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The teams at NYU’s Center on International Cooperation and Pathfinders share their initial observations and impressions on how *Our Common Agenda* links to ongoing and planned efforts on peace, justice, inclusion, preventing humanitarian crises and supporting peacebuilding and multilateralism.

The quick scan was written by Liv Tørres and Maaïke de Langen, with analysis and writing contributed by Sarah Cliffe, Paige Arthur, Karina Gerlach, Leah Zamore, Daniel Mack, Alisa Jimenez, and Bojan Francuz.

## Our Common Agenda: A Quick Scan

On Friday, September 10, Secretary-General António Guterres presented *Our Common Agenda*, his response to the request made by UN member states for recommendations in the [75th anniversary declaration](#) adopted in 2020.

The secretary-general does not mince his words about the problems the world is facing, from the pandemic that is upending our world, conflicts that continue to rage and worsen, and the disastrous effects of a changing climate—famine, floods, fires, and extreme heat—that threaten our very existence.

If ever there was a need for global collective action, it is now. Rather than dwell on geopolitical tensions, decades of international failure in Afghanistan, or the weakening of multilateral institutions, *Our Common Agenda* focuses instead on what we need to accomplish together and the urgency of getting to work.

The most important UN policy document this year, the report is set to shape the secretary-general’s second term and—hopefully—make the UN more effective and relevant to people’s lives.

### Our Common Agenda

As the secretary-general writes, *Our Common Agenda* *proposes a path forward, centered around a renewal of our social contract, adapted to the challenges of this century, taking into account young people and future generations and complemented by a new global deal.*

It is a wide-ranging document, which covers all aspects of life on earth, and even has a few things to say about outer space. Four things stand out:

**The social contract at the center.** The secretary-general stresses that *now is the time to renew the social contract* and underlines that there is a *growing disconnect between people and the institutions that serve them*. Indeed around the world we see the [social contract in peril](#), and it is of the utmost urgency to transform institutions so that they deliver for people and the planet. *Our Common Agenda* reiterates the idea that social contracts need to be anchored in human rights and focus on both trust and deliverables.

Building trust is identified as *our defining challenge* and includes the need to create institutions that listen. We were thrilled to see that the secretary-general heard the [call to put people at the center of justice](#) and that he *will promote a new vision for the rule of law, building on Sustainable Development Goal 16*.

Inclusion, protection, and participation are listed as critical components, and racism, intolerance, and discrimination are specifically recognized. The report urges governments to increase inclusion, for example, by lowering the age to vote and stand for elected office, strengthening youth participatory bodies, and considering youth labor guarantees.

The new social contract called for in *Our Common Agenda* focuses on delivering what people need most, including being able to access health care and education, finding decent jobs and affordable housing, and benefitting from social protection when they need it.

In support of this call, we will co-host a high-level, multi-stakeholder event on [Action to Achieve Equality and Inclusion](#) on September 23, 2021, presenting the evidence for action to deliver visible results, build solidarity, and improve trust.

**Shaping the future together with the next generation.** Solidarity with younger and future generations is a prominent part of *Our Common Agenda*. It contains proposals to give young people a voice at all levels of decision-making, to transform education, ensure the availability of decent jobs for youth, and accelerate progress towards Net Zero. It also lays out how the UN will increase its capacity to *think for the longer term* and institutionalize the interests of future generations, including through the appointment of a *Special Envoy for Future Generations* and carving out a role for the Trusteeship Council.

Informing *Our Common Agenda* was a process of consultations which engaged young people to articulate their own priorities and ideas for the future of international cooperation. Many of their proposals were echoed in the recommendations of the secretary-general, including on education, jobs, and representation, and in his recognition that *young people should be the designers of their own futures*. Others were compiled in the companion report [Our Future Agenda](#), which sets out the ideas in more detail and asks world leaders to *embrace our challenge to the status quo*, while stating plainly *it is not our job to agree with you*.

**Prevention and improved response to crises.** While *Our Common Agenda* speaks less to conflict and security, it renews the commitment to prevention, a signature issue of the secretary-general's first term. He deftly weaves it across the report, through social contracts, nationally led, inclusive approaches, and as a positive good that is relevant for all countries. The secretary-general rightly proposes to level up the UN's forecasting and insight capabilities, even though we are skeptical that producing a Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report once

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While *Our Common Agenda* recognizes that most of the action on the social contract is national, it also speaks about the global level to social contracts and about global public goods. This means that the level of ambition will have to be raised within and between member states, and within the UN itself.

Sarah Cliffe, director,  
Center on International  
Cooperation

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every five years is frequent enough to be of practical use. However, building dedicated capacity for such analysis will be progress.

When it comes to humanitarian crises, *Our Common Agenda* is in many ways a blueprint for addressing the structural and political inequities that produce and perpetuate them. This is perhaps most notable in the report's emphasis on the connection between forced displacement and the climate crisis. Whereas recent humanitarian frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees have largely ignored climate-induced displacement, *Our Common Agenda* urges member states to find ways to *prevent, protect, and resolve situations of environmental displacement*.

To facilitate interventions in complex global crises, the secretary-general calls for the creation of an Emergency Platform, which would bring together humanitarian agencies, member states, the UN development system, international financial institutions (IFIs), and civil society. This is an important proposal given the failures of international coordination during the pandemic across the health, economic, social and peace and security domains.

**The UN as a platform.** The report is not overly focused on the UN itself as an organization and member states are not the unit of analysis in *Our Common Agenda*, nor are governments the only actors that it calls on. This is an agenda for the world that focuses on results for people and embraces partnerships with a range of actors and organizations.

It is indeed essential that the international community creates space for people from different sectors and with varying roles and affiliations to contribute to solving today's most important problems. We've argued in the past for the role of [cities as a unit of analysis, ambition, and action](#) to drive innovation, including through networks such as [Peace in Our Cities](#).

The secretary-general also notes that reshaping our responses to all forms of violence would more effectively address violence holistically. Pathfinders' multi-stakeholder movement to halve global violence by 2030 seeks to do just that.

The secretary-general indicates that the UN *must provide a platform to shape the future* and he envisions the UN not as a bureaucratic, intergovernmental organization with highly protocolized decision-making, but as a platform with formidable convening power that can serve to set universal goals, develop global norms, support collective action, and achieve results in people's lives the world over.

All in all, *Our Common Agenda* is ambitious and visionary. It contains innovative ideas and actions that aim at bringing us a better, safer, and greener

future. More than ever, it considers long-term risks and prioritizes concerns of young people.

We are pleased to see that the key topics we have been highlighting over the years are incorporated in the recommendations. With the UN taking the lead, we have a much better chance of achieving justice for all, halving global violence, and combating exclusion and inequality.

## From ambitions to action

*Our Common Agenda* sets out high ambitions. Delivering on these ambitions may be the most challenging part of the plan.

**Summits as the solution?** The secretary-general proposes four new summits –the Biennial Summit, which is recurring, the Transforming Education Summit in 2022, the Summit of the Future in 2023 and the World Social Summit in 2025. These come in addition to regular meetings, such as the Second SDG Summit in 2023, the high-level segment of UNGA, the High-Level Political Forum, and many more.

The Biennial Summit is proposed as a meeting between the G20, ECOSOC, the secretary-general, and the IFIs. It is difficult to imagine this being met by anything other than grudging consent amongst the other multilaterals and it is not immediately clear what it would want to achieve.

A summit at the UN consumes immense amounts of energy, time, and money, not to mention all the travel which directly contributes to climate change. All the more worrisome is that *Our Common Agenda* is silent on how these summits will be connected to progress towards goals and in what way they will link to national action and results in people's lives.

A central challenge to the success of *Our Common Agenda* is therefore whether the UN will be capable to connect these global summits to national implementation in a virtuous cycle: from collecting data and evidence, to innovation, partnerships, and collective learning, leveraging international commitments to make significant progress domestically. The UN has much to learn in this respect and it would do well to study experiences of organizations like the [Open Government Partnership](#) and vertical global funds like [GAVI](#) and [The Global Fund](#).

**Measuring what matters.** A prominent but somewhat underdeveloped part of *Our Common Agenda* deals with *measuring and valuing what matters to people and the planet*, which points to the well-known shortcomings in what is reflected in countries' GDP. The secretary-general calls for a collective commitment to *complementary measures of progress*, most specifically in the areas of environmental-economic accounting and the care and informal economy. This is

an excellent area for the UN to focus on, where its global role in terms of standard-setting is clear and it can work with others to deliver results.

In fact, a much broader critique on what we measure and how we ascertain effectiveness is warranted together with a commitment to more data-driven and evidence-based policy making and implementation in the UN's own work, as well as that of member states individually and collectively.

In the areas of peacebuilding and prevention, CIC's [data for peace](#) initiative is a valuable source for policy makers and could help promoting more data-driven and evidence-based working. CIC's [UN Appointments Dashboard](#) tracks the appointment of women to the most senior UN roles. In the context of Pathfinders Justice Program, the world's first estimate of the [global justice gap](#) was developed to inspire change and work is ongoing to increase the quality and quantity of [people-centered justice data](#). These are important contributions to measuring what matters.

## Conclusion

*Our Common Agenda* is an urgent call for action. The secretary-general sketches a breakdown and a breakthrough scenario, and stresses that the choice is ours. We agree with the urgency of this call. We support the core directions of the report, the need for a new social contract adapted for the twenty-first century, an emphasis on making meaningful change in people's daily lives, delivering global public goods and protecting the welfare of future generations.

We encourage the secretary-general to focus on the innovative ideas and practical steps working with high ambition coalitions, such as the [Justice Action Coalition](#), [Peace in our Cities](#), and the new platform to combat [Inequality and Exclusion](#), that the Pathfinders will support.

*Our Common Agenda* calls for a different type of multilateralism, more suited to today's world. A multilateralism that incorporates the views of regional bodies, local authorities, academia, civil society, and private sector. This type of dynamic and open collaboration, bringing together a wide range of different actors in a common pursuit of shared goals, is at the very core of the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, and CIC's work more broadly.

We look forward to supporting *Our Common Agenda's* emphasis on prevention and renewed multilateralism, as well as working together to achieve measurable reductions across all forms of violence, injustice, and inequality.

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The secretary-general encourages us to work together for social contracts that are built on trust, inclusion, and actual and improved deliverables for people's lives.

*Liv Tørres, director,  
Pathfinders*

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## Review of *Our Common Agenda* from the perspective of CIC programs and Pathfinders Grand Challenges

### *Multilateral Reform*

The 75th anniversary of the UN in 2020 came at a time of immense pressure upon multilateral institutions. A shifting geopolitical landscape over the last 20 years has weakened the multilateral system, making it less effective when facing a major crisis like the global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and its effects have included not just the secondary effects of the health crisis on economies, social fabrics, and rising political risks, but also geopolitical tensions related to the competition over vaccines and other public goods, resulting in a sense of division and “two pandemics.” The situation has raised the urgency of the need for more effective and equitable multilateral responses. The weakness of the multilateral system is also painfully evident through other examples, such as the crisis in Afghanistan after decades of international engagement.

CIC has been highlighting in our work the “two credibility tests” for international cooperation, on global vaccine equity and on international support for an equitable economic recovery.

The secretary-general focuses on inclusive and networked multilateralism, which is exactly right. But the emphasis in the report on summits begs some questions. When we think about the impact of summits, there are two levels—a popular, normative shift in how the world sees a problem and its solution (which can apply to both more national and more global action), and practical action to follow up.

The Summit of the Future has some clear tracks laid out, and the potential to create a new normative direction linking the many gaps on climate action with connecting young people, and indeed those not yet born to international institutions.

The Transforming Education Summit will probably have a clear agenda and can achieve results, although it is unclear how it will avoid duplicating existing mechanisms to mobilize attention and results, and why education rather than health is a priority at this time.

On economic governance, the secretary-general proposes a Biennial Summit between the members of the G20 and the members of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the secretary-general and heads of IFIs. It is difficult to imagine this being met by anything other than grudging consent amongst the other multilaterals: in composition it would not solve the exclusiveness of the G20, but by contrast would add a disproportionate and equally exclusive weight to some countries in ECOSOC. It does not have a clear agenda described of what

it would want to achieve. It would need an energetic, non-bureaucratic approach and considerable investment in political orchestration to deliver results. This would have to use the complementary advantage in advocacy of the UN and the IFIs regarding their connections with, respectively, Foreign Ministries and centers of Government, versus finance ministries and Central Bank governors.

In the area of internal UN reform and partnerships, the report sways between promising and disappointing. On the promising side, the process was impeccable—the secretary-general’s office went out of their way to consult with many experts and think-tanks, South and North, as well civil society and young people. The secretary-general advocates in the report for networked and inclusive multilateralism. So far, so good. But the details are vague.

The substantive proposals appear to add up to a Special Envoy for Future Generations and the designation of dedicated focal points for civil society in all UN entities. The report also lays out “quintet” capabilities to do with drawing more on data, analytics, and communications, digital transformation, strategic foresight, behavioral science and performance and results orientation. These are all sound, but no pathway is laid out to how to implement them in the UN’s very diverse management. It is doubtful that these measures will be sufficient to create a UN fit for purpose in the next five to fifteen years.

A more positive point in this area is in relation to the idea of a global level to the social contract, and the implications for clarity over the UN’s role. While the report recognizes that most of the action here is national, there is clear reference to a global level and to global public goods as part of the fundamental reason for the multilateral system existing. This is a positive shift—and needed to raise the level of ambition not only between member states and multilateral leadership (which the secretary-general targets), but also within the UN itself.

### ***Justice for All***

*Our Common Agenda* recognizes that justice is an essential dimension of the social contract. The secretary-general highlights that [1.5 billion people](#) have unmet criminal, civil, and administrative justice needs, and links corruption and abuses by justice actors to weakening the social contract and fueling distrust.

Our briefing on [Justice for All and the Social Contract in Peril](#), outlines how justice actors can help prevent tensions in society if they work to understand people’s grievances, prevent abuses, become more effective at resolving disputes, work to dismantle structural injustices, and contribute to recovery by providing a platform for economic and social renewal.

We were thrilled to see in *Our Common Agenda* that the secretary-general heard the [call to put people at the center of justice](#). This call was the outcome of a ministerial meeting on Building Peaceful and Inclusive Societies through Justice

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The secretary-general calls for a new vision for the rule of law, building on SDG16. This should enable the UN to increase the effectiveness of its assistance and actually contribute to closing the global justice gap.

*Maike de Langen,  
program lead, Justice for  
All, Pathfinders*

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for All, that took place on April 14, 2021, organized by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the [g7+](#) secretariat, [The Elders](#), and the Pathfinders. The [joint letter](#) to the secretary-general was endorsed by Afghanistan, Canada, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Liberia, Libya, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Sweden, and Switzerland.

The participating countries also agreed to form a [Justice Action Coalition](#), a multi-stakeholder, high-ambition coalition of countries and organizations, championing equal access to justice for all. The guiding ambition of the Justice Action Coalition is to close the global justice gap and achieve measurable progress by the second SDG Summit in 2023.

In *Our Common Agenda*, the secretary-general states that he will *promote a new vision for the rule of law, building on Sustainable Development Goal 16*. This is an important step and an opportunity for the UN, its member states and the many partners working in the justice sector to collaborate for more effective and people-centered UN rule of law assistance.

### ***Prevention and Peacebuilding***

Prevention was a signature issue of the secretary-general's first term, but political sensitivities have made it difficult to move forward, as many countries do not wish to be seen as a place where prevention of conflict or violence may be necessary. This report renews the commitment to a preventive approach. It deftly weaves prevention across the agenda, through social contracts, nationally led, inclusive approaches, and specific actions to address risk—in a way that acknowledges those sensitivities and depicts prevention as a positive good that is relevant for **all** countries, rich and poor, North and South.

Key advances for the “prevention agenda” are:

*A focus on identifying and managing risk:* Despite political sensitivities, the secretary-general rightly proposes to level up the institution's forecasting and insight capabilities. While we are skeptical that a once-every-five-years Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report is frequent enough to be of practical use, if the implementation of such a report means that a dedicated capacity is being built, then this will be progress.

*Operationalizing prevention:* The degree of strategic, crosscutting interaction required for effective prevention is a difficult ask for the fractured UN system, even after the secretary-general's recent reforms, like the repositioning of the RC system. The report promises to redouble efforts at country level to overcome siloed approaches, including developing the requisite capacity: *We will look to make every United Nations presence a center of context-specific prevention*



*expertise*. While it remains to be seen how this will be put into practice, it is an important practical step.

### **Halving Global Violence**

The proposed New Agenda for Peace rightfully includes a refreshed vision on disarmament and arms control, a multi-stakeholder effort to reduce all forms of violence (reflecting the reality that most lethal violence takes place in non-conflict settings), an increase in investments for prevention, and would *place women and gender equality at the heart of peace and security*.

Noting that reshaping our responses to all forms of violence would more effectively address violence holistically, the secretary-general suggests this could be done *through a multistakeholder effort to reduce violence significantly worldwide and in all its forms, including against women and girls, in line with target 16.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals, and building on the **movement to halve global violence by 2030***.

As the New Agenda for Peace underscores the importance of placing women and girls at the center of security policy, we look forward to aiding in this effort through the work of the Gender Equality Network on Small Arms Control ([GENSAC](#)), hosted by Pathfinders and gathering women from CSOs, security and defense forces, and academia working on advancing gender responsive small arms control.

While *Our Common Agenda* gives a nod to cities as increasingly important multilateral actors, in particular as leaders on climate change, it misses an opportunity to showcase the fact that cities can, and are, leading on issues of urban violence. With most violent deaths taking place in non-conflict zones, and disproportionately on the streets of urban areas in Latin America and across sub-Saharan Africa, a “renewed multilateralism” must connect cities to broader violence reduction efforts, as showcased by initiatives such as [Peace in Our Cities](#).

We look forward to supporting *Our Common Agenda*’s emphasis on prevention and renewed multilateralism, as well as working together to achieve measurable reductions across all forms of violence, joining forces to [Halve Global Violence by 2030](#).

### **Humanitarian Crises**

Although the word “humanitarian” appears just eight times in the 85-page report, *Our Common Agenda* is in many ways a blueprint for addressing the structural and political inequities that produce and perpetuate humanitarian crises. This is perhaps most notable in the report’s emphasis on the connection between forced displacement and the climate crisis.

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The Halving Global Violence Movement gets added energy and authority through the endorsement of *Our Common Agenda* under the proposed New Agenda for Peace.

*Daniel Mack, program lead, Halving Global Violence, Pathfinders*

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At a time of skyrocketing hunger, unabated conflicts, and a global climate crisis, *Our Common Agenda* provides a foundation for responding to humanitarian crises in ways that go well beyond the delivery of short-term aid. Its emphasis on addressing the structural inequities that produce and perpetuate crises is especially welcome.

*Leah Zamore, program lead, Humanitarian Crises*

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Whereas recent humanitarian frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees have largely ignored climate-induced displacement, *Our Common Agenda* recognizes the climate crisis as a primary engine of human upheaval and urges member states to find ways to *prevent, protect and resolve situations of environmental displacement*.

In line with this emphasis on resolving the multidimensional root causes of humanitarian crises, *Our Common Agenda* proposes a new institutional architecture for facilitating interventions in crisis situations that transcend traditional divisions between humanitarian action and longer-term economic and social support. In particular, the secretary-general calls for the creation of an Emergency Platform to address complex global crises, which would bring together not only humanitarian agencies but member states, UN development system entities, international financial institutions, civil society organizations, and other key partners to formulate and finance comprehensive responses to humanitarian situations.

This is an intriguing proposal, as the existing humanitarian architecture lacks robust, pre-negotiated mechanisms for convening all relevant actors in the event of a major crisis. It remains to be seen whether such a platform will garner the political and financial clout necessary to make it effective, or how it might overcome the entrenched problems of existing ad hoc coordination platforms, which struggle to harmonize humanitarian action with broader development interventions.

At the same time, *Our Common Agenda* leaves unmentioned some of the most pressing challenges facing humanitarians today, including those related to restrictions on humanitarian access, perennial underfunding of emergency responses, and the complicated relationship between humanitarians and actors in the peace and security realms. But there should be little doubt: if undertaken by the global community, the calls to action at the heart of the agenda would dramatically improve living conditions in the world's most dire settings, while putting the human family on a path to avoiding, in future, the kinds of crises that have upended the lives of far too many for far too long.

### ***Inequality and Exclusion***

*Our Common Agenda* is centered around a renewed social contract: this chimes well with the work on what practical policies will underpin new forms of the social contract in our new report, [\*From Rhetoric to Action: Delivering Equality and Inclusion\*](#).

It also includes some innovative, tangible ideas—punchier than is usually the case in a UN document—to back up the social contract. A few observations:

There is a welcome focus on social protection, jobs and reskilling, and education.

The section on the social contract includes a call to see human rights as problem-solving measures and ways to address grievances. This is a strong framing to get away from resistance to human rights as finger-wagging compliance with norms.

The report has as much emphasis on respect for people’s views as on delivering practical results, with national listening dialogues seen as an important part of renewing the social contract.

The report also includes the innovative ideas of a global code of conduct on integrity in public information. This is particularly important given the unexpected challenges in the last five to fifteen years over “fake news,” in almost all countries.

The report urges governments to increase the political inclusion of young people, for example, by lowering the voting age and the eligibility age for standing as a candidate for elected office, as well as strengthening youth participatory bodies. It also encourages countries to consider youth labor guarantees.

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The Center on International Cooperation is a non-profit research center housed at New York University. Our vision is to advance effective multilateral action to prevent crises and build peace, justice, and inclusion.

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**Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies**

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The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies is a group of countries, international organizations, global partnerships, civil society, and the private sector that work to accelerate the delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice and inclusion (SDG16+). Pathfinders is hosted by the NYU Center on International Cooperation.

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