

# Upholding Bold Multilateralism...

**C** OVID-19 has exposed the fragility of our interconnected world, and the hollowness of nationalist and isolationist politics. In a global pandemic, none of us is safe until all of us are safe. A virus knows no borders, and shows no respect for national sovereignty.

Leaders and citizens alike need to recognize that our world is in a state of profound crisis, and that the multilateral system faces its gravest threat since 1945.

It is a poignant irony that the pandemic has struck in the same year as the 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. The UN was conceived amid the wreckage of an entirely human catastrophe, the Second World War.

Its founders shared a common determination to rebuild a better world, free from the scourge of war and where poverty, disease and discrimination would all be overcome in the name of human progress.

If we are to successfully overcome the pandemic today, we need to recommit to the values of solidarity, cooperation and equality that underpin the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These same values have underpinned the democratic revival and development of Germany since 1945 and helped to enable the peaceful unification of East and West 30 years ago in 1990, within the wider framework of the European Union.



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All of these significant anniversaries are inter-linked, and underscore that the path of human progress is rarely straightforward.

In retrospect, the world of 1990 can seem like a high point of optimism: the Berlin Wall had fallen, the Cold War was over and Nelson Mandela was marching on his long walk to freedom and victory over apartheid in South Africa.

Today, by contrast, we live in a world where a shock anywhere can become a catastrophe everywhere, while growing nationalism and populism undermine our shared peace prosperity, and

security. Infectious diseases feed off divisiveness; societal divisions can be deadly.

Institutions like the WHO, which were set up in the 1940s after the Second World War, must adapt to these changing geopolitical and biological realities. This requires a willingness from member states to share responsibilities and provide adequate funding to meet myriad global health challenges.

The world's health is too precious for the WHO to become a political football in the current US-Chinese rivalry, or indeed any future tensions between leading powers. This is particularly relevant to the current crisis and how nation states and international institutions, like the WHO, have responded. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a collective failure to take pandemic prevention, preparedness and response seriously and prioritize it accordingly. There has been too little coordination between countries, even in Europe where the EU offers a well-developed framework for information-sharing and political dialogue.

The virus will not be overcome unless all states work together, pooling resources and expertise to strengthen health systems, develop and distribute an effective vaccine, protect health workers, and provide the necessary care to all who need it in society. This must particularly include vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants, the elderly and the infirm. Tackling these multi-faceted challenges requires bold, inclusive and far-sighted leadership and a willingness to act in the interests of all humanity.

Only an honest reckoning with the complexities and ambiguities of our past can enable us to meet the challenges of the present and future. In public-health terms, these future challenges include even deadlier pandemics and the growth of anti-microbial resistance.

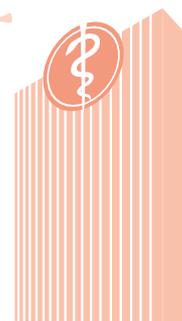
One of the greatest influences in my political life was Willy Brandt, who fought the Nazis from exile in Norway and Sweden, and then helped to anchor the post-war Federal Republic of Germany in the community of nations.

But his vision extended far beyond national borders – when he talked about peace and solidarity, he meant it in global terms. Today, Germany needs to act in a similar spirit of expansive humanity to make sure COVID-19 and future pandemics are tackled in a comprehensive, just and durable way.

The Brandt Commission of 1977 explored the widening gap between the global North and South, and how this could be bridged. It was a huge inspiration to me in my own work in chairing the World Commission on Environment and Development in the mid-1980s.

My report in 1987 was titled 'Our Common Future'. More than 30 years on, this concept still resonates. From fighting pandemics to managing migration, from developing new models of environmentally sustainable economic growth to promoting tolerance in multi-cultural societies, we will only make progress if we act in concert with one another.

As Willy Brandt himself said: 'The shaping of our common future is too important to be left to governments and experts alone'.



**...to overcome  
pandemics**