

THE 2021 DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD LECTURE

A Global Compact for a World beyond COVID



Agnès Callamard

THE 2021 DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD LECTURE

**A Global Compact for
a World beyond COVID**

Agnès Callamard

*This is the text of the annual
Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture given by Agnès Callamard
at Uppsala University on 17 September 2021*

The Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture is organised by Uppsala University and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations. It is given in recognition of the values that inspired Hammarskjöld personally and as Secretary-General, particularly compassion, humanism and a commitment to international solidarity and cooperation. Each year, the lecture is offered to an outstanding international personality who, in significant and innovative ways, contributes to a more just, peaceful and environmentally sustainable world through their contributions to politics or research.



Photographer: Mikael Wallerstedt



Photographer: Mikael Wallerstedt

A Global Compact for a World beyond COVID

Agnès Callamard

Distinguished guests, first I would like to thank you wholeheartedly for this honour. For this invitation to join you today as we commemorate the work and legacy of Mr. Dag Hammarskjöld. I actually have no words to express my gratitude for this invitation.

I. A World of Fundamental and Existential Change

Ours is a world in change. Threats and challenges overlap and intertwine – the climate crisis; current and future pandemics; deep inequalities between and within states; a global economy delivering unimaginable wealth to but a bare few, and low-to-no wages and unemployment to millions.

A demographic divide widens – the rich world ageing at unprecedented rates, while a staggering 90% of youth reside in the Global South, a majority under the impoverishing legacies of colonialism.

The latest of industrial revolutions – centered on information technology – transforms our daily life, our security, our societies; it may even transform what it means to be human – a revolution we don't understand, let alone control.

These historical global forces which drive the inter-connectedness of our world demand collective and global action; action on a global scale. Their human rights implications are made graver by a reshaping of the international system and of international relations.

The superpowers, China and the US, vie anew for hegemony, while a third – Russia – seeks to disrupt, destabilise and spoil. Trade wars; disputes over sovereignty; proxy hotspots and conflicts; a renewed armaments race and a new space race; races to control resources unclaimed – from Earth’s shrinking, frozen lands and the bottom of our oceans, to the untold riches of the moon and planets far beyond. The signs are all around us.

On the normative level: international rules are defied; attacks mounted against the very idea of universal norms and against human rights specifically, while the unravelling of the post-World War II multilateralism is engineered.

It is all largely overlain with toxic narratives that ‘other’ and dehumanise whole world communities: refugees and migrants; Muslims; the poor; LGBTQI+ persons; ethnic and racial minorities.

The result? Human rights violations and at a scale and spread likely without precedent; even further enabled by well-organised, well-resourced global and local campaigns against human rights defenders, civil society and our shared demands for universality.

Friends, it is an instability registering Force 10 on our human history scale.

II. COVID: The Magnifier of Everything that Is Wrong

Reflecting on the trajectory for rights in the midst of all this, I find myself returning again and again to the lessons of a tough professor – the COVID-19 pandemic.

A pandemic which has not only magnified world’s challenges, but has thrown a harsh spotlight on them. Exposing deep inequalities with brutal clarity, COVID has shown how austerity measures post-2008 weakened public infrastructure, ravaged public health systems and stripped out public services around the world. People pushed to the very edge of survival and, 4.5 million others (or possibly 5) to date, who were pushed far beyond that – the vast majority lost being elderly, Blacks, from ethnic minorities, frontline workers, the poor.

Millions of informal sector workers have been left destitute. Women and girls have suffered most from the denial of access to sexual and reproductive services, which have been deemed somehow less important during COVID. Meanwhile, many were subjected to an often-brutal silencing, even set upon, just for speaking out when leaders and their policies failed.

And yet, a tiny few have benefited to almost unimaginable levels. Oxfam research shows that, since the pandemic began, the combined wealth of the world's ten richest men has increased by half-a-trillion dollars, while the gap between the top 10% and bottom 80% has widened.¹

The pandemic has further exposed the world's inability to cooperate effectively in times of dire global need. President Trump's refusal to join in COVAX, the global vaccine redistribution mechanism, is but one example. Xi Jinping's government persecution of the Chinese health workers and journalists who attempted to raise the alarm about the virus early on was an egregious affront to international cooperation.

There are few signs that the lessons of 2020 have been learned.

COVAX itself has been rendered powerless, emptied out more often than not. Pharmaceutical companies have refused to share their knowledge and technology to expand global vaccine supply, while rich countries have hoarded vaccines.

Some states' fiscal responses to the COVID crisis did alleviate the worst of its economic impact but, even there, the wealthiest benefited most. What economist Mr. Tooze has said of the US is true for the entire world: if governments response to COVID 'was indeed a "new social contract", it was an alarmingly one-sided affair'.²

III. Why?

Friends, the pandemic cannot be addressed locally, or even nationally, alone. Some political leaders may try to pretend otherwise, but it's time we call their lethal bluff. And we also need to ask 'why?'

Why are things this way when the globalised management of COVID vaccinations is the only way forward? When that is the only way to prevent new variants emerging?

Why? When the world can afford to do it: As Christine Lagarde, the head of the European Central Bank, recently pointed out, '6,000 billion dollars have been spent already on fiscal support. But only a fraction of that is needed to vaccinate the entire world'.

Why? When the Global North could vaccinate 80% of all their people aged over 12 and still have large quantities left to distribute to the Global South?

Why? Is it because those of us benefiting from this gross inequality do not care enough to say to our governments, ‘No, not in my name’? Is it because the West is more concerned with the antivax movement than with vaccine equity? Is it an economic calculation driven by big pharma and their shareholders?

Why, dare we ask? Is this but the latest example of longstanding global biopolitics, of policies driving a biological division of the human species, causing a justification for extermination of those deemed not worthy of saving?³

Why? Is our response to COVID demonstrating forcefully a necropolitics – under which entire crowds of people are forced, through racism, to live at the very edge of life, pushed even onto its outer edges?⁴ After all, ideologies that permit as acceptable such violations, even deaths, are increasingly part of this century’s politics. We see that in:

- Migration and refugee policies that are predicated on ‘risk of death’ as an acceptable deterrent, to the point of even criminalising those trying to save lives;
- The post-9/11 securitisation framework, which perhaps may have protected us in the West but wreaked havoc on many other populations;
- The mess of an unplanned withdrawal from Afghanistan, where yesterday’s friends and allies were left behind to face the Taliban alone.

Necropolitics are hardwired into our international system – evident in whom it does and does not rescue; in whom it declares a victim and whom it ignores; in which deaths are mourned and which are ignored; in whose lives matter and whose just don’t. That is the tough lesson of COVID, and of today’s vaccine nationalism.

IV. A Fundamental Question

Dear friends, is it therefore not time to re-envision, re-create, re-establish a new world order, a new international system, with human rights protection at the centre? Isn’t it time to do so now, *without* waiting for a World War III or more holocausts to shame us into it?

Yes, you will say, a new international system and the shaping of the world ahead is exactly what is at stake right now in the conflicts between China, the US and Russia. But are we to be left as the passive storytellers of that struggle for power? Shall we simply bear witness to it, count the blows, tend the wounded? Shall we watch from the sidelines while the world for our children and our children’s children is refashioned by the very actors that are failing us in the face of crises today, including COVID?

Given the unprecedented degree of change underway, it is tempting to think that the only alternative is to resist the onslaught and protect what has already been achieved. But to my mind defensiveness is no more acceptable than passivity. Instead, we must be both defiant and demanding. We must stand up to build up a human rights vision for *the world that we are becoming*, not merely defend rights in terms of the world we once were.

That is very much the lesson of this past decade: the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, LGBTI and the marriage equality movements; Fridays for Future; the extraordinary protests in Sudan, Belarus, Myanmar, to name a few. They demonstrate that we can and we should defy and disrupt; go on the offensive—demand more, far beyond a mere recovery from COVID.

We must be willing, in other words, to be a *1948-like* generation – the generation that designed and declared, in the face of utter destruction, the UN Charter and the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). We cannot be a repeat of the 1930s generation, turning our backs to the oppression of others in order that our own comfort be sustained.

V. Principles for a New Global Compact

It is time to recommit. It is time to reset. It is time to reboot. It is time for a new and global compact; a compact for a post-pandemic world that is grounded in equality, human rights, founded on our common humanity. One that radically resets the relationship between rights-holders and the planet. It should put rights-holders in control of technology. And it must fearlessly tackle inequalities – including those of racism and sexism.

What I am calling for is a future-minded, bold, ambitious, human rights itinerary to the world of 2048 in the spirit of the vision of 1948. The foundations for a sustainable, truly post-pandemic global society rest not merely on recovery. They must be sunk deep into human rights-based accountability and be raised up by a human rights rethinking and reformulation of the relationship between equality, the environment and the economy.

The world we must shape is one where infinite greed no longer bulges the pockets of the already billionaires, transnational corporations and corrupt leaders, leaving public systems for education, health and livelihoods crumbling as our planet teeters on devastation. It's about securing a world where states end the normalisation of

emergency laws, where no one is persecuted simply for being who they are, for whom they love or how they worship.

For that journey to begin, civil society and academia will have to take the driver's seat, and a range of other actors must also climb on board. Not everything will go smoothly. There will be potholes and obstacles, wrong turns, and false starts. But we cannot stand at the roadside of the future waiting for a rescue that never will come.

To these ends and to add momentum to the urgency, I propose we establish, with like-minded stakeholders, a 20–48 Commission.⁵ Its purpose will be to apply an ethos of horizon-scanning, anticipation and innovation to the task of reimagining global institutions and agreements for our new world, and then building them. What should that commission do? Concretely, we should press forward with reform of the UN, and imagine its performance anew too. At a very strict minimum, the paralysis of the UN Security Council must be tackled, particularly in the context of severe human rights and humanitarian crises, through new rules over the use of veto, new rules over membership, and alternative decision-making bodies when it fails to act.

Let us take urgent steps towards establishing a new World Court for Human Rights. The International Criminal Court distinguished the last decades of the twentieth century. Let the World Court for Human Rights mark a new trajectory for our century. Meanwhile, we can build on the successes of the latest mechanisms for human rights monitoring, such as fact-finding missions and international independent investigatory mechanisms. Strengthen their mandates so that they can take on a range of situations, such as targeted killings and other acts of violence.

We must reshape the international legal system and international law to equip it to engage trans-boundary information flows, protect the environment and uphold the duties of corporate and other non-state actors. International law for the twenty-first century must bring corporate and other non-state actors fully into the international plane. It should help to reconstruct the relationship between rights-holders and the planet. International human rights law should explore now what it means to be human in 2048 and beyond, in the age of robotics, securing the place of autonomy and moral judgement, along with compassion and empathy. International law should set new benchmarks of responsibilities for

corporate actors and ensure the rights of other species are fully recognised in an era where biodiversity should be as protected as the risks of nuclear warfare should be prevented.

The idea that the markets, left to their own devices, will deliver the greatest social benefits for society at large has been debunked repeatedly; proven a hollow, disingenuous and dangerous concept. And yet, this is so often the default position. The global compact demands a fundamental shift away from market-driven responses only, toward an international economic system that is greener, predicated on greater equality and trust. Immediately, this requires new approaches to the measurement of economic performance and social progress. To quote Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, ‘Developing better metrics is particularly important now, because to “build back better”, governments need to be able to assess whether or not they are making progress on addressing the many fissures the pandemic exposed’.⁶

A global compact for the post-pandemic world would measure what matters for people, planet, peace and *shared* prosperity; not merely profit for some. Those metrics would include human rights indicators from the right to health to the right to a clean environment, for which metrics related to emission reduction and greenhouse gases are essential.

We must better measure inequalities of all shapes, including those driven by racism and sexism. International solidarity must be upheld as a core value of that global compact. Few, if any, of the crises and violations that plague this world of ours can be handled only nationally. They all demand that global connections be made, and that global accountability systems be strong enough.

The new global compact demands that we cast the nets of engagement further and wider, forging new partnerships, demonstrating more concretely how global solidarity can help counter global threats. And we must be prepared to be changed ourselves, including by and for those for whose future we are fighting – children and young people.

That global solidarity is needed urgently, and it must start now. We who are the privileged ones must come together in a concerted, visible and global effort, to stand up against vaccine nationalism; to demand that the powerful countries redistribute the 1 billion-strong vaccine surplus.

If we fail to prevent that self-serving hoarding, we all are made complicit in a massive violation of people's rights, complicit in preventable deaths. It is rare that as a global community we are in an immediate position to take concrete steps to prevent mass violations. Rarely does a doable solution present itself. But on this occasion, for this purpose, we have within our grasp the possibility of wide-reaching human rights impact, but only if we demand global vaccine justice.

VI. Conclusion

Distinguished guests and dear friends, my closing challenge is also practical, possible and portentous, although not on the same life-saving scale of immediacy. My proposal is that we work towards the convening of a 2028 World Conference on Human Rights. It would be held on the eightieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its purpose would be to re-launch boldly, without equivocation, respect for and protection of human rights as the core contract of the twenty-first century.

We can and we must position human rights squarely within the new world order – a system that must be equipped to act decisively for climate and economy; to address conclusively the systemic and historical injustices of racism and sexism. The 2028 conference can be a milestone in that journey. A place from where we would turn away from mere enunciation of normative truths, as precious as they are, to instead establish specific obligations, set measurable targets, raise up institutions and mechanisms for implementation, to invest proportionately and enable due accountability.

Distinguished guests, dear friends, we can, we must – bridge now into renewed resistance to the current onslaught against the very idea of equality and the very principle of universal and indivisible rights. We can and we must build up a renewed offensive to establish leadership, institutions and systems that are future-loyal, bold and visionary, fit for the protection of our planet and its peoples against all that plagues us – in the spirit of 1948, for the sake of 2048 and all that lies beyond it.

Thank you very much.

References

- ¹ Oxfam, ‘Adding Fuel to the Fire: How IMF Demands for Austerity Will Drive Up Inequality Worldwide’, August 2021, p. 3, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bp-covid-loans-imf-austerity-110821-en.pdf>.
- ² Adam Tooze, ‘Has Covid ended the neoliberal era?’, *the Guardian*, 2 September 2021, www.theguardian.com/news/2021/sep/02/covid-and-the-crisis-of-neoliberalism?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.
- ³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*.
- ⁴ Achille Mbembe (trans. Libby Meintjes), ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture* 15/1 (2003): pp. 11–40.
- ⁵ Hyphenated for emphasis.
- ⁶ “‘Building back better’ – but on what foundations?’ *The 2021 Green Templeton Lecture*, delivered by Joseph E. Stiglitz on 10 June 2021 at the University of Oxford’s Green Templeton College, <http://www.gtc.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/joseph-stiglitz-on-how-to-build-back-better/>.

Agnès Callamard

Dr. Agnès Callamard is Secretary General at Amnesty International. She leads the organisation's human rights work and is its chief spokesperson. She is responsible for providing overall leadership of the International Secretariat, including setting the strategic direction for the organization and managing relations with Amnesty International's national entities.

Dr. Callamard has been a prominent figure in the human rights world for decades. In 2016, she was appointed as the UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary killings. Along with her UN work, Dr. Callamard was also the Director of Global Freedom of Expression at Columbia University in New York.

Previously, she was Executive Director of the freedom of expression organization Article 19. She returns to Amnesty after 20 years, having previously held the role of Chef de Cabinet for then-Secretary General Pierre Sané. As a leading advocate for freedom of expression, a feminist and an anti-racism activist, she pushes out the frontiers of rights through her scholarship and advocacy.

Dag Hammarskjöld



Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961) served as Secretary-General of the UN with the utmost courage and integrity from 1953 till his death in 1961, creating standards against which his successors continue to be measured. He stood firmly by the UN Charter and lost his life in pursuit of dialogue and peace; Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash on a mission to mediate in the 1960’s Congo crisis. For his service, he was posthumously awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Hammarskjöld’s most notable achievements while serving as the world’s top international civil servant include restructuring of the UN to make it more effective, creating the basis for UN peacekeeping operations, and successfully implementing his “preventive diplomacy” in crises from the Middle East to China. Before he was appointed UN Secretary-General, Hammarskjöld held several senior positions in the Swedish civil service and became a non-partisan member of the Swedish Cabinet.

Hammarskjöld also had many cultural interests and served as a member of the Swedish Academy, the body that awards the Nobel Prize for Literature. Another testament to this literary side is his journal of personal and spiritual reflections which was published posthumously as *Markings* in 1963. Hammarskjöld spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Uppsala, which also became his final resting place.

Uppsala University



Uppsala University, founded in 1477, is the oldest and best-known university in Scandinavia. Famous scholars such as Rudbeck, Celsius and Linnaeus were professors here, as well as eight Nobel Prize laureates, among them Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, who was also the University's Pro-Chancellor. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1930. In the same year Dag Hammarskjöld completed his studies at Uppsala with a bachelor's degree in Law. He had begun his studies here in 1923, receiving a BA in Romance Languages, Philosophy and Economics in 1925 and took a further post-graduate degree in Economics early in 1928.

The University's international studies library is named after Dag Hammarskjöld and, in 1981, the Swedish Parliament established the Dag Hammarskjöld Chair of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University.

www.uu.se

Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation



The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation is a non-governmental organisation established in 1962 in memory of the second UN Secretary-General, which aims to advance dialogue and policy for sustainable development and peace. The Swedish parliament took the initiative to set up the Foundation shortly after Hammarskjöld's tragic death and UN General Assembly Resolution 1757 welcomed its establishment. The Foundation is an autonomous institution and is unaffiliated with any political, religious or ideological groups; its work is guided by respect for and alignment to the principles outlined in the UN Charter.

www.daghammarskjold.se

Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture

The Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture is given in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld, and in recognition of the values that inspired him as Secretary-General and generally in his life – compassion, humanism and commitment to international solidarity and cooperation.

The invited speaker should be an outstanding international personality who in significant and innovative ways contributes to a more just, peaceful and environmentally sustainable world through valuable achievements in politics or research. Further information about the annual Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture including the full list of previous lecturers as well as their published speeches, can be found online at www.daghammarskjold.se.

Other Dag Hammarskjöld Lectures available in print and on-line:

Christiana Figueres, *Leadership for the Decisive Decade*, 2019

António Guterres, *Twenty-first century challenges and the enduring wisdom of Dag Hammarskjöld*, 2018

Ban Ki-moon: *Evolving Threats, Timeless Values: The United Nations In A Changing Global Landscape*, 2016

José Ramos-Horta, *Preventing Conflicts, Building Durable Peace*, 2015

Helen Clark, *The Future We Want - Can We Make It A Reality?*, 2014

Margot Wallström, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*, 2013

Tarja Halonen, *Women's Participation in the Sustainable World*, 2012

Jan Eliasson, *Peace Development and Human Rights – The Indispensable Connection*, 2011

Francis Deng, *Idealism and Realism – Negotiating sovereignty in divided nations*, 2010

Karen AbuZayd, *Rights, Justice and United Nations Values – Reflections through a Palestine Refugee Prism*, 2009

Martti Ahtisaari, *Can the International Community Meet the Challenges Ahead of Us?*, 2008

Sture Linnér and Sverker Åström, *UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld – Reflections and personal experiences*, 2007

Hans Blix, *UN Reform and World Disarmament – Where do we go?*, 2005

Noeleen Heyzer, *Woman, War and Peace – Mobilising for Peace and Security in the 21st Century*, 2003
Lakhdar Brahimi, *The Rule of Law at Home and Abroad*, 2002

Kofi Annan, *Dag Hammarskjöld and the 21st Century*, 2001

Joseph Rotblat, *The Nuclear Age – A Curse and a Challenge: The Role of Scientists*, 2001

Brian Urquhart, *Between Sovereignty and Globalisation – Where does the United Nations fit in?*, 2000

Mary Robinson, *Human Rights – Challenges for the 21st Century*, 1998



The medal which Uppsala University has produced in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld is awarded to the Dag Hammarskjöld Lecturers. It is designed by Annette Rydström and cast in bronze. The obverse shows a portrait of Dag Hammarskjöld and on the reverse a handshake and a text in Latin which reads: 'Uppsala University to its disciple in memory of his outstanding achievements.'

Photo: Jan Eve Olsson, Kungl. Myntkabinettet



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET



Dag Hammarskjöld
Foundation