

# ACUNS speech by UNITAR Executive Director, Mr. Nikhil Seth

- It is a pleasure for me to interact with ACUNS at its 33<sup>rd</sup> session in this special year for the United Nations. As we celebrate our achievements, reflect on our failures and chart the future of the UN and multilateralism.
- Dark clouds hang over our people and our planet.
- The immediate darkness is largely because of this terrible COVID 19 pandemic and the misery, suffering and death it has brought in its wake.
- But more, the handling of the crisis has shown the absence of cooperation, compassion, and solidarity between nations.

- It has brought out the uneven impacts driven by inequality and poverty. It has shown the ugly face of disinformation, spread by social media. It has heightened domestic abuse and brazen neglect of human rights of women and children.
- It has shown how health systems, where they exist, work unfairly in favour of the rich. It has shown the bravery and agony of front-line workers who were often underappreciated and unprotected.
- But the darkness is made more profound not by this sudden event but by the continuation and exacerbation of deep political, economic, social, and environmental crisis.
- Conflicts and geopolitical tensions and related conflicts continue unabated in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

- Climate change and environmental degradation are at a pace never seen before.
- Trust is going from governments, business, and institutions. Many people feel unprotected and vulnerable.
- Racism, extreme nationalism, and xenophobia are at all-time highs.
- Unfettered capitalism and globalism are making our world more and more unequal.
- The dark side of technology is making us more vulnerable to cybercrime, hate speech and intolerance.
- These are only some of the problems of our contemporary world.
- In the 75th anniversary year of the UN we need to go back to our seminal Charter. It has stood the test of time.

- If this charter were being written today, what would be the thoughts preoccupying the drafters? Pandemics, public health, religious and civil strife, racism, new geo-strategic realities, democratizing the Security Council, environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, gender equality, indigenous issues, special vulnerabilities of the older persons, the disabled and those in abject poverty. None of these words are part of the current Charter which was crafted in the backdrop of the horrors of the World Wars. The Charter is still our bible but one which needs to be scrutinized and modernized.
- So here we are on the 75th Birthday to look at the achievements of multilateralism and to look at its future and capturing the hopes, dreams, and fears of humanity.

- Let me reflect on my own three decades in the UN. Through the summits and conferences of the 1990s to the SDG Summit five years ago. I had a ringside seat in many and was in the driver's seat in some.
- For a young multilateral diplomat, the early 90's were heady days. The cold war had ended and there was promise of a 'peace dividend'. Heads of States and Governments were constructively engaging in the UN like never before. Summits and Conferences on environment and development, social development, women, population and development were spectacular successes in engagement including at highest levels. Civil society, business and the media were engaging in multilateralism. There was hope that poverty, discrimination, and inequality would become history. The UN was in the driver's seat.

- It was the era of globalisation of finance, commerce, trade, and investment. Some countries benefited and a handful enjoyed spectacular growth rates. The technology and connectivity revolutions raised expectations for the perpetual growth of the world economy. But globalisation was not lifting all boats. Inequality was growing within and between countries. The stepping back of governments and decreased role of the state was increasing vulnerabilities. Business was callous about environmental impacts. Climate change and biodiversity loss, chemical pollution was irretrievably impacting on our land, water, and soil.
- This was the world we faced in 2015. There was limited faith in globalisation or in unfettered capitalism and laissez-faire, environmental tipping points were about to be irrevocable crossed, new conflicts, increased

terrorism, and civil strife dotted our landscape. Technology was changing us forever.

- But 2015 once again restored our faith in multilateralism with the SDGs and the Paris climate agreements. The SDGs in particular were a novel approach to address human fears and wants and the quest for peaceful and just societies.
- But the of euphoria of these agreements where short lived. In the five years since 2015:
  - In the DRC, Mali, Syria, Libya, the Middle East, South Asia, Venezuela conflicts abound. There is large-scale external interference in these conflicts. And new geo-political tensions are rising. Peace remains elusive.
  - The Security Council remains unrepresentative, ignored, paralyzed.

- The disarmament architecture including nuclear disarmament is being dismembered.
- The ECOSOC, the World Bank, the IMF appear distant and not leading change.
- Climate change impacts and images are everywhere. People fleeing homes because of wildfires, hottest temperatures in the Arctic circle, typhoons, cyclones, and hurricanes, breaking of new records in temperatures.
- The state of our oceans, plastic pollution and overfishing is alarming.
- Hunger and abject poverty is on the rise.
- Species loss is staggering and living in harmony with nature is imperative.



- For a fair globalisation we need to urgently advance the SDGs. We need more equal and inclusive societies with a special focus on women and girls.
  - We need to stop misinformation, strengthen media freedoms and the right of people to assemble and air their views.
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- These are some of the facets of the world we live in on the 75th anniversary of the UN. how do we restore multilateralism to the place it deserves?
  - Should we just wring our hands in despair and wait for more enlightened political leadership? Should we hark back on the world we have left behind and hope “normalcy”, the way we would like to define it, returns?
  - The answer to all these questions in my mind is an emphatic NO. We need to start by redefining multilateralism and the role of the United Nations.

- As the fight against climate change has shown even if some leaders are recalcitrant there is a coalition of support for urgent action now. The young are leading this change. Enlightened business and industry are leading this change. Mayors and cities are at the forefront. Academics, scientists and researchers are coming out with practical solutions.
- In all the challenges we face we need to co-opt these committed actors. Provide space for them to encourage action and innovation. Give them recognition and space.

Business determines the quality of our growth. As we will rebound and return to spectacular growth what can we do to show how future growth promotes gender equality, environmental sustainability, decent jobs and better employment opportunities.

- How do we help research and academia to focus on the SDG related achievements and what are the opportunities the UN should provide.
- How can the UN engage more robustly with civil society at the regional and local level? We need to encourage country teams to increase this local engagement.
  - We need to further democratize the UN and its institutions with 'we the people'. We need a leadership revolution where false notions of nationalism are rejected for more enlightened multilateralism.
  - We need to shift the balance of work of the UN to the last kilometer. To the people we wish to serve.
  - We need to make our inter-governmental bodies more robust and not emasculate them.
  - We need to recognize the indivisibility of issues and not paint the issues in a lopsided and unbalanced way.

- This is the UN we need and the UN we want.
- Moving to this new multilateralism needs significant attitudinal and behavioral shifts within the UN and with all these partners. And these shifts are difficult. At UNITAR we reach over 125 000 beneficiaries every year. Mostly adults, largely in the public sector with the training done by our divisions of Peace, Planet, People, Prosperity, Satellite Applications and Diplomatic Training. We need to move from 1000's to the millions. Technology is on our side. But we need all of you to be part of this change. We are fortunate to have as our Secretary-General a person committed to changing the UN and making it relevant for the 21st century.
- He is promoting greater digital cooperation, embracing transformation advocating “building back better”.

- He is championing prevention and mediation, combating hate speech, disarmament, climate and SDG actions.
- He has reached 50% gender equality in all senior positions in the UN.
- He has championed the UN as a space for governments, business and others to define new protocols and regulatory framework for the internet.
- He has taken numerous initiatives for making AI and technology a force for good.
- He has initiated far reaching reforms within the UN.
- This is what he said recently:

*“The year ahead will be pivotal for our common future. I want people around the world to be a part of it. Too often, governments and international institutions are viewed as places that talk —not places that listen I want the United Nations to listen. In this 75th anniversary year, I want to provide as many*

*people as possible the chance to have a conversation with the United Nations.*

*To share their hopes and fears.*

*To learn from their experiences.*

*To spark ideas for building the future we want and the United Nations we need.*

*And we are giving a priority to the voices of young people.*

*Together, we need to listen.*

*And together, we need to act.*

*At this 75th anniversary milestone, let us make the difficult yet vital decisions across our agenda that will secure a peaceful future for all.*

- You have a role to help develop and advocate for this vision of the UN.
- Thank you for your attention, happy birthday UN.