WHERE WE STAND WITH THE REFORM OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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Ladies and Gentlemen, if we ask today where we stand with the reform of the international system, we must begin with a sober answer: we are in a moment of transition, but not yet of transformation. The world has changed faster than the institutions meant to organize cooperation. Power has become more diffuse, crises more interconnected, and legitimacy more fragile. War, debt distress, climate disruption, technological upheaval, forced displacement, and widening inequality do not arrive separately; they reinforce one another. And yet the international system still too often responds in compartments, with procedures that belong to another era.

This is why the question before us is larger than the reform of one institution, even if the United Nations remains at the center of the system. What is at stake is the capacity of the whole multilateral order to remain credible, representative, and effective. We need institutions that can still convene states, but also listen better to societies; institutions that can preserve rules, but also adapt to realities; institutions that can protect peace and dignity not only in principle, but in practice. In that wider effort, reforming the United Nations remains indispensable — but it must be understood as part of a broader renewal of international cooperation itself.

And if we are looking for the right compass for reform, we do not need to search very far. The Charter itself begins with the words: "We the peoples of the United Nations." These are not merely ceremonial words. They are the moral foundation of the institution. And as António Guterres has rightly said, the Secretary-General is "a spokesperson for the interests of the world's peoples, in particular the poor and vulnerable among them."

Dag Hammarskjöld in his speech at the University of California in Berkeley on 13 May 1954 expressed the same demanding realism in memorable terms when he said that the United Nations "was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell." That sentence still reminds us that multilateralism is not an abstraction of comfort, but an instrument of responsibility in a dangerous world.

That is why my argument today is simple, and I will develop it in four points. First, the role of the Secretary-General and the Secretariat must become more dynamic, more visible, and more present on the ground. Second, the United Nations system must become less fragmented and more coherent in the way it serves people. Third, because the reform of the Security Council remains, for now, an almost unreachable ideal, we should concentrate on practical reforms that are politically possible: revitalizing ECOSOC and transforming the operational culture of the Secretariat. And fourth, if we want the international system as a whole to regain legitimacy, we must give greater place to parliamentary diplomacy, to responsible business actors, and to non-governmental organizations, because multilateralism cannot remain only an affair of executives and foreign ministries.

First, we need a more dynamic Secretariat. Too often, the Secretary-General himself is treated as though he were merely the head of a Secretariat, when he should also be understood as a source of political initiative, moral authority, and diplomatic impetus in the noblest sense. The Charter does not confine the Secretary-General to the role of a simple clerk of governments. It entrusts the office with moral standing, diplomatic initiative, and a responsibility to act when peace and human dignity are at stake. This is what gives the office its singular character: the Secretary-General is not only an international civil servant, but also an advocate — a representative of United Nations ideals and a voice for the poor and the vulnerable. António Guterres has emphasized that the Secretariat must uphold the values and moral authority of the United Nations, even when this requires Member States to look beyond their immediate interests.

A reformed Secretariat should therefore not remain confined to conference halls in New York. The Secretariat should be more visibly present in the field: in countries affected by hunger, in regions destabilized by debt and climate shocks, in communities weakened by failing public services, and in places where poverty silently prepares the ground for future conflict. Presence matters. It gives credibility to words, urgency to action, and human meaning to diplomacy. If the Secretary-General is truly to represent "we the peoples," then the Secretariat must be seen not only where power gathers, but also where human need is greatest. The poor cannot remain a peripheral concern of multilateralism; they must remain one of its central tests.

This does not mean transforming the Secretariat into a substitute for states, nor turning the Secretary-General into a solitary actor detached from intergovernmental legitimacy. It means giving fuller meaning to the Secretariat's existing vocation: to warn earlier, to mobilize faster, to convene more courageously, and to remind governments that human suffering cannot always wait for perfect consensus. In moments of famine, displacement, or state collapse, the international community often suffers not from a lack of information, but from a lack of political impetus. A stronger Secretary-General and Secretariat can help provide that impetus — not by replacing Member States, but by encouraging them to rise to their own principles.

Second, the United Nations must become more coherent and less fragmented. This leads us to a difficult but necessary question: do we still need such a multiplication of agencies, programmes, funds, and structures around the UN system? Specialization has value, of course. But when specialization becomes dispersion, when coordination gives way to competition, and when mandates overlap without sufficiently visible results, the system risks losing both efficiency and legitimacy. The purpose of reform is not to weaken the United Nations; it is to make it more intelligible, more integrated, and more capable of acting as one.

This is precisely the logic behind the UN80 Initiative, which aims to build "a simpler, more effective and more coherent UN system" by reducing bureaucracy, fragmentation, and duplication. Guy Ryder, presenting the action plan, explained that the effort is meant to ensure that every mandate, every dollar, and every decision delivers greater results for people and planet. That is the right spirit. Reform should not be an exercise in institutional vanity. It should be an exercise in clarity: fewer duplications, stronger coordination, better alignment between headquarters and the field, and a constant focus on measurable human impact.

Third, because the reform of the Security Council remains, for the moment, an almost unreachable ideal, we should focus on reforms that are achievable now. We should refer to Security Council reform with honesty: yes, it would be desirable; yes, it would better reflect today's world; but no, it is not the reform most likely to succeed in the immediate future. If we

devote all our political energy to what remains unattainable, we risk neglecting what can, in fact, be changed. That is why ECOSOC deserves renewed attention. In his recent remarks to the Economic and Social Council, António Guterres recalled that the development system had once been "too fragmented where cohesion was needed" and "too competitive internally where cooperation was needed." He also pointed to the strengthened Resident Coordinator system as a core achievement of reform, with host-country confidence in Resident Coordinators rising sharply in recent years. Those are not abstract bureaucratic gains. They show that when the UN coordinates better, it serves countries better. A revitalized ECOSOC could become the strategic forum where economic, social, and development priorities are aligned, where accountability is strengthened, and where operational coherence is driven forward.

And beyond ECOSOC, the Secretariat itself must evolve in its operational culture. It must become lighter, faster, more field-oriented, and less absorbed by its own procedures. The question is not whether the UN should think; of course it should. The question is whether it can also act with sufficient speed, unity, and presence. Reform must therefore mean a Secretariat that is less bureaucratic and more responsive, less compartmentalized and more mobile, less inward-looking and more focused on results. In short: a system designed not for itself, but for those it is meant to serve.

But if we are honest about where we stand, we must add one more point. The reform of the international system will not succeed if it remains confined to governments alone. It also requires stronger parliamentary diplomacy. Parliamentarians bring something essential to international life: democratic legitimacy, scrutiny, legislative follow-through, and the ability to translate international commitments into national law, budgetary choices, and public accountability. In other words, they help close one of the central gaps of multilateralism — the gap between global promises and domestic implementation.

We can see this clearly in the work of the **Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean**, which has become an important platform for dialogue across the Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf regions. At its 20th Plenary Session in Budva, Montenegro, held from 6 to 8 May 2026, together with the first Summit of Speakers and Presidents of Parliament of its member and partner states, the Assembly demonstrated how parliamentary diplomacy can elevate regional dialogue, connect legislative cooperation with political reform, and sustain channels of contact even when intergovernmental progress is slow. That is precisely the value of parliamentary diplomacy: it broadens the constituency of multilateralism, anchors international commitments in representative institutions, and keeps open a space for dialogue, oversight, and practical cooperation. It reminds us that reform is not only about redesigning institutions at the top, but also about strengthening the democratic bridges that connect international decisions to citizens.

The same is true, in different ways, for business companies and non-governmental organizations. Responsible companies are not only economic actors; they shape investment, innovation, employment, digital infrastructures, supply chains, and the energy transition. If they are engaged seriously, they can help turn international goals into concrete capacities. NGOs, for their part, bring expertise from the field, proximity to affected communities, and a moral vigilance that institutions often need. They can identify early warning signs, expose implementation gaps, and keep attention focused on those who are too easily forgotten. A reformed international system should therefore not dilute the role of states, but complement it through structured partnerships with parliaments, civil society, and the private sector. The legitimacy of multilateralism today depends not only on who sits around the table, but also on whether the table is open enough to reflect the societies in whose name it speaks.

So let us be pragmatic, but not timid. Let us set aside, for now, the illusion that every great reform must begin with the most blocked institution. Let us instead build momentum where change is possible. Let us strengthen the Secretary-General as a voice for peoples, not only for states. Let us simplify a system that has become too dispersed. Let us revive ECOSOC as a centre of coordination and accountability. And let us recognize that a more legitimate international system also requires stronger parliamentary diplomacy, more meaningful engagement with civil society, and more responsible participation by business actors.

We should also acknowledge the role of universities that are helping to shape these new diplomatic models. Institutions such as the **University for Peace**, created pursuant to a United Nations mandate and dedicated to peace education, show how academic training can form leaders able to work across mediation, development, and multilateral cooperation. In Europe, initiatives linked to institutions like **the University of Europe in Berli**n and **Gioya in Malta** that focus on applied diplomacy, business diplomacy, and international leadership illustrate another essential reality: diplomacy is no longer taught only as an affair of states, but as a field that must prepare actors to engage with companies, NGOs, local communities, and transnational networks. In France, the **Catholic Institute for Higher Studies (ICES)**, notably through programmes in international relations, geopolitics, compliance, and new diplomatic methods and practices, reflects the same evolution. Their contribution is therefore not secondary. They help train the people, methods, and intellectual frameworks without which institutional reform would remain abstract. If diplomacy is changing, universities are among the places where that change is being thought through, tested, and transmitted to the next generation.

For in the end, the true question is not whether the international system should change. It must. The true question is whether it can change in a way that is equal to the anxieties of our age: widening inequality, renewed great-power rivalry, climate disruption, sovereign debt, forced displacement, and the quiet humiliation of poverty. Institutions do not retain legitimacy by invoking their history alone. They retain it by proving, again and again, that they can answer the needs of the present. That is why a more dynamic Secretariat, a more coherent United Nations system, a stronger parliamentary dimension, and a more open partnership with business companies and NGOs are not secondary adjustments. They are conditions for credibility.

If the international system is to remain faithful to its founding promise, it must remember the words with which the United Nations Charter began: “We the peoples.” Not we the procedures. Not we the bureaucracies. Not even only we the states. But we the peoples. That is the standard by which our institutions should be judged. And that is the spirit in which they must be reformed. Thank you.