is scale and speed, which brings me to my second reason for optimism.

The market is responding – in some areas, in fact, exponentially – and we are starting to see a series of positive feedback loops that will drive even greater acceleration in the solutions we so urgently need. The fossil fuel industry is facing its expiration date, and renewable energy, which is defying all expectations, has grown boundlessly even through the pandemic, with much more growth to come.

A whole new world is opening up as technologies improve, and as voters and politicians realise that renewables mean gain, not pain. There is much work still

to be done in other sectors – like food, transport and industry – but all have passionate, creative and extraordinary innovators pushing the boundaries of what we previously thought possible.

If Hammarskjöld were with us, he would be inspiring this moonshot mindset, or what others today might call ‘10x thinking’, where we don’t just give something 10% more effort, investment or action, but rather aim for ten times more, or ten times faster, or both. It is the attitude necessary given the stakes we face, and it is tremendously exciting. Setting big, seemingly crazy goals is inspiring: it forces people to think not only outside the box but rather without a box, and crucially, it attracts talent and influences governments. It’s thanks to this type of innovation that renewable energy is where it is today, and it is what’s driving similar expansions in electric vehicles and plant-based food. We are at the beginning of one of the most disruptive decades in history.

More of us must learn how to tap into this moonshot mentality, where we decide to intentionally pursue not just incremental improvements but exponential, radical improvements to create breakthroughs. We are, after all, in a race against the exponential negative impacts coming at us from nature.

And that brings me to my final and most important reason for optimism.

This is totally up to us. No-one is coming to save us from climate chaos. That’s actually good news, because we have already accomplished extraordinary feats as a species. We have put people on the moon and into space; we have conquered deadly diseases; we have extended life expectancy and decreased child mortality; we have expanded girls’ education and brought millions out of poverty; we have learned how to harness energy from the wind, sun and water. We have what it takes.

Despite all this, some people listening today, and many others out there in the world, may feel that we cannot solve this challenge of the climate and ecological crisis. That it’s too late, that we are in fact not enough. That we are too weak, too addicted to our current way of living, with all its devastating side-effects. How many of us have had these thoughts? In all honesty none of us are immune, but this crisis of doubt is something we can no longer afford to indulge.

My friends, Dag Hammarskjöld would be the first to help us adamantly resist such doubt. If he were here today, he would be coaxing us into the great potential

we all embody; he would be shouting from the rafters reminding us that we are entirely capable, that we can muster the necessary resolve. After all, impossible is not a fact, it's an attitude. Only an attitude.

The scarcity mindset that predominates – the sense of not being enough or capable enough – does not serve us in this moment. We must go into this facing the imminent dangers on the horizon, facing the inevitable messiness of the transition, and most importantly facing each other with vision, solidarity and confidence.

This moment calls upon us to break through our self-imposed mental boundaries of how much change we can effect and how quickly. We have a vast array of transformative tools, including advanced technologies, purpose-driven finance, and effective policy. Let us realise that there is absolutely no limit to what we can achieve if we set our minds to it, individually and especially collectively.

And beyond the tools we choose in determining *how* we address the future, let us embrace this historical moment of great crisis and consequence as a trampoline for evolving our sense of *who* we are. The human capacity for vision, solidarity and creativity is 100% renewable and endlessly abundant. We can be a catalyst, each of us.

But it starts with each of us deciding who we want to be both individually and collectively, and what legacy we want to leave behind. It starts with acknowledging how we have benefitted from our ancestors in the Holocene era and recognising that we ourselves will be the ancestors of those generations who will live in the Anthropocene period – a period during which the quality of human life will be directly defined by our actions today.

We must start by tapping into our deepest wells of fortitude, with true love and care for each other, and with a firm belief that we *can* do this – that we are called to do this, in whatever way that presents itself in our lives, and that frankly it is not optional.

Christiana Figueres

Christiana Figueres is a Costa Rican citizen and was the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) from 2010 – 2016.

During her tenure at the UNFCCC, Ms. Figueres brought together national and sub-national governments, corporations and activists, women’s groups, scientists and spiritual communities, financial institutions and NGOs to jointly deliver the historic Paris Agreement on climate change. Under this agreement, 195 sovereign nations agreed on a collaborative path to limit future global warming to well below 2°C, and to strive for 1.5°C in order to protect the most vulnerable. For this achievement Ms. Figueres has been credited with forging a new brand of collaborative diplomacy, for which she has received multiple awards.

Since then, Ms. Figueres continues to foster rapid action on climate change. She is the author of *The Future We Choose, Surviving the Climate Crisis* (Penguin Random House 2019) and co-hosts the podcast *Outrage and Optimism*. She sits on the Boards of ACCIONA and Impossible Foods.

Ms. Figueres is a graduate of Swarthmore College and the London School of Economics. She lives in Costa Rica and has two fantastic daughters.

Dag Hammarskjöld



Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961) served as Secretary-General of the UN with the utmost courage and integrity from 1953 till his death in 1961, creating standards against which his successors continue to be measured. He stood firmly by the UN Charter and lost his life in pursuit of dialogue and peace; Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash on a mission to mediate in the 1960’s Congo crisis. For his service, he was posthumously awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Hammarskjöld’s most notable achievements while serving as the world’s top international civil servant include restructuring of the UN to make it more effective, creating the basis for UN peacekeeping operations, and successfully implementing his “preventive diplomacy” in crises from the Middle East to China. Before he was appointed UN Secretary-General, Hammarskjöld held several senior positions in the Swedish civil service and became a non-partisan member of the Swedish Cabinet.

Hammarskjöld also had many cultural interests and served as a member of the Swedish Academy, the body that awards the Nobel Prize for Literature. Another testament to this literary side is his journal of personal and spiritual reflections which was published posthumously as *Markings* in 1963. Hammarskjöld spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Uppsala, which also became his final resting place.

Uppsala University



Uppsala University, founded in 1477, is the oldest and best-known university in Scandinavia. Famous scholars such as Rudbeck, Celsius and Linnaeus were professors here, as well as eight Nobel Prize laureates, among them Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, who was also the University's Pro-Chancellor. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1930. In the same year Dag Hammarskjöld completed his studies at Uppsala with a bachelor's degree in Law. He had begun his studies here in 1923, receiving a BA in Romance Languages, Philosophy and Economics in 1925 and took a further post-graduate degree in Economics early in 1928.

The University's international studies library is named after Dag Hammarskjöld and, in 1981, the Swedish Parliament established the Dag Hammarskjöld Chair of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University.

www.uu.se

Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation



The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation is a non-governmental organisation established in 1962 in memory of the second UN Secretary-General, which aims to advance dialogue and policy for sustainable development and peace. The Swedish parliament took the initiative to set up the Foundation shortly after Hammarskjöld's tragic death and UN General Assembly Resolution 1757 welcomed its establishment. The Foundation is an autonomous institution and is unaffiliated with any political, religious or ideological groups; its work is guided by respect for and alignment to the principles outlined in the UN Charter.

www.daghammarskjold.se

Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture

The Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture is given in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld, and in recognition of the values that inspired him as Secretary-General and generally in his life – compassion, humanism and commitment to international solidarity and cooperation.

The invited speaker should be an outstanding international personality who in significant and innovative ways contributes to a more just, peaceful and environmentally sustainable world through valuable achievements in politics or research. Further information about the annual Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture including the full list of previous lecturers as well as their published speeches, can be found online at www.daghammarskjold.se.

Other Dag Hammarskjöld Lectures available in print and on-line:

António Guterres, *Twenty-first century challenges and the enduring wisdom of Dag Hammarskjöld*, 2018

Ban Ki-moon: *Evolving Threats, Timeless Values: The United Nations In A Changing Global Landscape*, 2016

José Ramos-Horta, *Preventing Conflicts, Building Durable Peace*, 2015

Helen Clark, *The Future We Want - Can We Make It A Reality?*, 2014

Margot Wallström, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*, 2013

Tarja Halonen, *Women's Participation in the Sustainable World*, 2012

Jan Eliasson, *Peace Development and Human Rights – The Indispensable Connection*, 2011

Francis Deng, *Idealism and Realism – Negotiating sovereignty in divided nations*, 2010

Karen AbuZayd, *Rights, Justice and United Nations Values – Reflections through a Palestine Refugee Prism*, 2009

Martti Ahtisaari, *Can the International Community Meet the Challenges Ahead of Us?*, 2008

Sture Linnér and Sverker Åström, *UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld – Reflections and personal experiences*, 2007

Hans Blix, *UN Reform and World Disarmament – Where do we go?*, 2005

Noeleen Heyzer, *Woman, War and Peace – Mobilising for Peace and Security in the 21st Century*, 2003
Lakhdar Brahimi, *The Rule of Law at Home and Abroad*, 2002

Kofi Annan, *Dag Hammarskjöld and the 21st Century*, 2001

Joseph Rotblat, *The Nuclear Age – A Curse and a Challenge: The Role of Scientists*, 2001

Brian Urquhart, *Between Sovereignty and Globalisation – Where does the United Nations fit in?*, 2000

Mary Robinson, *Human Rights – Challenges for the 21st Century*, 1998



The medal which Uppsala University has produced in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld is awarded to the Dag Hammarskjöld Lecturers. It is designed by Annette Rydström and cast in bronze. The obverse shows a portrait of Dag Hammarskjöld and on the reverse a handshake and a text in Latin which reads: 'Uppsala University to its disciple in memory of his outstanding achievements.'

Photo: Jan Eve Olsson, Kungl. Myntkabinettet



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