



## Report

### **The UN we need for the future we want**

Friday 30 October 2020 | WP1844V

Co-chaired by:

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Co-chaired by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Republic of Fiji

### Executive Summary

On 21 September 2020 the UN General Assembly adopted a Political Declaration commemorating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations. It acknowledged the successes and failures of the Organisation, and made twelve specific commitments to strengthen international cooperation. Member States also requested the UN Secretary-General to report back to them in 2021 with his own recommendations for reinvigorated global action.

This Wilton Park conference sought to contribute reflections on how such progress can be realised, taking as its starting point the UN75 Declaration, and the parallel global consultation with citizens undertaken by the UN75 Secretariat. The following 12 key conclusions and recommendations for implementation of the Declaration arose from the conference:

- UN75 is being commemorated against the backdrop of Covid-19. **The pandemic has significantly set back progress** on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, amidst widening inequality, and revealed the ill-preparedness of the international community. **Hopes were expressed for a 're-set' in international cooperation**, reflecting the UN Secretary-General's call for a 'New Social Contract for a New Era'.
- A new **effective multilateralism** is needed, to embody a 'hard interest' case for international cooperation while protecting core values. Such a 'multilateralism 2.0' will also need to be people-centred, inclusive and more multi-stakeholder. The role of the UN in convening diverse **multi-stakeholder partnerships** would increase, with new tools needed to enhance both legitimacy and improved efficacy. Mistrust from developing countries endures, and remedies include greater G77 leadership in partnership formation, improved data analytics on what drives successful and impactful partnerships, and highlighting success stories such as the Global Alliance on Vaccines.

- **Rebuilding trust between countries** is critical during a time of increased geo-political tensions. To this end, new member state coalitions need to be built, and cross-regional mini-lateral fora such as the G20 used to seed progress on challenges such as climate change. Renewal of UN principal organs, including the UN Security Council and ECOSOC, is required to preserve long-term legitimacy, but a shift in the narrative, resolve and spirit of multilateral cooperation was deemed equally vital.
- The international community's **approach to 'security' needs integration** across conflict, climate change, biodiversity, migration, health, food, water, and energy issue areas. Investigation and enforcement protocols from some multilateral regimes (e.g. the IAEA's role in policing nuclear non-proliferation, security and safety) may have salience for others (such as health or biodiversity) to give them more 'teeth'.
- **Increased 'agency' for African countries and peoples** across the UN system was a moral and practical imperative. Not least since much of the UN's development, humanitarian and conflict prevention work takes place on the African continent.
- The **ambition of 'building back better and greener'** amidst future fiscal tightening requires a smarter allocation of resources. Governments should prioritise those SDGs – such as gender equality and education – which act as multipliers for the rest of the global goals.
- The investment needed to meet **Agenda 2030 requires significant new private financial flows**. Donors must improve transparency and avoid double-counting to increase trust. Incentives for pension, insurance and sovereign wealth funds to invest in 'pro-poor' low carbon projects in developing countries are required.
- 'Leaving no one behind' requires **equality and inclusion for women and girls**. This rests on early quality education and recognition that women's empowerment fosters economic progress and improved peace and security outcomes. UN decision-making should mainstream women and girls, informed by qualitative and quantitative data, with commensurate resourcing. UN narratives on women and girls should portray women as heroes not simply as victims. Indeed, women kept societies and healthcare systems functioning through the pandemic. More broadly, an investment in UN strategic communications is needed to articulate better how it improves the lives of ordinary people, particularly youth.

- The pandemic shows how local outbreaks can quickly escalate to a global catastrophe. The main obstacle to early and effective action is not a lack of warning. It is that institutional incentives to prepare for such risks are poorly aligned. **Investment in prevention and risk management** across the UN system, and in the institutions of national governments and regional organisations, is needed. This requires changes in mandates and funding to build resilience in international supply chains, investment in data collection and analysis to inform policy, and building trust in multilateral processes, so that the social and political capital for cooperation exists when a new challenge emerges.
- The UN Secretary-General has introduced Secretariat reforms to **break down institutional silos** across peace and security, human rights, and development. Gaps exist at national and regional level hindering an integrated response, and funding must be leveraged to incentivise change. Building bridges across siloed actors – including the IFIs, the private sector, civil society, youth, city and regional authorities, parliamentarians, foundations, academia, and regional organisations – is equally vital in delivering Agenda 2030 outcomes.
- The UN has a major role to play in **bridging the digital divide and countering the dark side of digital**. This includes serving as a forum for inter-governmental learning and best practice, catalysing action by States, and drawing on existing UN agreements and norms to help ensure that digital technologies have a transformative effect on economic opportunity and political freedom.
- Implementation of the UN75 Declaration will require the design of better accountability mechanisms for progress on Agenda 2030. **Data transparency and integrity** will be a critical tool to enable citizens to hold their governments to account, such as monitoring decarbonisation to address climate change. AI integrated with ‘big’ data derived from satellite observation, and internet and smart phone use, can provide key tools for new UN-brokered governance mechanisms

The conference concluded with hope that the Secretary-General’s report in 2021 would present a roadmap for a refresh of multilateralism: investing in priority areas of emerging consensus and cooperation, such as health regulation, climate action, and gender equity; and placing a spotlight on areas such as conflict management, inequality, inter-generational justice, and cyber governance, which need urgent course-correction.

### **The context for the conference – UN75 and Covid-19**

1. This Wilton Park conference met the week of the 75th anniversary of ratification of the United Nations Charter, which gave birth to the Organisation. It also presaged the commemorations planned in January 2021 to mark the 75th anniversaries of the first meetings of the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly, both held in London in 1946. The conference was co-hosted by the United Kingdom and Fiji, two countries also pursuing progress on climate change together in the run up to the COP26 meeting.

2. The conference took as its starting point the outcomes of two UN processes - a UN75 participative global consultation run by the UN Secretariat, and a UN75 Political Declaration adopted unanimously at a High-level Meeting of the UN General Assembly, after intensive negotiations co-facilitated by the Permanent Representatives to the UN of Qatar and Sweden. Despite having been negotiated almost entirely online because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the face of considerable geo-political headwinds, the Declaration presented an unexpectedly strong affirmation of the value of strengthened multilateralism, with twelve short, clear commitments. It requested the UN Secretary-General to report, by September 2021, with his own recommendations to advance this vital common agenda. This Wilton Park conference sought to identify what needs to change in global governance, the pathways to get there, and any ideas that might assist the UN Secretary-General in the preparation of his report.

### **Covid-19 pandemic and increased inequalities**

3. The pandemic provided an additional backdrop to this online conference. The economic and social after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will be long felt. Existing inequalities within and between countries have been exacerbated, and progress on poverty, education and gender equality SDGs reversed. The UN system mounted a robust health and humanitarian response to the pandemic, but the international community had failed to cultivate the social and political capital of cooperation, or to invest in preventive systems. The pandemic was thus a valuable “fire drill” for future challenges.

### **Trust in institutions and the challenges facing a new multilateralism**

4. The UN Secretary-General’s Nelson Mandela Lecture of 18 July 2020 was repeatedly quoted. In it he pointed to a ‘rupture’ that had emerged between people and institutions, both pre- and post-pandemic. Growing inequality had undermined both sustainable development and people’s trust in their own governments and other institutions. He therefore called for ‘A New Social Contract for a New Era’, and a more inclusive, networked and effective multilateralism, “with teeth”. Solutions to rebuilding trust between citizens and their governments, and towards international institutions, include economic growth to generate jobs, education to combat misinformation online, and use of technology to improve transparency and accountability of governments.
5. Some participants pointed to the challenges ahead - that the design of the current global system gave geo-political advantage to some States, which favoured a return to ‘normal’ rather than a global re-set. Covid-19 has also reinforced nationalist and isolationist responses, and a growing gap may arise between what developed economies are willing to do for others compared to their own citizens. This presented a fundamental challenge for the UN Secretary-General to convince others that solidarity is in their self-interest. He had a delicate balance act between protecting core values, and making renewed arguments for an effective multilateralism which also reflected Realpolitik interests.

### **Institutional mechanisms – learning lessons**

6. The conference reflected on learning lessons across multilateral ‘regimes.’ The Paris Agreement’s combination of voluntary nationally-determined commitments with peer-pressure increasing ambition over time was seen as a possible direction of travel for new multilateral agreements. Others considered that States would accept more centralised enforcement mechanisms if the rules and adjudicator were deemed to be fair, and the benefits of universal adherence substantial. Examples were given of WTO and EU trade dispute mechanisms (notwithstanding recent weakening of the WTO appellate system), and the IAEA’s role in furthering nuclear non-proliferation, in concert with the UN Security Council.



The possible applicability of such mechanisms to problems such as biodiversity preservation and infectious disease control was raised. In turn, it was suggested that the provisions of WHO International Health Regulations might be emulated in relation to rules and norms for bio-risk and cyber. A victory for Joe Biden in the upcoming US Presidential election would lead to US re-engagement with multilateral mechanisms (subject in some cases to US Senate approval). This may also increase other major powers' willingness to accept new forms of international regulation, but new agreements would still be scrutinised to demonstrate a national interest benefit for all parties.

## **The UN75 Declaration – moving from paper to action**

7. To translate the UN75 Declaration into action requires both political will and resources from member states, and greater input from the private sector and civil society. Yet the UN doesn't yet have the modalities to fully harness the contributions of other actors, to achieve genuine impact rather than partnership 'lip service'. Too often, the inclusive notion of hearing the voices of 'we the peoples' had not lived up to its promise, with a slew of past outcomes catering more to the political will of 'we the states'. New mechanisms to incorporate the views of youth were especially needed.
8. The following were also key to implementation of the Declaration:
  - The UN Secretary-General's 2021 report should provide a roadmap for action, and mobilise for a decade of action
  - The design of better accountability mechanisms for progress on Agenda 2030.
  - Improved preparedness requires better predictive data analytics to inform international public policy. Attention was drawn to the UN Secretary-General's initiative on data: [www.un.org/datastrategy](http://www.un.org/datastrategy)
  - We should avoid institutional fixes to what are essentially political issues.
  - The need for a new narrative for international cooperation which preserves core values but shows how solidarity is also self-interest.

The conference also offered more detailed reflections on the following areas addressed by the UN75 Political Declaration.

## **Leave no one behind – women and girls**

9. There was particularly strong language in the Declaration on placing women and girls at the centre of what the international community does in 'building back better'. Gender equality was a 'public good' and the discrimination holding back women and girls was symptomatic of a sexist system. The Declaration had asserted that "human rights can never be fully upheld unless they are enjoyed by all women and girls". Addressing this needed an international response to close the gaps in education, health, access to digital tools, financial and physical security.
10. Early quality education was essential in securing equality and inclusion for women and girls. Reference was made to the campaign, championed by the UK government for 12 years of quality education for all girls by 2030. This had received widespread support from member states in a range of UN bodies including annually in the follow-up to UN Human Rights Council resolution 32/20. The UN should also champion the education of boys about equality and inclusion, as well as teachers. Tackling violent extremism was essential as this has a particularly negative impact on women and girls, as well as on the wider community. The UN system must bring in men and boys as allies on this agenda. It must both listen to civil society, youth, and women's groups, the private sector, parliaments and others, and act on their feedback.

11. A consistent UN narrative should articulate how equality and inclusiveness for women is good for economies and good for peace and security. Such a narrative should portray women as heroes, not just as victims. During the Covid-19 crisis, it is women who have kept societies and systems functioning, including through their role in health and social care. The UN's external messaging, and by delegations back to their capitals, needs to mainstream women and girls, backed by qualitative and quantitative data to communicate convincingly. UNGA's 5th Committee should ensure that funding decisions support the equality agenda.

### **Protect our planet, health and preparedness**

12. The climate crisis, coupled with the COVID pandemic, is a wakeup call that systemic change, and greater solidarity, is needed as we build back better. Investment in preventive systems should protect the most vulnerable communities from sea level rise, and enhanced food and water security. Quality data and data transparency are essential.
13. Climate action should be reframed as a long-term investment not a cost, with hope given through a positive narrative that solutions on climate change can work.
14. The Paris Agreement's 'bottom up' mechanism of national voluntary promises, relies on public opinion to impose reputational cost for not doing enough. Ambition can also be enhanced as technological innovation drives down costs of low carbon alternatives. New partnerships and trans- and sub-regional coalitions may raise ambition, with foundations bringing new tools. Recent net-zero commitments by the EU, Japan, South Korea and China in the run up to COP26 were encouraging. The UN's communications professionals should learn from the reach of the youth movement 'Fridays for Future', and how Greta Thunberg connects to people.
15. UN early warning and risk management systems need better coordination across agencies, and climate and health security risks discussed further by the UN Security Council, in an appropriate way. The progress achieved in integrating UN, World Bank and IMF climate responses must be consolidated. New mechanisms to harness private investment, as highlighted in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, must be developed.

### **Peace, justice and human rights**

16. The UN Secretary-General should be supported in his efforts to strengthen mediation and preventive diplomacy mechanisms (including through special political missions), to further advance the women, peace and security agenda, and to better integrate UN and IFI finance flows to support peacebuilding. He should also make greater use of his prerogatives under Article 99 of the UN Charter to encourage early preventive action for matters not already on the Security Council's agenda.
17. 'Social' emergencies will increasingly need collective responses by the international community, alongside health and economic drivers. Crises can be used to drive change but only if we are sufficiently prepared. Indicators of crises need identification, and a stocktake taken of available tools. Cross-cutting cooperation across peace and security, human rights and justice functions is needed, and greater coherence between headquarters and in-country activities. Recent reforms are positive but will take time.
18. The Security Council could play a role in de-escalating rising geo-political tensions. The UN also faces the challenge of online polarisation, and the changing nature of conflict, with new threats from cyber and autonomous weapons. Conflict entering the cyber domain has meant that local conflicts can become global far more quickly.

## Trust, inequality and the dark side of digital

19. Participants recognized the paradox of digital technologies, which created new inequalities but also new opportunities. Access to digital was increasingly a prerequisite to access other services e.g. health and education, so the new face of inequality is digital. Governments face connected but separate challenges:
  - An economic challenge: how to manage this new economic sector – and whether existing instruments to handle monopolies and taxation are adequate, or if new tools are needed.
  - A political challenge: how digital technologies impact on political process and civic life – such as when the business models of social media companies amplify hate speech. Solutions can be technological or may require deeper political and economic remedies. Digital technologies may create new inequalities, but they may also reveal existing challenges, since new tech has entered a world that was already unequal.
20. Digital technologies can also have a hugely positive effect on economic opportunity and political freedom – global action by young people on climate change could not have happened without such technologies – but controls on internet access by authoritarian regimes may negatively impact on such coordination.
21. Addressing the digital divide, and countering the dark side of digital, requires a multilateral response and the UN can contribute in three ways:
  - serving as a forum for inter-governmental learning and sharing best practice;
  - exercising its convening power to catalyse collective action by States;
  - applying and adapting existing UN agreements and norms, including UN Charter provisions on peace and security, and human rights instruments, to digital challenges.

## Youth and future generations

22. The world is undergoing a major demographic transition which will re-define the nature of work, education and political leadership. We face the triple burden of a pandemic, inequality and climate change. Young people are savvy, networked and engaged, but can be overwhelmed in navigating these seismic challenges. The UN has a role in responding to the social and economic upheaval resulting from rapid demographic change, including in the setting of new norms, and in championing new opportunities for young people, in fulfilment of the SDGs. Young people should receive improved representation in global platforms and a role in the elaboration of the new global deal. Disadvantaged voices must be heard, nurtured and supported.
23. Many young Africans question why their continent lacks a permanent UN Security Council seat, regard the UN as elitist, and see it failing to identify with the painful realities of people's lives. Much of the UN's work focusses on the African continent, yet African countries often fail to have their voices, policies and strategies heard. Greater African 'agency' in UN bodies must start with the mentoring of young people, including in UN employment.
24. Youth participants at the conference called for a 'recalibration of common values' in the aftermath of the global pandemic, and practical cross-border collaboration, to foster greater solidarity. There was criticism of the use of celebrities by the UN, creating unobtainable expectations for young people.
25. The UN needs to adapt its language to the ways that young people see the world. For example, they may not immediately relate to human rights language but they do believe in climate justice. Amnesty International has grasped this and engages effectively with a new generation of young people.



## Sustainable finance and partnerships

26. The UN is an important convenor and norm builder in sustainable finance, with implementation largely through others, including the IFIs and the private sector. It was noted that ODA is already dwarfed by FDI, remittances, and the taxes raised by developing countries. Incentivising pension, insurance and sovereign wealth funds to invest at scale in pro-poor, low carbon infrastructure in developing countries could be transformative.
27. The UN had a crucial role in creating the context for the private sector to scale up and make sustainable investments. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development recognised the importance of such a shift, as long as it did not negate the obligations of the global North to funding sustainable development, especially climate finance. Suspicions over the intentions of donors remain, and necessitate further issue-acclimatisation and trust building among States, and courageous leadership. The valuable role played by Jamaica and Canada in convening the Friends Group on SDG financing was highlighted, as was the new UN-brokered alliance of CEOs – the Global Investors for Sustainable Development (GISD). How we use public money to leverage private money for impact was seen as potentially transformational, and required inclusiveness not just in participation but also in terms of outcomes.
28. A number of voluntary international initiatives exist to evaluate whether an investment instrument was green or ‘SDG-friendly’. The UN could help member states and their regulatory bodies coalesce around a global kitemark to reduce ‘green-’ or ‘blue-washing’ by companies. Lack of a common definition creates breaches in transparency and accountability, particularly in the green bond market.
29. It was suggested that the economic fallout from the pandemic meant that governments needed to prioritise those SDGs, such as gender equality and education, which would serve as ‘multipliers’ in also helping realise the other Global Goals.

A number of areas of promise were noted:

30. The UN Secretary-General has developed a much closer relationship with heads of the IMF and the World Bank, both through the UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination, and through the alignment of the Bretton Woods Institutions with Agenda 2030. At a national level, the Integrated National Financial Frameworks had been an important step forward to identify and address gaps. A key next challenge was to incentivise the alignment of regional trade agreements, and investment pathways such as the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative to align with the Paris goal of keeping global temperature rise to below 1.5 degrees centigrade.
31. The renewal of ECOSOC was regarded as important – and potential was seen in the multi-stakeholder nature of the High-level Political Forum, since when ECOSOC reaches outside of itself it becomes more relevant. UN funds, programmes and specialised agencies (notably UNHCR, UN Women, UNFPA, WFP and UNICEF) had increasingly demonstrated greater impact on the ground through carefully curated private sector partnerships. Civil society organisations had also begun to work more closely with the private sector, with traditional mistrust lessening. Here the example of FAO’s Committee on Food Security was a good example of where NGOs and companies had come up with joint solutions, helping it become a more dynamic and modern institution. FAO’s launch in September 2020 of a partnership with Google on a big data tool was also lauded. This will enable anyone with basic internet access to tap into critical environmental and agriculture information in real time.

32. At the level of norm-building, UNEP FI and UNCTAD had demonstrated considerable innovation, including through the creation of the UN Principles for Responsible Investment in London, and the Sustainable Stock Exchanges initiative. Hopes were expressed that UN Global Compact, now under new leadership, would better incentivise behavioural change by companies.

**Sam Daws**

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