

Broad consultations planned for the S-G's follow up to UN75 Declaration

by Fergus Watt

On 21 September 2020, world leaders adopted the UN75 Declaration, which sets out twelve commitments to action across the global agenda, including sustainable development, pandemic response, climate action, prevention of violent conflict in fragile states, protecting biodiversity, upholding arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament agreements, enhancing democratic governance, addressing digital trust and security, and safeguarding human rights.

The Declaration also calls on the Secretary-General to report back to the General Assembly “with recommendations to advance our common agenda and respond to current and future challenges.”

At a time when the world is focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, including the distribution of vaccines, the requirement for a UN75 follow up report has given rise to efforts to take stock of the UN's current capacities, with the expectation that the Secretary-General's report will initiate a reform process to strengthen multilateralism. According to the Secretary-General, his office has initiated a period of “profound reflection,” including consultations not only with Member States but also with “thought leaders,” youth, and civil society.

In a speech January 28 outlining his priorities for 2021, the Secretary-General stated, “The challenges ahead clearly demand a more inclusive and more networked multilateralism. I have also called for a New Global Deal among countries to ensure that power, benefits and opportunities are shared more broadly and fairly. Developing countries merit a larger voice in global decision-making. Young people must also be at the table – as designers of their own future, not as recipients of decisions of elders who have, let’s be honest, failed them in so many key respects. My report in September should be seen as the beginning of this reset. Strengthening global governance to deliver global public goods is possible.”

For the Coalition for the UN We Need (C4UN, formerly the UN2020 Campaign) these developments represent progress. The campaign has not only adopted a change of name. Wide consultations among civil society organizations and networks led to the adoption in December of a three-year strategic plan to prepare for the period following the Secretary- General’s report (expected early September), when the international community’s efforts to strengthen international institutions is expected to gather momentum.

At a January 13 C4UN-sponsored online videoconference, Maria Fernanda Espinosa, former President of the UN General Assembly commented on the COVID pandemic’s impacts on the effectiveness of the UN system:

“This crisis, which has caused so much loss and suffering, has also been a stress test for multilateralism. While reinforcing humanity’s shared vulnerability and a sense of global solidarity, the pandemic has further illuminated so many problems – the reasons why global cooperation is needed in the first place. To name just a few: inequalities and growing poverty, the pandemic’s disproportionate impacts on women and girls, and vaccine nationalism. . . .

“And then there are the direct impacts that the necessary pandemic responses have had on the day-to-day operations of the UN system. Diplomacy by videoconference is a poor substitute for the real thing. Without the meetings, negotiations, stakeholder engagement, and all the other trappings of normal work at the UN, the international community has pressed “pause” on too many important multilateral processes.

“It is therefore no surprise that reinvigorating and rejuvenating the multilateral system has become a central ask of citizens, organizations and a large majority of Member States.”

Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations

Fergus Watt is Executive Director of WFM – Canada and Coordinator, Coalition for the UN We Need.