



---

## Presidential Address at CoNGO 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in Vienna

By **Liberato C. Bautista**  
CoNGO President

Excellencies,  
Esteemed UN officials  
Distinguished guests and NGO colleagues  
Ladies and gentlemen:

What a great day and year 2023—made even more significant because you honored us with your presence and accompaniment. Today, we commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CoNGO—the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations.

Along the way—all through the years from 1948 to 2023—many like you have trod with CoNGO on a path equally rough and smooth but decidedly doing so to trailblaze the way for non-governmental organizations to have a place and voice in multilateral arenas.

The United Nations was only three years old when CoNGO was born. I surmise that the UN and CoNGO grew up together in the same neighborhoods where wars of colonialism and imperial conquest tested anyone's resolve, fledgling as they were, to imagine a world of peace and security so that the "scourge of war"—indeed the ignominious legacies of slavery, colonialism, genocide and racism—visit us no more—not our imagination, not our neighborhoods.

The UN and CoNGO grew up together in the same neighborhoods that tested our imagination of what it means to recognize and protect innate human worth and dignity with a regime of universal, indivisible and interdependent human rights. We also grew up together in the same neighborhoods that tested our imagination of progress—characterized by development that no longer plundered the earth and compromised the enjoyment of our collective life as humanity.

By building up a pantheon of rights, our collective resolve was to bequeath to every person in the neighborhood the protections necessary for people to be bearers of human rights and enjoy and flourish with these rights and for nation-states, as duty bearers, to build the architecture of protection needed for the flourishing of human life in dignity.

And that even in the worst times of warring territories and quarrelsome neighborhoods, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness will not be derogated or diminished.

Never again should *human dignity* be otherwise than what it means to be people of innate worth. Protecting human dignity with human rights is the way to mobilize collective action and craft the collective voice and resolve to build the international regime for human rights and human dignity, security and peace for sustainable development.

I speak of neighborhoods because these places of familiarity, indeed of memory, make it impossible to live together without the genuine pursuit of friendly, just, peaceable and democratic relations—be it among people, nation-states or the institutions they have built.

Neighborhoods bring us back to a more general understanding of our global challenges. Simultaneously at the local and international arenas, we deal with the legacies of the past and the challenges of the present not as all too distant territories and atomized communities but as close neighbors and friends evolving common public goods—such as food and freedom, jobs and justice, land and liberty—and securing these for everyone—with no one left behind in their pursuit.

The multilateral enterprise must not be allowed to proceed as if it were about inanimate objects like nation-states rather than thinking, feeling, and acting as humans—citizens or otherwise. And indeed, as if it were not about a living, breathing, earth and fragile ecology. Because the SDGs are about people and the planet, our concern must be for both and not just one or the other.

The multilateral enterprise must bring us back to people and our true home, the planet Earth. Here, I recall the provenance of what we recite today as people-centered development, using the words of Federico Mayor as inscribed in his book *Memory of the Future*.

Mayor says that “we owe Mr. Mahbb Ul-Haq, then the former Minister of Industry of Pakistan, who came up with the concept and published in a report submitted to the United Nations Development Program in 1992. This term originally referred to “development which ensures both economic growth and equitable distribution of their growth, which sets out to satisfy the basic needs of individuals and the whole range of human aspirations, which aims at creating economic opportunities wherever there is scope for individual talents, which attaches as much importance to the agonizing choices of the North as to the misfortunes of the South; and which takes into account a whole set of parameters enabling well-being to be measured more accurately in terms of education, democracy, justice and solidarity.”

It may be worth reflecting on the above and seeing where we have been, where we are going, what needs to be done, and by whom, as I urge us to revisit the Brundtland Commission’s “Our Common Future” and Antonio Guterres’ “Our Common Agenda.” Might it be that we have compromised the future of people and the planet more than we admit and that we have delayed the future’s flourishing, that is, the flourishing of people and the planet, in the way that Guterres’s Agenda brings us back to the drawing board and calls are to reboot multilateralism—that is, revisit, reinscribe and redraw our aspirations again to achieve a responsive, accountable and relevant multilateralism where “we the peoples” and the planet truly matter in a globally interconnected world?

CoNGO’s 75th-anniversary theme is “Defining the Present, Shaping the Future, Making the Change Now.” In its 75 years, CoNGO has contributed to identifying the issues that matter to people and the planet, contributing the definition of the present challenges in our world today, and then imaging with the people and their governments and civic institutions how the future might be if we acted in a way that is more just, more peaceable, more democratic, more sustainable than our inherited past. This theme

forges us into the crucible of the present and into the urgency of acting now and committing ourselves to be the agents of change and transformation.

My NGO colleagues would have heard me repeatedly say that there should be no proxying the work in work for peace and security, human dignity and human rights, progress and sustainable development—the pillars of the UN and the multilateral agenda. We must embrace this work—together, not the least, the collectivity that is CoNGO, the mass of civil society.

In other words, also, both the UN and civil society formations must make available the platforms in which the voice and agency of the people—and the integrity of the living planet—are presented in multilateral discussions and negotiations—not via their proxies but via themselves who can articulate their present, dream their future and participate as primary players in achieving such dreams.

Today, CoNGO is a solid and visible presence at the United Nations, thanks to the power of doing and acting as Co-NGOs in the multilateral arena. Like governments, nothing can be done better to address the global challenges the people and the planet face except doing it collectively and together.

CoNGO is uniquely placed in the family of NGOs in that it puts primacy to access to the UN and representation at multilateral discussions. For me, this means access to the premises and the promises of the multilateral ideal. This means that the physical premises of the multilateral institutions must ensure that “we the peoples”—in our collective mass as civil society representatives organized as NGOs—find a secure place in the premises of the UN to our aspirations, contribute our expertise, and join in policy making that genuinely honors a broader expanse of democratic practice. Such will not happen if we allow the further shrinking of the public space, the subversion of the democratic discourse, and the arrest of civic activists and human rights defenders.

CoNGO is about premises but also promises. Premises and NGO access to them are central to the advocacy work of CoNGO. But access to the premises leads to something if we, as NGOs, also have access to the promises of the UN. By access to the promises, I mean access to the substantive agenda of the UN, and this means valuing NGOs' expertise in the multilateral agenda and negotiating tables.

Access to the premises and promises of the UN must be a component of Multilateralism 2.0. This would mean not just a reboot from the same multilateral architecture but a reboot and a rewire so that the NGO wire is internal rather than external to the architecture.

It is then my honor and pleasure to express the deep gratitude of CoNGO, its leadership and its membership worldwide to the people in the multilateral institutions, especially those here in Vienna, who have given the varied instances and occasions for our members—and civil society writ large—to present their voice and agency in the premises and the promises that are represented here at UNOV.

Thank you to all the speakers at this event, already named in our program and projected on the screen.

Thank you Mirella Dumar Frahi. Thank you, Maria Naderhirn. Thank you, Omar Zevallos-Orillo. My thanks go to far more people here. I invite you to look at the screen. {Mary Albon | Billy Batware | Ena Bektasevic | Sebastian Maurice Denton | Mirella Dummar-Frahi | Irene Hoeglinger-Neiva | Ahmed Tareq Ibrahim Maaty | Maria Naderhirn | Martin Nesirky | Sergey Peresada | Eija Rinnetmaeki | UNODC-Advocacy Section | Omar Zevallos Orrillo | Viktoriia Zharkova}

My thanks and gratitude also go to my colleagues at CoNGO, especially those stationed here in Vienna, for their labor of love—indeed passion for civil society work—expressed in their careful and dedicated preparation of this and related 75th-anniversary events here in Vienna. Under the leadership of Martina Gredler and her team of NGO representatives, it is possible to bring you this excellent program this afternoon. I invite you to look at the screen for the names of the preparatory team: {Renate Amesbauer | Wolfgang Beiglbock | Jamie Bridge | Hava-Eva Bugajer | John Clark | Georg Dimitz | Evelyn Dürmayer | Elizabeth Francis | Ingeborg Geyer | Martina Gredler | Ceja Gregor | Angelika Hofmann | Deb Kamil | Herta Kaschitz | Paul Loser | Hannes Ludwig | Belinda Mikosz | Eleonore Hauer Rona | Maria Riehl | Jacqueline Stark | Shantu Watt}.

Without you at the UN abiding with us, and without you, our dedicated officers here represented by our CoNGO Global Officers—with Cyril Ritchie, First Vice President and Martina Gredler, Second Vice President, and myself—and the six hundred plus NGO members of CoNGO, it would have been impossible to do the task we intentionally burdened ourselves with, not the least access to the premises and the promises of the UN so that we can contribute to defining the present, shaping the future and making the change—ourselves, with others, and not sooner or later, but now.

There was a story of a group of people who missed the centennial of their organization. They apologized to their president, who admonished them and said, “Thanks for the apology. Make sure you will not be late again in the next centennial.” I will not see you at CoNGO’s centennial in 2048. Still, I would like to think that there will be those at that centennial who will look back and say—well done, CoNGO and UN—the premises of the UN remain open to civil society. Its promises have been fulfilled, thanks to your continued engagement and collaboration for a greater UN, justice, peace, equity and equality, and representative democracy.

Vienna, Austria  
April 28, 2023