
Presidential Address¹

CoNGO General Assembly | 29 November 2021 | New York City | Hybrid

Shaping the Future: The UN We Need and the World We Want

By **Liberato C. Bautista, CoNGO President**

Your excellencies,
Esteemed delegates, observers and invited guests,
Friends, ladies and gentlemen:

Welcome to the 27th General Assembly of CoNGO—the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations.

I want to express deep gratitude to the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, for gracing our Assembly with a keynote address of prime importance. In his words, NGOs are “drivers of change, innovators and custodians of accountability for commitments made, you are an essential component of the multilateral system and critical partners of the United Nations in our pursuit of a more just, resilient and sustainable world.”

I want to also express deep thanks to the President of the UN General Assembly, His Excellency Abdulla Shahid of the Maldives, for his keynote address. Thank you Ambassador Shahid for addressing our assembly. I especially highlight your statement that “civil society organizations are and should never be passive observers” and that “civil society is an integral component of the global multilateral system.”

I deeply appreciate your excellency’s high regard for NGOs, when you said, “You are our advisers and our ears to the ground” and to that end, that “We cannot fulfill our duties without you.”

We will take heed of your charge to us. That in the context of “the universal convening power of the United Nations”, we will take seriously, as indeed we do, “the collective power of civil society to push for change”.

¹ Edited based on text as delivered.

We look forward to collaborating with your Presidency of Hope, noting your call: “To continue your important role as a reliable partner of the UN, and that you work to make our organization more accountable, efficient, effective and transparent.” CoNGO couldn’t agree more with you, Ambassador Shahid.

And last but not least, my deepest thanks as well to the President of the UN Economic and Social Council, His Excellency Collen Vixen Kelapile of Botswana, for his keynote address, and addressing us live from his office.

I note with great importance your message to us, Ambassador Kelapile, placing your presidency and civil society as dependable partners in the work of ECOSOC. I heard the challenge you posed to CoNGO: that the voice of NGOs “greatly enhances ECOSOC work by providing expert advice and policy recommendations” to ECOSOC deliberations.” We heard you loud and clear, and we will use and mobilize NGO voice and agency in every venue and instance so that the collaboration is meaningful and strategic.

We heard you say the same message from Ambassador Shahid: That our work “assists the governments in their implementation efforts by holding them accountable for commitments made in addressing the many challenges faced by humanity.”

I thank you in particular for lifting the concern on inequality and racism, calling these as the key priorities of your presidency. We look forward to collaborating with you on these priorities especially when you prepare and convene a meeting to address what you said is racism that is “one aspect of intergenerational reproduction of poverty and inequality.

As CoNGO President, to assemble the top three UN leaders of greatest importance to the work of NGOS at the UN and address us in succession bestowed enormous honor upon our organization. I am deeply grateful to you UN Secretary General, President of the General Assembly, and President of ECOSOC for your presence and keynote addresses. I could not have wished for more, even as in the next three days more UN-related addresses will be delivered.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

We are meeting at a time equally troubled and troubling, and auspicious and opportune.

Our times are troubled and troubling for so many reasons.

The infectious CoVID-19 virus continues to challenge science and our imagination. Unleashed in its many forms and mutations, it continues to wreak havoc on lives and livelihoods worldwide.

We are meeting in a troubled and troubling time. And it is worrisome.

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CoVID-19 has exposed the underlying inequalities and injustices in our society. Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance have heightened, exposing their systemic and structural nature and thereby exacerbating the deep fissures in our human, social and societal relations.

We are meeting in a troubled and troubling time.

But we must seize this troubled and troubling time for its auspicious and opportune moments not only to define the present that troubles us but to shape a future that is livable and sustainable, peaceable and just.

The frustrations expressed at the climate conference in Glasgow at the lost momentum for truly seizing climate change is certainly troubling, if not doomed. Loss and damage are real, if not terrifying, in peoples' lives and livelihoods. We must scale back and scale down human impact on climate if we are to survive, both as the human species and the planet.

The future—our future and our children and their children's future—is in peril. People and planet, peace and prosperity—all are in peril. Unless we act, and act collectively, survival and sustainability are imperiled.

We are meeting as the Conference of NGOs invariably related and accredited to ECOSOC and other bodies within the UN System. Our theme is thrusting us in this present that is at once troubled and troubling, auspicious and opportune.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

We must rise to the occasion, with all the moral suasion we can muster, and the material wherewithal we can roundup, so as to meet, at the very least, targets identified under the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

Meeting these goals will not be enough. So much more is demanded of us because the SDGs do not cover all that troubles us and the planet. At best, they are base floors to start from and never as ceilings to reach.

We must scale up. We must rise to the occasion—face the present tensions of our times and contribute to shaping the future we want.

Since 2008 when we launched a multiyear theme for CoNGO—Defining the Present, Shaping the Future—we have been collectively grappling with the issues of the present and peering into a future that is at once uncertain and knowable.

At the Civil Society Summit on Substantive Issues that we held on October 25, just a little over a month ago, we looked at several issues that trouble and challenge us. And then we ventured into an imagination of what the future would look like if historic injustices—like slavery, colonialism, genocide and racism—were truly eliminated, and

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hunger, poverty and diseases were truly eradicated.

As NGO leaders working the labyrinthine halls of the UN you know the many multilateral campaigns that start with what needs eliminating and eradicating. The work of eliminating and eradicating is daunting because most of the time we are dealing with historic injustices with systemic expressions that linger today.

At the Civil Society Summit we peered into the future through the prism of the present tense. Current tensions, if you will. I realized then that it was far easier to mobilize words to describe the tensions and concerns we face daily but far harder to conjure up images and texts on the things we must address together and collectively.

Part of the multilateral fascination is the penchant by its interlocutors for words and texts and more of the same. I am guilty as charged. But the search for forthright action is also part of multilateral imagination, even if mostly found wanting.

Our Civil Society Summit had the same dynamic. Our aspirations for a just, peaceable, durable and sustainable world, indeed, of life and living, were aching for words wrought in texts equally inspirational and actionable so that they coax actions that matter in effecting the change we want in the world we need.

Still, just like the multilateral arena, our work includes words and more words even as we know it actually needs—achingly needs—action and more action. We must not allow the further deterioration of civil discourse and the increase of undemocratic practices, including intolerance, in the public square.

Words and texts, of course, are not always rendered in manners actionable and urgently. Many times in many places words can come later. What is needed is timely solidarity in situations of rampant racism, in places with massive and forced migration and internal displacement, with unforgiving droughts and famines, and yes in places where gender violence and social inequities define human relations.

Actually, it is beyond solidarity and identification. From our Spanish-speaking siblings, we learn of being and acting solidarily. We must be about accompanying people triumph over the narratives that have controlled their lives and living. These are the narratives of their political oppression, their economic exploitation, their cultural marginalization, and their impoverization and vulnerability.

We must extricate our complicities in the systemic and structural injustices that people continue to suffer from because we continue to perpetuate these injustices in our human relations, in our communities, and in the systems of governance we have installed and entrenched at the local, national, regional and international, and yes even at multilateral levels.

Local governance as much as multilateral governance is in need of overhauling so that the orientation of governance is not just governance but just and participatory governance.

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

Even as our multilateral engagement continues in the production and deployment of words and texts (say treaties, conventions, declarations and protocols) we must per force engage in every locale we find ourselves in increasing the production and distribution of food as much as fostering freedom, in the creation of jobs as much as advancing justice, and in the productive and sustainable tilling of lands as much as securing liberty.

Food and freedom, jobs and justice, land and liberty. Perhaps more. But these and more are the civil and political as well as the social, economic and cultural concerns that must cajole us to action.

Lest we continue troubled, we must act on these, and now.

If we choose to be silent where these concerns are found lacking and wanting, we will have consigned the imagination of what humanity needs and what planetary solidarity requires to entities who would rather extract, pillage and plunder human and earth's resources for greed and profit.

Native and indigenous peoples know all too well this situation. We are still wanting in our collective search for forgiveness from our share of slavery, racism and colonialism.

I echo the frustration of the current UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Prof. E. Tendayi Achiume, that while civil society groups “have long called for reparations for historical racial injustices, there has been, for an equally long period, a concerted effort by some States and institutions to sideline, marginalize and dismiss reparative justice.”

If we act on these concerns, and we must, action will not be easy. Because we will need to trouble the waters of complacency and inaction. That's the future tense—questioning our inaction today because we have lives and livelihoods—indeed the flourishing of human life and the prospering of our societies and the planet—at stake.

The present is already imperiled; we must act today to secure the future of generations after us.

We must seize the time and not renege on our obligation to the future of our children and youth and the only planet we live in.

We must act today so that multilateral action—indeed collaboration on all fronts and collective action on all issues—will not be found wanting tomorrow and in the future. This we do—we promise we do—collaboration in all fronts and collective action on all issues.

This is multilateralism that works—when it works for people and provides the

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wherewithal for their needs to be met and for their human rights to be respected. This is multilateralism that matters—and it matters when dismantling and eradicating the structural and systemic injustice in society are the first order of business and governance.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

Shaping the future is not just a vision, it must be a task.

At this CoNGO assembly, we must share in the burden of defining what kind of UN we need for the kind of world we want.

I want you to note the conjunction “for” between UN and the world. In its entirety, our assembly theme says, “Shaping the Future: The UN we need for the world we want”.

There are many iterations of these twin undertakings, and one of them would have said “Shaping the Future: The UN we need and the world we want”.

The conjunction “and”—in my view—just doesn’t capture what the conjunction “for” does in our theme. What the conjunction “for” does is to

force upon our imagination that the UN we need is intrinsic to our imagination of the world we want. It cannot exist apart from the world it seeks to act upon.

Put in another way—the UN is not a universe of its own, and multilateral action, no matter how grand and grandiose multilateral texts are written—are not the sole venue of the imagination of people’s needs and wants and human rights. Rather, the multilateral arena, significantly the UN, is the interlocutor for those needs, wants and rights so that people and the planet truly matter.

Failing this, the troubled and troubling present will mutate into an even more troubled and troubling future.

The burden of this CoNGO assembly is not the lack of imagination about the present tense. You—our member organizations—are variedly located in parts of the world where you confront the issues that trouble our world and do your darndest best to act upon them.

The true burden of this assembly has to do with how we imagine international relations and international affairs. The notion of the international has moved too much away from the national—I mean from the true nationals—we the peoples. That’s what *international* means. We must recover and recenter “we the peoples” both in our words and deeds.

The multilateralism that works and will be relevant and responsive for the future is the multilateralism where the people of the world and the betterment of their lives in the planet they live in are at the heart of the multilateral agenda. It’s one thing to

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improve and innovate on multilateralism; it's another to conduct it in the service of the people and of the planet.

This to me is the true reason why we must protect the consultative status—indeed of access to the UN: it is to ensure that the voice and agency of “we the peoples of the world” always get a hearing and that we have a seat at the multilateral tables—not proxies but people and their organized and accredited associations.

NGOs accredited to the UN have varied responsibilities to create platforms for hearing the voice and presenting the agency of those who rarely have occasions to address the UN and multilateral gatherings, like:

- those who experience the inequalities that uneven economic development among countries exact upon peoples and communities;
- those whose labor and services are exploited and underpaid, like migrant workers, because of unregulated greed and profitmaking;
- those who meet and suffer the horrors of war and conflict—including wars of aggression and occupation—that are mediated by unchecked militarism, war adventurism, and increasing rearmaments that national security arrangements favor rather than prospering collective human security;
- those affected by massive displacement of peoples—forced migration if you will—because of lingering wars and conflicts, or restrictions placed on the practice of one's religion, but increasingly also due to climate change.

I could enumerate more. The vastness of concerns NGOs tackle can be seen in the expanse of work that CoNGO's more than 500 NGO members attend to everyday. The same holds true of the aims and objectives of more than thirty NGO substantive committees related to CoNGO. Part of the joy I receive as CoNGO president is derived from the updates you as members tell me in your emails, reports and phone calls.

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,:

With a vista of the present, the future seems bleak. Consider a world and its peoples, communities, resources and activities that are challenged by:

1. Global climate change, where global warming is affecting the relations of peoples among themselves and the planet—its resources and capacity to ensure sustainability and viability of civilizational and planetary life.
2. Global migration, where the freedom of movement—a protected right—is challenged by the fact that:
 - a) while the world is globalized, it is increasingly xenophobically nationalistic;
 - b) arrangements for movement are increasingly securitized, militarized and criminalized;

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- c) human identities and interactions are increasingly racialized and ethnicized, othered and anathemized;
 - d) people and their bodies, and the labor they do and the services they render, are increasingly gendered and sexualized, commodified and commoditized.
3. Global violence, where the world is increasingly growing wary and wary, armed to the death with increased armaments and instruments of mass destruction, endangering both people and the planet.
 4. Global pandemics that have unraveled inequalities at the intersections of crises in health (especially the Covid-19 pandemic), in economy, and environment.
 5. Global racism, in which the historic injustices and legacies of slavery, colonialism and racism are not only haunting us in the present but also demanding of us a renewed consideration of restorative and reparative justice.

If only this world were more kind, more just, more compassionate, more friendly, more diverse and more inclusive—oh, “what a wonderful world” and future that would be!

We can make it a wonderful world. Because that world is the future of your children, grandchildren, and seven generations thereafter. It is the future we are securing because we have the moral, and yes even increasing legal, obligations to secure and not imperil their right to the future (to peace, to development, to sustainability).

It is the future I would like for Logan, my 3-year old granddaughter, and Ayla, my less than three week-old new granddaughter. The future I just described is one they truly deserve. It is what I want to bequeath them. It is a future that your children and grandchildren, and future generations, deserve.

And we can redirect our energies and advocacies for the building of such a future. Let’s dedicate our energies to building an infrastructure of care and hospitality (acts of mercy and humanitarianism) as much as to the building of an architecture of solidarity and protection (legal and justice base for human rights protection, defense and solidarity).

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

At this assembly, we will look at the synthesis report of the Civil Society Summit on Substantive Issues and see how it can help us develop lines and methods of work and advocacy that contribute to national, international and transborder solidarity and action. The summit was convened to aid CoNGO develop strategic programmatic directions.

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When we take stock of our capacities as a confederal body of non-governmental organizations, we have capital in that we are a group of more than 500 NGOs. And that's a big group that can truly do good in society. But then we realize that we NGOs relating to the UN are but a fraction of the widest expanse of civil society, to use the words of Ambassador Shahid, "the NGOs on the ground," who are acting upon the world in the places where they operate.

The far more expansive social movements on the ground do not come to the UN. They consider such visits to the UN a luxury compared to tending and tilling their farms to put food on the table for their children and family.

We advocate for transparent, accountable and sufficiently funded United Nations because we want space and time for the widest expanse of "We the peoples" to truly matter in multilateral negotiating tables and multilateral processes and for the greatest need of people and the planet to be fully funded.

Let us be clear, that we as NGOs owe our identity and place in multilateral and intergovernmental processes from the understanding that we are part of "we the peoples" and therefore are rights-holders, and governments as member-states, are duty-bearers.

Let us be vigilant so that the "participation and engagement of civil society organizations in the work of the UN" are protected in accordance with existing modalities, not the least by ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31. But also, that the global citizenship we love to talk about at the UN and global levels must not give to governments a pass to curtail civic engagement and democratic discourse at the local and national levels.

While "we the peoples" come in many forms across decision making arenas, not just at the UN but in regional, national and local venues, the UN is one such place where the accredited consultative status should be followed and protected and not supplanted by other arrangements, including what are called multistakeholder arrangements, that accrue to non-accredited groups equal, and sometimes even greater access to and influence in the intergovernmental processes.

I submit to you that what I started in my second term when elected in 2018 is a leadership principle I will continue to pursue—that of harnessing the "power of *Co*" in CoNGO—as in us being co-NGOs together.

If we are to be efficient, responsive and accountable in our work, we must be in **Consultation** with our counterparts in the widest expanse of the UN System, systemwide. We must always endeavor to protect this consultative status and claim it with the responsibilities and obligations that accrue to it.

We must be in **Collaboration** with the widest expanse of NGOs accredited to the UN System, but especially through CoNGO's substantive committees working on a whole gamut of substantive issues.

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We must be in **Co**operation with the widest network of civil society and critical social movement alliances and networks on the ground.

Ladies and gentlemen, members of CoNGO:

I hope in the course of our three days of conferencing you will see glimpses of how we have pursued the organizational objectives of CoNGO. Our member organizations—the organizations that you represent here—are part and parcel of that workforce for good that you truly are.

At this assembly you will have the occasion to accept and approve a document called “*Compendium of Principles for NGO Good Practice*.” The Compendium was produced and submitted to this Assembly by the CoNGO Board which conducted consultations with CoNGO members, substantive NGO committees, and the wider civil society community.

This Compendium is not intended to be a Rules Book, still less to imply sanctions. It is a guidance document drawn from experience over the years in relationships among and within NGOs, notably those that have a consultative relationship of any type within the United Nations System. It may be considered that the Compendium could be revised and updated every few years, to take account of evolving conditions and practice

We must continue to strive to make NGOs and their work contribute to the public good. We must strive always to be a force for good ourselves, even a formidable force in shaping the future. This vision of our role in the local, national, regional and multilateral arenas augurs well as we prepare to plan how we leverage our 75th anniversary in 2023, in the same year as the UN Secretary General is proposing to hold a Summit of the future.

We have a say about this future. We have been defining this future and our work, your organizational work, and the work of our NGO committees, contributing to shaping the future with a UN we need—adequately funded, and accountable, transparent and responsible—so that it meets the demands of the people for the world we want.

We must leverage our organizational unity and strength in addressing a central task of CoNGO. I am referring to the facilitation and enhancement of the participation of NGOs in the United Nations System.

We must work harder to ensure that NGOs are fairly and justly evaluated when applying for accreditation before the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs. This is so fundamental to the access issue. We will continue a direct line of communication and engagement with the Chair of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs as well as the civil society units at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Department of Global Communications.

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Accreditation provides for the necessary portal to being present at multilateral tables of consultation and engagement. And once accredited, NGOs must have adequate and regular access to UN meetings, conferences, special events and documentation. NGO access to and at the UN is a major channel through which NGOs assert their voice and exercise their agency throughout the UN System, contributing their expertise, commitment, energy, and substantive input to policy-making processes.

“CoNGO has constantly striven to ensure and defend the free exchange of ideas among all parties at the United Nations, systemwide, including in relation to UN Summits and Conventions.” (CoNGO Statement on NGO Access to and at the UN in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, 30 November 2020. See www.ngocongo.org).

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

While these are troubled and troubling times, they are opportune and auspicious times too—to do justice, to love mercy and walk humbly with each other and in the way we tinker with the ecological system we all share.

It is crucial that we recognize the finitude of the resources of the planet earth even as we must believe in the plenitude of hope and compassion that we can muster.

We must be harbingers of a season of hope even when hope appears scant and deficient.

I would like to recall what I said in my New Year message to CoNGO this year. It seems relevant repeating a part of that message to end my presidential address, and still to define our present but also to frame the future.

In that message, I said and I say again, that:

“Today, the problems and challenges we face have brought about a surfeit or surplus of fear and a deficit of hope. Let us then commit our NGOs and CSOs to the urgent tasks of decreasing fear and increasing hope.”

“To decrease fear, we must continually affirm human dignity and human rights as inherent, inalienable, indivisible and interdependent.”

The affirmation of the universality of human rights lies in the expansion of such rights we add to the catalogue, and even more so, their application in our day to day lives.

“To increase hope we must build a common future for all the inhabitants of the earth and their natural ecology—the earth itself—refusing pillage and plunder in our economic life, and instead, promoting and safeguarding the common public goods and services indispensable to securing life and life’s flourishing.”

And while I speak of building a common future, lest we be negligent of our continuing entanglements with an ignominious past, let us not postpone any longer than is

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already inordinately delayed—our efforts, indeed responsibility, to address generational psychosocial traumas brought about by the historic evils of slavery, colonialism and racism.

We owe this work now not just to the dead, but to the living and to the future generations of children and young people. This future generation are decisionmakers now and they have a right to participate actively in crafting that future, their future.

I hope that in the next three days, as we plow through the agenda of this assembly, we will find not only words—new words—but also find common action—new actions. Actions that matter to people and the planet for peace and prosperity for all.

Thank you very much for your indulgence.

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