



Open Letter on Leadership and the UN We Need

H.E. Dr. Khalilur Rahman, President of the Eighty-First Session of the United Nations General Assembly

H.E. Mr. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations
Permanent Representatives of Member States to the United Nations

Re: Leadership and the UN We Need — Civil Society Reflections from the C4UN Global Futures Forum 2026

Excellencies,

We write as national, regional, and international civil society organizations, many of whom joined the more than 1,000 organizations from over 100 countries who participated in Regional Futures Forums in every UN region in 2026, and a Global Futures Forum on July 11, 2026. We are building on the continuing work of the *Coalition for the UN We Need* and related *ImPact Coalitions* on the implementation of the Pact for the Future, among other ongoing priorities.

In our dialogues, two questions recurred with striking consistency: What kind of leadership does the United Nations require to be successful, and what kind of United Nations Organization do we need to meet the demands of the 21st Century. This letter offers our reflections on both, in the hope of continued partnership with Member States and the United Nations Secretariat.

We recognize the seriousness with which Member States, the Secretariat, and the Office of the President of the General Assembly are approaching this moment. There is a significant reform process underway alongside the selection process of the next Secretary-General, against a backdrop of geopolitical fragmentation and acute financial strain. We offer these reflections not as a checklist imposed from outside, but as the convergent product of civil society dialogues conducted independently, across regions and generations.

I. UN Leadership: The Role and Qualities This Moment Demands

Across our consultations, participants converged on a leadership profile defined less by managerial competence alone than by independence, courage, empathy, and clarity of purpose. These desired qualities are not limited solely to the Secretary-General, but to UN leadership more broadly, at every level of the Organization. We offer the following reflections on the role such leadership must be equipped to play:

- **Resolute, principled, and consistent leadership:** UN leadership must be able to defend the UN Charter and international law, promoting the balance of the three pillars of peace and security, human rights, and development, even where doing so creates friction with powerful Member States. We recognize that budgetary and political realities inevitably shape what any Secretary-General can do; the measure of this leadership lies less in avoiding such pressures than in how consistently, and with how much integrity, they are managed.
- **A bold reformer:** Leadership must be bold in shaping a UN that is more efficient, accountable, and financially resilient, ensuring Member States meet their financial obligations on time, in full and without conditions, while strengthening the capabilities the UN needs to deliver on its mandates. Reform must be pursued collectively with Member States and civil society, including young people, who will inherit the institutions we re-build today.
- **Clarity of vision and public voice:** Bold reform demands visionary leadership that sees over the horizon, communicates what is needed, and inspires action among a broad array of constituents. UN leadership should articulate, clearly and to a global public, what the Organization can realistically achieve and why it matters, building the kind of public understanding and trust that a global institution needs in order to endure. This requires leadership that exhibits both empathy and pragmatism.
- **Genuine representation:** After eighty years without a woman having served as Secretary-General, gender parity at the highest levels of UN leadership remains overdue, as does meaningful geographic balance and Global South leadership throughout the Secretariat.
- **Structural inclusion of civil society, youth, and future generations:** We need leaders that listen to the people most affected by UN policies and programs, not merely on occasion but as an institutionalized practice. We ask UN leadership to establish a senior office for civil society engagement and a senior champion for future generations, and to provide both with the authority, resources, and reach to operate beyond New York.
- **Early, outcome-linked priorities:** In its early priorities, UN leadership should set out a small number of clear goals, linked concretely to country-level outcomes, and matched by processes that let Member States and civil society track progress over time.

These reflect priorities that emerged independently across civil society dialogues across regions and in dedicated conversations on leadership and legitimacy convened at the Global Futures Forum.

II. The UN We Need: Transforming the System to Meet the Demands of the Present and the Promise of the Future

Leadership alone cannot carry the weight of this moment. The reality facing the international community today cannot be fully captured through the perspective of Member States alone; civil society, including young people, local actors, and affected communities hold pieces of that picture that are not always visible from capitals or from UN Headquarters. A UN system that draws more fully on this wider picture, through genuine co-construction rather than consultation alone, will make better and more durable decisions. Our consultations surfaced a shared set of priorities for the institutional transformation required:

- **A more equitable international financial architecture:** An effective and independent international order depends on adequate and fairly distributed financial support. This principle is equally true at the national level where an unjust global financial architecture places the greatest burden on the countries most in need of support. Fairer access to concessional finance, credible sovereign debt resolution, and progress on international tax cooperation, among other key areas, are foundational to a UN system that can deliver for the peoples of the world.
- **Representation that matches today's realities:** The composition and working methods of global governance bodies, including the Security Council, General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, and their subsidiary bodies, should evolve to reflect the world as it is now rather than as it was in 1945. We do not prescribe a single mechanism, but we do believe the conversation about how this reform can be achieved, including the legal pathways already available within the UN Charter, deserves to be engaged seriously rather than deferred indefinitely.
- **More Effective and Accountable Mandates:** Reform should continue to make mandates more effective and organizational structures more coherent, with changes grounded in strong evidence of what will improve the UN's ability to deliver results and improve accountability to the people served.
- **Decentralization and local delivery:** Shifting decision-making and resources closer to the communities most affected by global commitments at country level would allow those commitments to translate more reliably into local outcomes. Strengthening the role of regional offices, Country Teams, and the Resident Coordinator system are also crucial to ensuring global norms translate into outcomes that people can feel and see on the ground.
- **Data, transparency, and digital governance:** Open, interoperable data on financing and implementation, paired with governance frameworks for AI, emerging technologies, and digital public infrastructure that protect rather than exploit people and the planet, should be treated as core infrastructures for trust, peace and security, development, and human rights, not optional extras.

- **Participation built for genuine inclusion:** Civil society's role throughout the system, including at UN HQ, should be structured so that its expertise, on-the-ground experience, and evidence-based knowledge, help shape outcomes, not simply so that its presence is recorded in the room. That means fewer moments where civil society is invited only to speak, and more where it is genuinely part of designing and delivering solutions in partnership with Member States and the UN system.
- **Aligning agendas:** the Pact for the Future and its Annexes and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are complementary agendas. An integrated approach to implementation must be maintained and strengthened, including in any future frameworks, recognizing the mutual interdependence of peace and security, development, and human rights.

Trust, our conversations repeatedly suggested, is becoming the central, endangered currency of multilateralism. It is easier to undermine trust than to rebuild it once lost. But we must try. The measure of success in the years ahead will be whether the UN can demonstrate, tangibly and repeatedly, that its commitments improve conditions on the ground.

We recognize the tension between what is immediately achievable and what the moment genuinely requires. But what is treated as “realistic” today may prove inadequate to the scale of the challenges ahead. Yet, work must continue in our ongoing pursuit of peace, prosperity and planetary health. Today’s circumstances do not allow the UN to constrain itself in the name of feasibility.

We offer this letter as a constructive contribution from organizations that believe deeply in the promise of the United Nations and want to help it reach its highest potential.

We remain ready to partner with the Office of the President of the General Assembly, the current and incoming Executive Office of the Secretary-General, the UN system, and all Member States as these processes move forward, through the **Coalition for the UN We Need**, our regional partners, and the many organizations who joined us at the Global Futures Forum and the Regional Futures Forums that preceded it. We welcome the opportunity for continued dialogue.

Please accept, Excellencies, the assurances of our highest consideration,

Sincerely,

As of 24 September 2026, the following signatories are endorsing the letter in their individual capacities. Organizational affiliations are listed for identification purposes only.

1. Adriana Abdenur, Co-Founder, Global Governance Innovation Network
2. María Elena Agüero, Secretary General, Club de Madrid
3. Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, Former Assistant Secretary-General and Assistant Administrator/Regional Director, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States; former Minister of Human Rights, Yemen
4. Jan Peter Balkenende, Prime Minister of The Netherlands (2002–2010)
5. Amitabh Behar, Executive Director, Oxfam International
6. Carol Bellamy, Former Executive Director, UNICEF

7. Anita Bhatia, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director, UN Women
8. Valdis Birkavs, Prime Minister of Latvia (1993–1994)
9. Linda Bonyo, Founder, Lawyers Hub
10. Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, El Salvador
11. Kim Campbell, Prime Minister of Canada (1993)
12. Laura Chinchilla, President of Costa Rica (2010–2014)
13. Sean Cleary, Chairman, Strategic Concepts (Pty) Ltd.; Executive Vice-Chair, FutureWorld Foundation
14. Ertharin Cousin, Former Executive Director, World Food Programme (WFP)
15. Rafael Dezcallar, Ambassador of Spain; President, Fundación Ayuda en Acción
16. Cellou Dalein Diallo, Prime Minister of Guinea (2004–2006)
17. Cristina Gallach, Interim Executive Director, GWL Voices; Former Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, United Nations; former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Spain
18. Mbaranga Gasarabwe, Former Assistant Secretary-General for Safety and Security, United Nations; former Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Mali
19. Monica Geingos, First Lady of the Republic of Namibia (2015–2024); Executive Chairperson, One Economy Foundation (ONE)
20. Kate Gilmore, Former Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations; former Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director, UNFPA
21. Neshan Gunasekera, Chief Executive Officer, World Future Council
22. Alfred Gusenbauer, Chancellor of Austria (2007–2008)
23. T. Anthony Jones, Vice-President and Executive Director, GFNA
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25. Adam Lupel, Executive Director, Coalition for the UN We Need
26. Beckie Malay, GCAP Philippines; Asian Civil Society Partnership for Sustainable Development
27. Susana Malcorra, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship, Argentina; former Under-Secretary-General for Field Support, United Nations
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29. Rexhep Meidani, President of Albania (1997–2002)
30. James Michael, President of Seychelles (2004–2016)
31. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Former Executive Director, UN-Habitat; former Mayor of Kuala Lumpur
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35. Andres Pastrana, President of Colombia (1998–2002)
36. Daniel Perell, Representative, Bahá'í International Community
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39. Richard Ponzio, Senior Fellow and Director, Global Governance, Justice & Security, Stimson Center
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41. José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, President of the Government of Spain (2004–2011)
42. Lisa Russell, Global Co-Chair, Arts & Culture ImPACT Coalition
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