

# A Faith-Based Vision for the UN at 75 and Beyond

## Summary

Seventy-five years of unprecedented international collaboration have elapsed since founding the United Nations (UN) and the UN Charter's signing. On this occasion, we, the undersigned faith-based organisations (FBOs), applaud the very many achievements of the UN System. Furthermore, as we reflect on the experience of these seventy-five years, we recognize that the UN has done much of its best and most important work on the ground when in dialogue and intentional collaboration with FBOs and members of our vast civil society networks. FBO input, guided by principles of subsidiarity and preferential option for the poor (among many others), has frequently been instrumental in ensuring that the world's most marginalised communities are included in the design, delivery, and fruits of UN efforts on the ground. Our knowledge of grassroots realities and our roles as trusted community pillars paired with the UN's technical support and multilateral strength have rendered FBO-UN partnerships uniquely impactful.

Our shared history demonstrates that FBOs and the UN are truly stronger and better when we work together. We therefore celebrate the moments of tremendous positive impact created by the partnership between UN and FBO actors, including in the areas of popular education on climate justice and the Sustainable Development Goals, confrontation of human trafficking, and provision of essential services in conflict-afflicted and remote communities.

Nevertheless, as FBOs who began pursuing many of the objectives of the UN decades to centuries before the establishment of the UN (and of many of its Member States), we note some weaknesses and shortcomings in the UN System that we believe this is an auspicious moment to address. As we lose the generation whose members witnessed the horrors of World War II, which became the impetus for the UN System's establishment, it becomes increasingly important that the System remains relevant and valuable in the eyes of upcoming generations of leaders. The UN Secretary-General has called upon us, as an international community, to "build back better" in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as the UN's initial establishment aimed to rebuild global society in the wake of World War II. Truly, much has changed in our world in the 75 years that transpired between these two occasions. We agree that it is time to build back better, even in the face of possible obstacles.

To that end, we urge the leadership and Member States of the UN to take action in four interrelated areas, which we believe are key to rebuilding a UN that is fit for purpose beyond the year 2020:

1. [Make the role of civil society, including FBOs, in UN processes more central and meaningful;](#)
2. [Reform the Security Council's structure and scope of work to reflect a modern, community-focused understanding of "security" and the UN's championship of democracy;](#)
3. [Develop a UN body dedicated to the coordination of both the internal \(i.e. UN institution-wide\) and national-level reviews of implementation of UN treaties, declarations, resolutions, and compacts;](#) and
4. [Scale-up technology capacity, affordability, and accessibility and revise the logistical approach to UN processes to allow remote participation to become a primary mode of operation.](#)

In the following pages, we illuminate how the call for each of these actions arises from our unique experiences as FBOs and the hard-won wisdom we have earned over the course of centuries. We also offer specific recommendations as to how each action can be implemented for the mutual reinforcement of FBO and UN actors' efforts toward our common mission. The ideas presented herein constitute a good-faith offering from a community of many names, many gifts, and many works but one, same spirit. With these words, we pour ourselves out, once again, as perpetual partners in co-creation of the just and peaceful world our faith emboldens us to envision.

## 1: Make the role of civil society in UN processes more central and meaningful

As members of FBOs, we view a central, impactful, collaborative partnership role for civil society in UN processes at all levels as paramount for the achievement of the UN's objectives. We align ourselves with the [UN75 People's Declaration and Plan for Action](#), particularly the following points:

- ❖ The contributions of civil society and critical social movements – sometimes made at great personal risk – are testaments to the need to create a more participatory democratic order that draws on the creativity of many and allows people to collectively shape the future.
- ❖ Civil society's collective voice, including FBOs, needs to be heard and included at all levels of decision making.
- ❖ Systematically increasing the participation of civil society and other stakeholders as key implementation partners is crucial to meeting current and future global challenges.

Due to our long-standing presence in many of the world's remote and vulnerable communities, FBOs are often the first and most trusted responders in times of global crisis, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Our partners on the ground ensure that basic needs are met for all people, regardless of religion, in the communities in which we live and serve, most of which are comprised of persons frequently left behind by government programs.

Faith-based actors also routinely continue to fill these service gaps long after government assistance and humanitarian crises responses have subsided. We continually engage in projects on the ground that concretely further the objectives of the UN Charter, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and other UN framework documents and step up to realise them when governments have ignored these processes or underinvested in them. Moreover, we are members of the communities we serve. As such, we cultivate relationships of mutual respect that reach across the lines of faith, ethnicity, and other divisions to engage civilians of all walks of life in work toward the SDGs.

Despite these demonstrations of long-term commitment and investment in the UN's mission, space for FBOs' participation in negotiations and reviews of UN frameworks remains tokenistic at best and often absent altogether. **We must ensure that throughout the UN processes and the consultations they require at all levels, FBOs and our civil society partners are not only present but have the meaningful, collaborative seat at the table that we continually earn.**

We offer the recommendations below as concrete steps toward the meaningful engagement of civil society within the UN System.

- **Establish as preparation for UN Commissions and other fora a more meaningful practice of collaboration with FBOs to engage individuals affected by the thematic issues being examined, including by**
  - Restructuring Expert Group meetings that construct panels to ensure a central presence of the affected and most vulnerable populations in these spaces
  - Preceding every outcome document's zero draft with a grassroots consultation on the selected theme

- Looking to the Financing for Sustainable Development Forum and the Commission on Social Development as burgeoning models of civil society integration
- **Recognise NGO Committees and Working Groups**, many of whose leadership teams and membership are comprised largely of FBOs, by designating a space for their presence and influence in negotiations of outcome documents at relevant commissions and meetings and in the planning and work of UN agencies or task forces with whom they share a focus area
- **Support meaningful inclusion and robust participation of grassroots leaders at all levels of SDG implementation (i.e. local, national, regional, and international)** by encouraging all national UN offices to invite input from FBOs within the country and offer themselves as communication hubs for remote participation in international-level processes
- **Ensure UN processes bring civil society and Member States together to listen to and engage with one another in a more integrated way**, including by
  - Alternating between Member State and civil society statements throughout open floor discussions and debates
  - Requiring Member States to engage at least one civil society organisation (CSO) as a co-sponsor for all side events held on UN premises
- **Incentivise Member States to diversify their delegations to UN Commissions and meetings** by requiring each delegation to have gender representation proportional to that of the national population and designating a certain number of passes in each delegation for constituents of each of the other Major Groups, Other Stakeholder groups, and persons from the grassroots with lived experiences relevant to the meeting's theme
- **Create a Major or Other Stakeholder Group for FBOs** which would afford us a standing invitation to participate in UN fora in all respects included in [Article 15 of A/RES/67/290](#) in recognition of our unique role in promoting cultures of peace, in advancing the SDGs, and in facilitating the participation of the most marginalised and affected populations in the UN conversation

## 2: Reform the Security Council's structure and scope of work to better reflect a modern, community-focused understanding of "security" and the UN's championship of democracy

Seventy-five years of history have clearly indicated that the powers that were in 1945, in collaboration with many other then existing States, had a wonderful intuition in deciding to found the United Nations, its Charter, and its Principal Bodies. Since then, some structural change has led to the advancement of the UN's primary goals, for example in certain aspects of the Economic and Social Council and the Human Rights Council as they currently stand. Much remains to be done, however, by way of structural improvement if the UN system is to live up to its Charter in the remainder of the 21st century.

We share the concern often noted by many UN Member States that the original design of the Security Council (UNSC) and its mandate have rendered it inefficient and ineffective in practice. On many occasions, the veto power of the Security Council's five permanent members has led to the Council's failure in its primary

responsibility: maintenance of international peace and security. As a result, the international protection system enshrined in the UN Charter for peace and security in the world is in question and Member States and civil society alike have deemed UNSC reform necessary for decades.

We note with regret that, despite the ubiquity of these calls for change, no serious efforts have been made by the UN Secretariat or the UNSC itself to officially initiate a reform process.

As FBOs, we respect history and have a strong appreciation for tradition, but we also view the UN, like all great human endeavors, as an ongoing creative act whose central mechanism is a cycle of life, death, and regeneration in new forms. We represent institutions and traditions which have not only survived but grown over the course of centuries based on concrete values of the dignity of the human person, the common good, and stewardship of the natural world (among others). Taken together, these values constitute an integral vision of “security” that has its root in the invitation to community rather than the pursuit of protective isolation.

When we have cultivated these values wisely, they have enabled us to construct borderless, global communities of good will that act as a social and material support system for its members. When we have strayed from them, we have found ourselves at odds with those we are meant to honor as neighbors and negligent of our call to protect and honor youth and future generations. In short, our attempts to secure our future through exertion of force, accumulation of resources, or obfuscation of truth rather than through a comprehensive approach to community building have only made us less secure in the grand scheme.

We believe we have survived our missteps by becoming students of our continually evolving environment and adapting ourselves to become “new wineskins” suited to carry the “new wine” of the present moment.

**We therefore call upon the UNSC to undertake a comprehensive review and revision of its mandate and modalities oriented toward a vision of security as “community honoring the dignity of the human person, the common good, and the integrity of the natural world.”** With this vision in mind, we recommend the following amendments to the UNSC’s *modi operandi*:

- **Engage in a consultative process to support the UNSC in reimagining the concept of “security”:** In the spirit of widespread movements to eradicate racism embedded in policing by reimagining public safety as a broad set of conditions for well-being throughout a community, the UNSC requires a 2020 vision of global security that integrates a broad swath of the interrelated social, economic, and environmental factors of which it is comprised.

While the outcome of such a process ought not to enhance the legal reach of the UNSC or expand its mandate so as to infringe on those of the other UN organs, a clear protocol for the UNSC’s consideration of routine, robust input from economically, socially, and environmentally focused organs ought to be established. As long-standing pillars and builders of communities ranging in scope from local to global, FBOs should be called upon to support and guide the process.

People who have experienced conflict situations and other causes of forcible displacement ought to be featured prominently in the re-imagining process in order to realise “Don’t talk about us without us.”

- **Abolish permanent membership:** No nation has proven itself such a perennial model or infallible advocate of peace so as to have merited eternal and irrevocable leadership in this regard. To hold up five States as peace and security authorities based on the geopolitical landscape of 1945 is a disservice to the UNSC’s purpose of avoiding war and making peace. Periodic changes in leadership according to the will of

the community would be instrumental to the UNSC's adaptation to an evolving landscape as they have for many FBOs and faith institutions.

- **Abolish the right of veto:** Alongside permanent membership, this right is a blatant provision for autocracy embedded within an institution that claims to promote democracy.
- **Codify regional equity:** Each of the five UN regions should be equitably represented among UNSC members at any given time because a community-focused concept of security requires equitable participation in decision-making processes.
- **Codify gender balance in the Security Council:** A community-focused concept of security requires proportional gender representation in leadership bodies, and a substantial body of evidence often cited by members of the UN system supports the benefits of gender diversity in conflict resolution and peacebuilding endeavors. The UN body most directly dedicated to these ends can and must employ creative structural requirements or incentives to ensure that gender representation at its table is proportional to gender representation in the combined populations of its members.
- **Establish practical requirements for membership:** No Member State should be a member of the Security Council while working against the community- and peace-building efforts of the UN, for example:
  - When in arrears in funding of the UN;
  - When involved in international making of war;
  - When involved, directly or indirectly, in the fabrication of war materials and armaments of any kind for the promotion of war or for sale to countries in conflict (Sovereign decisions to stockpile armaments strictly for national security purposes, although not desirable, need not disqualify a country for UNSC membership.)
- **Establish seats for youth and CSO representatives:** Designated space for youth and CSO representatives from each of the Member States on the UNSC would allow for intergenerational, non-governmental counsel to be integrated in achieving and maintaining peace and security.

As FBOs, we place a high value on intergenerational listening and learning as a cornerstone of both lifelong faith development and the effective application of timeless values to the social, economic, and environmental challenges of the day.

As with governmental representation, creative structural requirements or incentives should be employed to concretely promote 50% among youth and CSO seat-holders.

- **Develop a protocol for more robust and nuanced response to violence committed against or in the name of faith communities,** including consultation of FBO leaders and people of faith (both elders and youth) from the affected communities

Should the Security Council, as it currently stands, prove unwilling to undertake a serious re-consideration of its current mandate and modalities, we call for invocation of UN Charter Article 109 to undertake comprehensive review of the Charter with an eye to the amendments proposed herein. We support and applaud the on-going reform of other UN bodies like the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and the Human Rights Council. We anticipate that a parallel effort to reform the UNSC will further capacitate the UN System to assume its role on the global stage in a more effective and democratic manner.

### 3. Develop a UN body dedicated to coordination of both the internal (i.e. UN institution-wide) and national-level reviews of implementation of UN treaties, declarations, resolutions, and compacts

As FBOs, we construct and implement our strategic visions with an eye to sustaining inspiration and passion for our mission on an order of millennia. We have established constitutions and protocols that have carried our mission from one generation to another many times over. From both successes and failures to grow and meet the needs of the people in every new age, we have learned that an institution that does not strive consistently and transparently to live up to its own professed ideals is unlikely to inspire or be embraced by succeeding generations.

From our intentional practice of intergenerational dialogue and our grassroots presence in communities that have been disappointed or harmed by the unmet promises of top-down attempts at development, we know well the nature and ubiquity of disillusionment with the UN System that has called the utility of multilateralism into question. To hold a place of honor that might be deemed worthy of esteem and investment by historically neglected communities and by the next generation of world leaders, who are “digital natives” raised in the information age, we believe the UN must become more than aspirational in its principles. It must become a living, breathing model of good-faith cooperation; of human rights not only declared, but fulfilled; of equity among peoples (regardless of gender, color, creed, or place of origin) not only named, but ensured; of democracy not only touted, but practiced; of environmental stewardship not only preached, but embodied. Agreed upon action toward these transformative changes must be accelerated and sustained.

In the spirit of the [2005 World Summit Outcome](#), the UN must communicate *in deed* to all peoples that the words spoken in the halls of New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, etc. are more than rhetoric, that the expert advice exchanged within those halls is worth acting upon. The UN must demonstrate deep dissatisfaction with mere *discussion* of justice, peace, and human rights in a world still struggling so deeply to deliver them that many have begun to relegate them to the realm of fantasy. The UN System *must* realise them so that peoples under every flag may keep faith long enough to realise them for their respective nations. The UN must, concretely and transparently, become a champion of its own values so that it may be a beacon of hope to distressed societies and youth who are, in this moment, inclined to jettison the UN values they once championed. In doing so, the UN would implicitly evince the indispensability of multiculturalism and multilateralism as the bedrock of the just and peaceful future we seek.

Drawing on our lengthy and rich organisational experiences, we know that such institutional integrity is unattainable in the absence of strong internal communication and transparent accountability mechanisms. **We therefore urge the UN to develop a "review body" to monitor--at the national level and within the UN System itself--the implementation of the SDGs and all UN treaties, declarations, resolutions, etc.** Such a review body ought to be independent, not representing any Member State or UN agency or office. It should be tasked with coordinating among existing "review bodies" and mechanisms while also covering UN agreements and processes that have fallen through "accountability cracks" for lack of a sufficient monitoring mechanism.

To that end, we advise exploration of these specific considerations and courses of action:

- **Include a robust, well-defined channel for input from civil society, including members of affected populations,** in the planning and implementation of all the body's monitoring and evaluation processes

- **Establish a process for reviewing the UN System’s human rights record** by either developing an original mechanism or adding the UN System itself to the rotation of Member States in the Universal Periodic Review process
- **Establish a process for reviewing the UN’s delivery on the SDGs** by either developing an original mechanism or adding the UN System itself to the rotation of Member States voluntarily reporting during the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
- **Include evaluations of compliance with documents intended to guide the private sector and various other non-governmental sectors** (e.g. [Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights](#), [UN Global Compact](#)) in the UN System review
- **Codify the principle of gender equality in UN protocols by mainstreaming and incentivizing gender parity in representation and participation** across the UN System in order to ensure that the System’s initial progress made toward gender-diverse leadership in the 40 years since the adoption of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* is fulfilled with all due haste and in perpetuity, potentially by:
  - requiring that each incoming UN Secretary-General and each President of the General Assembly be of a different gender identity than that of their predecessor;
  - requiring that the Deputy Secretary-General be of a different gender identity than that of the Secretary-General under whom they serve;
  - requiring that no more than half of any fact-finding team or task force have a gender identity in common; and
  - allowing all Member States on any given UN Council or Commission to have at least two official representatives at all meetings of that Council/Commission but requiring that each team of representatives has gender representation proportional to that of the national population.
- **Mainstream exemplary environmental sustainability policies and practices** across UN System, potentially by:
  - expanding the annual “Greening the Blue” report to include quantitative reports on progress toward the commitments of the [Strategy for Sustainability Management in the United Nations System 2020-2030](#), “bottles-saved” by filtered taps at each UN facility, and expenses and renewable-source percentages of energy consumed by each UN entity;
  - installing filtered taps in all UN Secretariat entities and agency offices, and abolishing the sale and provision of bottled water *and* of boxed water at these facilities;
  - abolishing distribution of single-use plastics in UN facilities;
  - amending all catering contracts to require that all food vendors operating within UN facilities serve food with only reusable or fully compostable plates, bowls, cups, and utensils;
  - scaling up carbon offsets and installing solar panels at all UN facilities to achieve carbon neutrality by no later than 2023 and 100% renewable energy sources by 2030
  - establishing climate change mitigation, disaster risk reduction, forced displacement, and adaptation as permanent fixtures in the portfolio of the Security Council and integrate them into all events and processes considering the topic of “security”

- **Include evaluation of compliance of UN System’s procurement processes** with accepted human rights and environmental sustainability standards by:
  - reviewing UN entities’ supply chains to ensure all supplies are sourced ethically and do not unwittingly support slave or forced labour or other unacceptable labour conditions
  - publishing an annual audit report of UN entities’ supply chains on the UN website
- **Undertake a review of the UN Charter, Policies, Processes and Procedures to identify embedded racial or gender bias** and ensure changes are made to address any biases found therein
- **Integrate anti-racism and unconscious bias training for all UN staff and volunteers** as part of the mandatory coursework and annual Leadership Dialogues required by the UN Ethics Office

#### 4. Scale up technology capacity, affordability, and access and revise logistical approach to UN processes to allow remote participation to become a primary mode of operation

The COVID-19 pandemic has required many across the globe, including UN staff, diplomats, and civil society representatives in the UN community, to adapt to telework. This unexpected, mandatory pivot to teleconferences and online engagement has forced us to explore uncharted territory in international diplomacy and advocacy. As the pandemic begins to subside in some countries while worsening in others, the UN community is presented with two distinct paths forward: (a) work toward the gradual restoration of in-person diplomacy as the primary, nearly sole, mode of participation in UN proceedings, or (b) scale up communications technology infrastructure at UN offices and restructure UN proceedings to allow for meaningful, remote diplomacy to permanently become a primary mode of participation.

Option “A” will make participation in UN processes less accessible than ever to the world’s most vulnerable nations and communities who, as we have spent months witnessing with painful clarity, will face the most prolonged obstacles to gathering, serving as consultants, or safely traveling internally let alone internationally. Such an outcome would be especially egregious given that the nations most impacted by the economic and health effects of the pandemic were already among those who faced the greatest barriers to equitable representation in international fora.

Option “B” will seek to not only retain pre-pandemic levels of participation but seize this unique, historic moment as an opportunity to open the doors of the UN system wider than they have ever been in its 75-year history. Pursuit of option “B” will signify a bold assertion that the United Nations is meant to be an institution chartered for and by “We, the Peoples.” It would also bypass the prohibitive expense of international flights and the barrier of visa acquisition, which too frequently exclude accredited, non-governmental stakeholders from sharing their insights at the UN’s international offices and conferences. Furthermore, a shift toward remote participation would bring the UN’s operations into better alignment with its professed dedication to environmental sustainability by reducing the need for inter-continental flights undertaken for the sake of brief panel appearances or statement deliveries. The many events that CSOs, academia, the private sector, UN Member States, and UN agencies have held through social media and video conferences throughout the pandemic also provide ample evidence that remote engagement and technology-based collaboration across sectors is possible and effective.

As faith-based actors, we work with the most vulnerable, the most marginalised, and the most remote people at the grassroots. Though UN discussions often have the greatest impact on their lives, they seldom have the



opportunity to voice their own experiences and concerns. As people of faith called to be stewards of our natural world, we lament the environmental damage incurred--and felt most deeply among the poor--as a result of air-travel culture.

**We therefore urge the UN to make significant investment in technological capacities and infrastructure at its national and international offices that will facilitate the remote participation, especially of non-governmental stakeholders, in UN proceedings and to re-examine standard modalities of those proceedings to allow remote participation to become one of the primary modes of input from both Member States and non-governmental stakeholders.**

To these ends, we advise exploration of these specific courses of action:

- **Scale up investment in both communication infrastructure and personnel in the UN's national offices.** In order to begin to overcome the digital divide in the earliest stages of remote participation, build the technology capacity of national UN offices to allow them to become communication hubs to which both government and civil society speakers could travel in order to access video conferencing equipment and broadband services required for their pre-recording of messages or live, virtual connection to conferences being held at the UN's international offices. In places where freedom of religion is under threat, access to a safe, open forum for submission of insights and experiences to the global conversation is especially critical for faith-based actors.
- **Extend standard time frames in which UN meetings are held and negotiations are carried out.** In some cases, proceedings may be scheduled at a local hour that allows for reasonable participation from the widest possible range of time zones. In other cases, it will become essential to lengthen the overall timeline for the completion of a negotiation or approval of a resolution or reception of input from consultants. Allotment of longer windows of time for negotiations and consultations would expand the reach of participants to better allow those in time zones most distant from the UN's international offices to submit input in writing or by pre-recorded video message.

An extension of response time frames would be of particular value to FBOs who have constructed complex internal communication pathways in pursuit of the organizing principle of subsidiarity and to actors who place intentional limitations on personal hardware purchases and screen time as part of a faith-driven lifestyle of detachment and simplicity.

- **Establish an equitable access policy to ensure just utilisation of new technology infrastructure.** Prohibitive fees or preferential policies regarding use of the technology infrastructure at national and international UN offices will systematically favor the voices of governments of high-income nations over those of lower-income nations and the voices of governments over civil society stakeholders. UN representatives of FBOs have found the limited technology offerings currently available for presentations at UN facilities and fora to be cost-prohibitive. Such inequitable access can only serve to exacerbate existing, growing inequalities among these groups. A firm policy must be established to ensure that, in practice, technology serves to diminish gaps in representation rather than widening them.
- **Prioritise closing the digital divide.** The UN will need to work with Member States and the private sector toward long-term expansion of broadband internet coverage to all localities and toward reduction in cost of broadband services in order to ensure that the most marginalised and vulnerable can use these services to participate in the UN process. This move would be of great benefit to FBO constituencies who are called to live and serve in remote communities in accordance with the principle of preferential option for the poor.

## Conclusion

With seventy-five years of trial and tribulation behind us, and in the midst of a uniquely challenging present:

**We pledge** our steadfast commitment to the common good of the international community.

**We stand ready**, as first responders in times of crisis and community builders with lasting roots on the margins, to rise to the unforeseen challenges ahead alongside our partners in UN agencies, governments, and civil society.

**We offer** our grounding insights, our community-animating passion, and our unifying dedication to truth in service of human rights, in affirmation of the dignity and equal worth of every person, and in support of a sustainable relationship between humanity and the natural world.

**We keep faith** that a better UN and a better world are possible, if only we are willing to build them through collaboration across nations, faiths, cultures, and generations.

**ENDORSE THIS STATEMENT**  
**on behalf of your FBO**