

Fulfilling the UN75 Declaration's Promise Expert Series

Experts Roundtable 5

UN75 Declaration commitments

#6 We will build trust and #7 We will improve digital cooperation

Hosted on 29 April 2021

Synthesis of Major Insights & Recommendations

On April 29, 2021, the fifth roundtable of the “Fulfilling the UN75 Declaration’s Promise Expert Series” took place, and thought leaders from global civil society engaged UN Missions and Secretariat officials in a candid dialogue on progress, challenges, and further measures needed to meet two of the twelve commitments presented in the [UN75 Declaration](#). This discussion, sponsored by the Bahá’í International Community, Club de Madrid, Coalition for the UN We Need, and the Stimson Center, addressed the UN75 Declaration commitments #6 on “We will build trust” and #7 on “We will improve digital cooperation.”

The series is intended to take stock of progress toward achieving the twelve UN75 Declaration commitments, introduce alternative institutional, policy, and normative measures for improving implementation, and consider steps for achieving such reforms, including a possible follow-on intergovernmental process as recommended in the [Eminent Persons Open Letter](#) signed by 49 former world leaders and UN officials. The expert series aims to contribute insights and concrete proposals for consideration in the Secretary-General's forthcoming (*Our Common Agenda*) report—expected to be released by September 2021, prior to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) High-Level Week.¹

The roundtable’s lead-off speakers included: **His Excellency Jan Peter Balkenende**, former Prime Minister of the Netherlands and member of the Club de Madrid; **Ambassador Juan Somavía**, President, Foro Permanente de Política Exterior de Chile (Permanent Forum on Chile’s Foreign Policy), former Ambassador of Chile to the United Nations, and former Director-General of the International Labour Organization; and **Ms. ElsaMarie D’Silva**, Founder and CEO of Red Dot Foundation.

¹ The opinions, assessments, valuations, positions and, where applicable, judgements expressed are within the responsibility of the authors or the individual persons making the corresponding statements in this publication, which aims to capture and distill, while employing the Chatham House Rule, the ideas conveyed by the 29 April 2021 expert roundtable participants. They do not necessarily and not in every case correspond to the positions and opinions of the event co-sponsors and all participants.

Key Lead-Off Speaker Quotes

“Disinformation and the spread of fake news constitute a growing threat to democracies worldwide. Other threats arise from intrinsic aspects of the online world: algorithms seem to reinforce ideological and polarizing ideas, whereas anonymity further spreads hate speech ... Furthermore, we have been witnesses of how disinformation [and] fake news can shape political processes and determine its outcomes. An age of disinformation requires new views and strategies of the UN.” – *Jan Peter Balkenende*

“The UN75 Declaration stated that ‘we will build trust.’ The World Summit for Social Development more than 25 years ago gave us a clear political answer: ‘We can continue to hold the trust of the people of the world only if we make their needs our priority.’ We must act immediately to reverse the enormous social development backslide of the pandemic in every country. Otherwise, the whole 2030 Agenda will be in peril.” - *Juan Somavía*

“...creating technology that is feminist and inclusive is critical, as it can democratize access to information, make visible a highly taboo topic like sexual and gender-based violence, allow one to begin a dialogue without confrontation, and encourage building trust with institutional stakeholders, because an individual or a community can demand accountability, and discuss possibilities and options using evidence-based data.” – *ElsaMarie D’Silva*

UN75 Declaration Commitment #6 - We will build trust

Major Points Voiced by Participants

- Disinformation and the spread of “fake news” is generally facilitated by digital platforms where obtaining objective information and data is difficult. This can lead to increased polarization and partisanship, and further jeopardize trust in institutions. Populist movements, for instance, intentionally use mistrust as a political strategy, further deepening existing divisions within societies.
- Similar to governments, trust towards the UN has also been negatively affected, and currently sits around 50 percent. The UN must work with the whole of society to rebuild the trust which has been eroded.
- Building trust requires addressing the root of systemic inequalities, which often link back to the process of globalization and historical cycles of inequality.
- Building trust is a difficult task but recovering from a loss of trust is even more challenging. We should avoid finding ourselves in the latter position.
- Achieving this crucial commitment requires multi-stakeholder efforts. All actors, including the UN, states, businesses, education centers, and civil society must collaborate to successfully tackle the multifaceted and deeply rooted issue that is mistrust. Indigenous communities and vulnerable groups, in particular, should be deeply involved in this endeavor.
- There is a growing sense of non-representation among people, which causes them to distance themselves from governance systems. This includes governments, political parties, and even religious and spiritual traditions. It is essential that the international community recognizes this issue and promotes more spaces for engagement and participation.

- Growing mistrust and its origins, as well as the accumulated socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, call for the establishment of a global platform at the UN that cultivates conversations around the best ways to deal with the social crisis issues the world faces.
- Civil society's input must be meaningfully included in the Secretary General's *Common Agenda*. The path to a multilateral system that is trusted, effective, and inclusive must take into account civil society voices.

Major Recommendations: Policy, institutional, legal, normative, and operational reforms

- The UN should further foster international cooperation and regulations to support nation-states in increasing transparency and accountability of their public institutions, by capitalizing on the existing knowledge-base and expertise.
- The Secretary-General should launch a Global Trust Initiative, to further identify and understand the roots of mistrust, particularly those at the local level. Traditionally, the UN links itself closely to governments, but it must also strengthen its bonds with civil society to broaden its understanding of local challenges in ways which governments do not.
- Participatory democracy must be expanded to address the crisis of representation at the UN. It is essential that the UN improves its linkages to civil society organizations and their activities and creates opportunities for them to engage in meaningful dialogues.
- A World Summit for Social Development should be held soon as a follow-up to the one which took place in 1995, in order to develop a global agreement to confront the widespread social backsliding resulting from the pandemic, and reinforce the importance and significance of social development in reaching the 2030 Agenda. Otherwise, an unchecked social crisis can seriously undermine the Sustainable Development Goals achievement.
- A parallel People's Summit should be organized (possibly under the auspices of the UN) as an autonomous process of conversation and global consensus-building among civil society actors and governments from all regions on the above-mentioned issues.
- Lack of accountability jeopardizes trust in institutions, but existing global mechanisms and procedures of accountability are insufficient. Adequate accountability measures, such as an International Anti-Corruption Court, should be established to combat corruption, as well as promote transparency and trust.
- The establishment of a UN Parliamentary Assembly would strengthen trust in the UN and global governance as a whole and improve accountability. This proposed body would engage global citizens with their elected representatives, therefore amplifying local voices in global decision-making.
- In the same vein, a World Citizens' Initiative at the UN, similar to the European Citizens' Initiative, would promote trust and accountability at the UN by providing citizens with a direct platform to feed their ideas into global policymaking.

UN75 Declaration Commitment #7 - We will improve digital cooperation

Major Points Voiced by Participants

- Society is in the midst of a digital revolution. The complex challenges associated with it require not only national governments to be at the negotiating table, but also the private sector and civil society to ensure that holistic solutions are achieved.
- The digital divide limiting connectivity for developing countries must be reduced, as access to information, basic public services, economic development, and civic participation are increasingly tied to internet access.
- Digital cooperation and trust should not be thought of separately from one another, nor from the challenges that the Sustainable Development Goals aim to overcome. A clear connection must be made between trust, sustainability, digitalization, inequality, human rights, and inclusiveness to meet the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Universal internet access is an imperative, but it also needs to be equally affordable, high-quality, secure, open, suited to the needs of local communities, and democratically managed.
- There is a moral choice being made by a handful of publishers and governments regarding whether or not software, information, data, and content—all valuable digital goods—are open source and available to the public. High-income nations should better empower low-income countries to take advantage of the digital knowledge humanity has created.
- Human rights issues induced by technology, such as AI-powered discrimination, targeted internet shutdowns and surveillance, and the use of technology for the suppression of freedom of assembly and association, must be eliminated.
- Efforts should be made to engage closely with Big Tech around the issues brought about by digitalization, but the risk of technology companies holding monopolistic power must also be acknowledged and reduced.

Major Recommendations: Policy, institutional, legal, normative, and operational reforms

- A new social contract for the age of artificial intelligence, big data, and the internet should be established in order to assure that their use does not undermine the rules-based order and respect for human rights. These technologies must support sustainable development, inclusion, fairness, protection of privacy, and accountability for all stakeholders.
- A Bretton Woods for Digitalization could support the development of these recommended standards, and a Democratic Alliance for Digital Governance formed by governments could ensure that these technologies, particularly AI, avoid bias, are human-centered, inclusive, ethical, and responsible. Additionally, the ethical use of AI could be applied towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contribute to reducing gender gaps (SDG 5), combating climate change (SDG 13), and enhancing anti-corruption efforts (SDG 16), for example.

- Universal standards should be defined, and similar legislation between nations could be established, for accountability standards surrounding emerging technologies to diminish the risks posed by automated decision-making systems.
- Access to the internet and digital services should be a human right, and the internet should be considered a public good. The COVID-19 pandemic has powerfully underscored how essential connectivity is in the modern age, and the gender, locational, and disability-based digital divide must be bridged.
- There should be a greater focus on investing in an affordable range of technology solutions to provide broadband internet access, ensuring that all people have access to affordable internet-enabled devices, and education towards critical digital literacy skills.
- There should be a call for more software, data, and information to be made open source, rather than proprietary, following the positive example of the International Criminal Court's legal tools database and its partnerships with external actors to create a commons of digital public goods. There should be more success stories about how the playing field can be leveled by digital means.

Participant List

Jamil Ahmad, Director, Intergovernmental Affairs, United Nations Environment Programme

Saeed Al Dhaheri, Ministry of Presidential Affairs, United Arab Emirates

Morten Bergsmo, Author, Centre for International Law Research and Policy, Integrity in International Justice

Jan Peter Balkenende, Former Prime Minister of the Netherlands

Andreas Bummel, Executive Director, Democracy Without Borders

Yu Ping Chan, Senior Programme Officer, Office of the Envoy on Technology at the United Nations

ElsaMarie D'Silva, Founder and CEO of the Red Dot Foundation

Gillian D'Souza Nazareth, Vice-Chair, Red Dot Foundation

Chantal Davis, United Nations Environment Programme

Debra Decker, Senior Advisor, The Stimson Center

Winifred Doherty, Representative to the United Nations, Good Shepherd

Laura Flores, Institutional Relations and Internal Governance Assistant, Club de Madrid

Maja Groff, Convenor, Climate Governance Commission & Visiting Professor, Leiden University, Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs

Jeffery Huffines, Senior Advisor, Coalition for the UN We Need

Erik Litver, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the United Nations

Nuno Mathias, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of Portugal to the United Nations

Colette Mazzucelli, Professor, New York University

Mr. Vitorino Mello Oliveira, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Portugal to the United Nations

Peter Nagy, Third Secretary, Permanent Mission of Slovakia to the United Nations

Laura O'Brien, UN Advocacy Officer, Access Now

Eleanor Openshaw, New York Director, International Service for Human Rights

Dan Perell, Representative to the United Nations, Baha'i International Community

Richard Ponzio, Senior Fellow and Director, Global Governance, Justice & Security Program, The Stimson Center

Amb. Milenko Skoknic, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Chile to the United Nations

Amb. Juan Somavia, Former Director-General of the International Labour Organization

Leyla Vásquez, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of Chile to the United Nations

Shinobu Yamaguchi, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Japan to the United Nations