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MARK MALLOCH-BROWN

UN at 75:
**SLOW DEATH OR
A NEW DIRECTION**



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Contents

- 2 Foreword
- 3 About the author
- 4 Headwinds
- 10 Bending the sail
- 14 To conclude, seize the moment

See more



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Foreword

UNU-WIDER had the honour and the pleasure to invite Lord Mark Malloch-Brown — a former UN Deputy Secretary-General, and earlier Chief of Staff under UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan — to deliver the twenty-fourth WIDER Annual Lecture on 26 October 2020, held virtually due to the ongoing pandemic.

The United Nations was founded in 1945, just after the Second World War, committed at the outset to further global peace and security among states, with an agenda of social progress and better living standards for people everywhere. The United Nations Charter, the foundational treaty of the United Nations, stressed a human rights-based approach to economic and social progress, that was radical for its times. Today, the UN finds itself at a crossroads. Nationalistic governments across the world reject multilateralism, the diplomatic and co-ordinated interaction between states, as a way of addressing problems that matter to their populations. Rather, these governments aggressively pursue transactional and competitive foreign policy agendas, casting aside agreed values and norms between UN member states, the number of which today stands at 193 countries, almost four-fold from the original fifty-one founding member states. The human rights-based agenda has come under increasing threat, with the rise of authoritarian and populist politics, and the development success of some countries that privileged collective economic rights over individual civil and political rights.

Beyond the din of this political debate, serious global issues press down hard. Climate change, depleting natural resources, and a pandemic are sober reminders that whatever national politicians claim, multilateralism is sorely needed to find global solutions to crises that do not respect national borders. Against this gloomy backdrop, Mark Malloch-Brown asks the following questions. Can the UN find allies needed to take up this new agenda? Can the UN build alliances with younger citizens, businesses, and civil society. Can the UN challenge these dangerous new nationalistic orthodoxies that are a threat to all? Can the UN be in the vanguard for change for a better world?

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About the author

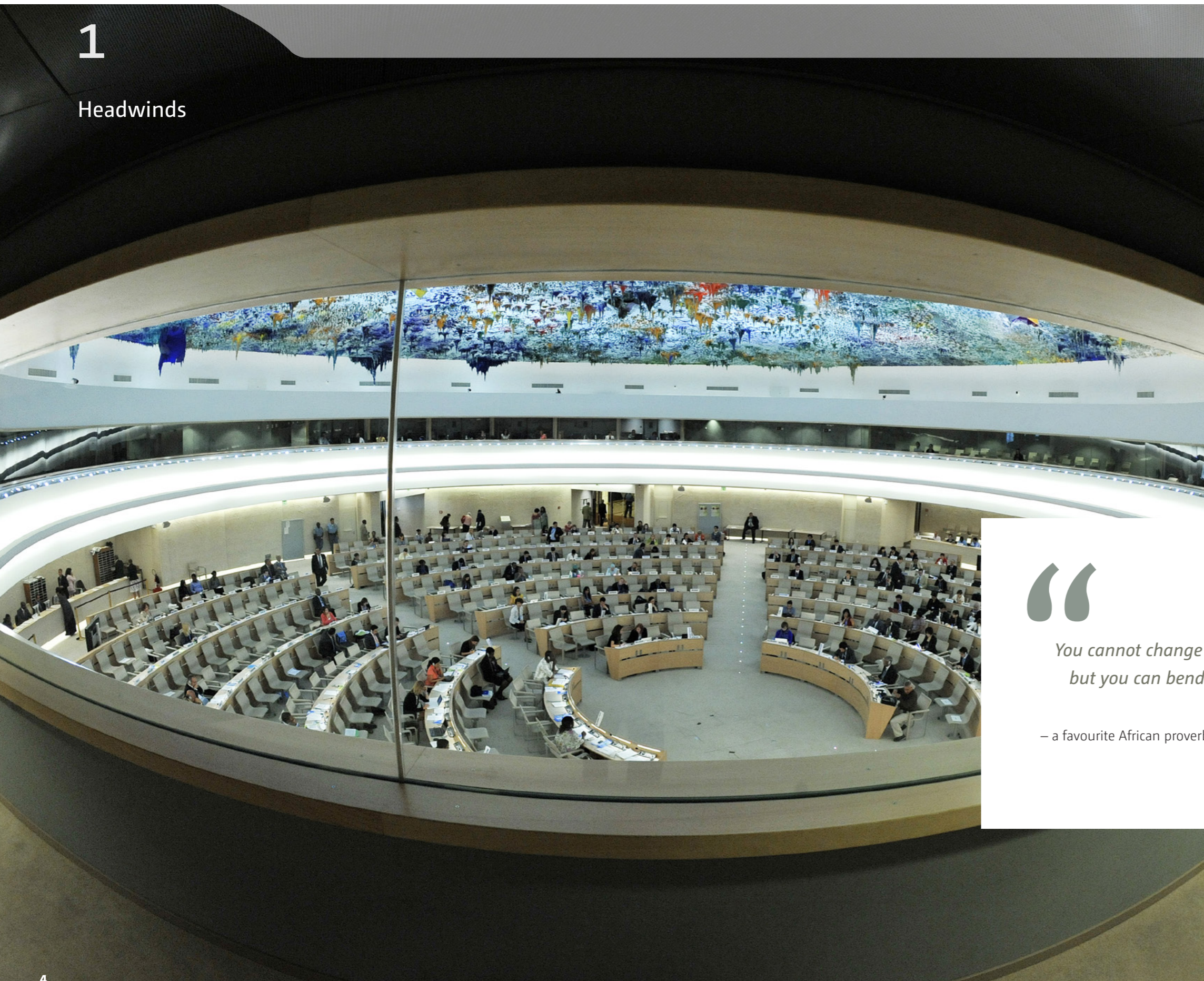
Mark Malloch-Brown holds international board and advisory positions in the commercial and not-for-profit sectors. He currently co-chairs the UN Foundation and the International Crisis Group and is on the advisory committees to the heads of the IMF and UNICEF.

He served as Deputy Secretary-General and earlier Chief of Staff of the UN under Kofi Annan. For six years before that he was Administrator of UNDP, leading the UN's development efforts around the world. Later he was later Minister of State in the UK's Foreign Office, covering Africa and Asia, and sat in Prime Minister Gordon Brown's cabinet. He has also served as Vice-Chairman of the World Economic Forum. He began his career as a journalist at The Economist and then worked for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and was later a Vice-President of the World Bank. He has served for many years on the Board of the Open Society Foundation.

He formerly chaired the Business Commission on Sustainable Development and the Royal Africa Society. He is author of *The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Limits of Nations and the Pursuit of a New Politics*.

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Headwinds



The UN is buffeted by headwinds, some new and some almost as old as the institution itself. From its beginnings it has struggled to keep up with a changing world. Born in the euphoria of a post-world war moment 75 years ago it has struggled with the ups and downs of geopolitics, surging when the world is briefly united, and falling back when it is more frequently divided. It walled frequently close to the rocks at the heights of Soviet-US Cold War confrontation but intermittently rode something of a wave during the parallel periods of decolonisation.

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*You cannot change the wind,
but you can bend the sail*

– a favourite African proverb of Kofi Annan

That too, though, created its own challenges as membership has almost quadrupled largely because of the birth of these new post-colonial states. This challenged the early ascendancy of the Allied victors, and its founders, in both the UN's governance and the staffing of the Secretariat and Agencies. To this day injustices are seen to remain in the distribution of posts between nationalities or in the perceived double standards of how the Security Council addresses issues. The influence of its post-Second World War founders remains disproportionate.

The UN has struggled from the start to be a mirror of the world it represents. The transition from its founding Anglo-Saxon and Western DNA to a more globally distributed state influence has been a struggle from the start. From 48 founding members 1945 to 193 today, the expansion reflects the big twentieth-century shifts — decolonisation, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and the pursuit of self-determination by those overlooked by history's cartographers. Adaptation to new members and their aspirations has been vital to the UN's legitimacy and universality. Although there is still controversy at the senior leadership level, where nationals of the five



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Permanent Members of the Security Council are seen as over-represented, among staff as a whole the UN of my experience was a gloriously diverse place that revelled in its mix of cultures and backgrounds.

Today, as big an issue may be a demographic revolution that goes far beyond the UN alone. A Youth Challenge is being mounted to the way we live, organise and govern ourselves. The social restrictions of COVID-19 may disguise the scale of the gathering social protest, but COVID-19 has also accelerated it. A digital revolution on the one hand and rising social and economic inequality on the other seems likely set to unseat a ruling establishment that has failed to navigate these tides. The UN, with a staff much older than the global mean and captured by a seemingly impenetrable intergovernmental culture, can seem out of touch.

The UN Charter, imbued with the wisdom and sacrifice of the survivors of a world war, is one of the world's most eloquent and uplifting constitutional documents. It is also thoroughly Western, borrowing from America's founding fathers and assuming a world order managed by the allied victors of 1945. This is reflected in a Western rights-based agenda that to this day has stressed human rights — in terms of individual civil and political rights, refugee protection, gender and reproductive health over collective economic rights.

There was an early opposition to Western dominance notably in the General Assembly centred on the championing of the New International Economic Order. Through the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77, new member states sought to correct the historical and structural imbalances in the global political economy. At the time, despite the passion brought to the debate by its champions, it seemed likely to remain a permanent backbench cause.

Now, however, it is not a simple division of East and West or North and South. Many of us emphasise collective social and economic rights within our own personal priorities — climate change, structural inequality and exclusion, and injustices in the global economic system. A Western human rights NGO or a former High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson is as likely to be heard championing climate justice as the cause of political prisoners. And younger generations across geography have rallied to the cause of tackling climate change and protecting the environment. It is an issue that unites their grandparents' UN to their own contemporary concerns.

China with President Xi's remarkable pledge at the 2020 UN General Assembly to reach carbon neutrality by 2060 has put himself in a leadership role on the latter. But this is the same regime that has employed mass incarceration and extensive discrimination to suppress the political rights of its 12 million Uighur minority. The Economist editorialised on the desperate plight of the Uighurs observing, 'China's ruling party has no truck with this concept of individual rights. It claims legitimacy from its record of providing stability and economic growth to the many'.¹

China has flexed its muscles in the UN, where it is now at 12 per cent the second largest contributor to the assessed budget — strengthening its representation across the secretariat, agencies, funds, and programmes. It has become a more active voice in critical policy debates from regulation of the internet to peacekeeping.

And in the wider world, a more authoritarian model of government is the new majority. It embraces leaders who come to power by the ballot box and those who didn't but who all share a preference for a nationalist foreign policy, weakening of domestic institutions and the rule of law including the political rights of its citizens, and a casual disregard for minority and in some cases majority rights.

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A digital revolution on the one hand and rising social and economic inequality on the other seems likely set to unseat a ruling establishment that has failed to navigate these tides.

¹ The Economist, 17–23 October 2020, Vol.437, Leader Page 13, Number 9216.



© UN Photo / Ariana Lindquist

That's the world today. For now, at least, they are the new majority in global share of population terms. Between them China, India, Russia, Turkey, Brazil, Hungary represent a demographic majority. And many others are borrowing from their playbook. The election of Joe Biden as the next US president might have blunted populism's momentum, but few doubt it is likely persistence.

The widespread rejection of traditional middle-class liberalism reflects very real shifts in global public opinion that are unlikely to dissolve any time soon. The uneven impact of economic change, now accelerated by COVID-19, has produced across much of the world's politics similar divisions of city versus town and country; young versus old; university educated versus high school or less, those employed in new services sectors versus those in failing industrial sectors. From Trump to Brexit, or Bolsonaro to Modi, we have seen the rise of economic security, cultural identity and anti-immigration as the flagship issues of a new populist politics that reaches those who feel they are being left behind by unsettling change.

Freedom House (2020) in its 2020 Democracy report notes that 2019 was the fourteenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Sixty-four countries experienced deterioration in their political rights from the pressure in India on Muslims to steady, less noticed restrictions of freedoms elsewhere. Its author observed, 'The unchecked brutality of autocratic regimes and the ethical decay of democratic powers are combining to make the world increasingly hostile to fresh demands for better governance'.²

The closing space for open inclusive debate does not stop at the borders of these countries, rather it seeps into the UN itself. The 2020 elections for membership of the UN Human Rights Council gave seats to China, Cuba and Russia. Each has served previously but it demonstrates how unaligned parts of the Council are to that founding Western individual rights-based agenda.

Inevitably, perhaps as a consequence, this is an age of UN caution. What stymies ambition let alone action in the Human Rights Council is found in spades in the Security Council. Veterans can rarely remember a time when it was as dysfunctional as today. It has basically proved incapable of agreeing, let alone acting, on almost any burning security issue. Richard Gowan (2018) of the International Crisis has observed that, 'Divisions among its five permanent members have repeatedly undermined the United Nations in recent years'.³ Few observers would disagree.

In a way it was ever thus. I remember in my first UN year, 1976, an older generation — indeed in a few cases the original generation, the self-named 'last of the Mohicans' founded by those who has joined the UN Secretariat before 15 August 1946 when the original secretariat camped out in temporary space on Lake Mohauk — complaining in not dissimilar terms. At 30, the UN already seemed stiff, cautiously bureaucratic and a bit rundown.

Yet parallel to this disheartening inertia and gridlock in New York there was expanding activity in the field. It was during the 1960s–80s that its direct operational capacities to address the refugee flows of the Cold War and post-colonialization grew rapidly. For the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) it saw the supplementing a small staff of lawyers, working on refugee protection cases by a much larger field staff of logisticians. It was the years of early growth for this year's Nobel Prize Winner, the World Food Programme, which was spun out of the Food and Agriculture Organisation in 1961. It was also when the technical assistance activities of the specialised agencies marshalled by UNDP were a critical prop to newly independent governments.

In 1980 the then UN Secretary-General visited a huge UNHCR-supported refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border where I was the Field Officer-in-Charge. He turned to me in bewilderment as we toured the huge encampment with its heavy UN and NGO presence and asked how this huge UN operation could have been set up without him knowing almost anything about it.

I tell this story to illustrate a simple truth. The political and security UN in New York was usually gridlocked but there was ample space for activism and innovation as long as you stayed well away from that graveyard, the Security Council. Operations like mine were run in the field and from Geneva, based on a mandate derived from international law, not the permission of the Security Council.

A few remarkable New York holdouts, such as Brian Urquhart, ingeniously shoehorned the UN into political and peacekeeping roles in the Middle East despite Big Power deadlock but this was the exception.

As I crisscrossed the world for UNHCR, from refugee hotspots in South East Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Central America and the Horn of Africa, I saw that an extraordinarily committed and creative group of UNHCR leaders had managed to prise apart the Cold War gridlock and make sufficient space for an imaginative operational activism that saved countless lives and relieved huge suffering. The politics of getting into these situations was never easy; the compromises often disappointing; and the motives of major interested powers and donors only rarely altruistic but the space was carved out and generally held.

When I arrived at UNDP as Administrator I found a similar legacy of programmes established by my independent-minded American predecessors against the prevailing political grain of the time — the first UN assistance programme in 'Red China'; PAPP, a programme begun in 1980 to support the Palestinians; or an office in North Korea whose establishment was still being contested by the US State Department years later when I was Administrator.

And indeed the UN of today has similarly found space — notably around the sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs) which play to the UN's convening and standard-setting roles; climate change where three Secretary-Generals in turn have driven this as a priority; and a tragically expanded humanitarian function as grim conflicts in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere stubbornly run on.

A UN, having to find space where it will not be bullied by its stronger members and ignored at key moments by many others, is not new. In fact, it's been the condition to which it has been condemned for most of its 75 years. There was a brief, glorious period of conception and birth from the San Francisco conference in 1945 to Churchill's Iron Curtain speech delivered in Fulton, Missouri in March 1946, when he warned of the coming conflict between the US and the Soviet Union.

Kofi Annan's Secretary-Generalship was a second honeymoon for the UN, coming six years after the fall of the Berlin Wall it was a moment of hope and alignment between the major powers of which he took ample advantage. He saw a moment of opportunity that was largely denied to those who came before and after him to get the UN's way on political, security and human rights matters. Yet, in the aftermath of a Security Council broken on the anvil of the US-UK invasion of Iraq, a gale turned on him too. So, for at most 10 per cent, of the UN's 75 years has the wind blown strongly in the right direction. For the rest success has come despite, not because of, member state unanimity.



© UN Photo / Evan Schneider

“ A UN, having to find space where it will not be bullied by its stronger members and ignored at key moments by many others, is not new. In fact, it's been the condition to which it has been condemned for most of its 75 years.

² Freedom House (2020). Freedom in the World 2020: A Leadership Struggle for Democracy. Authored by Sarah Repucci. Washington DC: Freedom House.

³ Gowan, Richard (2018). Minimum Order: The Role of the Security Council in an Era of Major Power Competition. New York: Centre for Policy Research, United Nations University.

What follows is a manifesto for a re-purposed UN that is both true to its Charter — but recognises the direction the winds are blowing; does not cling to the mast of a failing Western liberalism alone; but understands and responds to the dynamics that have left that liberalism, and it seems multilateralism, on the rocks. This is a comeback strategy for the world as it is, in order to allow us later to make the world as we want it to be.

The world needs to believe that the UN matters. That it is relevant. The UN still enjoys high levels of support in Pew and other surveys. Yet that support seems heavily aspirational — around what it ought to do, not what it does. Support falls when pollsters ask about its specific performance. Churchill would see this, in a term he used in his Fulton speech, as ‘Foundations built on sand’.

Without a more passionate public embrace it is hard to overcome the inter-state fault lines. Annan was possibly unique among Secretary-Generals in being able to appeal directly to people, citing the opening words of the Charter in justification: ‘We, the Peoples of the United Nations...’ Those before and since have been largely captives of governments and their disagreements.

On the one hand, the UN needs to demonstrate relevance to people’s leading concerns. On the other, it needs people to be more realistic about what it can achieve. For 75 years it has let people down because their expectations have been overblown. The UN’s supporters need to accept a more pragmatic UN rather than the aspirational Save the World one that lights up the top line poll findings. It will always disappoint such hopes. It is of the world, not above it. Dag Hammarskjöld’s words still capture it best, ‘The UN wasn’t created to take mankind into paradise, but rather, to save humanity from hell.’⁴

For its 75th, the UN undertook a survey of a million respondents supplemented by independent polling by Pew and Edelman Intelligence, as well the latter’s analysis of social and traditional media coverage in 70 countries. What comes through clearly is that across very different national economies and circumstances there is a demand

for the better delivery of basic services, notably at the moment: health; protection of the environment and containing climate change; honest accountable government that delivers and protects its citizens. The good news is this is already the UN’s agenda. The UN must deploy its convening, campaigning and normative roles to double down on its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda. COVID-19 has attacked that agenda, as Bill and Melinda Gates have said, setting back 25 years of progress in 25 weeks; driving 115 million people back into extreme poverty this year, and raising fears for economic security in almost every family elsewhere.⁵

The current UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres dedicated most of his early period in office in trying to pick off some early wins in conflict resolution — including Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Cyprus. His efforts were not blessed with any major breakthroughs. He then embraced the SDGs and climate. He was photographed for Time magazine with his trousers rolled up standing in shallow water on a beach in Fiji to illustrate a consequence of climate change — rising ocean levels. It illustrates his pivot from conflict to climate. Probably his most noticed speech as Secretary-General was his powerful Mandela lecture delivered in July this year. He called for ‘A New Social Contract for a New Era’ and spoke eloquently of how, ‘The pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of our world. It has laid bare risks we have ignored for decades: inadequate health systems; gaps in social protection; structural inequalities; environmental degradation; the climate crisis.’⁶ He went on, ‘Inequality defines our time. More than 70% of the world’s people are living with rising ... inequality’.

Secretary-Generals have been elected to be the world’s chief diplomat. Today successful ones quickly learn they have to be the world’s chief campaigner. The UN has a unique platform to measure a country’s progress, league table it, and name and shame those whose social and economic indicators fall behind. This began with the legendary Jim Grant at UNICEF; moved through the UNDP Human Development agenda to being picked up by Kofi Annan and those of us around him in how we established and campaigned for the Millennium Development Goals, the MDGs. Today the world is an unhappy place — and made more so by the economic impact of COVID-19, where at the core is a growing crisis of youth structural unemployment and

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⁵ Estimates of the World Bank provided at the Annual Meeting of the World Bank-IMF, October 2020.

⁶ Nelson Mandela Foundation (2020). *Tackling the inequality pandemic: a new social contract for a new era*. Annual Lecture 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, 18 July, New York. <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/annual-lecture-2020-secretary-general-guterres-full-speech>.

⁴ UN Department of Public Information (1954). Daj Hammarskjöld, UN Secretary-General Address, 13 May, University of California, Berkeley.



© UN Photo / Manuel Elias

exclusion and the skewed inter-generational distribution of wealth and government benefits. There is worse to come. Employment in small and medium-size enterprises around the world, which counts for the majority of employment, seems particularly vulnerable.

Here is the UN's great cause. Throw caution to the winds and lay out Guterres' new social contract for the world to see. Deploy campaigning and convening to build a new global bargain. And put governments on the spot by indexing and spotlighting performance to expose which are delivering and which aren't.

For the MDGs, I set up UN project offices outside the normal UN intergovernmental constraints to measure and create league tables and score cards of national performance that allowed citizens to hold their government to account; then under Jeff Sachs, to cost out what it would take to achieve the goals; and finally a team to liaise and communicate with civil society activists that was more jeans and T-shirts than the typical UN Brooks Brothers uniform.

Build on that precedent. Push bravely on the door. If I have a mild complaint about the SDGs it is that they have lost something of the edgy outsider status of the early MDGs. The UN is too much the incumbent and not enough the insurgent and it shows in the difficulty the current UN has in breaking through in communications terms.

On such a campaign's coattails remake the argument for multilateralism. Argue too many of these problems cannot be fixed at the country level alone. Local results, on say climate, require global collaboration and action. Once the UN is reconnected to grassroots concerns it is not a hard argument to make.

If a campaign that mobilises younger citizens around this global economic and personal security agenda is to have legs it must find allies where it can and not be constrained by the foot-dragging back end of the General Assembly. When the UN

has touched the stars, the lift has come from civil society not government. Civil society was active in San Francisco in 1945, pushing the level of ambition of the official conference as it was later when Eleanor Roosevelt led the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Today around each SDG clusters a network of champions. In many, corporates show greater ambition than governments. In all, the most innovative thinking comes from the many corners of the civil society mosaic — local and international NGOs, mayors and their cities, governors and CEOs; activists and academics that harness the energy. The UN Foundation which I co-chair interfaces with many of these groups. Their commitment is bracing but needs to be more fully included in the working methods of a future UN.

Building variegated coalition of states and non-state actors willing to be first movers on different parts of this agenda is a not a new path to action in the UN. Now it needs to be turbo-charged. The world won't wait for the most plodding and resistant nations to sign up to action. With civil society allies the UN needs to be much bolder in shaping, not just responding to, countries' agendas.

This same variegated approach needs to be applied to the more difficult area of human rights. The official intergovernmental body, the Human Rights Council is not fit for purpose but as one of the authors of the reform that raised it from Commission to Council, I doubt there is an institutional fix. The UN in the person of the High Commissioner for Human Rights needs to choose their ground and pick their fights — determine a mix of individual and collective rights on which they wish to particularly stand and marshal the UN's allies, a variegated coalition if ever there was one of states and NGOs, to champion Rights for which it can build support.

And where the High Commissioner cannot, and the Council will not, raise their voice, their office must still let its reporting speak for itself. Abuses of rights must be universally reported and documented, but allies in civil society and government partners must raise their voices when politics prevents the UN machinery shouting out abuses. The UN needs to be part of a rights ecosystem where different partners can each step up where their comparative advantage lies. It cannot make conscience a hostage to politics, but it must also make its intergovernmental structure more malleable. It can do that as civil society becomes a more recognised voice, one that can balance out the silence or opposition on occasion of governments. The current High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet has the stature to thread this difficult needle.

A less-noticed front in the battle to protect human rights is around civil society voice at the country level. UN Resident Co-ordinators that I have spoken to in recent months, and indeed the UN's 75th research, suggests closing space for their civil society partners around debating or criticising the performance of government on service delivery, or corruption and accountability. Resident Co-ordinators and the UN system must be critical protectors and promoters of local civil society voices. Too many governments see the current political climate as a license to step on their home critics. The UN needs to step in and protect its civil society partners. A Global Social Contract will be stillborn without them.

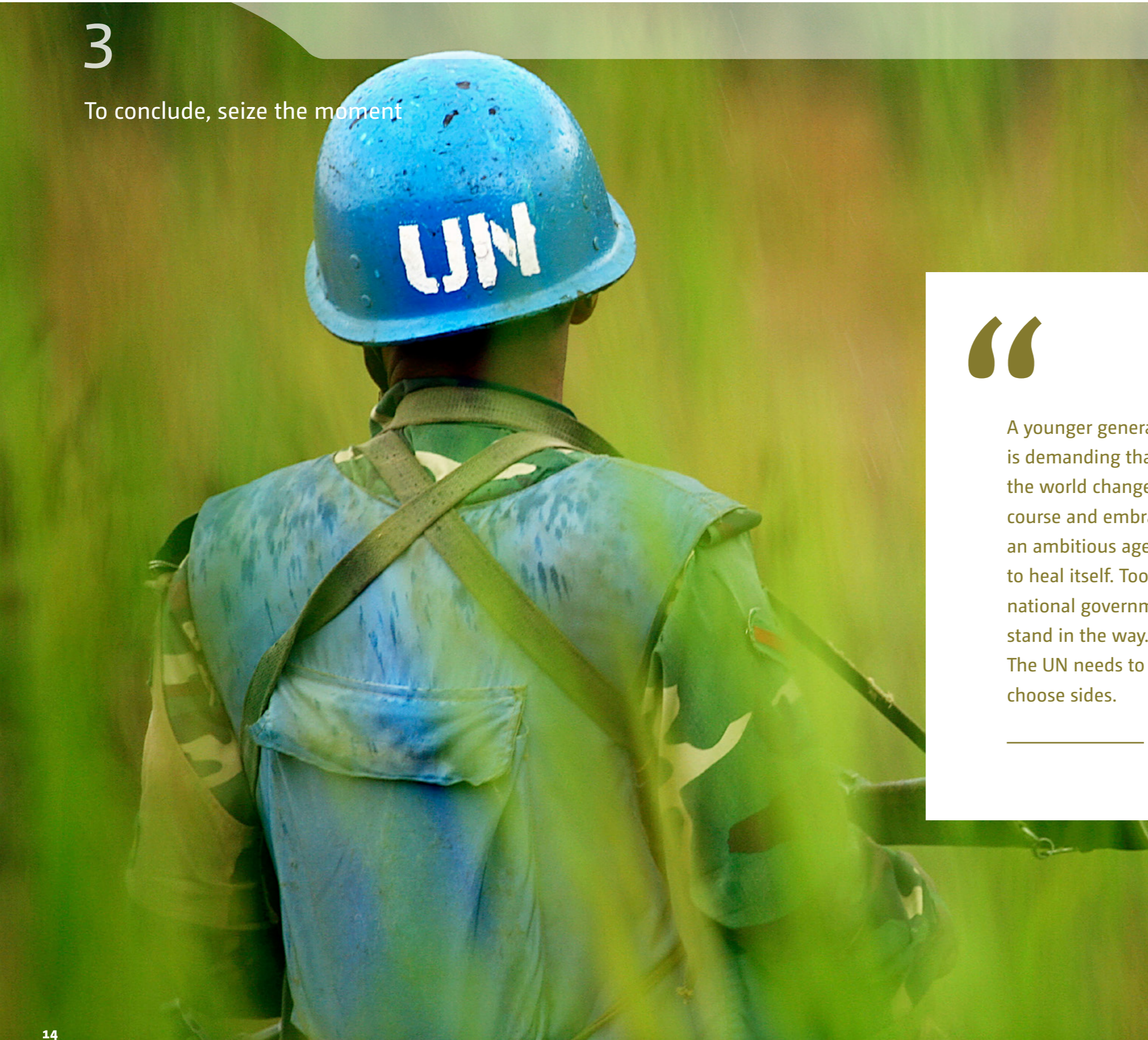
And the final step to restored effectiveness is of course in time to recover authority in the political and security space.



The UN is too much the incumbent and not enough the insurgent and it shows in the difficulty the current UN has in breaking through in communications terms.

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To conclude, seize the moment



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A younger generation is demanding that the world changes course and embraces an ambitious agenda to heal itself. Too many national governments stand in the way. The UN needs to choose sides.

If there is a silver lining it is that the character of conflict continues to change, opening grim new opportunity. Not only is peacekeeping less than ever the thin blue line between states, it is not even in many cases policing full-blown internal conflicts in a Democratic Republic of the Congo or Syria as in the past.

The more likely future of conflict, at least where the UN will have a role, is low-level but persistent political violence around exclusion, suppression of minority rights and inter-generational conflict in a context of deteriorating state institutions such as policing, justice and social service delivery.

The way into these situations that may not be via the Security Council but rather via humanitarian, development and the human rights arms of the system. These will be development and rights breakdowns where the UN is already present. The UN will not have to wait for the permission of the Security Council — it is there already. The World Bank has estimated that by 2030 two-thirds of the world's extreme poor could be living in areas of conflict and violence.

Or where the Security Council has allowed deployment it is the heads of those missions, the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General who, in their local good offices work, do more to heal wounds and build bridges than their masters around the Security Council table.

Pursuing solutions to conflict outside the confines of the Security Council may have a further benefit. Perhaps its privileged owners, the P5,⁷ may come to recognise through being so ostracised that unreformed they risk going down with the ship. Only through an ambitious expansion of 'ownership' through the election perhaps of key states to much longer revolving terms than today's elected members; together with reform of the rules to limit veto use and ensure an open agenda to address all threats to peace and security; together with the right of all parties, non-state as well as state, to participate in the evidence gathering phase of the deliberations can we rebuild a Security Council that counts.

For years there has been demand for Security Council reform. This would almost certainly require Charter amendment. The difficulties of that have offered a convenient hiding place for those reluctant to embrace change. However, if today under Article 109 of the Charter a review conference was called, a different starting point might be collective rights as discussed here. More robust burden-sharing and individual government accountability around climate change and other public goods issues might be a more powerful entry point to a restrengthened UN than the locked door of Security Council reform. A younger generation is demanding that the world changes course and embraces an ambitious agenda to heal itself. Too many national governments stand in the way. The UN needs to choose sides.

This is not a manifesto to change the world overnight. Rather it is a call for the UN to seize the moment and take advantage of the opportunities it has at a time of global crisis to recover relevance and to drive a new global consensus on tackling our collective weaknesses that COVID-19 has so cruelly exposed. There is a majority out there for a better governed and prepared, more caring and inclusive world but that same majority has grown impatient with existing institutions. The UN can be part of that failed past or attach itself to an emerging future.

Let The Campaign begin.

⁷ China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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- 24 | Slow Death or a New Direction
Mark Malloch-Brown
- 23 | Informality – addressing the Achilles heel of social protection in Latin America
Santiago Levy
- 22 | The Political Economy Of Structural Transformation: Has Democracy Failed African Economies?
Ernest Aryeetey
- 21 | How are People Poor?
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- 20 | Interventions against Poverty in Poor Places
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- 19 | Development research and changing priorities
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- 11 | The Climate Change Challenge
Kemal Derviş
- 10 | Global Patterns of Income and Health: Facts, Interpretations, and Policies
Angus Deaton
- 9 | The World is Not Flat: Inequality and Injustice in our Global Economy
Nancy Birdsall
- 8 | Rethinking Growth Strategies
Dani Rodrik
- 7 | Global Labour Standards and Local Freedoms
Kaushik Basu
- 6 | Winners and Losers in Two Centuries of Globalization
Jeffrey G. Williamson
- 5 | Horizontal Inequality: A Neglected Dimension of Development
Frances Stewart
- 4 | Globalization and Appropriate Governance
Jagdish N. Bhagwati
- 3 | Is Rising Income Inequality Inevitable? A Critique of the Transatlantic Consensus
Sir Anthony B. Atkinson
- 2 | More Instruments and Broader Goals: Moving Toward the Post-Washington Consensus
Joseph E. Stiglitz
- 1 | The Contribution of the New Institutional Economics to an Understanding of the Transition Problem
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