



Foundation for Global
Governance and Sustainability

THE UN SYSTEM AND THE WORLD POST COVID-19

Action Plan

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UN 2100 Initiative

In April 2020 FOGGS convened two brainstorming sessions on the UN system’s performance in response to the COVID-19 global emergency and the steps that could be taken to strengthen the system in the future so that it can be more helpful to the global community. The online sessions were held under the Chatham House Rule. Participants spanned 15 time zones and included former international civil servants, academics and practitioners. This Action Plan was produced after the second brainstorming and follows on the steps of the Discussion Paper entitled “The United Nations and the COVID-19 Global Emergency” that resulted from the first brainstorming. Both papers, which should be read in conjunction, are part of a series of consultations held and papers produced under the UN2100 (UN to 100) Initiative of FOGGS, which aims to promote innovative and practical ideas towards a modern, more effective, ethical and people-centered United Nations.

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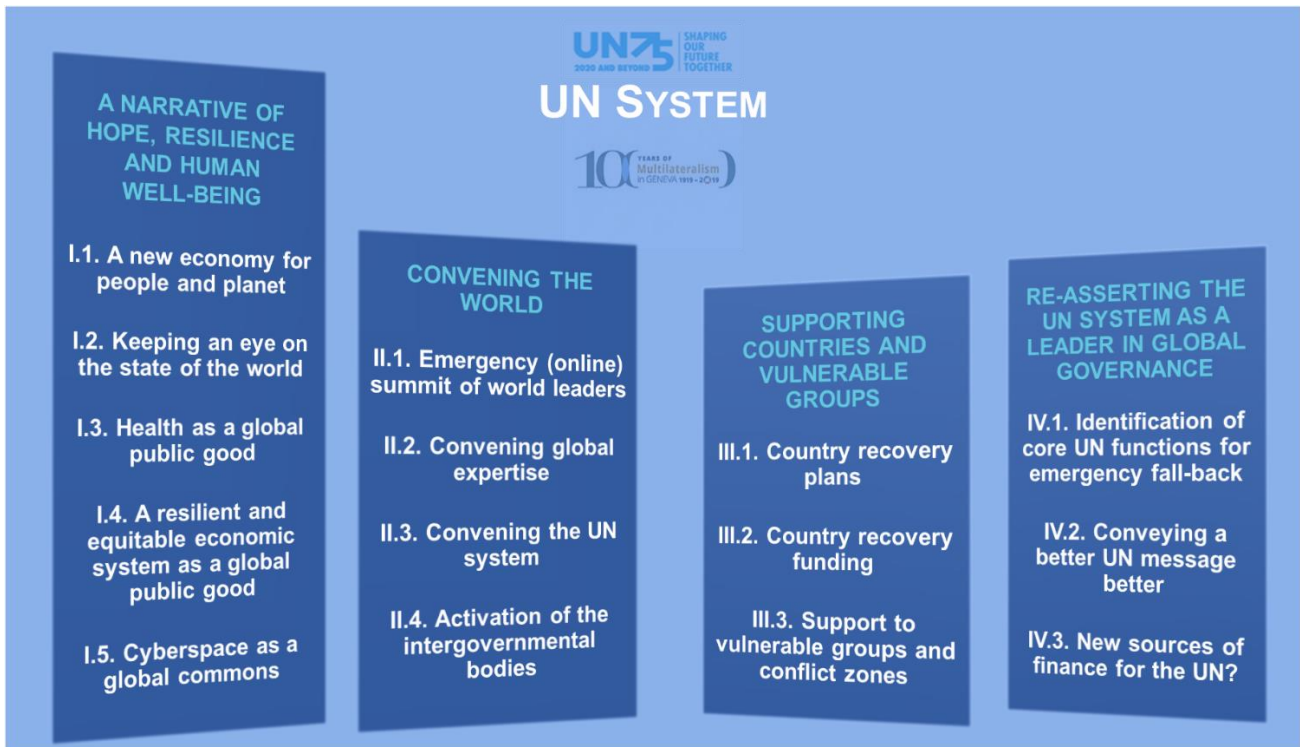
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RECOMMENDED ACTIONS AT A GLANCE



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic recession and social/humanitarian emergency are intrinsically global issues that seriously impact efforts to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The five core elements of the Agenda, “the five Ps” – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships – are now even more out of synch than they were before as a result of the crises. The challenge remains great for all governance structures, communities and individuals to recover from the shock and bounce back.

The United Nations system sprang into action in the early stages of the pandemic, spearheaded by the competent body, the World Health Organisation (WHO). While some criticism has been levelled against it with regard to initial delays in declaring a global emergency, the WHO remains the central body for technical guidance and international coordination in addressing the pandemic. The financial crisis also saw the IMF playing its role of lender of last resort with a total credit line of USD 1 trillion in response to the liquidity needs of dozens of low and middle income countries that turned to it for assistance. Responding to sharply increased humanitarian needs the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among other UN system bodies, intensified their operations and appealed for additional resources to support the large populations dependent on them for food and basic services. Specialised UN system bodies and regional commissions also increasingly addressed the issues pertaining to their sectors or regions.

After a period of silence at the early stages of the pandemic, the central United Nations also became active, with a number of reports on the socio-economic repercussions of the complex crisis, especially for the most vulnerable, and initiatives such as a call for a global ceasefire by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Tele-working in badly-hit New York the UN General Assembly produced two resolutions encouraging coordination and solidarity, while the Security Council is proving unable to agree on anything concrete on related matters. In the field, UN country teams are being tested by the impact of the virus but also by their ability or not to deliver as one in support of the countries concerned.

A lot is [under way](#) but a lot more remains to be done by the central UN and the UN system as a whole in the context of the response to the COVID-19 global emergency. Even what is being done needs to be presented to the world in a coherent and easy-to-understand way, so as to be appreciated and have a greater impact. Deeper cooperation and mutual support among governance institutions at global and regional level is required for the value of multilateralism to be broadly recognised and isolationism to be kept in check. To that end the UN needs to also partner with and/or excite the interest of social movements, online communities and the media in order to amplify its message and mobilise millions of people, especially young people, around the world.

In a world that is so interconnected and interdependent retreating to national frontiers and closing the fortress gates does no more good than the ostrich tactic of hiding the head in the sand when a threat is approaching. There is a need for structures, planning and action at all governance levels and all competent actors for humanity to emerge victorious from COVID-19, economic and financial fragility, climate change and other challenges already here or inevitably to come. To abandon the boat of multilateralism and multilevel governance every time a difficulty arises would only lead to rediscovering its usefulness a bit later and at greater cost. Instead, we should use all tools that such a system puts to our disposal, in the best possible way and with the necessary adjustments and reforms to help ensure the survival, resilience and well-being of all. The proposals that follow are put forward in this light and aspire to contribute to a proper celebration of the UN's 75th anniversary and institutionalised multilateralism's 100th anniversary, which de facto are acquiring a new meaning.

I. A narrative of hope, resilience and human well-being

The world needs a unifying framework of values, principles and rules for action to inspire mutually supportive global responses to this major global crisis of our times. The UN system leadership can and should draw on the 2030 Agenda and on the UN's solid body of norms for human rights, for peace and security, for development and environment to shine a bright light on the world, especially in difficult periods like the one we are going through. A world chopped into national responses takes us back decades and risks blaming falsely ethnic communities, immigrants, indigenous peoples, other vulnerable groups and 'foreign countries' for our current collective failures. The Secretary-General's "recover better" vision is critically important. It needs to be clearly communicated across all UN system organizations and jointly promoted around the world.

I.1. A new economy for people and planet

- Immediate steps should be taken to support developing countries in fighting COVID-19 and stabilising their economies.
- The UN system should come out strongly in favour of a new economy centred on people's wellbeing and resilience, and respecting planetary boundaries

The cost of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic per se and the much greater cost of responding to the ensuing crisis caused by freezing large parts of economic activity around the world call for a break from business as usual and for new approaches to the economy. Extreme emphasis on efficiency and profit maximisation has been exacerbating inequality and leaving vulnerable populations in dire situations. Even big and otherwise profitable companies are without sufficient cash reserves to withstand the shock, resulting in worker layoffs and demands for state subsidies. The pros and cons of globalised and just-in-time supply chains need to be reassessed and rebalanced. The debt burden on developing countries, absorbing big parts of their income for its servicing, allows them no fiscal space to defend the lives and livelihoods of their populations against the virus. In addition to immediate measures such as those recommended by [UNCTAD](#), which go beyond the credit lines and debt relief mobilised by the [Bretton Woods Institutions](#), a new approach to running the economy needs to be urgently introduced, one that moves beyond corporate profit maximisation and GDP growth to ensuring human well-being and resilience while respecting planetary boundaries. The UN system and the UN Secretary-General should not shy away from promoting this, despite the expected powerful pushback.

I.2. Keeping an eye on the state of the world

- Real-time monitoring of and related early warning on vital metrics of global challenges by the UN system in cooperation with experts, civil society and other stakeholders

The UN system is uniquely placed to monitor vital metrics on all global challenges, from disease spread and climate change to food security and inequality. Combining the diverse scientific and technical expertise of the various parts of the UN system would provide a unique possibility to do that, with real-time updates and a system of alarms for impending crises. This would be a way for the UN to advance its fact-based decision-making on all fronts – social, environmental, economic, human rights, humanitarian and governance-related – and attract media and the public's attention on a regular basis. Respected scientific establishments from around the world and grass roots organisations should also be integrated into the data gathering and early warning work. A UN system-wide coordination and data pooling team, founded on existing mechanisms, and a dedicated internet site should be requirements relatively easy to meet for rolling this out in a short period of time.

I.3 Health as a global public good

- Health to be treated as the global public good that it is, with affordable health care for all
- Establish expert panel to assess the state of the global health system and make recommendations for improvement

Governments individually and collectively need to ensure that all citizens enjoy the global public good that is health and have access to affordable health services. Health infrastructures, information sharing, drug and vaccine development and medical supplies need to be secured worldwide through cooperation and mutual support, as the health of all depends on the health of the weakest link in the global system. An expert, cross disciplinary panel should be set up to assess the state of the global health system, including personnel, infrastructures, supply chains, cooperation mechanisms, response protocols, and interaction with relevant research establishments and industries, with a view to making recommendations for their optimum funding, interlinkages and collective performance for the sake of the world's citizens. After its first, comprehensive report and if deemed useful for the long-run the panel could be converted into a standing advisory mechanism.

I.4 A resilient and equitable economic system as a global public good

- Establish expert panel to advise on a resilient and equitable economic system as a core global public good

As clearly demonstrated by the economic crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent social crisis, a resilient and equitable economic system is a global public good of the first order. It has to be guaranteed by every country, region and the world collectively, as it underpins the functioning and enjoyment of most other public goods, health included. A second cross disciplinary panel of experts from around the world should be established to advise on how the global economy could be run to put in practice the new approach already presented in I.1. above. After its first, comprehensive report and if deemed useful for the long-run the panel could be converted into a standing advisory mechanism.

I.5. Cyberspace as a global commons

- Cyberspace is a global commons that needs enforceable rules for universal, affordable and safe access, public regulation of its management and human rights guarantees

The COVID-19 experience showed beyond doubt the importance of the internet and social media for life and livelihood support and resilience. This virtual space is for all intents and purposes a global commons, where people from all over the world meet to socialise and work, even more so when they cannot move around physically. Its use keeps people sane, from meeting friends and family to exchanging jokes worldwide, students connected to their schools, and the economy going, from tele-working to online shopping. Not everybody in the world has access to it as of now, not even in the developed countries, and that digital divide has to be bridged with affordable access to the necessary infrastructures and technologies. Action is needed also at the global level to ensure that this public space is safe for all users, its use and its management are regulated through clear rules, all human rights are respected, and actual cyber-policing and public complaint recourse mechanisms are in place. The UN system should not shy away from addressing all this.

II. Convening the world

The moral authority of the United Nations and the fact that the UN system addresses virtually all areas of human activity and encompasses the whole of humanity allows the UN to convene the leaders of the world to bring them before their responsibilities for addressing shared challenges. This has been done in the past and should be done again in view of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic and social crises. The UN Secretary-General should exert this authority in the public eye, in an inclusive and reassuring way, and should also convene the heads of UN system agencies, funds and programmes, as well as expertise outside the UN system to make sure that the best resources of humanity are drafted into this latest fight for humanity's present and future.

II.1. Emergency (online) summit of world leaders

- UN Secretary-General to convene online world summit to foster unity and collective action for crisis response in line with his “recover better” vision

The Secretary-General should urgently convene a virtual world leaders' summit, to consolidate the rising spirit of global cooperation in dealing with COVID-19 and to frame an orderly and inclusive recovery for all, in line with his “recover better” vision. Tangible results could include mutual guarantees to strengthen collective crisis-response systems and calibrate the economy towards higher social and environmental outcomes. Modelled after the periodic climate action summits convened by the Secretary-General, this would require neither universal participation, if some leaders would not wish to attend, nor extensive negotiations on a formal outcome, as the Secretary-General could use his prerogative to issue a Chair's Summary. This can give a much-needed symbolic boost to recovery efforts and serve as an input to the UN@75 Summit scheduled for 21 September.

II.2. Convening global expertise

- A “Recover Better Emergency Task Force” should be established by the UN Secretary-General to come up with innovative ideas in a short period of time and inform any “recover better” plan

The UN Secretary-General has already been talking about “recovering better”, meaning that the world after COVID-19 should be better than the world before, in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda. Such a transition would entail learning the lessons from the medical, economic and social crises caused by COVID-19 and from the ongoing climate emergency. What options there are beyond business as usual could be the remit of a group of experts in health, economics, finance, information technologies, agriculture, public administration, business administration, global governance, etc. from around the world to be convened by the UN Secretary-General to advise the UN system and member states on an urgent basis. Such a “Recover Better Emergency Task Force” should be encouraged to be bold and should be supported by UN system experts, as well as specialised institutes, think tanks and civil society organisations from around the world. Innovative ideas like the issuance of additional SDRs by the IMF or other body, standing medical and environmental emergency forces, and the use of new technologies could be included in the recommendations of the Task Force, which should be presented to the world at the earliest possible time so as to inform any “recover better” plan.

II.3. Convening the UN system

- UN system coordinated response to COVID-19 and associated economic and social crises via CEB public meeting and UN system-wide task force for recovery planning

The broad expertise and resources of the UN system should be put to the service of recovering from COVID-19 and the associated economic and social crises in a coordinated and visible way. To that end, the UN Secretary-General could convene the UN system Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), which brings together the heads of UN system specialised agencies, funds and programmes, in a public meeting, which could showcase the main contributions of the UN system to the COVID-19 “war” effort. Moreover, a system-wide task force could be established under the Executive Office of the Secretary-General with key staff from all relevant organizations, to advise at headquarters level on recovery planning, with sector-based guidelines, common reporting metrics and tools for inclusive recovery. This would be then customised at country level by the respective UN Resident Coordinator and Country Team (see III. below).

II.4. Activation of the intergovernmental bodies

- All UN system entities to consider recovery strategies and identify good practices in their respective sectors

The inability of UN intergovernmental organs, notably the Security Council, to take decisions in their area of competence in response to the current complex crisis points to a serious structural weakness and lack of a crisis management mechanism at the intergovernmental level. The UN and the world thus end up waiting for bodies like the G-20 or G-7, which lack the legitimacy and apparently also the ability to act decisively. While broader thinking is needed on filling this gap, all UN system entities should be looking into the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for their respective sectors, should consider recovery strategies and identify good practices for present and future use. The heads of the governing bodies of these entities could also meet at the initiative of the General Assembly Presidency to take stock of the results and support the Secretary-General's work with the CEB (see above).

III. Supporting countries and vulnerable groups

“Delivering as One” at the country level is a long standing promise that the UN system has given to the world, especially the low- and middle-income countries that rely more on its support. The reforms introduced to the organisation and management of UN country teams by the current UN Secretary-General were meant to make this promise a reality. The COVID-19 emergency and the related economic and social crises offer a good opportunity to prove that in practice. Moreover, special attention needs to be paid to addressing the emergency needs of vulnerable groups, including those in conflict zones.

III.1. Country recovery plans

- UN country teams should support governments in preparing COVID-19 recovery plans covering health, the economy and social aspects

The UN country teams, under the convening authority of the Resident Coordinator as representative of the UN Secretary-General, should come together and be publicly accountable to deliver as one in support of governments in their preparation of comprehensive plans for recovery from the COVID-19 medical emergency and the associated economic and social crises. The WHO country representative should of course lead on the health aspects, including preparation for future pandemics, while on the economic aspects the Bretton Woods institutions would also ideally participate in the system's coordinated work. Country teams should follow the overall lead of and should be able to count on support from UN headquarters in New York, as well as from the relevant agency, fund and programme headquarters.

III.2. Country recovery funding

- UN country teams should help countries assess their emergency finance needs and support them in securing the necessary funds

The UN system should help countries assess their needs in terms of emergency finance for the fight against COVID-19, as well as in terms of supporting their economies and dealing with social/humanitarian emergencies that may have come as a result. Convening donors at the country level and connecting to larger appeals at the regional and global level are among the things that UN country teams could do in cooperation with the UN system regional and global headquarters. Cooperation with the Bretton Woods institutions is important but differing approaches should be straightened out at headquarters level.

III.3. Support to vulnerable groups and conflict zones

- UN country teams, humanitarian agencies and even UN peacekeeping forces should provide emergency assistance to particularly vulnerable populations

The COVID-19 and associated crises are hitting the hardest people that find themselves in refugee camps, are caught up between belligerents in conflict zones or are suffering from food insecurity in climate risk areas, or don't benefit from mainstream services like indigenous peoples, marginalised ethnic or gender groups. The UN system needs to make a special effort to respond to the heightened needs of such populations by strengthening its delivery on the ground through WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, country teams and other mechanisms. In countries where UN peacekeeping forces are deployed their logistics and medical capabilities should also be put to the service of the fight against COVID-19, encouraging de facto a ceasefire in front of the common enemy, as per the UN Secretary-General's appeal.

IV. Re-asserting the UN system as a leader in global governance

In such difficult times, when countries are preoccupied with their own immediate problems, even if they are shared globally, the chronically underfunded and politically squeezed UN system may find itself insolvent. It should be urgently looked into whether and how the necessary financial resources can be secured and what other adjustments need to be made for the UN system to continue to serve the world at a higher level of impact and efficiency.

IV.1. Identification of core UN system functions for emergency fall-back

- The UN and UN system organisations need to be ready to adjust their operations and ensure performance of their core functions even under a potentially significant reduction of resources made available to them

The UN proper and each UN system entity need to have plans for emergency reduction of activities, in case of a significant reduction in the resources made available to them. Such a development could come with advance warning or abruptly, like the recent halting of US payments to WHO. The relevant plans should consider scaling down of activities, personnel measures from pay cuts to redundancies, and other steps as necessary to secure the continuity of the organisation and the performance of its core functions, which have to be clearly defined. Personnel planning should recognize an obligation to support staff and regular contractors as they are generally excluded from national social, health, and economic safety nets. The UN system heads could take it upon themselves to hold a special brainstorming session in the CEB context to address a potential scenario of losing a significant portion of their foreseen budgets in terms of core funding and voluntary contributions, and see how they would respond.

IV.2. Conveying a better UN message better

- Coming up with a more exciting message and promoting it in an attractive way to the media and the global public needs urgent attention, as it is a matter of actual survival for the UN

The message of the UN seems to carry little weight and "air time" in media of all sorts in recent months and years. This could be attributed to the lack of actual newsworthy items coming out of the UN, which would reflect badly on the performance of the organisation and the UN system as a whole, or could be the result of not packaging the items in an attractive way. One needs to add to all this the rise in UN member states of leaders that favour nationalistic agendas and shun multilateralism. The central UN and the UN system as a whole need to try harder to generate more exciting news, in the spirit of a new narrative of hope, resilience and human well-being, and promote them in an attractive way to the media and through friendly civil society organisations and associations. If not, the disconnect with public opinion will increase and there will be no one to defend the UN when leaders hostile to it decide to attack it.

IV.3. New sources of finance for the UN?

- Explore ways of securing the financial stability and liquidity of the UN

The UN's perennial financial difficulties are expected to be exacerbated as member states redirect funds to domestic economic, social and health crises. Voluntary contributions from states and corporate donors can certainly help fill the gap, at least for a while, as in the case of WHO in the current context of COVID-19. Beyond that, though, it should be examined whether and how a fairly predictable level of available resources can be secured for the UN system to continue to serve the world with. While temporary measures could include allowing the UN to access emergency lending for operating purposes, the long-term solution would be to put in place automatic revenue generation mechanisms.

Epilogue

We put forward the above proposals in the hope that they can be taken up by or at least inspire the United Nations system and its member states to mount a more robust response to the COVID-19 emergency and the associated economic and social crises. In this 75th anniversary year of the UN and 100th year of institutionalised multilateralism the stakes are extremely high regarding the future of the world organisation and international cooperation more broadly. FOGGS intends to do its part towards ensuring global governance arrangements that are indispensable for a well-functioning, stable and sustainable world for humanity and the planet. We will continue to advance conceptual outputs prepared in collaboration with our network of friends, experts and activists from around the world, while also using this network to push the competent authorities for concrete action.

UN2100 Initiative

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