



A Letter to the International Community

As former ministers of government, United Nations officials, scientists, and concerned citizens, we are deeply concerned that the systems of global governance prominently including the United Nations, must do more to provide the moral, institutional, and juridical foundation necessary to ensure human security, planetary well-being, and the sustainable development of our 'future selves' and future generations.

In our present unfastened circumstances the terrifying and the fantastic dangerously propel us towards a dystopian future. It is one of cascading systemic crises including: the threat of nuclear war; the collapse of global biodiversity; the climate emergency; refugee crises; global financial instability; and crises of democracy, multilateralism and of sustainability. Individually and collectively these threaten planetary boundaries beyond which civilization is not assured. We are increasingly aware that the world is facing unprecedented challenges of global governance beyond that for which the United Nations was designed to address. These grave threats to human security and planetary well-being compel us to act today to ensure that the present is no longer the enemy of the future.

Whether our precarious condition will be transformed by political action that constructively addresses these crises and a plutocratic system of global governance that violates the dignity of humankind or whether we continue to lurch from disaster to disaster is not clear. What is clear, however, is that humankind's unfastened circumstances casts a moral shadow on the present.

We recall that the United Nations Charter begins with the words “We the peoples ... have decided to save succeeding generations” and that the “Peoples of the United Nations,” affirmed their “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small”. From the climate emergency to human security, gender and racial equality, and from sustainable development to international peace, we the undersigned are of the conviction that the international community must fully honour its commitments to the UN's founding Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement. Yet more is urgently required.

The coming decades must be those of a qualitatively new era for humanity informed by a new humanism and a planetary consciousness. For, what we do in the next few years will determine the future of humanity for the next millennium. And, thus we must dare to be bold.

We acknowledge that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has yet to free humanity from perpetual fear of war and deprivation, and while the Declaration has been politicised to serve geopolitical interests, the world has nonetheless progressed since the Declaration was adopted. Thereafter human dignity was understood as an inalienable entitlement of every member of the

human family, with rights that were juridical, justiciable and enforceable and where the rule of democratically legislated law offered a foundation for freedom, justice, and peace in the world.

We note that life in an era whose means of mass destruction and whose potential for destabilizing the global biosphere threatens civilization itself, repudiates parochial interpretations of rights and freedoms. Such narrow-mindedness serves to perpetuate a barbarous culture of domination, violence and war. In pressing for our own rights and freedoms “We the peoples” have a duty of care to respect the rights and freedoms of others. For, in any society, neither freedom nor power can be exercised without limits. Recognizing rational freedom as a collective, social and moral phenomenon, the more we cleave to freedom, the greater the responsibility we bear toward ourselves and future generations.

Insofar as rights and responsibilities are indivisible; the idea of a human right achieves integrity when we simultaneously acknowledge the duty of all people to respect it. For freedom is an illusion in a world that structurally denies us human security, planetary well-being, and sustainable development. Only when systems of economic and political governance no longer produce victims will words such as “freedom,” “democracy” or “fraternity” be meaningful.

We further note that while the Declaration of Human Rights was further developed in a series of agreements and treaties, it has no formal counterpart for human responsibility. Accordingly, our present circumstances and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights invites us to complete the work begun by the United Nations in 1948 with a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations.

Ushering in a new era of humanity; placing intergenerational human rights and human responsibilities at the centre of its decision-making and programming, a United Nations Declaration of Human Responsibilities is needed to reconcile political views toward a culture of peace and disarmament and ensure human security and sustainable development. Self-empowering and people-centred; no less would it enable the United Nations to move from being a platform to debate competing national interests, to one promoting the common global interests of “We the peoples”.

To further realise the UN's founding principles, “We the peoples” must not only aspire to a universal culture of human rights and responsibilities of the present generations towards future generations, but also institutionalise them. Equipped with science-informed foresight and an Ombudsperson for Future Generations, and other actions to deliver on its fiduciary responsibility to protect the future from the present, new norms including those enabled by a Declaration of Human Responsibilities are needed to preserve human rights. It is self-evident that those rights cannot survive the destruction of civilization. To survive, let alone retain our ability to develop, as guardians of the future “We the peoples” must institutionalise a new humanism and embrace a higher authenticity founded upon the moral imperative of responsibility. To ensure that our ‘future selves’ and future generations are the beneficiaries of multilateral governance we must ground that governance in the moral imperative of responsibility as a binding moral principle; one that is juridical, justiciable and enforceable. For we must embrace the imperative as a normative and operational requirement.

We acknowledge that the transformation will be no less profound than that which occurred in the early stages of anthropogenesis from which human society emerged. But, unlike our far distant ancestors, we do not have thousands of generations during which the transition took place from the herd and the horde to society. To realise a new era of humanity we may not have even a single generation.

A Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities is no panacea. However, a Declaration is urgently needed to redress the burdens that are inequitably born today by those least responsible for them. Recognising that the majority of future generations will be born in the Global South and while acknowledging the needs, priorities and aspirations of developing countries, a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities is a commitment to protecting the dignity of all people enhancing the universal bond between human rights and responsibilities.

Recognising with Albert Camus that “real generosity towards the future lies in giving all to the present,” to enable a great transformation from a culture of domination, violence and war to a culture of responsibility and peace we the undersigned call for an intergenerational social contract; one that is anchored in a comprehensive approach to human rights and responsibilities. When freed from fear, humankind with dignity may invent its future.

While the challenges are momentous, the impact of the cascading systemic crises on our children and future generations has made us determined to realize the ambition contained herein. Now is the time for boldness; for world leaders, national governments and the international community to come together to give children, young people and future generations the opportunities they deserve and to which they are entitled.

Offering a glimpse into the great transformation; welcoming United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres's call for a Declaration for Responsibility in Our Common Agenda, we the undersigned call for the United Nations General Assembly to adopt by resolution A Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations and similarly establish thereafter a Commission for Human Responsibilities as an inter-governmental legislative body within the United Nations system.

Let future generations look back on 2023 as the year when the arc of history was changed; when humanity, its leaders and decision makers took action to ensure human security, planetary well-being, and the sustainable development of present and future generations.

Most sincerely,

Dr Kenneth M. Stokes, Dr Moneef Al Zou'bi, Dr Alberto Zucconi

Founding Directors of the World Sustainability Forum

This letter is co-signed by: