



# **SDGs CONFERENCE 2023**

**In the Margins of the UNGA78**

**20 September 2023 | Wednesday**

**JOHN JAY COLLEGE**  
of Criminal Justice  
New York



**CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**



**JOURNALISTS AND  
WRITERS FOUNDATION**

**JOHN  
JAY** COLLEGE  
OF  
CRIMINAL  
JUSTICE



## **JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION**

*The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) is an international civil society organization dedicated to the culture of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. The JWF promotes diversity and inclusion by creating forums for intellectual and social engagement; generates and shares knowledge with stakeholders, builds partnerships worldwide and develops policy recommendations for positive social change.*

\* JWF is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization registered in New York State, USA.

\* JWF is associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communications.

### **CONTACT US**

**Address:** 4 West 43rd Street 4th Floor, Suite 419, New York, NY 10036

**Phone:** +1 (646) 838-4882

**Email:** [info@jwf.org](mailto:info@jwf.org)

**Web:** [www.jwf.org](http://www.jwf.org)

Copyright © 2023 Journalists and Writers Foundation

All rights reserved. Published in November 2023

Designed and printed in the United States of America

### **COPYRIGHT & DISTRIBUTION**

Material from this conference proceedings may be reproduced for noncommercial purposes only as long as the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) is fully acknowledged. The conference proceedings may also be distributed and linked to it from your website if the JWF is credited as the source. No part of this conference proceedings may be reproduced or distributed for any commercial purposes without the prior permission of the copyright holder.

### **DISCLAIMER**

The JWF has made every effort to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information in this conference proceedings; however, the JWF does not guarantee or accept any legal liability whatsoever arising from any mistakes based on the information acquired from public sources, organizations, media outlets, and individuals. We welcome recommendations for corrections with reliable and acceptable sources.

You may contact the JWF at [info@jwf.org](mailto:info@jwf.org)

### **EDITORIAL TEAM**

Cemre Ulker, Representative of the JWF to the UN Department of Global Communications

Mehmet Kilic, President, Journalists and Writers Foundation

Special thanks to Priyanka Chahal, JWF Program Associate and Zoya Ansari, JWF Intern for their contributions to the SDGs Conference 2023 Proceedings.





# T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION	4-8
PIONEERS IN SDGs AWARDS 2023	9-10
PANELISTS: SDGs CONFERENCE 2023	11-12
CONCEPT NOTE	13-16
OPENING SESSION	17-25
<b>PANEL 1:</b> BUILDING A NEW MOMENTUM TOWARDS THE 2030 DEADLINE FOR THE SDGs	26-46
<b>PANEL 2:</b> PRESS FREEDOM AS AN INSTRUMENT TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL	47-65
<b>PANEL 3:</b> WIDENING GAP BETWEEN EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND RISE OF AUTOCRACY	66-86
GLOBAL PARTNERS	87-88

# INTRODUCTION

## JWF HIGH-LEVEL RECEPTION 2023

**18 September 2023, Monday | PENTHOUSE 45 | NEW YORK**



The Journalists and Writers Foundation organized the JWF High-Level Reception to welcome its delegations of Global Partners who arrived in New York from 15 different countries to attend the JWF's 3-days of side events in the Margins of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA78) on Monday, 18 September 2023 at Penthouse45, New York. This high-level event brought together UN Ambassadors, diplomats, civil society members, human rights defenders, journalists, experts, and academics from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Greece, India, Iraq/Kurdistan, New Zealand, Philippines, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Tanzania, and the United States. The JWF High-Level Reception marked the official commencement of the



JWF's UNGA78 side events. At its 8th year, the annual SDGs Conference, organized in partnership with 52 Global Partners from 27 different countries focused on creating a new momentum for the second half of the SDGs 2030 Deadline, the role of press freedom for human rights,

the erosion of democracies and the rise of autocracies. Notable speakers of this international conference also participated at the JWF High-Level Reception to meet with international guests and exchange ideas on the working themes of the UNGA78. The event started as participants enjoyed a variety of buffet foods including various cuisines in the company



of live musicians Ali Kahya and Deniz Yilmaz. Mehmet Kilic, President of the JWF, and Cemre Ulker, Representative to the UN DGC, welcomed the delegations of international experts. Following their opening remarks, distinguished guests address this global audience sharing their insights on the UNGA78, civil society best-practices and the contemporary challenges of sustainable development and human rights.



### JWF UNGA78 High-Level Reception Speakers:

Mustafa Goktepe, President of the Instituto pelo Diálogo Intercultural, Brazil

Berta Valle, Journalist and Human Rights Advocate, Nicaragua

Oskar Siri, Youth Delegate of Sweden to the UNGA78

Dr. Rushan Abbas, Founder and Executive Director of Campaign for Uyghurs

[More details about the highlights of the reception can be accessed here.](#)

## ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: IN THE MARGINS OF THE UNGA78

**19 September 2023, Tuesday | John Jay College | NEW YORK**

On the occasion of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the Journalists and Writers Foundation, in partnership with its 52 Global Partners from 27 countries organized the Roundtable Discussion on 19 September 2023 at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. On the sidelines of the 8th SDGs Conference 2023, this event had two thematic sessions: (Round 1) **The Role of Human Rights Defenders for Sustainable Peace and Development** and (Round 2) **Civil Society Contributions in achieving the SDGs: Best Practices**.





Hosting 22 speakers from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Greece, India, Iraq/Kurdistan, New Zealand, Romania, South Africa, and the United States, the Roundtable Discussion created a platform for the international delegations of civil society members, journalists, academics, experts, and human rights advocates participating at the SDGs Conference 2023 to share their expert opinions, exchange ideas on various development challenges and offer inclusive solutions to the contemporary challenges on social, economic, and development issues.

**[Highlights of the roundtable discussion can be accessed here.](#)**

### **ROUND 1: The Role of Human Rights Defenders for Sustainable Peace and Development**

The UNGA78 marked a critical turning point in the implementation timeline of the Sustainable Development Goals. With this current rate of progress and rising geopolitical peace and security complexities, the Global Goals are a promise in peril. According to the recently released Sustainable Development Goals 2023 Report, only 15% of the Goals are on track while 48% are severely behind the target lines and 37% even regressed. At the midpoint of the 2030 deadline, delivering on commitments requires civil society organizations to take the lead on local bases with their transforming best practices and human rights advocates to create global solidarity to promote the fundamental rights of all individuals who have been subject to various forms of atrocities as a result of the current increase of autocracies and gender-apartheid regimes.

**[Recording of Round 1 on “The Role of Human Rights Defenders for Sustainable Peace and Development” can be accessed here.](#)**



### **ROUND 2: Civil Society Contributions in Achieving the SDGs: Best Practices**

Civil society plays a crucial role in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with innovative projects, programs, and initiatives. The SDGs need a strong and loud civil society to support and realize the Global Agenda by 2030. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres recognized the role of civil society, saying: “civil society is a key instrument for the success of today’s UN”, particularly in a global political climate “where governments are finding it more and more difficult to do their job”.

The UN Secretary-General's 2021 report on “Our Global Agenda” sets the parameters of the UN’s vision for inclusive, peaceful, and effective multilateralism to address global challenges such as sustainable development, peace and security, climate change, and human rights. The Common Agenda calls on civil society and NGOs to join their efforts in delivering solutions that make a positive impact in our society.

At Round 2: Civil Society’s Impact on SDGs: Best Practices, participants engaged in a vibrant dialogue, highlighting the vital role civil society organizations play in advancing progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. These organizations foster positive change, tackle social and environmental challenges, and encourage collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

**[Recording of Round 2 on “Civil Society Contributions in Achieving the SDGs: Best Practices” can be accessed here.](#)**





**20 September 2023, Wednesday | John Jay College | Hybrid**

In the Margins of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA78), the Journalists and Writers Foundation, in partnership with 52 civil society organizations from 27 countries, organized the 8th Annual SDGs Conference 2023 at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York on Wednesday, 20 September 2023. The event convened key actors working on sustainable peace and development, press freedom, and democratic governance at one of the most critical UNGA sessions, which marked halfway through the deadline of Sustainable Development Goals.



Since 2014, the SDGs Conference created a community of commitment composed of UN Ambassadors, diplomats, civil society members, human rights defenders, journalists, experts, and academics pledging for the timely, effective, and gender sensitivity implementation of the SDGs with Goal 17: Global Partnerships at the center through establishing and strengthening collaborations among various stakeholders of sustainable peace, security, and development. Having different sets of working areas every year in the light of the priorities of the ongoing UN General Assembly, SDGs Conference 2023 addressed the following themes: **(1) Building a New Momentum Towards the 2030 Deadline for the SDGs (2) Press Freedom as an Instrument to Defend Human Rights for All and (3) Widening Gap between Erosion of Democracy and Rise of Autocracy.**

This year, during the three plenary panel sessions, SDGs Conference 2023 hosted 21 notable speakers from 16 respective countries, including Australia, Afghanistan, Bahamas, Belgium, Brazil, El-Salvador, Greece, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, New Zealand, Nicaragua, India, Romania, Switzerland, USA. During the JWF High-Level Reception, Roundtable Discussions, and the SDGs Conference 2023, a robust interaction took place between delegations of experts, journalists, practitioners, and participants from 15 different countries.

## PIONEERS IN SDGS AWARDS 2023

**27 September 2023, Wednesday | New York | Virtual**

A promotional banner for the Pioneers in SDGs Awards 2023. The banner features a large, ornate golden trophy being held by a pair of hands on the right side. On the left, the text 'PIONEERS IN SDGs AWARDS 2023' is displayed in a bold, sans-serif font, with 'SDGs' in a larger, multi-colored font. Below this, a red button with white text says 'CALL FOR PROJECTS'. Underneath that, the submission deadline is listed: 'Submission Deadline : 8 September 2023'. A list of prizes follows: '1st Place: Pioneers in SDGs Award + \$2,000 cash prize', '2nd Place: Pioneers in SDGs Award + \$1,000 cash prize', '3rd Place: Pioneers in SDGs Award + \$500 cash prize', '5 Additional Awards 250\$ cash prize each', and '5 Changemakers Award 100\$ cash prize each'. At the bottom right, another red button with white text says 'APPLY NOW'. The bottom of the banner includes social media handles for JWF Foundation, JWF Global, and the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF), along with the website 'www.jwf.org' and 'unga-conference.org'. The background is a light blue with a network of white dots and lines.

In its 5th year, Pioneers in SDGs Awards continues to commend remarkable organizations and individuals who advance sustainable peace, development, and the preservation of a culture rooted in peace, human rights, and sustainable development. The Journalists and Writers Foundation, in partnership with 52 Global Partners from 27 countries, recognizes Pioneers in SDGs whose innovative and imaginative projects contribute to the timely and effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The unwavering altruism, philanthropy, dedication, and commitment exhibited by these Pioneers in SDGs are instrumental in cultivating a better world for all.

Pioneers in SDGs 2023 Award Ceremony was held virtually on 27 September 2023, hosted by Dr. Rajendran Govender, Social Cohesion Advocate and JWF's Advisory Board Member from South Africa. Our distinguished international jury meticulously evaluates projects based on four discerning criteria: innovation, stakeholders, scope, and impact. In 2023, Pioneers in SDGs Awards have expanded its reach to 64 innovative projects hailing from 36 different countries. These remarkable initiatives were implemented in 77 countries worldwide, demonstrating the global nature of the sustainable development movement. In 2023, a new category was introduced: the 'People's Choice SDGs Awards.' The overwhelming response (4827 votes) from our global audience demonstrated the power of collective engagement and the resonance of the Sustainable Development Goals worldwide.



It highlighted the importance of involving communities in shaping the future of sustainable development.

**[Full recording of the Pioneers in SDGs 2023 is available at the JWF YouTube page.](#)**

**2023 Award Winners are as follows:**

**1ST PLACE WINNER 2023** – Empowervate, The Youth Citizens Action Programme (South Africa)

**2ND PLACE WINNER 2023** - Ally Zlatar / University of Southern Queensland, The Starving Artis (Scotland)

**3RD PLACE WINNER 2023** - Embrace Relief Foundation, Fountains of Hope (Chad & Cameroon)

**INNOVATION EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNER 2023** - Cage Free Voices Online Learning (USA)

**STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT AWARD WINNER 2023** - Henelito A. Sevilla, JR., Sustaining Hope, Winning Peace (Philippines)

**SCOPE ACHIEVEMENT AWARD WINNER 2023** - Summit Green Company, Waste to Wealth Enterprise (Uganda)

**TRANSFERABLE IMPACT AWARD WINNER 2023** - Grains of Hope Mobilization, Community Youth Empowerment and Mindset Change Project (Malawi)

**YOUNG CHANGEMAKERS AWARD WINNER 2023** - Association Arco Forum - Spanish Youth Interfaith Ensemble (JOIRE) (Spain)

**PEOPLE'S CHOICE SDGs AWARD WINNER 2023** - Sisters of St. Joseph of Tarbes, Regenerative Agriculture through Sustainable Farming (Kenya)

**CHANGEMAKERS AWARD WINNER (1) 2023** - Pathchola Foundation Bangladesh, Skill Development Programme for Social Inclusion (Bangladesh)

**YOUNG CHANGEMAKERS AWARD WINNER 2023** - The Smile of the Child, Risks of Attracting Minors through Social Media Applications (Greece)

**CHANGEMAKERS AWARD WINNER (3) 2023** - Sheba Plastic (Rwanda)

**CHANGEMAKERS AWARD WINNER (4) 2023** - Huracan Foundation, Hurucan Football Club (Nigeria)

**CHANGEMAKERS AWARD WINNER (5) 2023** - Saint Andrew's Uniting Church & Pearl of the Islands Foundation, The Welcome Mat (New Zealand)

# SDGs CONFERENCE 2023 : IN THE MARGINS OF THE UNGA78

20 September 2023, Wednesday (10:00 AM – 4:00 PM EST)

[www.unga-conference.org](http://www.unga-conference.org)



## PANELISTS

### OPENING SESSION

#### Opening Remarks

**Cemre Ulker**, Representative of the JWF to the UN DGC, Journalists and Writers Foundation (USA)

#### Welcome Remarks

**Mehmet Kilic**, President, Journalists and Writers Foundation (USA)

#### Keynote Speakers

**H.E. Ms. Thilmeeza Hussain**, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Maldives to the UN (MALDIVES)

**Ulziisuren Jamsran**, UN Women Representative to Kyrgyzstan (KYRGYZSTAN)

**Ambassador Dr. Carlos Garcia**, Secretary-General of United Nations Association of El Salvador (EL SALVADOR)

### PANEL SESSION 1: BUILDING A NEW MOMENTUM TOWARDS THE 2030 DEADLINE FOR THE SDGS

#### Moderator

**Silvia Osman**, Associate Professor, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania (ROMANIA)

#### Keynote Speaker

**H.E. Mr. Stan O. Smith**, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Bahamas to the UN (BAHAMAS)



### Panelists

**George Abualzulof**, Senior Human Rights Adviser, United Nations Development Coordination Office (UN - USA)

**Patricia Garcia AO**, Partnership Development Manager, Institute for Economics and Peace (AUSTRALIA)

**Dr. Ranjana Kumari**, Director, Center for Social Research (INDIA)

**Jenifer Vaughan Fenton**, Spokesperson/Senior Media Adviser, UN Special Envoy for Syria (SWITZERLAND)

## PANEL SESSION 2: PRESS FREEDOM AS AN INSTRUMENT TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

### Moderator

**Tania Bozaninou**, Journalist, To Vima Newspaper (GREECE)

### Panelists

**Batya Ungar-Sargon**, Opinion Editor, Newsweek (USA)

**Paula Penfold**, Investigative Journalist, Stuff Circuit (NEW ZEALAND)

**Abdulhamit Bilici**, Journalist, Former Editor-in-Chief, Zaman News (USA)

**Christina Piaia**, ProJourn Legal Manager, Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press (USA)

**Ivy Murugi**, Global Youth Representative, World Organization of the Scout Movement (KENYA)

## PANEL SESSION 3: WIDENING GAP BETWEEN EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND RISE OF AUTOCRACY

### Keynote

**Mr. Naseer A. Faiq**, Chargé d'Affaires, Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations (AFGHANISTAN)

### Moderator

**Melissa Mahtani**, Senior Producer, Journalist (USA)

### Panelists

**Berta Valle**, Human Rights Defender, Journalist (NICARAGUA)

**Guilherme Stolle Paixão e Casarões**, Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Author (BRAZIL)

**Johan Heymans**, Managing Partner, Venote Criminal Law and Human Rights (BELGIUM)

**Dr. Fatih Demiroz**, European Center for Populism Studies, Non-resident Research Fellow (USA)

## PANEL SESSION 1: BUILDING A NEW MOMENTUM TOWARDS THE 2030 DEADLINE FOR THE SDGS

The long-term social, economic, and health challenges posed by COVID-19 Pandemic are still ongoing. Thereupon this unprecedented global crisis, 2022-2023 has been a year of deterioration on various grounds. Positive peace, freedom of expression, fundamental civil and political rights have been declining, while transnational crimes, the influx of forcibly displaced people, and authoritarian regimes across the globe have been on the rise. Day-to-day implications of the climate crisis are now in action in many Global South countries enforcing people to leave their homeland due to food insecurity, violence and political instability responding to this utmost urgent environmental call.

The largest setbacks were recorded in political terror scales and internal conflicts.[1] War in Ukraine, Taliban's take-over in Afghanistan, and the internal conflict that erupted in Sudan have created inevitable regressions in many of the Sustainable Development Goals. Besides these armed conflicts and internal political instabilities, democratic States fell behind in the progress track as well. Given this critical momentum, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres calls for an urgent renewal of commitments meaningfully involving all development stakeholders to break through for a better future for all and deliver the promise of Global Goals.

In order to work on effective and transformative action-oriented policy making for the second half of the implementation timeline, our global community must acknowledge the following critical assessment: “Only about 12% [of the SDGs] are on track; close to half, though showing progress, are moderately or severely off track and some 30% have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline”.[2] Another striking unfolded truth is the absence of accountable, up-to-date, gender-disaggregated data. The recently released SDG Progress Report indicates that about 8% of latest available data are from 2023, 21% from 2022, and 54% are from 2020 - 2021. SDG Goal 16: Peaceful, just, strong institutions, SDG Goal 13: Climate change and SDG Goal 5: Gender equality are among the targets with the least current available data. Academic institutions' innovative research methodologies to close the data gap is crucial to scale up the delivery of peace and development promises.

---

[1] 2022 Global Peace Index – Key Results, Institute for Economic and Peace, [https://www.visionofhumanity.org/peacefulness-declines-to-lowest-level-in-15-years/#:~:text=The%2016th%20edition%20of%20the%20annual%20Global%20Peace%20Index%20\(GPI,deteriorated%20by%200.3%25%20in%202021.](https://www.visionofhumanity.org/peacefulness-declines-to-lowest-level-in-15-years/#:~:text=The%2016th%20edition%20of%20the%20annual%20Global%20Peace%20Index%20(GPI,deteriorated%20by%200.3%25%20in%202021.)

[2] Ibid (1).

## Panel Session 1 - Building a New Momentum Towards the 2030 Deadline for The SDGs discussed:

- The latest progress of the Sustainable Development Goals halfway through the 2030 Deadline: Emerging challenges
- Strengthening institutions and political commitment in timely achievement of the SDGs: local, and regional governments aligning with the private sector
- Sounding an alarm for urgent action on increasing internationally comparable, gender-disaggregated, available data collection
- SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals as a pivotal actor to break through a sustainable, peaceful future
- The New Agenda for Peace: A Pack for a transitioning era of geopolitical complexities

## PANEL SESSION 2: PRESS FREEDOM AS AN INSTRUMENT TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

Freedom of the press is a prerequisite and catalyst for all human rights. Despite the fundamental role of the media and journalists in enabling a free and independent flow of information to foster peaceful and inclusive societies, there is a constant decline in press freedom recorded over the last decade. Misinformation, disinformation, technology and oppressive governance trends are bonded together fueling undemocratic state actions. Committee to Protect Journalists indicates that “the number of journalists jailed around the world set yet another record in 2022 as authoritarian leaders doubled down on their efforts to silence dissenting voices and stifle press freedom”.<sup>[3]</sup>

We are, therefore, at a crossroads to better defend press freedom and rebuild independent journalism to combat the rise of tyranny and uphold human rights for all. Polarized political discourses majorly fueled by government authorities over heavily controlled media outlets further manipulate and marginalize different ends of society resulting in widespread hate speeches. The 2023 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders indicates that 69 countries are in problematic situations, while 38 are in difficulty and 20 are in extreme situations. Silencing critical voices of diverse media outlets jeopardizes pluralism in society. This year’s index particularly reflects on the challenges brought into light by the “digital ecosystem’s fake content industry”.<sup>[4]</sup> Despite this fact, there is also a virtual reality that social media platforms provide democratized platforms for dissident journalists and human rights defenders, whose space has been shrunk by respective illiberal governments.

---

[3] Attacks on the Press, Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/2022/12/attacks-on-the-press-in-2022/>

[4] 2023 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders, [https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry?year=2023&data\\_type=general](https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry?year=2023&data_type=general)



Rapidly evolving information environments, digital platforms and technological advancements create contemporary challenges to ensure the safety of journalists, foster systemic attacks on dissident media outlets and increase online harassment on social media platforms.[5] Women journalists continue to be on the frontline facing various forms of gender-based violence. Even though digital harassment and online aggressiveness pose serious threats to journalists' physical and mental well-being, these venues serve as a new way to raise global awareness of the recent humanitarian crisis and mobilized civil society members calling on state actors and intergovernmental organizations to uphold international human rights law.

#### **Panel Session 2 – Press Freedom as an Instrument to Defend Human Rights for All discussed:**

- A decade of decline for the global press freedom
- Digital transformation and technological advancements creating new media outlets: Freedom on the Internet and social media
- Rising threats for journalists: politicized judiciaries and online harassment
- Disinformation campaigns and state's use of media as a venue of propaganda
- Gender-based violence and violations against women journalists

### **PANEL SESSION 3: WIDENING GAP BETWEEN EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND RISE OF AUTOCRACY**

The intermediate distance between democracies and autocracies is increasing as 2023 remarked the 19th consecutive year of decline in democratic governance worldwide.[6] There is a formidable increase in the number of transitional/hybrid regimes particularly in Central Europe and Asia in the last decade. With the rise of various state-led crimes and conflicts, many formerly democratic nations are trapped in the cycle of autocracy prioritizing political interests over human rights norms, oppression of citizens' right to peaceful protests, increasing forms of violence, consolidating power at the expense of ruling out checks and balances systems.

Populist leaders continue to abuse the will of the voters, polarize societies, induce hatred within communities and limit political pluralism. In 2022 – 2023, there were many critical elections that the global citizens, journalists, and intergovernmental observatories closely monitored. Many polls took place in electoral autocracies where multiparty candidates existed but only in the sphere of limited freedom of expression and insufficient components of free and fair election processes.

---

[5] World Press Freedom Day 2023, Shaping a Future of Rights: Freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights, UNESCO, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384177>

[6] Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2023, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/NIT\\_2023\\_Digital.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/NIT_2023_Digital.pdf)

In many of the elections that took place under the shadow of oppressive regimes, civic activism still strived to protect their fundamental civil and political rights despite the high cost of imprisonment or forced displacement. Under these circumstances, responsibility on the shoulders of democratic states and intergovernmental organizations increases as decisive actions must be taken through multilateral diplomacy to support democratic governance and uphold human rights for all. Supporting civil society which operates under high risks of reprisals in hybrid regimes and global advocacy for the release of political prisoners and human rights defenders are vital actions.

The Widening gap between democracies and autocracies is not only an impediment to local governance but the oppressive regimes pose a global threat to the rule of law and human rights as transnational repression are reportedly on the rise. Direct attacks on dissidents living in exile, co-opting other countries to act against international human rights law, mobility impediments, online intimidation and surveillance remains among the primary methods of repression.[7] The security of human rights defenders, journalists, academics, and civil society members who sought protection in another state remains in a dilemma as the extra-judicial acts of autocratic leaders continue their coordinated mobilities in host countries.

**Panel Session 3 – Widening Gap between Erosion of Democracy and Rise of Autocracy discussed:**

- Elections under electoral autocracies: Recent analysis from country cases
- Civil society resilience and solidarity against the authoritarianism
- Keeping a spotlight on human rights defenders in distress and advocating for the release of political prisoners
- The proliferation of transnational crimes for global peace and security
- Rising trends of populism



[7] Transnational Repression as a Growing Threat to the Rule of Law and Human Rights, Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/transnational-repression-as-a-growing-threat-to-the-rule-of-law-and-hu/1680ab5b07>



20 September 2023 | John Jay College of Criminal Justice | HYBRID

[www.unga-conference.org](http://www.unga-conference.org)

## OPENING SESSION

**Cemre Ulker, Representative of JWF to the UN Department of Global Communications | USA**

### **Opening Remarks**

[Click here to watch Cemre Ulker's remarks](#)

*Cemre Ulker is the Representative of the Journalists and Writers Foundation to the United Nations Department of Global Communications. Ms. Ulker leads JWF's global initiatives to promote the culture of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. She is a human rights expert focusing on civil, and political rights and dedicated to the gender-sensitive implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals with a particular focus on peaceful, just institutions, and global partnerships. Ms. Ulker is also a Faculty Member at the UNITAR Global Diplomacy Initiative. She completed her Master's Degree in Human Rights from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York.*



Excellencies, distinguished diplomats, and guests welcome to the SDGs Conference: In the Margins of the United Nations General Assembly 78th Session. As we are convened for the 8th Annual SDGs Conference, it is an utmost honor and pleasure to host you all. We are particularly thrilled this year with the great interest growing in attendance, as we are full house at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I would also like to note that the SDGs Conference 2023 is hybrid and we have over 300 guests at

at Zoom joining us live from more than 45 countries across the globe. Our panel sessions will also be live-streamed on JWF's YouTube channel throughout the event. SDGs Conference 2023 is hosting 21 notable speakers from 16 different Member States including Ambassadors, UN High-Level officers, courageous journalists, transformative civil society leaders, and human rights advocates.

UNGA is undoubtedly the busiest, the most high-level, and critical engagement of the United Nations calendar facilitating various levels of multilateral diplomacy. However, the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly carries particular importance to mark the beginning of a new phase of accelerated progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals with urgent transformative and accelerated actions leading up to the 2030 Deadline.

Halfway through, the world is not on track to achieve the SDGs. To boost the transformative, inclusive, and gender-sensitive development processes, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres calls; all stakeholders need to rethink, refocus, and recharge. As of today, given the fact that only about 15% of the SDGs are achieved in addition to many targets which are in fact regressed compared to their origin back in 2015, we need a “UN 2.0”, a vision of a modernized UN system including cutting- edge skills, forward-thinking culture that enable development stakeholders to better contribute to the quest for the SDGs.

This year, the themes of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, ECOSOC Youth Forum, High-Level Political Forum, SDGs Summit, and the call for a Rescue Plan for the People and Planet in fact paved the way to the UNGA78: questioning how to boost this fundamental shift in commitment, solidarity, financing and action to put the Global Goals on a better path. To address these agenda items expert panelists will discuss 3 main working areas at the 8th Annual SDGs Conference: contemporary geopolitical complexities, challenges of sustainable peace and development, intersectionality between freedom of expression, human rights, and the erosion of democracies.

---

## **Mehmet Kilic, President, Journalists and Writers Foundation | USA**

### **Welcome Remarks**

[Click here to watch Mehmet Kilic's remarks](#)

*Mehmet Kilic is the President of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, an international civil society organization dedicated to the culture of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. Prior to this position, Mr. Kilic was JWF's Representative to the UN ECOSOC from 2012 to 2017. As one of the co-founders of Peace Islands Institute NY, he served as the Director of the Center for Global Affairs from 2010 to 2016. From 2009 to 2016, he was the VP of the Turkish Cultural Center NY. By organizing international conferences, panel discussions, international trips, and youth projects on sustainable peace and development, he has mobilized civil society organizations for intellectual and social engagement that aims to promote peace, diversity, and inclusion for positive social change. Some of the initiatives include the SDGs Conference, Pioneers in SDGs Awards, Ambassadors Series, Young Peace Ambassadors Academy, and Young Peace Builders. Mr. Kilic holds a master's degree from Mercy College and currently pursuing a PhD in Global and Comparative Education at Walden University.*



Ladies and gentlemen, honorable guests, dignitaries from the United Nations and the Protocol. I welcome you all to the JWF's 8th Annual SDGs Conference organized by the Journalists and Writers Foundation in collaboration with 52 NGOs from 27 countries. It is a distinct honor to stand before you today as we gather once again to address the pressing issues that shape our world. As we convene here today, the 78th session of the UN General Assembly is underway bringing leaders and representatives from 193 member states to New York. This annual gathering while marked by diplomacy and political posturing also highlights the numerous global challenges that demand our collective leadership and action. Today we find ourselves at a critical juncture. The world faces a multitude of interconnected challenges from extreme poverty and climate change to the rapid advancements of artificial intelligence and the urgency to foster peace among great poverty tensions and destructive conflicts. Our global youth population seeks opportunities, skills, and hope. In this context, we need to remain engaged and committed to the values and goals that unite us as a global community. In times of unprecedented challenges, our message is one and that is unity and global partnerships. The past years have shown us that when the world comes together, we can overcome even the most daunting challenges and obstacles. It has also reminded us that no one can achieve anything alone. We must stand united as one world leveraging the power of collaboration, diversity, and inclusion. This year's conference is especially significant as we mark halfway to the deadline set for achieving the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. While we celebrate the achievements we have made so far, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges we face. Recent reports indicate and as my colleague underlined, only 15% of the SDG targets are on track to be reached by 2030 and over 500 million people may still live in extreme poverty.

To succeed, we must demonstrate renewed political will, backed by concrete actions, financial resources, and global partnerships. As we gather here, we are also proud to announce the continuation of the Pioneers in SDGs Awards as one of the most prestigious and impactful flagship initiatives of the JWF. These awards recognize remarkable organizations and individuals whose innovative projects contribute to the attainment of the SDGs. Over the years, we witnessed impactful projects from 52 countries each marking a different impact on their local communities. The unwavering commitment and dedication of these pioneers have been instrumental in creating a better world for all. This year, the Pioneers in SDGs Awards Ceremony will take place next week, Wednesday, September 27th, 2023, immediately following the SDGs Conference, our International Jury guided by the criteria of innovation, stakeholders, scope, and impact will once again identify and command the outstanding projects.

It is through these efforts that we find inspiration and motivation to continue our pursuit of the SDGs. Additionally, we are also delighted to share with you that this year we have introduced a new category under the award which is the 'People's Choice SDGs Award'. This category recognizes outstanding individuals and organizations that have contributed to the advancing of sustainable peace and development. It is a testament to the power of collective support and engagement as we invite the global community to participate in celebrating these visionaries and change-makers. Further, I would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the esteemed leadership of John Jay College of Criminal Justice for the gracious hosting of the SDGs Conference 2023 and over the past years. I would also like to express our deep gratitude to our esteemed global partners for their constant support. The SDGs Conference has been a beacon of progress for the last seven years, and it wouldn't be possible without their constant faith and commitment. Allow me to extend our heartfelt appreciation to our global partners, today. Please give a round of applause to all these global partners.

In closing, I would like to reiterate the dedication of the Journalists and Writers Foundation together with our global partners to remain committed to the SDGs and the broader proceed of global peace and prosperity. As we embark on this Eighth Annual SDGs Conference, let us remember that our collective efforts have the potential to reshape our world for the better. By working together, we can turn the challenges we face into opportunities for a brighter future. Thank you very much for joining us today. I look forward to the enlightening discussions and collaborations that will unfold over the course of this conference. Together we can make a lasting impact on our global journey towards achieving the SDGs.

---

## **H.E. Ms. Thilmeeza Hussain, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Maldives to the UN | MALDIVES**

### **Keynote Remarks**

[Click here to watch H.E. Ms. Thilmeeza Hussain's remarks](#)

*Her Excellency Ms. Thilmeeza Hussain is the Ambassador of the Maldives to the United Nations. Formerly, Ambassador Hussain was a key member of the Foreign Relations Committee of the then main opposition party, the Maldivian Democratic Party, where she lobbied to maintain close relations with the government of the United States and other agencies to garner support in the restoration of democracy in the country. Ambassador Hussain championed the climate change and sustainable development agenda, where she was the lead negotiator for the Maldives, at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and Co-chaired the Sustainable Development Working Group for the 48-members of Alliance of Small Island States.*





As we embark on the last decade to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 agenda, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of freedom of expression, press freedom, and access to information for the achievement of sustainable development goals. Journalists' role in advancing the 2030 agenda is crucial. They have the power of the pen and the lens standing on the front lines of truth, justice, and accountability. They are the voices of the marginalized, and the

oppressed and serve as the watchdogs of society. Journalists have the power to hold governments, businesses, and organizations accountable. The role of journalists in bridging the gap between information and action is indispensable in building a more sustainable and equitable world.

Let us take a moment to reflect on the state of affairs unfolding around us. The poison of conflict and warfare continues to infect our world. Poverty, hunger, discrimination, and inequality continue to haunt us with Hurricane Lee, wildfires in Hawaii claiming more than a hundred lives, and uncertain high tide patterns affecting low-line islands. Like the Maldives, planet Earth is sounding the alarm of climate disaster and climate emergency. We are facing greater risks than ever before, and we need bigger players to do their part. Climate journalism plays a vital role in driving this change. Climate journalists have been diligently uncovering the disparities between commitments and actual actions. Your reporting empowers the public fostering their ability to call for transparency, accountability, and substantive climate efforts from their leaders.

Despite being a relatively young democracy, the Maldives has embraced democratic values, including the promotion of freedom, including the promotion of press freedom. The current government has made significant progress in preserving democracy, upholding the rule of law, and ensuring freedom for journalists. Since taking office, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has been committed to advancing press freedom despite historically low rankings for media freedom in Asia, the Maldives rose by 48 positions in the World Press Freedom Index in 2021 which was just three years after he took office. We must also acknowledge the progress toward SDGs has been uneven and, in some areas, disappointingly slow. We must build new momentum towards SDGs, and this can be achieved through meaningful partnerships.

Our partnerships must be inclusive, involving not only governments but also civil society, academia, youth, and the private sector. As the co-chair of the preparatory committee of the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS), set forth for the upcoming year, Maldives is committed to supporting these partnerships while



formulating the next 10-year program of action for SIDS. We believe diverse perspectives and expertise are essential for innovative solutions. Let us reaffirm our commitment to these goals. Let us foster partnerships that ignite a new momentum and let us leave a legacy of hope and progress for future generations.

---

## Ulziisuren Jamsran, UN Women Representative to Kyrgyzstan | Kyrgyzstan Keynote Remarks

[Click here to watch Ms. Ulziisuren Jamsran's remarks](#)

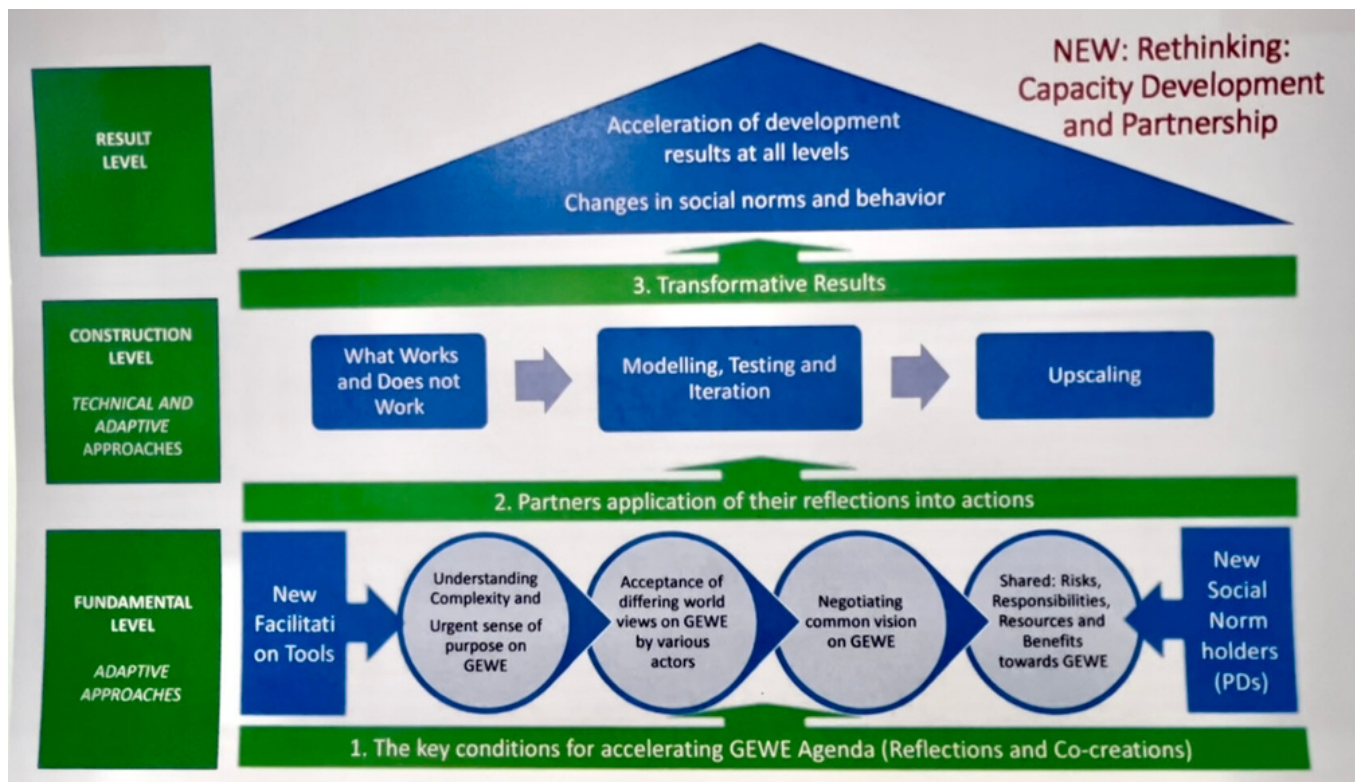
*Ulziisuren Jamsran joined the UN Women Kyrgyzstan Country Office as a Representative in June 2019. Ms. Jamsran's experience includes over 20 years of experience in international development, and strategic and managerial leadership in gender and women's issues in Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan for UNDP, UNIFEM, and UN Women. Earlier, she was the UN Women's Gender Adviser for Moldova and Ukraine, Regional Governance Specialist in Almaty, Senior Rural Development Specialist and Social Development Advisor in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, and Poverty Alleviation Specialist in Mongolia. Ms. Jamsran has a Specialized Master's in Leading Change from the University of Oxford and HEC Paris, and an M.A. in Economics from the Mongolian State University.*



Dear participants of the SDG Conference, organizers, and partners from the Journalists and Writers Foundation and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, I want to thank you for inviting me to speak at this important event. We all agree that stopping discrimination against women and girls is not just a basic human right but crucial for a sustainable future. Empowering women and girls has proven benefits for economic growth and development. Unfortunately, recent reports show that SDG 5

and the gender equality agenda are facing challenges. This is especially unfortunate as the world needs more equality and empowerment right now. It's critical for us to understand what's working well. That's why I want to share our journey at UN Women Kyrgyzstan Country Office on transforming the achievement of SDG 5 at the country level. I have a few slides to show, illustrating how we've been rethinking how we work with partners and engage them in the development agenda. In the following slides, I'll delve deeper into some key findings:

- 1. Understanding Complexity and Urgent Purpose on GEWE (Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women):** We created safe spaces for partners to understand the complexity and urgently work together on advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.



**2. Acceptance of Differing World Views on GEWE by Various Actors:** Once these spaces were created, it was crucial for partners to accept different world views on gender equality.

**3. Negotiating a Common Vision on GEWE:** Partners needed to talk and negotiate about common aspects in their agenda and vision to unite around gender equality

**4. Shared Risk, Responsibilities, Resources, and Benefits towards GEWE:** This step involved shared commitment, sharing risks, responsibilities, resources, and benefits toward the common goal.

These four steps were critical, and we also achieved concrete results by bringing partners together with two key elements:

**1. New Facilitation Tools:** Introducing new tools to facilitate discussions.

**2. New Social Norm Holders (PDs):** Bringing in individuals who influence social norms.

Testing these approaches helped us build a transformative change, resulting in significant positive outcomes. For instance, in just two to three months, we increased the number of women speaking out about their experiences tenfold. We would be happy to share more details with you. Please reach out, and we look forward to further conversations.



**Keynote Remarks**

[Click here to watch Dr. Carlos Garcia's remarks](#)

*Prior to his current post, Ambassador Garcia was the Permanent Representative of El Salvador to the United Nations and served at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Director of Multilateral Affairs, and Chief of the Caribbean Affairs. Before being appointed to the Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations on July 1, 1996, Ambassador Garcia served at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador, San Salvador as Director of Multilateral Affairs, and Chief of the Caribbean Affairs. As of June 2019, he has been appointed as President & CEO of The Organization for Poverty Alleviation and Development (OPAD) at the United Nations, United States of America, Asia, and Latin America & the Caribbean. In August 2019, Ambassador Garcia was selected to be 2019 Grand Marshall of the Salvadoran Parade in New Jersey that was held on September 15, 2019, in New Jersey.*



The main topic that I would like to address is how to build new momentum towards the 2030 deadline for the SDGs. At the beginning or the outset, allow me to acknowledge the long-term impact of COVID-19 in social, economic, and political areas that poses important challenges for many countries around the world and contributes negatively to the deterioration of several indicators in healthcare systems or healthcare programs, particularly in developing countries. You may know or

ask what this is connected to the SDGs. This negative impact goes directly and negatively to SDG 3, which is good health and well-being. Therefore, the negative impact of this pandemic continues to pose important challenges for many countries around the world. Therefore, you may find one clue to understanding the lack of commitment in that area but more than that, there is no doubt that this negative impact of COVID-19 has also impacted other diseases such as malaria, including increased epidemic risk and challenges for epidemic control.

This is one important fact that we need to consider when we address this issue but more than that, new challenges are arising from unexpected factors that have been consolidated in the last five years, in my view, namely a global trend of contraction of globalization as a phenomenon in the emerging forces around regionalism. This is creating a real impact from a geopolitical strategy and point of view that needs to be considered as part of the new challenges in the implementation of SDGs. You may be asking why the geopolitical situation has an impact on the SDGs. It is clear and fully connected with SDG 17 dealing with the global partnership that goes beyond only public-private partnership but also in the inter-state or intergovernmental relationship that that of course has

created new challenges and issues that need to be considered when we address the issue of this disease. The reality on the ground shows us that the international community is moving back to strong regionalism under the leadership of three main pillars or three main legs, namely the United States of America, Russia, and China. Therefore, or consequently, a significant number of setbacks can be explained by a change in the priorities of national or international interests in countries like Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asian countries. This is a very important topic that I will invite you to consider, since, moving back from a global or a globalism phenomenon, I am going back to a regionalism that implies not only a change in the mind of political leaders and countries but also affects national priorities. Even though we are moving back to regionalism, there will be an opportunity for the SDG Agenda to be on track for full implementation by 2030 but needs to be fully aligned with national priorities. Otherwise, it is going to be a waste of our time from a global perspective.

The President of El Salvador, His Excellency, Mr. Nayib Bukele, presented the successful case of El Salvador with strengthening institutions and political commitment for the timely achievement of the SDGs. Once El Salvador was at the top of the countries that were considered the most dangerous for high levels of criminality and of course for assassination, murders, extortions, and several other crimes in the context of four years after a change in the paradigm of understanding a very fundamental topic within the United Nations. El Salvador currently has become the safest country in the whole American continent. Now, how can you explain this change coming from being the most dangerous country in the hemisphere to the safest one? This of course is fully connected to the SDG as well, SDG 16 focusing on justice and peace because it is fully connected with our national interest and priorities.

That is the reason why El Salvador covering this aspect of their national interest simultaneously can connect with SDG 16 and at large with the SDGs as a whole. What we are proposing for consideration as a new factor to be included in the measure that can be taken by different other governments to create this momentum towards 2030, will be to create a harmonic combination of national interests together with the SDGs. If a country is not able to connect the SDGs with its national interest, it will be a waste of time and a waste of money. It has to be fully connected with the national industry and of course, every country has its particularities. We cannot expect countries to just simply commit to the 17 Goals. If we see the 10 commandments, it needs to be seen as a roadmap and if we see the SDGs as a roadmap, then we have a chance to expand and to flow with the national interest. Therefore, be in a better position for not only implementing but also fulfilling other areas of interest such as financing for development but also on the political participation of national institutions, civil society, and the private sector. In the end, nobody is going to invest in any country that is still suffering from criminality in the case of El Salvador.

However, also, if your country is in a different position and different level, nobody is going to make their best contribution if they feel they are just simply following an agenda that has been created outside their interests. This is a key point that needs to be considered. Finally, aligning national objectives with the SDGs and the role of financing for development takes me back to the idea that I mentioned in terms of how the geopolitical approach creates an interface or creates an impact on the implementation of SDGs. All issues of financing are connected to how a country perceives its areas of interest. Can we create a common agenda for all of us, perhaps, but not in my view, in the way in which the SDGs were negotiated? It was a different political context, and we can see this unfortunately in a similar case, when the UN addressed many years ago how to change or revitalize the United Nations, in particular the Security Council, we know that it has been an impossible task. Now, the problem will be who is going to be allowed to form a new United Nations Organization. However, as a part of an important understanding and how the UN can contribute to the development of a common agenda needs to be again in full connection with the national interests.



## PANEL SESSION 1: BUILDING A NEW MOMENTUM TOWARDS THE 2030 DEADLINE FOR THE SDGS

**Silvia Osman, Associate Professor, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration | ROMANIA**

**Moderator: Opening Remarks**

[Click here to watch Silvia Osman's remarks](#)

*Silvia Osman is an Associate Professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Department of Sociology in Romania. Author of more than 20 books, Silvia Osman has also published many articles on literature, discourse and multicultural dialogue, paradigm shift in education, and mindsight within the framework of multimodal approaches to communication. She completed Foreign Policy and Diplomacy Program of the Romanian Diplomatic Institute. Ms. Osman has her Masters in European Integration from the UCDC, Faculty of Law and Administration Studies at Bucharest, and holds her PhD in Esthetics, Theory, Pedagogy and History of Theater.*



We are a global community, and it is adequate to build momentum. It is said that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Therefore, raising an agenda and achieving it by 2030 takes a global community, a village. We started a series of SDGs Conference events with a roundtable discussion talking about human values, and timeless frameless norms, that take us closer to human rights. We have more strength in not only creatively rethinking frames but also thinking about the benefit of others.

Thank you everyone for your life of service in implementing the goals. What do we need to build? The Sustainable Development Goals are very clear-cut forward, comprehensible, and offer a roadmap creating momentum. Momentum is a property of a moving body that determines the time required to bring it to rest under the action of a constant force. So yes, our global actions are the constant force that when applied can bring momentum.

We will not rest until all those things we are fighting for, from human rights or human values to the surface of our global world, are in place. Yes, we are the moving body that makes the momentum happen, and I am sure that you will agree with me and contribute to building it. Love is a verb; it is a deep human value essential to all our acts. So, it means using the bricks of our own imagination, the building blocks of the momentum we need to bring about. I call on everyone to roll up their sleeves and put our values to work while we build a community, a global community of action, and establish a roadmap.

## **H.E. Mr. Stan O. Smith, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Bahamas to the UN | BAHAMAS**

### **Keynote: Keynote Remarks**

[Click here to watch H.E. Mr. Stan O. Smith's remarks](#)

*H.E. Mr. Stan O. Smith is the Permanent Representative of Bahamas to the United Nations. Before his latest appointment, Ambassador Smith served as personal assistant to Prime Minister Perry Gladstone Christie from 2018 to 2021. He was Ambassador-at-Large between 2015 and 2017, Head of the Legal Division in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as a contributor to its United Nations teams on human rights. During that time, he also provided general foreign policy development support. Before his diplomatic career, Ambassador Smith practiced law in Barbados between 2005 and 2015. Earning a bachelor's degree from St. Mary's University in Canada, he is also a graduate of the University of the West Indies Law School.*

I mark this a privilege, an honor and thank the organizers for this opportunity to discuss “Building a New Momentum Towards the 2030 Deadline for the SDGs” under the general theme “Transforming Our World”.





I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the integral role that journalists and writers play in shaping public opinion, and informing the world in an increasingly, physically dangerous environment against journalist and writers. I express thanks for your commitment to covering the challenges and opportunities faced in seeking to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. In January of this year, Foreign Policy published an article by Adam Tooze about the development profile of The Bahamas.

The point of the article was that: the Climate Crisis has eliminated the resilience in The Bahamas's economic model (Tourism; Financial Services and the Second Home Market) and we need innovations that can sustain socio-economic health against the volatility of the Climate Change landscape. The annual cost of natural disasters to SIDS is \$1 Trillion. This is a perennial SIDS challenge to achieving the SDGs.

NOW, do we attempt to activate the politically unused regulations and policy reliefs of the international financial institutions? Do we continue to universalize the policies and individualize (bi-lateralize) the innovations dynamics? OR, should we universalize the innovations dynamics and individualize policies? Do we address the SDGs, goal by goal? Do we invest in moonshot initiatives that create network effects more readily activating otherwise untapped capacities useful to, and meeting, the target of immediate community needs? The development community must address the mechanics about how to arrive at sustainable, resilient prosperity that eliminates 'genies in bottles' from the search for and the discovery of sustainable innovations. The questions we ask 8 years since the adoption of the SDGs tells us this: our politics; our finance experts and our country interests, are not connected to one another on common global challenges; not by connected language, not by experience, not by vision. Small Island Developing States are consumed by managing governance and lack implementation capacity; international financial institutions have nothing to lose that would incentivize commitment to reform; and development agencies lack scale. The Bahamas has made a pivot from this vacuum.

The reality is that:

- 1% of CARICOM state budgets are invested in science and technology;
- the Global North produces 60% of scientific literature;
- and 10 countries, not including The Bahamas, have absorbed 65% of World Bank loans.

The Government is now investing in understanding the science and the technology needed to benefit from the untapped ocean value in the archipelago.

It has recently created a carbon market registry and will next offer a \$500 million bond against the seagrass sequestration capacity in the country's 100,000 square miles of blue economy potential.

Not long ago, I was waiting in line for a diplomat of more than four decades of accomplishment to sign my copy of his book. He asked one of my CARICOM colleagues who was at the front of the book-signing line: How does such a small country win a Nobel Prize? In that moment I realized that a country with \$500 billion dollar GDP only wanted a Nobel Prize and hasn't gotten one. The small country with a Nobel prize really wanted \$500 billion GDP, and the challenge is how to get it.

We have each been winning alone, and we have each been structurally failing alone in the deficiencies of our resilience models. In one instance, I became aware of a small state that received development assistance on 40 projects, and every project failed because of that state's lack of capacity to deliver the projects.

Here's an essential question a SIDS expert asked a donor country partner:

- "Are SIDS states equipped for partnership engagement?"
- Here was the reply:
- "[Country] assistance is likely needed at earlier phases of initiatives."

Multilateralism has overemphasized bilateral solutions built on funding ourselves out of challenges. But we should be mindful that financing goals should not consume development ambitions into a solitary track. Funding is not the end of the development initiative. It is preparation for at least seven critical processes after 1st expertly, thoroughly, conceptualizing the initiative. We have, unfortunately, under-conceptualized the network benefits of framework thinking for the maximization of delivery outcomes. The proposition here is that we should create a sustainability, resilience framework.

We should physically integrate the private sector into the UN. The framework must be enabling to deal with the acceleration of negative development disruptions and the need of states to recover quickly and cost-effectively.

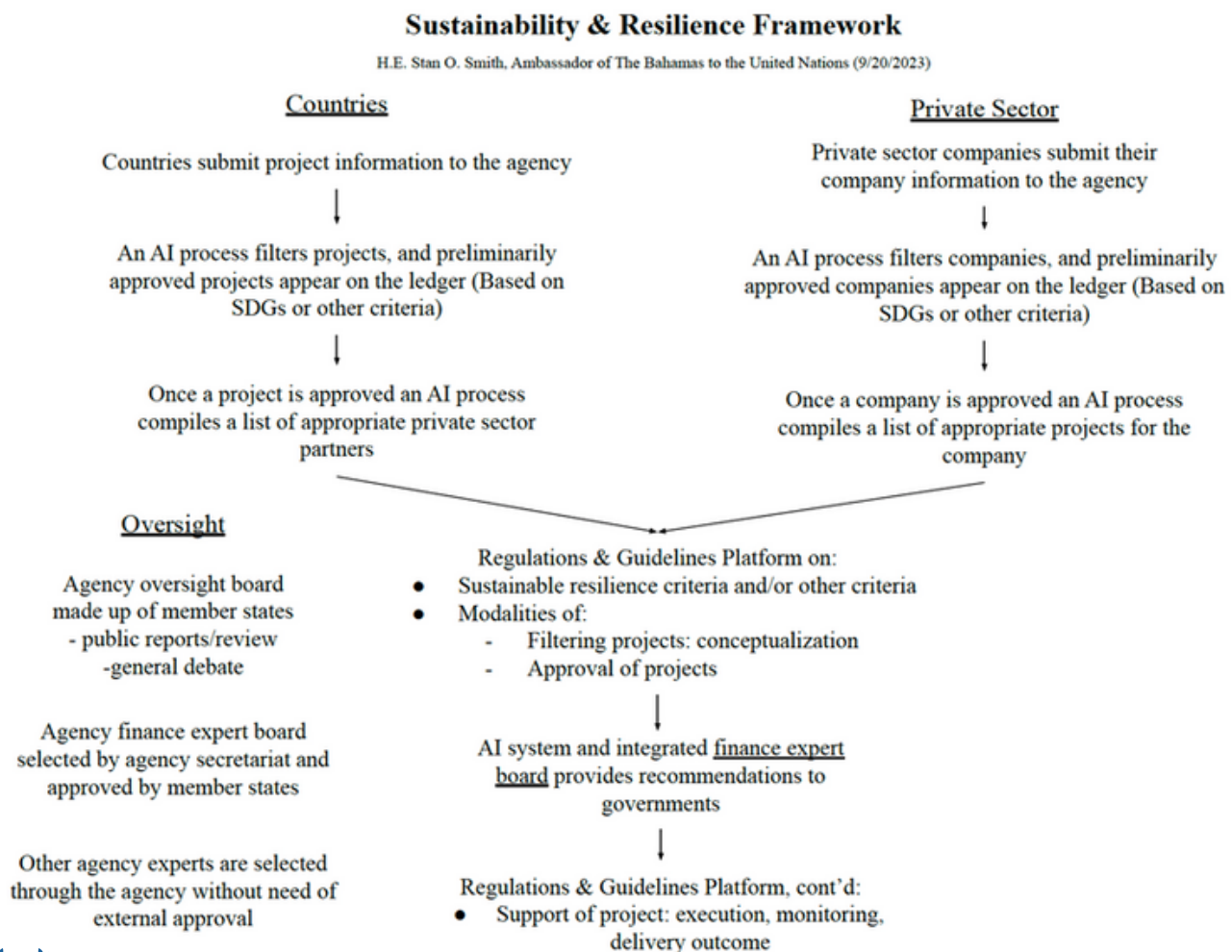
This framework should give partnerships the implementation capacity for dealing with:

- Managing the conceptualization process;
- Executing the initiative;
- Monitoring phases of the process;
- Managing delivery of outcomes.

- This framework should widen our capability:
- To realize the Innovation Creation Dynamics in individual and across similar initiatives;
- To realize the thematic essential in viable initiatives and essential for delivery outcomes;
- And to otherwise, realize unexplored Partnerships and Investment Pipelines.

I have adopted these terms for elements of my framework from discussions with the President of the Caribbean Development Bank, Dr. Gene [Leon], in discussions about improving development resilience. However, the genesis of this framework came from the fusion of two assignments I undertook in chairing a meeting on moving beyond GDP and in discussing Financing for Development with like-minded colleagues around the UN Campus.

I think small states like The Bahamas can get ahead of the innovation challenge posed in the Foreign Policy piece with the benefit of policy tools like the Bridgetown Initiative and the Multi-dimensional Vulnerability Index (the MVI) being applied to a resilience framework as I have sketched it in the below diagram.





**Panelist 1: The latest progress of the Sustainable Development Goals halfway through the 2030 deadline**

[Click here to watch George Abualzulof's remarks](#)

*George Abualzulof is a Human Rights defender with around 30 years of field focused experience in a variety of Human Rights areas including within conflict, developmental, and post conflict situations. Before joining UN DCO as its Chief of Universal Values Section, Mr. Abualzulof served as the Senior Human Rights Advisor to the United Nation Resident Coordinator Office and the United Nations Country Team in Jamaica MCO since 2018, and the representative of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Yemen from 2013-2016. In 2016 he was appointed as the director of the Qatar based UN Human Rights Training and Documentation Center for Southwest Asia and the Arab Region. Mr. Abualzulof worked with UNICEF MENA for 5 years as a justice for children specialists and as the General Director of Defence for Children International / Palestine Section for 10 years. He holds a master's degree in children's rights from University of Freiburg and Institute of Children's Rights in Sion, Switzerland and a BA degree in Social Work and Psychology from Bethlehem, Palestine.*



In 2015, the world leaders made an historic global promise to secure the human rights and well-being of everyone on a healthy, prosperous planet when they agreed to the 2030 Agenda. This promise is now in its halfway to the 2030 deadline, in deep danger. Instead of progressing towards the 2030 goals, development progress is reversing under the combined impacts of climate disasters, conflict, economic downturn, and remaining COVID-19 effects. Tens of millions have fallen into

poverty. Over 110 million people are forcibly displaced. Inequalities have worsened, strikingly so for women and girls. More people are being denied healthcare and education. The climate crisis is causing destruction on lives and livelihoods. This collective failure will impact every country and all of us; but the burden falls most heavily on developing countries and the world's poorest and most vulnerable people.

Thus, we must take urgent action now, and the SDG Summit is a vital opportunity to act and break through to a better world. The SDG summit is also a moment to recommit to a vision of the future that ensures no one is left behind and fulfillment of human rights for all without any form of discrimination. To be able to face these challenges, fundamental shifts in commitment, solidarity, financing, and action must put us back on track to end poverty and inequalities, realize just societies and reset a balanced relationship with the natural world.

The world leaders, who are gathering in NY these days, must choose to fulfil the promises they have made, and respect their obligations and commitments. There is no place left for failure. As “The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023” stipulated: The SDGs are in peril. The world has entered an age of poly-crisis and hard-earned SDG progress is threatened by the climate crisis, conflict, gloomy global economic outlook, and lingering COVID-19 effects. It sounds the alarm and urgently calls for redoubled efforts to get the Goals back on track.

**Sounding the Alarm: The world faces big misses across the Goals by 2030 in the absence of significant acceleration.**

A preliminary assessment of the roughly 140 targets for which data is available shows that only about 12 per cent are on track; more than half, although showing some progress, are moderately or severely off track; and some 30 per cent have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline. The number of people living in extreme poverty rose for the first time in a generation with the onset of COVID-19. For the first time in three decades, progress in key areas such as childhood vaccination and income inequality between countries has reversed. If present trends persist, by 2030, a staggering 575 million people will remain trapped in extreme poverty and 84 million children will be out of school. It will take nearly 300 years to close gender gaps in legal protection, eliminate discriminatory laws and end child marriage.

**We are at war with ourselves and nature.**

The climate crisis is worsening as greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. Global temperature is likely to reach the critical 1.5 °C tipping point above pre-industrial levels by 2035. Heat waves, droughts, flooding, and wildfires have become far too frequent. Rising sea levels are already threatening hundreds of millions of people in coastal communities.

**Developing countries and the world’s poorest and most vulnerable are bearing the brunt.**

The report shows that while the lack of SDG progress is universal, it is often the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people who are bearing the brunt of the consequences. Developing countries are also disproportionately affected, all while their voice is not fairly represented in the global governance architecture and in international financial institutions. This must change.

**We must make the next seven years count - achieving the SDGs depends on it.**

We can still turn things around. Since 2015, there has been improvements in key areas, including poverty reduction, child mortality, electricity access and the battle against certain diseases. If strong political is matched with the technologies and resources and knowledge now available, we can enable a breakthrough to a better future.

The report inspires hope by showcasing the progress the world has made and the potential for further advancements.

### **We must enact a Rescue Plan for People and Planet.**

We must be ambitious to match the scope of the challenges ahead. Fundamental shifts in commitment, solidarity, financing, and action are needed to put us back on track.

The political declaration adopted by the high-level political forum on sustainable development ensures a common understanding among Member States to advance transformative actions leading up to the SDG target year of 2030. The political declaration represents the beginning of a new phase of accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which will need to be complemented by continuous high-level political guidance and national and local actions. This is an opportunity for all of us, citizens, journalists, civil society organizations, the private sector, to advocate for urgency, ambition, and action to realize the Goals.

### **Data drive effective solutions for SDG achievement.**

Timely, high-quality disaggregated data are essential. Strengthening data ecosystems is critical to understanding where we stand and what needs to be done to achieve the SDGs.

### **The 2030 Agenda remains the clearest blueprint of humanity's highest aspirations.**

The SDGs are a blueprint for a more resilient, peaceful, and inclusive future. When historians write about the twenty-first century, they will judge leaders and policymakers by whether they have succeeded in transforming this blueprint into reality. It is now up to all of us to ensure that the Global Goals are achieved – in full and on time.

---

**Patricia Garcia AO, Institute for Economics and Peace, Partnership Development Manager | Australia**

### **Panelist 2: Contemporary challenges of development in the transitioning era of geopolitical complexities and conflicts**

[Click here to watch Patricia Garcia AO's remarks](#)

*Patricia Garcia is the Partnership Development Manager of the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP). She is a highly respected humanitarian and human rights advocate with experience in project design and delivery, campaigning, and fundraising. Patricia has worked for more than 20 years in some of the world's most dangerous conflicts including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Thai-Burma border. She has been appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2016 and was a finalist in the 2016 NSW Australian of the Year awards for her contribution and services to the international humanitarian aid and development sector over the past two decades. Patricia Garcia was a Human Rights Research Fellow at the University of Sydney's Centre for Peace and Conflict*

*Studies from 2000–2002 and designed the Human Rights course for the Master of Peace and Conflict Studies at CPACS. Ms. Garcia is also an Honorary Associate at the University of Sydney where she is a sessional lecturer on peace and human rights with a passion to promote and advance the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda.*

---



On the occasion of the International Day of Peace, I would like to call on all the stakeholders to take action and be part of the solution to this SDGs agenda, commit to both personal and collective action that can contribute to advancing the SDGs 2030 agenda. For those who have been following the SDGs agenda, it was in 2015, seven years ago that all 193 countries formally adopted it. These are the 17 SDGs with 169 targets to transform our world for a better future. Our previous speakers have

said that the SDGs have presented us with a roadmap of the 17 goals, with the signposts being these 169 targets. We have been passionate advocates of the Sustainable Development Goals and still, we have seen that over these last seven years, we have not performed well. In contrast, several countries have in many ways deteriorated the condition. So, there is a sense of urgency for us with time running out with only now at the midpoint of seven years that we have to accelerate our efforts.

I think it is important now that we look at how we can be able to find innovative ways and ways to collaborate to be able to address the enormous global challenges that we are facing today; whether it is the climate crisis, economic inequality, the growing societal polarization, geopolitical tensions, or conflicts that we are all facing. We need to look at the SDGs as not only a roadmap but also a vision of hope for a world where we can build a peaceful, equal, and sustainable future for all. The SDGs for me represent the five Ps: people, at first and then the planet, peace, prosperity, and partnership.

With these five, it is very important to understand that these are universal goals. They belong to all of us and because of that, it is a shared responsibility that we must take to be able to advance these goals and to be able to achieve all 17 goals. The nature of these goals when they were first developed was based on consultations all around the world. I think the importance of these goals is that they provide a common language for all of us to be able to address these global challenges in a way that we have, a common language to express how we can find solutions, how we can act, and how we can collaborate. My role at the Institute for Economics and Peace is as a Partnership Development Manager. So, the word partnership is central to my work and while working with the Institute for Economics and Peace, I have been so privileged to be able to meet with many of the people we have here yesterday and at the beginning of our SDG Summit to hear all the



wonderful work that many of us are doing to be able to advance the SDGs, particularly, Goal 16, the goal of peacebuilding, peaceful and inclusive societies with access to justice for all and also strong, transparent and accountable institutions at all levels. This is such an important goal because it is the goal that is cross-cutting across all 17. Many of you might know that the whole approach of the SDGs has been based on what we call "systems thinking", where we try to shift people's thinking from not looking at a singular cause-effect relationship of how we deal with issues but looking at issues as being a system.

With the system, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and this system's thinking is what also informs, the Institute for Economics and Peace in the way in which we measure and analyze peace and the economic cost of violence. I would like to start with just some explanation of the SDGs, many of you might also understand that there have been some constraints in being able to advance these SDGs and one of them has been the lack of financing. We heard earlier a speaker about the importance of having innovative financing mechanisms, whether it is increasing our overseas development assistance or looking at building public-private partnerships, but we need to look at different ME financing mechanisms to support the SDGs and EEGs. The other area is often the lack of measurement. How can we measure progress on how we are going with the 17 goals?

This is where the Institute for Economics and Peace is an independent global think tank that measures and analyzes peace and the economic cost of violence and provides metrics to measure peacefulness in 163 countries. We hope through our measurements of peace and analysis of peace, we can also provide a better understanding of the social, economic, cultural, and political factors that drive peace. So, just a little bit of an example of showing you how one of the examples of the tools that IEP has been able to develop is called the 'Positive Peace Framework.'

As I mentioned earlier, the Institute for Economics and Peace was established in 2008 and we pioneered the empirical study of peace. In other words, with the organization, we were able to measure and analyze peace and the aim of the organization is to undertake research to show how peace is a positive, tangible, and achievable measure of human well-being and progress. So, think of this concept of peace as something positive, tangible, and achievable, and a measure of human well-being and development. The 'Global Peace Index' was our first report and many of you might know this is the report that measures and analyzes the absence of violence or the fear of violence in 163 countries. The Index represents 99.7% of the world's population. So, I would like to just show you how we rank the 163 countries. We use three domains, these domains are International and Domestic Conflict, Safety and Society, and Militarization.

For those of you who want to look at understanding conflict and particularly the drivers of conflict and particularly want to know the changing nature of where we see the world going in, how we understand conflict, the Global Peace Index provides the evidence and data to show the trends of where countries are going in the issues of conflict. In the 2023 GPI, we saw that 70 to 84 countries had improved and 79 had deteriorated. The key highlights of this 2023 Global Peace Index showed that Iceland remains at the moment and has been for many years, the most peaceful country in the world. We have Libya and Burundi with the largest improvements, Middle East and North Africa have improved in the last three years.

Also, Europe has remained the most peaceful region and recorded only a slight improvement since last year. Afghanistan remains the world's least peaceful nation and has also recorded just in this last year. Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, there has been some improvement only in this last year, but it remains the least peaceful country in the world. You might be surprised to know that the Taliban has criticized IEP because of that ranking. This year, we got strong criticism from the Taliban government. This is the 10 most peaceful countries. Then, we have the 10 least peaceful countries. We have seen a decline in peacefulness over the last 13 or 15 years since IEP has been established and not very sobering news to be able to say that this deterioration has continued consecutively over the last 13 years. Unfortunately, the scenario is not looking good. Also, for the future, there are 23 indicators that we use to measure - the militarization, social security and safety, and the international and domestic conflict domains of each country.

Last year, the total number of battle deaths, as there has been an increase in conflict deaths and battle deaths since last year, primarily in Europe, Ethiopia, and Ukraine. When we people are looking at conflict and we are looking at war, we are not only looking at the actual conflict of fighting, battles, military, and security. People have to look at conflict and war as also being what we call military-industrial conflicts. It is the whole business of war.

IEP also measures the economic cost of the violence that the world spends each year and this figure, 17.5 trillion was the cost of violence for the last year. It is a huge figure. Many of you would be not surprised to know that most of this cost is coming from military expenditure and where does the military expenditure come from? It mostly comes from governments. So, who do we need to approach when we're talking about financing? We need to be looking at why governments are spending so much money on military expenditure that is contributing to more violence in our society. That figure of 2,200 per person is the equivalent of 17.5 trillion and I just wanted to mention that 2,200 per person is what that cost of violence is equivalent to 2,200 per person spent on violence.

Many of you might know that that is even more than the per capita income of people in developing countries. This is quite an important figure to be able to remember and what we could do if we just took 10% of that 17, 1% of that 17.5 trillion. If we could use that money instead of spending it on violence, think of what we could do to make the world a better place, and what we could do with spending that money on doing good things. So, positive peace is what IEP has been measuring on what we call the actual peace of the state of the world today. IEP calls that negative peace because it is looking at the broken bits in a society, the dysfunctional aspects, conflict, violence, and fear of violence are what we call the dysfunctional aspects of society. However, we found that it is not enough to understand peace if you only look at the broken bits of a society.

In other words, it is like looking at the human body. Yes, medical science and doctors have been able to discover wonderful ways to deal with our illnesses and diseases but as you know, to look at health, to make a healthy body, you also have to look at what makes a body healthy. We also know that good exercise and a regular diet make our body healthy. This is what now we call a positive piece. We not only look at what is broken, we also have to look at what are the positive elements and IEP is researching what comes up to be the most common characteristics in peaceful countries and what makes peaceful countries peaceful. We came up with what we call the set of eight interrelated factors or pillars of positive peace. The Global Peace Index measures the absence of violence or the fear of violence but now we also need to look at what we call positive peace. Positive peace is defined as the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. We should look at it as two sides of a coin. You need two sides to the coin, and we need negative and positive peace to be able to address peace and to be able to contribute to building peace. These eight pillars, as you can see here, are well-functioning, government, equitable distribution of resources, free flow of information, good relations with neighbors, high level of human capital, acceptance of the rights of others, low level of corruption, and sound business environment. These eight are all interrelated, they do not



work individually because they are all interrelated. Working together and putting the information together for these eight pillars contributes to creating a peaceful society and a peaceful community. We have been able to provide that evidence and data which is so important in being able to advance the sustainable development goals

so that you can show how you can contribute to the sustainable development goals by using this positive peace framework, what we call a monitoring tool or an advocacy tool. What are the benefits?

Why would we have this and why is it important to have a positive peace framework? Well, we found that through our research, the benefits of being able to use and contribute to positive peace led to higher per capita income, stronger resilience within the communities, better environmental outcomes, higher measures of well-being, and better performance on the sustainable development goals. So, this positive framework can be a practical tool for you to use in your monitoring and advocacy for the Sustainable Development Goals. This is some of the information that you can find in our report, which I brought, just to show you, this is the Global Peace Index, and this is the Positive Peace Report from which I have taken the information.

The majority of the eight pillars are correlated to the 12 targets of SDG 16. They are very strongly aligned with the positive peace framework and the pillars. What we have been able to show is that you could also use the positive peace framework as a critique of the 17 goals to show whether the goals are performing or not performing. One of the things that we have been able to show is that the issue of corruption which you would think is a serious issue is only mentioned as one of the targets out of the 169 targets in the Sustainable Development Goal. For us, this is quite surprising when you know the seriousness of corruption and the importance of how corruption can drive conflict and all sorts of tensions and also contribute to the crisis and global crisis that we are facing today.

Yet, it is only one target out of the 169 and it is in Goal 1, so this is why IEP is focusing also on the low levels of corruption as one of its key pillars. The data that you can use from our reports could contribute to how you could address this issue of corruption which is an underlying goal and target as part of the SDGs agenda. Another example is the increasing lack of media freedoms around the world, which we already discussed in detail yesterday and this is an important area. The lack of media freedoms is a concerning issue and it is one of the issues that are part of SDG 16. This is why at EIP, we measure the issues of the free flow of information and how we need to have a society where there is a free flow of information.

The lack of media freedom that we have been facing presents a challenge for us to see how we can address that issue. Using the positive piece framework, we can provide evidence and data to support how we can address this issue of lack of media freedom. Many of you might know, that with digitalization, the rise of what now we call misinformation and disinformation. It is presenting a huge challenge for the world now in being able to have access to freedom of information. These are some of the organizations that IEP partners with to be able to work on how we can contribute to building peace in the communities.



Goal 17, Global Partnerships, is the glue that links all the goals. This is why Goal 17 which I just like to stress for many of us, is the actual goal that we must all be able to contribute to because it is the glue that connects all the goals. When we are talking about partnerships, we are talking about building collaborations and connecting with the count. There is a shared responsibility for us to be able to develop partnerships, collaborations, and particularly international solidarity on so many of the issues that we are dealing with from climate, and economic inequality, to the displacement of refugees, mass migration, or governance affairs including corruption.

We need to work in partnership as diverse thinking leads to better solutions. We need to work together in a way that we can show leadership, we can work with advocacy and influence and also, we connect with communities, people, and organizations to build cultures of learning. A crucial aspect of the SDGs, especially in the context of the International Day of Peace, is the strong link between advocating for sustainable development goals and the fundamental principles of human rights. The Sustainable Development Goals are really rooted in human rights principles, with the "leave no one behind" principle being particularly important. Therefore, I would like to end with a poem that is based on the principle of 'leave no one behind', this was written by an Aboriginal woman who is a writer and poet, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and she is from my country.

#### "All One Race"

Black tribe, yellow tribe, red, white or brown,  
From where the sun jumps up to where it goes down,  
Herrs and pukka-sahibs, demoiselles and squaws,  
All one family, so why make wars?  
They're not interested in brumby runs,  
We don't hanker after Midnight Suns;  
I'm for all humankind, not colour gibes;  
I'm international and never mind tribes.

Black, white or brown race, yellow race or red,  
From the torrid equator to the ice-fields spread,  
Monsieurs and senors, lubras and fraus,  
All one family, so why family rows?  
We're not interested in their igloos,  
They're not mad about kangaroos;  
I'm international, never mind place;  
I'm for humanity, all one race.

**Panelist 3: Sounding an alarm for urgent action on increasing internationally comparable, gender-disaggregated, available data collection**

[Click here to watch Dr. Ranjana Kumari's remarks](#)

*Dr. Ranjana Kumari is the Director of Centre for Social Research as well as Chairperson of Women Power Connect. Dr. Kumari has dedicated her life to empowering women across the South Asia region and is also a prolific writer of many well-known publications. She has served as the Coordinator of the South Asia Network Against Trafficking (SANAT) in Persons and is a member of the Central Advisory Board on "Pre Conception and Pre Natal Diagnostic Tests Act, 2001", as well as the Central Advisory Committee for Prevention of Trafficking in Women and Children. Dr. Ranjana Kumari combines the two roles of a women activist and scholar with great felicity and panache. Having dedicated her life to significant social causes, Dr. Ranjana Kumari continues to impact the lives of many with her dedication and zeal. She has her MA, M.Phil and Ph.D. in Political Science from Jawahar Lal Nehru University.*



20 September 2023 marks a very critical day for Indian women. I would like to draw your attention to this achievement because it is earned after a fight and struggle. Women's lives are full of struggle, but this one was for getting women political power. Unless women hold 50% of decision-making positions at various levels, I do not think we would be in these circumstances. Today, while I am participating at the SDGs Conference, at the Parliament of India, a bill that has been fought for the last 27 years has passed following Prime Minister Modi's proposal and 554 Members of the House have accepted it. As a result, we have 33% of seats reserved in India's parliament for women, which is going to make an impactful difference. This is a point where I would like to bring in the importance of gender-disaggregated data and its impact. However, the sad news is that we have not been able to achieve even one-fifth of what we set out to achieve seven years back.

The pandemic was a big disruption for the setback in the implementation of the SDGs, but I do not think we can blame everything that went wrong because of the pandemic. At its halfway point, the SDGs are failing because most of the countries did not muster the political will and put their resources in the place that they should have put to achieving the Global Goals. We must look at what happens when we do have the correct, accurate, scientifically generated information and data. It is not only that 70% of the countries do not know what the status of women's gainful employment is but also, 40% of countries are not aware of land rights or land ownership of women.

I can continue commenting on how many countries reported when SDGs data was collated together. How many areas of progress have been too slow at the current rate? What will happen to women if the data comes to us? If we analyze that data, then we are looking at an estimated 300 years to end child marriage. It will take 286 years to close the gap in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws. However, this is achievable. Every country can set up a committee, or an expert board to review the laws from the gender lens and a gender perspective.

There are various laws that we inherited as we have spent 200 years as a British Colony. We continued to implement those for the past 75 years since independence. We need amendments for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership. India has made some steps towards achieving this; however, it took 47 years to attain equal representation in parliament. What is missing here is the political will of the nations to make progress and to get women equal opportunities. When we have the data, we can tailor the strategies and be able to change that situation if we have that information available.

In India, we had to build a whole data set from independence till now addressing the question of where women are in terms of power and decision-making. When we presented the data that we started on the eve of independence, 75 years back, only 3% were women in comparison to today's participation rate of 14%. Where are we in terms of women getting represented, how do you call it a democracy if women are not even sitting equally to make all types of decisions? Are women only there to vote and to bring others to power? Is the role of women household work only or is it more than that? If it is more than that, then look at this data and notice what is going wrong.

In post-pandemic so many girls have dropped out of school, especially from the lower income group communities. They started working with their mothers. So many girl children are never sent back to school because they are pushed into earning that income as it is needed for the survival of the family. They did not have enough resources to survive. In so many countries across the globe, the girl children are still in that position. On top of this situation, there is a concern for those children in terms of physical safety and sexual security. Eventually, the majority have been pushed into child marriage and thus the data is escalating about child marriage. The dropout rate has gone up, now we need to know the exact percent. When we started working in gender-critical districts in our country at the Center for Social Research, nobody agreed with us and denied the fact that girls have dropped out. When we looked at school rosters we asked where the girls were. Almost 20% of girls have never gone back to school and it is a very high number for a country that has decided to give the right to education as a constitutional guarantee.



When you have the data, you have informed policies. On the other side, you have informed advocacy, and it is extremely important for all of us who are working on different kinds of human rights themes. Accurate data collection is required because we have to all go back after reviewing the current concerning status of the SDGs that we have not been able to achieve more than 15%, to start working. So, we in fact need more gender-disaggregated data. Data has immense power. If the community is aware of what is happening, then there is not only sensitization and advocacy that happens, but also policymakers are enabled to design accurate policies. They can design correct interventions and, of course, impact assessment is extremely important.

There is one UN initiative that oversees gender budgeting in all our countries. India adopted this and when we do gender budgeting, then every penny spent will have to be seen from the perspective of who it is benefiting. What is the problem standing in front of us as are we not able to collect gender-disaggregated data? The first important issue is that we do not have the kind of understanding, index, or scale on which we are able to collect that data. So, many of our data collection machinery is not equipped with this working methodology.

When we started talking about women-headed households, everybody in the government questioned the meaning of women-headed households. Our data does not show any women head households. It is only men as they are the farmers. Women are not the farmers and surprisingly 70% of agriculture is handled by women only. Whether men are working or are out of their homes and working in different cities because of migration and migrant labor, women are left behind with children to make all the decisions, from



agriculture to health and education. It took years for us to convince our census data collection which happens once in 10 years and because of COVID disruption, we have not been able to do that. The data that we were supposed to compose in 2021 was accepted to be collected in an area where our enumerators go and ask who is the head of the house. However, in India, women are used to saying that either their husband or any elder male member is the head of the household. They tell us that their spouse is not there, he is in Bombay or Kanpur, wherever in the country but he is the head of the household. Women do not even think if they are the main providers, or they do not consider themselves as the head of the household.

I think if women-headed households were included in our census as one of the categories for data enumeration it would be driven by the cultural social understanding of how we collect our data. Now, the other fact that is very important is resources to get extensive data collection. We are making a lot of conjectures and observational calculations. I feel that it is important to understand the kind of data collection and so many aspects of it where we need to invest in improving the data infrastructure.

My call to action is to invest in a well-functioning data infrastructure because, without that, it is only a blind game. That is why only 15% in seven years are still not even one-fifth the way. Standardization is important because data needs to be comparable. A lot of data was sent when we were collating reports in the country. They are not comparable. There must be the same standards when you are looking at the data and it has to be global, so we can get a universal picture of what is happening. Most of the low-income countries are suffering because of these issues and there is not much progress because of resource crunch, debt crisis, war, and economies have gone down after the pandemic. Additionally, we have to take responsibility for capacity building, data collection, and enumerators. There is no way that we can get the right data unless they understand how to obtain it. There is a lot of good research that has been generated but there is a majority of people who are ignorant about those facts and those kinds of studies and research.

To conclude, the urgency of increasing internationally comparable gender-disaggregated data collection cannot be overstated. It is a call to action that demands the attention of governments, organizations, and academics worldwide. By working together to close the data gap, we can take meaningful steps towards a more equitable and just world. It is time to sound the alarm and act. Now with the availability of artificial intelligence and the technology that we have in hand, there should not be any excuse. The gender-disaggregated data will tell you that we are sitting on climate negotiations and women are missing, one or two in the corner of the table. Men create war and women suffer but we don't have any way to play a role in stopping that war we want to.

**Panelist 4: Strengthening media institutions and political commitments for sustainable peace and security**

[Click here to watch Jenifer Vaughan Fenton's remarks](#)

*Jenifer Vaughan (Fenton) has been the spokesperson at the United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Syria since May 2019. Ms. Vaughan attends the SDGs Conference in her personal capacity. Previously, she worked for Al Jazeera in Doha and New York, and CNN in Atlanta, Jerusalem, London, and Abu Dhabi, holding senior positions, including an Executive Producer. Ms. Vaughan also worked for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Palestine, and the UN Refugee Agency in New York. Vaughan held the Yale Poynter Fellow-in-Residence for the 2017–18 academic year. She has won several major industry news awards, including multiple Peabody Awards.*



The Secretary-General noted in his annual report that peace and security are threatened by the evolving nature of conflict, shrinking civic space, misinformation, hate speech, unregulated cyberspace, the climate emergency, and the rollback of women's rights. The political will has been lacking. Clearly, journalism plays a pivotal role in conflict resolution, safeguarding human rights, and fostering sustainable development. Sadly, journalism is a risky and far too deadly endeavor. Media is consistently

attacked and undermined in many contexts. Numerous studies have noted that across the world, female journalists and media professionals encounter escalating online and offline assaults. Gender-based acts of violence encompass stigma, stigmatization, misogynistic hate speech, cyberbullying, physical aggression, sexual assault, and tragically even murder.

Strengthening media institutions and media freedoms is essential for the promotion of democracy to enable the free flow of information and to protect the interests of society. The United Nations has among its primary objectives, preventing conflict and promoting international cooperation and since its founding, it has evolved to take on a wide range of global issues, including the vital role of media. The UN also recognizes the critical role that media plays in conflict resolution, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. The news media dictates what conflict, and its aspects get covered and how much airtime or front-page news coverage a conflict receives. Who speaks about the conflict in the media? Do we use the main or auxiliary players in the conflict aid agencies, terrorists, or the civilians who are impacted? The media can frame a matter in a way that makes it more intractable. Media can act as a weapon of violence, spreading hate and false information.

It can also assign and employ stereotypes and give people labels that are dehumanizing. News media can also provide accurate information in conflict zones, which is critical to help civilians stay safe and to access other necessities. It can also reduce conflict and help aid with resolution by providing accurate information in a timely manner. Also, it sheds light on the root causes of conflict and provides a path for meaningful dialogue. It can also hold parties to account, expose abuses of power, violations of human rights, and crimes of war, and act as a watchdog. The Secretary-General noted in his annual report on the organization that the UN has created mechanisms in an effort to bolster media development in places of conflict and countries. The report also highlights the work being done to fight back against the miss and disinformation, as well as hate speech and efforts, of course, including monitoring and training. Partnerships play an important role and include media, social media companies, and civil society organizations.

Obviously, the media variables are very complex. News media environments are varied. For example, there are government or quasi-government media monopolies, and large media conglomerates. The news values differ at different outlets as well as to the extent to which governments control communication through mechanisms such as strict penal codes, and legal frameworks that restrict or enable the freedoms of the press. There is also communication infrastructure that may be limited or advanced and may suffer from more related or other damage. The interests and motivations of media outlets and journalists, of course, are wide-ranging, and communication methods also differ depending on the country and the region. Communication Technology continues to change the media landscape, and it is challenging to manage the volume of information that we are receiving. There is, of course, a lack of political will to achieve these goals.

There are not only legal protections for the freedom of the press but also constitutional guarantees. Journalists and media workers have the right to be protected from harassment, violence, and censorship. There needs to be a political will to establish conditions where journalists can carry out their work without retribution. Alongside these information laws, political commitments are needed to strengthen the freedom of information to help ensure government transparency and accountability for journalists, citizens, and affected persons to request and access public documents. Regulatory bodies need to have clear mandates that can help ensure fairness, as well as accountability in the media industry and international organizations. Other countries and bodies also should encourage and share best practices and resources. Media organizations also need to self-regulate adhering to ethical codes of conduct and also diverse funding and independence. To the degree possible, funding should be diverse and media outlets should try to reduce their dependence on single revenue streams as this runs the risk of making them vulnerable to external pressures.

So, a combination of philanthropies, subscriptions, memberships, grants, and other funding to investigative journalism projects is critical, especially ones that aim to uncover corruption and hold powerful entities accountable. Media pluralism is also critical. We need to promote a diverse media landscape and have independent and community-led efforts. Education and media literacy are becoming increasingly essential programs, including at schools, teaching members of the public, engaging civil society, and combating disinformation and fake news.

Along with holding the social media platforms accountable, it needs to be fostered and media outlets need to prioritize. Public interest reporting and strengthening media institutions must be a process that is ongoing, combining a number of things that I underlined, including legal affairs as well as regulatory framework. A trustworthy and vibrant media ecosystem is one in which there is both freedom of the press and responsible journalism. Governments, international organizations, and civil society must work together to create an environment where media can operate freely and responsibly. Media must be strengthened and protected.





## PANEL SESSION 2: PRESS FREEDOM AS AN INSTRUMENT TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

**Tania Bozaninou, To Vima Newspaper, Journalist | Greece**

**Moderator: Opening Remarks**

[Click here to watch Tania Bozaninou's remarks](#)

*Tania Bozaninou is a journalist from Greece working since 1997 for To Vima on Sunday, as its Editor-in-Chief. Ms. Bozaninou covers a variety of topics, from diplomacy, foreign affairs to human rights and migration. She has reported from several countries in the Middle East, including Afghanistan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and Europe. After completing her studies of Economics at the University of Athens, Tania Bozaninou received an MA in Journalism and Communications Policy from City University in London.*



In the 25 years I have been working for To Vima, in Greece, the last six as an editor-in-chief, I have been in a position to witness the developments in journalism, some good and some bad, but also the undeniable decline in press freedom. I will begin my speech by giving you two definitions of press freedom, not because I think you do not know what press freedom is, but because I want to show you the evolution of the definition of freedom of the press through the decades. The first one is

by George Orwell, who lived in the first half of the 20th century: “Freedom of the press means the freedom to criticize and oppose” – as simple as that. Definitions of the 21st century, such as the latest one from Reporters Without Borders, describe press freedom as “the ability of journalists to select, produce, and disseminate news independent of political, economic, legal, and social interference and in the absence of threats to their physical and mental safety”. The definition of press freedom had to be broadened in this century in order to encompass the more complex threats that journalists face today.

I come from Greece which ranks in the worst position of all European Union countries concerning press freedom. According to this year's World Press Freedom Index, which evaluates 180 countries, Greece is in position 107. Unfortunately, my country is not an exception, but it is the norm: the environment for journalism is bad in seven out of ten countries in the world today, and satisfactory in only three out of ten. According to an analysis by UNESCO of data on freedom of expression, around 85% of people live in countries where press freedom has declined over the past five years. Several of the most populous countries have declined from very bad to atrocious, such as China, Egypt, Turkey, and Russia.

The entire American continent, including the United States, no longer has any country where press freedom is deemed good. In the Asia-Pacific, there are some of the worst countries regarding press freedom. In Africa, nearly half of the countries are problematic. Last in the regional ranking is the Middle East and North Africa, which continue to be the world's most dangerous region for journalists. Europe continues to be the best continent to work as a journalist, but even there the situation is problematic in some cases. I suppose you have heard of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta, Jan Kuciak in Slovakia, and Giorgos Karaivaz in Greece, who were all murdered in the last six years because they were doing their job. They were investigating corruption, and they were murdered because their investigation displeased the corrupt networks.

Even in Germany, which has a good ranking in the Press Freedom Index, number 21 out of 180, a record number of cases of violence against journalists were recorded last year. In Greece, just in the last five weeks, two journalists were beaten up in public places, one in a restaurant where he was eating with his family and one in a sports stadium. The second one is a colleague of mine. He was physically attacked by a businessman and his bodyguards, who were displeased by one of my colleague's articles. In both cases, the journalists sustained non-life-threatening injuries. But the point was not to kill them. The point was to threaten all journalists in Greece not to mess with these particular people.

Everything I have mentioned so far concerns the "traditional" threats that curtail press freedom: murder and attacks. Unfortunately, there are many more modern threats that might not harm journalists physically, but they do harm press freedom. For example, in 118 out of the 180 countries in the Press Freedom Index, politicians are involved in massive disinformation or propaganda campaigns, which results in blurring the difference between true and false. This is made possible thanks to new technology. But apart from new technology, those who want to mess with press freedom have many other tools at their disposal. I would like to introduce just two of them. One is media capture, which describes the way politicians and businessmen collaborate in order to control the media. Instead of a government directly controlling or closing a newspaper or a TV station because they are too critical of its policies, it colludes with friendly businessmen who buy the newspaper, the website, or the TV station. Under the new owner, the news medium stops being critical of the government, and the journalists who do not comply are simply fired.

Media capture is one of the gravest and most intractable new threats to press freedom around the world. In country after country, collusion between governments and wealthy media owners has become the preferred method of control over the media. In countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Russia it is already the dominant form of media ownership.

The second new tool used to curtail press freedom I would like to mention to you is SLAPPs, which stands for Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation or, more simply, intimidation lawsuits. These are lawsuits against journalists with the purpose of censoring, intimidating, and silencing them by burdening them with legal costs. In a typical SLAPP, the plaintiff does not even care to win the lawsuit, because the goal is to exhaust the journalists financially and psychologically with mounting legal costs so that the journalists themselves decide to stop being critical. SLAPPs are a very real threat to press freedom even in places where journalists are generally respected, such as in Western Europe. The people who want to control an "annoying" journalist are mostly politicians or public servants. They use strategic lawsuits often based on overstrict libel laws or vaguely drafted privacy rules, and more often than not they succeed in silencing their target. This form of harassment is used mainly against reporters and human rights defenders.

I would like to end on a positive note. To stop such misuse of the legal system, the European Commission drafted an anti-SLAPP directive which will hopefully be adopted next year - things go slowly in the European Union. Canada, Australia, and more than 30 American states, including New York, have anti-SLAPP laws in place.

---

### **Batya Ungar-Sargon, Newsweek, Opinion Editor | USA**

#### **Panelist 1: State of Press Freedom under Autocratic Regimes: State`s control of media as a venue of propaganda**

[Click here to watch Batya Ungar-Sargon`s remarks](#)

*Batya Ungar-Sargon is the Opinion Editor of Newsweek. She is the author of "Bad News: How Woke Media Is Undermining Democracy" and the forthcoming "Promised Land: The Working-Class Struggle for the American Dream." Formerly, she was the Opinion Editor of the Forward & has written for the New York Times, the Washington Post, Foreign Policy, Newsweek, the New York Review of Books Daily, & many other publications. Batya Ungar-Sargon has appeared numerous times on MSNBC, NBC, the Brian Lehrer Show, NPR, and at other media outlets. She holds a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley.*



There are many autocratic regimes across the globe that you will hear about, but they do not recognize freedom of the press or even the sanctity of human life, where speaking the truth can cost a journalist his or her freedom. I think a lot of us must have heard about Evan Gershkovich, an American Wall Street Journal Reporter who is imprisoned by Russia. These countries routinely inflict human and civil rights abuses against journalists and its unspeakable. 12 journalists were reportedly killed last

year for reporting on the war in Ukraine and Russia. 13 journalists were killed in Mexico in 2022. Nothing that I am about to underline should be seen as in any way making an equivalence between what happens in those countries and what happens in Western democracies. Human rights abuses against journalists, murder, culture of violence, and impunity are atrocities that cannot be compared to anything else. Unfortunately, many democratic regimes have begun to engage in a culture of oppression and incrimination, often ironically in the name of fighting misinformation and disinformation. I would like to be extremely clear this is in no way comparable to killing and jailing journalists or allowing cartels to get away with killing and torturing journalists.

Yet, when a government engages in efforts to suppress the truth about those in power and is met by a willing journalistic cast that has decided to assist in this suppression in the name of fighting misinformation, one can end up with a similar effect when it comes to the electorate. In other words, if the point of a free press is a free electorate whose freedom is in part predicated upon some level of being informed, then the sad truth is that journalism can be stifled by journalists if they are unwilling to stand up to government overreach, even when that overreach does not come in the form of imprisonment or physical threats. What we have learned in the US of late is that social threats, social status, and class solidarity can have a similar chilling effect on free speech and a commitment to diversity of thought.

Autocrats are very adept at suffocating free speech and a free press with state-sponsored violence. However, in democracies, class interests can also suppress free speech while perhaps not as evil, terrifying, or violent as physical violence, it can result in a similarly conformist and unfree civic society, one that should horrify people committed to a free press, especially, we Americans, with our First Amendment in the US State Agencies, have routinely intervened to spread or silence journalistic stories of late most famously.

I will present one example of how this happened in the name of fighting misinformation. In the run-up to the 2020 Presidential Election, President Biden's son, Hunter Biden left his laptop in a computer repair shop, we now know by his own admission that it was his laptop that contained compromising information. The laptop was full of images of Hunter where he could be seen in compromising positions, as well as emails that showed a vast enterprise of influence peddling with representatives of foreign governments. Some of them are adversaries that may have implicated Joe Biden, we do not know yet. Yet when this story first came out, it was vigorously ignored, voluntarily by the mainstream legacy press so much so that as a candidate, President Biden was never even asked to deny that this was his son's laptop, which it turned out it was. Instead of robust coverage, the media ran cover for the Biden campaign, which also colluded with a former acting director of the CIA, again, this is all reported. This is his own admission that got 50 intelligence officials to spread the lie.



We now know that the laptop was Russian disinformation. Twitter then locked the account of the newspaper that had published the story to keep that vital information from spreading. Emails have subsequently revealed how often the Biden administration reached out to social media companies like Twitter and Facebook successfully petitioning them to ban the accounts of established journalists for the sin of publishing stories unfavorable to the administration, the White House successfully petitioned Facebook to remove post discouraging people from getting the COVID vaccine or discussing what turned out to be the almost certain actual origin of COVID-19 and others were booted from Twitter at the White House behest. Autocrats also are very good at protecting the free speech of people who agree with them. The US government participated in this regime of censorship so aggressively that recently a Federal Appeals Court said that the Biden Administration had violated the First Amendment.

Again, I want to make it very clear that none of this comes close to jailing or killing journalists, but again, we are not here to discuss the evils of murder but rather the evils of suppressing the freedom of the press and silencing speech against our constitution. It is all the more egregious when that speech turns out to be true and yet with silence because of political purposes. Of course, the test of free speech is always when it comes to speech you disagree with, every autocrat can protect the speech of people they agree with. The worst part is that the media in America has been completely complicit in all of this.

None of this would've been possible if the media had simply stood up to what we all were after, the benign requests from a Democratic government or even no requests at all. As in the case of the Hunter Biden laptop story, in repressive regimes, the media is forced to report things that they know are lies but here the tragedy is that members of the media cast have come to believe whatever the administration wants them to and the reason for that is very simple, capture. The American media has become deeply captured by a socio-economic elite that is almost uniformly ultra-progressive and no longer believes that free speech is an absolute value, and that political debate is the sacred bedrock of a democracy. Some 96% of American journalists who gave political donations gave them to the Democratic Party, even though they only got 25% of the electorates' votes.

96% of journalists speak from the same position as a quarter of Americans, majority of them have graduate degrees. They make at least twice the median income, although most of them make much more, and vanishingly a few of them believe that those they disagree with deserve to make their case unimpeded to the American people. A lot of that is being done again and they use the terms misinformation and disinformation and push a political and economic agenda. American journalists routinely end up protecting the very people they're meant to be holding to account while smearing and silencing the working class who tend to be more socially conservative.

American journalists are now on the side of those in power. They go to the same elite universities as the tech billionaires and politicians they are supposed to cover, and their children end up in the same elite schools and they end up in the same neighborhoods at the same time. 97% of political donations that came out of Silicon Valley, surprisingly went to the Democratic Party. So, there are two ways to stop the truth from emerging in a free press. One is to kill journalists in jail and the other is to wait for them to become part of the same elites that benefit from the status quo and then they have a vested interest in protecting the lies of those in power to whom their own status is bound, making them reactionary; conservatives who will defend the Biden Administration or the Obama Administration before them. This panel is about the UN General Assembly's Sustainable Development Goals, which are noble goals including reducing all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.

However, the American press would not report the skyrocketing levels of violent crime plaguing low-income Americans, especially black Americans, and here is the worst part about it. They did not need to be told by a democratic administration not to report on the crime wave, which is highly localized in democratic cities. They did not have to be threatened with prison to not report on it. It came naturally to them. It is how they protect their elite status with ideas like defunding the police, which proliferated in 2020 and 2021. If you are a working journalist who knew people whose lives had been destroyed by crime and dared to speak up against it, you were ostracized, humiliated, and shamed into silence by your fellow journalists. Stories about crime are rife with misinformation and racism. They declared at the federally funded NPR a sentiment that was echoed over and over by the Legacy media. Now, imagine being the victim of rape or carjacking or the family member of a person who was murdered and having to read that headline.

I am sure everybody thinks education is a vital goal. Yet, thanks to the censorship of the Biden Administration, a compliant press, and complicit social media companies, the disastrous impact of learning loss due to school lockdowns on low-income children was hidden from view, as was how little children were in danger of negative outcomes from COVID-19. It will take a generation for black children to make up the impact of losing two years of school while rich white kids were back in school within six months. During these lockdowns, which got no pushback from the mainstream media, physical abuse of children skyrocketed and so did suicide attempts. What about Target 5.2, eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public in private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation? One fact you will not read about in the American media is the fact that one-third of all women crossing our southern border illegally admit to being raped.

Imagine what the actual number is as a third of these women admit that they were raped on the way here, including children as young as eight years old. Under President Biden, the US is seeing more human trafficking and more sex trafficking than we have certainly in my lifetime, probably in our entire history. Why don't you hear about it in the press class? Solidarity American journalists are in the class that consumes cheap illegal migrant labor, not the class who are competing for those jobs. The point I am trying to make is that there are many ways for a regime to control the media for purposes of propaganda and not all of them are violent. Not all of them occur under autocracies and even functioning democracies can have a dysfunctional press.

All it takes is for the people tasked with holding power to account, to get a taste of power, to cultivate deep contempt for the citizens they're meant to be informing. All it takes is for journalists to think it is their job to tell people how to think or what to value instead of supplying them with facts so they can make up their own minds, the way you do with somebody you respect. Autocrats have contempt for human life and human rights, but nothing compares to the atrocity that represents and the atrocities it results in. However, if you have contempt for the values of your fellow man because they do not agree with you, you can end up robbing them of the truth too and using journalism to spread misinformation in the name of defending the truth. I hope this goes without saying to me, but for an American, the government should never ever be involved in the business of fighting misinformation.

---

### **Paula Penfold, Investigative Journalist, Stuff Circuit | New Zealand**

#### **Panelist 2: Gender-based violence and violations against women journalists**

[Click here to watch Paula Penfold's remarks](#)

*Paula Penfold is an investigative journalist based in Auckland, New Zealand. Penfold reports for the video-led team Stuff Circuit at the country's largest media organization, Stuff. Her work consistently returns to human rights themes across a wide range of issues. A five-year investigation into the miscarriage of justice Auckland man Teina Pora for rape and murder contributed to the quashing of his convictions; two landmark projects exposed hidden aspects of New Zealand's role in the war in Afghanistan; and a major 2022 investigation, Fire and Fury, analyzed the motives of the key players in New Zealand's "freedom movement", whose occupation of the country's Parliament grounds ended in a violent riot. Stuff Circuit's work is frequently awarded both nationally and globally, and Paula Penfold was named New Zealand's broadcast reporter of the year in 2022 and 2019.*

Tēnā koutou katoa, a greeting in te reo Māori to acknowledge you all. People probably think nothing bad happens in New Zealand. The World Press Freedom Index for 2023 ranks New Zealand 13th.



We are described as a model for public interest journalism. We apparently benefit from a high degree of press freedom. It is true, relatively speaking. No journalist has died in New Zealand because of our profession. There are no state-sponsored invasions of reporters' homes or extrajudicial imprisonments. Unfortunately, the World Press Freedom Index is wrong when it says journalists in New Zealand work in an environment free from violence and intimidation. Increasingly, there is an

insidious threat, but it is not the state that is the problem. It is our fractured society, and a growing distrust, and more than that, a growing hatred towards journalists, a hatred borne disproportionately by women journalists. Given my brief is gendered violence, I want to step back, briefly, to 2013, when my colleagues and I began investigating a man's wrongful conviction for rape and murder. I work in a small team, and I was the only woman. So, when an email arrived saying I was "infatuated with the convict" I took note. My male producer did not receive the same email. I found it distasteful, but I put it to one side. 10 years on, if only things were that quaint.

Last year we investigated the worst spreaders of mis- and disinformation in New Zealand for a documentary we called *Fire and Fury*. It came about because of a protest inspired by the trucker's convoy in Canada. So-called "freedom movement" protestors converged on the capital, Wellington, and set up camp in the Parliament grounds. We were familiar with some of the key players, and we knew it was not, as they maintained, a protest of "peace and love". It was a recruitment drive and it radicalized ordinary New Zealanders.

When we started to see some of the leaders use the term "ungovernable" — and others call for a military coup — we decided we needed to start filming, on a day which, coincidentally, was the day the police made their final move. It turned into a riot the likes of which our country had never seen before, in the very seat of our democracy. When we have reported in countries like Afghanistan we receive security training, of course, in order to try to keep ourselves safe. We used that training more in Wellington that day than we ever did reporting in Afghanistan, the Philippines or Mexico; countries where just being a journalist can put a target on your back. We were abused and threatened. We were made to leave the protest by an angry, threatening group, who physically escorted us out, in spite of the fact that we were clearly entitled to be there to report. We went back in, and once the fires started and the gas canisters were exploding, we found ourselves in a no man's land between advancing riot police and enraged protestors, it was time to go. Our security training had drilled into us to always have an exit route. The violence and intimidation that day was directed at all journalists.



But what came in the wake of the documentary was plainly gendered, most of it was directed at me. It is also obvious from the language. Most of it is too offensive to repeat here. But I thought it might be instructive for you to get a largely sanitized sense of it. I apologize for the tone of what remains, but it is authentic.

From Joseph: “You are a complete piece of s.... You are lucky we do not meet. F you, [insert offensive term for prostitute]! The sooner you die the better.”

Peter agreed. “Even more citizens are aware of how much of a [c-word] you actually are. Eventually, your kids will despise you. What a lying piece of shit you are.”

And Sean simply said: “Wake up Paula. We are growing. We are GROWING. And you will all burn.” That’s a very small sample. But you get the idea.

When I was informed by a source that one of the subjects of Fire and Fury had my home address, my company put my family and me into hiding while we beefed up the already improved security at home. This happens in Aotearoa New Zealand, where we pride ourselves on press freedom, the 13th best in the world.

We do report some of these threats to the police, and sometimes a constable from the local station will ring and say, “Do you feel safe at the moment” and you will say: Yes, I guess. That is the end of it. No proper inquiry is ever made. Those of us who are frequently updating our police 10-5 file, as it is known, with the latest threats all the files will be useful for is to help police with their investigations in the event of our premature deaths.

New Zealand, like many other jurisdictions, is not legislatively equipped to deal with this new violent, threatening world order. On the rare occasions people are charged, it does not necessarily play out how it should. One person we investigated for that documentary was arrested in March last year on charges of threatening to kill then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. He also has me and other journalists on his Nuremberg list of those he says should be brought before a military tribunal for crimes against humanity. He was released on bail but failed to turn up for his next court appearance, and he has been on the run ever since. Police will not tell us what they are doing to try to catch him. Male journalists are abused, too, of course, and put on Nuremberg lists. But the research shows they do not suffer the same degree of abuse and harassment as women do, nor the sexually violent abuse. It is worse, as usual, for women of color. It becomes even more concerning in light of research commissioned by New Zealand’s Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet into COVID misinformation.

It surveyed 2000 people and found, disturbingly, that 8 percent believed threatening to hurt someone is an acceptable way to achieve change. The same survey revealed that 54 percent of respondents who strongly believe in misinformation have avoided or stopped watching or reading mainstream media.

The tentacles of the “fake news” narrative have reached all the way to the South Pacific and they are strangling us too. I have come to realize this is not happening in spite of New Zealand being a liberal Western democracy. It is happening because we are a liberal Western democracy. It is all part of the same continuum and the same mechanisms through which we are seeing a rise in authoritarianism throughout the world.

What’s the result? A chilling effect, obviously. This is where so many of us as journalists struggle because of course, we do not want to be silenced. And yet every time we put our heads above the parapet, particularly on social media, and no matter how strong your blocking game, the attacks begin. So consciously or not, you reduce your presence. You think — and think again — about telling some stories. It is driving some journalists from the industry.

When you consider that misogyny is not only or necessarily hatred of or towards women, it is the control of women, this is a victory for those who wish to silence us and the stories we wish to tell.

Senior media figures are worried about it, of course. My former boss, a 30-year veteran, wrote in a piece last year that when the ballistic grading of the windows at one of our newsrooms was discussed at a senior management meeting, he realized things had changed. They see the online threats against us and the stress that engenders. They too worry about whether or when those threats transfer to real life. What do we do about it? Rebuilding trust in the media is key, not just for our financial survival but potentially our literal survival. Being transparent about our processes. Advocating in each of our jurisdictions for better legislation to protect us in the face of increasing violence. Encouraging media literacy through a whole-of-society approach.

This problem does not just affect us as individual journalists, it undermines the very foundation of our role in democracies, and we cannot fix it alone. I do feel encouraged that while hate and distrust, gendered, and all forms of violence towards journalists, are at unprecedented levels, the craft remains and continues to be pursued with excellence. I stay — in spite of it all — because I believe what we do matters.

[Click here to watch Abdulhamit Bilici's remarks](#)

*Abdulhamit Bilici is the Former Editor-in-Chief of the now-closed Zaman Newspaper. He was also the Chief Executive Officer of its English-language version, Today's Zaman. Mr. Bilici was the General Director of Cihan News Agency and the Editor of Aksiyon Weekly Magazine. He has a Master's Degree from Department of Economics at Istanbul University and has an MBA degree from Faculty of Management at Fatih University. Abdulhamit Bilici has been living in exile as a journalist in the USA after the failed coup attempt in Turkey. Mr. Bilici is an expert on Turkish politics and continues his journalism career by writing freelance articles for various media outlets.*



To present my case will be very easy because if I introduce myself, it will be sufficient to tell how awful the situation is when there is no press freedom. I used to be Editor-in-Chief of the largest Turkish newspaper, which does not exist anymore, so it is not even a yellow journal. It was not a mouthpiece newspaper and even our archives were deleted. I used to write in that newspaper column twice a week and now I cannot find those articles. Still, this is the smallest part of it because some of

my colleagues are still in jail. I am lucky; although I have been in exile for seven years and of course, even that does not describe the situation because it is not just my newspaper but 200 media outlets that have been shut down in the last seven years, especially after the 2016 coup attempt. Turkey became the biggest jailer of journalists in the world. I would like to underline that the relationship between human rights in any country and press freedom is very significant. Those who follow international relations will remember Turkey was a rising star just 10 years ago, not a long distance. It was a model of a rising democracy. It was an economic success story in a very volatile, very chaotic world; it is not the case now. I will share two statistics to help you in making a conclusion for yourself.

What is the relationship between press freedom and the rule of law, human rights, or justice? Turkey now ranks 165 out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom according to the World Press Freedom Index. Turkey was 59th out of 126 countries on the Rule of Law Index, a global index telling us about the quality of justice in any country. Turkey was in the mid-level but now after seven years of the destruction of the press freedom, where is it now in that index? It is now 117th out of 139, almost 50 to 40 countries down in terms of quality of justice, rule of law, and human rights.

When I listen to my colleagues' observations about the United States, Greece, and New Zealand, I am learning that there are always some problems to focus on and to talk about and work on in regard to progress. There is a very important quote from George Orwell: "Journalism is printing what someone else doesn't want to be printed. Any other thing is public relations."

If journalism is to print something that some people do not like to be printed, it is a default fact that you will be targeted. So, this is kind of given for a real journalist if we do our job but the scale of being targeted, being attacked, being not liked, may be different. In my case, my newspaper was shut down and I went into exile. In some French cases, they are being killed just because of writing facts that some sources of power do not like. It may be a government, a political leader, a mafia boss, a leader of a company, or a tribe. The nature of journalism has that intrinsic in it.

You may not think that is disturbing some people. There are different levels of threat, damage, and problems but as I said, there is a strong relationship between press freedom, human rights, and the rule of law but of course, it is not a one-way street. If there is press freedom, journalists must respect the rule of law and human rights; however, this is not the case. There was relative freedom of media in Turkey, but it did not support human rights but eventually destroyed it.

An Armenian colleague of mine who was a journalist was assassinated by an ultranationalist group, but they have been targeted first by a very mainstream newspaper. As a result of a silly story, they put him on target. This was the starting point of him being killed and at the end of the process. There was a very popular singer, the Turkish audience will know very well, Ahmet Kaya, whose exile process, and his death in Paris, happened after him being targeted by the media. So, there have been some other prominent journalists and intellectuals who have been targeted in cooperation with the security agencies of the Turkish state.

These stories were published by mainstream media. Even when there is freedom of the press, it does not mean that all journalists and media will use it to support human rights. In my former newspaper, we had special policies. There are different groups and minorities that are oppressed by the state's ideology. So, what we did was, we had some intentional policies to contribute to human rights, not to eliminate it. One of those attempts was to invite columnists, and reporters from different backgrounds to be present in our newsrooms and to write their views in the newspaper.



In Turkey, we have an Armenian minority, a Greek minority, of course, a very big majority of Kurds, but still a minority. We had intellectuals from these groups representing their views freely in the newspaper, which was a training and education for us, for all our staff. We need to empathize and understand their situation as they were raising awareness of the violations that they were subjected to. Other than the established media in Turkey, 90 to 95 percent of it was controlled by two families.

That was a big problem. Whenever we see a story that looks fabricated or fake, we could send a reporter to investigate the truth about it. The first book that we published in the newspaper was a collection of those fake stories and their correct versions as a book. My newspaper was established in the 1980s or mid-1980s, but we have newspapers with 80 years of history. We had our reporters trained in human rights awareness. Journalists are not angels, so we may have some biases as well. Thus, we need to have all this education and training to not make mistakes or to make mistakes.

It is not possible in journalism to be mistake-free. Sometimes we make mistakes without being aware of what we are doing. It is very important to be able to reach out to different people who are living in the same society. So that was a very big problem and for the founders of my newspapers, one of the priorities was to change perspective in the media and to reach out to other people that were neglected before, not to be populist, but just to give them a chance to express themselves. My newspaper's history goes back to before Erdogan and AKP but first, when it was established, it was attacked by the seculars because it was an outsider and new player in the game. It was a tiny newspaper when it started but it became the largest newspaper in 10 to 15 years. We had strong relations, and this was appreciated by the community. In the case of Zaman, the newspaper shows that it is possible, even if you are not happy with the existing media's establishment, you can start something from scratch, but you need to have good principles.

When AKP was founded and Erdogan was the leader of that party, we thought their approach and their perspective were very close to ours. They had some pious backgrounds, but they were open to the world. They were pushing for Turkey to be a European Union member. They were progressive; and had a conservative background but progressive policies. We gave full support to this party and to this leader until 2013, the year that an extensive state corruption scandal was discovered. We had to cover and write about that and that was the beginning of the decline of Turkish democracy including my victimhood.

Turkey in 2013 and in 2023 is like day and night. My conclusion is that Turkey was becoming a good example of Muslim democracy rising in a very troubled area but now it is also another example of how press freedom, democracy, and human rights are very interdependent on one another. A state cannot have a democracy without upholding human rights for all first.



---

**Christina Piaia, Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press, ProJourn Legal Manager | USA**

**Panelist 4: Upholding the rule of law for the protection of journalists: Increasing legal harassment towards media members**

[Click here to watch Christina Piaia's remarks](#)

*Christina Piaia is the legal manager for the Protecting Journalists Pro Bono Program at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. She oversees legal intakes for pro bono matters concerning prepublication review and access to public records and develops relationships with law firms and corporate partners to provide journalists with pro bono legal assistance. Prior to ProJourn, Ms. Piaia served as a trial attorney with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and supervised the Gender-Based Harassment Unit at the NYC Commission on Human Rights, working extensively on gender discrimination claims with a focus on community outreach and education.*

*Before the Commission, Christina Piaia spent three years as an international human rights attorney, working on the ground with local grassroots organizations. Ms. Piaia worked as a journalist for The Associated Press for five years before beginning law school. As a passionate public interest attorney, she serves as pro bono counsel for several nonprofits and on the board of the Chris Hondros Fund.*



As a former journalist, now a lawyer, I have incredible respect for reporting the most pressing news. I think sometimes we see legal harassment that journalists are facing on a global scale as something that is an attack against the press. However, some of these attacks are not being housed in terms of press freedom but using different areas of law to target journalists and make it more difficult to do their work. At the Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press, we have a US Press Freedom

Tracker that takes a look at what is happening here on the ground, for journalists both from illegal perspective as well as attacks, assaults, and imprisonment against journalists. Since 2017, in the US, there have been thousands of assaults, mostly at the hands of law enforcement, against journalists in the United States. 2020 and 2021, not surprisingly, were exceptionally bad. 630 journalists in 2020 were assaulted, 145 in 2021 and although the numbers are lower this year, we continue to remain troubled about the state of press freedom here in the US, which of course boasts to have the First Amendment and some incredible legal protections for press. However, as you can tell from those numbers, not by any means free from issues.

At the top of my mind are the recent deaths of two journalists here in the US. Jeff Kerman, a veteran investigative reporter for the Las Vegas Review-Journal, was killed last September, allegedly by the subject of one of his investigations. A few months after that, Dylan Lyons, a reporter for Spectrum News in Florida was fatally shot while reporting on the scene. We know that journalists should not have to fear reporting information. They should not have to fear challenging public officials, who have been accused of misusing their office or betraying the public trust. It remains crucial to know that these journalists are out there covering these communities and how we have to make sure that communities are informed and that we hold those in power accountable for their actions. We have an inability to make sure that we are protecting journalists' access to local records. Journalists are often forwarded by government officials to obtain requests for certain government records. Legal protections can help kind of make sure that critical information is in the hands of journalists as they need it. Turning to more of the legal elements, again, we have a lot of protections here on the ground.

In the US, journalists have been confronted with a wide range of legal threats, including subpoenas and prior restraints. For those who might not be familiar with prior restraint, those are court orders that prevent news organizations or journalists from publishing newsworthy information. So, they essentially barred journalists from reporting on matters of public interest. In 2022, we saw several prior restraint cases here in the US and thankfully some of the judicial systems are working and most of those were reversed or dissolved. However, these orders have a significant chilling effect and unless they are ultimately blocked, they can stop reporters from reporting on crucial stories. I think it is a bright spot in journalism here in the US and also across the globe, that has always existed but it might be coming more into the public eye, which is local journalism, community reporting where individuals from their community go to open meetings, making sure that they are covering whether it be a school board hearing or how election funds are being spent in their district or community.

I have spent most of this past year working on the ground in several states here in the US looking at smaller news organizations, sometimes two or three journalists reporting on police accountability, local government officials, and abuse. These individuals are doing such crucial work, that they really are sometimes in the eyes and ears of the community. So, I do see a bright spot of local journalism happening across the country. Whether or not you can find this local journalism, I think there is still a lot of crucial work that we have to do to make sure that we are looking at all aspects of reporting. However, what I am seeing from a legal perspective becoming a threat is the actual status of the organization itself.



So, as you can imagine, many newspapers have shuttered news organizations or have been dissolved and individuals are starting to find creative models to encourage news and reporting. One of the ways is by creating nonprofit institutions that still have the journalistic ethics of a news organization, but they are built in to be able to receive grants and individual donations to cover their reporting.

Part of this is to support what is happening on the ground and what we are seeing from a legal perspective. Unfortunately, when reporting, these smaller news organizations are generally a handful of people and they are almost always from the community, born, raised, and living in the communities where they are reporting, and they are often working potentially in a language that is not English. Individuals are threatening their nonprofit status. So, essentially without their nonprofit status, they would not be able to report the news because they would have no funding.



So, we have seen threats against that type of status, kind of a new way to threaten reporting. Then, when we turn global and think about press freedom, governments have become very clever about talking more about press freedom, perhaps even enacting laws across different countries to help show if they are on the press's side. However, I think what is happening is that the legal rhetoric and ways in which the press is being threatened have changed. Governments and leaders have learned to talk very expressively about press freedom and the protection of journalists but oftentimes, other areas of law often complex and difficult-to-navigate areas of law are happening. We have seen this in the case of Maria Russa who faced a barrage of charges from the Filipino government. These charges were a series of criminal and civil cases, including tax evasion violations of foreign ownership rules. These areas of law are so complex and so difficult to navigate without expert legal counsel.

They know that it is difficult to be able to have the funding to do this work. It is difficult to be able, when an individual gets a complaint like this, to be able to even navigate the area of law or how they respond to this request. Thankfully there is pro bono support for some journalists but a lot of times these threats are not related to press freedom laws themselves. Still, they are criminal cases that involve significant legal action, also, legal action that takes years to evaluate and change. So, as an eternal optimist, I would like to close by ending with a few potential solutions. We have to make sure that individual journalist newsrooms across the country and the globe understand how critical legal support is and how legal support needs to be an infrastructure that is funded, whether by civil society, individuals, or community groups. We need to make sure that journalists who are doing this difficult work are supported from a legal perspective. We need to make sure that they have access to legal assistance at every stage of reporting investigation. We have to increase training on how they can be helped. Potential law enforcement officials do not even know what to do or they do not have the bandwidth, or they just do not bother. In that vein, we need to make sure that we are growing attorneys who are serving journalists, making sure that legal counsel is available to mitigate risks and address these non-press freedom areas of law that often include these criminal and complex areas of law.

---

**Ivy Murugi, World Organization of the Scout Movement, Global Youth Representative | Kenya**

**Panelist 5: : Youth Statement on Press Freedom to defend Human Rights**

[Click here to watch Ivy Murugi's remarks](#)

*Ivy Murugi is the Global Youth Representative of the World Organization of the Scout Movement. She is experienced in Mental Health and Sexual Reproductive Health Advocacy working with Youth-Led and Youth-Serving organizations.*

*Over the last 3 years, Ivy Murugi has served as the Team Lead for a Mental Health initiative dubbed Healing Invisible Wounds. Involved in resource mobilization and fundraising, program design and delivery as well as overall team coordination to meet set objectives in providing innovative solutions that promote the overall wellbeing and resilience of young people and communities. I am committed to ensuring individuals have access to advanced mental health care services, transforming the stigma narrative surrounding mental health and supporting integration of MHPSS into thematic areas such as Peacebuilding and Climate Action.*

---



I wanted to be a journalist when I was growing up and I do not know whether to be relieved that I did not become one, but I love the resilience that individuals have. I represent a movement of 56 million young people from across the globe in the world's largest youth contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. As a young person from Generation Z, I see endless opportunities in digital transformation that is happening around the globe. I recognize the importance of both social

and mainstream media as a tool to connect people to foster dialogues, ignite change, and hold people accountable. The current media landscape is more diverse, and the industry is attracting high levels of investment in capital in both mainstream and digital media platforms. I pay tribute to the vocal and fearless men and women in the media who have had to lose their lives in the spirit of uncovering ills and telling stories of change. I also celebrate a million others, some of them in this panel who have the willingness to continue informing the world and telling personal stories of abusing people from across the globe. I believe that press freedom is an essential pillar of any democracy as it provides the platform for a multiplicity of voices to be heard at the national, regional, and local levels. Individuals working as public watchdogs, activists, and guardians are also educators, entertainers, and contemporary chroniclers. I have seen the media thrive and do their best in the context of both liberal and authoritarian regimes. I come from Kenya, we had our general elections very recently and the media did an amazing job in its reporting. Their coverage gave people the confidence to believe in the final tallies that were given, especially for the very tightly contested presidential seat.

However sadly, a few months down, one of the cabinet appointees of the current president made a full appearance on one of the media houses in Kenya who have been very brave in uncovering truths and telling stories without fear in two case scenarios. I'll speak about one in one of them, he said, "XX Media Group, you must now decide where, whether you are a newspaper, a broadcasting house, a media house, or a political party. I have said from tomorrow, from today, even the government, any government department that is

found placing an advertisement with the XX Media Group, should consider itself out of the government.” These are some of the media-captured intimidation lawsuits, but I am more than sure that this is just one of the many existing situations in so many contexts with some having it more often than others from the statistics that we had.

The fundamental right to seek and disseminate information through an independent press is under attack, not just in Kenya but also in many other contexts. The threats have now taken new dimensions as they are publicly defended and even boldly justified by some of these perpetrators' elected leaders who should be press freedoms. Despite the robust legislation, media freedoms have been constantly curtailed. Freedom of the press is a right that every entity in society must care about and commit to. Protecting press freedom can rebound from even lengthening the states of depression when given the opportunity. In this regard, there is a need for sustained conversations and multi-sectoral approaches to achieve a free press in all contexts. I hope that the discussions today will help us spark actionable ways to be able to do this. Governments should not interfere with this freedom or censor media that are critical of state power. We need to safeguard press freedom and promote freedom of expression to ensure and facilitate global democracy and uphold the rule of law and human rights for all journalists. Please remember that people are more often than not going to take opinions as facts, but you are the remedy to set this right. Keep on fighting for the truth and holding those in power accountable. Be the watchdog that sheds light on wrongdoing, even in the wake of a shrinking media space. Keep giving accurate, fair, and unbiased information.



## PANEL SESSION 3: WIDENING GAP BETWEEN EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND RISE OF AUTOCRACY

**Melissa Mahtani, Senior Producer, Journalist | USA**

**Moderator: Opening Remarks**

[Click here to watch Melissa Mahtani's remarks](#)

*Melissa Mahtani is an Emmy-nominated Senior Producer and Reporter for CNN's award-winning digital team where she produces, writes, and creates content across all platforms since 2012. Mahtani has interviewed change-makers across the globe such as Vladimir Kara-Murza from Russia, Masih Alinejad from Iran, Afghanistan's youngest Mayor Zarifa Ghafari and the first lady of Namibia as well as celebrities like Naomi Campbell, Kristin Davis, Adwoa Aboah and Lin-Manuel Miranda. In addition to writing breaking news stories and feature articles, Mahtani currently reports for CNN's award-winning gender focused "As Equals" team, hosting and moderating events for wider impact and engagement. She also plays a key role in designing the social strategy around special events including bespoke CNN Town Halls, CNN Heroes and coverage from the United Nations General Assembly.*



Freedom cannot be taken for granted.

The idea of democracy quite literally means rule by the people, where a population gets to decide what decisions are made through an elected, represented government. Democracy can only exist when there are free and fair, transparent elections, accountability, a pluralistic system of political parties, freedom of expression, an independent judiciary, and respect for human rights. These democratic values do not vanish in an instant; but as the Israeli Supreme Court justice indicated: democracy dies in a series of small steps. Steps such as stifling opposition candidates, silencing the media, laws making it harder for certain types of people to vote, or rigging voting machines. Those things sound like they would be easy to see. But when a population cannot distinguish between what is true or false due to disinformation campaigns, technology that is manipulated, or a justice system that is slowly weaponized, how can one even see the line where democracy ends, and autocracy begins?

This is what we are witnessing in many countries around the world. A slow eradication of democratic values, in countries once cherished as stalwarts of freedom like here in America, and others from South Africa to India and Israel. Even in countries that are known as autocracies, like China, Venezuela, and Russia, we are seeing their leaders



take more ruthless actions and more worryingly, work more closely together to build and strengthen global undemocratic factions that make it harder to break through. Thinking about solutions is not an abstract thought or discussion that relates to a planet in outer space. This is our world. For those of us who do live and work in democracies, what can we do to strengthen them? How can we shine a light on the injustices we see in other countries? Every one of us has power. Power to shape the communities and world that we want to live in, and more importantly, the kind of world we want to leave to future generations.

As Nelson Mandela famously said in 1999, "Freedom can never be taken for granted. Every generation must safeguard it and extend it". It is up to each and every one of us to do our part to make sure freedom and democracy are rights that we enjoy, strengthen, and sustain.

---

## **Mr. Naseer A. Faiq, Chargé d'Affaires, Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations | Afghanistan**

### **Keynote Remarks**

[Click here to watch Mr. Naseer A. Faiq's remarks](#)

*Mr. Naseer Faiq is the current Charge d'Affaires of the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations in New York. Born and raised in Afghanistan, Mr. Faiq began his career in politics after joining the Afghanistan Foreign Service in 2005. Over the years, Mr. Faiq has held various high-profile positions within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan. He has served as the Deputy Director General for Regional Cooperation Directorate twice (2012-2013 and 2016-2019). Mr. Faiq has also served as a Minister Counsellor, Counsellor, and Third Secretary at the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations from 2008-2019. Mr. Faiq received a Bachelor's Degree in Administration and Diplomacy from Kabul University and a Master's Degree in Administrative Science from Farleigh Dickinson University.*



The world leaders are in New York to discuss global issues, distinguished guests, panelists, honorable members of JWF and esteemed faculty of students at John Jay College, respected delegates, and participants who are joining us online today. I stand before you to address a pressing global concern that has come to the forefront of our collective consciousness in recent times, drawing from recent words of the Secretary-General of the United Nations around the globe, old tensions fester while

new risks emerge. Our discussion focuses on the widening gap between the erosion of

democracy and the rise of autocracy within this very global canvas of mounting crisis across Africa, a continent with rich history and vibrant culture. We have observed and settled political upheavals, and the series of coups in nations like Niger, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Gabon signify a deeper regional struggle for democracy. As the Secretary-General pointed out, the Sahel faces its share of disturbances with a series of coups further destabilizing the region as terrorism gains ground. I would like to focus on my country, Afghanistan. I am sure you are well aware that nearly 20 years after being ousted from power, the Taliban took over control of Afghanistan in August 2021. It has now been a little over two years and there isn't the slightest way of hope for a positive future for the 28 million people that are in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

Among them are millions of Afghan refugees, disabled people, youth, and most importantly, women and girls. Speaking at this panel is very fitting for me. As the events that unfolded in Afghanistan served as a stark reminder of the complex interplay between democracy and autocracy, I, along with the international community, have had to witness the slow yet appalling erosion of democracy in my beloved country. Under Taliban Rule, autocracy has been on a rapid rise with them continuing to consolidate their power and authority through acts that intimidate, repress, restrict, and isolate the people of Afghanistan. They have returned to the draconian policies of the 1990s ethnic cleansing and forced evictions among a lot more. The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban raises patent questions about the fragility of democracies in the face of determined autocratic forces. Furthermore, it also highlights the vulnerability of democracies when confronted with extremism, corruption, and internal divisions.

Our primary anguish lies with their treatment of women. Nearly two decades after women regained their rights, women and girls in Afghanistan have been again banned from receiving quality education from entering amusement parks, gyms, and sports clubs. Women have been banned from working in NGO offices. They quite literally have been wholly excluded from Public Offices and the Judiciary. Today, Afghanistan's women and girls face gender apartheid and gender persecution, they are required to adhere to a strict dress code and are not permitted to travel without a male guardian, the Taliban is systematically violating the rights of women and young girls while regressing with time and resorting to cruel and inhuman practices. The rise of autocracies in the world, often under the guise of stability and security, poses a formidable challenge to the global order based on democratic values. Autocrats driven by personal interests and antique power disregard the rights and aspirations of their citizens. As per an Amnesty International report, the Taliban have directed collective punishment, particularly upon communities where the Taliban have established and deployed their forces.

They have retaliated against former security and defense forces and targeted the civilian population to force submission and compliance, especially those suspected of being associated with the former government. The list of war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law committed by the Taliban is long and I do not want to calculate all of them or mention all of them. As we reflect on the Afghanistan crisis, it is important to draw lessons that can guide us in addressing the widening gap between the erosion of democracies and the rise of autocracies. First and foremost, it is crucial to recognize that nation-building efforts cannot be imposed from the outside. We recognize that bringing peace to our country is a responsibility that primarily belongs to us, the people of Afghanistan.

Genuine democracy must emerge from within, rooted in the cultural, historical, and social context of a nation. External interventions can support this process but cannot substitute for it. Over the past two years, Afghans from all walks of life and age groups inside and outside Afghanistan have tirelessly worked and raised their voices in defending their rights, hard-earned achievements of the past two decades, and national values. In the past year, civil society, women and youth groups, and political parties have mobilized and initiated organized political activity. While various groups present diverse views for a solution, the main objective is to converge under a national agenda that is based on national unity. Moreover, we must acknowledge that the global community has a responsibility to promote and protect democratic values. The international community must stand united and its commitment to defend democracy, human rights, and the rules of law. Not just when it is convenient but especially when these principles are under threat.

The lessons learned from Afghanistan should lead to a more nuanced and thoughtful approach to promoting democracy worldwide. The erosion of democracy is a cause for serious concern. However, it is vital that we do not lose hope. It is through our collective commitment to democratic values and our ability to adapt and learn from our mistakes, that we can bridge the gap between the erosion of democracies and the rise of autocracies. The world's future depends on our ability to strike this balance and uphold the principles that ensure justice, freedom, and dignity for all. In this context, the challenges in Afghanistan, as well as in the African nations mentioned, serve as a historic reminder that our global commitment to democracy, peace, and stability, remains paramount. We must not only discuss but also act ensuring that democratic values persist and thrive. “I urge all countries to step up and to fund fully the global humanitarian appeal” - were the Secretary General's closing remarks yesterday. Let it resonate with us as we transition from dialogue to tangible action, ensuring that the spirit of democracy and the hope for a just world prevails across all nations.

**Berta Valle, Human Rights Defender, Nicaraguan Journalist | Nicaragua**  
**Panelist 1: Keeping a spotlight on human rights defenders in distress and advocating for the release of political prisoners**

[Click here to watch Berta Valle's remarks](#)

*Berta Valle is a recognized Nicaraguan activist, journalist, and human rights defender. With fifteen years of experience as a senior television anchor and station manager working with top morning shows in Nicaragua, Ms. Valle is one of the most-recognized broadcasters in the country. In 2016, she was nominated as an independent to represent Managua in the National Assembly by the Independent Liberal Party as part of its National Coalition for Democracy. However, Nicaragua's Supreme Court, controlled by Ortega loyalists, disqualified the party's electoral coalition and Valle was blocked from running. Since 2018, Valle, her daughter and mother-in-law have been living in exile due to the political persecution faced by her husband Félix Maradiaga and his family. Maradiaga was forcibly disappeared by the regime in June 2021 after announcing his intention to run against Daniel Ortega in November's presidential elections. On February 10, 2023, Maradiaga was released from prison after 611 days and expelled to the United States, where he reunited with Berta and their daughter.*



I stand before you today as a human rights defender from Nicaragua, as a woman, the wife of a former political prisoner, and as a mother, but also as someone who has dedicated over 20 years to working alongside journalists and media outlets. Over the course of my career, I have had the privilege of hosting television programs and serving as a general manager for a prominent television channel in Nicaragua. However, the most impactful chapter of my journey has been my involvement with

"Voces en Libertad" over the last five years. "Voces en Libertad" was founded by a group of journalists in exile, aimed at supporting those who are fleeing persecution under Daniel Ortega's regime. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to shed light on a matter that is often overlooked: the personal sacrifices made by human rights defenders who courageously stand on the front lines to protect our liberties, rights, and democracy in the face of increasing authoritarianism. I want to be very clear that journalists are human rights defenders – even though they might not always be recognized as such. Today, the contributions of journalists are more important than ever.

Nicaragua is rapidly turning into a totalitarian regime, bringing with it death, destruction, and poverty. This authoritarian decline, which gained momentum in 2018, seeks to eliminate any space where democracy could survive, both in public and private spheres, similar to North Korea and Cuba. This model has taken the lives of over 350 citizens, injured thousands, and forced hundreds of thousands into exile.



In February of this year, the regime stripped the nationality from another hundred people it sees as threats – including me – leaving us de facto stateless. Additionally, more than 1200 people have been imprisoned and tortured for political reasons. My husband Félix was arrested by Ortega's regime in June 2021. Although many political prisoners were released in February of this year, including Félix and more than 200 others who were expelled to the United States, it is essential to remember that there are still more than 80 political prisoners in Nicaragua's jails, including Bishop Monsignor Rolando Alvarez.

Despite the tremendous efforts of the global community, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo continue to commit severe human rights violations and crimes against humanity that surpass even those experienced during the civil conflicts of our recent history. This is a painful reality to witness, and urgent action is necessary to bring an end to these atrocities. The Ortega regime has engaged in extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, and all manner of violations of our civil and political rights. Especially severe have been the regime's attacks on the Catholic Church, including closing private universities like the Jesuit Order's Central American University and others, arresting priests for their sermons, and depriving over a million Nicaraguans of the philanthropic and humanitarian services offered by more than 3000 civic organizations represents an inhumane act of monumental proportions.

In the last 16 months, over 20 private universities have been closed and seized, and media outlets face censorship, leaving no free space to express oneself anywhere in the country, whether public or private. Those who dare to dissent face repression, confinement, or exile; being a journalist and covering a religious event can result in an 8-year prison sentence. Anyone can be jailed or exiled for publishing a tweet or making any public or even private denunciation on social media, which are obsessively monitored by the regime. The totalitarian model has taken a further step, as the confiscation and theft of properties from individuals, businessmen, and private parties have become commonplace throughout the country; any attempt at protest can be met with death, exile, or imprisonment. Nicaragua is at a turning point. With the right international intervention, the regime could be pressured to make changes and avoid an economic collapse. However, the plight of the Nicaraguans largely goes unnoticed, especially by international agencies and development banks that continue to fuel the government's totalitarian state agenda and project.

My country is grappling with a severe human rights crisis. But I am not here just to speak about the specific challenges we face in Nicaragua. I wanted to shed light on a global issue that threatens the very essence of democracy and human rights worldwide.

An aspect of great concern that is not discussed enough is the enormous danger faced by human rights defenders who are on the front lines of denouncing authoritarian regimes. Never in recent history has been a human rights defender been such a perilous profession. International treaties that uphold and protect the role of human rights defenders are increasingly being ignored, and these defenders often become the primary targets of totalitarian regimes. Consequently, the decision to take on the challenging role of a human rights defender is an exceedingly difficult one. Many defenders are forced into exile, leaving a significant portion of the population defenseless. This same reality applies to the role of journalists working in dangerous areas or where all civic spaces are closed. For instance, in Nicaragua, journalists like Victor Ticay from Canal 10 are imprisoned for covering a religious event in a public space. Even religious figures are being arrested for speaking from the pulpit, as is the case with Monsignor Rolando Alvarez and Father Jaime Montesinos, who are among the six priests in prison.

One aspect that I want to emphasize today is the critical role of keeping a spotlight on human rights defenders in distress. These brave individuals risk their lives daily to stand up for justice, democracy, and the rights of their fellow citizens. They are the guardians of human dignity and the last line of defense against the erosion of our most fundamental rights.

In Nicaragua, as in other autocratic regimes, arbitrary detention and the persecution of human rights defenders have become disturbingly commonplace. While speaking out against my husband's imprisonment, the regime labeled me a traitor to the homeland. It is not just about silencing dissent; it's about dismantling the very institutions and values that underpin democracy and human rights. But Nicaragua is not an isolated case. Similar stories are emerging from every corner of the world, from Venezuela to Belarus, from Myanmar to Russia.

The rise of authoritarian regimes and their united front poses a grave threat to global peace. When dictators collaborate and support each other, they not only perpetuate suffering within their own countries but also export their tactics, undermining the foundations of democracy and human rights everywhere. The world cannot afford to ignore this perilous trend. Allowing one dictator to abuse the rights of his citizens with impunity shows other dictators around the world that they can do so, too. We, as human rights defenders, and advocates, must work together to ensure that the world does not turn a blind eye to the plight of those who stand for freedom and justice. We must amplify the voices of those in distress and hold autocratic regimes accountable for their actions. It is our collective responsibility to keep the spotlight on human rights defenders in peril, for they are the beacon of hope in these troubled times.

By shining a light on their struggles, we not only empower them but also send a clear message to autocrats: that the world is watching, and that their actions will not go unnoticed or unchallenged. We must leverage our collective strength to pressure governments, institutions, and international bodies to take a stand for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

In conclusion, the widening gap between the erosion of democracies and the rise of autocracies is a global crisis that demands a united response. We must recognize that the dramatic increase in transnational crimes is not confined to the borders of any one nation; it threatens the peace and prosperity of the entire world. By keeping a spotlight on human rights defenders in distress, we can raise awareness, build solidarity, and take concrete actions to protect the values we hold dear.

We know we are strongest when we stand together to confront the obstacles we face. Let us remember that the struggle for human rights is not confined by borders or political ideologies. It is a shared responsibility, a universal cause that unites us all. Together, we can be a powerful force for change, working tirelessly to ensure that democracy, freedom, and human rights prevail over autocracy and oppression.

---

**Guilherme Stolle Paixão e Casarões, Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Author | Brazil**

**Panelist 2: Rising trends of populism: Threats to global peace and security**

[Click here to watch Guilherme Stolle Paixão e Casarões' remarks](#)

*Guilherme Stolle Paixão e Casarões is a Doctor and Master of Political Science from the University of São Paulo, a Master of International Relations from the University of Campinas (San Tiago Dantas Program), a specialist in History and Political Cultures from the Federal University of Minas Gerais. He has a degree in International Relations from the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais. He is Vice-Coordinator of the Graduation in Public Administration of the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV EAESP) and Professor of FGV in the areas of Public Administration, Political Science and International Relations. He was a visiting fellow at the Tel Aviv University (2011) and Brandeis University (2015). Guilherme Stolle Paixão e Casarões has published research and articles in the areas of Brazilian Foreign Policy, Brazil-Middle East Relations and International Relations Theory.*

---

Foremost, I would like to address the concept of populism, to which I draw on the already classic works of Cas Mudde and Benjamin Moffitt. I acknowledge this is not a new idea to most of you, but some clarification might be necessary. In academic circles, there are endless debates on the nature of populism or whether it is an ideology or a political strategy. Nevertheless, the main features of populism are well-known:



Populists divide societies in binary terms, usually between what they understand as ‘the true people’ versus ‘the corrupt elites.’ In some cases, the division takes place between pure good versus pure evil. By doing so, they advance a view of politics as war, in which the ‘other’ must be defeated or even eliminated from political life. Populists despise technocrats and democratic institutions, especially those whose members have not been elected. They want to tap into the common sense of the

average person. They do so by resorting to bad manners and, most importantly, by offering simplistic solutions to complex problems – from violent crime to health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Populists thrive on chaos and insecurity. They feed from people’s anxieties, grievances, resentment, and fear, and transform them into an unstoppable political force based on hate. This is why populists are always fostering crises and breakdowns as the necessary fuel for their political strategies.

The second part of my discussion seeks to discuss what populists are not (necessarily).

- Populists are not necessarily authoritarian – although they might easily slip into authoritarianism as they do not like political institutions to hold them back. They also advance the idea of a homogeneous society that most times leaves no room for the pluralism of civil society movements.
- Populists are not necessarily serial liars – although they often feel tempted to construct ambitious narratives about the people (and of themselves) through disinformation tools, from straight-up fake news to sophisticated algorithms, from rewriting history to banning (or even burning) books.
- Populists are not always right-wing – although they tend to favor socially conservative agendas based on race, ethnicity, and/or religion. Even left-wing populists, despite embracing revolutionary motifs and progressive causes at times, tend to privilege the majority to the detriment of minorities, instead of protecting the latter.

In part 3, I will answer the following questions: what does a populist foreign policy look like? How does it threaten global peace and security? In this effort, I draw my points on Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann’s work on India’s foreign policy, which may be generalized to think about other cases of global populism.

- Populists threaten global security because they are suspicious of and often hostile to global security because they are suspicious of and often hostile to global governance mechanisms and multilateral treaties that have been critical to world peace.



- Populists threaten global security because they prefer bilateral over multilateral relations, leading to complicity towards great-power conflicts or to unilateral violence and repression (in case a great power is ruled by a populist).
- Populists are a threat to democracy and political stability not just at home, but also abroad, as they frequently expand their understanding of the people to diaspora or religious communities across the world, and weaponize them to the populist's own political interests.
- Populists threaten global security because they are not bound by traditional foreign policy institutions and diplomatic rituals that often prevent disruptive events from taking place.
- Populists threaten global security and stability because they are able to permanently mobilize 'their' people against democracy, fundamental rights, and basic freedoms.

Finally, in the last part, allow me to look into how populism affects the attainment of SDGs, which are at the heart of this conference. Brazil's president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva spoke at the UN General Assembly yesterday (Tuesday, September 19). In his speech, he underlined two points I consider crucial to the future of multilateralism and the SDGs:

- SDGs are the UN's most ambitious initiative, but they may become the UN's most shameful failure if countries fail to cooperate wholeheartedly and urgently.
- Most political problems in the world today – brutal conflicts, democratic breakdowns, and the rise of extremism – share the common root of poverty and inequality.

Although populists are not necessarily against ending poverty and hunger (Goals 1 and 2), they will only commit to cooperation if there is no one else to blame. Populists are certainly not committed to quality education (Goal 4) and gender equality (Goal 5), as they feel the state should only serve those who share their values. Populists do not seem to care about clean energy (Goal 7) and climate change (Goal 13), often reducing these concerns to mere conspiracies advanced by transnational elites, which include scientists, activists, and politicians (dismissed as liberal or communist).

They are all accused of disregarding the true needs of the people. Having said all that, it comes as no surprise that populists are not willing to embrace Goal 16, peace, justice, and strong institutions. I am confident that populists uncommitted to global peace and security may lose momentum soon. It requires solid institutions, brave activists, and increased cooperation.

## Johan Heymans, Managing Partner, Venote Criminal Law and Human Rights | Belgium

### Panelist 1: Panelist 3: Strengthening the rule of law to combat the rise of authoritarianism: Intergovernmental Responses

[Click here to watch Johan Heymans' remarks](#)

*Johan Heymans is the Managing Partner of Venote Criminal Law and Human Rights. He obtained his Bachelor's Degree in Law from Namur University in 2010 and his master's degree from Leuven and Tilburg in 2012. He then took a Master of Laws (LL.M.) in international and US criminal law at New York University. Mr. Heymans later worked in Phnom Penh for the prosecutor's office at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal and was also a guest lecturer in international criminal law at the Royal University of Law and Economics in Cambodia. He has been a teaching assistant in criminal procedure at the Law Faculty of the Antwerp University since 2015. He also gives guest lectures at Ghent University and at the Belgian Institute for Judicial Training. Since March 2016 Johan Heymans has been active in the Liga voor Mensenrechten (the Human Rights League in Dutch-speaking Belgium): he has been elected to the General Assembly and the League Council. Johan Heymans is also active as a human rights expert at the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) and at Fair Trials.*



As a group of human rights lawyers, we work on different human rights problems in the world. Sadly enough, we have worked a lot in Turkey in the last seven years. It is in light of these experiences that I want to make some reflections, particularly regarding Goal 16. There is a need for more peace, justice, and stronger institutions because as we see in today's world, the rule of law is under threat and pressure. There is one specific tendency that I want to highlight that is close to my

heart and it is a tendency that concerns abductions that have been the rapporteur to the Turkey Tribunal Opinions Tribunal. It is a tendency that we see increasing in the world today. On the one hand, we have domestic abductions, which have existed for a long time but are really increasing in frequency. However, these techniques are used to eliminate political opponents in most cases, or any event, critical voices towards the regime. There is also some other tendency that is, in a way, newer but is increasing very rapidly, that concerns international abductions where countries do not limit themselves to their boundaries. They go abroad to eliminate the people who were thinking that was safe, who were thinking that they could construct a new life and suddenly they are captured and illegally brought back to their home countries where they were tortured. If I take the example of Turkey, in the last seven years, it has abducted individuals from 23 other

countries, critical voices, and people whom they consider to be opponents of the regime. So, if you think about it, 1 in 9 countries have been working together with Turkey to eliminate critical voices that have nothing to do with but concern a purely Turkish affair. The second worrying aspect of that tendency is that countries like Turkey are not limited by the fact that these people enjoy the protection of the United Nations. They are not limited by the fact that these people have double nationalities. They are not even limited by the fact that these people have not lived in their respective countries for many years and are doing something completely different in another country.

Abductions are very worrying because it is normalizing an act that is an international crime. Countries are working together; they are sharing the same practices, finding strength with each other to normalize crimes that should not be normal. It forces different countries to work and collaborate on these practices towards a more authoritarian regime, a more authoritarian way of working and thinking. How we can solve that issue is through the intervention of different actors. One of these actors is, of course, civil society. I have seen it in the past; if they are quick to react and intervene immediately after someone has been abducted, they mobilize the international community. Sometimes you can stop the abduction and people are released again.

You also have human rights defenders, who start litigating, when people disappear, either in the host state or in the country where the person has been abducted to challenge the judges to release the person and to help them to find the person. We have also seen that happen in different countries, notably in countries that were working together with Turkey but then if a person disappears, that means that they end up in these secret detention facilities where they are tortured and abused. It is also important to take action and human rights defenders do that by filing complaints to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which then renders provisional measures and imposes pressure on the different countries to release the people or at least make them resurface in the normal, official, and the judiciary system.

Then eventually, if the people resurface, most often that happens after a few weeks but usually it is a few months, a few years, and sometimes they never resurface again. It is important to get these people released as quickly as possible because they are pressured into not talking about what they suffered, and about not sharing the torture experiences that they have gone through. So, it is only when they are out that they can fully speak up and let us know what happened to them, but these categories of people will be more familiar. There is one category of people that we tend to forget, and they are important, which are judges; they have a huge responsibility in stopping these international crimes because in case there is a shift towards an authoritarian regime in a democratic state, a strong institutional and judicial framework can stop this deterioration.

We often see that when there is this strong judicial backbone democracy, even if it is harmed, it manages to survive for several years. However, it is at the moment when even the judicial backbone gives up that democracy and it has disappeared at lightning speed. It is critical to also focus on the judges.

If I take the example of Turkey again, over the last few years, thousands of people have been convicted of long sentences. We have been speaking about it for eight years as prolonged sentences are given on empty case files. If you open it, there is nothing in there; but even when there is something in the case files, it is evidence that a first-year law student would see that is not credible at all. Still, these judges convict the people and put them in prison. I do not want to completely destroy the very honorable profession of being a judge because it is a very important profession. I know it is not easy what they have to do but because I have also seen lots of cases where judges were arrested in their courtrooms. I have one case that comes to my mind where a judge made a decision that was not in favor of the government policy. He was arrested in his courtroom and replaced by another who did the same thing because of the fact there was nothing in the case file. So, they said this person should be released. He was also arrested and then the third one came in and he saw his two colleagues being escorted to jail and he came to a different conclusion. However, I know that it is not easy but if you take on that responsibility, you must make a choice. Either you do it properly or you do not do it at all.

It is important, on the one hand, to support the judges who try to do a wonderful job in very hard circumstances. However, on the other hand, we should send out a wake-up call to show them that there are consequences for covering up these international crimes. For instance, the Turkey Tribunal is an opinions tribunal with no legally binding powers, but we brought together judges from all over the world, all continents, and people with lots of experience. We presented them with five topics of serious human rights violations in Turkey. They looked at it independently and they concluded that crimes against humanity are being committed in Turkey. Notably, they dedicated a lot of attention to the judges who are assisting, covering up these crimes, or not investigating the crimes that are being committed, for instance Turkey.

Consequently, we also filed a complaint at the International Criminal Court, in this context, because it was remarkable. The Turkey Tribunal was followed by 2 million people and the most feedback that we got, reactions from the audience, came from judges who were asking, will there be consequences for me? Will I be held accountable because I am functioning in this defunct system? So, it showed that the work had an impact and that it could lead a change. That was also the reason why we filed the complaint before the International Criminal Court, not only against the politicians, the secret services, and the



police officers who are participating in these crimes but also against the judges covering up everything that the other actors in this context have been doing. We are also working around universal jurisdiction. It is a little bit comparable to sanctions in other countries like Russia. It all sounds or feels for them like there will be no consequences but then if they want to travel abroad for a holiday or their children study in some place and they want to go to visit them, the risk that they might be arrested for the crimes, the complicity in the crimes that they have been helping to commit. That sometimes helps to change the mindset of the people. It is not that I have the pretension to say that certainly will change the entire system and the rule of law in Turkey but also in other countries.

Still, I think it is important to know that every single one of us has skills and is good at something and that everybody if we unite and we keep on fighting for these things, that with these very small efforts combined and consistently done, can make great social impact and change. I think that it is important to remember for all of us that we should try to think about what we keep and what we can do. How can we help to make a difference? Often when you look at these big questions, you have the feeling that it is overwhelming and too complicated for an individual to do something. However, every single one of us can do something to change these situations.

---

### **Dr. Fatih Demiroz, Non-resident Research Fellow, European Center for Populism Studies | USA**

#### **Panelist 4: Populism`s impacts on democracies**

[Click here to watch Dr. Fatih Demiroz's remarks](#)

*Fatih Demiroz is an Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University and a non-resident research fellow at the European Center for Populism Studies. He received his Ph.D. in public affairs from the University of Central Florida. Prior to his assignment at SHSU, Dr. Demiroz worked at the Florida International University as a visiting faculty and Rhode Island Department of Health as a researcher. His research interests are social and organizational networks, disaster management, governance, and behavioral public administration.*



Democracy has been declining in the last two decades, even in countries that have been promoters of democracy, such as the United States and European Union members. Although there are many factors contributing to this process, the rise of populism and populism leaders are among the most noticeable ones. There are extensive discussions on why voters turn to populist leaders and why populism is increasing globally, but very little attention was paid to the relationship between populist

represent. In this paper, I will focus on this issue and discuss the relationship between populist leaders and bureaucrats. Specifically, I will address three questions: What do populists do with the bureaucracy, and how does the bureaucracy react? Should elected leaders have no control over the bureaucracy? Does too much bureaucratic autonomy lead to a rogue bureaucracy, also widely referred to as the “deep state”?

### **What is Populism?**

Populism is an ideological position built upon the idea that society is separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps. These two camps are (i) the pure people and (ii) the corrupt elite. The corrupt elite includes the media, some parts of the bureaucracy (if not all of it), universities, intellectuals, some business circles, etc. In this equation, the populist leaders represent the people against the evil elites (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). The relationship between populism and democracy is complicated. Although populist leaders may set the ground for the development of democratic institutions in authoritarian regimes, they themselves do not always request democracy. There is certainly an element of truth in the conflict between the people and corrupt elites, but it does not always hold ground in every single country, especially in countries with democratic institutions. On the contrary, populist leaders in democratic countries are viewed as (i) anti-elitist, (ii) anti-pluralist, and (iii) illiberal (Bauer & Bekcer, 2020; Bauer, Peters, Pierre, Yesilkagit, and Becker, 2021).

### **Democratic Backsliding and Populism**

Populism, claiming to speak for a single people, is one possible driver of democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding refers to the reduction of political pluralism. Indicators of democratic backsliding are harassment of the opposition, censorship of the media, subversion of accountability, and executive aggrandizement (Bauer & Bekcer, 2020; Bauer et al., 2021). On the one hand, populist leaders are anti-establishment and anti-bureaucracy; on the other hand, they need bureaucratic apparatus (especially security forces) to accomplish their political goals. The tension between being against the bureaucracy and needing the bureaucracy at the same time creates three broadly defined behaviors by populist leaders (Bauer & Bekcer, 2020; Bauer et al., 2021).

### **What do Populists Do with the Bureaucracy?**

First, populist leaders may choose to sideline or ignore the bureaucracy. Bureaucratic agencies routinely inform and advise politicians on many issues, from healthcare to national defense. Populist leaders often ignore the recommendations of agencies and their officials who are not aligned with the populist leaders' agenda. For example, Donald Trump in the U.S. openly expressed his negative feelings for Dr. Antoni Fauci, who was one of the leading figures in handling the COVID-19 pandemic.

An even more controversial and bizarre act of ignoring the bureaucracy happened in 2019. Hurricane Dorian approached the U.S. mainland in September of that year. Trump falsely claimed that the Hurricane would impact Alabama (ABC News, 2019). None of the forecast models predicted that Dorian would impact Alabama, and federal agencies initially refuted Trump's claims. However, after the Trump administration's pressures on the NOAA, the agency made an unsigned statement confirming what Trump said. Later investigations found that the agency violated scientific integrity codes.

Second, populist leaders may try to dismantle the bureaucracy that they see as an obstacle to their goals. Steve Bannon, Trump's chief strategist, promised to dismantle the administrative state during the election campaign (Michaels, 2017). Indeed, the Trump administration followed many strategies to make federal employees quit their jobs or limit their actions (NPR, 2021). A similar example at a massive scale happened in Turkey. In 2013, then-Prime Minister Erdogan's cabinet was shocked by a graft probe. Four ministers, their sons, and many other important officials were charged with taking bribes and involving in shady dealings. The Erdogan administration immediately reshuffled, suspended, or fired hundreds of police, prosecutors, and judges (Al Jazeera America, 2013). In 2016, after a suspiciously clumsy military coup attempt that Erdogan called a 'gift from God' (Bloomberg, 2016), Mr. Erdogan purged hundreds of thousands of officers in the public sector, especially in police, judiciary, education, and academia (The New York Times, 2016; Tharoor, 2017). This example brings us to the third point in the populist leaders' treatment of the bureaucracy.

The third type of action that populist leaders take in their relationship with the bureaucracy is capturing it. Turkey's President Erdogan aimed to accomplish this right after firing hundreds of thousands of bureaucrats. They nearly eliminated merit-based hiring procedures in the bureaucracy and handed all the government positions to party loyalists (Reuters, 2020). With that, Erdogan was able to use the bureaucracy to silence the opposition. For example, Canan Kaftancioglu, one of the leading figures in the opposition party, was banned from politics because of one of her posts on Twitter (The Guardian, 2022). Similar practices, although at a smaller scale, were visible in the Trump Administration. In his rallies, Donald Trump often boasted how many judges he appointed to the federal courts (The Washington Post, 2020). Some of Trump's nominees for federal courts did not have even the most basic qualifications to sit in a federal court (The New York Times, 2017). So far, I have discussed that populist leaders try to sideline/ignore, dismantle, or use the bureaucracy when they come to power. They accomplish these goals through multiple political actions. The first thing they do is change the administrative structure of the bureaucracy through centralization of authority and redistribution of budgets and personnel.

Second, they politicize the personnel by purging the top-level officials and replacing them with loyal ideological supporters. They also replace administrative norms with new ones and transform the institutional culture. Third, they rely heavily on executive decrees to avoid checks and balances and accountability (Bauer and Becker, 2020; Bauer et al., 2021).

### **How Does the Bureaucracy React?**

The next question I will address is how the bureaucracy reacts to populist leaders. Bureaucrats' reactions to populist leaders can be classified under three categories. First, they can work with populist leaders. Especially, national security bureaucracy especially tends to work with populist leaders more easily than other agencies. For example, The Border Patrol Union in the U.S. openly endorsed Donald Trump in the 2016 elections (Texas Tribune, 2016). Second, bureaucrats may shirk their duties, especially in policies that do not align with their agency missions. For example, bureaucrats in the Department of Education produced legally unusable drafts that would never withstand judicial review on politically sensitive issues, such as Title IX due process regulations (Sherk, 2023). Finally, bureaucrats may try to sabotage the policies of populist leaders. Some common ways to derail populist policies are to leak information to the public and to inform political opposition in the legislature and encourage them to act. Trump's policies were marred by such actions both from career bureaucrats and people in his own team (Woodward, 2018). Arguably, the most famous example of a saboteur in the Trump Administration was Miles Taylor. Taylor, who was the chief of staff in the Department of Homeland Security, wrote an anonymous op-ed to the New York Times in 2018 titled "I am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration" (Taylor, 2018). He wrote, "I work for the president, but like-minded colleagues and I have vowed to thwart parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations." (Taylor, 2018).

### **Balancing Political Control over Bureaucracy and Bureaucratic Autonomy**

The actions of Miles Taylor and many other people in the Trump administration and the federal bureaucracy bring up a legitimate question: Should elected leaders not have control over the bureaucracy? The answer to this question is not easy to find. In democracies, it is the people's and the politicians' right to have control over the bureaucracy. However, the level of political control over the bureaucracy varies depending on the political culture and agency capacity. In the United States, presidents have greater control over the bureaucracy through thousands of political appointments to federal agencies. Many European countries, on the other hand, allow elected leaders to appoint only a few dozen people to manage the bureaucracy (Fukuyama, 2023). Also, how much control to exert on an agency depends on the capacity of an agency (Fukuyama, 2013). Highly technical agencies (e.g., NASA, the National Institute of Health, the National Weather Service) or agencies with



greater administrative capacity can enjoy greater levels of autonomy compared to agencies carrying out simpler tasks (e.g., Departments of Motor Vehicles). Balancing political control and bureaucratic autonomy is not an easy task, and many factors, including the political culture and regime values in a country, contribute to this balancing act. On the one hand, too much political control can lead to micromanagement, reduction of administrative capacity, clientelism, patronage, and corruption. On the other hand, too much bureaucratic autonomy can lead to a rogue bureaucracy that is often labeled as the “deep state.”

The issue of the deep state has become one of the discussion points in political campaigns, especially in the United States. Donald Trump promised to “drain the swamp” in Washington and eliminate the deep state. The concept of deep state is believed to be first used in Turkey in the 1990s to describe rogue members of the national security bureaucracy that did extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, extortions, and other illegal acts. The term has been mostly used in the national security context around the world, except for the United States. In the U.S., the deep state mostly refers to the federal bureaucracy, and discussions on the deep state are bundled together with many conspiracy theories. Some of these conspiracy theories are common household names, such as George Soros, the Bilderberg meetings, and Rothschilds. Some conspiracy theories cross national borders and impact other countries. QAnon is a bundle of several deep-state conspiracy theories that originated in the United States, claiming that the world is run by a deep state and a secret group in the American military is fighting it. In 2022, a group of men inspired by QAnon were arrested in Germany under the charges of plotting to overthrow the German government.

Indeed, the issue of rogue bureaucracy needs to be taken seriously. Bureaucrats going rogue and committing crimes is detrimental to democracy. However, promoting conspiracy theories is a tactic from the populist playbook, and discussions on deep state and bureaucratic accountability should be discussed independently of conspiracy theories.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I addressed three questions. What do populists do with the bureaucracy, and how does the bureaucracy react? Should elected leaders have no control over the bureaucracy? Does too much bureaucratic autonomy lead to a rogue bureaucracy, also widely referred to as the “deep state”? Populist leaders use a combination of sidelining/ignoring, dismantling, and using/weaponizing the bureaucracy. Populist leaders deal with the bureaucracy by changing the bureaucratic structure through reorganizations and resource reallocations, changing the bureaucratic culture by altering organizational norms, purging top-level bureaucrats, and circumventing political checks and balances and

accountability by relying heavily on executive decrees. When populist leaders come to power, bureaucratic agencies choose to work with them, shirk or sabotage populist policies. Bureaucratic reactions to populist leaders lead to questions regarding how much political control we should have over the bureaucracy and how much autonomy we should grant to bureaucratic agencies. The answer to this question depends on the political context of every country. However, it is possible to argue that bureaucratic agencies with higher administrative capacity can enjoy greater levels of autonomy. Concerns regarding too much bureaucratic autonomy leading to rogue bureaucracy, also known as the deep state, are legitimate and need to be taken seriously. However, it is important that such discussions are made independent of conspiracy theories that come directly from the populist playbook.

## References :

- ABC News. (2019). Trump displays altered weather map showing Dorian could have hit Alabama. Accessed October 8, 2023 via: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/map-flap-trump-displays-altered-weather-map-showing/story?id=65384094>
- Al Jazeera America. (2013). Turkish prime minister reshuffles cabinet amid scandal. Accessed October 9, 2023 via: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/12/26/turkish-pm-reshuffles-cabinet-amid-scandal.html>
- Bauer, M. and Becker, S. (2020). Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Public Administration. *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*. 19-31.
- Bauer, M., Peters, G.B., Pierre, J., Yesilkagit, K., Becker, S. (2021). *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration: How Populist in Government Transition State Bureaucracies*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, United States. Cambridge University Press.
- Bloomberg. (2016). Coup Was ‘Gift From God’ for Erdogan Planning a New Turkey. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-17/coup-was-a-gift-from-god-says-erdogan-who-plans-a-new-turkey>
- Foreign Policy. (2022). Germany’s Conspiracists Borrow American Ideas to Plot Against the State. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/12/germany-conspiracy-us-arrests-january-6-capitol-attack-bundestag-nazism-reich-coup/>
- Fukuyama, F. (2013). What is Governance? *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (pp. 347–368).
- Fukuyama, F. (2023). In Defense of the Deep State. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*. Published Online: 25 August 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23276665.2023.2249142>
- Michaels, J. (2017). How Trump is Dismantling a Pillar of the American State. *The Guardian*. Accessed October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/07/donald-trump-dismantling-american-administrative-state>
- Mudde, C and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford; New York, NY. Oxford University Press.
- Müller, J. W. (2016). *What is Populism?* London: Penguin.
- NPR. USDA Research Agencies ‘Decimated’ By Forced Move. Undoing The Damage Won’t Be Easy. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/02/963207129/usda-research-agencies-decimated-by-forced-move-undoing-the-damage-wont-be-easy>
- Reuters. (2020). How Turkey’s courts turned on Erdogan’s foes. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-judges/>

- Sherk, James. (2023). Tales From the Swamp: How Federal Bureaucrats Resisted President Trump. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://americafirstpolicy.com/latest/2022702-federal-bureaucrats-resisted-president-trump>
- Taylor, M. (2018). I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration. The New York Times. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>
- Texas Tribune. (2016). Border Patrol Union Endorses Trump for President. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.texastribune.org/2016/03/30/border-patrol-union-endorses-trump-president/>
- The Guardian. (2022). Key Turkish opposition figure banned from politics after anti-Erdoğan tweet. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/12/key-opposition-leader-banned-from-politics-after-anti-erdogan-tweet>
- The New York Times. (2016). The Scale of Turkey's Purge Is Nearly Unprecedented. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/02/world/europe/turkey-purge-erdogan-scale.html>
- The New York Times. (2017). Trump Nominee for Federal Judgeship Has Never Tried a Case. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/11/us/brett-talley-judge-senate.html>
- The Washington Post. (2020). Trump brags to Woodward that he has 'broken every record' on appointing judges. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-woodward-judges/2020/09/20/86839d54-fae5-11ea-a510-f57d8ce76e11\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-woodward-judges/2020/09/20/86839d54-fae5-11ea-a510-f57d8ce76e11_story.html)
- Tharoor, I. (2017). Turkey's Erdogan turned a failed coup into his path to greater power. Washington Post. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/07/17/turkeys-erdogan-turned-a-failed-coup-into-his-path-to-greater-power/>
- Time. (2022). Germany's QAnon-Inspired Plot Shows How Coup Conspiracies Are Going Global. Accessed on October 9, 2023 via: <https://time.com/6239835/german-coup-qanon-conspiracies/>
- Woodward, B. (2018). Fear: Trump in the White House. Simon & Schuster. 2nd Edition.









# GLOBAL PARTNERS



Argentina



Australia



Australia



Australia



Belgium



Belgium



Brazil



Canada



Egypt



Germany



Greece



Greece



India



India



India



India



Iraq



Italy



Japan



Kenya



Lithuania



New Zealand



Mozambique



Netherlands



Nigeria



Nigeria



Nigeria



Nigeria



Romania



Russia



Philippines



Switzerland



Spain



South Africa



South Africa



Tanzania



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



USA



Zambia

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

**1** NO  
POVERTY



**2** ZERO  
HUNGER



**3** GOOD HEALTH  
AND WELL-BEING



**4** QUALITY  
EDUCATION



**5** GENDER  
EQUALITY



**6** CLEAN WATER  
AND SANITATION



**7** AFFORDABLE AND  
CLEAN ENERGY



**8** DECENT WORK AND  
ECONOMIC GROWTH



**9** INDUSTRY, INNOVATION  
AND INFRASTRUCTURE



**10** REDUCED  
INEQUALITIES



**11** SUSTAINABLE CITIES  
AND COMMUNITIES



**12** RESPONSIBLE  
CONSUMPTION  
AND PRODUCTION



**13** CLIMATE  
ACTION



**14** LIFE  
BELOW WATER



**15** LIFE  
ON LAND



**16** PEACE, JUSTICE  
AND STRONG  
INSTITUTIONS



**17** PARTNERSHIPS  
FOR THE GOALS



**JOURNALISTS AND  
WRITERS FOUNDATION**

4 West 43rd St. 4th Fl. Suite 419  
New York, NY 10036 USA  
[www.jwf.org](http://www.jwf.org) +1(646) 838-4882