

Exclusive Interview | Former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark: How to break the vicious cycle of global crisis?

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“What we are witnessing is not the failure of the idea of multilateralism itself, but the failure to support and renew its institutions to meet the challenges of the 21st century.”

The person who said this is Helen Clark, New Zealand's first democratically elected female Prime Minister and the first female Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme. She has long been regarded as a staunch promoter of global sustainable development and multilateral cooperation.



Helen Clark. Visual China data map

From 1999 to 2008, she served three consecutive terms as Prime Minister of New Zealand, placing climate change and social development at the core of her agenda. During her eight years at the United Nations, she led global poverty reduction and sustainable development efforts, encouraging more countries to prioritize public goods and international cooperation. She remains active on the international stage.

On September 9th, this year's United Nations General Assembly will convene in New York. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the United Nations. Eighty years ago, the UN was founded to prevent the next world war. Today,

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amid intensifying geopolitical conflicts, a worsening climate crisis, and frequent trade frictions, the world stands at a new crossroads.

As a member of the Club de Madrid, Clark and several former leaders recently launched an open letter calling on global leaders to reaffirm their commitment to the UN Charter and establish a more inclusive and representative mechanism to address today's common challenges.

Recently, in an exclusive interview with "Critical Point", a monthly e-magazine on climate change published by The Paper, Clark bluntly stated: Climate change, inequality, debt crisis and the weakening of the international order are intertwined. If we fail to face up to their inherent connections, we may fall into a vicious cycle of chain crises: environmental collapse fuels conflict and displacement, inequality breeds social unrest and political instability, and the erosion of trust in global institutions promotes division and unilateralism.

Clark's engagement with China dates back to 1991. Since then, she has visited China numerous times, witnessing firsthand the country's profound transformation. This year, she was among the former foreign dignitaries who attended the September 3rd military parade in Beijing. During her tenure as Prime Minister, she pushed for New Zealand to become the first developed country to sign a comprehensive free trade agreement with China.

In her view, China is not only a global leader in clean energy deployment, but will also play an increasingly important role in the global green transition and sustainable development. As she emphasized in an interview, "China's choices will have a significant impact on whether the world can achieve its climate goals." In the face of current protectionism and trade frictions, she cautioned, "Climate action should be a space for convergence and cooperation, not a battlefield for division."

The following is the full interview

The "deep interconnectedness" of global challenges

The Paper: Earlier this year, you and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon co-authored an article expressing concern about the decline of multilateralism. In an open letter from the Club of Madrid at the end of June, you and several former world leaders jointly pointed out that global multilateral cooperation and the financing of public goods and development aid are facing a crisis. What do you believe is the root cause of this crisis?

Clark: I believe the root cause is a lack of political will to uphold the principles of international solidarity and cooperation. Multilateralism is under pressure from rising nationalism, geopolitical confrontation, and a retreat from long-standing commitments to global public goods.

This erosion is exacerbated by deepening inequality and uneven recovery from a series of global shocks, from the COVID-19 pandemic to ongoing conflicts and the climate emergency.

What we are witnessing is not the failure of multilateralism as an idea itself, but the failure to support and renew its institutions to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This is why our open letter calls for a renewed commitment to the UN Charter and the establishment of more inclusive and representative mechanisms to address today's common problems.

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The Paper: From droughts and floods to wildfires, as well as inequality, sovereign debt crises, climate change, and the replacement of the rules-based order, what profound connections do you see between these challenges? And if these connections are not addressed, what are the most likely chain reactions?

Clark: These crises are inextricably linked. Climate change exacerbates inequality and food insecurity, while inequality undermines social cohesion and democratic resilience. Unsustainable debt burdens divert resources from public services and climate adaptation. And as the international rules-based order weakens, so too does our collective ability to manage global risks.

If we fail to address these interconnectednesses, we risk falling into a cycle of interlocking crises: environmental collapse fuels conflict and displacement; inequality breeds social unrest and political instability; and the erosion of trust in global institutions fuels division and unilateralism. The result will be not only more suffering, but also a less secure and less governable world.

The Paper: According to the latest assessment, only 15% of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goals are on track to be achieved. Your letter specifically mentions that nearly half of the world's population lives in poverty, and that "a trillionaire may emerge this decade." How do you view the impact of extreme wealth disparity on the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals?

Clark: Extreme wealth inequality is not only a moral and social challenge, but also a structural obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. When nearly half the world's population lives in poverty, while a small minority accumulates unimaginable wealth, it shows that our economic system is not aligned with human development or environmental sustainability.

This disparity distorts political influence, undermines trust in democratic institutions, and undermines the social contract. Reversing this trend requires rethinking fiscal policy, closing tax loopholes, promoting inclusive growth, and investing in public goods. If we are serious about leaving no one behind, we must seriously address the extreme concentration of wealth and power.

The Paper: The open letter emphasizes that 2025 is an "opportunity to reshape the world" and calls for the establishment of a new "Voluntary Economic Alliance" to promote global cooperation and end extreme inequality. Can you further explain the core goals and implementation path of this initiative? Looking ahead to the next decade, what global political trends do you most fear? What breakthroughs do you most hope to see?

Clark: The idea behind the Alliance of Voluntary Economies is leadership and shared purpose. We call on governments, regardless of their geopolitical stance, to come together around the urgent need to reform global governance, achieve climate justice, and end extreme inequality. This isn't a formal grouping, but rather a political alignment based on shared values and a forward-looking agenda.

I draw hope from the resilience of civil society, the mobilization of young people, and the willingness of many governments, cities, and communities to lead by example. If we can translate this momentum into coordinated global action, the next decade can still bring transformative change.

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Beware of "hesitation and regression" in climate policy

The Paper: Throughout your more than 27 years as Prime Minister and Member of Parliament, you have consistently promoted a comprehensive approach to addressing climate change. Following the "Dubai Consensus" reached by all member states at COP28 in 2023, many countries have hesitated or even regressed on their energy transitions with the inauguration of the Trump administration in the United States this year. What are your thoughts on this phenomenon? What are the prospects for global climate action in the coming years?

Clark: We are in a decisive decade. While the Dubai Consensus has acknowledged the need to transition away from fossil fuels, the key is translating this momentum into binding commitments and real action to reduce emissions.

Unfortunately, there has been a deeply worrying resurgence of climate skepticism and a rollback of clean energy policies in some major economies, including since the change in US government.

That said, there are reasons for cautious optimism. Many countries, particularly in the global South, are advancing green industrial strategies. Cities, local governments, and the private sector are increasingly setting their own climate targets. What matters most now is scale and equity. The world can no longer afford further setbacks. COP30 must be a moment to renew political resolve, particularly on climate finance, adaptation, and the phasing out of fossil fuel subsidies.

The Paper: You were New Zealand's first democratically elected female Prime Minister and the first female Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme. Do female leaders bring unique perspectives and approaches to addressing the climate crisis? How can women further play a role in global climate governance?

Clark: Absolutely. Women leaders often bring a collaborative and empathetic approach to governance, with a keener awareness of how decisions impact their communities. This quality, combined with a willingness to listen to experts, is helpful in addressing complex and intertwined challenges like climate change, where leadership with a long-term perspective is needed.

Yet, women remain underrepresented in climate negotiations, policymaking, and financing decisions. Strengthening women's leadership requires more inclusive decision-making spaces. Women must have equitable access to climate finance. The climate crisis is not gender-neutral—and neither should our solutions.

The ideal international order must "reflect the reality of multipolarity"

The Paper: You visited China as early as 1991 and have returned many times since then, witnessing firsthand the tremendous changes it has undergone. How do you evaluate China's efforts in addressing climate change? What contributions can China continue to make to global sustainable development and climate governance?

Clark: China is a global leader in renewable energy deployment, particularly in solar and wind power. It has set important national goals of peaking carbon emissions by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060.

Looking ahead, China has an opportunity to accelerate its transition away from coal, promote nature-based solutions, and strengthen international cooperation on green technologies and climate finance. As one of the world's major economies, China's choices will have a significant impact on whether the world can achieve its climate goals.

The Paper: During your tenure, you facilitated New Zealand becoming the first developed country to sign a comprehensive free trade agreement with China. Today, some countries are imposing tariffs and engaging in trade wars. What are your thoughts on this approach? What are your thoughts on trade protectionism and its impact on efforts to combat climate change?

Clark: Trade protectionism, especially when linked to strategic competition or unilateral measures, can have unintended consequences for global climate action. It could disrupt critical renewable energy supply chains, delay the deployment of low-carbon technologies, and undermine trust between countries.

In times of global crisis, cooperation is essential. We need an open and predictable trade framework to support the global green transition, ensure access to sustainable technologies, and foster innovation. Climate action should be a space for convergence and cooperation, not a battleground for division.

The Paper: Against the backdrop of the rise of the "Global South", how should your ideal international order balance the voice of traditional powers and emerging economies?

Clark: A just and effective international order must reflect the realities of a multipolar world. This means ensuring that emerging economies are meaningfully represented in global decision-making processes and that their views shape future rules and institutions.

This is not about replacing one center of power with another, but about building an inclusive, responsive, and cooperative system where responsibilities are shared and all voices are respected. A fair balance between traditional powers and emerging economies is key to restoring the legitimacy and effectiveness of multilateral governance.

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