



Our Common Agenda: a roadmap for the future

Volker Türk*

Introduction

We are at an inflection point in history. In the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), our biggest shared test since the Second World War, humanity faces a stark and urgent choice. We can continue with business as usual and almost guarantee ourselves a future of breakdown and perpetual crises. Or we can change course and break through to a better, more sustainable, peaceful, and equitable future for people and planet.

The pandemic revealed our shared vulnerability and interconnectedness, upending our world, threatening our health, destroying economies and livelihoods, and deepening poverty and inequalities. It also exposed fissures within and between societies, rich and poor alike, and exacerbated already existing global, regional, and country level challenges.

COVID-19 is a wake-up call that we would do well to heed. But it is far from the only problem we face, and it is not even the biggest cause of death in the world. By some estimates, nearly three times as many people have died from air and water pollution even as the pandemic has wreaked havoc globally. Meanwhile, conflicts rage and worsen. The disastrous effects of a changing climate – famine, floods, fires, and extreme heat – threaten our very existence. For millions of people around the world, poverty, discrimination, violence, and exclusion are denying them their rights to the basic necessities of life: health, safety, a vaccination against disease, clean water to drink, a plate of food or a seat in a classroom. And there is increasing breakdown of trust – between people, and between people and their institutions and governments.

* Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General at the United Nations Headquarters.

But hope is not lost. At the same time, the pandemic has led to a surge of collective action, with people working together to respond to a truly global threat. We have been reminded of the vital role of the State in solving problems, but also the need for networks of actors stretching well beyond States to cities, corporations, scientists, health professionals, researchers, civil society, the media, faith-based groups and individuals. When we all face the same threat, cooperation and solidarity are the only solutions, within societies and between nations. As the Secretary-General likes to say, solidarity is not charity. It is common sense. And increasingly, as challenges multiply that are beyond the capacity of any one State or community to solve, humanity's welfare and future depend on us working together as a global family to achieve common goals. For people, for the planet, for prosperity and for peace.



In 2020 we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the United Nations. Multilateral action has achieved an enormous amount over the past 75 years, from preventing a third world war to eradicating smallpox and mending the hole in the ozone layer. But we must strive to do more, and to do it

better. In commemorating the founding of the United Nations, UN Member States asked the Secretary-General to consider the path forward and report back with recommendations "to advance our common agenda", [building on a series of 12 commitments](#) of their own. The [Our Common Agenda](#) report, released in September 2021, is his response.

This is not an ordinary UN report. In preparing it, the Secretary-General consulted widely, including with UN Member States, thought leaders, young people, civil society and the United Nations system and its many partners. One message rang through loud and clear: we have some important choices to make; and we may not have this chance again. That is why Our Common Agenda is, above all, an agenda of action designed to accelerate the implementation of existing agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals, and make a tangible difference to people's lives.

The report makes recommendations across four broad areas.

First, the Secretary-General calls for a renewal of the social contract between governments and people and within societies, to rebuild trust and embrace a

comprehensive vision of human rights. Much of our global unease is rooted in persistent poverty, hunger, lack of access to health care, education, and income security, growing inequalities and injustices as well as misinformation and lack of confidence in institutions. It is time to update the understanding within societies of how people solve shared problems, manage risks and pool resources to deliver public goods, as well as how their collective institutions and norms operate. The exact nature of these reciprocal norms varies and is for each society to determine, but there are a number of core foundations: trust, inclusion and participation, and measuring and valuing what matters. People also need to see results reflected in their daily lives.

The Secretary-General proposes the renewed social contract include the active and equal participation of women and girls, without whom no meaningful social contract is possible. He urges a new era of universal social protection, health coverage, education, skills, decent work, and housing, as well as universal access to the Internet by 2030 as a basic human right. The Secretary-General invites all countries to conduct inclusive and meaningful national listening exercises, so people have a say in envisioning their countries' futures. He calls for an end to the "infodemic" plaguing our world by defending a common, empirically backed consensus around facts, science, and knowledge. He stresses that all policy and budget decisions should be informed by science and expertise and calls for a global code of conduct that promotes integrity in public information.

Renewing the social contract also means correcting a glaring blind spot in how we measure economic prosperity and progress. When profits come at the expense of people and our planet, we are left with an incomplete picture of the true cost of economic growth. As currently measured, the gross domestic product (GDP) fails to capture the human and environmental destruction of some business activities. We need new measures to complement GDP, so that people can gain a full understanding of the impacts of business activities and how we can and must do better to support people and our planet.

Second, Our Common Agenda looks to the future, proposing a deepening of solidarity with the world's young people and future generations. It is the time to think for the long term, to include the voices of those who will come after us, and to be better prepared for the challenges ahead. Young people will inherit the consequences of the decisions we take but are barely represented in decision-making. Yet, we also have many good examples of involvement of and leadership by youth, and evidence that this greatly enriches our decisions and illuminates

thinking and planning. Our Common Agenda is an example of that, with the Secretary-General's recommendations on youth responding directly to ideas presented by young people themselves in a report entitled [Our Common Future](#). Our Common Agenda proposes meaningful, diverse, and effective youth engagement both within and outside the United Nations, including through better political representation; by transforming education, skills training, and lifelong learning; and by focusing on the jobs of the future including in the digital and green economies. The Secretary-General suggests the convening of a Summit on Transforming Education in 2022, a "youth in politics" index to track the opening of political space in countries around the world, and a recovery barometer that will track career paths and labour market outcomes for youth between now and 2025 and beyond as part of the decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals.

We must also look even further ahead to those generations expected to be born. In 1945, the promise of the UN Charter was to save "succeeding generations" from the scourge of war. A similar promise today would necessarily encompass a much broader range of threats, including the very viability of human life on earth. More than 10 billion people are expected to be born this century, most of them in Africa and Asia, and they have no voice in shaping the world they will inhabit. The Secretary-General makes proposals, such as the establishment of a UN Futures Lab, a Declaration on Future Generations, and a United Nations Special Envoy, to ensure that policy and budget decisions take into account their impact on future generations and that we better harness our capacities on foresight, planning and managing future risks. He also asks Member States to consider repurposing of the Trusteeship Council – the organ of the United Nations that was established to supervise the administration of trust territories as they transitioned from colonies to sovereign nations. It has been inactive since 1994 and could potentially be repurposed as deliberative body on behalf of succeeding generations.

Third, the Secretary-General calls for a rethinking of multilateralism to ensure we are delivering on the most critical issues of global concern in ways that are more networked, inclusive, and effective. In particular he urges reinvigoration of the systems in place to protect the global commons and deliver global public goods – such as peace, the planet, the economy, and global health. The Secretary-General urges some immediate steps in urgent areas that cannot wait: a global vaccination plan to deliver vaccines against COVID-19 into the arms of the millions of people who are still denied this basic lifesaving measure; urgent and bold steps

to address the triple crisis of climate disruption, biodiversity loss and pollution destroying our planet; and a Biennial Summit between actors in the international system to ensure a more sustainable global economy.

Beyond this, he calls for the convening of a Summit of the Future in 2023 to forge a new consensus on our future and the best way to secure it. Some of the concrete initiatives this Summit of the Future could consider would include a new agenda for peace, a dialogue on the peaceful, secure, and sustainable use of outer space, an emergency platform to respond to complex crises, and a global digital compact to outline principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all. Ahead of the Summit of the Future, a High-level Advisory Board on Global Public Goods, involving former heads of State/Government, will be asked to develop further recommendations to advance governance in the areas of greatest concern.

Finally, for 75 years, the United Nations has gathered the world to address global challenges: from conflicts and hunger, to ending disease, to outer space and the digital world, to human rights and disarmament. In this time of division, fracture and mistrust, this space is needed more than ever if we are to secure a better, greener, more peaceful future for all people. The report calls for an upgraded UN that is fit for a new era: one that can offer more networked and inclusive solutions to the challenges of the 21st century, while living up to the purposes and principles of its Charter. This means more inclusion, ensuring every UN entity has a civil society focal point, the establishment of an Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments, and harnessing the potential of the private sector. It also means strengthening the UN as a source of reliable data and evidence, by reestablishing the Secretary-General's Scientific Advisory Board and delivering fewer but more coherent reports each year. And it means making the UN itself more effective, through cross-cutting change on a quintet of issues: data; digital innovation; strategic foresight; behavioral science; and performance and results orientation. The Secretary-General also stands ready to support Member States should they choose to adapt any of the UN's intergovernmental organs, such as the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, or the Security Council.

The Secretary-General has set out a compelling roadmap towards a better future. But it represents the beginning, not the end, of an important process. To transform words into action will require many actors in the international system to come together, and above all is in the hands of UN Member States to take forward. There are several key moments that will support this, including the Conference of Parties

(COP) 26 in 2021 and the Paris Agreement global stock take on climate in 2022; the Transforming Education Summit in 2022; the first Biennial Summit on the Global Economy in 2022; the anniversaries of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action on Human Rights in 2023; the Summit of the Future in 2023; and a World Social Summit in 2025.

“Humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: breakdown or breakthrough.”

United Nations Secretary-General
António Guterres
10 September 2021



These events provide us with some crucial milestones. We must harness the collective will to meet and surpass them. Humanity has shown time and time again that it is capable of great achievements when we work together. Our Common Agenda provides a path to recapture this positive spirit and begin rebuilding our world and mending the trust in one another we need so desperately. Now is the time to take the next steps in our journey together, in

solidarity with and for all people.