

Building a world community

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The UN at 75:
The world planned a party. . . . Then the coronavirus showed up.

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Since 2017 the UN2020 Campaign has provided a platform for a diverse constellation of civil society organizations (CSOs) calling for the UN's 75th anniversary to provide not only an occasion for celebrating past achievements, but also an opportunity to take stock of the challenges facing the multilateral system and advance a dedicated process for strengthening the UN system.

UN220 campaigners were pleased last June when the General Assembly adopted a comprehensive resolution on the "Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations."

The resolution identified an ambitious, forward-looking theme for the 75th anniversary: "*The future we want, the United Nations we need: reaffirming our collective commitment to multilateralism.*" This theme was meant to guide all activities, meetings and conferences organized by the United Nations in 2020.

It also mandated a High-level meeting for 21 September 2020, as well as additional commemorations on June 26 (Charter Day) and October 24 (UN Day). All member states were invited to contribute. There was a strong emphasis on youth involvement.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres Launched an even more ambitious UN75 program of "global dialogues" on "The future we want, the United Nations we need." From "classrooms to board rooms, village houses to houses of parliament," the intention was to engage "We the Peoples" on the role of the UN system in addressing global challenges.

But then, like the proverbial foreign object in the punch bowl, along came the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of what was planned for this year's UN75 commemoration had to adapt to the locked-down, socially-distanced realities affecting public life everywhere. The party moved online.

Strangely, however the curtailment of so much of what had been planned for UN75 has not diminished political support for the core idea being advanced by the UN2020 campaign – that a dedicated process to renew and strengthen the capacities of the UN is long overdue.

On May 14-15 the *UN75 People's Forum for the UN We Need* brought together over 600 civil society participants from 75 countries around the world. A UN75 People's Declaration and Plan for Global Action, "Humanity at a Crossroads: Global Solutions for Global Challenges" was presented virtually in a formal handover ceremony to the 74th President of the United Nations General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, who later had the document circulated to all UN missions.

Meanwhile governments at the UN have negotiated a UN 75 Declaration for adoption this September that sets out a dozen commitments to action in important areas of UN activity. Significantly, this draft UN75 Declaration calls for the Secretary-General to report back before September 2021 "with recommendations to advance our common agenda and to respond to current and future failures."

If the Secretary-General's follow up process is to become a catalyst for the transformative changes urgently needed to address 21st century global challenges, he will need support – from small and medium sized governments as well as from civil society.

But change may yet be possible. The coronavirus pandemic has aroused a "we're all in this together" political moment that, despite the widespread suffering, is also generating promises to "build back better" our national and international governance institutions.

At the opening of this year's High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, Secretary-General Guterres told governments, not unexpectedly, that the pandemic is causing additional setbacks for the global 2030 Agenda for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. 265 million people could face acute food insecurity by year's end – double the number at risk before the crisis.

But he also suggested that "We can turn this around. . . . From the awakening that this crisis is providing, we have a chance to create a more inclusive, networked and effective multilateralism."

Let's hope he's right.

To learn more about the UN2020 Campaign, visit un2020.org.