



## UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

San Francisco Chapter

### **Annual Multistakeholder Consultation in San Francisco: a Collective Narrative**

*On April 25, 2021, the [United Nations Association of the USA, San Francisco Chapter](#) (UNA-SF) hosted an annual Multi-Stakeholder Global Consultation with diverse members of civil society that have a relation to San Francisco. This annual consultation built on the work we accomplished last year in response to the public invitation made by UN Secretary-General António Guterres.*

*Since then, we decided to host one multi-stakeholder consultation on April 25 every year to commemorate the start of the [United Nations Conference on International Organization](#) (UNCIO) held in San Francisco in 1945. The results of these annual consultations will be published in standalone reports (like the collective narrative here) and will also contribute to the UNA-SF's UN80 Report in 2025 representing the evolution of the discourse over the years.*

*The data from the consultation was processed according to the Collective Narrative Methodology to provide a balanced summary of delegates' perspectives who framed ideas in their own language. If you have questions or comments regarding this narrative, please contact Agustina Singh, Chair of the UN Global Consultations Committee at [consultations@una-sf.org](mailto:consultations@una-sf.org).*

## **COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE**

### **Intersectional Issues Require Holistic and Collaborative Solutions**

A big thing we noticed in our conversations was how much the issues all intersect. For example, climate intersects with racial and social justice, which intersects with human rights, which intersects with inequality and economic justice. From there, we discussed bigger issues of income inequality, provision of housing, equitable distribution of vaccines and health services in light of the pandemic - which have really highlighted how communities around the world have been impacted by limited access.

In general, we see that long-standing problems such as social inequality, health disparities, and structural racism have become more visible during the pandemic. We noticed that the main themes presented were heightened by the urgency, the availability of data, and the extra time that COVID has provided for people to reflect on the issues that surround us. For example, we knew that there was social inequality, but the challenges of human rights and racial justice have become even more visible during this time and continue to be a key challenge.

Another key challenge is the overarching threat of climate change and the need for climate justice because of how much it relates to all the other issues facing us and all of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Some emerging patterns and related concerns include toxins in our environment, food insecurity, immigration and displaced individuals, indigenous peoples and the need to end war. These require and motivate an understanding of how global actions impact us locally, and why they are so important.

In tackling these intersectional issues, we see the need for increased collaboration and partnerships. We want to be in dialogue with people that have different positions, and then we want to aim to unify across cultural and religious differences. We see that topics that enable such a unifying approach are health and climate action.

We also believe that policy should always be centered around human rights, social justice and racial justice, and we hope that we can promote the connection to nature and to each other more broadly, because we realized during the pandemic that interconnectedness is so important to help each other and help make the environment better.

### **Climate Change - It Is an Emergency**

We agree that the climate crisis is, actually, an emergency. It is a big issue for us and around the world, as it was a very prevalent issue in our communication and dialogues.

As we mentioned that global actions have local impact, another pattern we found is that local actions also have global impact - so there is a lot you can do on your own in terms of climate action. There are trash pickups, you can grow your own garden, you can have zero food waste or just learn about composting and recycling. At the local and global level, the pandemic has also shown that we can really reduce our carbon footprint and that there are measures available.

The Sustainable Development Goals relating to responsible consumption and production, sustainable cities and communities, life on land, life below water, and good health and well-being (i.e. SDG's #3, 11, 12, 14, and 15) are also related to the toxins in our environment. The fact that it touches on about a third of the SDG's made toxicity mandates and toxins one of our overarching themes.

### **Taking Care of Our Bodies and Minds**

In terms of actionable recommendations from the most broad and needs-based view, we would like to start by ensuring access to water and food for everyone. And when we talk about food security, we do not mean access to any food but especially healthy food - food without added sugars.

We discussed that self care is very important because when the body is tired, the mind can quickly get defensive. And when we repeatedly push ourselves to get a lot of things done, we sometimes get into struggles. During the pandemic, people have learned that self care that includes nutrition, exercise, and mindfulness is really crucial to be ready and able to also serve others.

The need to address mental health has also just been striking throughout the pandemic because we learned that isolation is not good - it does not matter whether it is isolation due to the pandemic and government related restrictions or whether it is people in prison or, for example, people in Haiti who fear going out because kidnapping is the best way to make money. No one should be stuck at home without social interaction for such a long time, and that has really been shown during the pandemic.

### **Properly Responding to Substance Abuse**

We emphasized that we want equitable access to healthcare and wellness services, and an important point was to reduce mental health and substance use stigma that is still prevalent in the United States and other countries. Of course, while most people can use substances very responsibly, there were people during the pandemic who lost control with their substance use or otherwise harmed themselves. In 2020, 713 people died in San Francisco from a drug-related overdose. This is almost three times more than the 257 COVID-19-related deaths and highlights the urgent need for supervised consumption rooms and expansion of other harm reduction services for people who use drugs consistent with the Biden-Harris Drug Policy Priorities for Year One.

What they need is help, not punishment. That was very clear. So we have to work on reducing the stigma and also providing access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment and also harm reduction services more broadly.

We also hope that we can move towards decriminalization of non-violent crimes. That includes the decriminalization of substance use and possession. But we have seen that the decarceration during the pandemic has really led to a lot of health benefits. And we cannot just talk about decarceration without mentioning social reintegration as well. We heard that it is a human trait to struggle, and that is why we need to come up with solutions and plans. That includes providing community-based approaches and financial opportunities so that everyone can thrive.

As the United Nations (UN) states, there is a clear need to abolish the death penalty. And at the global level, when it comes to drug policy, there is the United Nations System Common Position supporting the implementation of the international drug control policy for effective interagency cooperation and we think this is a document that should also be included.

### **Minorities' Plight in the Pandemic**

As we mentioned that big inequalities have been highlighted or exacerbated during the pandemic, we felt that women have suffered greatly, possibly the most, through COVID-19. We have seen them having to stay home and provide care while working or having lost their jobs because they were in-person care jobs. We have also seen an uptick in domestic violence that we see as a challenge. So we felt that women were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and that it was not sufficiently highlighted in

the media or general conversations we were having about what is important or what we were experiencing.

At the local level, we talked about economic disparities that need to be addressed. We see many inequalities, including encampments and a lot of unmet needs for un-housed people. There is also a great need to provide health information to that specific population as well as access to vaccines or other health care interventions. We therefore want to ensure equitable access to housing, health services, and education.

Structural racism and the need for police accountability was another big theme and challenge because of the recent uptick of police violence and the recent discussions about it being mostly against people of color and black people. We therefore want to ensure police accountability and also discuss community-based models of policing.

### **Good Governance, Services, and Communication**

It was also discussed that accountability should be ensured in governance more broadly. We felt that good governance and accountability is so necessary, especially in the social context, to meet the wealth disparities here and all over the world.

We see that Sustainable Development Goal #16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions is necessary because of the prevalent corruption and the inability of governments to finance public programs such as health care, social services, and education we feel we need to make a change.

One of the things we would also like to see is indigenous and native people groups actively being brought to the table. We want to decolonize the mindset when addressing issues and really learn and understand what the communities need rather than implementing solutions that we think are the best – and that can also go to environmental issues. Overall, we think it is important to better evaluate how we communicate and share our differences.

It is also important to understand the role of misinformation, and this was a big topic that came up along with election integrity. We should understand its role in our elections and social systems, and also what is happening with our social media and how we can be manipulated. We think it is important to have good communication and best practices to foster trust between individuals and leadership, for example to ensure accurate COVID numbers.

### **Inclusive Education and the Importance of Technology**

We also discussed that, of course, education needs to be taken seriously and we want to provide continued and equal access to education, especially if education is going online. When we talked about education and access to education, it of course included technology. We have to think about other

people who may not have a good connection or are otherwise facing difficulties in accessing information and education.

We wish to highlight that it is important to have nontraditional means to reach communities that are not connected to the Internet so, again, community-based approaches or involving people that are working with these groups is very, very crucial.

We came up with an actionable recommendation to have a mandate that there is global access to the internet and building up that infrastructure because there have been accelerated uses of new communication methods and this underpins the ability to address so many other issues.

### **Engaging Civil Society and Empowering Youth**

We also talked about how it is a critical time for a certain age group, for the 18 to 21 year-olds who need a path to employment, independence, and all of that. In the past, if they had difficulties, they were encouraged to go into the military. If they were under the age of 18, this would be a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We discussed the importance of empowering youth - empowering and supporting those who need to have their voices heard. We recently saw in a youth hackathon that they recognized the importance of achieving all of the Sustainable Development Goals, not just a few or prioritizing one or two. They saw the importance of looking at the relationships between all of the goals.

So we are happy that our youth are very well informed and want to be active. Now we have to think about how to support them. We mentioned mentoring and training but also recognized we have to understand and meet the youth where they are.

We recognized that some students, up until the pandemic, were required to do a certain amount of community service. We know that schools in Mexico City require community service and that is also required of our high school students. So this is an opening for civil society organizations to give them a community, a place for networking and mentoring, and so forth.

We discussed that it is important to engage youth and women and groups impacted by certain issues in discussions around those issues, not just at a horizontal level but also at a high level. Especially in light of the present challenges and what is going on in the world today, we talked about how underrepresented communities are exponentially impacted.

### **Uplifting Underrepresented Voices and Grassroots Initiatives**

One way we think we can help is to uplift impacted voices that are traditionally disenfranchised and to give them a platform so we can get a true and diverse dialogue. We want to give a voice to those who are underserved, and that is something we feel as the United Nations Association we are trying to do

with our global consultations, education, and advocacy. But much more could be done. COVID-19 held us back and prevented us from actually meeting with people in the street. We had to instead meet virtually with the ones who were in their hotel rooms.

We also talked about how we could open it up to everyone, but there are other barriers that mean not everyone is going to be able to share their voice. So there are really specific places and platforms where we could be more effective.

We did recognize, however, that there are some bright spots with civil society leaders, even United Nations employees, that are nominating themselves to run for Secretary General to open up the conversations on broader issues.

We also see that grassroots initiatives have been creating this sort of new change, that small scale initiatives are creating new opportunities and we can use that individual motivation to tackle key issues.

### **Civil Society: We are the United Nations**

We also kept mentioning the idea that we are the United Nations. So we should mobilize civil society to advocate for change from government leadership. And that is on all levels. It can reach up to the United Nations level, where we create the opportunity for disadvantaged communities to share their voice.

We looked at, furthermore, not only what civil society is saying to the United Nations, but what the UN is saying to us as civil society. Because we see the United Nations as a platform for intergovernmental relations between nations, but we also talked about how the UN is saying it needs civil society. It is not enough for nations and for the UN to say they are going to meet certain goals that they will not be able to achieve unless civil society is pushing their leaders and representatives to support these global goals. So we agree that we are the UN and that it is up to us. We are the ones who have to support the UN - our role in UNICEF and all of the other many civil society organizations is critical at this time.

### **The Call for an Inclusive and Engaging United Nations**

We see that this moment then calls for more collaboration and activity. We are looking for multilateral international cooperation to move the discussion forward and overcome key issues. We also believe the UN could address emotional well-being by embedding emotional intelligence practices into how the UN functions across a number of different activities.

We think the UN should use and endorse participatory processes that maximize opportunities for affected stakeholders to frame issues and recommendations in their own language. Surveys help reach more people but they frame options for people instead of meeting them where they are in their own context. Also, inviting different stakeholders to meet each other in the same room goes beyond data harvesting, it becomes a transformational experience. When people are able to listen to multiple

perspectives in addition to sharing their own, it creates conditions for new insights and ideas to emerge that nobody had in mind before they joined the conversation.

We mentioned that there is a UN platform for better communication of the Sustainable Development Goals with some actionable recommendations. We would like to see more of this, for improved communication methods of the United Nations to reach the public and connect with the youth. We see an opportunity for them to really use advertising to share what the United Nations agencies are actually doing on the ground.

One of our specific, tangible recommendations to them is to use increased communication and technology to accomplish various missions across the United Nations. We think they could add small games, hackathons, and virtual conference technology across the UN Charter to communicate and enable more people to share their voice, especially to inspire action around the Sustainable Development Goals. Global games, especially simulation games, can not only communicate SDG's but even provide services (help people take action) through players' actions in the game.

### **The Recent Change in Administration**

What we noticed most of all, from our personal point of view here in the United States, is a sea change in our administration and our policies. We discussed that the change in presidency and administration will provide new opportunities for engagement and action. We see there are lots of changes and it portends that maybe now we can make some of these changes stick.

For example, we are emerging from an administration that was nationalistic, isolationist, and had an "everyone for themselves" mentality. This included isolating nations, even nations facing a huge displacement of humanity and the deadly pandemic, and echoing this sentiment that everyone was all on their own.

It also favored a marketplace for developing vaccines. In other words, allowing corporations to make large profits on the pandemic and retain the patent on the vaccines. It prevented the distribution of vaccines around the world, ignoring the need for all of us to be vaccinated in order for all of us to be healthy. It also refused to accept PPE from other countries, it was just too proud. At this time, Americans are being advised to not travel to 80 percent of the world because of the pandemic's spread.

We have also seen our administration pull out of the UN, essentially - pulling out of the World Health Organization, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Paris Climate Agreement to name just a few disastrous withdrawals.

That was the last administration. So now we have an administration that wants to bring us back to better and the focus now is more humane and on the health of the individual.

## **The Push to Protect Human Rights**

Moving forward, we need to improve our human rights record here in the United States. We would like the U.S. to sign the Conventions on the Rights of the Child since we are now the only nation in the world who has not ratified it. We are also one of six countries who have not signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, including Somalia, Iran, South Sudan, North Sudan, and a couple of Pacific islands.

We are embarrassed that we are the only or among the only states who have not signed these conventions, which is like the foundation of the United Nations. We are now feeling a little more optimistic knowing that there is a slim majority in Congress and that the issues can be addressed.

## **Leveraging this Season of Change**

We want to reinstate faith in the World Health Organization (WHO) and support the COVID-19 vaccine. We felt there was some ground lost or a missed opportunity early on when the WHO made statements around testing and actionable recommendations. We think we would be further along in our recovery if the WHO recommendations had been more actively integrated into national strategies and so on.

We also see an opportunity to engage in climate action with the summit happening this year. The Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November means we have an opportunity to launch a global carbon market and a global price on carbon. We also have the G20 Summit in Italy and have hope that the United States is committing to going back to better and will look at the systemic changes and outcomes needed to meet the climate crisis. All in all, we are seeing positive changes and we are optimistic and hopeful that we will be able to meet this climate emergency.

## **Building Back Towards Better**

One year into the pandemic, many people would frame that the main challenge is still how to get back to a normal life. Today's discussion, however, has shown that we do not just want to get back to normal, but to a better life for everyone.

We think we can use the emotions and perspective coming out of the pandemic to address climate change, inequality, and emotional wellness. We have all seen the impact of human behavior on the environment and climate - from the lack of soot on window sills during the pandemic to the clearing of the channels and return of wildlife in Venice and around the world.

We also want to continue to use peer to peer telecommunication technologies we have been using during the pandemic (like Zoom and virtual conferences) to allow for communications, engagement, and participation from a much larger audience in a way that is more equitable and has less impact on the environment. We anticipate and envision all tech conferences likely having a virtual component going forward.



We also mentioned from our personal perspective that the San Francisco Chapter of the United Nations Association has launched a two-year campaign to get those two conventions ratified (Rights of the Child and Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). We have a growing coalition and partnerships in place to reach that goal. It will take a good deal of our time, but we will use what we have learned from our partnerships to provide a platform for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

We also mentioned how the synthesis narratives of these global consultations were presented to policymakers and how they contributed to the overall narrative and report given to the United Nations by all 50 U.S. states. We think maybe we had an effect since we are beginning to see some of those in talking points with our elected officials. So again, the United Nations should see that civil society here in the United States still wants to be engaged and be a part of building a better future.