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How to ensure the future we want becomes reality

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Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres. (Reuters)

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Great-power competition, the troubling rise of xenophobic nationalism, existential environmental threats, and the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) onslaught all present major global governance challenges. Against this backdrop, world leaders have tasked UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres with recommending steps to advance the far-reaching commitments contained in last year's so-called UN75 Declaration, in which the UN General Assembly (UNGA) pledged to ensure "the future we want."

The secretary-general's much-anticipated report, "Our Common Agenda," is due this September and it would benefit from a follow-through vehicle to weigh the report's recommendations and deliberate on and adopt Guterres' best ideas. We therefore support the proposal for a World Summit on Inclusive Global Governance involving a wide range of participants.

Since Guterres addressed the UNGA's 75th anniversary meeting last September, he has repeatedly emphasized the need for "networked multilateralism," in which "the United Nations family, international financial institutions, regional organizations, trading blocs, and others work together more closely and more effectively." And on April 24, the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace, he called for "inclusive multilateralism that draws on civil society, business, local and regional authorities, and others, and shares power more broadly and fairly."

Given the continued strains on the multilateral system, and the UN's need to tap talent and resources from beyond its 193 member-state governments to solve urgent global problems, Guterres' appeal could not be more timely. But despite the new-found hopes of rolling back the COVID-19 pandemic and growing calls by world leaders to reinvest in the rules-based international order, much remains to be done.

In particular, multilateralism must be embraced widely to counter the impact of some political leaders' exclusionary rhetoric, which amplifies public anxieties and undermines the rules and institutions of global cooperation. These leaders often wrongly exploit public anxieties by blaming others for their countries' troubles, or for their own ineffective, insular approaches to inherently transnational problems. The world cannot reverse these growing stresses placed on the multilateral system with commitments to vague

principles, or to policy goals that are then not met.

Fortunately, the secretary-general's call for a new kind of networked and inclusive multilateralism is thus prompting a healthy and consequential rethink of global governance norms, policies, institutions and operations. The roadmap for implementing such reforms should include a comprehensive intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder preparatory effort that culminates in the world summit in 2023. Such a gathering would aim to help the UN system keep pace with current challenges and opportunities regarding peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights.

“ Multilateralism must be embraced widely to counter the impact of some political leaders’ exclusionary rhetoric. ”

Maria Fernanda Espinosa & Danilo Turk

By drawing on the talents of governments and nongovernmental groups around the world, this summit would seek to overhaul the global governance system and usher in a new collaborative compact of institutions, politics and people. A recent Stimson Center report, “Beyond UN75: A Roadmap for Inclusive, Networked & Effective Global Governance,” provides further details of this strategy.

Global coalitions of states such as the Alliance for Multilateralism, and civil-society networks including the Coalition for the UN We Need and the Together First campaign, can help provide the leadership, creative ideas and diplomatic skills needed to fulfill the promise of this much-needed endeavor. Our own organizations, the Group of Women Leaders Voices for Change and Inclusion and Club de Madrid, also remain steadfast in their support of a robust and meaningful agenda to realize the UN75 Declaration follow-through agenda.

In response to the socioeconomic problems triggered by COVID-19, Club de Madrid has proposed that the UN secretary-general's “Our Common Agenda” report call for a second World Summit for Social Development to reinvigorate the social components of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Focusing on people's needs and providing a strong, united response on healthcare, education, social protection and decent work is more essential than ever to ensuring the UN's continued relevance. Beyond addressing urgent needs, the UN must also continue to safeguard the “equal rights of

men and women and of nations large and small,” as proclaimed by the Group of Women Leaders in their recent “Multilateralism by Women” statement.

We strongly believe that the UN — the world’s only truly universal organization — has never been more vital to all people and countries. But it needs renewed imagination, vigorous adaptation to changing global circumstances, and emboldened advocates from within and outside governments.

As the world prepares to mark UN Charter Day on Saturday, we call on international leaders gathering at this September’s annual high-level UNGA meetings to heed the recommendation of 50 former government ministers and senior UN officials and support “a dedicated intergovernmental process” to “strengthen and reform the... institutional machinery of the UN system.” By mobilizing diverse actors worldwide — including academics, practitioners, activists and policymakers — the international community can ensure that “the future we want” becomes a reality.

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