



## Declaration of the Conference of Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) on the Occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations

12 October 2019

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Conference of Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) is an independent, international association facilitating the participation of NGOs at the United Nations. Since 1948, CoNGO engages with the UN through more than thirty NGO Substantive Committees. CoNGO endorses the goals and values enshrined in the United Nations Charter, and advocates for multilateralism to resolve political, environmental, health and other challenges. We reaffirm the centrality of the United Nations to a more peaceful and more just world, where all people have access to education, health, judicial remedy, democratic participation, and economic advancement. On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations, CoNGO salutes the achievements of the United Nations in the maintenance of peace and security, the promotion of human rights, and the advancement of sustainable development.

Agenda 2030 is a framework to eliminate poverty, reduce inequality, and protect the planet. Yet progress has fallen short of what is required. Achieving the World We Want and the World We Need calls for active partnerships among international bodies, governments, local authorities, corporations, and civil society. On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we must move from a climate of nationalism, conflict and injustice to a culture of multilateralism, peace, and security, for the good of all humankind.

CoNGO calls for the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to be an occasion for strengthening the United Nations, expanding its role to more effectively engage civil society everywhere. It is an occasion to enter into a dialogue to achieve a structure of relationships that responds to the challenges of a changing world. On this 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we urge all governments to strengthen their commitment to the United Nations not only morally but also financially and materially.

The United Nations must adapt to changing needs and realities, to increase its credibility and effectiveness, and ensure inclusive decision-making at all levels. Strengthening the United Nations will require the broad support and involvement of civil society and citizens everywhere, and flexibility in engaging with them and listening to their concerns.

As the United Nations celebrates its first 75 years, we have an opportunity to revisit the past, define the present, and shape a new future. Humanity cannot wait. Peace, justice and development depend on people-centred approaches to transforming our economy, society and environment. We must increase momentum to ensure that no one is left behind.

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# **Declaration of the Conference of Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) on the Occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations**

## **The First 75 Years of the United Nations**

1. On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations, the Conference of Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) salutes the achievements of the United Nations in the maintenance of peace and security, the promotion of human rights, and the advancement of sustainable development. The very existence of the United Nations is a demonstration of the marked progress humanity has made. The United Nations has helped to develop a rules-based international order through Conventions and Covenants that set standards for good governance, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights for all. It has overseen the challenging process of decolonization and reduced hostilities among its Member States. It has helped to bring reason and justice where before there was chaos and bloodshed.
2. Among the legal instruments developed by the United Nations are international agreements aimed at the protection of the vulnerable and disadvantaged, combating racism, preservation of a livable planet, safety on the seas and in the air, universal education, the conservation of heritage and culture, economic well-being, gender equality, decent work, and disaster risk reduction. The United Nations has promoted the peaceful resolution of international disputes, helped prevent conflict in troubled regions, and brought relief to many victims of war. In the 1990s, United Nations world conferences and summits engaged global civil society in adopting declarations and programmes that require full and effective implementation. The Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030 provide a roadmap for positive action by governments, civil society organizations, local authorities, industries, schools and universities, and individual citizens the world over, to work together for the World We Want and the World We Need.
3. Yet the work of the United Nations is incomplete. The achievement of international order, peace, and human rights continues too frequently to be undermined by the promotion of narrow national interests, the pursuit of economic advantage, the waging of war, and the suppression of human rights of individuals and groups. The world is facing unprecedented challenges that are, in some cases, existential: climate change, disruptive technologies, more lethal weapons of mass destruction, the extreme polarization of wealth and related inequalities. Indeed, the year of the founding of the United Nations coincided with the introduction of the horrors of nuclear war. The current pace of addressing global problems is inadequate; greater urgency and stronger commitment are required to stave off the potentially disastrous impacts of these developments.
4. Today, the Sustainable Development Goals have heightened awareness that the power of the United Nations is not enough: achieving Agenda 2030 calls for active engagement and a multiplicity of partnerships between and among international bodies, governments, local authorities, the private sector, and civil society

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in all its manifestations. Such partnerships must abide by governance principles such as transparency and accountability in the promotion and protection of the human rights of citizens and peoples as rights holders.

### **Addressing Persistent and Emerging Global Challenges**

5. Twenty years ago, the Millennium Forum Declaration, developed by 1,350 representatives of over a thousand non-governmental organizations from around the world, warned of the growth of racism, fascism, xenophobia, homophobia, hate crimes, and ethnocide. It noted a resurgence of patriarchy threatening to erode the gains made in the field of gender equality. It remarked on the persistence of child labour and the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of human rights violations. It drew attention to an upsurge of violence, militarism and armed conflict, and the growth of authoritarian regimes.
6. In 2020, these threats persist, compounded by the spread of populist dogma, retreat from international norms, treaties and agreements, and rejection of multilateralism in favour of agendas that are exclusivist and xenophobic. Around the world, people suffer from the impact of inequalities, loss of rights, and gender injustice, and are beset by conflict, militarization, terrorism, and environmental degradation. Over 70 million people have been displaced due to violent conflict, persecution, instability, climate change and natural disasters. All too often, economic, financial and political systems concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few. The beauty and diversity of the world's peoples, especially indigenous peoples, including their cultures and languages, are increasingly imperilled, and the biodiversity of the world's flora and fauna are endangered by climate change and unsustainable industrial practices.
7. The challenges facing humankind and the planet require urgent attention. The effects of climate change threaten food and water security and species diversity, and contribute to migration. Gender equality has not been achieved anywhere in the world; sexism and sexist behaviour remains rooted in and reinforces gender stereotypes. Gender-based violence, sex trafficking, child marriage and female genital mutilation continue. Many children, especially girls, are not enrolled in schools; the effects of conflict and forced displacement are exceptionally acute in the first years of a child's life, with negative consequences for entire societies. Health care is not universally available. Lack of access to social protection results in harsh consequences for the most marginalised and working poor, especially women in the informal sector. Corruption, illicit financial flows and tax evasion have subversive impacts on governments' ability to mobilize resources. A decade after the global financial crisis, global debt levels have reached a record high. Worldwide, human rights are often downgraded or overturned. Freedom of the press is widely ignored, and journalists jailed or murdered. Even those who work for peace, such as interpreters and medical workers, are attacked and killed. Cyberspace has created a new venue for criminal activities on a massive scale.
8. The promise set forth in the United Nations Charter to end the scourge of war remains largely unmet by its member governments; vastly more money now goes to military spending than to sustainable development. Militarization and the abandonment of arms limitations compound the need for disarmament, particularly nuclear disarmament. Even as memories of world war fade and those of colonial conflicts lose their force,

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the United Nations, civil society and governments must work harder, and work together, to outlaw armed conflict forever, lest future generations repeat the irreversible mistakes of their predecessors.

9. **On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we must move from the expansion of wars and a climate of conflict and injustice to a culture of peace and security, for the good of all humankind. It is time for humanitarian, development and peace actors to work cohesively to end global violence and achieve the ambitious goals of Agenda 2030 – peace and prosperity for people and planet.**

### **Renewing the Promise of the United Nations**

10. The United Nations must engage Member States in action that goes beyond mere acquiescence, and increases their accountability to the populations they serve. We need a newly reinvigorated multilateralism to boost action to address global issues such as climate change and forced migration, to accelerate progress on sustainable development, and to secure healthy, peaceful and prosperous lives for all people everywhere.
11. The United Nations System should be strengthened and made more equitable to adapt to changing needs and realities. The revolution in communications has the potential to democratize engagement at all levels. The United Nations must re-examine its communication with its various publics, speaking to them, and also listening to them, in languages they understand. Thus, it can become more credible and effective, ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory decision-making at all levels.
12. Among the fundamental requirements for a renewed United Nations is a sound financial basis for its work. The United Nations budget is less than that of some municipalities, local authorities, and multinational corporations. Member States must provide sufficient resources for programmes and activities they have mandated; they must pay their assessments on time, in full and without conditions. Much funding provided by governments involves earmarking, exclusions or refusal to fund certain activities. Some governments flout their treaty obligations by delaying annual payments. We rely on the United Nations to resolve world problems, yet governments change their priorities from year to year, and limit the ability of the organization to plan for the future. Financial constraints are compounded by limits to flexibility and failure to commit to long-term solutions.
13. While sufficient funding is an essential component of a strengthened and revitalized United Nations, effective and transparent management practices are equally important. Secretariat and Agency heads must be given adequate authority and clear guidelines to address emerging crises, whether political, humanitarian, economic, environmental, military or judicial. Well-managed and well-funded Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding operations are particularly important. In this connection, the policies and decisions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are often at odds with one another and with others within the United Nations system. Accordingly, a review of the international financial architecture is needed, aimed at advancing the efforts of developing countries to meet their fiscal, monetary, trade and development needs while maintaining democratic control of their economies.

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14. **On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we urge all governments to strengthen their support for the United Nations, morally, financially and materially. We call on all Member States to recognize the necessity of multilateral approaches to address global problems; to be accountable for turning rhetoric into action; to fulfil funding commitments and provide adequate resources to meet vital long-term needs.**

### CoNGO and the United Nations

15. CoNGO is an independent, international membership association founded in 1948, the year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As a non-governmental organization (NGO) in general consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council, our work relates to the entire United Nations System: the Secretariat, Agencies, Treaty Bodies, Regional Commissions, Institutes, Summits and World Conferences. CoNGO wholeheartedly endorses the goals and values enshrined in the United Nations Charter, and is a strong advocate for multilateralism to resolve global political, environmental, health and other threats. We encourage NGOs around the world to co-operate with the United Nations to promote and support its work and to draw civil society into an enduring partnership with the world body. Over 30 NGO Substantive Committees related to CoNGO in New York, Geneva, Vienna and worldwide demonstrate our commitment to supporting the mission of the United Nations.
16. CoNGO has a membership of diverse NGOs working in consultation with the United Nations, in collaboration with each other, and in cooperation with other like-minded stakeholders. CoNGO recognizes its role in adding value to the efforts of our members to effectively contribute to the achievement of goals agreed upon by the United Nations and its Member States. We particularly support young people and youth organizations as active participants and partners in all United Nations processes.
17. CoNGO has not shied away from positive criticism of the intergovernmental mechanism when it appears to have fallen short of the ideals of the Charter. We have identified obstacles and ways to overcome them, and have encouraged United Nations bodies and Member States to work more productively with NGOs. We have urged all civil society organizations to collaborate with governments in intergovernmental decision-making processes under the auspices of the United Nations.
18. CoNGO is aware of shortcomings in the United Nations System that undermine its effectiveness, its governability, and its credibility. The formally-agreed intergovernmental decisions and instruments are strong statements of principle and intent, yet governments often fail to implement the agreements that they have adopted multilaterally. These intergovernmentally-endorsed texts constitute promises that governments make to their people: it is surely a government's duty to fulfill its promises. Acquiescence is not enough: it must be accompanied by commitment and action.
19. **On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, CoNGO reaffirms the centrality of the United Nations for the achievement of a more peaceful and more just world, where all people have access to education, health,**

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**judicial remedy, democratic participation, and economic and social advancement. We reiterate our commitment to the goals, ethics, and vision that we share with the United Nations. CoNGO calls for this anniversary to be an occasion for strengthening the United Nations, expanding its role to more effectively engage civil society and people of goodwill everywhere.**

### **The Role of Civil Society**

20. The role of NGOs is described in Article 71 of the United Nations Charter, and the establishment of formal consultative status for NGOs with ECOSOC was groundbreaking for the system of international relations. ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31 governs the establishment of consultative status as well as that of accreditation of a broader group of civil society to United Nations conferences. It contains principles and modalities for regular NGO participation in designated United Nations bodies that has stood the test of time and enjoys broad NGO support. CoNGO is concerned about the shrinking space for civil society. Freedom of assembly, opinion and expression are inherent rights of every human being, but an increasing number of countries restrict these rights, treating civil society as a threat, rather than as a partner working to achieve common goals. Some governments imprison civil society activists or use force to quell peaceful assemblies and demonstrations. They formally accept the recommendations of the United Nations while ignoring them in practice. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and relevant international conventions and covenants must be universally applied. The United Nations must ensure that NGOs have maximum access to United Nations bodies, to allow the fullest contributions of their competencies, expertise, energy and experience.
21. Civil society itself is changing. The near instantaneous mobilization of social movements made possible by social media is upending traditional forms of social action. The new structures of civil society often do not match the hierarchical structures of governance within the United Nations and in Member States. CoNGO undertakes to enhance networking, integrate the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, and create economies of scale to have greater impact on world problems. CoNGO is committed to working with the United Nations on how a better communication with its partners can be established so that “We the peoples” have our voices heard and acted upon. The rebuilding of United Nations information and outreach components is central in this respect.
22. The High-Level Political Forums, the ECOSOC Youth Forum and other new mechanisms are already tapping into the energy generated by civil society movements. At the same time, the process of recognition of NGOs by the Economic and Social Council has changed little since its earliest years, and continues to be highly politicized. These tensions have strained the United Nations’ system of liaison with NGOs, including those associated with CoNGO. It is part of CoNGO's mission to ensure civil society access to the United Nations and improve collaboration, to push for change and facilitate the achievement of the goals agreed upon by the United Nations and Member States.
23. **On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we call upon the United Nations and Member States to enter into a dialogue with civil society to create innovative partnerships that respond to the challenges of a changing**

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world. The spirit of Agenda 2030 requires the robust participation of the peoples of the world so that the benefits of multilateralism are felt in their daily lives. Everyone must work in concert so that the United Nations we need for the world we want prospers in a rules-based international order. We call upon Member States to recognize the vast potential of civil society as an essential element of the international system, defining the present and shaping the future. We must dismantle the hurdles to physical and political access to United Nations processes, to achieve internationally agreed development goals and social justice agendas.

### Leaving No One Behind

24. As the United Nations and its Member States celebrate its first 75 years, it is therefore time to revisit the past, define the present, and shape a new future. Humanity cannot wait. The “Peoples” who gave voice to the United Nations Charter and who see the Member States as their representatives are demanding that the world body rise to its commitments and bring about transformative change. Peace, justice and development depend on holistic, human-rights based, people-centred and gender-sensitive approaches to the systems underpinning our economy, society and environment. We must increase momentum to transform the world and ensure that no one is left behind.

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