

Value Creation in a Time of Crisis

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The world today is faced with a complex set of urgent crises that can only be described as unprecedented in the history of humankind. In addition to the increasing incidence every passing year of extreme weather events that reflect the worsening problem of climate change, the onslaught of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to threaten social and economic stability throughout the world.

I use the term “unprecedented” here not merely in reference to the overlapping and interlocking layers of crisis we are experiencing today. Humanity has been confronted with various kinds of challenges throughout its long history, yet it has never faced a situation in which the entire world is impacted at once, gravely threatening the lives, livelihood and dignity of people in countries everywhere, throwing them into conditions in which they find themselves requiring urgent assistance.

As of January 25, 2021, the number of people infected with COVID-19 has surpassed 99 million; of these, more than 2.12 million have died. [\[1\]](#) In the span of slightly more than one year, the number of COVID-19 fatalities has far exceeded the total number of lives claimed by large-scale natural disasters over the past twenty years. [\[2\]](#) One cannot begin to fathom the depth of grief experienced by those who have lost their loved ones in this unforeseen manner; and this pain is deepened by the fact that, due to measures

Eradication of polio in African Region

Polio is a highly infectious viral disease that can cause permanent paralysis and can be fatal in some cases when muscles used for breathing are affected. There is no cure, but vaccination can protect people for life and lead to eradication of the disease.

In 2020, all forty-seven countries of the World Health Organization (WHO) African Region were declared free of wild polio after four years passed without any cases of the virus. This was achieved through a program of vaccination and disease surveillance led by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, the largest international public health initiative in history. There is, however, still a risk posed by vaccine-derived polioviruses, rare strains of poliovirus that have mutated from the weakened virus present in the oral vaccine. Polio remains endemic in two countries: Afghanistan and Pakistan.

to prevent the spread of the virus, so many of the victims have been prevented from spending their final moments with family by their side. Compounding the intensity of loss that has robbed people of any sense of closure, the breakdown of economic activity has led to a spike in bankruptcies and unemployment, pushing large numbers of people into poverty and deprivation.

Nevertheless, even as the dark clouds of this crisis continue to shroud the world, progress in efforts to build a global society committed to peace and humane values has not halted. Examples of important progress include: the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) this past January 22; universal ratification by the 187 member states of the International Labour Organization (ILO) of a convention outlawing the worst forms of child labor; and eradication of wild polio in Africa.

Each of these achievements holds great worth as the world strives to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, the target year set by the United Nations. These successes are clear expressions of the limitless human capacity to overcome obstacles and become the authors of a new history. This can especially be said of the TPNW, which fulfilled the conditions for entry into force last October 24, United Nations Day. The treaty maps a clear path to the achievement of the long-sought goal of nuclear weapons abolition, an issue that was addressed at the UN in 1946, one year after its founding, in the very first resolution adopted by the General Assembly; it has remained pending ever since.

In September 1957, amid the accelerating nuclear arms race of the Cold War, Josei Toda (1900–58), second president of the Soka Gakkai, issued a declaration calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Inspired by this, our organization has worked for the comprehensive prohibition of nuclear weapons and to make this a norm governing international relations. To this end, the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) has actively collaborated with such organizations as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). In light of this history, the TPNW's entry into force is an unparalleled cause for celebration.

With the world still reeling from the impacts of the pandemic, I would like to explore some of the approaches that I believe are required in order to overcome this complex crisis, as well as to offer a number of proposals on ways to generate solid momentum for the challenge of building a global society of peace and humane values in the twenty-first century.

The determination never to leave behind those struggling with challenges

The first thematic area I would like to explore is the determination never to leave behind those struggling in the depths of adversity, who find themselves isolated as our sense of crisis becomes increasingly normalized.

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic on March 11 last year, the numbers of infections and deaths are now a regular part of the daily news. In order to reflect on the actual significance of these continually updated statistics amid the seemingly ceaseless spread of infection, I believe we would do well to recall the words of Chancellor Angela Merkel in her address to the German people one week after the WHO announcement:

These are not just abstract numbers in statistics, but this is about a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother, a partner—this is about people. And we are a community in which each life and each person counts. [\[3\]](#)

When we are faced with an emergency such as a large-scale disaster, we need to remind ourselves not to lose sight of this perspective. This is even more essential today as we are confronted with a pandemic that continues to threaten the entire world and we have become increasingly accustomed to the crisis.

In our daily Buddhist practice, members of the SGI around the world have continued to offer heartfelt prayers for the complete eradication of COVID-19 at the earliest possible date as well as for the repose of the deceased. And we have of course taken strict precautionary measures in the course of our activities to prevent further spread of the virus.

Starting in September of last year, the Soka Institute of the Amazon, which I worked to establish, has been planting one tree in memory of each victim of COVID-19 in Brazil as part of its Life Memorial project. [4] With every tree planted, the initiative aims to honor and acknowledge those with whom life has been shared in the great land of Brazil—perpetuating their memory while also contributing to the reforestation and protection of the ecological integrity of the Amazon region.

It has always been a cornerstone of human society to collectively mourn the deceased and commit ourselves to living in a manner that honors their legacy. Today, when it is increasingly difficult to gather in one place to pay tribute to those who have passed away, it is all the more crucial that we not lose sight of the value of each individual and never let life be reduced to a mere statistic.

Amid the increasing normalization of the crisis in daily life and the focus on the need for each person to take steps to protect themselves from the virus, we risk neglecting the particular hardships faced by society's most vulnerable members.

In their efforts to contain the pandemic, countries have placed foremost priority on strengthening their medical and healthcare systems, along with introducing a variety of measures that are often described as representing a “new normal.” This includes practices such as social distancing—maintaining a safe physical distance from others to prevent exposure—remote working and online learning, as well as staying home as much as possible. These measures have been significant in suppressing the rapid spread of COVID-19 and reducing the pressure on medical systems.

In one sense, the fact that more people are proactively exploring new adaptations and innovations in response to calls to slow the spread of infection holds the potential to go beyond simple risk prevention. These innovations not only contribute directly to protecting the lives of family and loved ones and those in our intimate circle of connections; such seemingly small, repeated actions also embody a concern for the large numbers of unseen people with whom we share life in the broader society.

At the same time, we must attend to the needs of those whose lives were already made vulnerable by various disparities and discrimination, whose ability to live in dignity hinges on the support of social contacts and networks, and who have been gravely impacted by the crisis. For example, if support for those who require daily nursing care is reduced, this can seriously impede their ability to lead their daily lives. Furthermore, the loss of precious time with people in their support networks erodes the foundations for living with dignity. And as we spend more and more of our lives online—from work to education and shopping—there is a serious risk of leaving behind those who, for economic or other reasons, have inadequate access to online networks or have yet to master their use.

In addition, it has been reported that as people are increasingly confined to their homes the number of cases of women being exposed to domestic violence is escalating. Many of the victims of this violence find themselves unable to reach out for and receive assistance from governmental or social agencies due to the ongoing presence of the perpetrator (spouse or partner) in the home. [5]

As measures to contain the spread of infection take root in society and we become increasingly inured to the COVID-19 crisis, it is crucial that we maintain an active commitment to protect the large numbers of unseen people whose plight risks being overlooked. We must prioritize efforts to alleviate their pain and claustrophobic sense of danger, making this the requisite for rebuilding our society.

WHO has recommended use of the term “physical distancing” instead of “social distancing” to avoid the implication that we should limit our human connections with one another, as that could result in further cementing social isolation and division. [6] Even if the world has entered a long tunnel with no clear end in sight and the circumstances experienced by others are obstructed from view, we must absolutely not lose our essential orientation, which is the fact that we all coexist in the same society.

Here I would like to cite the views expressed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. When asked what the “new normal” meant to him at a UN webinar titled “Coping with COVID” held last July, he refused to describe our present circumstances in those terms, calling them instead “abnormal.” [7] Indeed, even as great numbers of people are thrown into an unavoidable state of emergency due to the pandemic, we must continue to maintain the awareness that these are inherently abnormal conditions for human beings.

On a separate occasion, the UN chief remarked:

There is a lot of talk about the need for a “new normal” after this crisis. But let’s not forget that the pre-COVID-19 world was far from normal. Rising inequalities, systemic gender discrimination, lack of opportunities for young people, stagnant wages, runaway climate change—none of these things were “normal.” [8]

I deeply share both of these concerns. If we allow such global inequities and distortions to continue unabated, this will inevitably leave more and more people behind, making it that much harder to envisage the post-COVID world we would want.

Although COVID-19 poses a threat to all countries, the fact remains that there is a wide gap in the severity of its impact depending on the circumstances in which people find themselves. For example, some 40 percent of the world’s population live in conditions in which they are unable to regularly wash their hands with soap, a standard method for preventing infection. This means that some 3 billion people lack access to a basic means of protecting themselves and their loved ones. [9]

In addition, with the number of people forcibly displaced from their homes by conflict or persecution reaching 80 million, many have no choice but to share close living quarters with others in refugee camps. Such conditions make it virtually impossible to practice physical distancing; these people must live with the risk of exposure should an infection break out.

The crisis facing the world today consists of many complex interlocking threats, making it difficult to identify the interrelations among them as required to fully address the problem. While acknowledging this constraint, I would argue that, even as we work to develop a comprehensive response, we must always prioritize addressing the suffering of each of the many individuals whose lives are directly impacted.

The following Buddhist perspective may be useful in this regard. In the parable of the poisonous arrow, Shakyamuni relates the story of a man who has been shot and wounded by a poisoned arrow. Before he will allow the arrow to be removed, he insists on knowing who made the bow and arrow and the identity—the name and clan—of the person who shot him. No measures can be taken while he demands answers to such particulars. What would happen to such a man, Shakyamuni stresses, is that the arrow will remain lodged in his body and he will end up losing his life. Shakyamuni uses this parable to

encourage his disciples, who have a tendency toward intellectualizing and theorizing, to focus instead on matters that actually affect human life.

The renowned twentieth-century religious scholar Mircea Eliade (1907–86) brought attention to this parable, keenly observing that Shakyamuni’s teachings were not aimed at providing a systematic philosophical theory. Eliade positioned Shakyamuni’s teachings as a kind of medical treatment to heal human suffering. [10] And indeed, Shakyamuni was wholly committed to removing the poisonous arrow; in other words, removing the underlying causes of people’s suffering. The living origin of what we now know as the teachings of Buddhism is Shakyamuni’s ardent concern, voiced in various settings and occasions.

Nichiren (1222–82), who expounded and spread the teachings of Buddhism in thirteenth-century Japan based on the Lotus Sutra, which expresses the essence of Shakyamuni’s teachings, described their power as being like “oil added to a lamp or a staff presented to an elderly person.” [11] In other words,

Shakyamuni did not deploy superhuman powers to save human beings; rather, he dedicated himself to offering the people with whom he engaged the kind of words that would help them reveal the strength and potential already existing within their lives.

This same spirit animates the Buddhist teachings of Nichiren, who stressed the crucial importance of taking action to eliminate suffering and despair. His treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” was written against the backdrop of a series of natural disasters, famine and widespread epidemics that tormented the people of Japan. It issued from his profound desire to eradicate human misery.

Three calamities and seven disasters

These catastrophes are described in various Buddhist sutras. There are three greater calamities of fire, water and wind, which are said to destroy the world, and three lesser calamities of high grain prices or inflation (especially that caused by famine), warfare and pestilence, all of which threaten human society.

The seven disasters differ slightly according to the source, but they include war, foreign invasion and natural disasters. Nichiren (1222–82) combined these two different types of catastrophe in a single phrase to describe the disasters besetting Japan in his time.

In another of his writings, Nichiren describes the intense suffering of the people of Japan, afflicted by one disaster after another, as follows:

In this way the three calamities and the seven disasters have continued for several decades on end, and half the people have been wiped out. Those who remain are parted from their parents, their brothers and sisters, or their wives and children, and cry out in voices no less pitiful than those of autumn insects. Family after family has been scattered and destroyed like plants and trees broken down by the snow of winter. [12]

It was during such an age of turmoil that Nichiren continued to offer people encouragement, seeking to illuminate a society darkened by chaos and confusion with the light of hope.

Nichiren, who was repeatedly persecuted and exiled by the ruling authorities as a result of remaining steadfast to his beliefs, would often write letters to his disciples in an effort to impart courage, even while he was physically separated from them. On one occasion, he wrote the following words to a female disciple who had lost her husband:

Your late husband had an ailing son and a daughter. I cannot help thinking that he may have grieved that, if he were to abandon them and leave this world, his aged wife, as feeble as a withered tree, would be left alone, and would probably feel very sorry for these children. [\[13\]](#)

And yet, he writes, “winter always turns to spring.” Through these words, Nichiren sought to convey the following message of encouragement: At present, you may be overwhelmed by despair as if the icy winds of winter were pressing upon you. But this will not continue forever. Winter never fails to turn to spring. I urge you to live out your life with courage and strength. Before concluding his letter, Nichiren adds that she should rest assured that he would always watch over her children, bringing the warm light of spring to this woman for whom time had stopped, her life frozen in winter as a result of her husband’s death.

In this way, Nichiren entrusted his words with the task of conveying his heart to his reader. Traversing physical distance, his words, when read, would come alive, becoming firmly engraved in the life of the recipient.

Though our present circumstances differ from those of Nichiren’s time, the widespread disorder brought about by this pandemic has taken many people to the edge of despair, sensing that their lives have come to an abrupt stop and finding themselves suddenly without any means of livelihood, unable to envision the future.

If a person in this state is forced to shoulder the burden of their suffering alone, without the support of a social safety net or personal connections, their world will remain bleak. As soon as someone takes notice of their situation and reaches out to them, however, and they feel the warm and attentive light of others illuminating their circumstances, I believe it becomes possible for them to bring forth the strength needed to rebuild their lives and regain a sense of dignity.

As heirs to the spirit of Nichiren, members of the SGI have carried out our practice of faith and social engagement in 192 countries and territories based on the determination never to leave behind those who struggle in the depths of suffering. This conviction is distilled in the words of my mentor, Josei Toda: “I wish to see the word ‘misery’ no longer used to describe the world, any country, any individual.” [\[14\]](#)

What is important here is that Toda was focused on the elimination of misery in all dimensions of life: the personal, the national and the global. Undeterred by the global inequities that persist, the issues different countries face or the harsh circumstances besetting people, we must continue to strive together for the elimination of needless suffering, bridging any and all divides that separate us. This determination underlies and drives the SGI’s efforts to deepen ties of cooperation with like-minded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) in pursuit of solutions to global challenges.

In one sense, human history consists of an unbroken series of threats, and perhaps it is inevitable that we will continue to face dangers in various forms. This is why it is crucial that we build the strong social foundations for eliminating misery so that, even when confronted with the most intense threat or challenge, we never leave behind those who are most vulnerable and are struggling in the depths of adversity.

In the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, we are called upon to maintain physical distance, making it harder to discern the conditions in which others find themselves. I cannot help but feel that religious movements and FBOs have an important role to play in supporting efforts to ensure that we do not lose our essential orientation—the recognition that we are all individuals coexisting within the same human society.

The pandemic has gravely impacted our world, and finding our way out of this labyrinth will be far from easy. Nevertheless, I believe the “Ariadne’s thread” that will enable each of us to emerge from the crisis will come into clear view when we allow ourselves to feel the full weight of each individual life and, from there, consider what is most urgently needed to protect and support that life.

Establishing a global solidarity of action

The next thematic area I would like to explore is the need for countries to transcend their differences and come together in solidarity to overcome the crisis.

What is the actual scale of the damage and harm wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic? The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has noted the following in light of the enormity of the tragic loss of life and health as well as the accompanying economic and social hardships: “When loss of employment and income are factored in, it could well be that more people have been affected by this single disaster than by any other in human history.” [\[15\]](#) Beyond this, the unprecedented nature of the crisis lies in the fact that it has affected almost all of the world’s nations.

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the world has seen a series of massive natural disasters, including the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami (2004), the Kashmir earthquake (2005), the Myanmar cyclone (2008), the Sichuan earthquake (2008) and the Haiti earthquake (2010). In each case, while the damage was severe, relief and support were made available from other countries, from rescue efforts in the immediate aftermath through to recovery and rebuilding. Following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, numerous countries extended various forms of support to people in the afflicted areas, which was a source of untold encouragement. When disaster strikes, such expressions of international solidarity provide vital spiritual support to those who have been impacted and who are unable to see what lies ahead.

The COVID-19 crisis has struck almost all nations simultaneously, and this creates conditions of even greater complexity, chaos and confusion. If we were to compare the nations of the world to ships that are each engaged in an ocean passage, the novel coronavirus represents a storm of unmatched fury that has struck them all at the same time such that, despite being in the same sea of troubles, they all risk being blown off course in different and random directions.

What, then, can serve as a compass helping us find our way on the uncharted ocean crossing that is the search for a means to overcome the COVID-19 crisis? The British historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975), with whom I conducted an extensive dialogue, left us these words: “Our experience in the past gives us the only light on the future that is accessible to us.” [\[16\]](#)

In that spirit I would like to reflect on the example, from the 1950s, of collaboration between the United States and the Soviet Union to develop a vaccine against polio in the midst of escalating Cold War tensions.

Until that time, a vaccine made up of inactivated (“dead”) polioviruses had been the prime method for preventing polio infection. In addition to the fact that this form of vaccination had to be injected, it was quite costly. To counter this, efforts were made to develop an orally-administered vaccine made up of weakened but still active (“live”) polioviruses. However, because of the already widespread administration of the inactivated vaccine in the United States, relatively few people there were eligible to enroll in trials for this new vaccine.

The Soviet Union, despite the possible benefits for its own children, was at first cool to the idea of collaboration with its rival, the United States. Over time, however, the Soviet authorities, concerned about increasing rates of infection, sought ways to work with the US. For its part, the US recognized the need for Soviet cooperation, and, from 1959, started supporting large-scale trials in the Soviet Union and its neighbors, leading to the development of a safe and effective live-virus vaccine.

I myself have vivid memories of the way that many children in Japan were saved from polio infection through this live-virus vaccine. Polio swept through Japan in 1960, and infections continued to spread in the following year. As the escalating number of patients became the subject of daily news reports, there were growing calls, especially from concerned mothers, for access to vaccines. When, in addition to 3 million doses imported from Canada, the Soviet Union provided 10 million doses of live-virus vaccine, the spread of infection in Japan was quickly brought under control. Sixty years later, I still recall how it became possible to administer these live-virus vaccines, the outcome of US–Soviet cooperation, as well as the palpable sense of relief this brought to mothers throughout Japan.

COVAX facility

The COVID-19 Global Vaccines Access Facility (COVAX) aims to ensure rapid and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines across the globe. It is coordinated by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, (which consists of UNICEF, the World Bank, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other partners) together with the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The COVAX facility will allow participating countries to access a range of vaccines, regardless of whether or not they have secured a bilateral deal with a particular manufacturer. It enables governments with a deal to diversify their vaccine portfolio and provides them with an insurance policy in case their deal fails; and for governments that would otherwise not be able to afford the vaccine, it should ensure a reliable supply of an effective vaccine. In the first phase, the aim is to provide 2 billion vaccine doses worldwide by the end of 2021, with 1.3 billion going to ninety-two lower income countries.

Today, as COVID-19 infections continue to increase throughout the world, a key focus, alongside the development and production of vaccines, is how to ensure a stable supply to all countries. To respond to this challenge, in April of last year, WHO, along with governmental and civil society partners, launched the COVAX facility for the global procurement of COVID-19 vaccines. With the aim of creating systems to ensure prompt and equitable access to vaccines for all countries, the facility has plans to supply 2 billion doses to participating states by the end of 2021.

The COVAX facility was established just one month after WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. This speed no doubt reflected the concern that if the competition to develop vaccines were to proceed outside of any international framework, gaps could open between countries with the necessary financial resources and those without, possibly resulting in skyrocketing prices. A resolution adopted at the World Health Assembly, held in May 2020, recognized “the role of extensive immunization against COVID-19 as a global public good” [\[17\]](#) to be shared by all countries. At present, 190

states and territories are participating in the COVAX facility with the goal of making vaccines available from February. But whether the stable supply of vaccines can be secured hinges on obtaining the cooperation of all major states and establishing the necessary support systems.

Japan was an early participant in COVAX, and I call on the Japanese government to make efforts to encourage the active participation of countries that have yet to join, such as the United States and the Russian Federation. Seth Berkley, CEO of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which coordinates with WHO to administer the COVAX facility, has offered this assessment of Japan's early commitment, made last October, to provide funding in support of developing countries:

This vital funding not only helps us ensure lower-income countries aren't left at the back of the queue when safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines become available, it will also play a vital role in ending the acute phase of this pandemic worldwide. [18]

At the Kyushu-Okinawa G8 Summit held in 2000, Japan, as president of the summit, raised the fight against communicable diseases as a key agenda item. Two years later, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria was established. Since then, Japan and many other states have continued to support this fund, saving the lives of an estimated 38 million people who would otherwise have fallen victim to these three diseases. [19]

In terms of generating global solidarity to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, I think it is important to maintain a positive focus on how many lives we are together succeeding in saving. When attention is directed at the negative data of increasing numbers of infections, a narrow concern with defending only one's own country may take precedence over solidarity with others. For this reason, I think it is vital to work from the recognition that efforts to protect people of all countries from infection will also contribute to protecting one's own people.

Just as WHO has characterized extensive immunization against COVID-19 as a global public good, I am confident that when the COVAX facility becomes fully operational, it will open the way for the shared enjoyment of global public goods of even greater value.

Researchers in the field of global public goods include in this category not only material products such as vaccines or social infrastructure such as the Internet, but also such conditions as peace and a healthy environment that are shared and enjoyed by the entire world as the result of policies promoted by countries working together. [20] If we take climate change as an example, when different countries take active measures to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, they will collectively create conditions—containing the risks posed by extreme weather events or rising sea levels, for instance—that benefit all countries. In the same way, if the nations of the world work in solidarity to bring the pandemic under control, this will strengthen global resilience against other infectious diseases that could arise in the future and establish the basis for protecting the lives and health of people everywhere.

The key players supporting this kind of resilience—those serving as lighthouses ensuring the safety of the different ships of state, to use my earlier analogy—are the world's medical professionals, the doctors and nurses who have been working with tireless dedication and a sense of noble mission to support those whose lives are threatened by COVID-19. I wish to offer my deepest appreciation to those working selflessly day after day.

I would also note that an estimated one in eight of the world's nurses are working in countries other than where they were born or received their training. [21] In many countries, we see a tendency to view immigrants and their families coldly, to regard them as a burden on society and exclude them.

The UN has called for efforts to counter such trends, and as different countries have found themselves enmeshed in the COVID-19 crisis, it has been immigrants, often working as nurses, orderlies and other personnel, who have become crucial contributors on the front lines of medical treatment, saving the lives of many people.

In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic declaration, critical shortages of face masks resulted in competition among states to secure supplies. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) cites a number of examples of refugees who spontaneously responded to the challenge facing their host countries.

In Kenya, after the first cases were reported in March, a directive to wear masks in public was issued. One refugee, a man who had fled the Democratic Republic of the Congo and was working as a tailor in a refugee camp, responded by making masks and distributing them inside the camp and in the local community, as well as to UNHCR staff. “I wanted to. . . show that we [refugees] can also contribute to the response to the pandemic and not just rely on assistance.” [\[22\]](#)

In Germany, a family of Syrian refugees began making masks out of the desire to support the nurses working at the hospital in the town that received them. When the refugees started running short of elastic bands for the masks, local residents immediately brought supplies of them to their home. A member of the family described their feelings in this way: “We were so warmly welcomed. . . We found shelter, we have jobs, our children can go to school. If we can give something back to Germany, then we are happy.” [\[23\]](#)

The irrepressible desire to do what one can to help even one person, the awareness of and concern for others, the wholehearted action taken on their behalf that arises from living in the same community. . . I am confident such awareness and action, sustained and repeated despite differences of nationality or circumstance, can cultivate the soil from which resilience arises and grows.

The development of a vaccine is of course a key factor in overcoming the current crisis but, as WHO warns, this alone will not resolve all issues. [\[24\]](#) There is also the need to ensure the safety of the vaccine and to create effective systems for transporting and administering it. Along with ongoing efforts to control the spread of infections, this means that at each stage the cooperation and support of large numbers of people will be indispensable. The fundamental challenges will be to create and maintain a shared awareness of the need to work in solidarity to overcome the present crisis and to expand the number of people taking responsibility to build resilience in their respective societies.

The word pandemic has its roots in the Greek *pandemos*, meaning “all people,” and until the spread of COVID-19 is brought to a halt everywhere on Earth, the disease will continue to pose a danger to everyone, regardless of nationality or circumstance. In that sense, traditional national security approaches, based on pursuing one’s own security apart from the interests of other peoples and countries, are clearly inadequate. Rather, the necessary approach is one of human security, in which countries look beyond their immediate interests to work together to reduce and eliminate the threats facing all people, as could be seen in nascent form in the example of live polio vaccine development through US–Soviet cooperation during the Cold War.

As the pandemic continues to worsen, we must make every effort to prevent countries’ measures to reduce the spread of infections, including through the provision of vaccines, from shifting to an

exclusive prioritization of their own security at the cost of saving lives worldwide. In certain ways, this could recapitulate the Cold War nuclear strategies of the superpowers referred to as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Under that doctrine, both sides pursued their own national security by building up overwhelming deterrent forces. And yet, were war to have broken out and exchanges of nuclear attacks commenced, not only would this have resulted in the destruction of both societies, it would have undermined the basis for the continued survival of humankind as a whole.

As noted earlier, last year it was announced that wild polio has been eradicated in Africa, [\[25\]](#) and if this can be repeated in two remaining Asian countries, the global eradication of the disease will be achieved. The first case of a communicable disease being overcome by humanity was smallpox, in 1980. Bernard Lown, cofounder of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and a dear personal friend, expressed these thoughts regarding that important achievement:

Even in the darkest days of the Cold War, cooperation between doctors of the two rival ideological camps had never ceased. At the very time when missiles were multiplied in readiness for preemptive nuclear strikes, American and Soviet physicians struggled shoulder to shoulder in a global campaign to eradicate smallpox. Such acts of camaraderie were persuasive models for the antinuclear struggle. [\[26\]](#)

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) grew out of IPPNW and, along with the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and all the world's hibakusha, played a leading role in the civil society movement that culminated in the realization of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). So long as threats remain—even as smoldering embers—it will be impossible for everyone on Earth to fully enjoy physical and psychological security. The only form of security that will bring about authentic peace is one in which it is unacceptable to sacrifice the inhabitants of any country and the right to exist is guaranteed to all the world's people. The TPNW, which entered into force this past January 22, is a benchmark treaty and pivotal event ushering in a new era.

Arnold Toynbee used the rather striking expression “time-perspective” to pose the following question:

What will be singled out as the salient event of our time by future historians, centuries hence, looking back on the first half of the twentieth century and trying to see its activities and experiences in that just proportion which the time-perspective sometimes reveals? [\[27\]](#)

In a similar manner, we may ask what future historians looking back on the first half of the twenty-first century will choose as salient events seen in this kind of time-perspective. One of these may be the entry into force of the TPNW—realized against the backdrop of a deepening COVID-19 crisis—as an event spurring a paradigm shift in approaches to security. And I would strongly hope that another would be the history inscribed by the efforts of international society to promote vaccination on a global scale under the auspices of the COVAX facility.

While the threat posed by the pandemic is indeed grave, I believe that if we muster the limitless human capacity to break through impasses and become the authors of a new history, we will be certain to overcome it. Our shared efforts to respond to the pandemic can serve as a foundation for generating global awareness of the essential role of human solidarity in transforming crises. This can, in turn,

shift the trajectory of human history, enabling us to break free from the tragedy of national security approaches that are rooted in, and perpetuate, conflict.

Constructing a culture of human rights

The third thematic area I would like to explore is the need to counteract the spread of misinformation regarding the novel coronavirus, particularly with regard to the effect such misinformation can have in fueling discrimination against those who have been infected. This must be part of the effort to construct a culture of human rights in which no one's dignity is denied.

Among the literary works that have garnered renewed attention since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is Daniel Defoe's (c. 1660–1731) *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Set in seventeenth-century London, the work portrays citizens' loss of reason and self-control under the influence of demagogic rhetoric that incites fear, confusion and insecurity. Since ancient times and most recently with HIV/AIDS, human history has seen repeated incidents of discrimination against those suffering from infectious diseases. Outbreaks of irrational fear have again and again caused sharp divisions and disruption that have left deep scars in society.

Contagious diseases differ from conditions such as cancer or heart disease in that we are always alert to the danger of contracting them from other people. This raises the risk that fear of the pathogen will translate into wariness or fear of others. Such feelings are especially problematic when they escalate in ways that compound the suffering of those who have been infected and their families, or when the mood in society becomes one of blaming the spread of infection on people or groups already subject to discrimination and prejudice. Today, there is the additional concern that misinformation or incitement related to infectious diseases can be instantly propagated through social media.

As guidelines for mitigation continue to evolve and the pandemic has an increasingly intense impact on our lives, people look beyond newspapers and other traditional media in order to sate their hunger for information. This has exposed many people to unreliable information from unknown or unconfirmed sources. This virtual information space is often home to malicious forms of discourse that prey on people's sense of unease in order to incite social disruption or to direct hatred toward certain people or groups.

The unchecked spread of misinformation or incitement, often referred to by the neologism "infodemic," can intensify discrimination and prejudice, eroding the very foundations of human society. This is another kind of pandemic, one that parallels the spread of the actual disease. The UN has urged strong caution in this regard, and in May last year launched the "Verified" initiative to combat the spread of inaccurate or malicious information about COVID-19. The UN works with multiple media outlets to disseminate information whose accuracy has been confirmed by its own experts as well as other scientists and specialists. The initiative calls for the participation of "information volunteers" throughout the world, who will actively share reliable content as a means of keeping their families and communities safe and connected.

The dangers arising from failure to thoroughly expose errors by challenging falsehoods and misinformation are not limited to the resulting dearth of correct information and knowledge. Of even graver concern is the risk that existing discrimination and prejudice will interact with fears of infection

to spur runaway suspicion that deepens the fractures within society and undermines the human rights and dignity that must be protected for all people.

Addressing the question of human rights and contagious disease, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet noted the following in a statement issued on March 6, 2020, five days before WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic: “Human dignity and rights need to be front and centre in that effort, not an afterthought.” [\[28\]](#)

In September, discussing the approaches that are indispensable to our efforts to overcome the COVID-19 crisis, the High Commissioner stressed the following:

We have witnessed the ways in which deeply entrenched inequalities and human rights gaps fuel this virus—magnifying contagion and vastly accelerating its threat. What we need to see today is action to repair those gaps and heal those deep wounds, both in and between our societies. [\[29\]](#)

The structural nature of what the High Commissioner refers to as deeply entrenched inequalities and human rights gaps has tended to obscure the resulting deep wounds. I believe the COVID-19 crisis has brought to the surface discriminatory attitudes already held by people in a semiconscious manner. As the pandemic has worsened, there is concern about the heightened risk that people, influenced by hate-filled discourse, will seek targets on whom to vent their pain and frustration.

Everyone, regardless of geographic or occupational differences and distinctions of ethnicity or faith, is exposed to the risk of infection with COVID-19. Despite the fact that this is clearly a challenge we must confront and overcome together, we see social fragmentation that exacerbates the threat. What are the underlying factors driving this?

In considering this question, I would like to reference the analysis of the nature of discrimination by the American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum in her book *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Nussbaum argues that the act of drawing boundaries within society is rooted in our feelings of disgust for those others we consider evil and our attempt to distance ourselves from them. She summarizes her point in this way: In seeking the comfort of distancing ourselves from evil, we call disgust to our aid.

Although Nussbaum is focused here on ways of thinking that seek to tie evil acts to specific groups, assuming that these bear no relation to us, I believe there are structural similarities between such thinking and the kinds of disruption and discrimination that an outbreak of infectious disease can provoke.

In this same work, Nussbaum notes the many examples of medical terminology such as bacilli (bacteria) being enlisted to direct disgust at certain groups, justifying their denigration or oppression. [\[30\]](#)

At the root of discrimination is the feeling that the members of one’s own group are the most just and valuable of all. When society confronts a crisis situation, there is a strong impulse to prioritize the members of one’s own group. This interacts with feelings of distaste for others, causing people to seek security by cutting off contact with those seen as different from themselves.

Nussbaum warns that this feeling of disgust “imputes to the object properties that make it no longer a member of the subject’s own community or world, a kind of alien species of thing” [\[31\]](#) and further

argues that “when it conduces to the political subordination and marginalization of vulnerable groups and people, disgust is a dangerous social sentiment.” [32]

At the same time, Nussbaum assigns importance to indignation as an emotion that supports democratic society. “Indignation has a constructive function: it says, ‘these people have been wronged, and they should not have been wronged.’ In itself, it provides incentives to right the wrong.” [33] In this sense, while the experience of difficulty and precariousness of life can become the cause for an intensification of discriminatory consciousness and bears the risk of deepening divisions in society, it also has the potential to give rise to constructive action toward the realization of a society of creative coexistence.

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, making its presence felt in virtually every sector of society, large numbers of people are finding themselves more attuned to and affected by the pain of those whose lives and dignity are being denied, perhaps with an intensity they have not previously experienced. We must be careful not to allow our own sense of claustrophobic despair to seek outlet in feelings of disgust for others. Rather, it is vital that we use it to empathize with others—to extend our thoughts to the difficulty and precariousness others are experiencing—and from there, to direct our energies into expanding solidarity with those engaged in constructive action to change the harsh realities of society.

Of course, it is only natural that we would regard our own lives as the most precious of all. This reality is embraced in the approach to human rights expounded by the Buddhist teachings practiced by members of the SGI.

For example, we have the following account drawn from the life and teachings of Shakyamuni. On one occasion, while in conversation, the king and queen of the ancient Indian kingdom of Kosala came to realize that they each held no one more dear than themselves. Upon hearing this honest feeling, Shakyamuni responded with the following verse:

*Having traversed all quarters with the mind,
One finds none anywhere dearer than oneself.
Likewise, each person holds himself most dear;
Hence one who loves himself should not harm others.* [34]

In other words, if you regard your own life to be precious and irreplaceable, then you should grasp the fact that each person must also feel that way; making this realization the basis for how you conduct your life, you should resolve never to act in ways that will cause harm to others.

As illustrated by this anecdote, the Buddhist perspective on human rights urges us not to extinguish or suppress our feelings of cherishing ourselves above all else. On the contrary, by extending and opening the love we feel for ourselves to love for others, we can rebind the tapestry of our lives, restoring the ways in which we connect to others and to society at large.

The Lotus Sutra is an unfolding narrative of the dramatic revitalization of human life. As one person after another comes into contact with this notion that all without exception inherently possess the most sublime state of being, and as they steadily awaken to their own precious and irreplaceable dignity, they begin to recognize the weight and value of the dignity of others. Thus, they mutually deepen their determination to build a world in which the dignity of both self and others shines brightly.

In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni dispels the boundaries dividing people in society, stressing that the most sublime state of being resides equally within all, including women—who had long been subjected to harsh discrimination—as well as individuals who had committed evil deeds. Clearly declaring the dignity of those who have been the target of various forms of oppression and discrimination, the Lotus Sutra is interlaced with the lively exchange of voices in mutual celebration and affirmation of the dignified essence of our being. Through this rich drama of lives inspiring and becoming inspired, it gives concrete form to the principle of the inherent dignity of all humankind.

Based on the Lotus Sutra’s teaching of human dignity, committed to building a society which opposes any and all forms of discrimination and to ensuring that no one is denied their dignity, the SGI has consistently worked to promote human rights education as called for by the United Nations.

In support of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education that began in 1995, the SGI organized the exhibition “Toward a Century of Humanity: An Overview of Human Rights in Today’s World,” which traveled to forty cities in eight countries. We have also actively engaged in the promotion of the World Programme for Human Rights Education since its launch in 2005. In addition, in 2011 the SGI worked in collaboration with other organizations to support the adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, a landmark instrument in setting universal standards for human rights education. Since then, we have engaged in activities such as co-organizing the exhibition “Transforming Lives: The Power of Human Rights Education” [\[35\]](#) in cooperation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and in co-creating the Human Rights Education: Open Web Resource website. [\[36\]](#)

During the UN Human Rights Council session held last September, the SGI, on behalf of the NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning, delivered a joint statement in reference to the Plan of Action for the fourth phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, which focuses on youth and began last January:

[The Plan of Action] sets great possibilities for human rights education and young people. While COVID-19 adds challenges to the implementation of the Plan, there cannot be a “break” for human rights education which is a key condition for human rights to be a reality. [\[37\]](#)

This year will mark ten years since the adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, which describes human rights education as being integral to building an inclusive society. Just as a circle cannot be considered complete unless all of its constituent arcs are drawn, so long as the promise of universal respect for human rights is undermined by social disparities and distinctions—so long as people continue to be excluded and marginalized—it will remain an empty slogan, never becoming a tangible reality.

Human rights education can propel the formation of robust solidarity among people who, sharing an awareness of the importance of human dignity, are engaged in the work of reexamining our ways of living and thus transforming society. In so doing, we can give clear and palpable form to those arcs of the full circle of human rights and dignity that have been lost and obscured by the structural nature of oppression.

The SGI has consistently carried out activities in support of human rights education with a view to completing the circle of an inclusive society, working together with all those with whom we share this world. Strengthening efforts to stop the spread of malicious misinformation and discrimination and to dispel the dark clouds of fear and anxiety seeded by the COVID-19 crisis, we must now rise to the challenge of anchoring a vibrant culture of human rights on our shared determination that no one's dignity ever be denied.

International guidelines for combating infectious diseases

Next, I would like to make specific proposals in three main issue areas toward the construction of a global society of peace and humane values.

My first set of proposals relates to strengthening people-centered global governance and establishing global guidelines for combating infectious diseases.

Last year, the World Food Programme (WFP) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. For decades, WFP has been helping people suffering from hunger by providing food assistance and also contributing to improving the conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas. Last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic generated a surge in food insecurity, WFP intensified its efforts to provide food assistance based on the conviction that “until the day we have a medical vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos.” [\[38\]](#) The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded in recognition of these initiatives and contributions. It is also worth mentioning that WFP has played another important role during the crisis: When the pandemic caused many flights to be canceled, greatly disrupting the global transport system, WFP leveraged its logistics capacity and expertise to secure chartered vessels and flights to deliver critical medical supplies as well as health and humanitarian personnel.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has also provided logistical support to deliver COVID-19 related medical supplies such as masks, gowns and oxygen concentrators as well as diagnostic test kits. UNICEF has long collaborated with logistics industries in different regions, supporting vaccination programs to protect children from infectious diseases. From last October, in preparation for what it expects to be “one of the largest mass undertakings in human history,” [\[39\]](#) UNICEF began laying the groundwork for COVID-19 vaccination in various countries by purchasing and delivering syringes and other necessary equipment. It also began making transportation and distribution plans so that vaccines can be delivered as soon as they become available. UNICEF has experience in transporting vaccines in temperature-controlled environments and has promoted solar-powered refrigeration in areas where it is difficult to secure electrical power. Its expertise and know-how in managing vaccination programs will play a crucial role in addressing the crisis.

When I think about the significance of the initiatives led by WFP and UNICEF, I am strongly reminded of the importance of the global safety net that has been woven together in overlapping layers through the activities of different agencies of the United Nations. The UN has a number of organizations tasked with addressing the needs of specific populations, such as UN Women and UNHCR. Through the initiatives and activities of these entities, the UN has brought a sustained focus on those who would otherwise be left behind and has opened the way for the provision of international support.

In my 2019 peace proposal, I highlighted the importance of fostering people-centered multilateralism as a means of protecting those who face the most serious threats and challenges. It is increasingly urgent that we make this approach foundational to how humanity lives in the twenty-first century.

Last year, the UN launched the UN75 initiative, a global consultation to commemorate its seventy-fifth anniversary. This is an ambitious attempt to listen to the voices of the world's people through surveys and dialogue. In addition to the more than 1,000 dialogues conducted in person, online and through social media, more than one million people in all UN member and observer states across the globe responded to an online survey. The results make it clear that the overwhelming majority support greater global cooperation. Respondents of all age groups and nationalities expressed the view that this is vital in dealing with today's challenges and that the pandemic has increased the need for international solidarity. [\[40\]](#)

The voices of participants from across the globe were published in the survey report. As one notes:

The virus has taken away jobs, interactions, education and peace. . . Students who have worked so hard to get an education might not get a job, people who don't have access to technology can't move forward in a society that now depends heavily on it, workers who are supporting their families have lost their jobs and it doesn't seem like life will be back to normal anytime soon, so people are stressed, anxious and depressed because they fear the future. [\[41\]](#)

As the above comment suggests, this sense of urgency for global cooperation arises not from some idealized vision of international society but from people's lived realities as they confront adversity in various forms. And this is being felt by large numbers of people across different countries.

Reading of the hopes and expectations for the UN expressed by the world's people, I am reminded of the words of former UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, who passed away at the age of one hundred in March last year. Born in Lima, Peru, he took part in the first UN General Assembly in 1946 as a member of the Peruvian delegation. He spent most of his career as an ambassador and senior UN official before being appointed Secretary-General, serving two consecutive terms over ten years starting in 1982.

We met for the first time in Tokyo in August 1982, soon after he took office as Secretary-General, and on a number of occasions after that. I still vividly recall how each time I touched upon the importance of civil society support for the UN, Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar, a man known for his sober and honest manner, permitted himself a smile as he expressed his deep commitment to the UN's mission.

He played a crucial role in resolving a number of conflicts as Secretary-General. Even in the final days of his tenure, he continued negotiations to bring an end to the civil war in El Salvador, culminating in the historic peace agreement reached on New Year's Eve, his last day in office. This achievement still shines as an important milestone in UN history.

He once described the UN's essential role as follows:

The Charter and the working of the world Organization do not promise a problem-free world. What they promise is a rational and peaceful way of solving problems. . . To the great dangers of the proliferation of nuclear and conventional weapons, political disputes,

violations of human rights, the prevalence of poverty and threats to the environment have been added new sources of conflict. There is a need for the world's wealth of political intelligence and imagination—and compassion—to be employed in coping with these dangers. It can be done through constant and systematic effort only within the United Nations. [42]

In another address, he expressed his deep commitment as UN chief to actions that would benefit all of humankind, saying that the crisis the UN was then facing could provide creative opportunities for renewal and reform. [43] To meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the climate emergency, I believe we should adopt the approach called for by the late Secretary-General and make the present crisis an opportunity for strengthening people-centered multilateralism through the UN system. Likewise, the current UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has affirmed that overcoming today's fragilities and challenges requires better global governance, [44] something we must continue to promote.

From this perspective, I would like to propose the holding of a high-level meeting at the UN to address COVID-19 as a means to further strengthen networking and collaboration among the world's governments. With a view to the possibility of new infectious diseases emerging in the future, I would further propose that international guidelines governing pandemic response be adopted at such a meeting.

Last month, a special session of the UN General Assembly focusing on the current pandemic was held at UN Headquarters in New York where General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir addressed the gathering, expressing the sentiment shared by millions worldwide:

Right now, we are all dreaming of the day this pandemic is over. The day we can take a deep breath of fresh air without fear. The day we can shake the hands of our colleagues, embrace our families, and laugh with our friends. [45]

Toward that end, he called for strengthened international cooperation led by the UN. Following a moment of silence in memory of all those who have lost their lives, heads of state and government addressed the session through pre-recorded video statements, and online panel discussions were held with WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. I believe the high-level meeting I am calling for could be convened as a follow-up to develop international guidelines that would serve as the basis for a coordinated COVID-19 response. These guidelines should be sufficiently robust to also defend against future outbreaks of infectious disease.

We have seen how, in 2001, the UN General Assembly Special Session issued a Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS with a list of categories for action and a timeline for achievement, and how this provided a powerful impetus to each country's response to that epidemic.

It is also worth looking at the international approach to disasters of a different nature. In 2015, four years after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 was adopted at the third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Sendai, a city that had been severely affected. This framework included guiding principles and priorities for action in disaster risk reduction, clearly underlining that the aim is to protect not only people's lives but also their livelihoods. It further included specific lessons learned from disasters including the Tohoku earthquake, such as the importance of enhancing resilience—the capacity of societies to recover

from severe shocks. Further, as a result of the Sendai Framework setting specific targets toward 2030, including substantially reducing the number of victims of disaster worldwide and containing damage to critical infrastructure such as healthcare and educational facilities, countries around the world have begun to share priority areas and best practices in this field.

I believe that, building on the achievement of the Sendai Framework and based on lessons learned and experiences acquired, international guidelines for combating the current pandemic must be established as a matter of great urgency.

Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include bringing an end to certain communicable diseases such as AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, there is no explicit mention of the word “pandemic.” Bearing in mind the possibility that new infectious diseases will emerge, the international guidelines I am proposing should outline the priority actions for pandemic response to be implemented by 2030. As guidelines linked to the SDGs, they should be integrated in such a way as to reinforce those goals.

Alongside a meeting to draw up such global guidelines, I would like to propose the holding of a “beyond COVID-19” youth summit, a convening of young people to discuss the kind of world they would like to see in the aftermath of this crisis. Two years ago, the UN Youth Climate Summit took place at UN Headquarters in New York. It provided a platform and opportunity for young leaders from around the globe to engage with UN leadership, sharing their solutions on climate issues so that their concerns could better be reflected in policy-making processes.

A “beyond COVID-19” summit could utilize online platforms, thus enabling the participation of many more young people from diverse backgrounds, such as those struggling in poverty, those living in conflict areas and those compelled to live as refugees. Such a summit would provide youth with the opportunity to freely exchange their views and hopes with UN officers and national leaders.

Many participants in the UN75 dialogues mentioned above voiced the need for UN reform that would strengthen collaboration with civil society and expand the involvement of women and youth in UN decision making. Of the suggestions detailed in the UN75 Report, I would especially like to highlight the idea of establishing a UN youth council with the role of communicating to the UN leadership ideas and proposals developed from the perspective of young people.

In my 2006 proposal on UN reform, I shared my strong belief in the importance of promoting young

Archimedes

Ancient Greek mathematician and inventor Archimedes (c. 287–211 BCE) is best known for his discovery of the relation between the surface and volume of a sphere, as well as a hydrostatic principle known as the Archimedes principle. He also defined the principle of the lever in his work *On the Equilibrium of Planes*. Archimedes is quoted as having said, “Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world.” This phrase is taken to express the idea that, given a firm footing and the proper tools, anything can be made possible.

people’s active engagement with the UN. Referencing Archimedes, I stated that when youth have “a place to stand,” they can leverage the potential of the UN. And in my 2009 peace proposal, I called for the creation of an office of global visioning within the UN Secretariat to help identify the future direction of the UN and bring focus to that purpose. It is crucial that the UN not only react to immediate challenges but also better reflect the voices and perspectives of women and youth in its efforts to develop future-oriented action strategies.

To that end, a UN youth council would regularize and sustain the kind of youth engagement described above. A youth summit dedicated to responding to the COVID-19 crisis,

following the precedent set by the Youth Climate Summit, would build momentum for the creation of such a youth council. I sincerely believe that the active participation of youth in this way would bring fresh ideas and vitality to the organization, strengthening UN-centered global governance for the benefit of the world's peoples.

The TPNW—A turning point in human history

The second issue of concern regarding which I would like to offer specific proposals is the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is the first legally binding international agreement to comprehensively prohibit nuclear weapons, adopted with the aim of their eventual elimination. The treaty was endorsed by 122 countries at United Nations Headquarters in New York when it was first adopted on July 7, 2017. On October 24, 2020, it reached the fiftieth ratification required to enter into force, and since has gained further support, with eighty-six signatories and fifty-two ratifications as of the end of January 2021.

Contained in its twenty articles are provisions that signatory states must agree not to develop, test, produce, manufacture, transfer, possess, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons, or allow nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory. States possessing nuclear arsenals may join the treaty upon submission of a time-bound plan for the verified and irreversible elimination of their nuclear-weapons program.

On January 22, 2021, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), long sought for by civil society, entered into force. The treaty comprehensively bans nuclear weapons, prohibiting not only their development and testing but also their production, stockpiling and use or threat of use. At present, the treaty has been signed by eighty-six countries and ratified by fifty-two.

Following the precedents set by the Biological Weapons Convention and Chemical Weapons Convention, which ban those weapons of mass destruction, the entry into force of the TPNW marks the start of an era in which the continued existence of nuclear weapons on Earth has been stipulated as unacceptable by a legally binding instrument.

Last October, Setsuko Thurlow, a hibakusha who has worked with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to advocate for the treaty's entry into force, shared her thoughts on hearing that the TPNW had met the conditions for doing so. As one who has also committed my life to realizing a world without nuclear weapons, I was deeply moved by her words:

This truly marks the beginning of the end of nuclear weapons! When I learned that we reached our 50th ratification, I was not able to stand. I remained in my chair and put my head in my hands and I cried tears of joy. . . I have a tremendous sense of accomplishment and fulfilment, a sense of satisfaction and gratitude. I know other survivors share these emotions—whether we are survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki; or test survivors from South Pacific island nations, Kazakhstan, Australia and Algeria; or survivors from uranium mining in Canada, the United States or the Congo. [\[46\]](#)

As Ms. Thurlow noted, people throughout the world have suffered from the development and testing of nuclear weapons over the course of the nuclear age that has persisted for more than seventy-five years. As stressed in the TPNW, the very existence of nuclear weapons poses a grave danger to the world; and the catastrophic consequences that would result from their use and any subsequent nuclear exchange

would be truly imponderable. The irreversible damage done to the planet would extend beyond the dimension of mass destruction: in an instant, everything would return to nothingness, all would cease to exist—each precious life, all community and social activity, the entirety of human history and civilization—everything would be cruelly stripped of meaning. Something capable of producing such tragedy can only be described as an absolute evil.

My mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, issued his declaration calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons in 1957 at a time when every part of the world was coming within range of a nuclear-weapon strike as a result of the arms race. Seeking to confront and overcome the underlying thinking that justifies the possession of nuclear weapons, he stated that his goal was to “expose and rip out the claws that lie hidden in the very depths of such weapons.” [\[47\]](#) He went beyond declaring the use of nuclear weapons unacceptable under any circumstance. By using deliberately provocative language, he wished to emphasize that without exposing the true nature of absolute evil lurking within nuclear weapons possession, it would be impossible to protect the right of the world’s people to live.

As the preamble of the TPNW states, a sense of urgency to ensure “the security of all humanity” lies at the foundation of this treaty. Establishing a norm comprehensively banning nuclear weapons under international law, the treaty’s primary purpose lies in protecting the right to live of all the people with whom we share this planet—regardless of whether the states in which they live are nuclear-weapon states, nuclear-dependent states or non-nuclear-weapon states—and in ensuring the survival of generations to come.

Support for the treaty has steadily continued to grow: even after the TPNW reached its fiftieth ratification required for entry into force, sixteen more states expressed their intention to ratify at last year’s session of the UN General Assembly’s Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee). [\[48\]](#)

Attention now focuses on the first meeting of States Parties of the TPNW, which the treaty requires be held within one year of its entry into force. Here, the next step will be to muster broad-based support for “the security of all humanity” and greatly expand the number of states signing and ratifying. Furthermore, since all states, including those not yet States Parties, are welcome to attend this meeting, a major focus will be how to involve as many nuclear-weapon and nuclear-dependent states as possible in the deliberations. The challenge here is to build the kind of robust solidarity that will bring the era of nuclear weapons to a close.

The UN75 Report I referred to earlier also clearly reflects growing support among the global public for the creation of this kind of solidarity. It cites a ten-point list of priorities for the future, including a global push to support entry into force of the TPNW as well as a ban on lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) such as robotic weapons. [\[49\]](#) In addition, according to a survey of millennials in sixteen countries and territories commissioned by the International Committee of the Red Cross, 84 percent of all respondents agreed that the use of nuclear weapons in war or conflict is “never acceptable.” Notably, there was also overwhelming support for this statement among millennials living in nuclear-weapon states. [\[50\]](#)

As the only country in the world to have experienced a nuclear attack in wartime, Japan should pave the way for the nuclear-dependent states by announcing its intention to participate in the first meeting of States Parties of the TPNW and to proactively take part in discussions. On this basis, Japan should

aim for ratification at an early date. In light of its history and the underlying spirit of the treaty—to protect the right to live of all the people with whom we share this planet and to ensure the survival of future generations—it can certainly send a powerful message to the world. In this way, Japan can make an important contribution to ensuring that the talks reach a constructive outcome.

The TPNW stipulates that in addition to reviewing and discussing its ratification and implementation status, the meeting of States Parties can also address “any other matters pursuant to and consistent with the provisions of this Treaty.” [\[51\]](#) Based on this, I would like to propose that a forum for discussing the relationship between nuclear weapons and the SDGs be held during the first meeting of States Parties.

The issue of nuclear weapons is not only central to the attainment of world peace; as noted in the treaty’s preamble, it has grave implications for many areas of concern including human rights and humanitarian issues, the environment and development, the global economy and food security, health and gender equality. Since each of these represents a crucial aspect of the SDGs, the theme of nuclear weapons and the SDGs can be positioned as an issue concerning all states and serve as the impetus to engage as many nuclear-weapon and nuclear-dependent states as possible in the discussions of the States Parties.

The prolonged severity of Cold War tensions following World War II caused the threat posed by nuclear weapons to become entrenched, so much so that even today, thirty years after the Cold War ended, there is a strong tendency to view it as an unchanging “given.” Even recognizing that national security is a high priority for states, is it really the case that this can only be realized through continued reliance on nuclear weapons? I believe that debating this question in light of the importance of achieving each of the SDGs would represent a significant opportunity for both the nuclear-weapon and nuclear-dependent states to reexamine their current stances.

This is all the more crucial as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to overstretch national healthcare systems and undermine economies across the world, with forecasts showing that recovery may take years. I strongly believe we have reached a critical point at which states must seriously reconsider the merit of continuing to pour vast sums into military budgets in pursuit of security through the possession of nuclear weapons.

In Greek mythology, we find the story of King Midas, who came to possess the ability to turn everything he touched into gold. Once this wish of his had been granted, however, he discovered that even water and food, the basic necessities for human survival, were turned to gold at his touch, rendering them useless. In the end, he chose to relinquish his “gift.” At present, in the face of not only climate change but the COVID-19 crisis, there is an urgent need for all countries to thoroughly reconsider the implications of nuclear weapons for the peoples of the world. This, I am confident, will be brought into sharp relief through discussions on the relationship between nuclear weapons and the SDGs, which will in turn be indispensable in our efforts to create a world in which we would want to live.

More than anything else, it is the united voice of civil society that will serve as a major force for generating greater global support for the TPNW. In my proposal last year, in addition to calling for civil society observer participation in the first meeting of States Parties of the TPNW, I proposed the holding of a people’s forum for a world without nuclear weapons to follow up on the first meeting, bringing together the world’s hibakusha, municipalities that support the TPNW and representatives of civil

society. These two proposals would serve to amplify the voices of civil society and help position the TPNW as a pillar of twenty-first-century disarmament efforts as well as a focal point for popular energy to transform human history.

Now that the TPNW has entered into force, will it be possible for the countries of the world to come together to eliminate the planetary threat posed by nuclear weapons?

As we stand at this crossroads in history, I would like to consider the example of Professor Joseph Rotblat (1908–2005), who long served as the president of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs and whose life story may offer us a guide for achieving the paradigm shift to which we aspire.

Of the many scientists engaged in the Manhattan Project, the US-led endeavor to develop the atomic bomb during World War II, Prof. Rotblat was the only one to quit before its completion. Several years before joining the project, he had moved to Britain from his native Poland in order to pursue his research, but was separated from his wife when Nazi Germany invaded their homeland. Asked to participate in the Manhattan Project as part of the British mission, he left for the United States torn by a conflict between his conscience and the desire to deter the Nazis from developing and using a nuclear weapon.

At the Los Alamos laboratory in New Mexico, his office was adjacent to that of Edward Teller (1908–2003), who would later be known as the father of the hydrogen bomb. One day, the military general in charge of the Manhattan Project told him that the real objective of building the atomic bomb was to subdue the Soviet Union, rather than to outpace the Nazis' development efforts and thereby demoralize them. [52]

In a dialogue we conducted many years later, Prof. Rotblat recalled his deep shock at this revelation: "I began to feel that I was at Los Alamos for the wrong reason. I felt as if the soil beneath my feet was beginning to crumble." [53] He submitted a request to be relieved from participation in this top secret project and, despite various forms of pressure to rescind his decision, he returned to Britain by himself. Tragically, it transpired that his beloved wife had been killed in the Holocaust.

When he heard about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in a news broadcast on August 6, 1945, he determined to devote the rest of his life to ensuring that nuclear weapons would never again be used. In 1946, he organized the British Atomic Scientists Association in order to campaign against any use of nuclear weapons. To promote public awareness of the dangers of nuclear weapons, he helped sponsor a mobile exhibition in train carriages which traveled throughout the British Isles, Europe and the Middle East. He switched his field of study to the therapeutic use of radiation, as he wanted to see his research used in ways that would help save lives. His earlier work on the radioactive element Cobalt-60 continues to contribute to the treatment of malignant tumors to this day.

In 1954, a hydrogen bomb test was conducted at Bikini Atoll, exposing local inhabitants and the crew members of the Japanese fishing boat *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* (Lucky Dragon No. 5) to radioactive fallout. This occasioned an encounter between Prof. Rotblat and the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). Prof. Rotblat went on to sign the 1955 Russell-Einstein Manifesto, and in 1957, he cofounded the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs in which he continued to play a pivotal role until his passing in 2005. His was a life devoted to the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons.

His views on the reality of nuclear deterrence, voiced when he and the Pugwash Conferences jointly received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995, are still relevant today:

Nuclear weapons are kept as a hedge against some unspecified dangers. This policy is simply an inertial continuation from the Cold War era. . . As for the assertion that nuclear weapons prevent wars, how many more wars are needed to refute this argument? [54]

In our dialogue, Prof. Rotblat and I discussed how nuclear weapons were first developed in the name of counteracting Nazi Germany and how their possession and competitive development was justified with ever-changing reasons and strategic theories. We reached the conclusion that nuclear weapons do not continue to exist out of necessity, but rather, their existence has necessitated a search for arguments to justify their existence. [55]

So long as states continue to possess nuclear weapons, citing the threat of some “unspecified dangers,” the actual threat these weapons pose to our planet will persist into the indefinite future. In contrast, the TPNW, which aims to eliminate “the risks posed by the continued existence of nuclear weapons,” [56] establishes a path for countries to move forward together toward the eradication of that threat.

In their efforts to achieve the abolition of nuclear weapons, the Pugwash Conferences saw their first successes with the entry into force of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, the year after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although the treaty prohibited nuclear explosions in the atmosphere, outer space and underwater, it did not prohibit underground nuclear explosions. This in turn led to the adoption of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which bans all nuclear tests, three decades later, in 1996.

Although the CTBT has yet to enter into force, it has been signed by 184 states and, through the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), has a verification regime to ensure that no nuclear explosion anywhere on the globe goes undetected. This regime helps forestall the creation of the kind of “unspecified dangers” that Prof. Rotblat warned against. Further, mobilizing the data collection resources of its network of monitoring stations, which spans the entire globe, the CTBTO helps protect the lives of people everywhere, enabling, for example, early disaster warning and the detection of nuclear power plant accidents.

Similarly, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) launched an initiative in March 2020 to use nuclear-derived technology to help more than 120 countries with COVID-19 detection tests. [57] The IAEA has a track record of assisting countries to expand access to cancer treatment and rapid detection tests in the fight against epidemics such as Ebola and Zika. Regarding this initiative, Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi declared: “When people turn to the IAEA for assistance in times of crisis, the IAEA has not failed them and will not fail them.” [58] These activities echo Prof. Rotblat’s lifelong commitment to saving lives through his research and activism.

If a deterrent force is needed in the world today, it is certainly not that of nuclear weapons. Rather, it is the power of joint action and solidarity transcending national borders, brought to bear against the intertwined crises of climate change and COVID-19 and related economic impacts.

The international community’s attitude toward biological and chemical weapons changed dramatically after the entry into force of the treaties banning these weapons. States initiated the process of destroying them: more than 90 percent of the world’s declared chemical weapon stockpiles have so far been eliminated. [59] A similar change regarding nuclear weapons might not immediately occur among nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-dependent states, but it is not as if the process would be starting from scratch.

Biological and chemical weapons

The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), adopted in 1971 with entry into force in 1975, effectively prohibits the development, production, acquisition, transfer, stockpiling and use of bacteriological and toxin weapons. The treaty currently has 183 states parties. As the first disarmament treaty to ban a whole class of weapons of mass destruction, it has successfully deterred the acquisition of biological weapons for over forty years.

The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), adopted in 1992 with entry into force in 1997, currently has 193 states parties and similarly prohibits them from the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer or use of chemical weapons. The CWC also introduced a strict regime to verify compliance and monitor the production of chemicals that could potentially be used in the production of chemical weapons.

These treaties are significant as they represent the collective international will to ban biological and chemical weapons and establish an international norm by which any country using such weapons is considered a pariah.

Three international conferences on the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons were held between 2013 and 2014. With each iteration, the number of participating governments increased, including those of nuclear-dependent states, with the United States and the United Kingdom among the 158 states that attended the third conference. [\[60\]](#)

Among the conclusions drawn from those conferences, I think that the following three points are particularly important:

1. The impact of a nuclear-weapon detonation would not be constrained by national borders and would cause devastating long-term effects on a global scale.
2. It is unlikely that any state or international body could adequately address the immediate humanitarian emergency caused by a nuclear-weapon detonation.
3. The indirect effects of a nuclear-weapon detonation would be most concentrated on the impoverished and vulnerable segments of society.

Though the threats differ in their nature, the impacts of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic resemble those of nuclear weapons in each of the above ways. The devastating impact that COVID-19 has had upon the world should bring home to all states, including the nuclear-dependent and nuclear-weapon states, the critical importance of eliminating the threat of these weapons, which are capable of wreaking havoc on a truly unimaginable scale.

Removing this grave danger that has persisted from the Cold War era is at the heart of both the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which entered into force in 1970, and the TPNW, which just entered into force this month. The NPT calls on its signatories to make every effort to avert the danger of a nuclear war [\[61\]](#) and the devastation it would visit upon all humankind. The two treaties complement each other, providing a dual basis for setting into motion global efforts to put nuclear-dependent security policies behind us.

Here I would like to make two proposals to the NPT Review Conference scheduled for August this year: that there be a discussion on the true meaning of security in light of crises such as climate change and the pandemic; and that the final document include a pledge of non-use of nuclear weapons and a pledge to freeze all nuclear-weapon development in the lead-up to the 2025 Review Conference.

The Review Conference, originally scheduled for 2020, was in fact postponed due to the pandemic. When the Review Conference is held, I urge participants to reflect on the way that the world's people

have been craving real safety and security over the course of the last year, and seriously consider whether the continued possession and development of nuclear weapons as “a hedge against some unspecified dangers” is consistent with the spirit of the NPT.

In 1958, against the backdrop of the escalating Cold War nuclear arms race, the United States had a secret project to detonate a thermonuclear bomb on the surface of the Moon. Its purpose was to produce an intense flash of light that could be clearly seen from Earth, thereby demonstrating to the Soviet Union the superiority of US military might. Fortunately, the project was soon aborted, and the Moon was spared. [62] This plan to use even the Moon for nuclear intimidation was underway at the very same time when, back on Earth, the US and the Soviet Union were working together to develop and deliver a vaccine to contain the polio epidemic.

Today, at a time when the world is expected to require several years or more to fully recover from the damage caused by COVID-19, governments should apply this lesson from history and earnestly question the value of continuing to modernize their nuclear arsenals.

At the 2021 NPT Review Conference in August, I strongly urge that, on the basis of pledges of non-use of nuclear weapons and a freeze on nuclear-weapon development, states initiate good-faith multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament at the earliest possible date, thus complying with their disarmament obligations under Article VI of the NPT. Such actions will ensure substantive progress is made prior to the next Review Conference in 2025.

The TPNW allows a nuclear-weapon state to become a State Party by agreeing to submit a plan for the elimination of its nuclear-weapon program. [63] Such participation by nuclear-dependent and nuclear-weapon states in the TPNW would be facilitated through the above-outlined steps taken under the NPT regime—embarking on multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament undergirded by pledges of non-use and a freeze on nuclear-weapon development. I call for efforts to link the operation of these two treaties in ways that will put us on the path to ending the nuclear age.

Rebuilding life in a post-COVID world

The third issue area where I would like to offer proposals pertains to the reconstruction of economies and lives disrupted by COVID-19. Time and again, the global economy has been hit by severe recessions, triggered by such factors as currency instability, fluctuations in energy prices and financial crises. The impact of the current pandemic, however, far exceeds the damage done by these past events. According to the World Bank, the global economy is experiencing its worst contraction since the end of World War II. [64] Businesses in most sectors have registered sharp declines in earnings, resulting in mass layoffs and significant drops in household income.

The depth of the current economic crisis is such that the International Labour Organization (ILO) warns that 1.6 billion people—nearly half the global workforce—“have suffered massive damage to their capacity to earn a living” as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. [65] In response, some governments have taken emergency measures to provide income support, including cash transfers, in an effort to soften the blow to their populations. At the most recent G20 Labour and Employment Ministers’ Meeting held in September last year, participants expressed the view that the pandemic “has reinforced the need for strong social protection systems to support all workers and their families.” [66]

Social Protection Floor Initiative

The UN launched the Social Protection Floor Initiative (SPF-I) in 2009 in response to the global financial crisis. Driven by a coalition of UN agencies and development partners, it is an integrated set of social policies designed to guarantee universal access to a basic floor of social protection provided by public and civic bodies. Through an approach that tailors guidance according to each nation's circumstances and level of development, building social protection floors can provide income security and access to essential healthcare for all, contributing to the achievement of the SDGs.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that, despite significant progress achieved through working with national governments and taking into account the impact of the pandemic, as many as 4 billion people (55 percent of the global population) are not covered by any social protection benefits.

A social protection system is a portfolio of interventions that provides a lifetime of social assistance to individuals facing financial challenges due to ill health, loss of work or other unforeseen events. The right to social security is stipulated in numerous human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. [67] In response to the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008, impacting large numbers of people in the areas of employment, healthcare and education, the UN in 2009 launched the Social Protection Floor (SPF) Initiative to shore up the foundations of people's lives.

In my 2013 peace proposal, I strongly endorsed this initiative, stressing that the employment conditions facing youth at the time were especially severe. It has been my abiding belief that a society that deprives young people of hope cannot expect to achieve sustainability or build a culture of human rights. I therefore proposed incorporating into the SDGs, which were then being deliberated at the UN, the target of a social protection floor in every country to ensure that those

suffering from extreme poverty would be able to regain a sense of dignity.

While equivalent content was incorporated into the SDGs, [68] the magnitude of the COVID-19 economic shock, which is even greater than the impact of the 2008–09 financial crisis, has thrown many millions of people, including those who previously enjoyed stable lives, into financial devastation. This has driven home the urgency of strengthening access to social protection systems, a goal also supported by the thirty-seven member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). [69]

The OECD's policy statement, "Supporting livelihoods during the COVID-19 crisis: Closing the gaps in safety nets," issued in May last year, points out that this protracted hardship is forcing workers to fall back on their savings, putting their current and future well-being at risk. It further states:

The unprecedented scale of the crisis means that this is not only a short-term challenge, but it will require sustained policy efforts over the coming months and, possibly, years. Careful consideration of how support programmes can be made as effective and as sustainable as possible is needed. [70]

In 1948, the forerunner of the OECD was established to oversee the Marshall Plan, a US program developed to provide aid to European countries ravaged by World War II. The OECD is now referred to as the world's largest think tank, bringing together experts from across the globe to enhance international standards, including through processes of national policy peer review. [71] Recently, as it places greater emphasis on ensuring the implementation of its policy proposals, the group has started to position itself as a "think and do tank." [72]

With this in mind, I hope that OECD members will take the lead in efforts to realize all SDG targets related to ensuring universal social protection measures. I also hope that they will work together to establish and implement global policy standards for rebuilding economies and livelihoods devastated by the COVID-19 crisis. One direction this could take is the development of new industries and the creation of job opportunities through rapid transition to a green economy, scaling back military spending and allocating the resources saved to strengthening social protection systems.

Further, OECD members have a significant role to play in enacting ambitious policies that enhance social resilience. This could include building regional sustainability by way of responding to the climate crisis, promoting disaster risk reduction and ecological conservation, supporting healthcare systems and improving the employment environment for caregivers, including those involved in nursing care. My rationale for citing these overlapping policy areas is that we are living in an era in which we need to adopt a comprehensive and simultaneous “multi-hazard approach” to threats and challenges, with a clear understanding of the systemic nature of risk, as advocated by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. [73]

The UN Biodiversity Summit held last September confirmed that, should the current deterioration of the global climate and ecosystem persist, new forms of contagious disease can be expected to emerge. [74] By taking a multi-hazard approach to address spirals of negative causes and consequences, we can transform these into their positive equivalents. For example, efforts to mitigate climate change can enhance prevention measures against emerging infectious diseases, which will in turn boost disaster resilience. Similarly, strengthening disaster prevention and risk reduction measures in tandem with ecological conservation will help meet the challenges posed by climate change. These are but a few examples of the much-needed efforts we must make to transform a confluence of challenges into a cascade of positive changes.

In order to rebuild economies and lives in a post-COVID world, we need to prioritize the expansion of social protection floors and build multidimensional resilience. Countries should work together to create a global society where every person can live in security and in peace of mind.

Instead of addressing each crisis situation in isolation, adopting a comprehensive approach provides a shared platform from which to develop new possibilities for the future. In his remarks to the Biodiversity Summit, UN Secretary-General Guterres identified the following as priorities:

First, nature-based solutions must be embedded in COVID-19 recovery and wider development plans. Preserving the world’s biodiversity can yield the jobs and economic growth that we urgently need today. The World Economic Forum signals that emerging business opportunities across nature could create 191 million jobs by 2030. Africa’s Great Green Wall alone has created 335,000 jobs. [75]

The Great Green Wall (GGW) is a pan-African project to develop a roughly 15 km-wide vegetation belt over a length of some 8,000 km across the Sahel region at the southern edge of the Sahara desert. It involves regenerating indigenous plant varieties and cultivating agricultural plots interspersed among them. Launched in 2007 by the African Union, this initiative has succeeded in restoring 20 million hectares of degraded land. [76] Some key results of this movement include creation of green jobs in such areas as tree-planting and agriculture; mitigation of persistent food insecurity due to desertification; and stabilization of health and living conditions. [77] The GGW project, which supports fifteen out of the

seventeen SDGs, [78] is expected to enhance resilience in the Sahel as well as to evolve into an economic development initiative that benefits all people in the region.

Sharing the epic ambition of building the largest living structure in the world—slated to encompass 100 million hectares by 2030—African countries involved in the GGW project are reinforcing efforts to achieve the interrelated goals of post-COVID economic recovery, realization of the SDGs and meeting Paris Agreement goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This massive endeavor is underpinned by the confidence that working with nature, even in challenging places like the Sahel, makes it possible to surmount difficulties and build a better world for the future.

OECD countries and others could engage in equally ambitious projects as they address and seek to overcome the COVID-19 crisis. According to World Economic Forum forecasts, the business opportunities arising from a transition to nature-positive socio-economic systems could deliver approximately 400 million new jobs by 2030. This figure includes 191 million jobs that could be created in areas such as food and land use alone, along with such transitions as developing resource-efficient infrastructure and expanding use of renewable energy. [79] It would be a highly positive development if OECD members were to further their collaboration with such key partners as Brazil, China, India, Indonesia and South Africa, in efforts to rebuild the world economy and ensure a safe and secure life for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a great challenge to the UN Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs, which was launched last year. However, I am confident that humanity possesses the ability to transform challenges into the energy to create positive value. This is evident in the example of the people of Africa, who have come together in a united and sustained effort to restore degraded land, adorning the planet with a vast new swath of green.

Soka, meaning “value creation,” embodies our commitment as the Soka Gakkai to build a society whose guiding principle is the realization of happiness for both oneself and others through bringing into full play the human capacity to create value.

Describing the dynamism of value creation, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), the first president of the Soka Gakkai, likened it to a “lotus flower in muddy water,” an image found in the Lotus Sutra. [80] The lotus flower blooms fragrantly, unsullied by the muddy waters from which it draws sustenance. This illustrates that however deep the chaos and confusion of the times, we can refuse to let this overwhelm us, staying always true to ourselves. The limitless power of value creation, which is intrinsic to life, enables each of us to transform our circumstances into an arena where we can live out our unique mission, imparting hope and a sense of security to all those around us.

The Japanese term *soka* arose from a dialogue between mentor and disciple—Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda—in 1930. From its beginning under the leadership of these two founding presidents, the Soka Gakkai has developed as a popular movement dedicated to the happiness of self and others that now extends to 192 countries and territories. The target year of the UN Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs—2030—coincides with our centennial.

Drawing upon the network of collaborative relations we have developed to date, as part of civil society we are wholeheartedly committed to working toward 2030 with like-minded people and organizations to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs and to realize a global society of peace and humane values.

Notes

- [1] WHO, “WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard.”
- [2] See UNDRR, *Human Cost of Disasters*, 6.
- [3] The Federal Chancellor, “An Address to the Nation.”
- [4] See Soka Gakkai, “Soka Institute to Plant One Amazonian Tree for Each Brazilian COVID-19 Victim.”
- [5] See UN Women, “The Shadow Pandemic.”
- [6] See Kerkhove, “WHO Emergency Press Conference,” 6.
- [7] UN News Centre, “Our ‘New Normal’ Requires Human Contact.”
- [8] Guterres, “The World of Work.”
- [9] UNICEF, “FACT SHEET: Lack of Handwashing with Soap.”
- [10] See Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 2:50–51.
- [11] Nichiren, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 2:920.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 2:768–69.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 1:535–36.
- [14] (trans. from) Toda, *Toda Josei zenshu*, 3:290.
- [15] UNDRR, “Biggest Risk Driver of All.”
- [16] Toynbee, *Change and Habit*, 3.
- [17] WHO, “COVID-19 Response,” 3.
- [18] Gavi, “Japan Pledges US\$ 130 Million.”
- [19] Global Fund, *The Global Fund Results Report 2020*, 11.
- [20] See Kaul, “Governing Global Public Goods,” 299–300.
- [21] WHO, “WHO and Partners Call for Urgent Investment in Nurses.”
- [22] UNHCR, “Refugee Tailors Switch to Making Face Masks and Protective Gear.”
- [23] *Ibid.*
- [24] See Ghebreyesus, “WHO Director-General’s Opening Remarks.”
- [25] WHO, “Africa Eradicates Wild Poliovirus.”
- [26] Lown, *Prescription for Survival*, 71–72.
- [27] Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, 213.
- [28] OHCHR, “Coronavirus: Human Rights Need to be Front and Centre.”
- [29] Bachelet, “Leadership Dialogue Series.”
- [30] See Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 110.
- [31] *Ibid.*, 166.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 171.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 105.
- [34] Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 171.
- [35] See SGI, “Transforming Lives: The Power of Human Rights Education.”
- [36] See Human Rights Education, “Transforming Lives.”
- [37] NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning, “The Implementation of the Plan of Action and COVID-19.”
- [38] Nobel Prize, “The Nobel Peace Prize for 2020.”
- [39] UNICEF, “UNICEF to Stockpile over Half a Billion Syringes.”
- [40] UN, *The Future We Want*, 8.
- [41] *Ibid.*, 41.
- [42] UN GA, “Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization,” 27–28.
- [43] See UN GA, “Provisional Verbatim Record of the Thirty-Third Meeting,” 7.
- [44] See Guterres, “Address to the Opening of the General Debate.”
- [45] Bozkir, “31st United Nations General Assembly Special Session.”
- [46] Thurlow, “The TPNW—A Game Changer in Nuclear Disarmament.”
- [47] Toda, “Declaration Calling for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons.”
- [48] See ICAN, “First Committee Reaffirms Support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.”
- [49] See UN, *The Future We Want*, 126–27.
- [50] See ICRC, *Millennials on War*, 15.
- [51] UN GA, “Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” Article 8.
- [52] See Ikeda and Rotblat, *A Quest for Global Peace*, 45.

- [53] Ibid., 46.
- [54] Rotblat, “Remember Your Humanity.”
- [55] See Ikeda and Rotblat, *A Quest for Global Peace*, 25–26.
- [56] UN GA, “Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” Preamble.
- [57] See IAEA, “IAEA Assistance for the Rapid Detection and Management of COVID-19.”
- [58] IAEA, “IAEA Project to Help Countries Combat COVID-19.”
- [59] OPCW, “OPCW by the Numbers.”
- [60] Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, Republic of Austria, *Vienna Conference*, 2.
- [61] UN GA, “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).”
- [62] Rauf, “Looking Back.”
- [63] See UN GA, “Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” Article 4.
- [64] See World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, 149.
- [65] ILO, “ILO: As Job Losses Escalate.”
- [66] MHLW, “G20 Labour and Employment Ministers,” 2.
- [67] See UN, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” Article 22.
- [68] See UN GA, “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015.”
- [69] See OECD, “Supporting Livelihoods during the COVID-19 Crisis.”
- [70] Ibid.
- [71] OECD, “The OECD’s Peer Review Process.”
- [72] De Meyer, “L’OCDE, le « think and do » *tank de Paris*.”
- [73] UNDRR, “Biggest Risk Driver of All.”
- [74] See UN GA, “United Nations Summit on Biodiversity.”
- [75] Guterres, “Remarks to United Nations Biodiversity Summit.”
- [76] Rural 21, “The Great Green Wall Implementation Status.”
- [77] See UNCCD, “The Great Green Wall Initiative.”
- [78] Great Green Wall. “2030 Ambition.”
- [79] See World Economic Forum, *New Nature Economy Report II*, 11.
- [80] (trans. from) Makiguchi, *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo zenshu*, 10:22.

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