



KEYNOTE ADDRESS · UN DAY 2026

A New San Francisco Moment?

People, Power, and the Potential for a
Revitalized United Nations

Adam Lupel

Executive Director, Coalition for the UN We Need (C4UN)

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Good evening. What a pleasure and a privilege to be here with you.

What a pleasure and a privilege to be in California on United Nations Day, where just up the coast 81 years ago the UN Charter was drafted and We the Peoples of the United Nations first “determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights...[and] to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.” Commitments that should still guide us today.

What a pleasure and a privilege to have the opportunity to take some time to reflect upon how far we have come and yet how precarious the world feels today.

Many people feel powerless in the face of global challenges and the rapid pace of change. But allow me to say at the start tonight that I’d like to explore ways we can work against that feeling, together.

We have entered a time of great transformation, but the outcome of that transformation remains uncertain. This means the door is still open for us to effect change, not just experience it as it washes over us.

The post-World War II geopolitical order has “ruptured;” armed conflicts are dramatically on the rise; climate change is increasingly evident; and for better or worse, new technologies, in particular AI, have put us on the cusp of dramatic social, economic, and political changes that we can scarcely imagine and only partially predict at the moment.

Meanwhile, the architecture of the United Nations remains largely set on that foundation laid in San Francisco in 1945.

This is not to say the UN has been static. It has not.

The global order has shifted several times over the last 81 years –through the advent of the Nuclear Age, the vast process of Decolonization, the conflicts of the Cold War, and the fall of the Soviet Union. And the UN has changed along with it. There were only 51 founding Member States of the UN. Today there are 193.

The UN can adapt, and it has changed over time. And this is important to recognize as we seek its continued evolution.

I have been working around the UN in New York for over 20 years now, and it seems we have been talking about one reform or the other the whole time. But today does feel different. The calls for greater structural reform are growing louder, and the voices expressing fear of the potential for collapse are sounding more urgent.

Last month, at the opening of the General Assembly, Finnish President Alexander Stubb called for a “[new San Francisco moment](#),” where world leaders could come together to chart the path forward.

And there have been increasing calls, especially among civil society, for a Charter Review Conference to explore potential amendments and revisions to the UN Charter, offering one concrete proposal for long-term structural change.

I will leave it to my friends in the [Article 109](#) Coalition to lead the charge there.

Tonight, I would like to speak of a complementary vision of what a new San Francisco moment might mean, one while inspired by 1945, is situated in the multi-stakeholder, multi-aligned, multi-complex context of the 21st Century.

One, dare I say, that could even begin here, tonight, in this room, together with all of you.

Are you ready?

Maybe, what we are talking about when we talk about a new San Francisco “moment”, is not a “moment” at all, not just another gathering of government officials, but a **MOVEMENT**, a global movement to revitalize international cooperation and transform global governance for the 21st century.

And that requires the participation of all of us, member states, civil society, regional organizations, cities, the private sector, and engaged citizens of all types.

Not a “moment” at all... but a movement, a global movement to revitalize international cooperation.

Did you know, I assume some of you do, that your predecessors were at the San Francisco Conference? The American Association for the United Nations, which later became UNA-USA, was part of a group of official “consultants” to the US delegation, invited by the State Department.

Stephen Schlesinger in his classic book *Act of Creation* tells the story of how the Executive Director of the Association, Clark Eichelberger, was critical in marshalling the civil society pressure that led, along with key member state allies, to the successful addition of Human Rights to the Charter in Articles 1, 55, and 68.

We are often reminded that the UN is an intergovernmental organization, which is true, fundamentally so, but Civil Society has had a role in the Organization from the beginning. And we have a role to play now.

II

At his UN Speech in September, President Trump blustered, “There is no global government!”

On this point, he is right. The UN is not a global government, and it has never aspired to be one; it is a complex system that reflects the global order of political, economic, and military power.

It is an arena, where geopolitics are played out and member states come together to solve problems; and it forms a principal part of the system of global governance—central to international law, managing crises, and stewarding the global commons—but it does not constitute global governance in its entirety. There are other actors at play.

Yet, it is important to be clear, and this needs to be heard in Washington, for those who may have their doubts: We do need the United Nations.

There are some in their frustration who would suggest that we'd be better off trashing the whole thing, or starting something new from scratch. We would not. The world would be poorer, sicker, and more violent without the United Nations. There is no replacing it as a universal system.

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We are all reform minded right now and recognize the need for change, all institutions must adapt to the times, but if we ask the question, has the UN delivered progress over time, the answer is demonstrably, yes it has:

- the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- the 1975 First World Conference on Women and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, advancing Women's rights and girls education;
- the eradication of small pox;
- the General Assembly role in ending Apartheid in South Africa;
- the steep reduction of global poverty under the Millenium Development Goals;
- and the mere fact that the Cold War did not escalate into a Third World War...

...are all among the many examples that demonstrate that yes, the UN has contributed to global progress. And it continues to do so.

There remain over 50,000 UN Peacekeepers in the field, serving in 11 missions around the world—and despite the specific-mission failures, [the data shows](#) that the presence of UN peacekeepers systematically reduces violence on civilians and helps prevent conflict recurrence.

The technical agencies of the UN provide untold benefits. One could not get on a plane safely without ICAO (the International Civil Aviation Organization).

In recent years it has been the humanitarian side of the house that has been most visible.

- In 2020, the World Food Program was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work combating hunger.
- In 2024, UNICEF [supplied vaccines](#) to approximately 45% of the world's children under 5.
- In 2026, the UN Refugee Agency has worked to protect over [28 Million refugees](#), as currently an estimated 1 in 70 people in the world are displaced.

But OK, to say we do need the UN, is not to say we have the UN we need:

There is broad agreement that we can and must do better: **We need a UN that is more inclusive and representative, more efficient and effective, more consistent and accountable.**

And we need a UN that is more connected to the people it serves.

To say we need the UN, is not to say we have the UN we need.

III

So, what is to be done?

To talk about a new “San Francisco moment” is not to start over, to rewrite the charter from scratch. It is about mobilizing the moment with a collective vision for the future.

The last 18 months of Secretary-General Guterres’ tenure has been focused on the UN80 Initiative—which has three reform Workstreams, with a strong focus on finding efficiencies and ending duplication.

The Initiative will continue until the end of the year, but the reality is that despite some progress, UN80 has come at a time when Antonio Guterres is near the end of his time in office and all but bereft of political capital. Most of his big structural reform proposals have stalled.

All eyes are now on the race for the next Secretary-General and staking out priorities for her first term to begin in January. What will her vision be?

A new Secretary-General does present an opportunity. Every Secretary-General has come into office with a change agenda.

But we must manage expectations about what the Secretary-General can and cannot accomplish.

When we talk about UN reform, we must be specific about what part of the system we are talking about, and when we call for change, we must be conscious about who holds the power to make those changes.

For example, two of the most common and merited complaints about the UN Architecture are the lack of a permanent seat for Africa on the Security Council and the misuse of the Veto.

These are the prerogatives of the very member states that are calling for reform, not the Secretary-General.

One thing is certain, the next Secretary-General will have fewer resources at her disposal. Antonio Guterres has [proposed](#) a 2027 regular budget of just over \$3.3 Billion, down 4.3% from what was appropriated for 2026, and down more than 11% from 2025.

This does not include the assessed Peacekeeping Budget or the voluntary spending on Humanitarian relief, but by way of comparison, the proposed UN Regular Budget for 2027 would be about half the annual budget of the NYPD.

In this context of austerity, a narrative has been building that the next Secretary-General must get “back to basics” with a focus on conflict prevention and mediation.

At a time when powerful member states are systematically violating long-established norms on the use of force, with disastrous consequences for civilians, many see the absence of the UN as a player in today's major peace and security crises—in Ukraine, Iran, Israel/Palestine, or Sudan—as an abdication of the principal purpose of the Organization.

The next Secretary-General must be willing to take risks, go where others won't, speak directly to conflict parties, and commit to a robust use of her Good Offices and make conflict prevention a signature priority of the organization from top to bottom.

But there is a risk that this call to get “back to basics” will be interpreted through a narrow lens of hard security— the bare bones negotiations among men-with-guns in a time of rising militarism.

It is true, the United Nations was forged from war to prevent its “untold sorrow” from spreading across the world again and again. But this purpose was never separate from the pursuit of development and the establishment of justice.

We know that advancing peace requires commitments to sustainable development and human rights. A true “back to basics” approach would require a commitment to all three foundational pillars of the United Nations.

This is particularly important as the debate about what will succeed the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development will heat up rapidly in the coming year in the lead up to the SDGs Summit in September 2027 and the 2028 Review of the Pact for the Future.



A true “back to basics” approach would require a commitment to all three foundational pillars of the United Nations.

But the reality is that the UN will have a smaller footprint for the foreseeable future, and this will require focus. More importantly, it will require that the UN works in partnership.

Many have noted that this is a time for forming Alliances and building Coalitions. In September, the EU with co-sponsors Australia, Barbados, Brazil, Canada, India, and Kenya launched the "Partners for Multilateralism," and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights formed the multi-stakeholder Global Alliance for Human Rights.

And in recent months, we at the Coalition for the UN We Need have brought together over 1,000 civil society organizations in 100 countries to provide [inputs on the future](#) of the UN.

As one leading candidate for Secretary-General, Rebecca Grynspan, has taken to repeating in her campaign, "the UN is unique, but it is not alone."

At a time of diminished resources, the Organization will have to take a step back and ask, where does it have a comparative advantage, where can it lead, where should it step back, and where would it be best to serve in a supporting or norm-setting or coordinating role, as local actors take the lead.

I recently had the privilege of meeting a woman peacebuilder from Afghanistan, who told the story of how a donor had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in an educational facility only to have the government exclude women and girls from entering.

In turn, the woman was able to secure a micro-grant at a fraction of the cost to purchase a set of tablets for girls to pursue their education away from the repression of the state.

The Afghan case is perhaps extreme, but if the UN is going to deliver on the ambitious goals it has set for itself, it must listen to grassroots actors, often women, who know their local contexts intimately and who are best positioned to deliver for their communities.

And it is no accident, young people hold the key. We are seeing Gen Z movements drive political action around the world, in Bangladesh, France, Madagascar, Nepal, and Peru, and here in the United States their turnout could prove pivotal in the midterm elections.

Gen Z is the most educated and connected generation in human history. And they have proven ready to act, to fight for their future.

The next Secretary-General would be wise to engage with young people to bring their energy and insights into the circles of decision making. **Young people are leading the way. And we should follow their lead.**

IV

Tonight, we're celebrating the 81st anniversary of the United Nations but to conclude, I'd like to take note of one other recent anniversary: October 12 was the 40th anniversary of the Reykjavik Summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, where they planted the seeds of the Arms Control regime that would help bring an end to the Cold War, and where they came remarkably close to abolishing nuclear weapons altogether.

They met in a small house with only a few aides, but what is often forgotten is that that moment was made possible by a mass popular peace movement in the United States and Europe.

In 1982, a million people attended the Rally for Nuclear Disarmament in New York's Central Park. In Europe, mass anti-nuclear movements were a fixture of the early 80s.

We are not powerless.

There are lessons here for our times, especially amidst the unchecked race for AI.

Last week's *New York Times Magazine* featured an [interview with Mirjana Spoljaric](#), the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. In the face of rising conflicts around the world, a renewed arms race, and the failure of our leaders to see reason, she asks: Why would it be so wrong to start a global movement for peace? "It's possible," she mused.

Speaking about Climate Change at the UN in September, the youthful Prime Minister of the Netherlands, [Rob Jetten remarked](#) that pessimism on the Climate Crisis is somehow only possible because we feel powerless.

Perhaps the powers that profit from fossil fuels want us to feel that way. And yet, we have doubled the amount of renewable energy in the last 10 years. We have the knowledge and technology to address climate change.

Forty years ago, the people took action and helped change the course of history in Reykjavik. 81 years ago, We the Peoples of Civil Society showed up in San Francisco, and insisted that Human Rights be placed at the core of the UN Charter. How many lives have been saved by that action?

As we work to revitalize the United Nations, as we head towards a “new San Francisco moment” or a world movement to elevate the voice of We the Peoples to transform global governance for the 21st Century, we must remember, we are not powerless.

We have the knowledge, history, and tools to effect change. We are at a crossroads of history. And we all have a role to play in charting the path forward in the coming period.

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