

# A Conversation on “A United Nations for the 21st Century”



ADI CONVERSATIONS *Exclusive*

A panel titled “A United Nations for the 21st Century” was convened, chaired and moderated by **Kamal Malhotra**, former United Nations Resident Coordinator and the UN Secretary General's Representative in Malaysia, Turkey and Vietnam (2008-2021), with Panelists Ambassador (retired) **Vijay Nambiar**, previous Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations (2002-2004), Special Adviser to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (2006-2007) and Chef de Cabinet of UN Secretary General Ban ki-moon (2007-2012); **Shombi Sharp**, UN Resident Coordinator and Representative of the UN Secretary General in India and **Ms. Ruchira Kamboj**, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations in New York (2022-2024). Vietnam's Political Counsellor in India also attended. It was held exactly one month after the UN's 2024 Summit of the Future which concluded in the UN General Assembly in New York on September 23, 2024. The Summit concluded with consensus amongst the UN's 193 Member States on a Pact for



the Future, and its accompanying Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations. The Pact for the Future has 56 commitments. It is indeed remarkable that full consensus was reached on these historic documents in a very polarized global context.

The discussion was held just two days before the commemoration of the 79th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations on October 24. It was timed to reflect a “We the Peoples” (the first three words of the UN Charter) discussion on the Pact for the Future and UN Reform issues more broadly. The panel is also timely because the world is at a critical juncture, given the multiple simultaneous crises and the extreme polarization that currently exists.

As a result, one of the questions all panel participants were asked by the moderator was: are we at a 21st century equivalent of the 1942 moment when the Declaration for a United Nations was put forward as the precursor to agreement on the UN Charter in San Francisco, USA on 26 June, 1945 and the creation of the United Nations on October 24 that year, exactly 79 years ago, today?



**K**AMAL MALHOTRA: The United Nations is arguably the world's greatest and most enduring, all encompassing, global public good. Any independent, objective assessment of the Organization will probably conclude that it has made an enormous, largely measurable, overall positive and constructive contribution to the world and its citizens over the last almost 80 years.

The UN Charter's principles and values are timeless and are as relevant today as they were in 1945, notwithstanding that some important amendments to the Charter are necessary in the changed context of the 21st century. We currently face unprecedented global and transnational challenges, which only a politically legitimate body such as the UN can have a hope of addressing.

It should be obvious, therefore, that the Organization has a continuing relevance despite its many naysayers and detractors. The three documents agreed in New York by consensus a month ago are a testimony to the fact that the United Nations will remain at the center stage in terms of the world's current and future global, regional and national governance architecture.

There is no doubt that the UN needs urgent and serious reform at global, regional, and national levels if it is to retain political legitimacy and have a real chance of resolving the world's current, complex growing and intractable problems as well as its future challenges.

In addition to the urgent need for the transformation of the UNs global governance architecture, there is an equally urgent need for a One UN approach at country and regional levels if the UN is to live up to the promise and aspirations of the human rights based Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 adopted by consensus by all 193 UN Member States in 2015.

Vietnam has been the world leader of the One UN at country level for the last 20 years. I witnessed this firsthand since I had been privileged to Head the UN there for almost five years and lead the One UN there between 2017 and 2021. The One UN House in Hanoi, provided by the Government of Vietnam in 2015, and its ownership and leadership of the One UN process from the pilot days of the "Delivering as One" initiative in 2006 till the present, had created the essential building blocks for the success of the One UN in Vietnam.

The One UN Communications Team in Vietnam was created 17 years ago in 2007 and has been essential in conveying a consistent One UN message since then. Since the move to the One UN House in 2015, there has been one Common Back Office (CBO) Team. And, while a Programmatic One UN was the hardest part, everyone working on similar substantive issues began working and sitting together in a One UN Team, linked to



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the four strategic areas they worked on after the signing of the One UN Strategic Plan (2017-2021). It did not matter which UN agency a staff person worked for. They clustered around either Inclusive Social Development, Inclusive Growth, Climate Change or Governance and Justice, the four strategic outcome priority areas of the joint UN-Government of Vietnam One Strategic Plan.

The Government of Vietnam fully supported this. Of course, there was resistance, and there is still resistance from some UN



agencies, but while there appears to have been some rolling back of this arrangement in 2023, I continue to believe that while staff sitting together according to what they substantively do is not an end, it is an essential step if the institutional barriers of different UN agencies are to be transcended in order to deliver on Agenda 2030.

**AMBASSADOR NAMBIAR:** It has become a truism when you talk about the United Nations that it is based on three pillars which are **Peace and Security, Sustainable Development and Human Rights**. However, that in 2001, when the UN Intellectual History project was being discussed, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had written a Forward to the publication. In that, he had identified four big ideas that have animated humankind, and which are in a sense embodied in the United Nations three pillars, but also a fourth one which, now of course, is not talked about very much, but which continues to be important and relevant: **Independence**.

**Independence** was very relevant in the early years of the UN. From only 52 UN Member States at the time of its founding in 1945, the UN has 193 Member States today. The main reasons for this dramatic increase in independent states were decolonization and the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Decolonization has been one of the historic achievements of the United Nations.

However, in the process, 152 nations today, or even more, are part of the Group of 77 developing countries. Many of them are facing multiple crises. Moreover, they have been dependent on external assistance from their very inception. Most also have entrenched poverty and public health problems.

There are major shortcomings which the system has not been able to find solutions for. One of the major reasons for the failure of multilateralism in this respect was its inability to provide public goods for these developing countries, particularly the vulnerable among them, especially its inability to tackle their financial requirements and debt. Public debt has become the biggest problem, particularly after the 2008 global economic and financial crisis and felt that this is the biggest problem developing countries currently face. Instead of financial safety, developing countries are faced with an outdated, dysfunctional, unjust global economic and financial system that is not meeting their needs.

The isolation of many developing countries because of these crises is not an accident. It is an inevitable result of the way the global system was designed. The Bretton Woods institutions, particularly the World Bank and the IMF, were designed for the world of our grandparents, not the world of today, let alone the world of our grandchildren. Over three quarters of today's countries were not present at the founding of the World Bank and the IMF at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, USA. Many were still under colonial rule. The Bretton Woods institutions were designed by the richest countries and remain dominated by them. Today, many developing countries are stranded in the Bretton Woods system which symbolizes the failure of the international financial, and especially glaringly, its handling of debt. The last four years have been nothing short of a debt disaster. Developing countries also face the bias of credit rating agencies, paying much higher interest rates than rich countries.

In this post-pandemic period, interest rates have soared to astronomical levels. Development plans are quickly swamped by the tsunami of debt servicing. There is urgent call for the re-configuring and reimagining of the multilateral development banks to meet some of the major needs of the sustainable development goals, particularly in debt ridden developing countries. The Pact for the Future has at least five action points connected with the financial architecture. It is unfor-



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tunate that the IMF is neither able to increase Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) nor allocate unused rich country SDRs to developing countries.

It is critical that the multinational development banks to be re-configured to meet some of the critical, priority needs of developing countries as well as for international tax cooperation with a focus on making high net worth individuals (HNWIs) contribute more substantively, through higher taxes.

Many transnational corporations use digital methods to engage in base erosion and profit shifting, allowing them to siphon their profits away from the host country without it even knowing, often to a remote tax haven. As a result, the legitimate tax, which the countries, particularly poor countries, should be getting from the activities of such corporations are not available to them.

While this set of issues has been addressed by the OECD, there is a conflict of interest. It needs to be addressed in the United Nations.

Of the total annual budget for the entire UN family of about USD 60 billion, 62% are earmarked funds. Moreover, 80% of the UNs development funds are earmarked. This is a retreat from the true spirit of multilateralism. The UN needs to get core resources which can be put to use for what the UNs country analysis and Cooperation Framework prioritizes, not what donors earmark their funds for, since even if earmarked for certain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), donors often cherry pick the ones they want to support.

The SDG core Funding Compact has not succeeded. It stands at around only 20% whereas a minimum of 30% was the target. How to increase this to the target is the big challenge.

**KAMAL MALHOTRA:** Mr. Sharp, can you share your idea of the formation of the UN out of the ashes of World War II and comment upon the interconnectedness and indivisibility between the three UN pillars of peace and security, sustainable development and human rights, and the need for them to be viewed as an integrated package.

**SHOMBI SHARP:** You cannot have one without the other. The United Nations should not be looked at as one monolithic structure. Like governments, it is a complex array of, of, of structures interacting with each other in different ways within a broader framework. Within the UN which the Secretary General has direct influence and control over, we have seen a lot more progress in terms of reform and keeping up with the times, but not enough by any means.

Various Secretaries General have implemented various reform initiatives, and the current Secretary General Antonio Guterres launched a significant reform back in 2019 which we have seen percolating its way through headquarters, the regional and the country level. For example, from 2019 the role of the UN Resident Coordinator across all of the program countries was really cemented as the direct representative of the Secretary General in the country. Second, the UN created what is called the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework which is a revitalized singular strategic partnership offer with the host country whereby the entire United Nations system present in the country is comes together to deliver with synergies for the greatest impact at the request of the host government.

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There is no greater proponent for reform at that level than the



Secretary General himself. But that is the prerogative of the Member States which goes beyond the remit of the staff of the institution. We have to look to the member states to drive this agenda and help us be fit for the 21st century.

We just barely got out of a pandemic. 40% of the world's population live in countries paying more on debt service payments than education or health. The good news is that the world has woken up on climate, coming together under the Secretary General. The Pact for the Future and the Digital Compact really bring fresh momentum for the future.

International Financial Architecture reform has historically been seen as a Bretton Woods or the Bretton Woods institutions issue, not United Nations which has looked more at social, humanitarian or human rights or just development without money. But we have realized that money is needed to drive development and that we need a step change in the ability of the financial system to bring financing aligned with the SDGs.

During its G 20 presidency, India put forward the Summit experts report, which aligned precisely with the Secretary General's call for a stimulus package of \$500 billion a year aligned with the SDGs, crowding in another \$3 to \$4 trillion of blended and private sector finance to meet the SDG financing gap of three to \$4 trillion a year. This gap seems huge, and it is, but when you look at the more than USD 120 trillion dollars, we have in global capital markets, it really is not a lot. The issue is not money, per se, but how it is aligned and who has influence over it is spent?

**KAMAL MALHOTRA:** Ambassador Kamboj, you have only recently returned from your assignment in New York. What are your impressions on the role and impact of the UN today?

**AMBASSADOR KAMBOJ:** Regarding the One UN, it was correct to point out the inherent challenges of coordination between the different agencies of the United Nations which are not unique to it. This is common to any large complex organization with multiple autonomous bodies. The One UN initiative while ambitious has indeed, as has already been rightly pointed out, faced difficulties, precisely because of these coordination challenges, and the UN Secretary General's broader push for UN reforms is centered on the One UN.

The Secretary General has been advocating, as we know, reforms that include enhancing the authority of the UN Resident Coordinator as well as streamlining the system to make it more effective and accountable. What are the solutions for this apparent lack of coordination on the ground? What could be some of the urgent steps forward? Well, first and foremost, in an ideal world, a full buy-in by the leadership that is involved. Governments and agencies must re-commit recognizing the authority of the UN Resident Coordinator as far as possible as well as the harmonization of regional structures. The role of the UNDP and the Regional Economic Commissions should be clarified, focusing on complementary strengths.

In an ideal world, nothing is complete without financing. New partnerships with private sector entities, philanthropic organizations and non-traditional donors could be explored to overcome financial shortages, particularly for countries which are unable to contribute at previous levels in the post-COVID pandemic. In an ideal world, there should also be accountability mechanisms and transparent performance benchmarks to ensure that the reforms remain on track. What I would say about the lack of coordination is that while the ideal formulation is always unrealistic, reforms could aim for pragmatic coordination, focusing on areas where coordination makes a tangible difference, leaving some room for flexibility. In some cases, complete unification may be impossible, but there are indeed areas where better alignment



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**Tung Truong Phong**



can yield benefits. Coordination efforts are undoubtedly difficult, and we’ve all seen that, but they are not necessarily doomed.

Some areas, such as humanitarian crises and development planning, have seen improvements in coordination when there is strong leadership, clear mandates and joint funding mechanisms in place. The challenge lies in balancing the autonomy of agencies with the need for strategic alignment and a coherent approach at the country level, prioritizing strategic unity and operational autonomy. The idea isn’t about erasing agency independence but creating mechanisms that can allow for better collaboration where it matters the most.

**KAMAL MALHOTRA:** Would you, Ambassador Kamboj, comment on the central issue of Security Council reform.

**AMBASSADOR KAMBOJ:** There had been three decades of proposals and that there has never been a time without some discussion on it.

The Security Council reform stood high in the list of priorities during discussions on the Pact for the Future she had been involved in and that there was a very strong case for Africa, for India, and for Brazil. Bringing greater diversity and democracy of voices to the table meant more seats, more voices and greater legitimacy, so there is a very strong case for that. It would take time since it is the most complex process in the entire United Nations. The Pact for the Future was not particularly helpful here since while it did recognize that there is need to reform the United Nations Security Council, it was very vague in the specifics. In the continuing discussion on this issue there was a need to look at it from a fresh lens and see how the entire process could be expedited.

Most of the UN Member States support a comprehensive reform of the UN Security Council which means an expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent categories, not a piecemeal reform. Only a small minority of countries support piecemeal reform. I do not see the abolition of the permanent member veto happening at all, at least not yet. In fact, there is a contrary move in the General Assembly among member states which is a move to restrict the use of the veto. She recalled both the 2022 Initiative of Liechtenstein as well as the French-Mexico initiative to restrict the use of the veto which should be used only under certain situations and circumstances.

There have been many proposals in the past calling for a restriction on the use of the veto. It is another matter that many countries, and I do know that the African Union has this very maximalist position, either that the veto should be extended to all new permanent members, or that it should be completely abolished. I do not see member states giving up the veto very easily or very quickly. How to strengthen the role of the United Nations General Assembly when the United Nations Security Council has not quite delivered on peace and security, is the question.

Measures are afoot and there is a very vital discussion going on in





the United Nations about the revitalization of the General Assembly. The Uniting for Peace resolution of 1950 has been invoked quite often, both in the case of Ukraine and Gaza. She felt that much more can be done in the General Assembly, but unfortunately, there is a limitation because any radical reform of the General Assembly's role, like, for example, giving it the power to pass binding resolutions on matters relating to peace and security, would necessarily require an amendment of the UN Charter. Such an amendment of the UN Charter requires a buy-in of the Permanent Five in the Security Council, which she felt was not something which was going to happen very easily. Despite these difficulties, she felt that there are lots of possibilities and that we should not give up because there is a crying need to make the United Nations fit for purpose for the 21st century. I agree with Ambassador Nambiar that the current system was created for our grandparents. If we want the system to work, we cannot bequeath the same system to our grandchildren.

**KAMAL MALHOTRA:** Would any of the panel want to add on UN Security Council reform or the role of the UN General Assembly in terms of strengthening it vis-a-vis the role of the Security Council.

**AMBASSADOR NAMBIAR:** I broadly agree with Ambassador Kamboj on UN Security Council reform. I see the Security Council as the cockpit of the United Nations because it was tasked to deal with peace and security which is the touchstone of the UN's work.

Any big power, by definition, is not going to give up its veto power; so calls for its abolition seem unrealistic. Big powers will continue to use the veto on issues of absolute importance to their national interest whether the UN likes it or not. The abolition of the veto may in fact undermine the UN, if big countries start to increasingly act unilaterally or otherwise, outside the United Nations.

The UN Security Council permanent member veto power is built into the system and is an insurance that the system itself will work. While I agree with Ambassador Kamboj that there must be some restraint on the use of the veto, it should be used for matters which are central for the absolute national security of a state. The abolition of the veto would eventually lead to the disappearance of the United Nations system.

The situation today was very different from the 1942 Declaration of the United Nations moment. Because the world is polarized today in a different kind of a manner from how it was in 1942. The power balance in the world is changing, and it is high time that the rest of the world including UN Security Council permanent members take note of this. They must know that things are changing in the world, and that they are going to change even further. While recognizing this, the BRICS should be recognized. Whether such new members can live up to the expectations of permanent membership of the UN Security Council, it was not a popularity contest, and recognizing the reality of power shifts, therefore giving a seat at the table to an important nation is something that was merely recognizing a fact.

Providing permanent Security Council membership to additional countries was not a favor to the country concerned, but to the Organization. While some of the countries who have the current power may view the addition of new members as a problem, it was not for them to see this as something for them to give.

While Ambassador Kamboj did not view the Pact for the Future as promising on the specifics of UN Security Council reform, it had at least three action points dealing with the restructuring of the Security Council. And while its use of the words representative, inclusive, transparent, efficient, effective, democratic, and accountable are all like motherhood



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which no one can dispute, the crucial instrument to take all this forward will be the continuing UN intergovernmental negotiations.

The intergovernmental negotiations would ultimately lead to the two thirds majority required for UN Charter amendment which I think is important.

It is possible to modernize the UN Charter but that any attempt to start a new process of building a new international organization to replace the current United Nations would be a mistake and result in shambles.

**KAMAL MALHOTRA: Mr. Sharp, any final comments.**

**SHOMBI SHARP:** People should not forget that the women and men of the United Nations are out there, providing shelter to over 117 million people who have had to flee their homes; it is helping vaccinate 45% of the world's children; it is providing food assistance to 160 million people in 120 different countries; while 87,000 men and women in uniform are providing peacekeeping duties with India, of course, being one of the world's greatest provider of peacekeeping service personnel since the very beginning.

I agree with Madeline Albright who had said that if you did not have a United Nations, then you would have to reinvent one. In terms of the Security Council reform, which are absolutely needed, only the Member States, not staff of the UN can decide what will happen.

While I agree that no permanent member of the Security Council was likely to give up its veto powers, I feel they needed to recognize the risk of holding on too long. I feel they risk losing everything, or of throwing the baby out with the bath water if they do not broaden permanent Security Council membership. The rising middle powers and those who were left out of the 1940s formulation will start using other multilateral bodies for their purposes.

At the G 20, at India's very welcome initiative, this was a perfect example. The African Union has now joined the G 20 and made it a much more inclusive body. The BRICS is now expanding with new members either joining or expressing an interest in joining. While the world needed more multilateralism, the UN was the only global forum with 193 Member States. The P5 should realize that the longer that the Security Council goes without reform, the more other bodies are going to try and fill the perceived vacuum of legitimacy. The UN Secretary General is the greatest proponent for both Security Council reform and UN reform more broadly.

**KAMAL MALHOTRA: I will now go back full circle to the One UN Reform at country level. Let me ask the Political Counsellor of Vietnam, Tung Truong Phong, to share his government's perspective since Vietnam has been at the forefront of the One UN initiative at the country level. The delivery of the sustainable development goals must be on the ground at the country level and that to enable this, what is going on globally or even regionally is less important.**

**TUNG TRUONG PHONG:** Vietnam celebrated the 47th Anniversary of it joining the UN exactly a month ago on September 22. From Vietnam's perspective, the One UN initiative and UN operations in Vietnam over nearly 50 years have been very successful. Vietnam has been one of the first countries to join the United Nations' Delivering as One (DAO) initiative in 2006. And within that framework, the Government of Vietnam and the UN actively cooperated on the UN One Plan (2012 to 2016), consistent with Vietnam's Five-year Socio-economic Development Plan.

The two sides also completed the Joint One Strategic Plan (2017-2021) within the framework of the One UN. From September 1977, Vietnam had transformed from a country depending on UN assistance





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to one which has strongly contributed to the UNs regional and global agenda, demonstrating its role as an increasing active member of the international community, including contributions to UN peacekeeping missions and the UN Women Peace and Security agenda. Vietnam, with the UNs support, has lifted 40 million people out poverty in the last few decades.

**KAMAL MALHOTRA:** It is important for the government leading the One UN on the ground. If a government does not lead it, it will not happen. Vietnam’s case has been one where the government has led it for the last two decades, first in its Delivering as One pilot phase and then as One UN. While I was the UN Resident Coordinator between 2017-2021, the Government treated me as a one-stop shop for anything to do with the UN, including the political and human rights sides, not just development, effectively allowing the three pillars of the UN to be under a broad One UN umbrella.

Returning to the global level, there has been an active discussion about broadening representation and participation in the UN General Assembly to bring in the private sector, civil society groups, academia, local elected bodies in essentially what is referred to as a “whole of society” approach reflected in point 55 of the Pact for the Future. The Bretton Woods institutions specialized agencies of the United Nations, are no different from the WHO or the ILO, yet they have been given a life of their own with little or no accountability. Such accountability needs to be prioritized to a strengthened UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

I would also like to refer to the need for a strengthened Peace Building Commission which can take on some of the UN Security Council’s agenda. I agree with Ambassador Nambiar that the world does not appear to be at a 1942 moment, given the emerging two broad blocs in the polarized geo-political world.

It would be impossible, today, to reinvent a UN or a UN Charter that comes anywhere close to the inspirational UN Charter of 1945, since we are living in a world of many illiberal nations and leaders. As a result, any new, alternative global governance institution design will be far worse than the Allied forces and their leaders were able to come up under the leadership of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1942 which became the basis for the creation of the United Nations.

### Questions from the floor:

**DR RASHMI JAIPAL:** With reference to the 2023 General Assembly mental health resolution, are civil society organizations were engaged with the One UN at country level, especially during implementation.

**RADHIKA KAUL BATRA:** Is there any lack of specificity on UN Security Council reform in the Pact for the Future and is there any special lens that countries like India and the G77 would like to see in the future if UN Security Council reform is to be realized.

**AMBASSADOR NAMBIAR:** Each Member State will require a level of specificity which is intrinsic to its own interest. Furthermore, it will be difficult to have something which is agreed to in general. The UN intergovernmental process will be critical for this. If the P5 are opposed to any reform proposal, it will not go through. He indicated, however, that there was value in putting the same proposals again and again to publicly shame the countries or people who are standing in the way of what almost everyone recognizes as an urgent area for change.

On mental health and civil society participation the C20 have been working on issues of public health very closely with the United Nations in several countries including India, not just by making statements but





on implementation through an integrated One Health paradigm.

**AMBASSADOR KAMBOJ:** I agree with Ambassador Nambiar on the crying and urgent need for the United Nations to be reset because it is not business as usual. I think we can all agree with that. Having been part of the Pact for the Future negotiations, when they started, ambitions and hopes were high, but as they progressed, it became quite clear that the proposals would be diluted. It is very heartening to see that there are segments on Security Council reform in the Pact for the Future, and there is an acknowledgement to reform it. However, the proposals in the Pact lack specificity and are vague about the details. The devil would lie in detail.

I agree with Ambassador Nambiar that the whole Security Council reform process needs to be looked at afresh through the intergovernmental cycle which starts in 2025. India was not pinning too many hopes on it because this has been going on for years. However, the inter-governmental process is the only one that we have in the UN General Assembly right now to deal with this issue. Everyone needs to work harder. Whether and how we can achieve that consensus is another matter. This issue is very important. The bottom line is that reform is the crying need of the hour. The bulk of speakers who spoke during the 79th UN General Assembly supported a comprehensive reform of the United Nations system. And as far as India is concerned, four of the five current permanent members supported India's presence in an expanded Security Council as a permanent member. This process is still work-in-progress. While there is every reason to be a little skeptical, there is also every reason to be a bit positive, particularly given the current momentum for comprehensive changes. The growing political climate is increasingly more favourable for reform, driven by demands from emerging powers and under-represented regions like Africa and Latin

America. Countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa, along with others in the Global South, are making stronger, more coordinated calls for greater inclusion in global governance.

Moreover, geopolitical shifts, including the diminishing influence of the post World War II order, provide an opening for countries to push for a more equitable system. The growing recognition that the UNSC must reflect today's geopolitical realities, not those of 1945, add further wind to the sails of the reform efforts. The support for a more representative and accountable UNSC is broadening beyond traditional advocates, creating a positive environment for change.

**SHOMBI SHARP:** There is unanimous agreement that we need UN Security Council reform. On mental health, the One UN in India has health and well-being as very central issues in the UN's current Strategic Cooperation Framework, ensuring that services are reaching the most vulnerable, marginalized populations. The UN in India have increasingly understood that mental health is a critical part, not just of health, but of life skills and of being a 21st century citizen. Also, the UN in India often worked through civil society organizations since the UN itself did not have the community-based presence. 