



SDGs CONFERENCE 2025

In the Margins of the UNGA80

TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD

22-24 September 2025

NEW YORK

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS



**JOURNALISTS AND
WRITERS FOUNDATION**

www.unga-conference.org



JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION

The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) is an international civil society organization dedicated to the culture of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. The JWF promotes diversity and inclusion by creating forums for intellectual and social engagement; generates and shares knowledge with stakeholders, builds partnerships worldwide and develops policy recommendations for positive social change.

* JWF is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization registered in New York State, USA.

* JWF is associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communications.

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Cemre Ulker, Representative of the JWF to the UN Department of Global Communications

Mehmet Kilic, President, Journalists and Writers Foundation

Priyanka Chahal, Youth Representative of the UN Department of Global Communications



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JWF HIGH-LEVEL RECEPTION 2025

22 September 2025, Monday | 6:30 – 9:30 PM | PentHouse45 Rooftop, New York

The Journalists and Writers Foundation hosted its UNGA80 High-Level Reception on 22 September 2025, at PentHouse45 in New York, bringing together a distinguished gathering of global partners, diplomats, human rights advocates, youth delegates, and civil society leaders from 24 countries. Held during the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly under the theme #BetterTogether, the event aimed to foster dialogue, strengthen partnerships, and share innovative practices for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over 150 attendees participated in this vibrant gathering, which emphasized the crucial role of inclusive cooperation in building a sustainable, peaceful world. The event opened with remarks from



Cemre Ulker, Representative of the Journalists and Writers Foundation to the UN Department of Global Communications. She underscored the importance of grassroots action, inclusive dialogue, and multilateral cooperation as pillars for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Her comments highlighted the vital role civil society plays in transforming communities from the bottom up, especially during global uncertainties, and set a tone of shared responsibility and hope.





Mehmet Kilic, President of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, welcomed participants and reflected on the significance of convening during this pivotal UN session. He emphasized the importance of SDG 17, Partnerships for the Goals, and celebrated the Foundation's expanding global network. Kilic highlighted ongoing initiatives, including side events such as the Roundtable on Education and Youth Participation, the SDGs Conference on Inclusive Policymaking, and the Pioneers in SDGs Awards Ceremony. These platforms aim to promote

intergenerational dialogue, showcase innovative solutions, and encourage civic engagement to accelerate progress toward sustainable development. Representatives from international delegations, including Dr. Mehmet Aslan from McYESS Ltd, emphasized unity and collective action as essential for advancing the SDGs. Aslan reflected on the threats facing democracy today climate change, conflicts, and human rights violations, and underscored the importance of inclusive dialogue as a catalyst for meaningful change. The keynote address was delivered



by H.E. Epsy Campbell Barr, former Vice President of Costa Rica, who urged the global community to translate SDG ambitions into tangible realities for all. She called for compassionate, courageous leadership rooted in unity and moral clarity, emphasizing that progress depends on active participation from all sectors, journalists, human rights defenders, educators, and civil society. Campbell Barr urged the audience to act with conscience and hope, envisioning a more just, inclusive, and peaceful future.



Hon. Mr. Thanasis Chimonas, Vice Mayor of Athens, echoed these sentiments, warning of the alarming rise in conflicts, xenophobia, and threats to democracy. He stressed the importance of collective efforts to reaffirm shared humanity and uphold fundamental rights through civil society dialogue and international collaboration. Romanian writer and former diplomat Cleopatra Lorințiu offered a profound reflection on the erosion of humanistic values amidst societal fragmentation. Drawing from her experiences in Eastern Europe, she emphasized the importance of tolerance, cultural understanding, and the power of civil society to restore dignity and empathy in times of crisis.





Mr. Daniel Juma Omondi from the African Peace Foundation highlighted the urgency of dialogue and partnership in addressing global conflicts, from Ukraine and the Middle East to Africa, calling on leaders and civil society to declare that enough is enough, and to prioritize peace and responsibility in international relations. Ms. Daisy Khan, founder of Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE), shared her lifelong commitment to bridging divides rooted in faith and

culture. Drawing from her Kashmiri roots, she emphasized that all humans share a divine spark and that each individual holds the power to foster unity and amplify marginalized voices. Her words reinforced the JWF’s mission to nurture peace-building and social cohesion globally. The reception concluded with a lively networking session, featuring an open buffet and live music, where guests exchanged ideas, expanded collaborations, and reaffirmed their shared commitment to building a more inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable world.



SDGs ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION 2025

unga-conference.org | jwf.org

23 SEPT
2025
TUESDAY

10:00 AM - 1:30 PM EST
630 Second - Guild Hall
630 Second Ave New York, NY 10016
(Entrance bet 34th - 35th Streets)

RSVP
REQUIRED

**ROUND 1: THE ROLE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE FOR
SUSTAINABLE PEACE & DEVELOPMENT**

ROUND 2: GLOBAL YOUTH VOICES FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE



SDGs ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION 2025

**23 September 2025, Tuesday | 10:00 AM – 1:30 PM | 630 Second, New York
12 SPEAKERS FROM 12 COUNTRIES**

ROUND 1: Role of Interfaith Dialogue for Sustainable Peace and Development

In an increasingly interconnected world, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration among diverse faith communities is crucial for advancing sustainable peace and development. Interfaith dialogue provides a vital platform for building bridges, promoting social cohesion, and addressing shared challenges faced by societies worldwide. Recognizing the significant role faith-based initiatives can play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this roundtable aims to explore how interfaith collaboration can contribute to creating more inclusive, peaceful, and resilient communities. Through dialogue, mutual understanding, and collective action, interfaith communities can make meaningful contributions toward building a more cohesive, equitable, and sustainable world. This event serves as an important step in harnessing the transformative potential of faith-based collaboration to achieve the SDGs and foster lasting peace for future generations.

SPEAKERS:

Temir Naziri, Executive Director, ARCO Forum - SPAIN
Opening Remarks

Rahul Watson Govindan, Board Member, Pearl of the Islands Foundation Chief Executive, New Zealand Philanthropy - NEW ZEALAND
Moderator, Introduction Remarks



Rocío Cortés Rodríguez, Assistant Professor of Theology, Department of Theology, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile - CHILE

The Significance of Interfaith Collaboration

Cenap Aydin, Director, Expert in Interreligious Dialogue, Tevere Institute - ITALY

Building Partnerships and Networks

Noel Mifsud JP, Chair, Multicultural Education and Languages Ministerial Committee - AUSTRALIA

Strategic Approaches and Collective Actions

[CLICK Here](#) to Watch Round 1: Role of Interfaith Dialogue for Sustainable Peace and Development





ROUND 2: Global Youth Voices for Peace and Justice

In today's global world, young people stand at the forefront of advocating for peace, justice, and social cohesion. Their unique perspectives, innovative initiatives, and active participation are vital to fostering sustainable peace and preventing conflicts. This panel aims to showcase the vital role of youth in shaping peaceful societies and to explore strategies for amplifying their voices in decision-making processes at local, national, and global levels.

This roundtable also aims to create a platform for dialogue among youth leaders worldwide in communication with policymakers and practitioners on how youth are promoting peace and justice, leading initiatives that build social cohesion, participating as decision-makers, and cooperating in crisis response efforts. Empowering youth as active agents of social change is essential for sustainable peace and justice. This panel aims to elevate youth voices, showcase impactful initiatives, and inspire collective action towards a more peaceful and just world. The panel will offer policy recommendations for integrating youth perspectives into peacebuilding and conflict prevention strategies.

SPEAKERS:

Samet Shabani, Expert on Countering Violent Extremism - NORTH MACEDONIA
Moderator, Introduction Remarks

Lavinia Teodorescu, International Military Staff, Cooperative Security Division North Atlantic Treaty Organization - ROMANIA
How Interfaith and Intergenerational Engagement Have Transformed Communities?

Melek Busra Ozel, Youth Coordinator, Nordic Youth Platform - DENMARK
Youth and Digital Tools for Peacebuilding

Dr. Lukman E. Ismaila, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Johns Hopkins University SOM - NIGERIA
Youth-led Initiatives that Build Peace and Social Cohesion

Zeynep Selma Guney, JWF Research Intern, B.A. in Philosophy, Politics, & Economics, University of Rochester - USA

Youth Participation as Decisionmakers: Rebuilding Youth Trust in Diplomacy

Elif Soylemez, JWF Research Intern, B.A. in Criminology, Toronto Metropolitan University - CANADA

Youth Participation as Decisionmakers: Rebuilding Youth Trust in Diplomacy

Kubra Kaya, Youth Representative, Balturka Culture Academy - LITHUANIA

Youth-led Initiatives that Build Peace and Social Cohesion

[CLICK Here to Watch Round 1: Role of Interfaith Dialogue for Sustainable Peace and Development](#)





SDGs CONFERENCE >>> 20 25

IN THE MARGINS OF THE UNGA80 SESSION

24 SEPTEMBER 2025 | NEW YORK | HYBRID

PANEL 1: DIGITALIZATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

PANEL 2: WOMEN AND YOUTH AS LEADERS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

PANEL 3: CROSS-CUTTING THREATS TO THE PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY



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SDGs CONFERENCE 2025: IN THE MARGINS OF THE UNGA80

**24 September 2025, Wednesday | 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM | 630Second, New York
18 SPEAKERS FROM 14 COUNTRIES**

The 10th Annual SDGs Conference 2025, held on September 24, 2025, in New York, marked a significant milestone in global efforts to promote sustainable development, human rights, and democratic governance. Hosted by the Journalists and Writers Foundation in the margins of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA80), the conference brought together civil society organizations from 24 different countries. This global platform served as a vital platform to examine pressing challenges and innovative solutions in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) amidst a rapidly evolving digital and geopolitical landscape.

A key highlight of the conference was the recognition of how digital technologies are transforming human rights monitoring and advocacy. Advanced digital tools now enable organizations and activists to document violations more transparently and respond more swiftly, increasing accountability worldwide. Grassroots communities, especially marginalized groups, are empowered to participate actively in advocacy, often drawing international attention to issues that were previously overlooked. As technology continues to evolve, its role in safeguarding human rights becomes increasingly vital, offering new avenues for oversight, activism, and justice.

The first panel session, “Digitalization of Sustainable Development and Human Rights Advocacy,” explored these themes extensively. Expert speakers from Paraguay, Australia, Costa Rica, New Zealand and the USA emphasized the dual-edged nature of technological progress, while promising significant advances in education, health, and poverty reduction, it also poses risks of misuse for surveillance, manipulation, and control.





Panelists underscored the importance of civic technologies that amplify local voices and challenge top-down policies, asserting that the future of sustainable development hinges on empowering communities to act on their data. Experts on violence against women highlighted how online abuse disproportionately affects women and vulnerable communities, but emerging technologies, such as AI bots, also offer innovative solutions to combat harassment.

The conference also spotlighted the vital roles of women, youth, and marginalized groups. Civil society leaders shared powerful narratives on women’s resilience and migrant inclusion, emphasized youth-led peacebuilding efforts, and called for global incentives to increase youth participation in decision-making processes. Media professionals drew attention to underreported stories from conflict zones like Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan, highlighting women’s resilience and leadership despite systemic repression. Experts warned that the ongoing democratic crisis, characterized by the silencing and marginalization of women, threatens the progress made since the Beijing Declaration and other landmark commitments. Throughout the session inspiring insights on youth-led peacebuilding and leadership in Africa was shared emphasizing the centrality of youth participation in shaping democratic futures. The SDGs Conference 2025 also



emphasized the importance of protecting democratic principles against emerging threats. Renowned panelists from the USA, Australia, India, Canada and Brazil discussed the global retreat of democracy, the rule of law, the rise of autocratic regimes and underscored the fragility of civic trust and the urgent need for constitutional safeguards, judicial independence, and civic engagement. Journalists reflected on the internet’s evolution from a human right to a

complex digital ecosystem shaped by profit-driven architectures that threaten democratic principles. Addressing the erosion of civil liberties, civil society leaders provided stark analyses of media’s role in democracy and highlighted the dangers faced by journalists worldwide amid conflicts and authoritarian crackdowns. Throughout this multidisciplinary convention, the digital media ecosystem emerged as both a tool for activism and a battleground for disinformation and authoritarian influence. The need for multilateral responses, ethical digital architecture, and inclusive governance was a recurring theme. Participants agreed that safeguarding democratic principles, promoting human rights, and ensuring sustainable development require collective action, innovation, and unwavering commitment to human dignity. The conference closed with a call to protect civil liberties, empower communities, and foster resilient, just societies worldwide.



PANELS AND THEMES

PANEL 1: Digitalization of Sustainable Development and Human Rights Advocacy

- Civic Technologies to Foster Revitalization of Sustainable Development Goals
- Misinformation/Disinformation as a Tool of Warfare in Divided Societies
- The Growing Threat of Technology-Facilitated Gender Based Violence
- The Use of Digital Technologies in Human Rights Monitoring

PANEL 2: Women and Youth as Leaders for Civic Engagement and Social Change

- Implications of Women's Rights Backlash on the Progress of the Global Goals
- Mitigating Intergenerational Trauma and Ensuring Mental Health of Youth and Women in the Era of Conflicts
- Ensuring Youth Leadership in Social Change and Peacebuilding: Challenges and Resolutions
- Rebuilding Youth Trust in Inclusive Governance and Multilateralism

PANEL 3: Cross-cutting Threats to the Principles of Democracy

- Global Stability at Risk: Geopolitical Tensions and Weakening Rule of Law
- Undermining Trust in Mainstream Media eroding Social Cohesion and Peacefulness
- Multilateral Responses to the Rise of Autocratic Regimes and Practices
- The Power of Social Media and Technology for Human Rights and Democracy
- Civil Society in Turbulence: Legal Attacks, Defamations, and Restrictions



PIONEERS IN SDGs AWARDS 2025

- 1st Place:** Pioneers in SDGs Award + **\$2,000** cash prize
- 2nd Place:** Pioneers in SDGs Award + **\$1,000** cash prize
- 3rd Place:** Pioneers in SDGs Award + **\$500** cash prize
- 5 Additional Awards** **250\$** cash prize each
- 5 Changemakers Award** **100\$** cash prize each

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7th ANNUAL PIONEERS IN SDGs AWARDS 2025

8 October 2025, Wednesday | 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM | Virtual at ZOOM
77 PROJECTS FROM 43 COUNTRIES

[CLICK Here to Watch the Awards Ceremony](#)

In a world filled with complex challenges, recognizing those dedicated to sustainable development is more important than ever. The 7th Annual Pioneers in SDGs Awards Ceremony, held virtually on October 8, 2025, celebrated the remarkable individuals and organizations making a difference. The event was graciously hosted by Patrice Samara, President of Triumph Communications Group and COO of Wordeee.

Organized by the Journalists and Writers Foundation in collaboration with 56 global partners from 30 countries, the awards honor outstanding contributions by civil society organizations toward achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Pioneers in SDGs Awards spotlight changemakers who exemplify the principles of peace, diversity, inclusivity, human rights, and the empowerment of women and youth.

This year, we proudly recognized 2025 Awardees who have made significant impacts in advancing the SDGs. We believe that everyone involved is a winner, as each contribution helps create a better society. From 77 exceptional projects submitted from 43 countries, these pioneers demonstrate selflessness, philanthropy, and unwavering commitment, qualities vital to shaping a brighter future. Their inspiring work encourages others to join our collective mission for positive change and sustainable development.



Our esteemed panel of judges carefully assessed each project based on four key criteria: innovation, stakeholders, scope, and impact. They reviewed essential indicators to identify projects that serve as exemplary models, inspiring individuals and organizations to drive social change aligned with the SDGs.

Projects were scored based on the following:

- Innovation: Examining the project’s unique approach to tackling global challenges through creativity and problem-solving.
- Stakeholders: Assessing the project’s inclusiveness and collaboration with diverse stakeholders.
- Scope: Measuring the comprehensiveness of planning and implementation, with clear goals and strategic objectives.
- Impact: Evaluating the social, economic, and environmental contributions of each project.

PIONEERS IN SDGs AWARDS

JURY MEMBERS

JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| Dr. Kathy Egea Senior Lecturer UTS FFYE Coordinator University of Technology Sydney (Australia) | Patrice Samara Chief Operating Officer Wordeee (USA) | Dr. Thomas Sideris Journalist Documentary Film Director and Producer (Greece) | Dr. Rajendran Govender Social Cohesion Advocate Government of South Africa (South Africa) |
| Nancy Falcon Executive Director Alba Intercultural Dialogue Center (Argentina) | Dr. Reginald Nalugala Professor of Social Transformation, Tangaza University (Kenya) | Dr. Joan H. Serret Professor of Communications Int'l University of Catalonia (Spain) | Ibrahim Anli Executive Director Rumi Forum (USA) |

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AN INTERNATIONAL JURY FROM

Argentina | Australia | Greece | Kenya | Spain | South Africa | USA

Evaluated 77 Projects Submitted from 43 Countries

PEOPLE’S CHOICE AWARD Selection Received Over +13,000 Public Votes

1ST PLACE WINNER: Global Green Hub (Kazakhstan)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

2nd PLACE WINNER: Benguela Seaweed Fertilizer (Namibia)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

3rd PLACE WINNER: Blossom Together for Brighter Futures (USA)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)



INNOVATION EXCELLENCE AWARD: Digital Refugee-Led Cooperative (Japan)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT AWARD: Water for Wisdom: Building Resilient School Communities Through Safe Water Access (Netherlands)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

SCOPE ACHIEVEMENT AWARD: Lise Hizmet (Nigeria)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

IMPACT AWARD: Little Miss Intellect Zambia-SDGs Awareness (Zambia)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

YOUNG CHANGEMAKERS AWARD: Nordic Youth Platform (Denmark)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

CHANGEMAKERS AWARD 1: Two Stories, One Future of Hope (USA)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

CHANGEMAKERS AWARD 2: Smart Community Pods for Resilient Learning and Livelihoods in Monguno, Borno State (Nigeria)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

CHANGEMAKERS AWARD 3: CUFA – The Unique Center of the Favelas: Expo Favela Innovation & Favela Cup (Brazil)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

CHANGEMAKERS AWARD 4: Underground Schools for Girls in Afghanistan (Afghanistan)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

CHANGEMAKERS AWARD 5: Transforming Education in Niger State (TENS II) Programme (United Kingdom)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD: Localizing Peace and Engaging the Victims: towards Peace Education (Ethiopia)

[Click here to Watch the Video](#)

CLICK HERE



[CLICK HERE TO REVIEW ALL PARTICIPATING PROJECTS AT PIONEERS IN SDGS 2025](#)





SDGs CONFERENCE 20 25

24 SEPTEMBER 2025 | NEW YORK | HYBRID

PANEL 1 : DIGITALIZATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
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24 September 2025, Wednesday | 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM | 630Second, New York
www.unga-conference.org

OPENING SESSION

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch the Opening Session

Opening Remarks: Mehmet Kilic, President, Journalists and Writers Foundation | USA

Mehmet Kilic is the President of the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF), a U.S.-based international civil society organization dedicated to promoting peace, human rights, and sustainable development worldwide. With over twenty-five years of experience in the non-profit sector, he is a dedicated educator, human rights advocate, and global leader specializing in organizational development and the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Mr. Kilic has built partnerships with NGOs, international organizations, governments, and the private sector to foster peaceful and inclusive societies through various programs and initiatives. His engagement with the United Nations includes representing JWF at the UN ECOSOC, participating in interventions before UN Treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council, and advocating for marginalized groups through legal aid and awareness campaigns. Currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Education, Mr. Kilic remains committed to education and global advocacy for peace, diversity, and inclusion.





Mehmet Kilic, President of the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF), welcomed all attendees to the 10th Annual SDGs Conference 2025, held in the margins of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. He expressed his sincere appreciation for the vibrant and diverse gathering of changemakers, visionaries, and leaders committed to shaping a better future. Mr. Kilic highlighted the significance of the partnership with global stakeholders in organizing this milestone

event, emphasizing the shared commitment to a world rooted in peace, justice, prosperity for all, and inclusivity, affirming that no one should be left behind. He described the SDGs Conference as a unique platform that not only reflects on progress but also ignites action through collaboration and innovation across sectors and borders. He acknowledged the presence of a diverse assembly, including UN diplomats, academics, human rights advocates, youth leaders, journalists, civil society champions, and community heroes from every corner of the globe. Mr. Kilic underscored that their collective voices and visions are essential to advancing the SDGs.

Turning to the vital role of partnerships, Mr. Kilic expressed gratitude to JWF's 56 Global Partners from 30 countries whose efforts focus on improving quality of life, promoting peaceful and cohesive societies, upholding democracy and the rule of law, defending human rights, and advancing sustainable development goals. Their dedication exemplifies the collaborative spirit necessary for meaningful progress. Mr. Kilic provided an overview of the "Three Days of Action," describing it as a dynamic series of events designed to inspire, educate, and mobilize participants toward impactful social change. He recounted the successful kickoff with the JWF High-Level Reception in Manhattan, followed by engaging SDGs Roundtable Discussions on Interfaith Dialogue and Global Youth Voices, as well as a scenic Manhattan boat tour.

On the third day, Mr. Kilic emphasized the importance of this flagship event, the SDGs Conference 2025, organized in collaboration with 56 NGOs from around the world. He expressed anticipation for the insights from distinguished speakers that would guide the collective effort toward achieving the SDGs. Mr. Kilic also announced the upcoming Pioneers in SDGs Awards 2025 on October 8th, celebrating individuals and organizations whose innovative projects exemplify the power of collective action. From a pool of 77 projects across 43 countries, these stories are expected to inspire further dedication and innovation.

Mr. Kilic then paid tribute to the late Hon. Mr. Fethullah Gulen, the Honorary President who had passed away nearly a year prior. He reflected on Gulen's inspiring legacy of promoting dialogue, mutual understanding, education, humanitarian aid, and the building of peaceful societies through interfaith and intercultural cooperation. A short tribute video featuring Gulen's message was presented to honor his profound impact. Concluding his remarks, Mr. Kilic reaffirmed the collective commitment of all present to drive social change and build a future where peace, justice, and prosperity are accessible to everyone.



He expressed his gratitude for the dedication and passion of the attendees, inspiring continued efforts toward a more sustainable and inclusive world. In his concluding remarks, Mr. Kilic ended his remarks by reaffirming their commitment to the achievement of the SDGs and said: “Thank you for being part of this transformative journey. Together, let’s continue to build a future where no one is left behind.”

Keynote Remarks: H.E. Epsy Campbell Barr, Former Vice-President | COSTA RICA

Strategic Pathways Forward: Renewed Commitments for Human Rights on the 10th Anniversary of the SDGs

Honorable Ms. Epsy Campbell Barr is the Former Vice President of Costa Rica, and she was the first Afro-descendant and the first woman to be appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship. Ms. Barr is a global leader in inclusion, development, human rights, and sustainability. She was also twice elected as a congresswoman of the Republic of Costa Rica. Ms. Barr is an Independent Expert of the United Nations and a promoter of business and employment opportunities in new technologies and cybersecurity for people from historically marginalized sectors. From 2021 to 2024, she was the President of the United Nations Permanent Forum of Afrodescendants. As an international activist, she founded the Global Coalition Against Systemic Racism and for Reparations, a large international organization that develops actions in countries to combat racism through art, culture, and education.



We gather at a time when humanity stands at a crossroads, as there are poverty and exclusion around us; scarcity in the lives of billions, as entire populations fear war and extermination. We witness the impression of power that denies people their voice, while the institution of multilateralism, built to ensure peace and cooperation, is strained and weakened. Racism continues to divide and dehumanize. Sexism and systemic exclusion of women prevent humanity from truly contributing

to our share of the future. Resources are concentrated in a few, while millions remain trapped in a circle of poverty. The climate crisis is no longer a distant threat; it is here. The vast communities from the Caribbean, from the Pacific Islands to the Arab world, our democracies are fragile, often unrepresentative of the needs and aspirations of the people.

We are not merely living through a crisis. We are living in a change of era. The global crisis is not only economic; it is social, environmental, and cultural. It is a crisis of leadership and civilizational values. It is too often that the leadership today is built on individualism and ruthless competition. Patriarchal communities are accommodating wealth, resources, and empowered without concern of the common good. It is extractive, even predatory, consuming the earth's resources without caring for the future generation. It is a leadership that embraces the doctrines to justify the means. A leadership that excludes diversity, rather thrives on violence and confrontation that denies the dignity of those who are different.



This is the model of leadership that has brought us to the edge where survival itself is at stake. Despite this challenge, humanity has a shared compass, which is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all nations. The SDGs represent more than a checklist. It is a common agenda to guarantee rights for all people, to build peace, equality, and sustainability. The goals remind us that development must mean eradicating poverty in all forms, ending hunger, and ensuring dignity through access to health and education. It ensures gender equality not as a favor for women, but as a necessity for humanity. They are protecting our planet, oceans, forests, biodiversity, because there is no plan B and no planet B. SDGs are ensuring that women and men share power and responsibility in equal measure at every level of decision making. The SDGs are about translating promises into lived realities. They are about ensuring that no one is left behind because, more than a slogan, it becomes the measure of our collective consensus.



Let us be clear: a promise, no matter how noble, is not enough. Commitments on paper do not feed hungry children, do not heal our wonder planet, and do not empower silenced voices. We must go beyond rhetoric and good intentions. Delivering on the SDGs means building political will, allocating resources, strengthening institutions, and holding ourselves accountable. It means aligning the energy of civil society, the innovation of the private sector, and the responsibility of governments. It requires courage, the

interest to redistribute resources, and to stand firmly for human rights. Yes, this is a time of extraordinary challenge, but it must also be a time of collective and joint actions. We are called to be part of what I call the shining generation. A generation that refuses to surrender the despair and still transforms pain into labor of birth, as with childbirth, the deeper the pain, the closer we are to bringing it into life. Despite the intensity of today's crisis, we are closer than ever to delivering a new era of peace, justice, and sustainability. That is why each of us, wherever we are, must promote change. Starting with the immediate impact we can make in our communities, in our institution, and in our own leadership. We cannot despair and fail to take hold. The SDGs call us to act now and known more than clearly that Goal 17 is to strengthen coordination and partnership across all the sectors, all the identities, and all the people. Only together in unity can we transform the promise into a reality to finish the task.

We must also change how we lead. The future will not be secure with the same leadership that created today's crisis. We need a new leadership that is transformative and compassionate, that chooses cooperation over confrontation. Inspire through example, not fear. Listen deeply, especially to the voices that are long ignored. Operate with a clear framework of principles and values. Understand and live the principle of Ubuntu: I am because we are. This is the leadership that nourishes and protects, that heals and restores. It is a leadership that embodies the strength with empathy, care, and collaboration. It is a leadership that knows strength lies in lifting others up. And it is a leadership that brings self-leadership, the capacity to go beyond one's own ego. They cultivate humility to align personal conduct with universal values. Without self-leadership, we cannot lead orders with integrity.



The task before us is urgent but not impossible. The sustainable development goals are promises we made to the poor, to excluded ones, to the planet, to the future generation. That promise must be kept, but promises are only fulfilled when people, leaders, the community, and each of us decide to act. The SDGs are not the responsibility of the governments alone. They are the responsibility of all humanity. So let us leave this conference with a renewed determination to act together across borders, culture, and generations. Let us embody a new leadership that is both bold and compassionate. Let us make the principle of Ubuntu real in our life. At the end of the day, our lives are intertwined. My humanity is bound up with yours. Your future is linked to mine, and only together only as a human family, can we finish the task. Let us deliver the promise of Sustainable Development Goals. Let us ensure justice, sustainability, and dignity for every person, everywhere.

Keynote Remarks: Hon. Mr. Thanasis Chimonas, Vice Mayor for Social Integration of Migrants and Refugees, The City of Athens | GREECE

Cross-cutting Threats to the Principles of Democracy

Hon. Mr. Thanassis Chimonas is the Vice Mayor for Social Integration of Migrants and Refugees at the City of Athens. He studied Literature and Film at the University of Strasbourg and Journalism in London. As a globally recognized author, his novels and short stories have been published in France, Germany, Israel, and North Macedonia, while he has also worked as a columnist for major media outlets such as Ta Nea, Athens Voice, Liberal.gr, and Fos ton Spor. Hon. Mr. Chimonas has also served as Secretary of Culture, parliamentary candidate for Athens A, and candidate for the European Parliament with political party, PASOK, as well as a member of the Political Council and candidate for the European Parliament with political party, To Potami.



“We are living, dear friends, through very difficult times. This is not some cliché. We all witness it every single day. Bloody wars rage in every corner of the Earth: in Ukraine, in Gaza, in Sudan, and elsewhere. Hundreds of thousands of victims – among them a vast number of civilians, women, children, and the elderly – are paying the price of political and geopolitical choices they never made themselves. Political assassinations are back and shaking humanity. And the victims now belong not only to one faction or the other.

They span the entire ideological spectrum. Racism, intolerance, xenophobia, and racial and religious discrimination tend to become normalized. They are no longer marginal behaviors. They threaten to become definitively mainstream, part of everyday life.

We see mass demonstrations erupting in major European cities, not to defend solidarity or rights, but to declare hostility against migration. We see far-right and Alt-Right parties increasing their strength everywhere. In many countries, they are winning or about to win elections. And worst of all, these parties are often accepted as partners in governing coalitions, fully legitimized.



Democracy, freedom of speech, human rights – all those things we took for granted for decades are under threat and shrinking. I will not hide behind generalities. I live in a country, Greece, which is ruled by an authoritarian and racist regime. We do not have a dictatorship, a junta like that of the colonels, in the dark period of 1967–74. We do not have tanks in the streets. The government of Mr. Mitsotakis was elected in the most democratic manner, with comfortable victories in two consecutive elections. Only, in 2025, authoritarian regimes are not installed through military coups. They are consolidated from within the very institutions themselves. They are born in parliament. They begin as elected governments and gradually restrict democracy, transforming it into a one-man democracy.

In the country where I live, most of the mainstream media is controlled. They were openly bribed during the pandemic under the pretext of so-called public information. Scandals follow one another, but ordinary citizens are often forced to search the internet to learn the details that the major channels conceal.

I will give you an example: Two and a half years ago, fifty-seven people perished in the deadliest accident in the history of Greek railways. And yet, this tragedy is being covered up with reports of dubious credibility. The relatives of the victims are mocked not only by the systemic media but also by armies of government trolls online. In my own field, that of migration, things are even worse. A few months ago, a politician with a heavy far-right past was appointed minister. He had been the leader of the youth wing of a pro-Nazi party in the 1980s and later the representative of the French Front National's franchise in Greece. When this minister became embroiled in scandals, he was replaced by another politician of similar views, notorious for his far-right ideas and the son of perhaps the most important far-right ideologist in Greece – a man (the father) who, among other things, had written a book claiming that Jews are not humans.

The second minister did exactly what one would expect of him, exactly what he was placed there to do: he adopted a series of extreme racist measures, a disgrace not only for my country but also for the European Union, which insists on looking the other way. Imprisonment (under certain circumstances) of migrants and refugees without even examining whether they qualify for asylum. -a measure that applies to everyone, women with children, the elderly, and the disabled. Deportation, even for legal migrants who have lived in the country for years. Demonization – almost criminalization, of NGOs that work to provide aid to migrants and refugees. The Greek government has even boasted of deliberately worsening the quality of meals in migrant facilities, in order to make their lives unbearable.

Unfortunately, Greece is not an exception. It is an extreme example, but not unique. Similar phenomena can be found in many countries of the so-called “enlightened” West. Even in giants such as Germany, France, and the UK. The argument is always the same: “We must adopt some harsh measures so that the far right does not come to power.” But when you truly want to defeat the far right, you do not act like them. You do exactly the opposite. Otherwise, you become the far right yourself. Therefore, the problem is not only the regimes of Orbán, Meloni, or even Donald Trump. Conservatism existed and will always exist.



The real issue is the parties that are elected under liberal or center-left banners, that promise to be bulwarks against the far right but ultimately become Trojan horses. It hurts me to admit this, but right now, the only ideological space that presents a coherent narrative is that of the “hardcore”. What do we have to counter their flimsy and repulsive, yet seductive, arguments? The quota of actors in Hollywood films? How can we contribute to the integration of migrants and refugees when we are making cuts to everything that concerns them, as well as to culture, to education, under doctrines such as “Rearm Europe”? Because true inclusion is not achieved with weapons



or with exclusions of the cancel-culture kind. It is achieved through culture, education, sports. Through play from the earliest age. We are obliged to stand against the racist, to fight him, not to fear him. But we will not wag our finger at the ordinary citizen who, perhaps influenced by the surrounding atmosphere and the misinformation of which he is also a victim, feels uncomfortable when he sees people around him who are different than him. This guy is not our enemy. He is a misled potential ally. And we must approach him with respect, listen to him, and convince him with arguments and truths.

We must come forward with ideas. With proposals. With a narrative that is not defensive but offensive. We must work with migrant communities, with civil society. We must put forward arguments of substance. We do not need, and must not, imitate our opponents with fake news or unethical methods. We have something far stronger: The truth. And it is enough to say it clearly, to shout it loudly.

The future, of course, appears bleak, dark, unpredictable. For many years, after the Second World War, humanity lived through a relatively calm period. It seemed that we had learned from the mistakes of the past. But all signs suggest that this is changing.

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci once wrote: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Gramsci wrote this in prison, shortly before he died, when Italy was ruled by fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. And we all know what followed.

Today, we find ourselves once again in such an interregnum. Around us, the “morbid symptoms” multiply. Authoritarianism, disinformation, disappointment, and the sense of deadlock. We must, therefore, help this “new” to be born. To nurture it, to protect it, to bring it into the light. Before it is too late.”



PANEL SESSION 1: DIGITALIZATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

[CLICK HERE](#) to Watch Panel Session 1

Martin Burt, Founder, Poverty Stoplight & Fundación Paraguaya | PARAGUAY Moderator Introduction Remarks

Dr. Martin Burt is a world-renowned social entrepreneur and microfinance pioneer who has developed two social innovations: the financially self-sufficient agricultural school model and the Poverty Stoplight, a new poverty metric and coaching methodology that is currently being implemented by more than 665,000 families and 1000 organizations in 60 countries. He is the Founder and CEO of Fundación Paraguaya, a social enterprise named Latin America's most impactful and innovative development organization by the Inter-American Development Bank. In public service, Dr. Martin Burt has served as Chief of Staff to the President of Paraguay, was elected Mayor of the capital city of Paraguay, Asunción, and was appointed Vice Minister of Commerce. Dr. Burt has written books on economics, development, municipal government, poetry, and education. He holds a PhD from Tulane University.



I have been working in poverty for more than 40 years, concentrating on street vendors with the microfinance movement. There must be a time when we got really frustrated because we did not understand how some street vendors came out of poverty, and some did not. Why did some people who increased their family income not fix their teeth or their bathroom? Why the promise of trickle-down economics by investing in the bottom of the pyramid sometimes worked and sometimes did not.

So, we looked at what the World Bank said about \$3 per person per day, which did not match reality at all. Then we analyzed the Sustainable Development Goals. We asked the poor people with whom we work: "What does it mean for you to be not poor?". They were ready to list us the requirements of having an income, clothes, nutritious food, drinking water, having adults and children to sleep in different bedrooms, education etc. And then they added: you must have a motivation, self-esteem, and be able to control your emotions. What is more important? Drinking water or controlling your emotions. The response was controlling emotions. There are no such subjective indicators among the SDGs, but we kept asking what is more important? Self-esteem or housing? The response was self-esteem. How do you measure poverty with subjective indicators? We did a visual survey using three colors: green to represent non poverty, yellow to represent poverty, and red to represent ultra poverty.



Any family in the world can self-diagnose their level of multidimensional poverty and come up not with an index that aggregates information for decision makers at the top, but a dashboard that disaggregates information for decision makers at the family household level. All these indicators that we were told, in addition to being objective and subjective, are actionable and achievable in five years.

We have now moved from having national development plans, municipal development plans to having family development plans for the world. At the family level, poverty can be eliminated in the short term. This is why we think that we must reconsider everything we are doing with the SDGs because they are third industrial revolution. With this current crisis, we are in the fourth industrial revolution, and now we have AI bots and avatars to coach every single family in their own language, in their own priorities. We are very encouraged with our work on the poverty spotlight. We are working in 14 States in the United States, in 100 communities in the UK. in addition to roma communities in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, in the favelas of Brazil, in the township of South Africa. At the family household level, change is possible. So, let's hope that the fourth industrial revolution allows this.

Sophie Farthing, Head of Responsible Technology Program, Human Technology Institute | AUSTRALIA

Civic Technologies to Foster Revitalization of Sustainable Development Goals

Ms. Sophie Farthing is Head of the Responsible Technology Program at the Human Technology Institute at the University of Technology Sydney. A human rights lawyer, her work encompasses human centered approaches to new and emerging technologies, with a current focus on AI governance and regulation. Previously, Ms. Farthing was the Senior Policy Adviser to the Australian Human Rights Commissioner. She has held legal policy roles at the Public Interest Advocacy Centre in Sydney, at National Council for Civil Liberties in the United Kingdom and was appointed the Research Assistant to Baroness Hale of Richmond in the United Kingdom Supreme Court. Ms. Sophie Farthing recently served on the Australian Human Rights Commission Expert Reference Group on Neurotechnology and Human Rights.



As a human rights lawyer, I have been working in AI, governance, and technology policy for almost a decade now. The Human Technology Institute, based in Australia, is coming to this fourth industrial revolution, looking to see how we can ensure new and emerging technology is adopted in a way that is human-centric, so that we get the benefits from this very powerful technology, and we do not steer towards that dystopian future that we definitely all fear. First, I would like to give a proper framing for what civic technologies are.



Like artificial intelligence, there is no fixed definition, but as we think about civic technologies, we are looking for the positive examples. The ones where the use of technology is transparent, where there is accountability, and it is used for the public interest. Therefore, when we are talking about the revitalization of the Sustainable Development Goals, we are in an incredible era where there is so much potential and a lot of peril.

Artificial intelligence is one technology, and there will be other examples of civic technologies that are going to be relevant to the SDGs. My focus on AI is because of how transformative this technology is. So, if we are thinking about potential, it is incredible what AI is going to be able to achieve because it is pervasive and now touching on all parts of societies and economies in very different ways. We surely have a huge digital divide, and we are getting an AI divide as well. As we have had past technologies that have completely transformed societies, that is what AI has the potential to do if we make the right choices with the right questions. If we approach the AI in the right way, then we will be able to use these technologies to revitalize and to work towards the attainment of the SDGs.

I also would like to note that we steer between two extremes, with a polar extreme headline of "AI could wipe out humanity," which had many political ramifications, to the claim that "AI can be worth trillions," referring to huge productivity and jobs. But what we are doing at the Human Technology Institute is focusing on examples showcasing how AI is being used now. We can get very distracted with the AI debate, and that is certainly occurring in particular environments globally. We can talk about the promise of AI transition from the promise of AI as one extreme to claiming that it will wipe us all out, taking our jobs. We must have practical conversations to make the right choices.

I would like to elaborate on the promise and the peril when it comes to using AI to achieve the SDGs, and the best way to do this is by speaking of examples. As I am coming from Australia, I have got a very particular example of AI from my country and how we are approaching it. During the week, I have met an obstetrician who specializes in high-risk pregnancies in Australia, where there is an excellent health system, but in our rural and remote areas, there are a lot of challenges. This woman's health professional was talking about diagnostic tools; the majority are powered by AI. She was saying that this new tool is not replacing what she does when she goes out to rural and remote Australia, but it is speeding up the time she must make a diagnosis quickly and therefore see more people and offer more help. These kinds of examples about health are very incredible when it comes to the use of AI. Ending hunger is another area with life-changing impacts of AI. I spoke with another person from Mali who has developed an app that is launching this week. The application will provide local people, including farmers and non-farmers, with information about growing food using the land around them, with the kind of information about weather and possible crops that could be planted. This is about the accessibility of information.

My computer scientist colleagues at the Human Technology Institute are globally leading a Bayesian statistical analysis and deep machine learning, looking at the education system in New South Wales, the state in which I come from. They have taken huge swaths of data held by the New South Wales Department of Education. After organizing that data and feeding it into their very spectacular mathematical formulas, they receive incredible algorithms.



What they are doing is looking at all this data that has been held for decades, and they are trying to understand why some kids finish school particularly strongly, and some finish at a disadvantage. One of the interesting findings is the unexpected causal relationships. Not only the correlation, but they are using AI to understand causation, which is the lower socioeconomic status that might indicate how well a child finishes school, if they finish school at all. In fact, they are finding a sense of belonging. These kinds of examples of AI use are the ones we need to really lean into when it comes to achieving the SDGs. We, of course, have a lot of frightening examples of how AI is undermining human rights and dismantling democracy. We must have a kind of environment in which healthy and well-functioning democratic institutions can operate. And AI is really undermining that ecosystem when it comes to misinformation. Social media is another good example of how powerful business models that are driving particular social media trends are having impacts on the health of young people and all of us. Seeking to understand how AI is reshaping public discourse in Australia and everywhere around the world is really important when we think about this promise and peril. How do we get the most out of AI?

We could have many different futures when it comes to AI and achieving the SDGs, but we need to be very careful about our decision making. We need active leadership at this point in time. As we are talking about AI revitalizing the attainment of the SDGs, it is addressing that global divide which is hugely significant. We are talking about the benefits of AI streaming to developing countries and even echelons within developed countries. We need good governance, ethical regulation, and human rights protection at the very core of all those regulatory instruments.

Prof. Mariateresa Garrido, Associate Professor, UPEACE, Deputy Director, Global Center for Peace Innovation | COSTA RICA

Misinformation/Disinformation as a Tool of Warfare in Divided Societies

Dr. Mariateresa Garrido is an Associate Professor in the Department of International Law at UPEACE, the Doctoral Committee Coordinator, and the Deputy Director of the Global Center for Peace Innovation. She is an international lawyer and holds a Doctorate from UPEACE and her main research area is related to the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and the protection of journalists in Latin America. Dr. Mariateresa Garrido is also researching the interaction between human rights and Information and Communication Technologies, using mixed methodologies and legal research to explore the linkages between the law and new technologies.



I would like to begin with an important question: Where do wars start? From the UNESCO charter, we learn that war starts in the minds of people. War doesn't start with AI or technology. War starts with the information we consume, in the information we distribute and engage with, and with the information we create. This implies an important social change that comes from the Fourth Industrial Revolution, specifically from the creation of information networks, how they operate, and how we are part of the distribution process.

In today's networks, information is the main good that we are discussing and distributing, creating. Then, it is essential to understand the information creation process. Coming from the idea of the minds of people, it's in our minds where the separation of us vs. them is created. It usually relies on the creation of stereotypes and highlighting the differences that create divisions; in other words, division is fueled by not knowing each other and the lack of understanding of what can make us a common group. These ideas impact us deeply. On one side, they lead us to the use of stereotypes that secure separation, and on the other side, they help us to justify the creation, consumption, and distribution of a very particular type of information. In consequence, information as a tool must be evaluated as a chain.

When we talk about misinformation or disinformation as a tool for warfare, we're usually looking at the idea of the creation of this type of information. Thus, when we refer to disinformation campaigns, we limit its study to an operation in which information has been purposely created to produce some harm. In this scenario, we recognize the use of bots, mass distribution of content specially designed for social media and internet-based platforms.

On the side of misinformation, we refer to information that might not have been created with the purpose of causing some harm, but it ends with conversations that are misleading. One example of this happened recently in Costa Rica when one congressman visited an area affected by intense rains, and when sharing about it with the media, he sent a picture of him in the affected place but from a previous visit. We know that he visited the area, but when he sent an image that was not from that very specific moment, he was misleading the media and the population in general. In conclusion, the main difference between misinformation and disinformation is the purpose and the goals for which they are created.

Continuing with the idea of the information chain, once it is created, it is massively distributed, permeating the information ecosystem, in both digital and non-digital networks. The digital distribution usually starts in social media, which is one of the biggest dissemination channels for this type of information because it is fast, emotional, and easy to relate to the situations people are facing. Then we also have media taking over, in some cases, traditional media using breakout news, without an exhaustive checking process.

Some of the problems we see in the distribution process are the existence of echo chambers. These are networks created around our interests and that impede us from receiving information that is posted outside those chambers. So, thinking of the idea that war starts in the mind of people, if we're only receiving information that is confirming our stereotypes and biases, then it is extremely easy to use information as a tool for warfare, because it is endorsing the preexisting believe of us vs. them. Then, the question is, how do we break this cycle? What do we do? The answer is simple: analyze the information. Some of the questions we can ask ourselves are: What is this information bringing to me as a person? How am I part of this echo chamber? Am I contributing to the distribution of misinformation or disinformation?

Disinformation campaigns rely on the use of emotions to ensure a connection with the audience. Thus, if it is relying on us vs. them, outrage and stereotypes, fear, anxiety, and conflict, then it is very likely that we are receiving disinformation.



To move away from the temptation to share that content, we need to consider our responsibility and find a path to disrupt the cycle, and it is precisely on this point that we go back to our minds.

If we are conscious of who we are in the network society, how this information is getting to us, then it's easy to take effective actions to break the cycle by doing something different. To counter the effects of these campaigns, it is worth identifying the main beneficiary of the information, the context, or the group for which disinformation is relevant, and considering the larger effects of the division that it is causing.

We must recognize that it will be specific people or groups who are creating this type of information and disinformation campaigns, with clear goals and intentions. They need society to think about a specific topic, and they are disseminating information to increase division and polarization. This is why, before sharing, it is crucial to stop and say: Is it worth sharing?

These are simple questions to explore, and that I want to leave you with, because if war begins in the minds of people, so does peace. We need to be intentional in the creation of peace, and for that, awareness of the type of information we consume and share is essential. If we can fight the temptation of sharing content that promotes division and polarization, we can do our part to build the society we want.

As we say at the University for Peace, if you want peace, work for peace. This work starts with us, in the most private space – our mind – and from there it impacts our networks and our society. If you can identify how the information is affecting you and stop the distribution cycle, you're already building peace.

As users, we're not powerless, we can create change by bringing unity when we recognize the us vs. them dynamic, dismantling echo chambers by accessing different ideas and consuming information that challenges our beliefs, and stopping the cycle by impeding the limitation of these types of contents. Change doesn't happen suddenly, but remember, if you want peace, work for it.

Alison Mau, Co-Founder, Tika, Award-winning Journalist | NEW ZEALAND **The Growing Threat of Technology-Facilitated Gender Based Violence**

Ms. Alison Mau is an award-winning journalist with more than thirty years in major television, radio, and print media roles. A long-time advocate for gender equity, in the wake of the global #MeToo movement, Ms. Mau created a groundbreaking investigative journalism project at NZ's largest news platform in 2018. Over five years, the #MeTooNZ project published dozens of major investigations and supported hundreds of survivors to tell their stories, leading to widespread change in the way sexual harassment is reported by media. Her leadership of the project has been recognized in national and international awards. In 2023, Alison Mau Co-Founded Tika, a tech-first access to justice charity designed to remove the barriers survivors experience when seeking justice and accountability. Her bestselling memoir, No Words For This, was released in April 2025.





Kia ora koutou katoa. Ko Alison Mau toko ingoa. In the Māori language of Aotearoa, this means hello, my name is Alison Mau. I'm from Aotearoa New Zealand, a beautiful country at the bottom of the South Pacific - a country with a stellar reputation for peace, a stable democracy, and, in particular, for its global leadership in the gender equity space. We were the first independently governed country in the world to grant women the vote. We were among the first nations in the world to achieve majority female representation in parliament. When I Googled

that to check the exact details, the AI overview told me that milestone was built on “a long history of women's political empowerment” in our country. But ours is also a country that bears a shadow not many in the wider world know about. We have appalling levels of domestic and sexual violence that belie that stellar reputation, much worse than our closest neighbor, Australia, which last year declared violence against women a national crisis.

In fact, in New Zealand, we have the worst rates of domestic and sexual violence in the OECD. Although it is not framed that way in public discourse, the truth is we are facing a national crisis of gendered violence in our small, idyllic country, and increasingly much of that is taking place online, or with the use of technology to coerce, control, and terrorize.

Zooming out for a moment. Internationally, the rise of online and technology-facilitated violence against women has become one of the most pressing human rights challenges of our time. It is ubiquitous and creates real-world harms, both psychological and physical. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has defined this abuse as “Any act of gendered violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated by the use of ICT such as mobile phones, the internet, social media or email against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately.”

This might look like a partner controlling a woman using spyware, tracking software, or the health apps on her phone or smart watch; the online environment is being used to spread misogyny or attack public figures to silence them; new technologies leading to new forms of abuse, such as the spreading of deepfake images; or the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. In my years as an investigative journalist writing almost exclusively on gendered violence, I have seen many cases of all of those categories, and even personally experienced one of them. But it is a case that falls into that last category, that really sticks in my mind.

Samarah, that's not her real name, is a New Zealand woman who came to me in desperation after years of trying, on her own, to track down and stop the man who was posting sexual videos of her without her consent - all over the internet. Or at least that is what it genuinely felt like to her. She had done what society considers “the right thing to do”. She had gone to the police. They had taken a case forward.



She had undergone intense and victim-blaming cross-examination by this man's defense counsel. And despite the fact that she could prove that he had uploaded the video to dozens, maybe hundreds, of pornography websites, her perpetrator was acquitted and set free. How could this happen? Well, at the time of her trial, under the New Zealand legislation called the Harmful Digital Communications Act, prosecutors had to prove that the offender intended to cause harm. A high legal threshold that made convictions almost impossible. That loophole was closed in 2020, but too late for Samarah.

Even after leaving journalism, I have kept in touch with Samarah, and I know she has spent most of the past decade chasing around the world wide web, filing take-down notice after take-down notice to porn websites, only to find the footage pop up somewhere else. Samarah is now part of a massive class action made up of women all over the world, which is suing Pornhub for allowing non-consensual videos like hers to remain online. This might sound like an outlier, something so horrible that it can only, surely, be happening in isolation. I am very sorry to say that when it comes to gendered violence online, it is everywhere you look and growing at an alarming rate.

A 2015 study by the United Nations Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development showed that almost 75% of women surveyed have experienced some form of gender-based violence online. A 2020 study covering 45 countries and conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit reported that 85% women have experienced or witnessed online and technology-facilitated violence. In my own country in 2017, Amnesty International released results of a study across Europe, the US, and New Zealand, which showed that a quarter of all women had personally experienced online abuse and harassment motivated by gender at least once in their lives. In 2021, UN Women reported that 60% of women in the Middle East had suffered from online and technology-facilitated violence and had reported it in the past year.

The intersectionality of victim-survivors must be acknowledged, too. There are much higher rates of abuse and harm in the LGBTQI+ community, and Black women also experience higher levels of abuse online. Sometimes it is your profession that will put the target on your back. I know from personal experience that women journalists are targeted disproportionately, and so are women in politics. In New Zealand, we are holding local government elections next month, an event that comes around every three years. The surge in racist, sexist, and sexualized abuse against women who are putting themselves up for those local council seats has made national news headlines for months already.

In 2020, at New Zealand's general election, there were 263 women candidates standing for election to our national Parliament. In the lead-up to the election, those women were sent 200,000 toxic messages on Twitter (now called X) - most of them directed at Jacinda Ardern, and other women politicians like Chlöe Swarbrick from the Green Party and Judith Collins, of the National Party - so this was a misogyny issue, not a political one. How do I know about those 200,000 tweets?

Those 200,000 abusive messages sent to women political candidates back in 2020 were detected by a custom-made Twitter Bot created by a women-led tech company called Areto Labs, a pioneering AI-driven content moderation company tackling digital harm.



When a tweet to a woman politician reached a threshold of awfulness, the bot would immediately tweet something positive and affirming back to the candidate. There is legislation in the wings that could help, and I would say not before time, because while technology-facilitated harm races forward, legislation to combat it tends to plod along in the distance, and it seems, is given few opportunities to catch up. A new bill called the Online Safety Duties for Platforms Bill has been mooted by New Zealand's main opposition party, and if passed, it would impose legally enforceable duties on social media companies where there currently are none, protecting children, limiting harmful material, and taking down deepfakes. Unfortunately, it does not cover racist or misogynistic pile-ons as they would fall outside the Bill's definition of harmful material. If the Bill makes it through, we will have to wait and see if it makes much of a difference. And finally, there is a light in the darkness for victim-survivors of sexual harm – whether it happens online, or IRL. And that is TIKA, the new NGO I have co-founded with the New Zealand barrister Zoe Lawton.

When I stepped away from journalism in 2023 after years of investigating sexual violence in the wake of the Global #MeToo movement, I was disappointed that all the awareness-raising and all the survivors' voices we had platformed had not made a single dent in the truly terrible reporting rates, which had stayed stuck at 7 per cent for 10 years. That meant 93% of harm, including online sexual harm, was going completely unreported. We asked each other, my co-founder and I, what would budge those statistics. What could we build that would sweep away the barriers of shame and self-blame, aloneness and isolation, fear of not being believed or having their experiences minimized and allow people to confidently and privately make a report and take the steps towards accountability they craved.

We decided the answer lay in access to justice using two things: collective action, and technology. So, over the past 2 years, having raised more than \$2 million in cash and in-kind support, we built a secure platform that uses algorithmic pattern matching to bring together groups of survivors of the same repeat perpetrator. We do it this way because we know that perpetrators rarely only harm one person, and there is better evidence, a better chance of an early guilty plea, a better chance of a conviction, and more support and comfort in numbers.

Once you register with TIKA, you have automatic lawyer-client privilege, a chance to find out whether your perpetrator has harmed anyone else, and a number of different pathways each group can choose for justice. Not everyone wants a criminal trial, so we offer restorative justice, a civil claim, or mediation, for example. The choice always remains in the survivors' hands, and our lawyers advise and support the group for free because we are a registered charity to the conclusion of their chosen justice pathway.

TIKA is a very special word in te reo Māori. It means justice, or what is right, and we're grateful to have had it gifted to us by tangata whenua, the people of the land. TIKA is a concept and a technology that has international appeal and a number of different use cases, and when we launch the TIKA platform next month, we expect to hear from thousands of New Zealanders who have experienced gendered harm online, whether it be harassment or online criminal acts under the HDCA and the Human Rights Act.



If I could finish by harking back to Samarah, the young woman whose life has been swallowed whole for ten years by the actions of that one man who posts her video online. I know one thing: I know that Samarah shares the same fervent wish that I have heard at least once from each and every one of the thousands of survivors I have spoken to. Samarah is desperate that no one else gets hurt. She wants her perpetrator stopped before he causes any further harm. And that's where we come in.

Dr. Michael L. Best, Executive Director, Institute for People and Technology | USA
The Use of Digital Technologies in Human Rights Monitoring

Dr. Michael L. Best is Executive Director of the Institute for People and Technology and Professor with the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs and the School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Institute of Technology where he directs the Technologies and International Development Lab. He was founding director of the United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society in Macau SAR, China. He holds a Ph.D. from MIT and has served as director of Media Lab Asia in India and head of the e-Development group at the MIT Media Lab. Professor Best is Associate Editor for Global Computing with Communications of the ACM and co-founder and Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of the journal Information Technologies and International Development.



Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and in part information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers. I was reminded of an essay I wrote quite some time ago when my colleague in a public forum recently stated that this essay was the first time that anyone had directly claimed in a publication that the internet itself was a human right. I am not sure

that it was the first time, but this was two decades ago, and it was probably one of the first times amongst the collection of such publications.

So, two decades ago, I wrote an essay entitled "Can the Internet be a Human Right?". The title of the essay is a question. But as I reread the essay itself, I realized that I had answered that question for myself at that time in the affirmative. Two decades ago, I was a very young scholar, and when I reread this essay, I was impressed with was my claim in this material that access to the internet itself is a human right. That is the reciprocal claims of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for being able to seek, receive, and impart information. The realization that the internet today is fundamentally the mechanism with which we act, beyond the statement of how the internet could be a human right. If we come to today, my question for us all is, has the bloom fallen off that rose?

As my fellow panelists have also noted, there is a janus-faced nature to the internet today that we are balancing multiple equities. The online gender-based violence that is perpetrated on people across the planet is indeed sobering. In the nature



of this kind of multiple equities today, would we want to challenge the notion that the internet itself could be a human right? Access to the internet is required if we wish to seek and receive information. I would like to argue that the designs of the internet, social media, and AI platforms are part of the problem. Those platforms and systems are no longer what the UDHR would contemplate as part of a human rights-based approach to informational exchange.

I would like to illustrate a case that I am personally involved in Myanmar. In 2018, the UN established that Facebook was used in Myanmar to incite hate and offline violence against the Rohingya people, who are an ethnolinguistic Muslim religious minority population in Myanmar. The UN had already established that the military was engaged in genocide against this minority population and community. The UN Special Rapporteur explicitly called out Facebook as an instrument towards that genocide, which is extraordinary. The United Nations is essentially pointing a finger at a social media platform being a part of a genocide. It was not a good look for Facebook or Meta, and they approached me during the 2020 election, asking if I might be a partner with them to flag, track, and monitor the dis and misinformation, electoral irregularities, and hate speech on Facebook during the 2020 election.

It is not just about Facebook, but at the time in Myanmar, the Internet was Facebook. This is because of a program that they run called Zero Rating or Free Basics, meaning that for the people of Myanmar, Facebook was free back then, but if you wanted to do other actions on the internet, you had to pay for data. I called this a walled garden in an essay I wrote 8 years ago, which is a metaphor for what I think that Meta at the time was doing.

"I stroll the gardens of this virtual garden along with all of my best friends. I chat with my buddies, play games, shop at the many concessions, or engage even in serious activities around politics or education. My friends all love the garden, and so do I, spending hours a day delighting within its walled confines. All the while, the proprietors are monitoring every aside I make to a friend or lingering glance I place on a storefront window. The proprietors are well-meaning enough, but they realize someone has to pay for all the costs associated with the grounds. They portfolize my size and my glances and sell them to storefront managers who can use the information and personalize my shopping options, constraining my experience to match their calculation of my interests. We feel free in our choices as we linger on the grounds, though of course, it is a well-planned architecture is not without influences. The managers had a brilliant new idea. At the entrance gates, these newcomers are welcomed freely, and they stream in. But when it comes time to exit, to everyone's surprise, they have placed ticket booths. It was free to enter, now they pay to leave."

There are two important aspects about the design of these platforms that are not because Facebook, Meta, X, TikTok, or WeChat is debased or depraved. It is simply a business model, an economy of surveillance and engagement. When Facebook surveil, me is to my choices for the sandwich I eat for lunch, it is not due to a debased interest in my love of roast beef. It is simply that they would like to sell that choice to a lunch meat company. So that motivates them to find out what I am eating for lunch, and then it further motivates them to elevate information that is going to engage me and keep me on the platform.



It is the engagement part that creates a platform that wishes to bring up mis and disinformation, to highlight hate speech or problematic speech, and to indeed create echoes and create the strongest opportunities for rights inflicting content online. So fast forward today to Myanmar, Facebook has been banned there, as have most social media platforms, because in February of 2021, the military junta took control of the country, destroyed the democratic process, and to this day are in control, perpetrating human rights and civil rights abuses against the democracy programs that are in the country.

It is a little rich that a platform that was cognizant of human rights abuses pre-military coup would be the one that the military junta would choose to ban. Meanwhile, Meta has dismantled its content moderation programs globally, and Twitter is a hellscape of harmful content. The UDHR may still purposefully affirm all these rights to receive, seek, and impart information and ideas, but in the presence of a designed Internet world that is about surveillance and engagement, is that a rights-affirming world? Is the internet in that instance a right itself, as I believe 20 years ago naively? Or is there a possibility for a new design of the Internet? If so, then are we able to move forward to put it in place?



PANEL SESSION 2: WOMEN AND YOUTH AS LEADERS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Ernest Alesin, Vice-Chairman for International Affairs, Lithuanian Union of Journalists | LITHUANIA

Moderator Introduction Remarks

Ernest Alesin is the Vice-Chairman for International Affairs at the Lithuanian Union of Journalists. He has 30 years of professional experience in the media sector, including leadership roles in television, radio, print, film, and podcast production. Mr. Alesin actively contributes to strengthening media ethics, freedom of expression, and international cooperation. Since 2017, he has been involved in international programs supported by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. Mr. Alesin is also the Head of the Association of Minority Media in Lithuania and currently, he is pursuing a Master's degree in Sports and Tourism Management. Ernest Alesin is a Member of the Media Council under the Ministry of Culture of Lithuania, where he contributes to policy discussions on media diversity, media resilience, and the protection of minority voices in the public sphere.



The SDGs Conference 2025 is taking place at a truly critical moment when the year 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and the 25th anniversary of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. It also coincides with the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. These milestones remind us that while progress has been achieved, it remains fragile and must be advanced through leadership that is inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking.

I have spent more than 30 years in the media sector, and I have seen firsthand how societies, institutions, and narratives change. Just as journalism has been transformed by technology, globalization, and shifting values, so too must we recognize that the future of governance and civic engagement depends on transformation. The world around us is changing, and we must be ready to respond by solving today's challenges and by building tomorrow's solutions.

The panel “Women and Youth as Leaders for Civic Engagement and Social Change” focuses on the vital role of women's leadership in shaping the future of the United Nations, the dangers posed by backlash against women's rights, the urgent need to address intergenerational trauma, and the restoration of youth trust in inclusive governance and multilateral institutions.



These are not abstract debates; they are questions that define the future of global governance and our capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

I come from Lithuania, a country that, just twenty years ago, could hardly imagine the reality we live today. We had our first woman president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, whose leadership marked a turning point for the country. Today, women hold the highest offices: the Prime Minister is a woman, in fact, the second woman to hold this office in Lithuania, and they also serve as Ministers of Defense, Education, Justice, and Culture. Women chair parliamentary committees, lead banks, and run unicorn companies. Just a year ago, two of the three top positions of state, Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament, were both held by women. Women also led the ministries of Finance and of Economy and Innovation. This is not an exception anymore. This has become the new normal. It has transformed the culture of governance, strengthened democracy, and built greater trust within society.

However, leadership is not only about women's representation. We must also recognize the crucial role of youth leadership. In Lithuania, we see this in the work of school parliaments, where students practice democracy at an early age, and in LIJOT (the Lithuanian Youth Council), which brings together youth organizations from across the country to influence national policies. These are not symbolic exercises, but real platforms where young leaders learn responsibility, representation, and dialogue.

Across Europe and globally, youth leadership programs, from the UN Youth Delegates to the European Youth Parliament and many regional youth ambassador initiatives, are creating a generation of leaders who are courageous, innovative, and unafraid to challenge outdated structures. Their voices are essential if we are to renew multilateralism and ensure the future of inclusive governance. Throughout Europe and the world, women are also redefining leadership in times of crisis. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has carried the weight of COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and the economic transformation of the European Union. Giorgia Meloni became the first woman Prime Minister of Italy, leading one of Europe's largest economies. Kaja Kallas of Estonia has become a symbol of determination in the face of war. And Maia Sandu, the first woman President of Moldova, has led her country toward European integration despite immense external pressure and internal resistance.

These examples show us that leadership, both women's and youth's, is not simply a matter of equality. It is about resilience, building societies capable of withstanding crises, and ensuring that decisions reflect trust, diversity, and long-term vision. We must learn to look at people not through the categories of gender or age, but through the lens of their ideas and their ability to shape the future. The challenge before us is to recognize and elevate the solutions that will serve generations to come.



Kelly Kimball is the Managing Editor of More to Her Story, a global newsroom amplifying women's and girls' voices through rigorous reporting, features and investigations. An award-winning reporter, editor and social media strategist based in New York City, Kelly also serves as an adjunct professor at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, where she teaches law, ethics and safety. Her reporting and editorial work has appeared in Foreign Policy, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Poynter Institute, Heat Map News, Long Lead, and more, reflecting her commitment to helping readers navigate the complexities of international affairs, war and conflict, the geopolitics of climate change, and the ripple effects of global flashpoints.



Our mission is urgent yet simple: to center the voices of women and girls through robustly reported journalism. Nearly every story we publish crosses my desk, and with each one, I am reminded of the weight of our responsibility, because many of these stories rarely make it into the headlines of mainstream media.

Our newsroom has grown rapidly in recent years, with over 120 reporters filing stories from underreported geographies, refugee camps, war zones, border crossings, rural

villages, and protected wildlands. We have published investigations into everything from sexual abuse in Malawi's tea plantations, period poverty in Gaza, to forced hysterectomies in India's sugarcane belt, to Afghan girls defying Taliban restrictions by enrolling in underground schools or taking classes over clandestine radio programming.

These are not side stories. They are the story. They tell us about the ripple effects of global flashpoints and about how the status of women is inextricably tied to the state of our societies. As world leaders gather in New York, I want to share from my vantage point as a global affairs journalist what I believe is one of the greatest impediments to peace and prosperity today: the stagnating, and in many cases worsening, status of women worldwide.

Across the regions we cover, a sobering pattern emerges. In Afghanistan, four years after the Taliban's return to power, women face what the International Criminal Court now calls gender persecution; women on the ground are calling it something far more severe: Gender Apartheid. From the banning of girls' education beyond primary school to the imprisonment of women for defying dress codes, Afghan women live under a system of near-total erasure. Yet Afghan women continue to resist, it's why our newsroom continues to keep their voices and experiences alive by partnering with Afghan women-led newsrooms Rukhshana Media and Zan Times, to remind the world that women are never passive victims of history, but agents of defiance and resilience.



In Iran, women remain on the frontlines of one of the most defiant civil rights movements in recent memory. The crackdown that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, which passed its third anniversary this month, has only intensified, but global headlines have precipitously fallen from the top fold. Women are surveilled, fined, beaten, electric shocked, and imprisoned for showing their hair or peacefully protesting, yet millions continue to engage in creative acts of daily resistance. Their struggle shows us that gender equality is not a cultural afterthought; it is a litmus test of a society's democratic health.

In Gaza, our reporters have told the stories of women enduring the impossible: war, displacement, and deprivation layered upon entrenched gender inequality. We've covered the quiet yet pervasive crisis of menstrual dignity and maternal mortality, issues that rarely surface in international negotiations but that define survival for half the population. These stories are not distractions from geopolitics; they are its sharpest consequence.

In Sudan, where the war has fractured governance and left civilians unprotected, women are sustaining both survival and the vision for peace. Dr. Entisar Abdelsadig, a leading women, peace, and security expert, has repeatedly demonstrated that Sudanese women can and must be central to negotiations, as leaders shaping ceasefires and political transitions. Her experience in Geneva in August 2024, where Sudanese women were successfully part of peace talks, underscores that inclusion is possible when there is genuine will.

I know this not just as an observer but as a journalist. At More to Her Story, we have covered how women in Sudan, especially those operating emergency response rooms, bear the brunt of violence. As we speak, RSF bombardments are overtaking El Fasher and pushing into the Kordofan region, where civilians are enduring both persistent conflict and systemic neglect. We have reported on women who were the first to speak out about the atrocities unfolding yet again in Darfur, bearing witness to genocide when the world was not listening. We have documented how women are among the thousands arbitrarily detained as the war drags through its third year. And in the course of this reporting, I have spoken to Dr. Entisar herself, whose words embody both the frustration and the fierce determination of Sudanese women leaders.

In Ukraine, too, women bear the brunt of war. They are among the millions displaced, they sustain families under bombardment, they endure wartime sexual violence, and yet they are also leading local councils, volunteer brigades, and grassroots humanitarian responses. Their dual role, as targets of war crimes and as architects of resilience, underscores the paradox of women in conflict: indispensable, but too often invisible.

As a newsroom leader, amplifying these voices is not optional, it is what makes journalism responsible, rigorous, and relevant. Supporting women's leadership is also the foundation of robust journalism that keeps the world informed, keeps policymakers accountable, and keeps hope alive in places where it is most under siege. This brings us to Sustainable Development Goal 5: achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Gender advisers, humanitarians, and advocates have told our newsroom that the reality is simple: without SDG 5, none of the other SDGs are achievable.



You cannot eradicate poverty (SDG 1) when 351 million women and girls are projected to remain in extreme poverty over the next five years. You cannot achieve quality education (SDG 4) while girls are banned or blocked from classrooms. You cannot build peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) while women peacebuilders are excluded from negotiations and gender-based violence remains normalized and unpunished.

Research shows that governments lose 4% of GDP to violence against women. Strong women's rights movements stabilize communities and countries. When women's rights are upheld, societies are more prosperous, more peaceful, and more democratic. Conversely, every crackdown on women's rights signals democratic backsliding and fuels cycles of instability and impunity. There is another challenge we face: while the need for women-led solutions has never been more urgent, women's organizations are facing unprecedented funding cuts. Less than 1% of global aid reaches women-led organizations.

A UN Women report that will be released later this month has found that 40% of groups it surveyed have scaled down or shut their shelters, emergency hotlines, and psychosocial support, turning survivors away. As Sarah Hendriks of UN Women said when presenting this report over the weekend, "The cost of global inaction is counted in lives."

As a journalist, I see another danger: when women's voices are lost, accountability disappears, and impunity grows, threatening to invisibilize the communities and movements the press so badly needs to cover. According to the latest Global Media Monitoring Project released earlier this month, women appear in just 26% of news stories worldwide, a figure virtually unchanged in 15 years. Only 2 out of every 100 stories challenge gender stereotypes. Journalism that counters gender bias has fallen to its lowest point in three decades. This is not simply a media crisis; it is a democratic crisis.

So where do we go from here? We must listen to what women activists from countries like Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine, Syria, Haiti, Myanmar, and elsewhere are telling us this week in New York: sustainable peace is impossible without the voices, leadership, and rights of women at the center. Women are not a footnote to peacebuilding and good governance; they are the backbone of it.

The Sustainable Development Goals are not 17 separate ambitions. Our journalism has found they are interdependent, and gender equality is the fulcrum on which all others rest. When women are empowered, societies are healthier, economies are stronger, democracies are more resilient, peace is more durable, and the press has true freedom. When women are silenced, the opposite unfolds.

As a journalist, my task is to tell these stories as the core of global affairs reporting. For policymakers and advocates, their task is to ensure women's rights organizations are not the first to be defunded, or the first to be under threat, but the first to be supported. Because if there is one truth that has emerged again and again in my reporting, it is this: the fate of women and girls is not separate from the fate of our shared world.



Adla Shashati, Director, Greek Forum of Migrants | GREECE

Mitigating Intergenerational Trauma and Ensuring Mental Health of Youth and Women in the Era of Conflicts

Ms. Adla Shashati is the Director of the Greek Forum of Migrants. She is a journalist and social activist with roots in Sudan and Greece. She holds a degree in Media and Cultural Studies and a postgraduate degree in New Media Technologies. Passionate about social justice, Adla has been actively engaged in efforts against racism and xenophobia at both the national and European levels. She has represented Southern European countries in the Board of the European Network Against Racism and currently serves on the Steering Committee of Equinox, Initiative for Racial Justice. Her advocacy focuses on inclusion, equality, and building cohesive societies that rely on care and not punishment. Ms. Adla Shashati has participated in conferences and public dialogues, highlighting the importance of inclusion and participation of migrants in the social dialogue to strengthen social prosperity and combat institutional racism.



As the Director of the Greek Forum of Migrants, I will address an issue deeply rooted in many of our communities, how intergenerational trauma can be mitigated, and the mental well-being of youth and women protected in times of conflict. More specifically, when I refer to intergenerational trauma, I refer to the transmission of trauma across generations, shaping identities and mental health long after conflict ends, and the way it is being addressed along with other issues in grassroots-level work.

Before I proceed, I would like to introduce you to the work done by my organization, which is a work done by grassroots, migrant-led communities. The Greek Forum of Migrants (GFM) is a network of migrant and refugee organizations across Greece. We operate as a union since 2002, and GFM's members and the Board of Directors are exclusively representatives from migrant and refugee communities. Currently, our network numbers 44 organizations from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, including other associations and networks. We envision a society where migrants enjoy equal rights, fair treatment, and social inclusion. We deliver projects focused on equal rights, social cohesion, empowerment, and combating discrimination.

What do we have to face in Greece? Mainly, what most of the migrant communities are facing nowadays. The migrant population in Greece is approximately 600,000, and around 300,000 European migrants. The migrant population in Greece is composed of 501,093 third-country nationals, 90,174 beneficiaries of international protection, according to the info by the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum in May 2025.

The current challenges these people face are the following:



1. Criminalization of migration: The new law criminalizes undocumented migrants. If you are found without papers, you are immediately imprisoned and face deportation. It does not matter if you are 30 years in the country or if you came yesterday.
2. Invisibility for the state: Residence permits are issued expired because it takes too long to issue them, and the Greek reality is full of bureaucratic obstacles that create difficulties for the vulnerable communities. Today, more than 293.000* of our fellow citizens are still waiting for the renewal or the first issue of their residence permit. (*Greek Ministry of Migration & Asylum - May 2025)
3. No integration policy: Thousands of refugees who gained asylum face homelessness due to policy gaps in integration and shelter programs. This also reflects on the immigrant population. There are no state schools for learning the Greek language; if you are lucky, the Municipality will have a school, or your community will have volunteer teachers.
4. Danger: Especially vulnerable groups include survivors of gender-based violence, people with mental health issues, single women or single-parent families, and young adults. People who have faced traumatic experiences are being traumatized again through a different process. And it takes even more time to heal.

Impacts of trauma include personal and communal effects. We have seen that youth exposed to conflict may experience anxiety, depression, PTSD, and barriers to education and community integration. On the other hand, women face compounded stress, from caregiving burdens and trauma to gender-specific challenges such as violence and exclusion. The psychological approach requires time and attention. So, the re-emergence of the traumas suffered can be a long and difficult process. It cannot go away in a day. It needs time, and the states do not seem to care to provide this time. Moreover, they are putting more obstacles to vulnerable communities.

In Greece we are facing a systemic fallout due to the lack of a holistic approach to migration policies, migrants in Greece face a repetition of trauma in their everyday life. A trauma that reflects throughout generations (birth, school, regularization process, employment, and even death). Without proper support, trauma becomes entrenched across generations, weakening the social fabric. The support we try to give relies mostly on care and safety.

Pathways to Healing and Mitigation:

Community Support and Safe Spaces: Our Community-led groups and forums offer places of belonging and mutual support, which are fundamental for beginning healing. We try to address the lack of information | marginalization, and exclusion through several tools inside the communities, including safe spaces, which are places of care created and run voluntarily by migrant community-led groups.

We provide free and valid Information: the GFMs Summer Guide initiative offered vital services for health (including mental health), psychosocial support, legal aid, and job assistance for migrants & refugees in Athens. We also have an INFODESK initiative, which operates daily in GFM as an information office with referrals from and for migrants.



Moreover, we believe that there should be inclusive access to mental health services. Mental health care must be integrated into broader service provision, especially for single women and youth with trauma-related vulnerabilities. There is an extreme need for culturally sensitive, language-accessible mental health services, embedded in trusted community spaces. Every day, we receive calls from doctors & social workers to support them with translation, home support, or even care during patients' cancer treatments. We create multi-language guides about gender-based violence, reporting hate crimes etc.

We also try to provide empowerment through integration, as GFM encourages policies that extend beyond emergency aid to long-term community support -housing, work, and social integration. In one of the pillars that we work which we call NEW CITIZEN, we have P2P training, for community representatives to lead and train others inside their community. GFM's advocacy relies on legal inclusivity, fair migration law, and access to social services as critical to mental health recovery and prevention of destitution in collaboration with the community's leaders to represent themselves.

Other important tools are education, leadership, and skill building. We have youth-focused programs with language classes, workshops, and leadership training, building resilience, self-esteem, and future orientation. There are also women's empowerment initiatives with economic, educational, and psychosocial programs that restore agency and reduce trauma cycles. We are very proud of the work and efforts done by our women's group, including United African Women Organisation, Nigerian Women Organisation of Greece, and Migrant Women Network.

The Role of Civil Society and Collective Action:

At the Greek Forum of Migrants, we recognize that healing and inclusion demand collective effort. We must unite governments, civil society, and migrant-led organizations, with migrants taking the lead in advocacy and empowerment. What is important is to emphasize migrant-led initiatives, informed by lived experience and community insight, as catalysts for sustainable inclusion. Trauma from conflict can echo for generations but so can healing. By investing in culturally informed mental health services, equitable policies, solidarity, community, and empowerment of youth and women, we can break intergenerational cycles.”

Call to Action could refer to the following:

- Treat mental health as an urgent, non-negotiable aspect of refugee and migrant policy.
- Champion inclusive integration, housing, psychosocial services, legal access.
- Elevate youth and women through leadership, education, and support programs.
- Support already-existing grassroots organizations and projects.

Together, we can ensure that future generations inherit resilience, hope, and the strength to thrive.



Daniel Juma Omondi, Africa Regional Representative, Global Peace Foundation | KENYA

Ensuring Youth Leadership in Social Change and Peacebuilding: Challenges and Resolutions

Mr. Daniel Juma Omondi is the Africa Regional Representative of the Global Peace Foundation with over 13 years of peacebuilding and youth development experience. He also serves as GPF Kenya's Country Director, where he has curated and led initiatives that promote social cohesion, ethical leadership, and transforming education reform across Kenya. Under his leadership, programs such as the Great Places to School Awards, the Character and Creativity Initiative, and the President's Fellowship have nurtured and empowered emerging African leaders. Before joining GPF, Mr. Omondi served as a Trade and Investment Promotion Officer at KOTRA, expanding Korea's economic ties in East Africa. He was recently recognized as one of Kenya's Top 50 Most Influential CEOs. An alumnus of the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities, Mr. Daniel Juma Omondi holds a B.A. in Political Science and Korean Studies from the University of Nairobi and a Diploma in International Studies from IDIS.



Our shared commitment to collaborative peacebuilding makes this platform not just a speaking opportunity but a testament to the power of partnership itself. Our founder, Dr. Hyun Jin Preston Moon, defines youth not by a number on a birth certificate, but by the state of one's heart and mind, it is, fundamentally, the ability to dream. To look at the world not just as it is, but as it ought to be. And across the globe, we are witnessing a seismic shift, an awakening driven by a generation of dreamers who refuse to accept the

status quo. We have seen the raw power of this dream on the streets of Nairobi, Dhaka, and Kathmandu. The Gen Z uprising is not a mere protest; it is the necessary pang of birth. It is the sound of a new civilization struggling to be born, one that rejects the old diseases of corruption and discrimination and demands a world built on integrity, justice, and the radical idea that all humanity is One Family Under God. But a dream, no matter how powerful, requires a blueprint for action. It requires us to equip these dreamers not just with passion, but with the tools for transformational leadership.

This is the mission of the Global Peace Foundation. Through initiatives like our President's Fellowship, we are intentionally nurturing the next generation of African leaders. We move beyond skills to build character, instilling a values-based leadership of service above self and unity over division. We are preparing these young minds to lead a global renaissance because by 2050, Africa will be home to a quarter of the world's dreamers.

And our work is a direct contribution to the blueprint you have all gathered here to discuss: the Sustainable Development Goals.



-In pursuit of SDG 4 on Quality Education, our initiatives have transformed over 5,000 educators, believing that to transform education, we must first transform people holistically.

-For SDG 8 on Economic Growth, our LEAP Hubs have empowered over 3,000 young entrepreneurs to innovate and create opportunities.

-For SDG 15 on Life on Land, our Chandaria nurseries have grown over 3 million trees, restoring ecosystems and fostering environmental stewardship.

-And at the heart of it all, SDG 16 on Peace and Strong Institutions is advanced through our global campaigns for dialogue and unity, from the One Korea campaign to programs preventing violent extremism here in Africa.

This is how we build peace, through concrete action aligned with global goals and powered by SDG 17: Partnerships. Yet, as the great Genghis Khan said, “If one person has a dream, it is just a dream. But if many share that dream, it becomes achievable.”

Today, from this global stage, I call on you to share in the dreams of those who are silenced. Let us share in the "Korean Dream" of our founder, Dr. Moon. We cannot speak of empowerment while the youth of North Korea remain isolated from civilization itself. We urge this global community to prioritize dialogue for a peacefully reunited Korean Peninsula. Let us share in the dreams of Afghan girls who dream only of classrooms, not confinement. We call for the immediate reversal of the ban on education for women and girls. To deny education is to murder a dream.

And in my continent, Africa, we must share the dream of a peaceful future. It is time to “Silence the Guns” in the Sahel, the Eastern DRC, and Sudan. The sound of gunfire is the sound of stolen futures. But peace is not just the absence of war; it is the presence of opportunity. For an African Renaissance to flourish, we must break down the walls between us. I call upon African leaders to eliminate visas and allow for the free movement of people across this great continent! Let our dreamers, innovators, and traders move as freely as our data.

To our partners in the West: we extend a challenge. Share in this dream. Dismantle the restrictive visa practices that target African youth. These barriers are not just policies; they are a statement of mistrust that undermines our shared future. Let us build bridges, not walls. The energy is here. The dreamers are emerging. The question before us is whether we will be the architects of their future or the guardians of a broken past. Let us choose to be architects. Let us choose a world of peace, of opportunity, and a world where every single person is valued as an essential member of our One Family Under God.



Rebuilding Youth Trust in Inclusive Governance and Multilateralism

Ms. Oluwaseun Ikusika is a Nigerian British family lawyer, Franco-British Council Local Leader, United Nations contributor, Global Youth Ambassador and a strong advocate for gender and disability rights. She serves as a Global Youth Ambassador for Theirworld, a charity dedicated to promoting children's rights and education. Additionally, she is an ambassador for SpeakUpNowUK, an organization that advocates against racism, discrimination, and sexism in the workplace. Her impactful work spans Europe, Central Asia, Africa, and North America, earning her certifications from various UN bodies.



I am honored to share my contributions not just as a youth leader but as one of millions of young people worldwide who are calling for real, lasting change in how we are included in governance and global decision-making. Right now, the trust between youth and institutions is breaking down. Many young people feel ignored, excluded, and tokenized in spaces where critical decisions are made. And yet we are among the most affected by these decisions. Whether it's climate change, conflict, digital rights, or economic insecurity, our futures are on the line.

Let me be clear: I am not saying that youth are disengaged, we are not, but we are dissatisfied, we are disappointed, and unhappy. Regardless, we are still organizing, protesting building communities, launching movements, and shaping new ideas of leadership every single day. But too often, those in power still see us as “future stakeholders” rather than as equal partners today. We do not want a seat at the table just for show. We do not just want to attend conferences and take pictures. We want influence, we want accountability, we want change, and we want to open the door that has been historically closed.

So, how do we rebuild the trust?

- Firstly, youth participation needs to be real, not symbolic. This means establishing youth councils that truly influence decision-making processes. We urgently need Participatory budgeting where young people help allocate public funds for projects in education, climate action, and even in digital innovation. For example, in Scotland, France, and many European cities, participatory budgeting has already shown success. So, imagine scaling that up globally. We also need youth representatives to contribute to shaping the agendas, and this will also require governments that are willing to listen and act.
- Secondly, youths need investment; we need funding. We have been calling for this forever, but only little progress has been made. Youths need funding not just in programs, but in leadership, in capacity, and in civic space, especially for the marginalized youth, those in conflict zones, and those too often left out.



- And finally, multilateralism must progress. The UN and other global bodies need to speak our language. They need to speak it digitally, accessibly, and transparently. We need to see the impact of our voices, not just be invited to speak. This is not about charity; it is about democracy, it is about justice, and it is about making the systems we inherited better than how we found them.

The best way to regain youth trust is to earn it and we are ready to work with you to build a future that is not just inclusive but equitable, representative, and sustainable. Trust is not rebuilt overnight. It is earned. It is earned through inclusion, consistency, and courage.

To the institutions: Do not just invite young people to the table; share the table with us.

To the governments: Do not fear youth power, embrace it. It is what we need; it is the antidote to stagnation and opposition.

To the young people: You are not just the voice of tomorrow, you are the integrity of today. Demand accountability, organize boldly, collaborate across borders, shape the systems you want to inherit. Because when youth trust governance, democracy becomes stronger. When youth shape multilateralism, the world becomes more just. When we do it together, we will build a future that is not only inclusive but unstoppable. So, keep pushing. Keep organizing. Keep imagining. Because a more inclusive, just, and peaceful multilateral world is not only possible, but also necessary. And it begins with me; it begins with you. It begins with all of us.





PANEL SESSION 3: CROSS-CUTTING THREATS TO THE PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

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James Patton, Founding Partner, Lead Integrity | USA Moderator Introduction Remarks

Mr. James Patton is a Founding Partner of the women-led consulting firm, Lead Integrity and an Environmental and Social Impact Consultant for the Inter-American Development Bank. He has conducted conflict transformation, reconciliation, and economic development for 25 years in 40 countries. His advisory roles include the U.S. Department of State's Working Group on Religion and Foreign Policy, the UN Multi-Faith Advisory Council to the Task Force on Religion and Development, and Religion and Conflict Co-Chair for the G20 Interfaith Forum. Mr. Patton is a Lifetime Member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Advisory Council Member for the Center for Women, Faith and Leadership, Faculty Advisor at Brigham Young University's Wheatley Institution, and Senior Fellow at the Rumi Forum. James holds a Master of Divinity from Harvard University and a Master of Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School at Tufts University.



In 2010-2011, I was a State Department conflict mitigation expert in what was then southern Sudan during the referendum for independence. There was an almost universal consensus in the South, widely promoted by southern politicians, that divorce from the North was the solution to generations of suffering and violence. As part of my work, I was in Northern Bahr El-Ghazal, near the border with Darfur, as an election observer. 99% of ballots were clearly marked for secession and independence, but what surprised me most

was the celebration among community members when they found the few and far between ballots marked for sustaining unification with the north. Considering the histories involved, it seemed deeply illogical to me. But it turned out that they were so excited because these few dissenting votes showed clearly that the Referendum was “free and fair” – something that they knew was important to show the world that their birth as a new democratic state was legitimate.

Two years ago, I was conversing with a university student in Utah, exploring ways that faith might support civic engagement, and she was lamenting the state of the US democracy. She put it quite simply, “politically, I have nowhere to go”. Her complaint was not about candidates as much as it was about how party politics and the need to stay in power had created reductionist, essentialist platforms with implied loyalty tests.



We discussed how voters used to push ideas up into political parties, moving legislative priorities, but now the parties push down into the populace their own priorities, not grounded in either legislation or even logic but rather in a polarized power struggle that not only fails to capture the great diversity of ideas in society, but is actively working to eliminate them in favor of a false binary that is often illogical and is increasingly destructive, thriving on, rather than positively transforming, conflict.

It is true that democracy has never been anything but deeply flawed. Among the foundations of all democracies are littered the bricks of injustice, corruption, disenfranchisement, and myriad other failures. But a functioning democracy is not an experiment in perfection; it is an experiment in improvement. The failures of democracy's promise are both a lament and an opportunity. Democracy understands that we get things wrong, it enshrines the need to change and adapt, and it is illuminated by the practical hope that we can have difficult dialogues that will guide us from the inevitable conflict of ideas and needs that mark human society towards more fair and functional structures and social relationships, rather than deteriorating into absolutism, authoritarianism, and exclusivist bloodshed.

In 2022, Freedom House described democracy as a “governing system based on the will and consent of the governed, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights.” Consent, Accountability, Rule of Law, and Human Rights are among the principles that consistently appear in descriptions of democracy, including within the UN system.

The institutions of democracy, as well as those core ideals that uphold them, are groaning under the pressures of polarization. Perhaps the most nuanced measure of global democracy, produced by the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, applies around 600 “attributes of democracy”. Some highlights include:

- 72% of people now live in autocracies; the highest since 1978.
- Average levels of democracy for global citizens have retreated to 1985 levels – before the end of the Cold War.

Those who are given power are greatly seduced by the temptation to erode controls on their power. And I don't mean this as any kind of partisan or moral judgment; I mean it in very practical terms with respect to the careful architecture surrounding democracies that acknowledge and respond to this temptation by insulating popular governance against power consolidation, corruption, and other abuses.

But when people lose faith that their system of governance can help them, they either turn from those institutions or seek to take them over and rebuild them in their own image – not to preserve and protect a participatory and pluralist system, but to preserve their own policy and values priorities – at the cost of others. Democracy needs preservation and constant repair to defend against our all-too-human inclination to take power, but also to maintain the basic trust of the citizens who participatory governance is meant to represent.



The Hon. Chief Justice Chris Kourakis, Supreme Court of South Australia | AUSTRALIA

Global Stability at Risk: Geopolitical Tensions and Weakening Rule of Law

The Honourable Chief Justice Kourakis was the Legal Services Commissioner for the State of South Australia from 1993-1997 and then the Solicitor-General for the State of South Australia from 2003-2008. His Honour was appointed to the bench of the Supreme Court of South Australia in 2008 and then appointed as Chief Justice in 2012. The Honourable Chief Justice Kourakis has served as National Patron of the Hellenic Australian Lawyers Association and the Chairperson of the Judicial Council on Cultural Diversity since 2014 and 2018 respectively. Chief Justice was appointed as the Chair of the National Judicial Council of Australia on 17 April 2020 but has now resigned from that position.



The Origin, Development, and Future of the Administration of Justice in the Western World

I intend to address the rule of law as a constitutional concept in the internal government of nation-states. I will not address the rules-based international order, an order which, in recent times, is more honored in its breach than its observation. However, similar geopolitical tensions are threatening both. Those tensions radiate out from the fault line between the world's two great economic powers, the United States and China, in their competition for global hegemony.

The fallout adversely affects both superpowers as well as developed and developing countries around the world, by undermining their national economies, the living standards of their people, and their sovereignty. Historically, it is not surprising that in this period of existential threats, so many look to demagogues and authoritarians for their salvation. Nations around the world are riven by bitter divisions that threaten democracy and the rule of law.

But let me first quickly trace the history of our liberal democratic tradition and the related principles of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. The democratic government adopted by ancient Athens, interspersed by periods of tyrannical rule, was exercised directly by its citizenry and not mediated through parliamentary representatives. It was radically participatory, but it was not a liberal democracy: it recognized only one of what we now know as human rights, the right to free speech. Pericles, in his famous funeral oration, explained: We Athenians, subject our decisions on policy to proper discussions, for the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated.

Athens' participatory democracy extended to the administration of the law. The legal codes of law makers such as Draco and Solon were enforced by juries comprising upwards of several hundred citizens who cast their decisions by ballot in accordance with which orator most appealed, usually to their reasoning, but all too often to their passions and biases. However, in the same period, a concept of justice closer to ours was conceived.



The Aristotelian ideal is that the law be governed by reason and morality, unaffected by passion. Aristotle warned that the direct administration of the law by the sovereign, even if it be an assembly of the citizenry, allowed passion to pervert the reason of even the best of rulers. The just resolution of disputes is a deeply rooted human need. It is the cornerstone of the social contract. The Aristotelian ideal has been passed down through the religious precepts and philosophical thought.

Think the fourth Beatitude: “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be filled.” And Leviticus: “Do no pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great”, commands which still find voice in many judicial oaths to this time. However, the constitutional adoption of the Aristotelian ideal was many centuries in the making.

The 17th century was an era of great political turmoil in England. James II was crowned in 1685, but by 1688 had become deeply unpopular. He ruled by decree, dismissed judges who disagreed with him, and fermented religious and political divisions. All this in a period of shifting European alliances. All too familiar stuff. Fearing a return of civil war, the Dutch prince William of Orange was invited by the parliament to invade and save the nation and the religion. He ruled in collaboration with the Parliament, in a way that laid the foundation for what has become the Westminster form of constitutional and democratic monarchy.

In 1701, Parliament, with his assent, passed the Act of Settlement, which provided that judges retained their office for life unless both Houses of Parliament voted to remove them for misbehavior. The monarch’s power to control the judiciary, by threats, punishment, or dismissal, was abrogated forever. Montesquieu (1689–1755) based his treatise ‘The Spirit of Laws’ on that legislated separation of powers. He argued that “there is no liberty if the [power of judges] be not separated from the legislative and executive [powers]’ because ‘the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control.” He contended that an independent judiciary would decide cases by reasoning from the circumstances of each case, in accordance with the law.

Montesquieu, however, did not favor the establishment of an institutionally independent judiciary appointed from the ranks of the preeminent jurists. To this day, the inquisitorial courts of the civil law jurisdictions comprise university graduates trained to be judges and not lawyers, organized like a department of a state, with promotion and short-term leadership positions decided by the executive government. Features which make those courts more vulnerable to executive interference, a trend which emerged strongly in Europe from 2010, including Poland’s muzzle law in 2019. Judges remain in prison to this day in Turkey as a result of repressive measures taken in 2016.

On the other hand, the English jurist Sir William Blackstone (1723–1780) contended that the public’s liberty could only be preserved by the distinct and separate existence of the judicial power if it was exercised by a corps of independently minded and organized judges learned in the law, appointed by the Crown but not removable at its pleasure. Blackstone’s view was undoubtedly influenced by the historical fact that English common law was developed by judges who studied judicial precedents and applied them logically and coherently. Whereas the law in civil law jurisdictions was codified by the legislature.



On either approach, the judiciary is, as one of the founders of the US Constitution, Alexander Hamilton wrote, ‘from the nature of its functions, the least dangerous to the political rights of the Constitution, having neither force, nor will, but merely judgment’. A former Chief Justice of Australia explicated that theme when he said that ‘the judiciary has public confidence as its necessary and sufficient power base. It does not have, nor does it need, the power of the purse or the power of the sword to make the rule of law effective, provided the people whom [it serves] have confidence in the exercise of the power of judgment.

At the close of the 20th century, many were celebrating what was called the ‘end of history’ and the dawn of a liberal democratic eternity. Constitutional limitations on governmental power, the rule of law, and an independent judiciary were proclaimed as the gold standard for all nations to follow. Liberal democratic constitutions guaranteed an ever-increasing range of human rights, protected by the independent judiciary. The autocratic demagogue ruling by decree was relegated to history or so it seemed.

Well, history’s wheel has not stopped turning. Geopolitical rivalry, global economic uncertainty, and internal crises are back. However, whereas the crisis in 17th century England gave birth to liberal democracy, and the aftermath of World War II to a rule based international order with the United Nations at its core, opposing reactionary forces are at work today. Nations are at war with themselves. Divisions are deep, and political rhetoric can be hateful and even violent, resulting in an aggressive majoritarianism that challenges the legitimacy of the independent judiciary.

Traditional and social media now pass judgment before trial and without ever hearing both sides, in a perversion of the Athenian jury, or they condemn the decisions made by judges after the event, not caring to inform themselves of the law or the facts. Growing numbers of sovereign-citizens who refuse to recognize any legal authority clog up courts with pseudo-law defenses, and, increasingly, take the law into their own hands. The problem is exacerbated when the executive anticipates constitutional obstacles to its agenda by appointing judges who it believes will be subservient to its political program, trashing the until recently accepted convention that only those who are most skilled and most independently minded will be appointed judges.

The identification of a court with a political party becomes complete when judges breach convention by not distancing themselves, or their close family members, from political parties to which they are sympathetic. Watching from Australia, where constitutional protections and conventions remain strongly embedded and institutions robust, it is deeply disturbing to hear frequent references to the political connections of a judge when reporting on court decisions.

The capacity, or even the will, of political leaders to fix this, at least in the short term, is questionable. It is of first importance, therefore, that judges adhere strictly to the judicial method and continue to fully explain their reasoning in their judgments. They must not sit on a case if there is a reasonable apprehension of bias. They must distance themselves from the politically or financially powerful. They must model respectful behavior which recognizes the equal human dignity of all people.



Most importantly, the judiciary and legal profession must show themselves to be the servants of the public by substantially expanding timely and cost-effective access to courts so that wrongs are remedied. If courts do not satisfy the public's thirst for justice, then the public will see no value in the independence of the legal system and have no reason to defend it when it is threatened by powerful interests.

Arfa Khanum Sherwani, Senior Editor, The Wire | INDIA

Undermining Trust in Mainstream Media eroding Social Cohesion and Peacefulness

Ms. Arfa Khanum is a Senior Editor at The Wire, an independent news website published in Hindi, English, Urdu and Marathi. She leads the multimedia team and hosts one of the most popular online video programs in India, which is primarily devoted to the issues of people living on the margins of Indian democracy. In 2019, Ms. Khanum was one of the first journalists to visit the Kashmir Valley after the Indian government stripped Kashmir of its autonomy and imposed a complete security and communication lockdown. Her journalism is focused on covering politics and policy, with a special focus on social justice. Ms. Arfa Khanum previously worked for NDTV, one of the largest television news networks in India. She is a recipient of the Red Ink Award for Excellence in Journalism from the Mumbai Press Club and the Chameli Devi Jain Award for Outstanding Woman Journalist of the year from The Media Foundation.



Cohesion and Peacefulness: As the United Nations turns 80, with so much conflict around us and the tragic loss of lives, we are all asking: How relevant is this institution in 2025? But the truth is, the UN remains a crucial platform for international dialogue, for peace, and for security efforts.

Tribute to Journalists in Palestine: Before I begin, I want to take a moment to remember my colleagues in Gaza

Palestine, who are no longer with us. In the past 22 months, more than 200 journalists have been killed there. Those who have survived continue to report every single day, often counting their own days as well. They put everything on the line, including their lives, to bring us the stories of one of the most persecuted people on this planet. I want to take this moment to honor their courage, their work, and their service to humanity.

India: The Global Battle for Democracy: With 1.45 billion people, India is now officially the most populous country on Earth. And today, India is where the global battle for democracy is being fought. In many ways, India exemplifies the global democratic recession, and, I must say, America is giving us tough competition. It is, as I often say, the worst time to be a journalist in India, and yet, the best time to be a journalist in India.



The Media Landscape in India: India's media landscape is vast and diverse. We have over 140,000 registered newspapers and periodicals, including more than 22,000 daily publications. Stories are told in 189 languages and dialects. The television landscape is equally sprawling — with over 900 channels, 350 of which are dedicated to news, many broadcasting around the clock. By 2026, India is projected to be the world's fifth-largest media market, both in print and broadcast television. And yet, despite this incredible scale, the state of media and the state of democracy in India have never been more worrying than they are today.

The Crisis of Information: Despite hundreds of media organizations and thousands of journalists, India is going through a crisis of information. People are not getting the information they deserve. Why so? Because there are two sides to Indian media: The pro-establishment media, and the free, progressive media.

Political Context: It is now the 12th year of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rule, his third term in power. The pro-establishment media sees no fault in his work, not even during the five million deaths during COVID, rising unemployment, or deepening social unrest.

Meanwhile, the progressive media faces constant suppression. For instance, the I&B Ministry ordered the takedown of 138 videos and 83 Instagram posts about the Adani Group, using ex-parte court orders. Those who are still reporting the truth, are doing so at great personal risk, often against one of the richest men in the world. Although the election last year resulted in a coalition government, the Modi administration continues to target political opponents, dissenters, journalists, activists, and even comedians, who, today, are not allowed to crack a joke.

Mainstream Media's Role: Most of the mainstream media in India today are spreading misinformation, disinformation, and suppressing information. Many are actively colluding with the ruling party and its agenda of religious supremacy. This agenda involves polarizing the country daily, demonizing the Muslim minority, and inciting hate and violence. This cycle of media suppression to lack of information to uninformed citizens and weakened democracy is what defines the current crisis.

Rise of the Alternate Media: In response, we are witnessing the rise of alternate media, independent, citizen-led, digital platforms that are challenging narratives and restoring truth. But they too face intimidation, censorship, and financial pressure.

Conclusion: We all agree that democracy rests on an informed citizenry. Citizens must know how governments perform, where policies succeed, and where they fail, in order to make fair choices at the ballot box. But the way Indian media is functioning today, it is polarizing communities and undermining any possibility of reconciliation or peaceful dialogue. Especially in a country as diverse as India, where unity in diversity has been the very foundation of our democracy, rebuilding trust in media is essential, not through control or censorship, but through transparency, accountability, and ethical journalism.



On the sidelines of this 80th UN General Assembly, it is vital to recognize that safeguarding democracy is not only about protecting elections or institutions, but also about protecting the credibility of information that binds citizens together, in trust and peaceful coexistence. At 80, the United Nations reminds us that peace and democracy are inseparable. For India, safeguarding democracy requires restoring faith in the fourth pillar, our media, so that citizens can hold governments accountable and participate in democracy from a place of knowledge, not misinformation.

Michael Bociurkiw, Global Affairs Analyst, Former Spokesperson, UNICEF and OSCE Multilateral Responses to the Rise of Autocratic Regimes and Practices

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw is a New York Times-published opinion writer, former journalist, and respected global affairs analyst. He is the creator of the influential World Briefing newsletter on Substack and the author of Digital Pandemic: How Tech Went from Bad to Good. Mr. Bociurkiw served as UNICEF Spokesperson in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and later as the organization's global spokesperson in Geneva, leading communications in several high-profile emergencies worldwide. He also brought his diplomatic expertise to the role of spokesperson for the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe in Ukraine. A trusted voice on international crises, he is a regular contributor to BBC World Television, BBC World Service Radio, CNN, Al Jazeera, Times Radio, and other leading global outlets.



I am based in Odesa, Ukraine, which is currently a war zone. Just a few minutes ago, the air raid sirens went off in the region; it is probably the fifth one today. Whenever sirens go off, as it is night-time now in Ukraine, children are woken from their sleep. If they are not sleeping and they are in school, classes stop, and they rush to bomb shelters. Imagine the disruption and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) people get after so many air raid sirens every day. I would like to start my reflections by acknowledging this dire situation.

I am a Canadian citizen, and this is my first time entering the United States since Trump took office again (Trump 2.0). I have several notes on this because we are talking about democracies and autocrats. I used to live in a Canadian-US border town on Vancouver Island. It is the first time ever that I felt so anxious entering the U.S. - and I have crossed a lot of borders in my lifetime, very challenging borders. I never thought that the day would come when we could be denied entry based on what we [journalists] said on air, put in print, and posted on social media. This is a very disturbing time when a lot of Canadians have had problems going in and to the point where, I included, we delete the social media apps on our telephones in case we are taken to secondary examination. They have been known to look through our belongings, and they could ask us: "What do you think of Trump?". It is not a good place for what is supposed to be the leader of the free world.



There is some good news at the end of my speech but let me get the bad news first. When we take everything into consideration about what is happening around the world, we cannot blame it all on the current occupant of the White House, though he can take a lot of credit. It feels like the rules-based international order is in free fall. As we convene on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, I must say that severe financial cuts to the United Nations have been very deep. All organizations, including the one I used to work for, UNICEF, are having to decide what to cut. At the end of the day, whether you are talking about UNICEF, the World Food Program, or UNAIDS, this does cascade down very quickly to the field and to the point where managers of certain UN organizations have to decide, "Do we bring out this vaccine or do we not?"

Who lives, who does not, who gets fed, who does not?" What is happening in Gaza is beyond belief. It is horrible on every level. As the UNICEF spokesperson at the time for the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), I got to know almost every inch of the Gaza Strip. I have spent a lot of time there and also in the West Bank. When I hear of this man-made starvation, famine, genocide, it just brings me back to the faces of young kids that we used to work with there. It is very difficult to watch. I am often asked on air about my views on the stance of the European Union and European allies to end the war in Ukraine. I reply by noting that there is a man-made famine happening on their doorstep in Gaza, and yet - they are either unwilling or unable to end it. So that is all everyone needs to know. It is very disheartening to watch the kind of impotence right now of these major powers.

We are now in a very unenviable situation in which what were formerly red lines are now dotted lines or ambiguous lines. For example, consider what happened recently in Poland with Russian drones and in Estonia. They [European leaders] have either the inability or the unwillingness to tell their own populations that they have to switch our economies to war economies, as done by Russia, given the fact that almost 40% of their GDP is aimed towards the war.

The other theme I would like to cover is that attacks on the media have a cascading effect, not only within the United States but worldwide. What I mean is attacking journalists not by shooting them, as done in some states, but by inviting the (pro-Trump) 'tech brothers' to launch court cases against journalists or media outlets that they do not like. It opens the door for ordinary people to intimidate journalists. It opens the way for copycat attacks, including autocrats creating laws that make it impossible for journalists to operate. What is happening right now is very worrisome in terms of the restrictions on coverage, whether it is for the Oval Office or the Pentagon. Additionally, what is worrisome are some of the legal costs that Mr. Trump has launched against a publication I have written for - the New York Times, which is around \$1 - 1.5 billion. Do not believe for a minute that this does not cause journalists to really shudder, not out of fear, but out of what could happen. I would like to remind everybody that journalists are not a target and, in fact, deliberately targeting a journalist is a war crime.

It is important for me to note this because I am based in Ukraine. Democratically-elected leaders there are very much lionized by the foreign media, like President Volodymyr Zelensky. But his team are also using tools to corral the media or control them.



As soon as the war started, Mr. Zelensky said that all the main government-friendly TV channels would become part of what is called a 24/7 tele-marathon- a 24/7 TV show with all the different outlets. It has become a very patriotic, pro-Zelensky forum as no one there has criticized the government, and it features Mr. Zelensky quite prominently.

There are huge threats to democracies and countries that neighbor Russia. This Sunday in Moldova, there is a very important parliamentary election where the ruling party may actually lose. If you look back at the recent referendum on EU ascension and the presidential election where Maia Sandu got re-elected, it was razor thin. And if it were not for the votes counted by the diaspora, it would not have gone through. In the past weeks and months, Russia has devoted tens of millions of dollars to disrupt the elections, but also to sway the outcome. They are using incredible tactics that we have not seen before. They put a verification process of Russian-linked agents in Moldova paying masquerades journalists. They go around, film people, and if they get an anti-government comment or response, they throw that out on social media. Even though Moldova is a very small country, some of these types of posts have got 20 million views, which is quite disturbing.

Other techniques also include bots and fake accounts. There is also soft power techniques such as funding sports teams and cultural events. There are unfortunately a lot of gaps in international law where it makes it very difficult to prosecute the wrongdoers, whether it is an idea of soldier shooting at a young child for asking for food, or it is a Russian soldier kidnapping Ukrainian children so that they can be put up for forced adoption in Russia. Universal jurisdiction allows countries to try a war crime suspect in a third-party state. For example, a Russian soldier identified, perhaps through AI, killing a child could be tried in Argentina. Technology has often been maligned, but it can also be used for good purposes, including facial recognition to identify perpetrators of genocide.

Mr. Bociurkiw continue his comments during the Q&A session that followed.

Dr. Karina Stange Calandrin, Professor of International Relations, Brazilian Institute of Capital Markets, Postdoctoral Researcher, Institute of International Relations at the University of São Paulo | BRAZIL

The Power of Social Media and Technology for Human Rights and Democracy

Dr. Karina Stange Calandrin is a Professor of International Relations at Ibmec-SP. She is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute of International Relations at the University of São Paulo, where she conducts research on public opinion and foreign policy. Karina holds a PhD in International Relations from the San Tiago Dantas Graduate Program, with a dissertation focused on foreign policy analysis. Dr. Calandrin has extensive experience in teaching, research, and academic publishing in the fields of international relations theory, foreign policy, and global political dynamics. Dr. Karina Stange Calandrin has also been interviewed as an expert by major Brazilian media outlets, including Globo, CNN Brasil, Band, Record, O Estado de S. Paulo, Folha de S. Paulo, and CBN. She is a columnist for Interesse Nacional.





In the margins of the 80th United Nations General Assembly, it is a privilege to reflect on one of the most urgent questions of our time: How do we protect democratic values in a digital world that both empowers and endangers them?

I come from Brazil, a country of immense cultural richness and democratic resilience, but also of deep inequalities and political volatility. In Brazil, as in many parts of the Global South, the relationship between technology, democracy, and human rights has evolved rapidly, and not without consequences. Social media has transformed the way politics is practiced and perceived. It has given voice to historically silenced groups:

Indigenous activists denouncing illegal mining in protected lands, women organizing against gender violence, and young Black leaders challenging institutional racism. And yet, the same platforms have been weaponized to spread lies, fuel polarization, and incite attacks on democratic institutions.

In the 2018 and 2022 elections, Brazil became a global laboratory for political disinformation. A report published by Avaaz and the Institute for Technology and Society of Rio de Janeiro (ITS) found that 62% of the most viral political images sent on WhatsApp in Brazil during the four weeks leading up to the 2018 election contained false or misleading information. In 2022, similar patterns reemerged, only faster, more coordinated, and often harder to trace.

The attack on Brazil's democratic institutions on January 8th, 2023, when thousands of radicalized individuals invaded the presidential palace, the Supreme Court and Congress, did not come out of nowhere. It was the culmination of years of digital radicalization, coordinated in Telegram groups, amplified by influencers on YouTube and TikTok, and legitimized by elected officials. Much like the January 6th insurrection in the United States, Brazil's January 8th was an algorithmic insurrection, organized not through secret meetings, but in public posts, livestreams, and viral memes. This convergence of technological infrastructure and authoritarian narrative reveals a central contradiction of our time: The same digital tools that connect us can also tear us apart.

What happened in Brazil is not unique; it is part of a global and deeply alarming trend in which democratic backsliding increasingly operates through digital infrastructure. Facebook, X, YouTube, and TikTok profit from attention, regardless of whether that attention is democratic or destructive. Their algorithms optimize for engagement, which often means outrage and fear, the very emotional conditions that autocracies exploit. We have a lot of examples from Hungary to Israel, from the Philippines to the US. These examples are not isolated crises.

They form a coherent authoritarian playbook in which digital tools are not only communication channels, but mechanisms of power consolidation. Without coordinated action, we risk entering an era where formally democratic regimes, with elections and constitutions, operate as digitally enabled authoritarian systems, in which consent is manufactured, dissent is discredited, and citizens are gradually transformed into followers, not participants.



Let me give you another example from Brazil: In many rural areas, WhatsApp is the only source of news. Entire communities receive political content often false, emotional, and unchecked through chains forwarded by friends and relatives. This creates information bubbles resistant to fact-checking or dialogue.

Why does this matter for democracy? Democracy is not just about voting. It is about shared truth, mutual recognition, and legitimate disagreement. When public debate is hijacked by disinformation, when social trust collapses, when the idea of “the people” is split into enemies and allies, democracy begins to rot from within. In Brazil, recent polls have shown that over 40% of the population distrusts the electoral system, despite its international recognition for security and transparency. This erosion of trust is not the result of facts, but of narratives strategically constructed and emotionally amplified online.

We cannot ignore the complicity of major platforms in this process. Despite years of warnings, companies like Meta, Google and X have:

- Delayed responses to election-related disinformation.
- Underfunded content moderation in non-English languages.
- And refused transparency about how algorithms influence public opinion.

In Brazil, civil society organizations like SaferNet, InternetLab and Democracia em Xequê have demanded accountability. But change remains slow because the incentive structures of these platforms prioritize engagement over safety, profit over democracy. We must insist: Free speech is not a license to destroy the very foundations of democratic life. So, what can we do? Neither censorship nor naïve optimism will suffice.

We need action on at least three levels:

1. Regulation: Governments must create legal frameworks that ensure platform accountability, especially during elections. But these regulations must be grounded in human rights, not political revenge.
2. Digital education: Citizens, especially youth, must be equipped with critical tools to navigate digital ecosystems, detect manipulation, and participate responsibly in public debate.
3. Global coordination: The UN, regional bodies, and transnational coalitions must push for binding norms of digital governance, focused on transparency, equity, and linguistic diversity.

We must also support independent journalism, protect whistleblowers, and strengthen civic institutions. Technology alone cannot save democracy, but without democratic oversight, technology can destroy it. Let me end with a note of hope. The future of democracy will not be decided only in parliaments or courtrooms. It will be decided in feeds, threads, and group chats, where millions of people learn, decide, and act every day. We must reclaim these spaces, not through fear, but through collective imagination. Democracy is not only about protecting institutions, but also about preserving dignity, fostering empathy, and building trust, even in disagreement. And in that effort, we all have a role to play, as scholars, educators, policy makers, platform designers, and citizens of a shared, fragile world.



Aslihan Kas, Director, Silent Screams Exhibition Coordinator, Advocates of Silenced Turkey | USA Civil Society in Turbulence: Legal Attacks, Defamations, and Restrictions

*Ms. Aslihan Kas is a human rights advocate, educator, and filmmaker based in New Jersey. She holds a B.S. in Biology from Istanbul University and worked for 17 years as an educator and General Manager in leading schools, overseeing curriculum, teacher development, and student programs. Since 2018, she has served as a Board Member at Advocates of Silenced Turkey and as Director of the Exhibition of Silent Screams, a traveling exhibition presented across the United States, Canada, and Europe. She has also contributed to human rights reports documenting violations against women, children, and civil society. Ms. Kas is the author of *Being the Other in Turkey* and director of two award-winning documentaries, *Metamorphosis* and *The Other Children*.*



I would like to share my reflections on how civil society is under pressure, laws are manipulated against activists, and how human rights advocates are attacked just for speaking the truth. These are global problems that we monitor a systemic trend not only in one place, but across the globe. Authoritarian regimes are rising, democracy is under attack, and civic space is shrinking around the world. As an activist from Turkey who closely follows the Middle East, I see this very clearly.

In Turkey, like in many countries, we have seen a growing crackdown on civil society since 2013. After the Gezi Park protests, the government began criminalizing activists, and many organizations faced increased restrictions. Since 2016, following the failed coup attempt, this repression has worsened, with devastating consequences. According to the Economist Democracy Index 2024, Turkey ranks 103rd out of 167 countries and, in CIVICUS assessments, its civic space is classified as “repressed.”

Over 2.2 million investigations have been opened against civil society members and any dissidents who dared to speak out, including journalists, academics, and educators. The media has been heavily censored, with more than 100 outlets shut down. Over 100 journalists have been jailed, and many others face constant threats of arrest. In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, Turkey ranked 159th out of 180 countries.

In this period, over 3,000 children have grown up in jails with their mothers, and nearly 1,000 people, including children, have lost their lives many due to torture and denial of medical care in prisons, stress-related illnesses, suicides, fatal work accidents in unsafe jobs, and drowning on migration routes after their passports were cancelled. However, behind each of these numbers, there are real human lives, real people whose stories need to be heard.

A very recent example is the imprisonment of Istanbul’s mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, followed by the detention of hundreds of civil society members and young people after March 19. These arrests show how the right to protest is being violated, and how laws on ‘insult to the president’ or ‘inciting hatred’ are abused to silence dissent.



Like many others, I have faced human rights violations in my own life, losing my job as a general manager in private education, being unjustly detained for political reasons, being separated from my husband for two years while taking care of our children, and leaving many of my friends behind in prison. I felt a deep responsibility to speak up for those whose voices are silenced. We did not commit any crime but were persecuted because we stood up against the authoritarian regime.

This is why I took on the role of coordinating the Silent Screams Exhibition, directing *Metamorphosis* and *The Other Children* documentary, which together have won more than ten international awards, including Best Women's Film at the Cannes World Film Festival and Best Documentary at the Amsterdam New Cinema Film Festival and contributing to many human rights reports and book projects. These projects were born out of the desire to amplify the stories of those who suffer in silence, just as I once did.

As we discuss the cross-cutting threats to democracy, I would like to share some of the most powerful stories from the Exhibition of Silent Screams and *Metamorphosis* documentary. These works highlight the real human suffering as a form of punishment that comes from oppression and show the strong resilience of those who fight for justice. The Exhibition of Silent Screams has traveled to over 37 locations, showcasing more than 500 personal items that symbolize the persecution faced by many in Turkey. In this exhibition, we brought together hundreds of memories from persecuted and marginalized people of all ethnic identities, beliefs, and ideological views, especially Kurds, members of the Hizmet Movement, women, children, journalists, politicians and activists.

Journalist Mehmet Baransu's Radio

Mehmet Baransu was arrested just for his journalistic activities and given 17 years in prison. In this exhibition, we display the radio that he was allowed to use for only one week before it was taken away in prison, symbolizing the ongoing suppression of freedom of expression he suffered.

Ali İsmail Korkmaz's Letter and Photographs

Ali İsmail Korkmaz, a young Alevi man from a religious minority community in Turkey, was killed by a police officer during the Gezi Park protests in 2013 for exercising his right to protest. His courage to stand up against injustice is remembered through his photographs and his handwritten letter, "Authoritarian regimes give rise to individuals who stand up against their order."

Teacher Mesude and her son, 18-month-old Enes

Ms. Mesude was a primary school teacher dismissed under the state of emergency decrees and had a travel ban. She couldn't get a passport for her son, as she could not go to the official authorities due to the risk of being arrested. Her husband and other children had already left the country, and despite all the risks, she succeeded in reuniting with her family. She gave Enes sleeping medicine and hid him in a suitcase to cross the border. Such journeys are extremely dangerous, and tragically, many people have already lost their lives on these routes." In this exhibition, you can see the suitcase that Enes was carried in.



After Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, women's legal protections against violence were disregarded. Following this decision, over a thousand women were murdered. Since 2016, hundreds of women have lost their lives in prisons, on migration routes, and under oppression. Tens of thousands have been forced to flee their countries, risking death. In this context, I am honored to be the director of the award-winning documentary "Metamorphosis," where we interviewed four courageous women: A writer who was imprisoned for her writings, a dormitory manager who was sexually harassed during detention, a judge who was arrested alongside her husband, and a mother of four who was subjected to a strip search while in custody.

Today, in addition to these women's stories, I would like to focus specifically on the Kurdish writer Meral Şimşek. Meral Şimşek was interrogated solely because of her literary works and charged with terrorism. Due to the restrictions and prison sentence against her, she attempted to leave the country but was unfortunately subjected to a pushback and was forcibly returned. During this return process, she narrowly escaped death. Meral did not only fight as a writer, but also for the right to exist with her Kurdish identity. She is currently in Germany, continuing her literary career and human rights activism.

In *Metamorphosis*, we say: Despite all oppression, women continue to fight for justice, freedom, and equality. This was not just their story; it was a test for all of us. They resisted, and we were witnesses. The rise of authoritarian regimes and attacks on civil society are global threats. They affect us all, directly or indirectly. International cooperation is vital. Powerful countries must act, impose sanctions, and protect democracy and human rights. This is not just about witnessing; it is about taking action. We all have a responsibility. The time to act is now.





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