UN75: Future of multilateralism debate in COVID-19 era

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Shotlist

Wide shot: exterior, Place des Nations, Geneva, with broken chair sculpture and UN Geneva in foreground.

2. SOUNDBITE (EN) - Guy Ryder, head of the International Labour Organization (ILO): “It is impossible to imagine effective responses to the pandemic if we did not have the World Health Organization leading the international effort with all of us in support. By the same token, there is no solution to climate change unless we act as the Paris Agreements encourage us to do, in the framework of international cooperation.”

3. Medium shot: from outside UN Geneva with flag alley beyond fence.

4. SOUNDBITE (EN) - Ms. Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG): “We can see the Himalayan mountains in many Indian cities, where normally they were covered by smog because of the pollution. We can see blue waters in the Pacific ocean in Lima, we can see crystal clear water in Venice. We can breathe fresh air in Los Angeles, Rome and in many other places. So, we really can realise that if we can decrease our footprint, we can avoid a climate emergency.”


6. SOUNDBITE (EN) - Guy Ryder, head of the International Labour Organization (ILO): “We have to find ways of not putting people in front of the impossible choice: protecting themselves against the virus, isolation by staying at home, and by so doing removing any possible source of income and survival that they may have. And this is, unfortunately, the very dramatic reality we risk confronting many people with.”

8. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Martin Chungong, Secretary-General of the International Parliamentary Union (IPU): “We see that many parliaments are stepping up to the plate and saying, that ‘Yes, these measures are temporary, yes, they have to be circumscribed, yes, we allow Governments to take extraordinary measures, but we are keeping a watchful eye.’”

9. Close-up: UN flag alley with UN palace to rear.

10. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Mr. Noel Curran, Director-General of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU): “We need to be able - and the public needs to be able - to access independent news and current affairs; and we need to know that that news and current affairs is prominent – it’s in a prominent position - and it’s easily accessible on social media platforms. And that for me is how you counter - it’s probably the biggest way of countering - this flood of misinformation and disinformation that we’ve seen.”


10. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Ms. Fabiola Gianotti, Director-General of CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN): “It’s clear the current crisis if anything will increase the inequalities and the gap between the poor and the rich. The developed countries and the developing countries. Those who have access to education and those who don’t have access to education. So, I think the key word in the coming months is not competition but collaboration.”

10. Medium shot: UN Geneva shot from below, with UN logo and lettering visible.

11. SOUNDBITE (EN) - Guy Ryder, head of the International Labour Organization (ILO): “It’s a simple issue of social protection; we need to get not tomorrow but today, direct transfers of cash and resources of these people desperately in need.”


13. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Fabrizio Hochschild, Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on the Preparations for the Commemoration of the United Nations 75th Anniversary: “We have to overcome this false dichotomy between you’re either a patriot or a globalist; either you care about your country or you’re an internationalist. Nobody, no patriot who’s a true patriot can care about their country alone; in an interconnected, interdependent, interbenefitting world, if you’re a true nationalist, a true patriot, you have to be an internationalist as well, because that’s just the way the world works together.”

Challenges for multilateralism - and optimism - revealed in UN-led global debate

While the world grapples with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, an online debate on Friday between UN and international agency heads and the wider public highlighted serious concerns about the challenges facing multilateralism, along with optimism that it is the only way to tackle global threats.

Scheduled to coincide with the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace, the UN Geneva-hosted web event served as a reminder of Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’s message that the COVID-19 pandemic “is a tragic reminder of how deeply connected we are...Combatting it requires us to work together as one human family.”

Echoing that message, Guy Ryder, head of the International Labour Organization (ILO), heralded the lifesaving work of the World Health Organization in coordinating Member States’ response to the new coronavirus which emerged in late December.

“It is impossible to imagine effective responses to the pandemic if we did not have the World Health Organization leading the international with all of us in support,” he said. “By the same token, there is no solution to climate change unless we act as the Paris Agreements encourage us to do, the framework of international cooperation.”

In his capacity as head of the UN labour agency, Mr Ryder also made a strong personal appeal to help 61 per cent of the world’s workforce who work informally.

“It’s a simple issue of social protection; we need to get not tomorrow but today, direct transfers of cash and resources of these people desperately in need.”

Informal workers frequently lack any social protection to help them in times of crisis such as the current pandemic, he said, insisting that “we have to get food to these people, no matter how inconvenient” it might seem to people in places that are likely better equipped to cope with shortages.

He added: “We have to find ways of not putting people in front of the impossible choice: protecting themselves against the virus, isolation by staying at home, and by so doing removing any possible source of income and survival that they may have. And this is, unfortunately, the very dramatic reality we risk confronting many people with.”

Ms. Fabiola Gianotti, Director-General of CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), maintained that one of the most disturbing aspects of the COVID-19 crisis was that it had revealed countries’ weaknesses.

“It’s clear the current crisis if anything will increase the inequalities and the gap between the poor and the rich,” she said. “The developed countries and the developing countries. Those who have access to education and those who don’t have access to education. So, I think the key word in the coming months is not competition but collaboration.”

On a more optimistic note, the CERN head added that science-based approaches were now more highly valued by Governments and people, an attitude which she hoped would last long after the current health crisis was over, as a way of promoting greater global equality.

To date, more than 80,000 people have taken part in an online one-minute UN survey to discuss their hopes and concerns for the future, as part of a global discussion launched by the UN Secretary-General, in the Organization’s 75th year.

Responses from 191 countries show overwhelming public support for international cooperation – with a
significant increase since COVID-19 began spreading around the world.

Although people’s main immediate concern is the new coronavirus, their long-term concern is tackling climate change, the UN poll has indicated clearly.

“We can see the Himalayan mountains in many Indian cities, where normally they were covered by smog because of the pollution,” said Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG). “We can see blue waters in the Pacific ocean in Lima, we can see crystal clear water in Venice. We can breathe fresh air in Los Angeles, Rome and in many other places. So, we really can realise that if we can decrease our footprint, we can avoid a climate emergency.”

With human rights concerns also a key priority for respondents of the UN75 survey, Martin Chungong, Secretary-General of the International Parliamentary Union (IPU), insisted that Members of Parliament had an important role to play in protecting people’s freedoms everywhere.

“We see that many parliaments are stepping up to the plate and saying that, ‘Yes, these measures are temporary, yes, they have to be circumscribed, yes, we allow Governments to take extraordinary measures, but we are keeping a watchful eye.’”

The issue of fake news and belief that action is needed in future to curb social media platforms from spreading misleading information also featured in the debate.

“We need to be able - and the public needs to be able - to access independent news and current affairs,” said Noel Curran, Director-General of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU).

In line with the COVID-19 crisis, the EBU head noted that there had been significantly increased demand for news by partner broadcasters in recent months. To ensure that those looking for trusted information knew where to find it, Mr Curran called for more transparency on social media platforms and greater algorithmic transparency, while cautioning against over-regulation.

“We need to know that that news and current affairs is prominent – (that) it’s in a prominent position - and it’s easily accessible on social media platforms. And that for me is how you counter - it’s probably the biggest way of countering - this flood of misinformation and disinformation that we’ve seen.”

Juxtaposing the optimism about the future expressed by many of the UN survey’s respondents with the threat to multilateralism of growing populist rhetoric and nationalism, Fabrizio Hochschild, Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on UN75, insisted that no country go it alone.

“We have to overcome this false dichotomy between you’re either a patriot or a globalist,” he said. “Either you care about your country or you’re an internationalist. Nobody, no patriot who’s a true patriot can care about their country alone; in an interconnected, interdependent, inter-benefitting world, if you’re a true nationalist, a true patriot, you have to be an internationalist as well, because that’s just the way the world works together.”

Planned in cooperation with the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, the University of Geneva and Foraus, the event drew well over 1,000 engaged netizens, via Facebook and the Organization’s video platform, webtv.un.org.