



**UNIVERSITÉ  
DE GENÈVE**

GLOBAL STUDIES INSTITUTE

# Call For An International Youth Assembly

## Policy Brief

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*"It is not enough to proclaim the virtues of multilateralism;  
we must continue to show its added value.  
International cooperation must adapt to changing times.  
We need an [...] inclusive multilateralism [...] where the voice of  
youth is decisive in shaping our future".*

António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General.  
International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace  
United Nations, April 24, 2020

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## 1. Contextualisation

The United Nations (UN) recognised the importance of youth involvement for the first time on December 7, 1965 by means of the Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples.

To celebrate its 75th anniversary, the UN invited young people to take part in a broad-based, worldwide discussion on the role global cooperation will play in building our common future. At a time when over 40% of the world's population is under 25 years of age<sup>1</sup>, the commemorative slogan: "Shaping Our Future Together" reminds us of the need to involve young people.

The operational difficulties facing the UN – which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis – are an obstacle to pursuing the objectives enshrined in its Charter, confirming that there is a need to adapt to the changing circumstances of the international system. Only a collective response that involves a diverse range of actors with different projects and solutions can solve global problems.

Key personnel at the UN are fully-aware of the direction that multilateralism is taking, and have been keen to dedicate the year 2020 to dialogue, conciliation and inclusion<sup>2</sup>. The UN wants to extend access to its institution to new groups, such as young people, the private sector, the media, academia, civil society, and so forth. The UN Secretary-General supports this vision: "Together, we can draw inspiration from people across the world to improve the way we meet the global challenges of our age."

## 2. Recipient

Thanks to its international status, Geneva has enjoyed a long history of hosting international organisations. With its tradition of multilateral diplomacy, the UN's second emblematic city seems to be the ideal location for developing our initiative.

The UN's unique international status means that it can offer a unique forum for expression, dialogue and negotiation to bring together protagonists from around the world, as we see it.

In this policy brief<sup>3</sup>, we highlight the need to involve a wider diversity of stakeholders on the international scene, and we will present ways to include young people in the process of solving international problems.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1. Accessed at <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, "UN75 and Beyond" presentation flyer. Join the UN75 conversation. Accessed on May 18 at <https://toolkit.un75.online/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/French.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> This paper forms part of the joint appeal of April 24, 2020 for a more diverse multilateralism of senior UN officials and youth representatives. It was drafted as part of the Project Management course delivered by Professor Frédéric Esposito at the Global Studies Institute at the University of Geneva. We would like to thank Professor Esposito for his advice, support and assistance, without which this project would not have been possible.

### 3. Problems of the UN system

#### I. Rigidity of the system

The international context – marked by instability, break-ups and "might is right" – impacts on the symbolic power of the UN with a two-fold, contradictory logic: on the one hand, these problems remind us of the need to unite countries in a global system of cooperation that is likely to dissolve conflicts; and, on the other, they constitute evidence of the gradual disintegration of the UN and the breakdown in understanding between parties.

In its 75 years of existence, the UN has at no time fundamentally revised its state-centric functioning, which is evidence of a rigidity that is ill-suited to a constantly-changing world. This state monopoly, which is firmly rooted in UN agencies, ignores the growing importance of NGOs, transnational networks and civil society.

In fact, there is now a three-fold need to develop the UN system, which is still characterised by the Westphalian model of state sovereignty. First, globalisation has generated greater interdependence between states, inevitably leading to the establishment of better supranational governance. Secondly, non-governmental protagonists are becoming partners in interstate and international relations, disrupting the territory of national sovereignty. And thirdly, the conventional "hard power" characteristics of the nation state are being counterbalanced by "soft power" characteristics.

These developments mark a profound shift in multilateralism, which until now could be described as "multilateralism 1.0". The concept is evolving in the 21st century because "policy authority for tackling global problems and mobilising the necessary resources are vested in states, while the source and scale of the problems and potential solutions to them are situated at transnational, regional and global levels."<sup>4</sup>

Our initiative fits neatly into the multilateralism renewal process described by Luk Van Langenhove: "Amid such shifts, signs of a transition in multilateralism are emerging: from the old mode 1.0 to a new 2.0. Generally speaking, multilateralism 2.0 can be seen as more open than closed, more networked than hierarchical, and less state-centric."<sup>5</sup>

#### II. Lack of representativeness and diversity together with a failure to listen

"We, the peoples of the United Nations", the Preamble to the UN Charter, sets out the key role that the people, their aspirations and interests should take within the organisation. The international stage, which has for too long been the preserve of states, is now claimed by numerous other actors.

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<sup>4</sup> RameshThakur and Luk Van Langenhove, "Enhancing Global Governance through Regional Integration," *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 12, No. 3 (2006): 223.

<sup>5</sup> Luk Van Langenhove "Global Science Diplomacy for Multilateralism 2.0," *Science & Diplomacy*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (December 2016). <http://www.sciencediplomacy.org/article/2016/global-science-diplomacy-for-multilateralism-20>

In its current form, the UN is inaccessible to the populations of its member states, which, moreover, have an uneven capacity to represent them and recognise the problems of their peoples. The exclusive nature of the UN magnifies the distance between decision-making centres and realities on the ground.

An organisation that claims to protect human rights and freedom of opinion, expression and participation should organise itself coherently around processes that are more democratic and include a diversity representative of the reality of the world, creating "the UN for everyone."<sup>6</sup>

### **III. Lack of solidarity and common action**

The solidarity and common action that should arise from international cooperation is undermined by the lack of coordination and understanding between states. The heterogeneity of the different national agendas means it is not always possible to align common perspectives and responses to tackle major challenges, and it also acts as a real obstacle to collective action. The conflicting visions of the different states diminish the ability of the UN to mobilise, sometimes preventing it from taking action when necessary. These consequences have a direct impact on the credibility and legitimacy of the UN to defend the interests of the citizens of the world. Only a global response will enable us to respond to a global problem.

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<sup>6</sup> (February 25, 2020). Young people in Geneva plead for a more democratic, open and participatory UN. *UN Info.* Accessed at <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2020/02/1062601>

## 4. Youth vision

As part of this project, we submitted a questionnaire about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and multilateralism to 170 young students, including 56 association members. We wanted to find out their views on international relations and compare and contrast it with our own perception as part of a first step towards a wider consultation of young people.

As an initial observation, we noted that the UN's ability to address global challenges using its current operating model was thrown into doubt by the student group we polled. The 2030 deadline set by the UN to reach the 17 SDGs seems out of reach, although deeply desirable. In the eyes of the survey participants, the UN is still an important institution in spite of the fact that its influence has gradually crumbled. In the same way, cooperation between states and democracy are currently in decline across the globe, according to the respondents. In addition, the young people surveyed have a relatively positive vision of the non-immediate future (the next 10 years). In particular, we noted the enthusiasm that would be generated by young people having greater involvement on the international stage.

The main form of multilateralism that is sought consists of taking better account of the wishes of citizens. Inclusive multilateralism, resulting in consultation and a broader capacity for action, could ultimately make it possible to get closer to accomplishing the 2030 agenda at the same time as restoring the UN's legitimacy. This type of shift is necessary in the eyes of the young people who took part in the survey. Optimism regarding the future of multilateralism and international relations is dependent on redefining the way the UN and its organisations operate.

## 5. Solutions presented

### I. Global youth participation

Young people have demonstrated their ability to come together to tackle global issues, pushing back state boundaries and international interests, as has been the case with the FridaysForFuture movement. The director of the UN Office in Geneva, Tatiana Valovaya, supports this call for a more diversified form of multilateralism: "Young people have the power not only to raise awareness, but also to appeal to leaders to propose practical solutions to the challenges currently facing us."

Young people are sounding the alert, providing a fresh look and new solutions to global issues, reminding international and national institutions of the major challenges of our future.

Youth engagement, however, has to do more than simply demonstrate in the street: the convergence of young ideas from all four corners of the globe must result in effective solutions and bring plans to fruition so we go beyond mere consultation. It is im-

perative that the educational themes discussed by young people are adapted to reality and the changing context in order to renew existing programmes and design their own future.

Multilateralism as we know it today no longer meets the needs of our society, with national and regional interests often acting as obstacles to international cooperation. In this sense, young people can represent their own challenges and free themselves from the interests of their states of origin.

## **II. Citizen education**

Education is often linked to school and academic circles even though it continues far beyond their doors. Citizen education represents all the notions, understanding and knowledge of living together and citizenship. It takes concrete form in the way that individuals understand the policies of a community and cooperate to achieve common goals and conserve resources. Citizen education is essential for achieving good cooperation in the years ahead, and especially in the coming decades.

The population knows little about the SDGs, even though they affect everyone's life regardless of where they come from and irrespective of their standard of living and education. Raising awareness about major current and universal challenges from an early age will help forge a common conscience.

## **6. Unifying young people worldwide**

We hope that young people across the world will be able to testify to problems related to the SDGs that they are witness to and help solve them. To this end, we have devised a timeline: a virtual platform, a Youth Assembly and a Youth Charter.

### **I. Virtual mobilisation**

Social networks offer everyone the opportunity to testify to a problem that they are witness to or a victim of in order to create general awareness. Their reach goes beyond the boundaries of the virtual world, culminating in concrete movements such as #Me-Too and #FridayForFuture. Furthermore, young people – the leading users of social networks – can easily use these tools to express themselves freely and openly. We are keen to use this potential by launching a sharing movement on existing social networks (Instagram, Facebook and Twitter): individuals who witnesses a problem related to the SDGs will be able to upload a post a with a # to refer to it (e.g. #sdgyouth, #UN75youth, etc.).

At the same time, we would like to develop a virtual platform specific to this initiative with the aim of creating a connection between the problems and solutions in a common location and thereby link them to an SDG.

On this platform, people who witness, or are victims of, an SDG-related problem – the "Problem Witnesses" – can report it by posting on the special tab. Another tab will be used to post solutions concretely delivered by "Problem Solvers" so that everyone can take inspiration from them and identify the various initiatives already undertaken. In this way, the Problem Witnesses and Problem Solvers will be able to interact in a mutually beneficial manner. A third tab will be reserved for international, non-governmental and local organisations so that they can also take on the role of Problem Solvers.

This platform will have a rating system (similar to "likes") so that everyone who uses it can endorse the importance of a problem or commend a solution that has been put forward. The highest-rated problems and solutions will be highlighted in this way so they can receive the potential support of the national and international user community.

This system will result in opportunities that have never before exploited in multilateralism: it will give the general public direct visibility, involving them in solving global problems and giving access to international expertise. In particular, it will facilitate interaction, mutual enrichment and problem solving. This inclusive approach, which is truly unprecedented for the UN, will reduce the distance between decision-making mechanisms and realities on the ground. The people on whom the decisions are imposed will then be in a position to co-determine them.

The platform will also play a very important role in the second part of our initiative: the setting up of a Youth Assembly. By targeting young people directly, we will encourage the most successful Problem Solvers – and anyone else who is interested – to submit their motivation for taking part in this global movement and become Youth Representatives, all via a very short document.

## **II. Youth Assembly and International Youth Charter**

Virtual movements with global potential must at all costs be translated into concrete encounters and be anchored in reality: technology has to be seen as a tool for action rather than as an end in itself.

Youth Representatives will be invited to Regional Summits organised on five continents, where we will discuss the trends and issues identified through the social networks and on the virtual platform. The Youth Representatives will meet a panel of experts, associations and international organisations to work together, develop solutions and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the projects proposed at the Summits. If the proposed projects are feasible and provide solutions, we will ask for them to be incorporated into and supported in international and national programmes.

The convening of an International Youth Assembly in 2021 at the UN Office in Geneva will help anchor the framework and objectives of a new citizen contract in a Youth Charter.

During this first year, the regional summits will draw up and supplement the Charter in turn. Once the Charter has been signed in Geneva, it will guarantee the proper functioning and preservation of this new system. In particular, it will guarantee the general principles and guidelines needed to carry out the 2030 Agenda.

The charter will be both the culmination of the first stage and the starting point for this project.

### **III. Periodic consultation**

Once the milestones have been set, annual Regional Youth Summits will be held on each continent, resulting in an International Youth Assembly in Geneva every two years.

## **7. Solutions provided by the Charter and the Assembly**

We want to react against the institutional rigidity of the international system, which is unsuited to the shift in global rationales and the growing number of international actions, incorporating the evolving nature of our society into global governance. The objectives of the Youth Charter will be regularly updated by the International Youth Assembly to factor in the evolution of our societies and their challenges.

Due to the logic of national interests, which are sometimes antagonistic and counter-productive in relation to inter-governmental projects, we hope that the Youth Representatives will be independent of the interests of their home countries so that they champion the concerns of young people first and foremost. By focusing on common objectives, young people will be able to combine their strengths and undertake actions that are in the interest of one and all.

Our virtual platform will make part of the work of the Youth Assemblies and the UN interventions accessible by establishing them as Problem Solvers. The pooling of initiatives by organisations and civil society will form a database representative of the efforts undertaken.

As a follow-up, our project will also include an educational component. In fact, the SDGs are still not recognised by citizens. The educational content of the subjects tackled during the Youth Assemblies will be adapted to several levels of learning. The goal is simple: to raise awareness from a very young age about the different challenges to provide a holistic perspective in the long term to the problems and facilitate their resolution.

The drafting of the Youth Charter illustrates multilateralism 2.0 by opening up contributions to non-state protagonists organised in horizontal networks. The process of drawing up this Charter is intended, therefore, to be as important as the outcome itself, since it will bestow a new legitimacy on the final document. Finally, the Charter

will be the topic of debate between governmental and non-governmental voices when it is presented at an International Youth Assembly in April 2021 at the UN in Geneva.

## **8. Demands and expectations**

Although setting up a representative youth body at the UN would in itself represent a significant step forward in terms of the diversification of international actors, we would also like to extend the scope of involvement beyond dialogue by activating concrete and effective solutions. As discussed above, to achieve this the representatives of the Youth Assembly need to receive the support of the UN's experts and associations and international organisations as well as civil society.

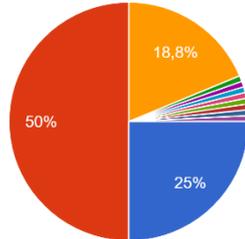
The Assembly and the Charter will only become reality with the active support of the UN. As a result, we are asking the UN to concretise its support for our initiative by implementing the following:

- Recognising and incorporating Youth Assemblies within the UN.
- Providing venues for holding Youth Assemblies.
- Recognising the principles of the Youth Charter.
- Helping to develop the virtual platform mentioned in this document and benefiting from the visibility of the UN in order to improve the dissemination of our message.

## 9. Appendices

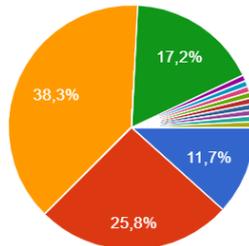
Summary of the results of the survey of students and UNIGE student groups.

How do you view the UN today?  
128 replies



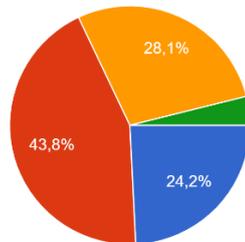
- It is an important institution whose importance is gradually disintegrating.
- It is an institution that is still important symbolically and concretely
- It is an obsolete institution with only symbolic importance.
- Other

How do you see multilateralism evolving given the Covid-19 crisis?  
128 replies



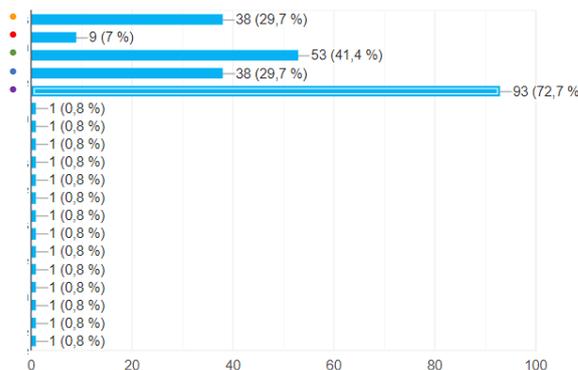
- Cooperation between states is weakening.
- Cooperation between states is stable.
- Cooperation between states is inexistent in a time of crisis.
- Cooperation between states is growing stronger.
- Other

Does the current crisis risk undermining democracy in the world?  
128 replies



- Probably yes
- Probably no
- Yes
- No

Does the current crisis risk undermining democracy in the world?  
128 replies



- A federation of states
- The status quo (the current situation)
- Sovereign states with enhanced UN powers, better consideration of civilian actors
- Cities involved in international decision-making, better consideration of civilian actors
- Better consideration of civilian actors
- Other: unique replies