



'Once we are in a crisis it is not enough to repeat what has already been said and done'

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On 24 April we observe the [International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace](#). The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation marks this occasion by asking Mr Csaba Kőrösi, President of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), seven questions in an interview with Edit Morin-Kovacs, Programme Manager for Multilateralism.

Mr Kőrösi generously shared his reflections on water, science, his personal experience from the- UNGA, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), United Nations Security Council reform, role of the UN General Assembly and offered advice to future generations.



António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General (left), Csaba Kőrösi, President of the 77th session of the General Assembly (center), and Movses Abelian, Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management (right).

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Ambassador Kőrösi, in March you completed the 2023 UN Water Conference, the first in nearly 50 years. What are your key take-aways from this process and what will happen now?

Thank you for starting with water, which is close to my heart. I think it is also close to the heart of those 9,000 people who attended the three-day meeting in New York. We can clearly say that a breakthrough happened after 47 years of hesitation and going through crisis to crisis.

There were three basic acknowledgements which transpired from the discussions and helped us get into some breakthrough points.

The **first** of these acknowledgements was that we are in the middle of a water crisis which requires a different perception of what we should need, what we should do and where we should go.

The **second** acknowledgement was that finally we understood that the water cycle or the hydrological cycle was part of the global common goods. We are using it together, we have changed and altered it together and we have a responsibility for it together.

The **third** ground-laying and foundational experience was that we understood jointly that for the first time in the history of humankind we had crossed the tipping point of freshwater.

So, what we agreed upon, even though it was not a legally binding agreement by the member states and stakeholders, is that now we will start the implementation of a transformational agenda.

On the one hand, it relies on the water commitments by Member States and other stakeholders, we call it water action agenda. On the other hand, it will rely on some voluntary financial commitments by Member States and stakeholders. We summed up only those which were marked by concrete numbers, and it went up to US\$ 40 billion.

If we take into consideration how much socio-economic and ecosystem gains it could unlock, it goes beyond one trillion US\$. It is very encouraging.

But we also understood that once we are in a crisis it is not enough to repeat what has already been said and done, it is not enough to do an encouraging inventory or to do things even faster than in the past.

We must identify some game changers to change the course of events in the years to come. We identified nine real game changers that will alter our actions and will allow us in the water crisis to move from reactive policies and behaviour to a proactive one, moving from an increasing instability to an increasing predictability. I hope you can follow the implementation of these game changers in the weeks, months and maybe years to come.

They are as follows:

First, we have agreed to integrate water into climate policies. It is almost evident, because they are closely interlinked, but we have never done it. The work will start now.

Second, once we integrate the water in climate policies, in practical terms it also means that we must integrate our water in climate databases.

By 2030, we will create a global water information system to support each country to make preparations to change water conditions at least five to ten years ahead. It means it has an impact on investment policies, agricultural policies, urban policies, urban planning and industrial policies as well.

We also agreed on a **third** game changer, which will create early warning for all by 2027, to help people safeguard their lives and property.

The **fourth** game changer is a complicated but a very necessary one. We need to decouple our water consumption, food production and energy production. If I take into consideration the agricultural

needs and food processing, food production is taking about 85% of freshwater. By 2050, we will need to increase food production at least by 50% and we are already at 85%. The fossil fuel related energy production is also taking a huge amount of freshwater. So, unless we decouple these three, the way out of the water crisis will be impossible.

The **fifth** game changer is that we are developing a new economics of water for a sustainable world. It will quite significantly change the economic thinking, with a great impact on the Sustainable Development Goals implementation as well.

The **sixth** game changer is that we are about to create a global water education network. So far, nine or ten universities have joined. We need to educate more water experts, particularly in the developing world.

The **seventh** game changer is coming from the field of the transboundary water cooperation. We know that it has been a hot potato for over 4,000 years. The first war over water happened about 4,600 years ago, but the first legal framework so far for transboundary water cooperation is the [UN Water Convention](#).

It was designed for Europe, but we are now expanding it into the whole world and just during these couple of days ten countries outside of Europe have registered their willingness to join. It will indeed be a very different world if we all stick to those rules enshrined in this convention.

The **eighth** game changer is that if we want these big changes to be implemented, we need to change the supporting institutional architecture within the UN. In the coming weeks and months, we will create that to make sure there will be a unified strategic guidance for water action within the UN, shared by the UN agencies and member states, supported by a scientific and practice panel, with a serious role of the newly established UN Envoy for water.

Finally, we have to have a long-term follow-up as well. Hopefully by 2025 we are going to have an intergovernmental meeting to see

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what has been agreed upon, what has been achieved and what remains to be achieved. My main take-away is that the work will start, but the breakthrough has happened.

We are gradually closing the gap between governance and science. Since the beginning of your presidency, you have been a strong advocate of scientific engagement at the General Assembly, e.g. on climate-conflict correlation and the role of early warning for pandemic preparedness. A bit more than halfway through your presidency, where do you think we are on this road? Perhaps we can discuss this again at the tail-end of your presidency.

I hope there will be tangible results to share. Let’s start with why we need science in a bit more organised and regular way in the General Assembly.

We are deliberating on a huge number of issues, but strangely enough, when 193 countries are trying to create consensus, it used to be a kind of political consensus, and sometimes on issues that are clearly rooted in science related evidence, without consulting the people of science.

Therefore, in many instances our compromises are not so much based on the evidence but based on the ability of our drafters. When we have a rather difficult negotiating process launched in the Assembly, it is very important to create a common knowledge base, to see what the scientific evidence can tell us. Which are the key problems to be solved and what are the options?

Another phase of the scientific involvement, in my understanding, is when the negotiations are coming to a closing stage and the results are largely shaped. There is always a need for a reality check, whether or not the outcomes of the negotiations are corresponding with the original objectives, and whether or not the outcomes are really addressing the issue to be solved.

Last but not least, probably one of the most important parts is about to be created now, because the first two are already in operation. We have to create a system in the UN that will be more efficient in validating the implementation of the decisions. It will be especially important with the Sustainable Development Goals and for all issues related to the global common goods.

In the first two phases of the application of science, we are already having a result-oriented approach, with 16 ongoing negotiating processes, 13 of which are transformational. All of them started with stocktaking, with the involvement of scientific actors, and we will have a scientific reflection on the results.

In the course of negotiations, we are holding scientific briefings for the Member States on the most difficult and most complex issues and without any political affiliation we are asking the people of science to indicate their findings, purely based on evidence.

The third phase, as I mentioned, is going to be created very soon together with the Secretary-General. He is going to re-establish a scientific advisory board and, as we agreed with him, this board should be instrumental to help Member States as well to validate the

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implementation of the decisions taken by the General Assembly.

Here we are on this road – part of the delivery is still ahead, particularly when it comes to the creation of the board and the creation of the science and practice advice to the water institutional structure that we are going to build in the UN.

You played a key role in negotiating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Can you recall some lessons from these times which you think are applicable and useful today for the upcoming [SDG Summit](#)?

When the Sustainable Development Goals were crafted, during those two years, it was absolutely essential that we were guided by a vision of a sustainable transformation.

That vision was created in the [Rio+20 conference](#), and that vision helped us throughout the negotiations. It is absolutely necessary now to keep our eyes on the necessity of the transformation.

The second good lesson learnt is that during the SDG negotiations we invited science to be on our side, to create a common knowledge base. It served as a kind of blueprint for many other negotiations and helped bridging over an issue which the New York Times at that time described as a ‘mission impossible’, to bring 193 countries to a common platform. That common platform was scientific evidence. Later we made a political agreement, but it was based on scientific evidence, with compromises of course, at the end of the road.

A third good lesson for the future, is that at the beginning of those negotiations, we spent a lot of time identifying key challenges and options. Instead of starting to draft some kind of a text, which we all could agree upon, and which could take a huge volume and at the end of the day we would say that we had done our drafting job, the drafting exercise was postponed.

The most important part of these negotiations was to agree upon the real challenges and

options. It is still an issue today because the challenges are growing, and the options are shrinking.

Another lesson is that during the SDG negotiations, you may recall, the Rio+20 conference decided that this open working group should be composed of 30 Member States. At the onset, it turned out that the interest was much higher among Member States than to pick 30, so we had to reinvent mathematics and we started sharing the mandates among Member States.

First it was 72 but very quickly we ended up with 193. But the notion of countries working together on shared mandates, this means sometimes 2, 3 or 4 countries sharing a mandate, helped changing the environment.

Instead of digging the traditional trenches, countries were compelled to work together and finding a common ground among themselves.

Last but not least, it was crucial at the time that we could secure a very strong stakeholder participation, it was not only science but all major groups, actors across the board. I spent more than 50% of my time as co-chair of the negotiations with stakeholders. All this resulted in an atmosphere that we need today as well. Today it will be more difficult. That was a grace period, that does not exist today.

First and foremost, we have a much deeper crisis than we had a couple of years ago and the division among Member States is more visible, so it will take a wise and more delicate approach, and the options ahead of us and the time available for addressing those issues is much shorter.

The world is closely following the issue of the Security Council's reform and the role of the General Assembly in this process. Is there anything you can reveal about some challenges and prospects?

In the last 13 years we have been conducting inter-governmental negotiations on the reform of the Security Council (SC). The notion, however, has been on the agenda for 43 years. It also indicates how inefficient this process has been and how far we are from the

necessary solutions. But, talking about today's realities, last September [2022] during the high-level week, more than one third of the heads of states or governments present in New York, in their national interventions, demanded very directly a speedy and efficient reform of the SC, to make it more compliant with the realities of the 21st century. It is a new situation, when such a large number of member states at top level is very strongly demanding it.

The other issue which makes a difference nowadays is that the SC is basically paralysed. Paralysed in time of war. The SC has been created to be the guardian of peace and security and prevent wars, prevent, and mitigate conflicts or soften their impacts.

Now we have a situation when a war has been started by one of the five permanent Members of the SC and the same country is basically preventing the Council from taking any decision on this war, that is the war in Ukraine. Many Member States therefore are feeling that the SC is not delivering on its mandate.

Negotiations are going on in a little bit more encouraging way than in the last 13 years, but it remains a Member State led process, it will go as fast and as far as the Member States want it to go.

The structure of the negotiations is clear, two co-chairs of the negotiations were nominated, and they are working with Member States. I hope it is now more encouraging for many Member States than it was a year ago.

Let me also mention something that has not come directly from the SC reform negotiations but has an effect on it. It is the so-called veto initiative, which has been adopted by the General Assembly roughly a year ago and we agreed to have a next debate, a large debate, about it on 26 April. Namely, if a veto is cast in the SC on any issue, there is an automatic obligation on the president of the General Assembly to convene a meeting of the General Assembly, a debate, on the same issue to examine the reasons for the veto and to look at ways to address the questions. I am really looking forward to this debate.

I think that the Member States have used the last couple of years to digest what this new tool would give them, what this new tool can be used for and how to encourage the work and the reform process of the Security Council in the months and years to come.

In this difficult context, what are the challenges of the General Assembly?

Indeed, when we talk about the reform of the UN, it is not only limited to the reform of the Security Council.

The General Assembly itself needs reform and it also has its negotiating process, as everything in the UN General Assembly: we call it the revitalisation of the work of the General Assembly. It is an awful expression, I am sorry for the UN speak, but it means how we are going to change some working methods to make the General Assembly more efficient.

We discuss with Member States and let me give you my perspective on that. As we discussed earlier, we are in crisis times, and in crisis times you have to have a very clear vision on how you are going to come out of the crisis and what your vision on the future is.

The General Assembly is a huge factory or producing many resolutions; in the first half a year alone, we had 181 agenda items. If, in a large organisation you have 181 priorities, then it prompts the question what your real priorities are.

Every company, every government institution in the world must have essential priorities to sail rough waters. I think we are about to create that in the General Assembly, but it takes time to have everyone on board. It will be very difficult to introduce a set of reforms without the consent of the Member States.

It is about us, it is about all of us, but the General Assembly is understanding that not only the Security Council but also the General Assembly is in need of reform.

Last but not least, let me make a point. Some believe that the General Assembly and the

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Security Council are somehow opponents in a power structure. It is not my view.

My view is that we are one UN, and that one UN is supposed to deliver. We have a distribution of roles within the UN, so if there is a debate in the General Assembly and if there is a veto resolution in the General Assembly, it is not to create a contrast between different organisations of the same larger body, but to optimise the possibilities how to encourage each other with the best performance we are expected to deliver.

As Permanent Representative and as Vice-President, you were part of the General Assembly before presiding it. Can you share some reflections on the different experiences of the same room?

Times are different. The organisation is the same, but times have changed. We are in the middle of the prototype of the Anthropocene crisis. It has never been experienced in the past. It means that within a short period of time this type of very complex crisis is capable of bringing down complete communities, countries and even regions. As we saw it during the COVID crisis.

On the one hand, the UN, the General Assembly, is a kind of a reflection of the realities out there. On the other hand, the UN must be, and is, the platform for searching solutions. My observation is that the world has changed and so has the General Assembly.

The other observation is that the division among Member States has always been there,

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but today it is visibly deeper than it was ten years ago. It is partly due to the Anthropocene crisis as a consequence, and partly due to the deepening geopolitical divide in the world.

Last but not least, when we created the big transformation goals, the SDGs, the Paris Agreement, financing for sustainable development, we had more or less a unified vision of the future. This still stands, but since then the world is more split than at any time in the last thirty years.

The difference now, compared to ten years ago, is that we have to go for a better understanding of the shared responsibility of the global common goods to prevent an even deeper crisis in time of a deepening geopolitical divide.

This deepening geopolitical divide is not necessarily helping the shared responsibility, the shared thinking of the Member States, but it is nevertheless an obligation on us. And the General Assembly is trying to do its best.

If a 13-year-old child comes across this interview in 20 years’ time, what would you like them to take away?

You want me to be a fortune teller which I am not. But I can safely tell these children that in 20 years’ time their world will be very different from the one we have today.

The acceleration is ongoing, the difference between today and 20 years from now further along the road will be bigger than the difference between today and twenty years ago. It will be a bigger difference in terms of some of the crises we are facing and some of the tools we can use for solutions.

Technology and science are rapidly growing and not only the challenges are growing, but our ability to find the answers.

My hope and my message to these youngsters is that I hope that they will perceive 2023 as a turning point that made life better.

I hope that they will recognise that in these years around 2023 the scientific knowledge became much closer to the political decision making, producing more relevant answers for the future.

I hope these years, taking into consideration issues which are very close to scientific breakthroughs such as fusion energy, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, life sciences, will also mark a threshold that something new started.

I also hope that our economic thinking will be very different by then, and we can identify that although it started much earlier it took a very interesting shape in the years around 2023 when we started adopting very different values and factoring them into our economic planning and operations.

One thing is still missing from the equation, but it is very important. We see the challenges, we have the tools, but we still have to make sure we also have the political will for the transformation.

And I hope that those youngsters in 20 years’ time will look back and say ‘these were the brave guys who took the necessary decisions. □