Toward a Collaborative Ecosocial and Cultural System for Sustainable Development: Fostering Trust and Values-Based Solutions

Opinion piece

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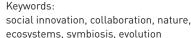
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Taghyeer is an NGO, aims to create a healthy, vibrant society by empowering people to think critically and lead the change they seek in their communities.

ICAN promotes inclusive and sustainable peace globally. Recognizing the gendered impact of conflict and the critical role of women peacebuilders, we shape and guide peace and security policies through thought leadership, strategic advice, and gender-responsive analysis. We foster a global movement of locally rooted women peacebuilders to have voice and influence in matters of peace, conflict, rights, and human security. We bring the spirit of the Women, Peace and Security agenda to life.

The University of Helsinki is located in Finland. It is the oldest and largest institution of academic education in the country. The university is an international scientific community of 40,000 students and researchers. In international university rankings, the University of Helsinki typically ranks among the top 100. Through the power of science, the University has contributed to society, education and welfare since 1640.

ABSTRACT:
The world stands at a critical juncture, grappling with unprecedented challenges of climate change and conflict. A staggering 360 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian aid. The established frameworks and institutions meant to safeguard peace, security, health, and sustainability, painstakingly crafted by past generations, are being disregarded by powerful entities entrusted with their enforcement. Consequently, public trust has plummeted to an all-time low, and pessimism pervades our global consciousness. Focusing excessively on what isn't working not only perpetuates inertia it diverts attention from the diverse solutions that exist, and the extraordinary work of many stakeholders, often working in civil society and local communities worldwide.

This paper underscores the importance of global governance and multilateralism while highlighting positive developments rooted in local contexts yet interconnected on a global scale within multilateral frameworks. It highlights the 2023 UNGA resolution "Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development" (A/RES/77/281), which acknowledged the importance of social innovators, especially civil society, to be included in all planning and decision-making. It argues that the G20 has a unique opportunity to lead other resolution implementations to cultivate thriving societal ecosystems to move beyond inertia and pessimism to tackle contemporary challenges effectively. Offering illustrative examples, the paper provides guidance for G20 nations to spearhead ecosystemic approaches that acknowledge the invaluable contributions of all stakeholders—be they local,

»**The G20, with inclusive models prioritizing solidarity, equity, and innovation, catalyzes transformative change for sustainable development and resilience.**«

national, or international; governmental or non-governmental; civil society or private sector. By embracing such inclusive and cooperative models that prioritize solidarity, equity, and innovation, the G20 can catalyze transformative change, fostering sustainable development and resilience. These influential nations can pave the way for a more hopeful and collaborative future, where the collective well-being of humanity and the planet are safeguarded.

INTRODUCTION: AN UNPRECEDENTED MOMENT IN HISTORY

The world stands at a critical juncture, grappling with unprecedented challenges such as climate change and conflict. Over 360 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian aid (Guterres, 2023). 100 million of them are war-affected - either internally displaced within their own countries or refugees. For the first time in history, children are making up a significant percentage of war casualties. For example, in Yemen, approximately 30% of casualties are children, while in Gaza they make up 41%.

Multilateral structures and frameworks and institutions established to safeguard peace, security, health, and sustainability, painstakingly crafted by past generations, have, for too long, been taken for granted, instrumentalized, or disregarded by powerful entities entrusted with their enforcement - namely governments. Ongoing efforts made by states and global civil society movements to evolve the multilateral system to meet contemporary and future challenges have had mixed and limited success. In the realm of peace and security, for example, the end of the Cold War was a pivotal moment of hope and change. Transformative agendas offering new approaches, ranging from human security to the women's peace and security (WPS) agenda, the Responsibility to Protect commitments (R2P), and the International Criminal Court (ICC) emerged thanks to the co-creativity of civil society social innovators and governments. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which is one cornerstone of the UN system, led to the evolution of conventions on the rights of the child, women's rights, cultural rights, etc. In 2000, the Millennium Developments heralded a new vision for the century. Fifteen years later, Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed unanimously in the UN General Assembly, again in conjunction with non-state entities. These developments are a reminder that despite the myriad differences that exist between states, the multilateral space enables them to find common ground, fostering responsible governance globally. The committed ways in which civil society stake-holders working locally, nationally, and internationally have pioneered and persisted in drawing attention to challenges and solutions in every field is a testament to the universality of humanity's hopes and aspirations for a life of dignity, equality, and justice across generations, geography, and cultures (Sikkink, 2017). It is also a testament to people's desire and interest in contributing positively to their societies and globally. Yet across every sector and agenda, a similar critique is evident: elite capture, top-down approaches that are, at best, inadequate, and at worst, harmful, and the pervasive syndrome of 'business as usual' fueling inertia, prevents the potential for innovation to be fulfilled.

Scientists and civil society stakeholders have criticized the 2030 Agenda for not challenging the powerful entities including states, international financial institutions, transnational corporations, and even international NGOs that produce and reproduce inequalities in income, wealth, and power at national and global levels, causing the very problems that the SDGs are trying to solve (Esquivel and Sweetman, 2016; Krieg & Toivanen, 2021). Christine Struckmann (2018) argues that the agency of local communities, especially those in the Global South and the indigenous peoples worldwide is inadequately acknowledged. Peace and security practitioners demonstrate how effective innovations in mediation and peace process design, mandated by countless laws and policies, are nonetheless ignored, or implemented in haphazard ways. The cost of such ad hocery and apathy is profound, as the outcomes of the failed negotiations regarding Afghanistan, Sudan, and other conflicts attest (Naraghi Anderlini, 2024).

In each arena when the powerful abrogate their responsibilities to fulfill the commitments to which they pledge, their less visible, less resourced counterparts in civil society take on those responsibilities. While they may not have the political and economic clout, they are propelled by their deep roots and care for their communities.

TIME TO TAKE SOCIAL INNOVATORS ON BOARD

The spectrum of social innovators, working locally, and connecting globally blossomed in the 1990s after the Cold War, and at the time when neoliberalism was ramping up. On the one hand, they arose to fill the voids created by privatization, and structural adjustment policies that reduced state support for socio-economic wellbeing and community security. On the other hand, they are also the embodiment of democracy and civic and political freedom in practice. Whether seeking to reform national security policies as in South Africa in the 1990s (Naraghi Anderlini, 2004), or address climate change, "We, the Peoples of these

»**"We, the Peoples of these United Nations" drive human rights, security, sustainability, peace, pluralism, and justice forward as a powerful force.**«

United Nations" emerged as a powerful force for driving forward the agenda of human rights and security, sustainability, peace, pluralism, and justice. From the outset, they had their challenges including the inertia of bureaucracies, the blockages from vested interest groups, and the unnecessary mistrust that exists between

»The G20's challenge: leading by example through profound collaboration with civil society to envision a more equal, peaceful world.«

state and civil society. Additionally, the separation of these stakeholders into silos reproducing a neoliberal logic has meant that instead of working in concert, based on the comparative advantages and solutions of each, there is a limited exchange, many duplications, and at worst competition that have thwarted the potential transformation that could be harnessed.

Now with the foundational cracks in multilateralism and the rising threats to good governance against the backdrop of environmental threats and persistent wars, we have a choice: to feed the pessimism and inertia, with each sector blaming the other, or to come together, across differences to find shared solutions, and in

doing so to leave a legacy of positive peace and dignity for future generations, as previous ones sought to leave for us.

In 2023, despite the tensions, more than 50 UN member states, recognizing the need for positive change, the United Nations General Assembly united to adopt resolution A/RES/77/281 on "Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development." The resolution acknowledges the importance of recognizing and fully enabling social innovators - across all civil society sectors - to be included in all planning and decision-making about the SDGs and the broader vision of fostering peace, development, security, and rights for the people and the planet. As a UNGA resolution, it can build on the progress made through UN Security Council resolutions that call for similar recognition and inclusivity of civil society (e.g. SCR 1325 & 2250). It offers the G20 a unique opportunity to role model recognition of social innovators and cultivate thriving ecosystems for shared actions.

HOW TO DO THAT?
Nature has always found effective solutions to crises. Below we draw on three concepts evident in nature to inspire and enable global governance and multilateralism to be fit for purpose for the 21st century.

a) Evolution not revolution enables nature to thrive:
Many forces at the extremes of the political spectrum seek the demise of multilateralism, while others are cynical about the need for it. Instead of enabling the demise of multilateralism, the G20 should emphasize its evolution by embracing the innova-

tions and commitment to good governance that has come from civil society. From local community organizations that respond to crises or take on the challenge of literacy and health, to global networks that mobilize around peacebuilding and climate change, the independence, diversity, and vibrant nature of civil society organizations and committed women and men, should be celebrated. Dissenters and protesters, rabble-rousers, or policy wonks are key to solving our global challenges and should be recognized as allies, not adversaries. Given that increasingly the expertise and depth of knowledge about issues reside with such stakeholders, it is efficient and essential to evolve state-based institutions to enable robust, respectful, and equal engagement and cooperation with civic actors.

b) Fostering a diverse ecosystem by scaling, not relying on top-down solutions:
Nature, like any society, thrives when there is a diverse, balanced ecosystem of mutual in-terdependence. Top-down solutions, even if useful, are neither effective nor sufficient, if they are not rooted in local contexts. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were a case in point. The World Health Organization (WHO) was essential for enabling the sharing of in-formation, dissemination of guidance, and distribution of masks and vaccines. But its call to ʻwash hands with soap and waterʼ was of limited value in countries and communities where either clean water or soap was nonexistent or too expensive, or where the public mistrusted the state, or governments were unable to reach communities. These voids were filled by locally rooted

community organizations. For example, in remote areas of Pakistan, and war-affected parts of Cameroon, Nigeria, Somalia, and Iraq, local women-led peace-building organizations that were already trusted and had access to their communities became the first responders. They, in turn, were connected globally through online forums convened by the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), to exchange infor-mation. For two years, the group shared recipes to produce alcohol and plant-based hand sanitizers, strategies for engaging local authorities and businesses to collect and distribute food for the neediest, tackling the surge of domestic violence, and other aspects of the pan-demic experience. (Naraghi Anderlini 2020).

In effect, each entity from the WHO to national and local governments, international NGOs, and local community organizations and businesses played a role. None alone was sufficient. Rather, it was the collective presence and contribution to the societal ecosystem that ensured people could cope and survive.

c) Symbiosis not Amensalism (harmful interaction):
The third inspiration from nature comes from the process of symbiosis. It is the biological term referring to the close and often long-term interaction between two different species, where both organisms benefit from the relationship. Its opposite, amensalism refers to asymmetric interactions where one species is destroyed by the other. Given we live in the most pluralistic and interconnected era of human civilization, the current march towards increased competition and militarization will lead us to devastating ends.

We cannot afford a geopolitical environment riven by competition, oppression, or binary and false notions of 'us or them'. As climate-related crises and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have shown, events in one part of the world impact others in unprecedented ways.

Symbiosis enables co-creation. It is the pathway to finding solutions, drawing on the strengths that each sector brings, anchored in cultural context while embracing universal aspirations and values. To fulfill the potential, however, new models of cooperation between diverse stakeholders are required - be it scientists and community leaders, policymakers and artists, business entrepreneurs, and civil society activists - to combine the strengths of scientific inquiry, local knowledge, and presence, with political decision-making. This approach has been powerfully expressed by the activist of the disabled community: Nothing about us without us (Charlton, 2000).

THE RATIONALE FOR G20: PROMOTE THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The first step towards emulating these lessons is to recognize the social innovators who are currently active at the frontlines of problem-solving. Despite differences in sector or discipline, their approaches are often similar: a focus on positive social change; a commitment to interdisciplinary co-creation, collaboration, and innovation; and an appreciation of the importance of interconnectivity on the personal, relational, institutional, and cultural realms (Lederach, 2007) to foster transformative change.

Even though they prioritize social impact over profit maximization globally they contribute to about 7% of GDP nationally and up to 12% of employment in some countries. In Europe, there are 2.8 million social economy organizations, employing 13.6 million people (Schwab, 2022), and in Africa, there are millions of active social entrepreneurs. They are invaluable to national governments in achieving their SDG 2030 targets.

Too often, however, despite their contributions, they are either overlooked or siloed and divided. As a result, they are marginalized and often under-resourced. In some contexts, they are also threatened as their solutions to societal challenges may critique existing practices, challenging the status quo and the interests of the powerful (ICAN 2020).

The UNGA resolution provides an umbrella for the recognition of such actors. The G20 could use the resolution as an effective framework and tool to:

• Enable structured collaboration with social innovators on the implementation of SDGs across all sectors;
• Encourage the private sector to engage and support civil society-based social innovators;
• Call on international financial institutions and development banks to support social innovators, including through existing and new financial instruments;
• Empower education systems to incorporate a social entrepreneur spirit into curricula to build the next generation that can think creatively and become solution-oriented towards developmental issues; and
• Co-create with civil society, time-bound, value-based benchmarks for implementation and impact.

This paper illustrates the potential for G20 nations to spearhead societal ecosystemic approaches that acknowledge the invaluable contributions of all stakeholders—be they local, national, or international; governmental or non-governmental; civil society or private sector. By embracing such inclusive and cooperative models and championing the UNGA's Social and Solidarity Economy resolution the G20 can catalyze transformative change, paving the way for a more hopeful and collaborative future, where the collective well-being of humanity and the planet are safeguarded.

As a standalone document, the UNGA resolution is not new. However, it is an important evolution in unifying existing praxis and policies across the UN and member states. It is also a key reminder that while nations may gauge their "wealth" based on natural resources, the greatest asset of any nation is its people, whose potential for creativity and desire and ability to contribute to their societies is often thwarted. The challenge for the G20 is whether as a collective of the world's wealthiest nations, they can lead by example by engaging in profound collaboration with "We the peoples" - i.e., their civil society social innovators - to envision and co-create a more equal, peaceful world for all.

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