

## **DISCUSSION SUMMARY**

### **INFORMAL ROUNDTABLE ON *Our Common Agenda* and the Future of Multilateralism**

*Date: Thursday, 27 January 2022*

#### **Background**

On 27 January 2022, FOGGS convened an informal roundtable discussion bringing together a small group of representatives from UN Permanent Missions, the UN system, as well as international think-tanks. The goal was to consider the optimal substantive and procedural follow-up to key global governance proposals included in the UN Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda (OCA)* report in the lead-up to the proposed multi-stakeholder Summit of the Future in 2023, and with a view to identifying the contours of a new, inclusive, and effective multilateralism that can address the multidimensional and interconnected global crises of today.

The event was conducted under the Chatham House Rule. Moderated by Richard Kinley (President of FOGGS), and with lead introductions by Harris Gleckman (FOGGS Executive Board Member), Georgios Kostakos (FOGGS Executive Director), as well as Maria Fernanda Espinosa (Robert Bosch Academy Fellow, Member of the Group of Women Leaders Voices for Change and Inclusion, and former President of the UN General Assembly), the agenda was divided into three segments, exploring the following topics:

1. Conceptual elements and multi-stakeholder issues in the *OCA*.
2. Key institutional proposals and counter-proposals.
3. Strategic priorities and political processes leading to a successful Summit of the Future in 2023.

#### **Key Points Raised**

In the introduction of speakers, the sentiment was repeated that this roundtable discussion was taking place in the spirit of care and concern for the United Nations as an essential global governance body. Overall, the *OCA* report itself is seen as an opportunity of unleashing a necessary and vibrant discussion about the future of the UN and multilateralism more broadly in the lead-up to the 2023 Summit of the Future. It thus opens

a space for in-depth consultations on proposals to improve multilateralism with a view to best tackling today's global challenges.

## **Topic 1: Conceptual elements and multi-stakeholder issues in the OCA**

### Overall Reception of the SG's OCA report

There was **strong support for what the UN stands for**, appreciating its work and commending the Secretary-General for mapping out many key global governance issues in the OCA report. Overall, there was a view that the report contains good ideas and points to issues that need to be addressed urgently.

Concern was expressed about **the UN losing credibility and standing**, such as recently witnessed during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Once again, global leadership was perceived to be missing, efforts were largely managed at the national level with COVAX as a footnote, and the cumbersome nature and slow functioning of the UN in times of crises was evident.

A fundamental dividing line that was exposed concerned the role of multilateral institutions vis-à-vis the **sovereignty** of states represented by their governments and national decision-making processes. In this vein, proposals included in the OCA for a strengthening of the involvement of actors other than states and the introduction of new **multi-stakeholder partnerships** for managing the global commons was seen by some as taking a step too far in challenging the authority of national governments and, thus, dividing the world further.

Some wondered about the process used to reach the proposals included in the OCA, pointing to a top-down approach that did not adequately include governments and civil society from the Global South. Others, though, saw this as unwarranted criticism based on erroneous premises, as in the OCA the UNSG was not proposing the creation of new bodies but was rather suggesting the establishment of partnerships that did not challenge the authority of the intergovernmental system and the Member States.

### Inclusion of non-state actors and multi-stakeholderism

Participants agreed on the importance of civil society engagement as an established practice and honored tradition at the UN. However, there were divergent views on how and to what degree to engage civil society. For some, the '**voices of the North**' were perceived as dominant, while '**voices of the South**' representing civil society from developing countries were not seen as treated equally. Otherwise, the agenda would have been different with regard to such issues as vaccine equity, intellectual property, etc. The key question echoed was how to enhance the engagement of civil society without undermining Member State prerogatives under the UN Charter.

The OCA seemed enthusiastic about the **concept of multi-stakeholderism**, proposing the creation of nine new multi-stakeholder dialogues to deal with key issues like outer space and cyberspace. It was not clear how these dialogues would feed into the intergovernmental

process for legitimate decisions to be made and how the dialogues themselves would abide by adequate transparency and accountability standards, including how they would deal with potential conflicts of interest.

Several participants cautioned that opening up the system to more constituencies may not make the decision-making processes any easier or more effective. Also, they questioned whether the proposals in the *OCA* Report on multistakeholder engagement would, in fact, lead to the desired outcome of greater inclusiveness of non-state actors. An example cited were the efforts by separate segments of the business community to each have a seat at the table, while civil society was increasingly lumped together.

An idea put forward was that of **establishing consultative assemblies representing key stakeholder constituencies**, such as scientists, parliamentarians, local authorities, civil society organizations, businesses. They would convene to discuss issues, ask questions, and make recommendations, thus increasing accountability in the intergovernmental system, while also helping in the implementation of decisions eventually taken through the intergovernmental process.

#### Governing by Network

Extending the debate on multi-stakeholderism and the *OCA* reference to '**networked multilateralism**', perspectives on the general concept of governing by network were presented. One participant explained that the term 'network governance' originated in political science as a way to claim things are being 'governed' without political leadership or accountability, through cumulative impacts of voluntary actions by various actors. In such a network of multiple actors with no clear lines of responsibility, it was impossible to plan a clear course of action that would take a global issue from state A to state B, and no one could be held accountable for a governance failure. For another participant, though, there would always be power imbalances in a network, while there was the expectation that it would be the responsibility of the UN to put in place controls to manage such imbalances. Overall, the benefits and risks of 'networked multilateralism' needed to be better understood so that an informed discussion on related *OCA* proposals could, in fact, take place.

## **Topic 2: Key institutional proposals and counter-proposals**

### Trusteeship Council and perennial UN reform

It was mentioned that Security Council reform and Trusteeship Council repurposing had been on the UN reform agenda for decades to no practical effect. Specifically on the Trusteeship Council, its structure and procedures were tied to the legacy of colonialism and its mandate could not easily be amended without UN Charter reform. There were no new circumstances that would make its repurposing any more viable now.

There were, however, **references to recent examples of a successful establishment of new global governance bodies**, such as the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) jointly created by the General Assembly and the Security Council as an

intergovernmental advisory body in 2005, as well as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) set up a year later in 2006.

#### Emergency Platform

The *OCA* proposal for the creation of an Emergency Platform convened by the UN Secretary-General in response to a global crisis was seen by many to respond to an urgent need in crisis management on issues of 'human security' that are not handled by the Security Council. It was commented, though, that such an ad hoc body could have been convened by the UNSG and would have served well at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, but that did not happen. Alternative arrangements were presented for more permanent crisis management mechanisms, such as a Sustainable Development Council or a Global Resilience Council. The latter was described as a **"Security Council" for non-military threats**, with better representation by countries and regions and without veto power for any of its members. A science-based knowledge body created after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an 'IPCC for the Globe', could be at the core of the Global Resilience Council.

#### Institutions serving the priority needs of humanity

Instead of attempting to reform the UN from the inside out, repurposing or modifying existing institutions, an entirely different suggestion was to start to imagine that the UN did not exist at all, determine the critical and priority needs of humanity at this point in time, and then logically decide from there on institutions needed. From this perspective, the position of sustaining an organization for its own good was contrasted with putting the needs of humanity at the center of institution creation and management.

Eventually, among those who spoke on the *OCA* institutional proposals, there appeared to be a consensus that **'function should come before form'**, meaning that the primary focus should not be on what old or new institutions should be improved or created, but on how the work that needs to be done can be done. Tackling current and foreseeable threats in an effective, transparent, and inclusive manner would be more important than upgrading an old or creating a new forum for dialogue that would not provide solutions.

### **Topic 3: Strategic priorities and political processes leading to a successful Summit of the Future in 2023**

#### Incremental vs. drastic UN reform

At least on the intergovernmental side, there seemed to be an overall preference for **incremental change**, starting with an assessment of the performance of existing bodies and introducing necessary improvements. This would mean restarting the so far failed reform of the Security Council and continuing with efforts to revitalize the General Assembly and ECOSOC. It was stressed by some that setting up new institutions, in particular a 'Security Council' type of creation, would be problematic or even naïve, as 'big bang' reforms just did not happen at the UN. The engagement of civil society in multilateralism had made some progress in connection to ECOSOC but that was not considered sufficient.

The UNSG's efforts to strengthen the engagement of local and regional governments was to be commended.

Think tanks, on the other hand, pointed to **existential threats and the urgency for adequate and effective global governance bodies** to be set up to handle the current challenges and foreseeable threats to human survival. There were even stark warnings by some that the current deficit in trust in global governance institutions, notably the UN, is growing in lockstep with civil unrest demanding clear accountability and leadership on the national political stage.

A comment was made that calls for government reform to restore trust in institutions were taking place as much at national level as at the UN. **All levels of governance were affected by a lack of public trust that needed to be rebuilt**, and there could be a mutual reinforcement if attempted simultaneously at national and global level.

Another position taken was that having to choose between incremental change or bold new ideas presented a false dichotomy. Both approaches were possible at the same time: recalibrating existing institutions while exploring bold new ideas to fill institutional gaps. One should keep in mind the science community's warnings of a time limit for our planet, that planetary boundaries making human life on earth possible are being crossed, and that these **existential threats to humanity are not pausing to wait for adequate institutions to be set up**.

#### Drivers of institutional change

Some participants pointed out that, over the last couple of decades, civil society had become more involved and demanded to be more involved due to the paralysis of government to deliver and respond to citizens' needs. In the same vein, much-needed institutional change was not driven by existing institutions and member states themselves but rather in response to civil society demands, such as the creation of the International Criminal Court and the Mine Ban Convention.

The UNSG's OCA report and its proposals were recognized as an opportunity for driving institutional change, guiding decisions to be taken at the Summit of the Future in 2023, and realigning global governance bodies with the evolving global challenges. It was reiterated that the process of consultations and decision-making on these proposals was equally important as the outcome. In this context, the **High-level Advisory Board on Global Public Goods** that was in the process of being established was expected to play an important role in informing the discussion towards the Summit of the Future.

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