



The
Elders

HOPE FOR A SEA-CHANGE

WHY MULTILATERALISM
MUST RESHAPE THE WORLD
AFTER COVID-19



MULTILATERALISM POSITION PAPER

THE ELDERS

The Elders are a group of independent leaders, brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007, who use their collective experience and influence for peace, justice and human rights worldwide.



MARY ROBINSON
CHAIR



BAN KI-MOON
DEPUTY CHAIR



GRAÇA MACHEL
DEPUTY CHAIR



LAKHDAR BRAHIMI



GRO HARLEM BRUNDTLAND



ZEID RAAD AL HUSSEIN



HINA JILANI



ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF



RICARDO LAGOS



JUAN MANUEL SANTOS



ERNESTO ZEDILLO

Martti Ahtisaari, Ela Bhatt, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu provide continued wisdom and support as Elders Emeritus.

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

Front cover: UN Photo/Sophia Paris

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Multilateralism and respect for a global rules-based system has underpinned peace, security, health and prosperity across large swathes of the world for the past seventy-five years.

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FOREWORD by the Chair, Mary Robinson

COVID-19 knows no borders and pays no heed to national sovereignty. The pandemic has swept through every part of the world since the beginning of 2020, leaving a devastating cost; first and foremost in human lives, but also in terms of economic growth, political momentum and social inequality.

A global crisis demands a global response. Yet the virus struck at a time when the multilateral system was already subject to a sustained and targeted assault. This has made it harder for leaders and institutions to respond effectively and save lives.

This narrow nationalism betrays the interests of the people it purports to represent. COVID-19 has exposed the fragility and interconnectedness of our globalised world, and our shared vulnerability to external shocks.

Overcoming the pandemic, producing and equitably distributing an effective vaccine and ensuring a sustainable long-term economic recovery can only be achieved if states work together. They must pool resources and expertise to strengthen health systems, support the vital work of

the World Health Organization and encourage a spirit of solidarity.

COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities, and shown the intersectionality of poverty, gender, race and disability. At the same time, many countries whose governments are led by women have been noted to manage the virus better, and the jobs which have been revealed to be essential during the pandemic – from health and social care to low paid services – are predominantly held by women.

All world leaders must 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.

It will be essential as we emerge from the crisis and 'build back better', that the recovery is aligned to the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement, and that the commitment to gender equality and parity of decision-

making is at its core. It is also crucial that generous financial support is provided to the Global South to tackle the problem of rising indebtedness, which risks undermining global economic growth over the next decade.

An effective, rules-based multilateral system is the world's insurance policy against existential threats from pandemics to climate change and nuclear weapons, and we now know the awful cost of failing to provide comprehensive cover.

Seventy-five years on from the founding of the United Nations, it is more critical than ever for global leaders and citizens to stand together, affirm the values of its Charter and commit to living up to their common responsibilities.

The network of international covenants and institutions agreed and constructed since the end of the Second World War, with the United Nations at its core, is far from perfect. But it has nevertheless decisively supported the pursuit of peace, security and the protection of human rights, as well as economic and social improvements, around the globe, for over seven decades.

Yet in recent years, the United States – the world's leading superpower and the country hitherto regarded as a key guarantor of this global rules-based system – has deliberately weakened it across several fronts: from climate change and nuclear non-proliferation to respect for human rights, free trade and health security. Although it is clear that the incoming Biden administration in the United States will recommit to multilateral cooperation in 2021, the damage inflicted on the multilateral

system over the past four years will not be easily reversed.

Effective multilateralism is in the national interest of all countries, regardless of size or strength. Cooperating by means of internationally-agreed mechanisms is less costly and more reliable than using unilateral force.

Actions that weaken multilateralism are damaging in themselves, and also embolden other leaders with isolationist or nationalistic leanings. We have seen instances of leaders using the COVID-19 crisis to weaken democratic safeguards and human rights, in countries as diverse as Hungary, Israel and The Philippines.

Not only do these actions hamper an effective response to COVID-19, they also make it harder for the world to collectively tackle the existential threats that will remain after this pandemic abates: climate change and nuclear weapons.

The hard months and years ahead will require determined and principled leadership. Multilateralism is not an option: it is the only path that can deliver a green, sustainable and equitable recovery.

Today's crisis reveals fundamental truths about what it is to be human, to live and to die, and to share our lives with others. The great Irish poet Seamus Heaney captured these truths in his reworking of Sophocles' Greek myths, and I believe this spirit can guide us through our contemporary troubles and lead us to a brighter, fairer future:

*“So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.”*

Hurricane Florence
as viewed from the
International Space
Station (Photo: NASA)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Multilateralism and respect for a global rules-based system has underpinned peace, security, health and prosperity across large swathes of the world for the past seventy-five years. The United Nations embodies these principles and remains an indispensable actor in facing contemporary existential threats from pandemics to climate change and nuclear proliferation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly exposed the vulnerabilities and faultlines of our interconnected world. Only an effective multilateral response can tackle the virus and protect lives and livelihoods, but this is dependent on national leaders showing the requisite political will and being honest with their citizens about the scale of the challenge.

All states must take urgent actions to strengthen their health systems, protect health workers and provide the necessary care to all who need it in society, including vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants, the elderly and infirm. For developed countries, this responsibility extends to supporting poorer states with humanitarian aid, debt relief and political counsel via the mechanisms of the UN, G20, World Bank and other international fora.

A successful recovery must address the deep-rooted, systemic economic and social inequalities that the pandemic has accentuated, in particular the discrimination and prejudice to which women are still subject. All sections of society must be included in national response plans, consistent with the global mantra of the Sustainable Development Goals to 'leave no-one behind'. Lessons need to be drawn from the experience of successful democratic female leaders during the crisis, and heeded by all their peers regardless of gender.

In an age of growing nationalism, populism and isolationism, it is all too easy for leaders and citizens to resort instead to seemingly simple solutions and scapegoats. This makes it all the more critical to defend and champion the multilateral system. Nations need to recognise that effective multilateralism is in all their interests regardless of size or strength, offering amplification and protection to the weak, and a less costly whilst more reliable means of influencing global trends for the strong. All states should ensure that the multilateral system is adequately funded, resourced and respected to operate efficiently, at scale and in harmony with universal human rights.

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2020 has marked the 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations and the end of the Second World War, and has been an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the multilateral system, reaffirm a commitment to the values of the UN Charter, and recognise the need to take action to strengthen today's institutions to meet the global challenges of the 21st Century.

This demands effective and responsible leadership. Today's member states of the UN should recall the words of Winston Churchill, the UK's wartime leader who became a strong supporter of multilateralism in the post-war era. Speaking in 1946 when the organisation was in its infancy, Churchill declared:

"We must make sure that its work is fruitful, that it is a reality and not a sham, that it is a force for action, and not merely a frothing of words, that it is a true temple of peace in which the shields of many nations can someday be hung up, and not merely a cockpit in a Tower of Babel."

Churchill was speaking at the onset of the Cold War as the Iron Curtain divided Europe, and superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union sparked costly arms races and devastating proxy wars across the developing world, all of which hindered economic development and increased risks across the globe. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s led to the end of the Cold War and hubristic predictions of the "end of History" and a new "unipolar world" where liberal democracy and free trade would become the global consensus.

Over the past thirty years, significant progress has undoubtedly been made in consolidating democratic norms and institutions in many areas of the world, including Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Institutions like the European Union, African Union, Mercosur and ASEAN have strengthened their effectiveness, helped lower trade barriers and established effective common standards of regulation that protect consumers and citizens.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) and its predecessor body the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade are also examples of effective multilateral institutions. The increases in international trade over recent decades were built on the rules-based approach which these institutions established and governed. WTO member states now need to break the political impasse and confirm a new Director-General so the organisation can play a leading role in stimulating trade and economic recovery in 2021.



Ban Ki-moon addresses the UN Security Council in New York, USA in June 2019. (Photo: UN Photo/Loey Felipe)

More broadly, economic globalisation has helped lift millions of people out of poverty as countries like China and India have become more integrated into the global economic system, offering new consumer and export markets as well as broadening the global exchange of ideas and expertise through academic and inter-governmental cooperation. Whatever the long-term impact of COVID-19, the growth of economic innovation and development in the Global East and South is unlikely to recede.

At the same time, some national politicians have failed to both manage and explain the domestic impact of economic globalisation, especially the outsourcing of traditional industrial jobs from the Global North to the developing world, which has led to pockets of severe unemployment, marginalisation and political alienation.

Nationalists, isolationists and populists have exploited these fears and resentments to secure power and unpick the existing international order. Their perception of geopolitics as a zero-sum game that favours the powerful is wholly at odds with the ideals of the UN, and cannot deliver effective responses to global challenges like climate change. The pandemic has exposed reckless and cavalier approaches to scientific truths, with fatal and long-lasting consequences. This is why the case for multilateralism needs to be reasserted boldly, proudly and vigorously.

“ **The pandemic has exposed reckless and cavalier approaches to scientific truths, with fatal and long-lasting consequences. This is why the case for multilateralism needs to be reasserted boldly, proudly and vigorously.** ”

Calls to Action for Global Leaders

- 1 A clear, unambiguous and unapologetic recommitment to the values and responsibilities enshrined within the **UN Charter** to “save the world from the scourge of war”;
- 2 Redoubling efforts to ensure that the United Nations is able to fulfil its mandate as the “**centre for harmonising the actions of nations**” as a means of collectively solving the most pressing global problems;
- 3 Decisive and sustained action and financial support to strengthen **global health systems**, embedding resilience and long-term planning on a global level in line with the recommendations of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board;
- 4 Increased multilateral ambition on **climate action**, emission reductions and financing for a sustainable and just transition to a net zero-carbon economy by 2050;
- 5 A sustained, global effort to mobilise citizens, civil society, businesses and other stakeholders towards achieving the **Sustainable Development Goals**, and ensuring a fairer future for humanity.



A woman cycling
with her son in Siem
Reap, Cambodia.
Photo: Socialtruant /
Shutterstock.com

HISTORICAL GAINS, CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Today's world faces a myriad of critical global threats, including that of pandemic disease, climate change and nuclear conflict and proliferation. Other pressing issues include the mass movement of migrants and refugees caused by instability and conflict, as well as the threat posed by terrorism. None can be resolved by nations acting alone, however powerful they may be. All demand multilateral cooperation.

Gender inequality remains a persistent scar on the face of humanity which hinders effective responses to all of these threats. It constitutes a threat in and of itself to human dignity, good governance and economic growth. Dismissing half of the world's population is a recipe for disaster and wilfully ignores the profound and rich contributions women have made to human freedom and development across the centuries. Women's voices need to be at the heart of the debate on the future of multilateralism if past failures and omissions are not to be repeated.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the interconnected nature of global risks, and the extent to which even well-resourced health systems can be rapidly overwhelmed when crises hit. Effective multilateral cooperation on risk reduction is always preferable to attempting to ameliorate the impact of catastrophic crises after they have emerged. A good example is provided by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has broadly been successful in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons over the past 50 years.

The gains provided by the NPT in reducing nuclear threats, or by the World Health Organization in protecting against pandemic disease, must never be taken for granted, even if the benefits may not be prominently visible under ordinary circumstances. Yet far too often in recent years, some of the most powerful countries have undermined many of these global protections in pursuit of short-term or selfish national agendas. This includes actions by nuclear-armed states that contravene the spirit of their obligations under the NPT to pursue nuclear disarmament. Such actions are dangerous, and ultimately risk devastating consequences for the future of humanity.

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The importance of multilateral cooperation can often be most visibly and dramatically seen when such cooperation breaks down.

Multilateralism is predicated on the need for countries with diverging viewpoints to negotiate and compromise to find common ground. While the specifics of international rules, agreements and institutions are important, ultimately they are subsidiary to the overarching need to have forums for dialogue and agreed international rules and regulations that the most powerful countries have a stake in – and agree to abide by. Such agreements make the world more stable, predictable and prosperous.

This is clearly in the interests of smaller nations, who benefit from having agreed international rules and international institutions where their voices can be heard. It is also in the interests of powerful countries, enabling them to influence the international order without resorting to multiple unilateral demonstrations of their economic and military might. Such unilateral actions tend to be both costly and of limited and temporary effectiveness.

The post-1945 multilateral system has provided significant common benefits for humanity. From helping to mediate disputes between nations, to facilitating trade between countries and economic development, to establishing rules for the common management of the oceans, international agreements have made an enormous contribution to making the world more predictable and stable.

The value of the multilateral system in existence today is too often taken for granted. The impressive public health gains that have been made in eradicating smallpox and nearly eradicating polio in recent decades, as well as progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS, are sometimes viewed as an inevitable

part of human development. Yet they would have been extremely difficult to achieve without international coordination through organisations such as the World Health Organization. The coordination efforts against COVID-19 in 2020 have shown again how multilateral cooperation, mutual trust and transparency are essential to protect global public health. The independence of the WHO and its ability to act without fear or favour vis-à-vis its member states must be vigorously defended in the interests of global public health and good governance.

For all of the successes achieved by the multilateral system, it is also worth considering how much more effective it could be but for the failures of governments to support and abide by the mandates of international organisations to which they have agreed. Too often, member states – particularly the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – have not acted in a way that would have supported the effectiveness of the UN. The Security Council's failure to agree a collective response to COVID-19 – in stark contrast to the leadership the Council showed during the West African Ebola crisis – underlines the severity of current divisions.

The tragic conflict in Syria is an archetypal example where several major powers chose to intervene on behalf of different parties to the conflict, rather than work through the UN Security Council to encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The consequences of this failure have reverberated around the world. Syrian civilians have suffered the most: hundreds of thousands have been killed over the last decade and half the country's population has been displaced. The brutality there has generated refugee flows, strengthened terrorist networks and undermined the credibility of the international community to maintain peace and security.

The importance of multilateral cooperation can often be most visibly and dramatically seen when such cooperation breaks down; the relative absence of credible and well-functioning regional multilateral bodies in the Middle East in recent years is one cause of that region's continuing tensions, conflicts and instability.

Multilateralism has played a critical role in anchoring gender equality in international norms. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and ratified by 189 member states, is a valuable means of holding governments to account and in asserting the universality of women's rights, even if progress in many countries remains disappointingly scant. The Beijing Declaration on women's rights, and UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security are also significant multilateral accomplishments that need to be defended against resurgent discriminatory attitudes and policies.

THE ELDERS CALL ON GLOBAL LEADERS TO:

1

RECOMMIT TO UN CHARTER

Make a clear, **unambiguous and unapologetic commitment** to the values and responsibilities enshrined within the UN Charter to “save the world from the scourge of war”;

2

EMPOWER UN’S MANDATE FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

Redouble efforts to ensure that the United Nations is able to fulfil its mandate as the “centre for harmonising the actions of nations” as a means of **collectively solving the most pressing global problems**;

3

STRENGTHEN GLOBAL HEALTH SYSTEMS

Take **sustained action** and provide **financial support** to global health systems, embedding resilience and long-term planning on a global level in line with the recommendations of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board;

4

SHOW GREATER CLIMATE AMBITION

Increase multilateral ambition on climate action, emission reductions and financing for a sustainable and **just transition to a net zero-carbon economy** by 2050;

5

MOBILISE SUPPORT FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Make a sustained, global effort to **mobilise citizens, civil society, businesses and other stakeholders** towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and ensuring a fairer future for humanity.



UN flag flies at half mast outside
UN Headquarters in New York, USA
(Photo: UN Photo/Mark Garten)

THE THREAT TO MULTILATERALISM

The principle of multilateralism is under serious threat today. The response to COVID-19 and the long-term recovery from its effects risks straining the limits of international solidarity, and has raised questions about the interconnected global systems of trade and associated movements of people that have often been taken for granted in the post-Cold War era.

The past decade has also more generally seen a sharp decline in confidence in the effectiveness of international institutions (due in part to the impact of the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-8) and the capacity of multilateral cooperation to solve contemporary challenges, coupled with an increasing willingness by certain governments to actively undermine international institutions. Paradoxically, this comes precisely at a time when the need for international cooperation is greater than ever in the face of an ever increasing number of “problems without passports”, as The Elders’ late Chair Kofi Annan described them.

On peace and security, the enthusiasm of some Western governments to pursue regime change through military interventions outside of UN auspices, most notably over Iraq in 2003 and to a lesser extent Libya in 2011, has deepened distrust between the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5). This has contributed to the unwillingness by some of the P5 to provide the international community with the tools it needs to reduce and resolve conflicts. Instead they have blocked resolutions on conflicts from Syria to South Sudan, even when there has been a desperate need to halt mass atrocities. The problem has been compounded by the increasing willingness of certain P5 countries to adopt positions in flagrant violation of international law, for instance through participating in or recognising territorial acquisition by military conquest such as in Crimea or in the Golan Heights.

Just as worrying has been the decline in commitment to international cooperation over the threat of nuclear conflict. The P5 countries are increasingly paying little more than lip-service to their commitments under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to pursue disarmament in good faith, while simultaneously pursuing expensive nuclear modernisation programmes which imply the maintenance of nuclear arsenals for decades to come. The termination of the INF Treaty in 2019 is just one alarming example of growing nuclear brinkmanship. Declining doctrinal commitment by some of the P5 to the 1987 Reagan-Gorbachev declaration that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” is a particularly disturbing indication of the erosion of common purpose amongst the nuclear powers towards eliminating this existential threat to humanity.

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The multilateral trading system has also come under serious attack in recent years, as protectionist ideologies have gained popularity.

This inadequate sense of common purpose can also be seen over climate change, despite the entry into force of the Paris Agreement on climate change. Regardless of whether the United States returns to the Paris Agreement in 2021, the commitments made by governments through their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) remain inadequate to tackle the urgency of the climate threat and keep average global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius. Many governments are failing to fulfil even the modest, voluntary commitments they have made under the Paris Agreement to reduce net carbon emissions.

The COVID-19 pandemic risks worsening this situation, if countries do not commit to a resilient and climate-conscious recovery and instead pursue short-term economic gains through environmental deregulation and continued investment in fossil fuel energy production.

The multilateral trading system has also come under serious attack in recent years, as protectionist ideologies have gained popularity and as certain governments have increasingly called into question the desirability of having an international rules-based system for managing global trade. Conflict between the United States and China has been the most visible and most economically damaging manifestation of this, but it is also the case that governments' unwillingness to compromise on narrow national interests



The Elders meet with China's President Xi Jinping and other senior leaders to discuss global issues, in Beijing, China in April 2019.

has hampered global cooperation on trade over a much longer period, demonstrated in the failure of the Doha Development Round of trade talks over the past two decades.

The US decision to block the appointment of a new Director-General at the WTO in November 2020, has had significant repercussions in undermining global trade cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic also precipitated protectionist moves by many countries, for instance through export bans on medical equipment, undermining the global response to the pandemic.

It has nevertheless been possible to protect some multilateral trading agreements in the face of protectionist pressure. The NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) between the United States, Mexico and Canada of 1994 benefited industry, workers and consumers in the United States as well as those in its northern and southern neighbours. Despite the decision of the United States to withdraw from NAFTA, the re-negotiated USMCA (United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement) of 2018 largely preserves its predecessor's key elements. This shows how deft diplomacy can defend the gains and principles of multilateralism, much more of which will be needed as the world seeks to recover from COVID-19 and simultaneously tackle some of the key global issues facing humanity in the years ahead.



The Elders meet French President Emmanuel Macron, at the Élysée Palace, in Paris, France in December 2017.

Declining faith in globalisation

The reasons for the declining commitment of many governments to multilateral cooperation are manifold and complex. Undoubtedly, the global financial crisis of 2008 and its negative effects have played a role in undermining public confidence in economic globalisation, particularly in industrially-developed countries in the Global North where electorally-significant middle class constituencies have felt themselves squeezed. In some cases, this has become conflated in the public mind with multilateralism more generally, as some leaders have proffered simplistic solutions and narratives of restoring national superiority, rather than addressing the complex and interlinked causes of contemporary social and economic problems.

At the same time, many parts of the world, particularly in Asia, have seen dramatic economic growth in recent years, taking advantage of the opportunities afforded through multilateral cooperation on trade and globalisation. This has resulted in an explosion in the size of the global middle classes, unprecedented improvements in living standards and significant declines in extreme poverty in many countries. Although the long-term consequences of COVID-19 are highly uncertain, they are unlikely to fundamentally reverse these economic gains.

Technological change has been a huge driver of this rise in global living standards. But the pace and nature of future change has serious consequences for workers, consumers and citizens worldwide, which if not managed responsibly could further weaken both trust in, and the effectiveness of, a global rules-based system.

The impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation of labour poses a much more serious long-term challenge to the future of work in many parts of the world than that of moving production to factories overseas or increased trade competition. This highlights the need for global cooperation to ensure that technological developments serve the interests of humanity. It is easier

“ More multilateral cooperation, rather than less, is essential for maintaining the stability of the global economy. ”

however for political leaders to encourage people to think that their jobs have been unfairly stolen by others – whether by immigrants, foreign countries, or shadowy global elites – than it is to acknowledge that technological change is dramatically changing the nature of the labour force, and makes many previously valuable skills worth less or even obsolete.

Significant efforts have been made to reduce money laundering through multilateral mechanisms such as the Financial Action Task Force. However greater multilateral efforts are also needed to tackle tax avoidance with the rise of highly-profitable technology-driven businesses which can easily move their profits to avoid tax. These practices weaken the social fabric and have a corrosive effect on fiscal norms. They can only be addressed through greater cooperation between states, such as the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on BEPS (base erosion and profit shifting), to tackle tax avoidance and improve the coherence of international tax rules.

Particularly in the context of COVID-19, multilateral cooperation will be essential for maintaining long-term global economic stability, as insufficient macroeconomic cooperation between the largest economies was a significant cause and amplifier of the 2008 global financial crisis. Without sustained economic cooperation coordinated through a range of multilateral institutions, including the G20 and regional multilateral organisations, it is likely that the long-term global recovery from the pandemic will be plagued by many of the same problems that followed the financial crisis.

The obvious conclusion is that more multilateral cooperation, rather than less, is essential for maintaining the stability of the global economy. When some multinational businesses, particularly in the hi-tech sector, have more economic power and apparent political influence than some nation states, it is perhaps no surprise that they lobby for a minimal regulatory framework. However, a poorly-governed global economy is likely to have worse outcomes in the long term, whatever short-term profits may be made, and be far more vulnerable to future economic crises and political instability.

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Where the Security Council has managed to achieve consensus, its decisions carry a moral weight and impact far beyond that of any country acting unilaterally.

WHY MULTILATERALISM MATTERS

Preventing Conflict

The United Nations and other multilateral institutions were created after 1945 precisely as a result of the devastation caused by the Second World War, and out of a determination from world leaders to prevent such destruction from ever happening again. As the late UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld famously said, the United Nations “was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell”. This determination to reduce the threat of conflict has also been one of the primary motivations behind progressive European integration since the 1950s, and in the creation of multilateral forums such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

It would be easy today to underestimate the impact of multilateral institutions in preventing global conflict over the past 75 years. For instance, although the UN Security Council receives significant (and often justified) criticism for its perceived inaction, it has also served as an important forum for dialogue between the most powerful countries on the most pressing global peace and security issues – for example during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the world really did stand on the brink of nuclear war. Where the Security Council has managed to achieve consensus, its decisions carry a moral weight and impact far beyond that of any country acting unilaterally.

Attention is often focused on the most tragic failures of the UN Security Council to prevent mass atrocities – Rwanda, Srebrenica and Syria being amongst the most harrowing examples. Yet in many other cases, for instance in Sierra Leone and East Timor, UN peacekeeping missions have played crucial roles in resolving conflict, or in preventing the breakdown of fragile ceasefires. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has played a vital and lifesaving role in managing the consequences of conflict, through protecting millions of refugees worldwide and providing for their basic needs.

In the case of the threat of nuclear conflagration, multilateral efforts such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) have been effective in reducing and managing the threat and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. Nuclear materials and technology can only be effectively controlled through multilateral agreement, pointing to the urgent need for multilateral action in the face of the changing and rising threats of nuclear devastation – whether through deliberate action or otherwise.

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The crucial role of the WHO and other international organisations in pandemic prevention has been readily apparent in the response to COVID-19.

Addressing Common Threats

Multilateral cooperation also plays an essential role in addressing common threats where domestic action proves insufficient. An instructive example is disease control efforts. In the cases of both the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the West African Ebola outbreaks in recent years, international organisations made critical contributions in ultimately containing the outbreaks and preventing potentially devastating global consequences. The importance of international cooperation is also evident in successful vaccination efforts against smallpox and polio.

The crucial role of the WHO and other international organisations in pandemic prevention has been readily apparent in the response to COVID-19. It is essential that countries support the work of the WHO and provide it with the necessary funding to carry out its work, including through implementing the recommendations of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB) to strengthen global pandemic preparedness. It is also critical that countries do not undermine the WHO or constrain its work through pursuit of narrow national interests. The WHO should instead be enabled to work on behalf of the entire world, acting solely on the best available scientific and medical evidence.



Gro Harlem Brundtland challenges leaders to deliver publicly funded universal health coverage, during her keynote address on behalf of civil society at the UN High Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage in New York, USA in September 2019. (Photo: UN Photo/Kim Haughton)

The impact of the 1918 influenza outbreak illustrates the possible consequences when international cooperation is absent or breaks down. Exacerbated by malnutrition, unsanitary conditions and large-scale population movement caused by the First World War – itself the result of a catastrophic breakdown in international relations – the spread of the outbreak was also likely facilitated by the absence of effective international institutions. The inability to contain the pandemic ultimately killed many times more people globally in the space of a year than died on the battlefield in the entirety of the First World War. This is a testament to the unpredictable and often extreme consequences that can result from the failure of cooperation, which has been evident again in the challenges facing the international community in its response to COVID-19.



Mary Robinson speaks on a panel alongside UN Secretary-General António Guterres and International Chamber of Commerce Chair Paul Polman at COP25 in Madrid, Spain in December 2019. (Photo: UNFCCC)

Preserving a Sustainable Planet

The climate crisis is an existential threat to humankind. The 2018 IPCC report set out the devastating consequences of allowing the average temperature to rise by more than 1.5 degrees. To stay below this level, intensive and unprecedented multilateral coordination by governments, the private sector and civil society will be required.

This global threat can only be solved through international cooperation, as even the largest carbon emitting countries cannot halt global emissions through unilateral action. Additionally, although the most severe impacts are likely to fall on the poorest countries which have done the least historically to contribute to climate change, the effects will be felt by all. This will not only be in terms of climatic effects, but also in the likelihood that climate change will contribute to increased instability, conflict, and refugee and migration flows over the coming century.

The Paris Agreement on climate change has been an important step forward at the nation state level. The separate multilateral processes on biodiversity and the oceans are also crucial aspects of the global response to environmental threats. Multilateral processes may also be helpful in coordinating global regulation of technological developments designed to help prevent climate change and limit its impacts, and in facilitating the introduction of new technologies at the global level.

However, amongst the most notable developments on combatting climate change has been the increasing proliferation of non-state multilateral coalitions, including in local government, the private sector and civil society. In an increasingly interconnected world, where governments fail to agree on collective international action, there is increasing evidence that many citizens are willing to take action themselves.

Not only must the world move more rapidly to net zero carbon emissions by 2050, but countries also need to plan for a circular economy and the reduction of waste. The 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals,

“ **In an increasingly interconnected world, where governments fail to agree on collective international action, there is increasing evidence that many citizens are willing to take action themselves.** ”

points the way, but needs to be implemented much more seriously – and governments need now to view their voluntary commitments under the Paris Agreement as an essential minimum in the face of the latest scientific evidence.

Strengthening civil society and human rights

More broadly, the growth of non-state multilateralism has been reflected in the remarkable growth in the scale and influence of cross-border civil society alliances in recent decades. Human rights promotion is an example of such cross-border alliances having an important impact, leading to the development of a human rights movement, incorporating grassroots organisations from all parts of the world.

The rise of the internet has been a significant contributing factor, creating a far more interconnected world which has facilitated the development and mobilisation of global networks of activists and concerned citizens. This also highlights the importance of the internet as a critical global commons, which requires protection through multilateral coordination. The 2019 report of the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation has made important recommendations in this regard, as has the 2019 report on electoral integrity in the digital age by the Kofi Annan Foundation.

Undoubtedly, the existing multilateral human rights architecture has had an important norm-setting impact in helping to develop common principles and in holding to account some of the states which most egregiously violate the rights of their citizens. It is notable that, more than 70 years on from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this document retains a huge inspirational and mobilising power for many citizens.

The growth of global civil society movements remains a promising avenue for strengthening global cooperation in the future. Now school children, young people, women and other groups are mobilising to demand action on climate change. The short timescale in which a sharp reduction in global emissions is needed makes it likely this mobilisation will intensify.

THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM

On some important issues, such as the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, it may well be the case that more decentralised forms of international cooperation may prove effective in mobilising citizens and societies around the world to take action. There is also an urgent need to increase the presence and effectiveness of regional multilateral organisations to ease security and sectarian tensions in regions such as the Middle East. However, on many multilateral issues it will remain the case that there is no substitute for global collaboration between nation states, with COVID-19 providing the most immediate and compelling example.

In this process, it is not necessary to be overly prescriptive about what forms multilateralism should take. Any arrangements and institutions which do not reflect to some degree the interests of the most powerful countries as well as smaller ones are unlikely to be successful in the long-term. For the international system at large, it will be necessary to be flexible, and not assume that arrangements shaped 75 years ago as the Second World War drew to a close should be preserved intact in their present form for perpetuity. This will particularly be the case as countries adapt to a post-COVID-19 world, which is likely to contain new global challenges that may require innovative multilateral responses, while the urgency of responding to the pre-existing acute threats of climate change and nuclear conflict will not diminish.

Addressing these issues effectively, and developing a renewed consensus on multilateral cooperation, is likely to be a slow, arduous and sometimes dispiriting process for advocates of multilateralism. However, the importance is too great and the stakes are too high for this to wait. Multilateralism can only be effective with the consent of ordinary citizens around the world and their governments, and it is only through effective multilateralism that the world will be able to meet the immense challenges that will confront us over the course of the 21st century.



Participants embrace at the conclusion of the 63rd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW63) in New York, USA in March 2019. (Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown)

“ **The Elders can speak freely and boldly,
working both publicly and behind the scenes.**

**They will reach out to those who most need
their help.**

**They will support courage where there is fear,
foster agreement where there is conflict and
inspire hope where there is despair.**

Nelson Mandela, 2007, Founder of The Elders

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The Elders Foundation

3 Tilney Street, London, W1K 1BJ +44 (0) 207 013 4646

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