



Global cooperation in a fragmented world

Policy Position Paper
on Multilateralism





Nelson Mandela addressing the UN General Assembly, 1990.
Photo: UN Photo / Eskinder Debebe

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About The Elders

The Elders' strategy for the period 2023-2027 addresses three of the existential threats facing humanity – the climate and nature crisis, pandemics, nuclear weapons – as well as the persistent global challenge of conflict. More recently, Elders have been considering the risks and opportunities of artificial intelligence. Drawing on Nelson Mandela's mandate, our approach also incorporates four cross-cutting commitments: to multilateralism, human rights, gender equality and women in leadership, and intergenerational dialogue.

The impact of these threats is already being seen on lives and livelihoods: a rapid rise in extreme weather events, a pandemic that killed millions and cost trillions, wars in which the use of nuclear weapons has been openly raised. But there could be worse to come – maybe much worse. Some of these threats jeopardise the very existence of human life on our planet. We have the power to destroy ourselves as well as the world we live in. Nations seem to lack the ability or will to manage these risks.

The urgency of the interconnected existential threats we face requires a crisis mindset from world leaders – one that puts shared humanity centre stage, leaves no one behind, and recognises the rights of future generations. When nations work together, these threats can all be addressed for the good of the whole world. There is still hope.

As Elders, we use our experience and influence to work for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet. We engage with global leaders and civil society through private diplomacy and public advocacy to address existential threats, promote global solutions, and encourage ethical leadership that supports the dignity of all human beings.

The Elders and multilateralism

Multilateralism is central to the Elders' mission as a group. Between them they hold vast experience of multilateral cooperation, both as Presidents/Prime Ministers, and as heads of international organisations, special envoys, chairs of commissions and campaigners.

The late **Kofi Annan** and Elder Emeritus **Ban Ki-moon**, who both served as UN Secretary-General for ten years, were Chair and Deputy Chair respectively of the Elders. Their experience and wisdom did much to shape the group's thinking on the opportunities for multilateral reform and what is possible.

Mary Robinson and **Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein** both served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Mary Robinson has also served as UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region of Africa, while Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein played a central role in the establishment of the International Criminal Court and was its governing body's first President. **Hina Jilani** was UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders. **Graça Machel** was the UN's first independent expert on the impact of armed conflict on children. Elder Emeritus **Lakhdar Brahimi** served in multiple UN special envoy and mediation roles and authored a landmark report on peacekeeping.

Ban Ki-moon played a leading role in the negotiation of the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015. Mary Robinson, **Gro Harlem Brundtland** and Elder Emeritus **Ricard Lagos** all served as UN Special Envoys on Climate Change (and Mary Robinson additionally on El Niño and climate). Gro Harlem Brundtland's seminal report *Our Common Future* in 1987 laid the foundation for the sustainable development agenda.

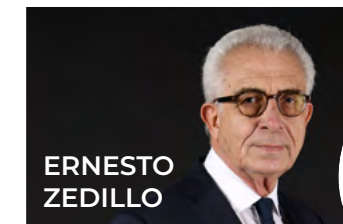
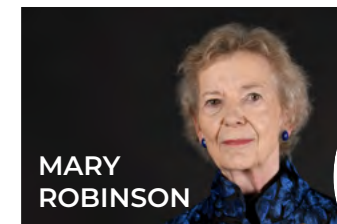
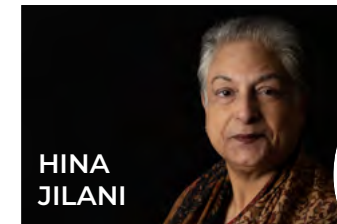
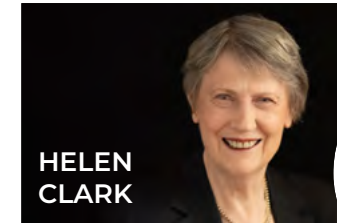
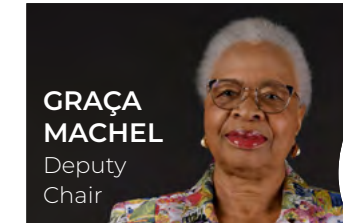
Juan Manuel Santos and **Ellen Johnson Sirleaf** played significant roles in bringing the SDGs to life, while Ban Ki-moon oversaw their launch in 2015 during his tenure as UN Secretary-General. Graça Machel is a current member of the UN Secretary-General's SDG Advocacy Group.

Helen Clark was Administrator of the UN Development Programme for eight years (where Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was previously Assistant Secretary-General for Africa). She and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf have co-chaired the Independent Panel (for Pandemic Preparedness and Response) since it was established by the World Health Assembly in 2020, which Ernesto Zedillo was also a member of. Gro Harlem Brundtland served as Director-General of the World Health Organization, and later as co-chair of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein convened negotiators in Geneva on the Pandemic Agreement.

Ernesto Zedillo chaired the UN High-Level Panel on Financing for Development in 2001 and the High-Level Commission on Modernization of World Bank Governance in 2009, as well as serving with Gro Harlem Brundtland on the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament.

The Elders

Founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007, The Elders are a group of independent global leaders working together for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet.



Ban Ki-moon, Lakhdar Brahimi, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Ricardo Lagos and Muhammad Yunus are Elders Emeritus.

Kofi Annan (1938-2018) was a founding member of The Elders and served as Chair from 2013-2018. **Desmond Tutu** (1931-2021) was a founding member of The Elders and served as Chair from 2007-2013. **Ela Bhatt** (1933-2022) was a founding member of The Elders. **Martti Ahtisaari** (1937-2023) was a member of The Elders from 2009. **Jimmy Carter** (1924-2024) was also a founding member of The Elders.

Executive summary

Multilateral cooperation is facing its greatest crisis since World War II. It comes at a time when nations most need to be working together to address the challenges facing the world.

Powerful governments are retreating from the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, disregarding the rule of law when it suits them, and cutting funding from international organisations.

The most glaring impact of these decisions is to be found in today's conflicts. The fundamental concepts of territorial integrity and political independence are under attack. Illegal and immoral actions are met with inaction and impunity. From Ukraine to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from Gaza to Iran, from Sudan to Myanmar, disregard for the rules of war has reached new lows. The world has entered a new global arms race, covering conventional, nuclear, and increasingly artificial intelligence-powered weapons.

Meanwhile, humanity faces a deepening climate and nature emergency, the prospect of more frequent pandemic threats, mounting debt in fragile economies and lingering extreme poverty, global trade volatility, spiralling disinformation, and unregulated AI.

Yet to present this current situation as an indictment of multilateralism would be misleading. The international system created over the last eighty years, while deeply flawed and not keeping up with current challenges, has ensured much greater peace, security, prosperity and respect for human rights than what came before.

Multilateral institutions have organised the collective action of nations, pooling resources to maximise collective benefit. They have generated global norms and policies, peacefully resolved many disputes, promoted interdependence among sovereign nations, fostered treaties and agreements of great value for the prosperity and security of people the world over, and contributed to historically unprecedented reductions in poverty and suffering.

No state, big or small, stands to benefit from the collapse of this system, however flawed and outdated it is.

But attempts to revitalise and reform the multilateral system are not going well, with agreements reached but not implemented, funding inadequate for the ambitions set out, and open hostility from some countries.

The majority of countries would like to see stronger multilateral cooperation to address the existential threats and other challenges the whole world faces. They need to work together to make that happen, north alongside south, east alongside west, large alongside small.

Former UN Secretaries-General Ban Ki-moon and Kofi Annan at an Elders Board Meeting in London, 2017.
Photo: Richard Lewis



A powerful minority is less committed. Yet, collective action that serves the interests of the vast majority of people must not be held hostage by a few countries.

Nor can the multilateral system be left to decline steadily. When rules are out of date or ignored, it is time to update and strengthen them, not to give up on them. When double standards are practised, it is time to defend international standards, not to pursue a race to the bottom. When a system is unjust, it is time to make it just, not to walk away.

The need to revitalise multilateral institutions is urgent. Now is the time to reinforce what works, and improve what does not. The Elders are not nostalgic for the multilateral system of the past. We believe it needs reforming and re-energising.

Such an endeavour may be daunting to some leaders. But the alternative is appalling. Only after the horror of World War Two were global leaders able to negotiate the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their core commitments and values must remain our guiding stars. It is the architecture housing them that is outdated and dysfunctional.

The UN Charter itself was intended to be expanded and improved over time, as US President Harry Truman emphasised in 1945: "No one claims that it is now a final or a perfect instrument." With backing from Brazil, South Africa, India, other governments and civil society organisations, momentum for reform of the UN Charter is growing. Indeed, the absence in the Charter of contemporary challenges such as the environment and climate change, artificial intelligence and nuclear weapons will only become more glaring over time.

Reforms that are rushed and driven by the refusal of governments to pay their dues are unlikely to give us the multilateral system the world needs: one that is fair, equitable, effective, and takes account of the interests of future generations as well as of all people living today. To deliver this vision requires bold political leaders who can take a long view of the challenges facing the world, and the necessity of nations cooperating to address them.

Elders call on political leaders to implement ambitious change in four areas:

- **Global security:** a revitalisation of the international peace and security architecture to meet the challenges of the 21st century.
- **Global solidarity:** a new model of global solidarity that provides timely, adequate and equitable financing, and which is governed inclusively.
- **Global public goods:** a collective effort to invest in the global public goods needed to protect people and planet, particularly from existential threats.
- **Global representation:** an overhaul in representation within the multilateral system, reflecting the reality of today's world and the interests of future generations.

Not all countries will want to move at the same pace to build a better multilateral system. But those who are most opposed to finding global solutions to global challenges cannot be allowed to hold up the rest of the world. If some governments choose the path of isolation, others must press ahead without them, while leaving the door open for future engagement.

Our founder, Nelson Mandela, gave us a mandate to inspire hope where there is despair. If nations work together, guided by a sense of shared humanity, we believe a better future for all lies ahead. This time of crisis can be turned from despair into a moment of opportunity.

In this paper, we set out some ideas for how to do so.

The challenges and our position

A. Global security

The world is experiencing its highest level of conflict since the UN was established. In 2024 there were 59 active state-based conflicts, causing 152,000 deaths. Far fewer conflicts end decisively than in the past, and even fewer through a peace agreement.

Beyond its immediate casualties, conflict is devastating to the fundamental aspirations of all people, from health and food security to education and economic stability. Women and girls are disproportionately affected, and recent years have seen horrific levels of conflict-related sexual violence. The repercussions of conflict transcend borders, through the spread of infectious disease, disrupted food chains, mass migration, economic disarray, and as a driver of extremism. The risks are even greater in a nuclear era.

Conflicts have become more internationalised. Regional and global powers increasingly provide military support to conflict parties, and seek to set the terms of any resolution. Peace-making efforts are more often driven by self-interest than by international law. Increasingly, countries are being forced to barter and buy their way through a conflict. Access to critical minerals has become a feature of negotiations, notably for Ukraine in seeking support from the United States of America (USA), and for the Democratic Republic of the Congo in its US-facilitated agreement with Rwanda.



Elders meet UN Secretary-General António Guterres during a visit to New York for UNGA High-level Week, September 2024. Photo: The Elders



Helen Clark and Mary Robinson visit the Rafah border and witness the unfolding humanitarian crisis. Rafah, August 2025. Photo: The Elders

As the second UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, said, “the United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell.” It was born from a global yearning to move beyond the violent and destructive authoritarianism that gave rise to World War II.

Yet in this changing global context, it seems some UN member states have lost sight of its founding mission to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. Regional organisations, envisaged by the UN Charter as having a central role in promoting peace and security, have also struggled to live up to their mission. Nations must rebuild the multilateral system so that it can successfully maintain peace and security in the 21st century.

The urgency of UN Security Council reform

The UN Security Council has often failed in its core responsibility to prevent and resolve conflicts, largely due to the veto power which the permanent five (P5) members can wield. Those members are the USA, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom. This inaction frequently stems from permanent members’ direct involvement in wars, from Iraq to Ukraine and beyond. Council members openly disregard Article 27(3) of the UN Charter which specifies that “a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting”. It runs counter to both common sense and natural justice that a state waging war can prohibit any attempt to end that war.

It is therefore unsurprising that global public opinion of the wider UN is deteriorating. For many, the UN helps to maintain a world order in which the powerful are exempt from compliance, and in which some lives appear to be worth more than others.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf addresses Heads of State and Government at the Security Council meeting on the maintenance of international peace and security. New York, 2024.
Photo: UN Photo/Evan Schneider



Reform of the Security Council has been debated for years without much progress. But the idea has gained momentum in recent years as global frustration with its abject dysfunction has risen. At the Summit of the Future in 2024, member states agreed that reform was urgent. This commitment must be translated into action.

A consolidated model informed by proposals submitted to the intergovernmental negotiations may result in a breakthrough. Seeking consensus on any particular model could continue to delay reform indefinitely. Faced with a choice of continuing under a broken system, or moving to a better one, many states may come on board with a consolidated proposal, even if it does not give them everything they want.

Ideally this would see additional permanent representation through longer term re-electable seats and allocated by region. This would bring a positive cycle of accountability for those that step forward to promote peace and security in their regions.

The expansion of veto rights, however, which is opposed by most member states, would bring further dysfunction to the Council. If the veto cannot be eliminated in the short term, further steps to increase its political costs and constrain its use, particularly in cases of mass atrocities, must be promoted. A more representative Council should not be a less effective one.

The path to reform should follow that of the only successful previous expansion of the Council from 11 to 15 members in 1965. Then, in the crucial General Assembly vote, only one of the P5 supported the change. But once the majority of member states had spoken, the remainder were compelled to follow, and the change was ratified within two years.

Looking beyond the UN Security Council

UN General Assembly members must not underestimate their collective strength and leverage on issues of peace and security. While the structure of the Security Council is inherently unjust, the General Assembly has at times seized a greater role, both in holding the Council to account and fulfilling its own peace and security mandate. The UN Charter empowers the General Assembly to consider issues of peace and security under Article 14, and this was reinforced by the Uniting for Peace resolution of 1950, which empowered the Assembly to act when the Council would not.

More recently, the 2022 Liechtenstein-led “veto initiative” was a welcome further advancement, allowing for the General Assembly to demand transparency and accountability for veto decisions in the Security Council. The General Assembly should continue to explore options to expand its role, drawing on past successful practices.

Examples of UN Secretaries-General (along with other senior UN officials) playing a decisive role in conflict prevention and mediation have declined over time. The next Secretary-General must revitalise that role. UN member states must support her in doing so.



The Elders with Dennis Francis, then President of the UN General Assembly, discussing how the Assembly can stimulate debate and reforms to strengthen the UN in the face of deepening global crises. New York, June 2024. Photo: The Elders

There is potential for other bodies to play a greater role in conflict prevention and management, including the UN Peacebuilding Commission and those regional organisations with a mandate on peace and security.

Reinforcing the rule of law

Attacks on the international rule of law and efforts to undermine the institutions that enforce it are a symptom of a diminished and dysfunctional multilateral system. All member states of the UN are bound by the rulings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Yet leaders regularly flout or ignore its judgements. The 125 States Parties to the International Criminal Court (ICC), in signing the Rome Statute, have committed to end impunity for the most grievous international crimes. Yet the world's five most populous countries have not joined, and some States Parties have wavered in their treaty obligations.

Most recently, the USA sanctioned the ICC and its chief prosecutor (again), and later four ICC judges, in response to legal proceedings over Israel's alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes in Gaza. Such actions mirror a global rise in the political persecution of judges, lawyers, and courts, both domestically and internationally. When the rule of law is disregarded on the world stage, opportunistic leaders are emboldened to do the same domestically.

In this context, public faith in the rule of law and international justice is increasingly weakened. The provisional measures ordered by the ICJ to prevent genocide in Gaza, including unhindered humanitarian access and international investigation, have largely been ignored. The Rome Statute was established to address "unimaginable atrocities that deeply shock the conscience of humanity". But these atrocities are now commonplace.

Compounding this, the growing disregard for international humanitarian law – evident in attacks on health workers, hospitals, journalists, and civilians in general – undermines the Geneva Conventions. Such attacks make it harder to prevent conflict and protect civilians, while worsening the spread of preventable disease when people are unable to access care safely during crises, and increasing charges of misinformation and disinformation about what is really happening in warzones.

For nations to rebuild a multilateral system that is fit for purpose, respect for international rule of law must be reinforced so that it can withstand attacks from powerful member states and help ensure the rights of all people.

States committed to the rule of law must find the political strength and moral courage to respect and strengthen the work of international courts. Firstly, they must support the arrest of defendants in their jurisdictions who are wanted by the ICC and uphold the unanimous ICC Appeals Chamber ruling that there is no immunity for heads of state. Secondly, they must ensure that they are upholding the values of the Court themselves, while encouraging other states to ratify the Rome Statute. Thirdly, they should amend the Rome Statute to close the glaring jurisdictional gaps that currently prevent the court from prosecuting the crime of aggression. Given today's circumstances, it is regrettable that States Parties postponed a decision on this until 2029. The governments responsible for obstructing progress should commit to enabling the ICC to fulfil its mandate effectively.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands. Photo: Shutterstock





Prioritising conflict prevention

Prevention eliminates the extensive costs of war, including loss of life and limb, healthcare costs, military spending, infrastructure costs, economic collapse, the displacement of people, and environmental damage. Prevention bolsters the social contract, and a resilient social contract in turn bolsters prevention. So, it is perverse that peacebuilding and conflict prevention, often best delivered multilaterally, are losing funding while military spending is soaring.

Peacekeeping desperately needs a meaningful reset. The number of deployed peacekeeping troops has fallen by 42% over the past decade while the number of conflicts has steadily risen. Peacekeepers are increasingly unwelcome in many countries, with a common perception that they are expensive and ineffective. That negative view has been exacerbated by the sexual abuse of vulnerable populations by peacekeepers in multiple countries.

Yet the success rate of UN peacekeeping is predominantly positive, most notably by lessening the likelihood of a conflict recurring. The UN peacekeeping system has a unique range of tools that far surpasses those of other international organisations (and certainly many states). Given steep funding cuts to peacekeeping in particular, ways to strengthen its credibility, legitimacy and effectiveness must be found.

Women's participation in peace and security also remains low, 25 years after the United Nations landmark Security Council Resolution 1325 recognised their critical role. This is despite decades of evidence that women's participation contributes to both conflict prevention and peaceful resolution. If governments are serious about a peaceful global future, they must invest in the catalytic role of women in peace-making and peacebuilding.

Addressing the resurgent nuclear threat

The risk of nuclear catastrophe today is higher than at any time since the height of the Cold War. Nuclear states are expanding their arsenals while increasingly eroding the taboo against the use of nuclear weapons through the exchange of barely veiled threats.

Fighting in 2025 between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed states not signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), underscores the terrifying risk of how quickly conflict can escalate to the point of a nuclear exchange. A conflict between the USA and Russia, with some 11,000 nuclear weapons between them, could end human civilisation as we know it.

Even in the absence of deliberate nuclear use, a technical malfunction or human error that causes a false alarm – of which there have been several in the past – would give as little as six minutes for other parties to respond. The acceleration of unregulated AI in nuclear command and control systems presents new risks, and threatens to undermine effective human control over nuclear decision-making.

Putting nuclear weapons at the heart of national defence perpetuates the dangerous myth that nuclear deterrence keeps us safe. One single bomb dropped in Hiroshima claimed around 140,000 victims by the end of 1945. Today's weapons have a combined destructive capability of close to 100,000 Hiroshima or Nagasaki-sized bombs.

Yet war and nuclear confrontation are not inevitable.

All leaders must take meaningful steps to minimise nuclear risks, revitalise dialogue on arms control – including AI-related risks – and de-escalate nuclear modernisation. Failure to do so would be a betrayal of the memory of the 1945 victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and threaten the security of current and future generations. Dialogue on nuclear risk reduction needs to happen through both bilateral and multilateral routes.

In the long-term, all states must re-engage efforts towards the full abolition of nuclear weapons. The nuclear states are not taking their disarmament obligations under the NPT seriously. This is another opportunity for the majority of states to use their collective leverage to push for change among the most powerful. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (which entered into force in 2021 and already has nearly 100 signatories) is one route to do so.



B. Global solidarity

Much of the world is still dealing with a range of consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic which, among other things, has severely damaged trust between north and south. Countries now face potentially severe economic repercussions from increased tariffs. Seven hundred million people still live in extreme poverty (two-thirds of them in Africa), and only around 17% of the Sustainable Development Goals targets are on track. Developing countries spend on average 42% of government revenue on servicing debt (55% in Africa). More than three billion people live in countries whose debt payments exceed spending on health or education.

At the same time, several advanced economies have significantly reduced their official development assistance, and the USA has recently dismantled USAID, the world's largest bilateral aid agency. While many countries would like to see an end to the outdated donor-recipient model, the suddenness of aid reductions has left big gaps in funding. In the absence of alternative interim arrangements, the transition to more domestic financing covering these costs will be very difficult for several countries, putting millions of lives and livelihoods at risk.

International financial institutions (IFIs) were established to foster global financial stability, but they were designed in an era when many states were not yet independent. The governance of IFIs continues to reflect this outdated world.

While it is national governments that are ultimately responsible for meeting the basic needs of their citizens, even the best-intentioned leaders of developing countries face structural barriers that severely impact their capacity to do so in the short to medium-term.

Global financial architecture for the 21st century

The global financial architecture cannot be transformed overnight. However, there are clear and actionable steps the global community could take towards a fairer system.

A powerful first step would be for financing institutions to relieve the sovereign debt burden of developing countries to promote resilient economies. Many low-income nations were already struggling with sovereign debt before COVID-19, and had to borrow more during the pandemic.

Financing institutions should explore all options to relieve sovereign debt to create much-needed fiscal space. To begin with, streamlining the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatments would facilitate access for low-income countries in debt distress. While the common framework has delivered substantive debt relief, the system is overly complex and slow moving.

Multilateral development banks (MDBs) remain the most effective institutions to provide low cost, long maturity financing. They should maximise their impact by significantly increasing their lending. The G20 Roadmap towards Better, Bigger, and More Effective MDBs outlines recommendations to this effect, but progress made so far is insufficient.

Second, states should move more quickly towards equitable global tax reform. There is potential for raising innovative sources of finance for global solidarity. One example is the G20 idea for a wealth tax, proposed by Brazil and carried forward under the South African presidency and the proposed UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation. The proposed 2% tax on billionaires would raise \$200-\$250 billion per year from about 3,000 taxpayers if coordinated globally. Given recent progress in international tax cooperation, the common standard required to make the proposal functional has become technically feasible. It could be implemented even if all countries did not adopt it.

We are also encouraged by the growing momentum behind the Global Solidarity Levies Task Force. Powerful ideas emerging from the task force, co-chaired by the leaders of Barbados, France, and Kenya, could see hundreds of billions of dollars generated through internationally coordinated levies on undertaxed and polluting industries. Several countries have long been taxing flights to fund HIV testing and vaccine programmes, and a new coalition is now looking to fund climate priorities such as just transitions and increased resilience. Other levies being considered would target financial transactions, global shipping emissions, cryptocurrency, and fossil fuel extraction.



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf delivers a speech at a World Bank reception, calling for global solidarity in financing pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. Washington DC, April 2023. Photo: World Bank

Multilateral cooperation should address those areas where profit motives have undermined equitable access to benefit-sharing. Inequitable access to countermeasures during the pandemic was a clear case of that. Multilateral cooperation can also help better leverage development finance institutions and private capital for public goods, such as surge financing for the production of emergency goods.

Third, we welcome the debate on global public investment (GPI) as a way of financing the provision of global goods. The principles of GPI are simple and clear. Each country contributes according to their means: this could involve each participating country paying into a dedicated, multilateral fund at a level dictated by their GDP. All benefit through GPI financing flowing to the provision of global public goods, such as pandemic preparedness and climate action. All decide: GPI governance gives equal voice and decision-making rights to all contributors. We support leaders from South Africa, Norway, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay in their championing of GPI as a pathway to transforming international development financing, and urge others to follow suit.

C. Global public goods

Efforts to address global public goods have long been stymied by a range of factors, including short-sighted leadership that prioritises apparent sovereignty over longer-term benefits, the free rider problem, and the protectionist impulses of wealthy states and their private sectors. These efforts now face further headwinds amid the worsening multilateral crisis.

Leaders should recall the historic benefits generated when countries pool resources and work collectively, such as the eradication of smallpox and the restoration of the ozone layer. These are two of the greatest global public investments in human history, and would have been impossible without multilateral cooperation, which happened even at times of heightened political tension.

Today the world faces even greater challenges that affect us all. If governments choose to compete or isolate rather than cooperate in addressing, for example, climate change, pandemics, and the governance of AI, we will all suffer as a result in the long run. Instead, we must find ways to finance global public goods as a cost-effective and powerful approach to tackling our shared global challenges.

The concept of global public goods is often misunderstood. Global public goods are those that could in principle benefit all countries and all people, and can be made use of repeatedly without diminishing the benefits they deliver to others. Examples include a stable climate, international security, global financial stability, the scientific knowledge involved in vaccine production, and international regulations for civil aviation. Once such global goods are established, they are available to all. Global public goods require stable and reliable financing (albeit modest relative to their benefits).

Global public goods enjoy broad public support around the world. One of the strongest calls coming from the UN's public consultations on its seventy-fifth anniversary was for the strengthened provision of global public goods. In a welcome development, MDBs have broadened their scope in recent years to support borrowers' investments in global public goods, alongside a continued focus on national and regional development. We encourage further scaling up of lending in both respects.



Ernesto Zedillo addresses the F20 Forum in Tokyo on securing a just transition to a low-carbon economy. June 2019. Photo: F20

Our planet as our primary asset

Healthy ecosystems, including a stable climate, are vital global public goods. Their safeguarding requires urgent and collective action. There is a rapidly closing window to act before tipping points are reached – some of which will be irreversible. Wealthy countries and those most responsible for historic emissions have an obligation to take the lead and support developing countries to act. This was the grand bargain behind the Paris Climate Agreement.

The Paris Agreement is working, but not fast enough. Even with UN-convened global climate cooperation, the world is heading towards around three degrees of heating. Economic challenges around the world have made the green transition and its perceived costs politically risky, hindering coordinated action. Controversy around climate change and solutions to it have played into negative narratives around global cooperation more broadly, which populist politicians and fossil fuel lobbies have encouraged.

Far more momentum is needed as the climate ecosystem teeters. If the world is to deliver on the Paris Agreement, investment into emerging and developing countries for renewable energy, adaptation, and the restoration of nature must ramp up to \$1.3 trillion a year by 2035. At COP29, wealthy countries committed to provide just \$300bn of this as public finance – falling short of what is needed. The collective level of ambition of national climate plans is insufficient to keep warming below 1.5 degrees.

Mary Robinson joins Brazil's Environment Minister Marina Silva, the COP30 President and CEO, Indigenous leaders, activists, scientists, and community representatives at the first Global Ethical Stocktake dialogue. London, June 2025.
Photo: Isabela Castilho / BRICS Brasil



Political leaders need to support and strengthen existing multilateral processes. COPs need reform to make them fit for purpose, now that the focus is shifting from negotiations to implementation. Brazil and other countries are proposing radical solutions to drive more political momentum. The 2022 Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework – the most ambitious multilateral agreement on biodiversity to date – also requires a stronger collective commitment to bring about its implementation.

We welcome the recent unanimous advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice, which unequivocally rules that states are legally responsible for climate harms, in particular those caused by the fossil fuel industry. Requested by the UN General Assembly, the case became one of the ICJ's largest ever, despite having started as an idea among students in a Pacific Island classroom. This grassroots-to-global movement demonstrates the power of civil society in shaping and employing international law and global governance to serve the interests of people and planet. The ruling stands to re-energise negotiations at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, providing a foundation for more ambitious multilateral action on climate.

A new era for global health

It has been known for several decades that global public goods such as shared research, global disease surveillance, and reduced disease prevalence through widespread vaccination are essential to protect and promote public health across the whole world.

But when COVID-19 struck, many countries lacked the infrastructure, resources or plans to protect their populations effectively, and global coordination fell short. Vaccine hoarding and border closures sent a message of disunity and inequality. Misinformation spread quickly, creating confusion and undermining trust in public health measures. Around the world, we saw overwhelmed health systems, preventable deaths, economic and fiscal pressures, and social disruption. Multilateral cooperation faltered when it was needed most.

Today there is reason for some hope that multilateral cooperation may address future global health crises better. In May 2025, the World Health Assembly adopted a Pandemic Agreement – the world's first global treaty on preventing, preparing for, and responding to pandemics (PPR). The agreement effectively recognises PPR as an essential global public good, along with its many components such as health infrastructure, surveillance capacities, and pandemic countermeasures – including vaccines and medicines.

A related achievement was the amendments to the 2005 International Health Regulations (IHR). The IHR emphasised important principles for multilateral cooperation for PPR, such as equity, respect for human rights, and transparency, as well as shared responsibility for compliance and co-ordinated financing in the face of cross-border health threats.

The success of the Pandemic Agreement will depend on it receiving the funding, urgency, and political attention it deserves. Political commitment at both the national and international levels is needed to ratify and implement it. Its Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing Annex is yet to be negotiated. The only other global health treaty negotiated under the WHO Constitution –



Graça Machel visits a health centre in Rwanda to hear from community health workers and women living with HIV about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. July 2023. Photo: UNAIDS Rwanda

the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control – has saved millions of lives worldwide since it entered into force in 2005. This is because governments rolled out measures to operationalise it, despite industry and libertarian opposition.

As efforts to secure sustainable financing become increasingly complex, these multilateral health mechanisms can be severely undermined. As of mid-2025, less than 20% of WHO's base budget comes from assessed contributions, prompting calls for countries to increase reliable support to WHO. There is an agreement in place to reach a target of fifty per cent of the base programme budget being met by member states.

In parallel, serious engagement of broader UN leadership is needed. The UN must enable a whole-of-system response to health emergencies through coordination, partnership, and creative use of existing tools. This needs to be planned now, rather than rushed through at the outset of a future disease outbreak.

Finally, pandemic risks are increasingly impacted by broader global dynamics, including climate change, geopolitical realignment, and economic instability. This underscores the need for a multilateral system that does not treat pandemics and climate disasters as siloed threats, but instead equips institutions and financing mechanisms to address both as interconnected challenges.

At the same time, the rise of regional blocs and a more multipolar world demand a more inclusive and representative approach to global public health – one that elevates the priorities and capabilities of countries in the Global South. This includes meaningful support for technology transfer, regional manufacturing, and locally led preparedness and response efforts that support domestic investments in health, alongside continuous, reliable access to essential health services in times of crisis.

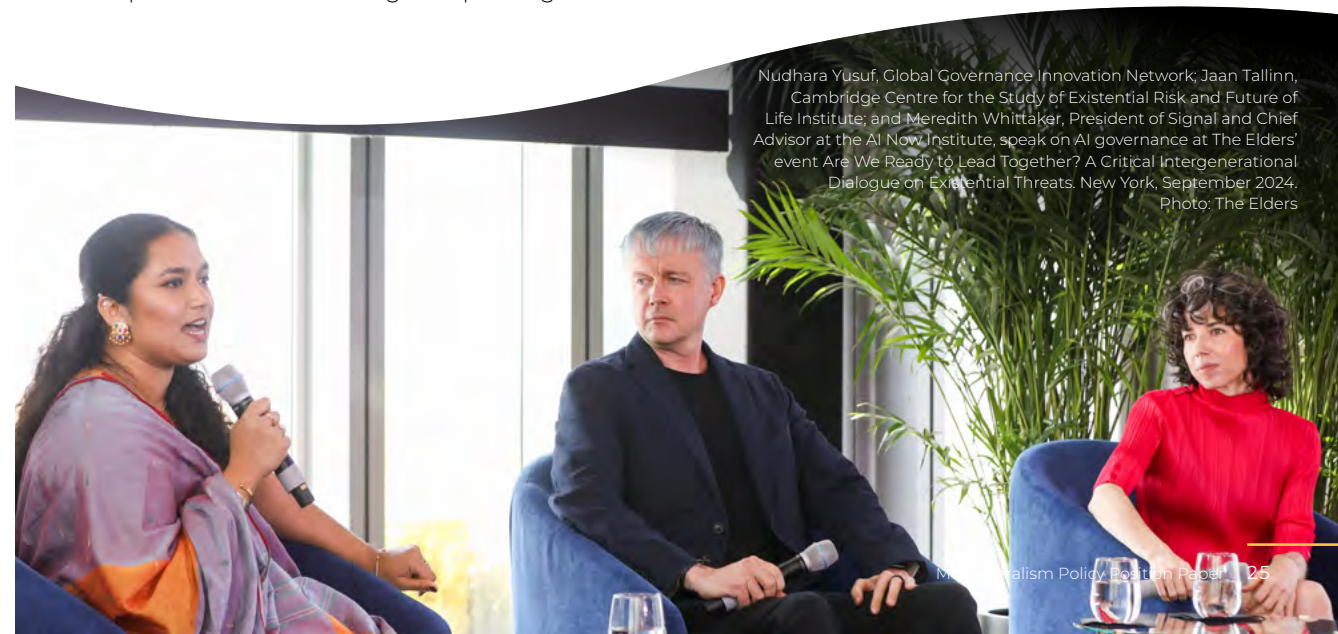
Artificial intelligence as a catalyst for good

AI is developing at a dizzying pace, with profound implications for all aspects of society. We believe AI has the potential to bring enormous benefits to human life, including to health, education and other aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, without effective global governance, supported by meaningful and enforceable regulation, the extraordinary rate of technological change AI is delivering poses an existential threat to humanity, as well as more immediate risks.

We are alarmed by predictions from leading AI scientists such as Geoffrey Hinton and Yoshua Bengio that there is a 10-20% chance that the technology will end in human extinction. Uncontrolled AI could increase the risk of catastrophic events such as an accidental nuclear launch or a bio-engineered pandemic. It also has the potential to exacerbate other global challenges – from the use of autonomous weapons to disinformation and the erosion of democracy. AI is already exacerbating the climate crisis through its high-intensity extractive demand on energy, water, and mineral resources.

Despite these risks, an effective form of global governance which protects human rights, dignity, and privacy seems distant. Decision-making on AI's rapid development sits disproportionately within profit-driven private companies. Global cooperation remains hamstrung by competition, in particular between the USA and China, and leaders who prioritise perceived economic advantage over their responsibilities to manage the risks of new technologies to their own populations and the world.

The benefits of AI will not be realised or fairly distributed through national policies or the private sector alone. Multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation is urgently needed to harness the power of AI to achieve global public goods.



Nudhara Yusuf, Global Governance Innovation Network; Jaan Tallinn, Cambridge Centre for the Study of Existential Risk and Future of Life Institute; and Meredith Whittaker, President of Signal and Chief Advisor at the AI Now Institute, speak on AI governance at The Elders' event Are We Ready to Lead Together? A Critical Intergenerational Dialogue on Existential Threats. New York, September 2024. Photo: The Elders

We welcome recent initiatives in AI governance at regional, national and sub-national levels, as well as convenings by governments, scientists, and industry leaders. The AI Safety Summits hosted by states to discuss the safety and regulation of AI have brought much-needed engagement between the USA and China, as well as the launch of the International Network of AI Safety Institutes. Efforts such as these are crucial to building and strengthening the legal and technical guardrails needed to keep this transformative technology safe and secure.

The UN has a critical role to play in driving forward inclusive global governance of AI and acting as a connecting force. With support from member states, the UN should lead efforts to implement the welcome provisions on AI in the Global Digital Compact adopted at the Summit of the Future in 2024. This includes the establishment of the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and the launch of a Global Dialogue on AI Governance.

A diversity of approaches can provide vital insights and differing perspectives on AI governance. But there is an urgent need to harmonise efforts. A coordinated approach will ensure that all nations participate in shaping the future of AI, not just those with advanced AI capabilities. It will ensure that knowledge and expertise is shared, and that governance decisions are based on the global public good.

UN member states must establish global AI governance norms rooted in international human rights law. The 2024 findings of the UN High-level Advisory Body on AI, which rightly emphasise that “AI governance does not take place in a vacuum,” are a good place to start.

D. Global representation

The under-representation of marginalised groups and historically disadvantaged nations needs urgently addressing across the global governance architecture, first and foremost within the UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. For people all over the world, global governance reflects an unjust reality in which wealthy countries dominate, women are passed over for highest office, and civil society engagement is too often a gesture.

As the most ambitious multilateral projects in human history, these institutions have the potential to make fair and meaningful representation a reality. This is all the more crucial when some governments are seeking to undermine the multilateral system, including through bilateral pressure and obstruction, especially where consensus is required for joint decision-making. A fractured and resentful global community is far easier to pick off than one that is working together to build a way out of crisis.

Fairer representation can serve as a unifying force – building trust, buy-in, and solidarity between states, genders, stakeholders, and even generations.



Mary Robinson with
President Lula, Brasilia,
August 2024.
Photo: The Elders

Shared leadership between regions and economies

Despite justifiable grievances, the majority of Global South countries continue to support multilateralism. Small states in particular recognise their vulnerability in a chaotic “might is right” world, and many are working hard for reformed global cooperation. But there is also widespread resentment over the current dynamic. So it is unsurprising that new groups such as BRICS have emerged, to counterbalance what is perceived as biased global governance.

Countries from the Global North who also support multilateralism could do more to work more closely with those from the Global South who share this commitment, even if that runs counter to the views of their traditional allies who no longer do.

For the UN to survive and fulfil its obligations, it must recalibrate to represent the world more fairly. In this respect, the national ring-fencing of senior UN posts (the continued practice of appointing individuals from influential states to specific roles) is deeply damaging. The two Elders who served as UN Secretary-General were very aware of how this pressure works. It is telling that the General Assembly has called for an end to this practice in resolutions spanning five decades – to no avail. Appointments should be made on merit, with due regard to regional diversity. To encourage independence, candidates for senior posts should not be required to have the backing of their national governments.

The introduction of a single, seven-year term for UN Secretaries-General would enhance their independence, by freeing them of the need to secure support from the P5 for re-election. The power to make this recommendation lies with the General Assembly; it is regrettable that member states failed to seize the opportunity to do so under pressure when adopting the recent Resolution on General Assembly Revitalization, which provided the last formal opportunity ahead of the upcoming selection process. The need is still there.

IFIs and other MDBs are also in urgent need of more representative governance as part of their broader reforms. The structural under-representation of developing countries based on shareholdings is a serious shortcoming in the international financial architecture. Decades of policies and measures that are seen by many as disempowering and harmful to some of the poorest people in the world have created a significant deficit in trust between IFIs, recipient countries and their populations.

IFIs and other MDBs can and must play a critical role in building a multilateral system that represents and delivers for the modern world. This includes giving more voice to developing countries, advancing more inclusive economic governance models, and extending recipient representation to include civil society.

Equitable approaches to financing must also ensure that fragile and conflict-affected countries, which currently receive significantly less support (especially on programmes that support peace and security) are not left behind.

Shared leadership between women and men

The multilateral system must defend gender equality from regressive efforts to roll back women's rights. We strongly believe that the next UN Secretary-General must be a woman, appointed through an open, transparent process that seeks the most qualified candidate. A continuing succession of men at the top of the UN is counterproductive to what multilateral cooperation is seeking to achieve.

The selection of the next UN Secretary-General is an opportunity to drive transformative change. It would send a long-overdue message that women's leadership is essential to solving the world's most pressing challenges. The General Assembly must have a greater role in the selection process, and insist that the Security Council nominate more than one candidate. Member states must also ensure regional diversity and consider joint nomination of candidates.

We support the 2024 guidance by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women that 50-50 representation should be an indisputable standard in all decision-making (across the public and private sectors, in political and economic spheres). The Committee rightly noted that the previous target of 30% is incompatible with the elimination of discrimination against women, as it suggests that inequality is justifiable.



Mary Robinson delivers the Kofi Annan Peace Address during Geneva Peace Week, advocating for gender parity in leadership and the inclusion of women in peacebuilding. Geneva, October 2024. Photo: Olivier Chamard Photography

We echo the Committee's warnings that failing to achieve parity will prevent governments from addressing urgent challenges effectively, notably those related to peace, political stability, economic development, climate change, and technological advancements such as AI.

Male-dominated leadership of AI is particularly concerning given that AI will soon impact most areas of human life, including in the realm of global governance. Parity in AI leadership and decision-making would be a catalyst for long overdue balance. Yet women's representation in AI is currently even lower than across the broader tech industry.



Taking civil society seriously

The multilateral system cannot function inclusively without the meaningful participation of diverse civil society, including women-led and youth-led groups. Since their formal recognition at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, civil society organisations have played a critical and growing role in multilateral fora, from across the UN to the G20. They have long advocated for marginalised voices as part of deliberations on human rights, development, and peace and security.

Recent multilateral achievements that are civil society-led provide some inspiration for what more representative collective action might achieve. The ICJ's July 2025 advisory opinion on climate change is a powerful example, along with the Paris Climate Agreement, the High Seas Treaty adopted in 2023, the proposed Global Plastics Treaty, and the proposed UN Tax Convention.

Young people, indigenous leaders, women's groups, and minority groups often play a major role mobilising such major breakthroughs. Through determined engagement and advocacy, and by holding national representatives to account, they demand heightened ambition of multilateral agreements to make them consequential.

However, civil society organisations face resistance and are often restricted to a consultation role, with limited involvement in decision-making. It is regrettable to see some member states using the UN Charter to justify restrictions on civil society in the name of sovereignty.

In this moment of multilateral crisis, civil society can help channel the global public's demand for meaningful reform. Giving voice to publics around the world is an important part of the solution. Civil society empowerment is crucial to building a multilateral system that represents and serves the world, especially those who have traditionally been left behind. More opportunities must be created for civil society, including women, young people, and indigenous communities, to meaningfully participate in multilateral institutions, and to shape their future.



The Elders and young experts present their joint Call to Action, urging leaders to protect future generations through stronger international cooperation and decisive action today. New York, September 2024.
Photo: The Elders

Protecting future generations

The decisions, actions, and inactions of today will shape people's lives for decades to come. The July 2025 ICJ advisory opinion on climate change is groundbreaking because it demands that states consider the rights of generations yet to be born as well as those alive today. The concept is not new: the UN Charter opens with a pledge to "save *succeeding* generations from the scourge of war".

We support the appointment of a UN Special Envoy with a mandate to ensure that the needs and interests of future generations are properly considered in multilateral decision-making. Likewise, we welcome progress by governments to establish similar positions and to institutionalise future-oriented thinking.

The UN Declaration on Future Generations encourages long-term and sustainable solutions to today's existential threats, while also leaving a better future for generations to come. A pivotal agreement for future generations, the Declaration saw a record number of countries committing to the considerations of those yet to be born in their policy and decision-making. It recognised multilateralism as a future benefit, committing to "a stronger, more effective and resilient multilateral system based on international law, with the United Nations at its core, underpinned by transparency, confidence and trust, for the benefit of present and future generations."

Across the globe, people of all ages are demanding leadership that listens to everyone, regardless of gender, age, nationality, or economic status. The majority of people want to see stronger international cooperation, and an even higher number believe that true leadership must combine the wisdom of the past with the creativity of the future. The greatest impact of multilateral cooperation today may lie with future generations. The responsibility of making the system fit for purpose lies with those of us here today.



Ban Ki-moon and Juan Manuel Santos in Irpin, Ukraine, August 2022.
Photo: The Elders / Paul Kuzmickas

Our proposals for action

1. Reclaim the UN's founding mission in preventing and resolving conflict

The UN is failing to fulfil its founding mission to prevent and resolve conflict.

- From the UN Secretary-General down, the UN must rebuild its political role in mediating and settling crises. Member states must support this role, rather than encourage or tolerate a free-for-all in which powerful countries dictate political settlements.
- A consolidated model for UN Security Council reform, which improves both its representativeness and effectiveness, and has a realistic chance of securing General Assembly approval and final ratification by the P5, must be brought forward for debate in the General Assembly during 2025-26. We call for a cross-regional coalition of states to drive this change.
- It is past time to realise fully the catalytic role women can play in preventing and resolving conflict. We call on the UN and its member states to make women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations mandatory.

2. Reinforce the international rule of law

International courts and the rule of law are the best protection for those that do not want to live in a "might is right" world.

- Global leaders must recommit to respecting international law (International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law, International Criminal Law), including the rulings of the International Court of Justice.
- We call on countries that have not joined the International Criminal Court to do so, and those that choose not to join to stop attacking its work.
- The Rome Statute should be amended to give the International Criminal Court full jurisdiction to prosecute the crime of aggression – the supreme international crime from which other crimes follow.

3. Revitalise cooperation on nuclear arms control

The possibility of nuclear catastrophe today is greater than in most people's lifetimes, while AI threatens to exacerbate risks.

- We encourage all countries to engage with the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in good faith, and its States Parties to strengthen the treaty's verification and enforcement provisions.
- To reach full abolition, the five recognised nuclear states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons must take serious steps in line with their Article 5 commitment to pursue disarmament, including the adoption of no first use, taking weapons off high-alert and out of deployment, and reducing warheads.
- All nuclear states should enter into sustained high-level dialogue on placing guardrails on AI in weapons systems, with a focus on how to maintain meaningful human control.

Juan Manuel Santos joins Herb Lin, Suzet McKinney and Robert Socolow for the unveiling of the Doomsday Clock. January 2025.
Photo: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists



4. Redesign global financing

Our international financial architecture is outdated and unfair, and in need of a major reset.

- Financing institutions must commit to relieving the sovereign debt burden of developing countries to create fiscal space that can be used for achieving national development goals.
- Governments must urgently pursue equitable and innovative global tax reform, such as a wealth tax and other ideas being explored by the Global Solidarity Levies Task Force, and under the proposed UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation.
- Governments should consider the global public investment model, where ‘all benefit, all contribute, all decide’, to address the shared threats humanity faces, finance the global public goods everyone benefits from, and show solidarity with the most disadvantaged people in the world.

5. Raise the ambition on climate action

Meeting agreed climate and nature goals requires urgent and unprecedented cooperation, ideally between all countries, but if not between as many as are willing to agree to it.

- G20 countries should take the lead in mobilising collective action to turbocharge the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement and the Global Biodiversity Framework.

- All multilateral processes should be streamlined to become more accountable and action-focused, and to make it easier for decisions to be taken, implemented and monitored. A consensus-based approach must not slow down the actions that science tells us are needed. The Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change should fully adopt its rules of procedure, notably on majority voting.
- Governments must find a way to conclude a binding international agreement with enforceable commitments to phase out fossil fuels and make polluters pay.

6. Renew political leadership on global health security

Global health security requires a step change in prioritisation and financing and, above all, bold political leadership.

- All states should provide adequate funding and political attention to the World Health Organization and its critical multilateral health mechanisms, including the Pandemic Agreement and amended International Health Regulations.
- We urge states to strengthen financing across the global health security architecture, with increased investments for multilateral institutions, including regional organisations, as core pillars of equitable, resilient, and rights-based pandemic preparedness.
- We encourage states and multilateral organisations to address emerging infectious disease threats proactively, with pandemic priorities better integrated into climate, conflict, and sustainable development agendas.

Mary Robinson and Razan Al Mubarak speak at the Enhancing Inclusive Climate Action panel, during COP29 in Azerbaijan, November 2024. Photo: UN Climate Change High-Level Champions



Gro Harlem Brundtland delivers a speech at the 75th anniversary of the World Health Organization, emphasising the importance of pandemic prevention, preparedness, response, and strengthening global health security. Geneva, May 2023. Photo: WHO / Pierre Albouy



7. Rally together to make AI a force for good

Only through collective efforts and shared responsibility can governments around the world ensure that AI is predominantly beneficial to all humanity, rather than one of the greatest threats we face driven by profit for a few.

- We urge political and business leaders to prioritise multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation to drive forward global AI governance that is in everyone's interests and reduces the risks.
- We call on the UN to play a connecting role in establishing global AI governance norms rooted in international human rights law, including through implementation of the Global Digital Compact.

8. Reform global governance and leadership for a more just future

A historic lack of fair representation at the highest levels of global governance has damaged the credibility and effectiveness of multilateral institutions. Change here is central to increasing the global legitimacy of these institutions. As well as calling for reform of the UN Security Council:

- We call on shareholders of the International Financial Institutions to follow the recommendations of the Bridgetown Initiative to ensure that developing countries have a stronger voice in their governance and decision-making.

Juan Manuel Santos with Sanna Marin, former Prime Minister of Finland, and Comfort Ero, President of the International Crisis Group, at the Martti Ahtisaari Legacy Seminar at the UN, addressing the need to rebuild trust and strengthen global governance. New York, April 2025.
Photo: CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation



- We encourage UN member states to nominate only women candidates to be the next UN Secretary-General, and to push for a single, seven-year term for the post.
- We expect the next UN Secretary-General to end the ring-fencing of senior UN roles to nationals from powerful countries, as repeatedly called for by the UN General Assembly.
- We call on UN member states and civil society to offer strong support to the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Future Generations, who once appointed must advocate boldly for the interests of those who will inherit this planet. We encourage governments to establish similar posts at the national level, and for them to work closely with the UN Special Envoy.

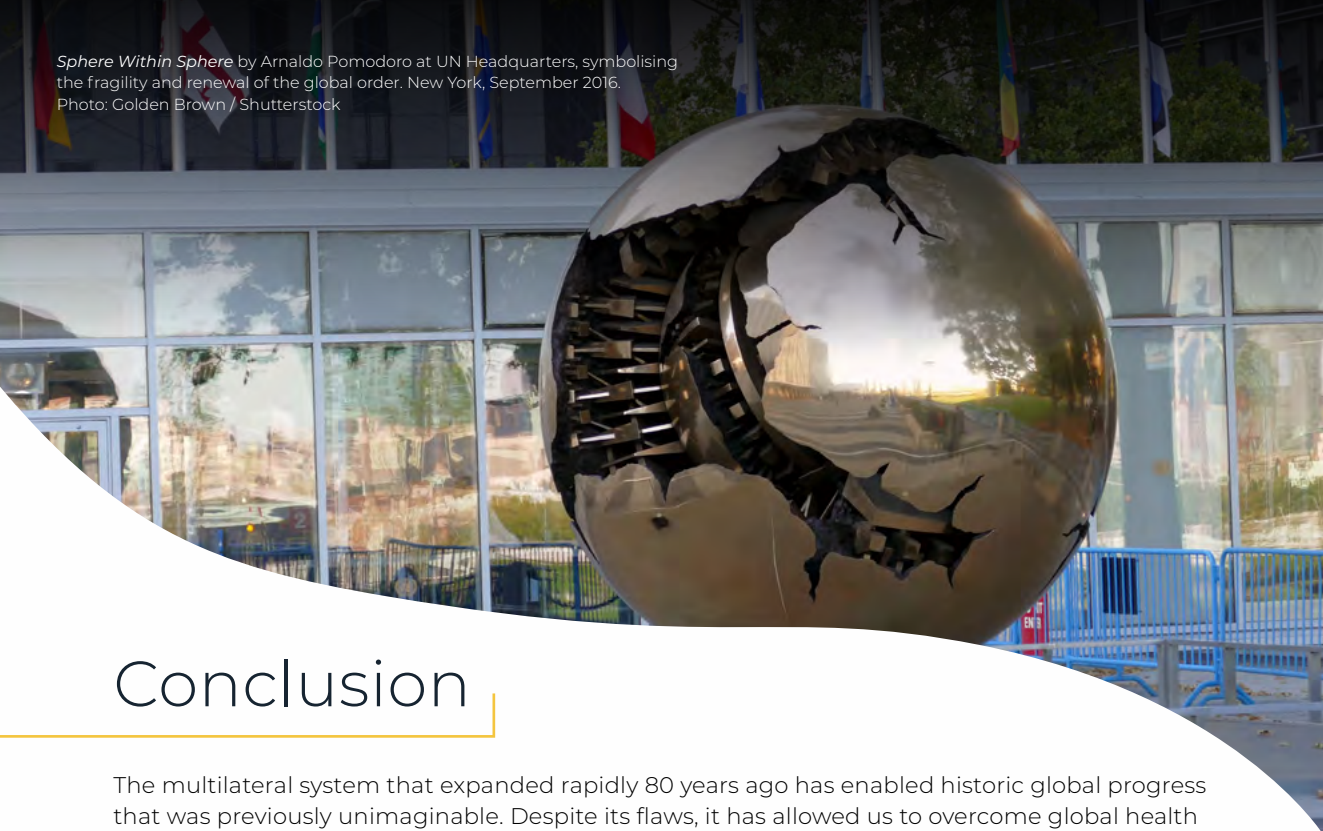
9. Resist efforts to undermine global cooperation

Some governments would like to see global cooperation weakened, and are seeking to undermine the multilateral system. Those who believe in cooperation must not let this happen.

- Governments who are committed to global cooperation must work together, uniting on the importance of a functioning multilateral system even where they disagree on individual decisions. Alliances between countries of the south and north are vital; working collaboratively and using the strength of unity is the best way to defend multilateral values and the rule of law.
- We call on governments who choose not to participate in particular multilateral institutions to respect the wishes of countries who want to do so, and not to seek to undermine institutions they have chosen not to be part of.

The Elders meet Kaja Kallas, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission. Brussels, April 2025.
Photo: European Commission





Conclusion

The multilateral system that expanded rapidly 80 years ago has enabled historic global progress that was previously unimaginable. Despite its flaws, it has allowed us to overcome global health and environmental crises, set normative standards for human rights, contribute to sustainable development around the world, provide humanitarian assistance to hundreds of millions of people, and (to date) save multiple generations from a third world war and nuclear calamity.

Even as multilateral cooperation faces its greatest ever crisis and geopolitical tensions flare, achievements are still happening, with new treaties agreed (including on marine biodiversity, cybercrime, and pandemics) and others under negotiation (including on tax cooperation, plastics, and crimes against humanity), while multilateral institutions continue to deliver vital services and coordinate member state activities around the world.

Today's global crisis cannot – and must not – be met with inaction, or negotiation of agreements that are not implemented. Our multilateral system is creaking under the strain of power dynamics that allow wars to rage, nuclear weapons to proliferate, pandemics to devastate livelihoods, and fossil fuel companies to destroy the environment.

If we continue down this path, we risk losing the gains we have made over the past 80 years, as well as squandering the promises multilateralism holds for a better future. Worse still, particularly with the proliferation of nuclear weapons and unregulated AI, the decline of multilateral cooperation could bring the end of human civilisation as we know it.

As a group of people who have held high office in governments and international organisations around the world, we have experienced the noblest hopes of multilateral cooperation, its dismal disappointments, and all that falls between. We know what is possible, even when it might seem otherwise at first. With this paper, we hope to contribute to a growing pool of ideas that must be considered urgently if the world is to change its direction of travel. We know there are many other ideas out there that also warrant consideration, including reform of the UN Charter itself to reflect the world we now live in.

Civil society, young people, women's and minority groups, and businesses all have a role to play in which direction is chosen. But most importantly, political leaders must step up and show real bold leadership, prioritising the long view over short-term considerations.

Building a better future through more effective multilateral cooperation will only happen if leaders do the hard, often unglamorous work of forming alliances, understanding each other's positions, finding compromise where necessary, and rejecting fatalism and cynicism.

Multilateral cooperation is not an abstract concept or a utopian aspiration. It is a precondition for the peaceful, inclusive, and resilient future we all want. The Elders call on political leaders with courage and vision to find global solutions to global challenges. Urgently.

Alley of flags leading to the Palais des Nations, headquarters of the UN Office in Geneva. 16 November 2024.
Photo: Shutterstock





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