

Re-Imagining and Re-Narrativizing Multilateralism: Why NGOs and Civil Society Truly Matter - Keynote on the occasion of the 75th-anniversary celebration of CoNGO, UNOV-Vienna, 28 April 2023

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1. It is a great pleasure to be here with you at the occasion of CoNGO's 75th anniversary. Happy Birthday, CoNGO. I have the privilege of working with Cyril Ritchie and Levi Bautista for so many years and thank them for inviting me.
2. I have witnessed CoNGO engage, convene and make effective NGOs and civil society many times during my 3 decades with the UN and your work has had a strong impact on the work I was privileged to lead – in particular the process leading to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs in 2015. I interacted deeply with civil society during the SDG process and we have much valuable outcome as a result of their passionate engagement. The SDGs have stood the test of time, because of the buy-in from Civil Society which helped create them. I look back with deep nostalgia at the innovative process which created them.
3. The title of my keynote is "Re-Imagining and Re-Narrativizing Multilateralism: Why NGOs and Civil Society Truly Matter?" and I want to use this opportunity to delve deeper into the vital role that NGOs and civil society play in the multilateral system and in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.
4. Firstly, let me reflect briefly on the state of the multilateral system and the SDGs
5. The current multilateral system is facing numerous challenges that threaten its ability to effectively address global issues. One of the major challenges is the rise of nationalism and war-generated hysteria, which has led to an erosion of trust in multilateral institutions and weakened international cooperation. Additionally, the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of global issues such as climate change, poverty, and conflict require more coordinated and collaborative responses, which are sadly absent.

6. Further, the emergence of new technologies and the rapid pace of innovation have created new global challenges that require novel multilateral approaches.
7. These challenges also affect the implementation of the SDGs which are on life support and, as often stated by the SG, need a rescue package. The confluence of war, COVID-19, and climate change impacts are threatening the very survival of humanity. Only 12% of the targets are on track. 50% are severely off track. 30% have seen no movement or have regressed below 2015. Since the pandemic 93 million people have been pushed back into extreme poverty, 147 million children missed in-person instruction and education, health services have been disrupted, anxiety and depression have increased exponentially, life expectancy has been lowered globally, routine health care disrupted. In 2030, 575 million people will be in extreme poverty. It will take 286 years to close the gender gap.
8. War has displaced 100 million people from their homes. One quarter of humanity live in conflict affected countries. War in Ukraine has led to a crisis in food, fuel, and fertilizer prices which is now abating because of the UN-brokered Black Sea grain deal. Supply chains are reeling, financial markets are in turmoil, aid has shrunk, trade is deeply impacted, food security is in jeopardy and foreign investments to the developing world are declining.
9. The climate emergency is upon us. We are all feeling the palpable impact. CO2 emissions are predicted to rise by 14% by 2030. The driver who brought me to the hotel yesterday said that he had not seen snow in Vienna for the last three years. Floods, extreme weather, drought, forest fires have become images that we are seeing regularly on our news channels.
10. Multilateralism is in distress. The paralysis in the Security Council is reflective of the new and powerful global political divides. But multilateralism is morphing from what it was three decades ago. Civil society, academia and business are leading the charge to a new multilateralism where young people, enlightened business and academia are cooperating, across borders, like never before. There are new coalitions for change transcending the purely intergovernmental nature of multilateralism. CoNGO has to be in

front to empower these coalitions. Your special status gives you that role. You are close to the grassroots and key to the interface with global and regional processes.

11. So where are we in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda - a wonderful blueprint for a better world by 2030 with its ambitious goals, targets and indicators structure? The SDGs are in the emergency room on life support.
12. A sizeable number of countries – often classified as least developed countries – have yet to find the formula for achieving sustained and robust economic growth. A much larger group of countries faces the challenge of building more just and inclusive societies where all people can thrive, irrespective of such circumstances as ethnicity, social status, gender, age, disability or other vulnerabilities. This is the essence of the call in the 2030 Agenda to ‘leave no one behind’.
13. We have been starkly reminded of entrenched inequalities by the pandemic notably, in the vulnerabilities of different social groups as well as the stark inequalities in access to life-saving vaccines and therapeutics across countries and regions.
14. Besides reducing inequalities, environmental sustainability is the other imperative of ‘building back better’. There are a few aspects to this, the most urgent of which are tackling climate change and halting biodiversity loss and land degradation.
15. Tackling climate change must go hand in hand with ensuring fairness and equity. Thus, ensuring a fair sharing of the costs and benefits of dramatic transformation is crucial to being able to implement ambitious measures aimed at achieving net-zero economies at the earliest possible date this century.
16. Halting biodiversity loss, land degradation and beginning to restore nature is another aspect of environmental sustainability which requires urgent attention as a contributor to tackling climate change through so-called “nature-based solutions”.
17. Ladies and Gentlemen, in challenging times like these the reflex of Governments is to go back to the old ways with redrawn political coalitions, and to overlook or

under-appreciate the role of NGOs and civil society in advancing solutions that require a multitude of perspectives and actors.

18. And yet, as we approach the SDG Summit in September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in 2024, let us recall that the SDG implementation needs engagement of all stakeholders, especially civil society organizations. The same can be said about a truly inclusive multilateral system.
19. NGOs and civil society organizations are often the voices of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities, and they bring a wealth of diverse perspectives and experiences to the table. They are often the ones who have the closest connections to local communities and can provide insights into the living realities of those most affected by global challenges.
20. Therefore, it is critical that we re-imagine and re-narrativize multilateralism to recognize the vital role of NGOs and civil society. This means creating a more inclusive and equitable multilateral system, one that provides meaningful space for engagement and participation by NGOs and civil society organizations. Over time civil society has been given more space. But civil society organizations need to be closer to the decision-making table. I have seen the transformation of their role from the 1992 Earth Summit to the 2015 Sustainable Development Summit. But more needs to happen.
21. What are some of the opportunities during upcoming major UN events?
22. I already mentioned the upcoming SDG Summit, to take place in September 2023 as well as the Summit of the Future in September 2024. The Summit of the Future is part of the UN Secretary-General's ambitious 'Our Common Agenda'.
23. Our Common Agenda lays out a series of proposals for consideration by UN Member States as elements of a roadmap for accelerated SDG and 2030 Agenda implementation.
24. Our Common Agenda also recognizes the critical role of NGOs and civil society and the importance of their engagement and participation in shaping the future of the world.

Recognizing this role is important but delivering on actually enhancing their role, at all levels, is more challenging.

25. The report emphasizes that civil society plays a crucial role in advocating for social justice, human rights, and environmental protection, as well as in holding governments accountable for their actions. It also recognizes that civil society can bring diverse perspectives and voices to the table, contributing to more inclusive and democratic decision-making processes.
26. To further support civil society's engagement in global governance, the report proposes measures such as strengthening partnerships between governments and civil society, creating more spaces for civil society participation in international forums, and increasing funding and resources for civil society organizations.
27. Overall, the report highlights the importance of civil society in promoting a more sustainable, equitable, and peaceful world, and calls for greater recognition and support of their role in global governance.
28. The path to the Summit of the Future in 2024 has been clearly marked. The SDG Summit in September this year and the 2024 Summit of the Future are intrinsically related. Their scope and proposals will be determined by Member States, informed by the policy briefs being prepared by the SG. Civil Society needs deeper engagement in deliberations around:
 - a. Future generations
 - b. The creation of an emergency platform to deal with future shocks
 - c. A new agenda for peace
 - d. Finance – a) looking beyond GDP, b) Reform of the Bretton Woods institutions
 - e. Global digital cooperation
 - f. Peaceful use of outer space
 - g. Education
 - h. Engaging youth.
29. In defining the new agenda civil society and CoNGO must be in step the entire way. The report of the High Level Board on effective multilateralism, gender equality and human

rights will be woven through the outcome. We must seek out the key players now to influence the process.

30. At the same time, we need to recognize the unique challenges and opportunities facing NGOs and civil society organizations. These organizations often operate in difficult and complex environments, where they may face significant obstacles to their work. They may also be subject to scrutiny and criticism, both from governments and other stakeholders.
31. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to provide NGOs and civil society organizations with the resources and support they need to be effective partners in the SDG implementation process. This includes providing funding and capacity-building support, as well as creating a supportive policy environment that encourages and enables NGOs and civil society to engage fully in the multilateral system.
32. I come to the end with a plea to CoNGO: Embrace technology. It will be the best friend in the networks you create and the influence you wish to wield. The pace of technology-driven change has to guide your own future and the future of multilateralism.
33. Let me conclude with the following thoughts: Societies are deeply divided across the globe today, and it is hard to conceive how a societal consensus can emerge around the sometimes difficult actions that need to be taken – from decarbonizing our economies to changing our high-consumption lifestyles in the advanced and emerging economies to redistributing wealth, income and opportunities to the benefit of those people who have been until now left behind. But our survival and prosperity depend on these fundamental changes.
34. The 2030 Agenda and Paris Agreement provide our north stars. Our Common Agenda provides elements of the roadmap with an emphasis on the roles of different stakeholders. There is a vital role of NGOs and civil society in this endeavor. By creating a more inclusive and equitable multilateral system, one that provides meaningful space for engagement and participation by NGOs and civil society.

35. We need to come together in a spirit of caring, compassion, and coordination to realize our dreams for the future we want.