UN75 Global Consultation with Young Professionals in San Francisco: a Collective Narrative

By Agustina Singh

On March 7, 2020, the United Nations Association of the USA, San Francisco Chapter (UNA-SF) hosted the UN75 Global Consultation with Young Professionals in San Francisco to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations (UN) and help the UN set its priorities for the next 25 years. This endeavor is part of a series of consultations with several stakeholder groups of San Francisco — the birthplace of the United Nations.

Delegates of this consultation represented four cohorts of the Young Professionals for Sustainable Development Goals Seminar Series offered jointly by the UNA-SF and the University of San Francisco since 2018. These young professionals come from various walks of life, have different professional experiences and aspirations, but they share interest in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and a passion for working towards a brighter future.

In the context of the rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic, this consultation was conducted online. A participatory process called World Café was used to combine the benefits of small group conversations and cross-pollination of diverse perspectives of the group-at-large.

This session was hosted by a team of delegates with support from Fyodor Ovchinnikov, Chair of the UN Global Consultations Committee of the UNA-SF. Agustina Singh, Jenna Hermann, Maria Diana Velica, Sergio Acel Herrera-Ibarra, Srujana Kaddevarmuth, Swagata Sen, Tatiana Vekovishcheva, Timea Soos, Trevor James Yan, and Zohal Tareen served in various hosting roles in addition to contributing to conversations as delegates. Ali Shahhosseini, Ambica Selvaraj, Brian Andersen, Casey McHugh, Denis Lemeschenko, Eric Wade Beasley, Jenn Yan, Jheel Doshi, Karina Castro, Lysondra Ludwig, Mina Loldj, Sasha Ponomareva, Stefania Guadalupe, Stuart Blackwell, and Zoe Pilla served as delegates.

Delegates’ reflections were stewarded and harvested according to the Collective Narrative Methodology and turned into a collective narrative by Agustina Singh with support from Fyodor Ovchinnikov. As Head of Reporting, Agustina Singh will use the information from this narrative to submit a report to the National Office of the United Nations Association of the United States of America in Washington DC. This report will be combined with reports from other consultations and shared with the United Nations and Members of Congress.

After the participatory session delegates had an opportunity to engage with an expert panel moderated by Jeff Weiner, Chair of the Young Professionals Committee of the UNA-SF. Before and during the panel discussion Elsie Galawish, Vice-President and Chair of the Nominating Committee of the UNA-SF, Mary Elizabeth Steiner, President of the UNA-SF, and Melinda Lord, Former Human Rights Legal Advisor, United Nations Mission in Kosovo, and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in the former Yugoslavia had an opportunity to listen to our delegates and share valuable reflections and advice.
COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE

We had some really fascinating, powerful, and productive conversations that resonated with many delegates. Themes that were dominant in all the conversations were climate action, equity, and gender equality. Other repeating themes included Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals in general as well as more specific topics such as poverty, food security, inclusion, migration, technology, democracy, the US justice system, and more.

Ensuring a Brighter Future for All

In 25 years we would like to see education for all, equality for all, and a world that has mitigated and adapted to climate change. We would like to see a future with less discrimination and subconscious biases which would help bridge a lot of gaps. Furthermore, we would like to see the United Nations taking action to ensure that such a future is achievable in the next 10-25 years.

We also want to know what has been done in the past 10 years that would ensure that, in the next 10-25 years, the issues we are facing today will be resolved. What have we done? What do the experiments reveal about our strategies to address climate change, hunger, poverty, etc. and how do these inform future actions of the United Nations to ensure timely change is achievable? We want to hear more about this from the UN and see what changes need to happen to make sure that the progress we need can actually be achieved within the timeframe set by the UN.

At the most fundamental level, we agreed that we need to address issues globally: it cannot be just piecemeal — one area of the world at a time — because all of these issues are interconnected. Some problems we are facing are really universal — pandemics like the Coronavirus have no borders — which is one of the reasons why the United Nations has a great opportunity to facilitate conversations on topics like disease and climate change preparedness.

Our actionable recommendations below were centered around the need to be proactive because we are behind schedule and a lot of the things that need to happen needed to happen yesterday. We believe that future action should be taken by the UN and other international organizations to implement effective initiatives, engage youth, and hold countries accountable.

Accountability for Leaders at All Levels

Accountability became a prominent topic throughout our conversations today. We discussed how the United States really needs to step up in those issues and how we are lagging behind as a country that is trying to influence the world and our collective future.

We believe that local and state governments in the U.S. and abroad can play an important role when national governments fail to take leadership in achieving the SDGs. We want to be mindful that leadership at the local level needs to be the first step in influencing broader change because we do not want to leave people out. We believe there is an important need for accountability in leaders who have not advanced us in the right direction,
and we think the United Nations would be instrumental in enacting broader change if it could provide technical support to state and local governments so they can lead the way to achieve the SDGs.

**Leveraging Personal Experiences and Breaking Free of Unconscious Biases**

When we talked about the barriers to achieving the SDGs, we observed that people's personal journeys influenced what issues they brought to the table. There is a need in being able to communicate our personal experiences, something that impacted a lot of us personally, to increase awareness of issues and to encourage action on the Sustainable Development Goals. We all believe in different SDGs, but we all came together and are finding ways of applying this framework to specific sectors where we think this could be done better.

We would also like to see a shift in our subconscious biases in how we approach these global problems. We think that we cannot just find quick ways to solve them: we have to shift our thinking about how we go about solving them. We emphasized the interconnectedness of all 17 SDGs and the importance of compassion and empathy along with investment by governments and the private sector in achieving these goals.

**Strengthening Existing Institutions**

Especially in today's world, we believe there is a need to strengthen existing institutions. Examples that came up within the United States are the Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control, etc. We think it is really important not only that these institutions are funded, but that they are actually being adhered to irrespective of the political climate and the status quo. People should actually care about our emission standards, the role of clean water, etc.

Additionally, adherence to global treaties, norms, and best practices for addressing climate change is really important. Using the example of the Coronavirus pandemic that we are facing right now, strengthening relationships with the World Health Organization and other organizations that deal with public health crises feels particularly important. It is not just about the discourse — there are actual institutions and best practices, and we find value in making an effort to strengthen these institutional relationships.

**Generating Global Discourse & Facilitating Grassroots Solutions**

In this day and age, we see that we have become increasingly reliant on billionaire philanthropy to solve global problems. Ultimately we would like to see the United Nations create more grassroots opportunities for those who are not billionaires to influence the way the world could - and should - change.

We need to engage everyone who is impacted, not just people who traditionally have had the opportunity to wield power and money. We need to make sure that some solutions are coming essentially from the ground up. The United Nations has a really powerful opportunity to have the discourse at the big macro level and then facilitate something like these consultations that we are having, where we are coming from more specific areas but can tap into these big issues.
So the UN has these two important roles: generating global discourse and facilitating opportunities for local consultations. We need guidance from UN expert panels along with getting input from ordinary people who are interested in particular Sustainable Development Goals. We need effective partnerships for the goals and we would like to see a better sense of community.

When we are dealing with global issues like climate change and the overall health of the world, communicating effectively is something that we need to get better at. Our current situation with the Coronavirus has drawn our attention to the lack of cross-border communication between countries and communities. This is causing more people to panic than to take smart, nonviolent action. There have been a lot of reports worldwide where certain groups were targeted and now people are scared. However, if we are able to effectively communicate the issue, we could potentially lessen negative implications and the chaos they create.

Better connected communities are open to more opportunities, so we need to improve our communications, be in community with each other, and then build on that. We talked about how if we were to go out onto the street today and ask a random person about the UN Sustainable Development Goals, we assume that they would probably have no idea what we are talking about. So we think that the UN should try to have more public social media campaigns that can reach out to the masses, raise awareness, and build on the existing movement.

Social media campaigns are extremely powerful and harnessing the power of social media is an actionable way to bring that discourse and conversation to people in a tangible way that makes sense, is accessible, fun, and makes people actually want to mobilize. The United Nations can also tap into influencers (e.g. Leonardo DiCaprio) who have a strong following base and can leverage their platform to discuss critical topics like climate action.

Another idea that came out of our discussions was to have groups for each goal where the UN could engage people in different countries and provide recommendations that are specific to their country so that local stakeholders could focus their resources on the most important issues in their geographic area. We know that there is such an asymmetry in wealth between the Global South and the Global North, so even though we have universal metrics and indicators, we are working with very different economies. We recognize that, given some countries have limited financial resources, working towards the same metrics and indicators but with less money might look very different. Education and facilitation of conversations at the local level would be important from that standpoint.

We also spoke about the Global Citizen Music Festival and how that was a really interesting way of evangelizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Music is a great universal language and experience to tap into, so maybe instead of only having that festival in New York, it could be expanded to other places in the world and help more people connect to what the UN is trying to accomplish.

**Engaging & Transforming the Private Sector**

We think that it is not always just about the individual grassroot efforts: the United Nations also has a lot of opportunity to wield its influence and provide education to corporations. It should look at helping to educate
corporations on how to make critical changes like reducing their plastic consumption and shifting to net zero water buildings and net zero energy buildings.

We focused a lot on the need to hold large corporations accountable, whether through regulation or through providing information about the harms that they are causing. Since corporations like Google and Amazon “run the world”, the United Nations or local governments should have certain rules in place to make sure that these corporations are not causing a lot of damage to our world — in various issue areas that can range from environment to equality. The local government or the UN should make sure that these large corporations are held accountable for what they are producing, for what is going on.

Public-private partnerships present an important opportunity to generate innovative solutions to different social issues. In particular, we had great conversations about the example of affordable housing. We noticed similarities between San Francisco and Seattle in that context and discussed leveraging opportunities to engage big multinational corporations that have local presence while making sure that there are conversations going on with nonprofit organizations and other key stakeholders. We recognized the role of civil society and the importance of ensuring buy-in from the entire community.

We also think that it is important to change the definition of business — of what it means to run a business or to have a business, and to make sure it is more than just profit-seeking as it is today. This can open possibilities for the corporate sector. We want to make sure we include the corporate sector in addressing the world’s most pressing problems. And we think that the corporate sector needs to take an active role in achieving these goals. It used to be on the outside of solving these problems, and we think that we need to bring it in.

**Engaging Young People in Movements & Politics**

When we talked about the role of civil society, our main focus was on mobilization of youth and our generation of young professionals. We think that the United Nations can definitely play a role in encouraging young people by working on outreach to these groups, making sure that they are validated, engaged, and that they participate more in our democracies and societies.

As we need to mobilize youth, it is really important to build upon the momentum of existing youth movements and make sure that the United Nations is actively supporting those movements, whether they are domestic or whether there is a global conversation about that. This, in turn, would allow for more confidence in democratic institutions in the United States and across the world.

When we discussed the need to mobilize the youth vote, echoing the need for compassion and empathy in these conversations, one of us shared a really powerful story about standing in line to vote in a courthouse and witnessing people allowing older voters to not have to wait in line for hours. That is a really powerful story about compassion and empathy.

This showed that this is a bigger conversation about being part of the electorate. We talked about the possibility that a larger percentage of youth eligible to vote would get out to vote and actively support marginalized communities or communities less able to to cast their vote.
Achieving Gender Equality to Benefit All

Along with focusing on engaging young people, the United Nations should focus on equal representation of women. Throughout all the issues we discussed, we especially wanted to bring up gender equality which affects women in all aspects of their lives. We discussed gender equality in length and it was one of the overarching themes that we saw.

We really want the United Nations to pay attention to ending violence, human trafficking, oppression and exploitation of women around the world. We feel that violence against women and the existence of sexism and misogyny is so prominent all over the world and we would like to see governments take action against this type of discrimination. As far as the job market is concerned, we need corporations to ensure equal share of men and women employees to move away from employing men and not looking at women as part of the job market. It is also very important to introduce women to peace negotiations, and to include them in decision making processes related to international security as there is a big discrepancy there.

We also discussed universalism and how it applies to equality principles. We think it is important to engage men in gender equality topics and make sure that they fully contribute in areas like domestic work. Studies show that what is good for women is good for everyone, and that if we invest in women and create policies that benefit women, it results in a better future for everybody. This is what we mean by universalism in this context.

Leveraging and Regulating Tech so that it Serves Humanity

Using tech to achieve longevity and inclusion is a way for us to move forward and it definitely has a role in the discourse. We have delegates who are employed in the tech sector and have a good insight into regulation of artificial intelligence.

We believe in a technological revolution; we believe that data science and especially artificial intelligence is going to transform multiple facets of life and become one of the greatest transformations that our species would ever encounter. Therefore, we should be prepared for that and make sure that we steer the application of data science and artificial intelligence in a direction that it is beneficial for societies and communities at large.

We need to make sure that we look at data through the lens of ethics and compliance. We should respect individual privacy to the extent possible rather than use digital platforms that are unleashing some racist views because we have data on public display. There is a need for facilitating global conversation on best practices and ethical standards surrounding artificial intelligence.

We also talked about a regulatory framework. There needs to be a government mandate to temper the Wild West of artificial intelligence. While the technology is influencing multiple facets of our life, unconscious biases based on gender, ability, different ways of seeing things, etc. end up in the data that is being collected. To address that, we need an effective regulatory regime that would make sure that we do not institutionalize and perpetuate these biases.
Taking Care of Our Planet in the Face of Climate Change

We think that the United Nations needs to make sure that governments are taking action on climate change. It is also important that developed countries are included in this as much as the developing countries. We call for some redistribution of resources: there is a need for wealthier countries to provide help with addressing climate change to countries like, for example, Bangladesh, that may not have the resources needed to address climate change on their own.

The need to prioritize climate action, addressing climate change and environmental disasters, showed up in our personal reflections as something really important, a critical challenge for us to address now. An issue that is related to climate change is the extinction crisis, the extinction of biodiversity. We are in the midst of the sixth great extinction, and the United Nations should hold governments accountable to make sure they respect both human and non-human life and allow all species to exist based on the science of conservation, biology, etc.

Taking care of our planet is one of the most important things that we need to do, and at the same time we need to make sure that we address climate change as a disparate impact on people in poverty. We specifically discussed water infrastructure and water demand that is expected to exceed supply by 20 percent in a year from now. We recognized that water will definitely be an issue down the road if we do not address it properly.

Raising the Bar in Our Fight with Hunger

We advocate for a fair and more accurate methodology in assessing hunger and poverty around the globe. In our discussions, eliminating hunger was not just about getting calories - it was also about making healthy, more nutritious calories more accessible. Currently, hunger is defined by 1,800 calories a day for one year, which is not the right way to start solving those problems. This way to define hunger is no longer acceptable.

We think it is important to reconsider the definition of hunger and poverty, to raise that threshold and to include nutrients along with calories as we work towards a future with no hunger as our goal. In addition to that, we would like to see a lot more good quality food like organic food. We currently feel that access to such quality food is very difficult in the U.S. and around the world.

We also discussed the illogical imbalance of food waste and hunger and how so much food is wasted that we could put toward feeding people. We think it is very important to aim to end hunger on the planet and we think that it is a very achievable goal that the United Nations should work on.

Addressing Other Issues: Education, Healthcare, Housing, and Indigenous Rights

Among other basic human needs, we discussed the lack of universal health care access as well as housing insecurity and homelessness, which is tied to land insecurity in the developing world and the rights of indigenous peoples. We need universal tenant protections and the shift in the view of housing for profit to housing as a human right - which is especially important in San Francisco.
Also, countries should be encouraged to invest in both education and universal health care. This is very pertinent to the United States, in particular. More federal and local money should be allocated to these issues because there are a lot of funding asymmetries that happen which results in wealth inequality across communities.

Equitable educational opportunities can be leveraged to address climate change and other issues. The United Nations has a great opportunity to facilitate a discourse around mental health and to talk about best practices within education. For example, making social emotional learning standards trauma informed: recognizing the notion that children and youth experience a variety of traumas that are really affecting their ability to learn even if they have access to education. This is a conversation that the United States should have had a long time ago, but it is becoming even more prevalent now and we should definitely focus on this both domestically and internationally.