What gives me hope for the next decade

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Reading the news these days can be a nerve-racking experience. The headlines tell stories of an unprecedented wave of protests and of wildfires, stoked up by climate change, that are engulfing the green lungs of our planet from the Amazonian rainforest to Australia. And yet, I remain hopeful for our common future. Here is why.

Imagine, if you will, a world in which all global leaders come together and pledge to accelerate their common efforts to achieve a more just, peaceful and sustainable future in 10 short years.

What if I were to tell you, this is exactly what our world leaders pledged to do? What if I told you that this pledge did not happen at some unique moment of unprecedented good will and trust in international relations, but just this September, when multilateralism is otherwise under attack from many sides?

And what if I added that this shared vision, which they committed to achieve, is not some pie-in-the-sky wish list, but a set of 17 ambitious goals, with 169 targets and over 230 measurable indicators?

This is the world we live in. At a recent UN summit, leaders of over 190 countries called for a Decade of Action to achieve these 17 ambitious objectives – called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – by their 2030 deadline. And this year, the countries will meet again at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) to find concrete ways of accelerating action.

This means that despite a barrage of negative news and international tensions, we can still agree on the kind of world we want to see in 2030 and on the way to get there. What we need now is to bridge the gap that still yawns wide between promises and concrete actions.

For all the expressions of commitment to the 2030 Agenda, a recent UN DESA report found that only a handful of countries have so far embedded the SDGs in their budget processes. The shifts in policy...
required to eradicate poverty have not materialized either, and by the latest estimates, six per cent of us will still be living in extreme poverty 10 years from now. Progress is even slower on ending hunger, which is rising again after years of decline. All while the 1.5°C climate goal is treading on the edge of becoming impossible to reach.

With so little time and so much left to do, why am I still hopeful that we will be able to achieve the ambitious vision we’ve committed ourselves to?

The answer lies in the interconnected nature of the modern world. The 2030 Agenda is the first-of-its-kind global plan to recognize that the world’s ills can only be solved if tackled together – all at the same time. While this integration makes for an unwieldy policy proposal and an extremely challenging institutional adjustment, it can also work to our advantage. In a highly interconnected world, such as ours, taking action on one issue, can greatly accelerate progress on multiple others.

The recent Global Sustainable Development Report, supported by UN DESA, identified 20 such “levers of change.” Take cities for example. With the majority of humanity already living in urban areas and with their share rapidly growing, making our cities sustainable, accessible and inclusive will have profound consequences for poverty reduction, gender equality, climate action, sustainable production and consumption, clean energy and many more goals.

Many countries, international organizations, civil society organizations and businesses are already heeding the call of the Decade of Action. So far, they have officially announced over 140 SDG Acceleration Actions, ranging from Sweden’s ambitious plan to become the first fossil-fuel free state, to the Maldives’ vision of becoming a model of sustainability and ocean protection for other small island states. And at this year’s HLPF, close to 50 countries have already volunteered to present their review of progress for the Goals.

But governments and large organizations are just some of the actors driving change. UN DESA has found inspiring action for the SDGs on every level and in every corner of the world. We compiled our findings into a database of over 500 Good SDG Practices, including projects as immense as the European Union’s circular economy plan, and as local as a group of Brazilian students transforming their neighbourhood as part of the curriculum.

The Political commitment, the determined action at every level and the guidance of science show that there is hope for humanity to make enormous progress in the next 10 years. Poverty, hunger, climate change and inequalities are all human-made crises, which means that we have the power to “unmake” them.

We know the world we want and we have a road map to get there. Now, it is up to everyone – from students in Brazil to governments at the UN – to push the levers of change as hard as we can to accelerate action for sustainable change to benefit people everywhere.