

## **The Elders call for urgent action to address multilateral failings exposed by COVID-19**

**LONDON, 22 October 2020**

As Elders, we call today on world leaders to urgently strengthen, defend, and realise the potential of the multilateral system. This is the fundamental requirement to end the current disarray in the global order, and tackle existential threats such as COVID-19, the climate crisis and nuclear conflict.

We also call for their clear commitment to erase the moral stain of economic and social inequality, both within and between nations, that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The collective failure of leaders to articulate the benefits of effective multilateralism, which serves the self-interest of all countries, has further damaged the effectiveness and reputation of the wider rules-based multilateral system.

We deplore the isolationist and nationalist politics that have shaped too much of the world's response to the pandemic, with US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization being only the most egregious example.

In the face of COVID-19, all of us need access to essential medicines and vaccines, especially those in developing countries. In this regard, we support the campaign by South Africa and India for the World Trade Organization to waive certain provisions of the TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement.

We affirm our support for the United Nations as the only body through which the people of the world and their leaders can collectively address their gravest challenges.

As Elders, we share the diagnosis of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, in his recent Mandela Lecture, that the global political and economic system is not delivering for the world's people in this hour of crisis. We encourage him now to use the platform of his office and the full potential of the UN to address the challenges that he so clearly identifies. We urge all leaders to show the confidence and courage to build a UN which truly advances peace, justice and human rights.

COVID-19 has laid bare manifold failures, including insufficient coordination and information-sharing to contain the pandemic, inadequate economic coordination by the G20 to protect the global economy, and insufficient financial assistance to support the global South.

There has been near-paralysis in the UN Security Council as geopolitical rivalries trump humanitarian priorities, and sustained attacks on democratic safeguards, human rights and the rule of law, sometimes under the pretext of “emergency measures”.

We insist that world leaders assume their responsibilities to address the long-term drivers of inequality. This includes tackling racial and gender discrimination, violence against women, the pernicious legacy of colonialism, inadequate social security nets and workers’ rights, and chronic indebtedness across the nations of the global South.

The damage to collaborative decision-making has been exacerbated by the deliberate spread of online misinformation and hate speech; better governance and regulation of the Internet is now a democratic imperative.

In addition to toxic online polarisation, there have been instances of violence committed by both protesters and state authorities in relation to democratic election results across the world. We call on political leaders, citizens and security forces alike to respect decisions made at the ballot box and ensure peaceful transfers of power when voters have spoken. Leaders in the United States have a particular responsibility in the coming weeks to uphold electoral norms and the rule of law.

As we look forward to 2021, we urge leaders to heed the voices of their citizens, especially young people, and break the cycle of short-termism and neglect of multilateral cooperation. The COP26 climate summit, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference and the CBD15 UN Biodiversity Conference are significant opportunities for collaborative leadership.

Collectively, we should use the chance to “reset” global governance to fully exploit the potential of digital technologies, renewable energy and medical advances to build a stronger, more just and resilient world for all.

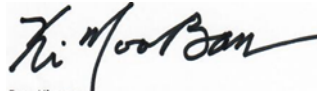
Speaking for all the Elders, our Chair **Mary Robinson**, said:

*“COVID-19 has placed unprecedented strain on the multilateral system and cruelly exposed its failings. All leaders share in the responsibility for not living up to the values of the UN Charter, but the greatest culpability must lie with the five Permanent Members of the Security Council who were entrusted in 1945 with a specific mandate to rebuild a fairer and more peaceful world. A fresh approach is urgently needed in 2021 with an unrelenting focus on justice and equality.”*



**Mary Robinson**

Former President of Ireland and Chair of The Elders



**Ban Ki-moon**

Former UN Secretary-General and Deputy Chair of The Elders



**Graça Machel**

Founder of the Graça Machel Trust, co-founder and Deputy Chair of The Elders



**Lakhdar Brahimi**

Former Algerian foreign minister and senior UN diplomat



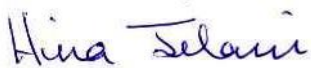
**Gro Harlem Brundtland**

Former Prime Minister of Norway and former Director-General of the WHO



**Zeid Raad Al Hussein**

Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



**Hina Jilani**

Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and co-chair of the Taskforce on Justice



**Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

Former President of Liberia and Nobel Peace Laureate



**Ricardo Lagos**

Former President of Chile



**Juan Manuel Santos**

Former President of Colombia and Nobel Peace Laureate



**Ernesto Zedillo**

Former President of Mexico

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### **About The Elders**

The Elders are independent leaders using their collective experience and influence for peace, justice and human rights worldwide. The group was founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007.

The Elders are [Ban Ki-moon](#) (Deputy Chair), [Lakhdar Brahimi](#), [Gro Harlem Brundtland](#), [Zeid Raad Al Hussein](#), [Hina Jilani](#), [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#), [Ricardo Lagos](#), [Graça Machel](#) (Deputy Chair), [Juan Manuel Santos](#), [Mary Robinson](#) (Chair) and [Ernesto Zedillo](#).

[Martti Ahtisaari](#), [Ela Bhatt](#), [Fernando Henrique Cardoso](#), [Jimmy Carter](#) and [Desmond Tutu](#) are Elders Emeritus.

[Kofi Annan](#) (1938-2018) was a founding member of The Elders and served as Chair from 2013 to 2018.

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