In a speech at the second Paris Peace Forum in November 2019, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres warned of “five global risks, or widening fault lines”, whose underlying causes could only be addressed by strengthening “multilateralism”. First, he referred to the broken relations between great powers and their competition over economic, technological and geostrategic interests. Second, he cited the weakening of the social contract, and the increasing inequality that has led to widespread social unrest and protests. Third was the lack of solidarity motivated by the rise of populist, racist and nationalist narratives that turn societies inward. The fourth fault line was the climate emergency, which requires greater celerity and determination. Finally, Guterres came to the technological divide. New technologies bring great potential to transform societies but also to deepen inequalities, while posing risks to governments and individuals, from disinformation to cyberattacks. Facing these challenges, Guterres said multilateralism was indispensable: “What country is capable of bridging these fault lines in isolation, separately from the rest of the world?”

These fault lines have widened in 2020. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has led to a global health crisis that has dramatically accelerated
current dynamics in international relations. The rivalry between the US and China mounts, while global cooperation dwindles. Technology has enabled many of us to work from home, but the coronavirus crisis has destroyed millions of jobs and widened social inequalities between those who can and cannot adapt to changes in their workplace (potentially providing fertile ground for the populists of the future). For many, COVID-19 is also a warning of the climate-related crises to come. The greatest challenge to the UN since its creation after the Second World War may have arrived on its 75th anniversary. The question of how to strengthen multilateralism and global cooperation appears ever more pressing in the light of the coronavirus.

This CIDOB Report is an attempt to think about the challenges that currently affect the UN and offer pathways for the reform and strengthening of multilateralism and global cooperation. The report is structured in two parts: the first addresses how the UN has dealt with today’s key challenges, while the second offers analysis and recommendations for tomorrow.

In the following chapter, Anna Ayuso examines the current reforms of the development agenda, which is closely linked to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the pledge to “Leave no one behind”. In the third chapter, Pol Bargués reflects on the evolution of peacekeeping operations towards a model of sustaining peace, which requires reform of UN forces to make them better coordinated, more reflexive and agile, and to focus more on conflict prevention and sustaining peace in conflict-affected societies.

In chapter four, Moussa Bourekba explores the UN’s shift towards a preventive approach to terrorism and violent extremism, where a combination of hard-security approaches and non-coercive measures has evolved to tackle the drivers of the radicalisation of individuals and groups. In chapter five, Carme Colomina addresses how the heavy machinery of the UN architecture struggles to adapt to the new interdependencies and vulnerabilities – new digital divides and media landscapes, multiplying information and disinformation – brought in by the ongoing digital transformation of economies and societies. Héctor Sánchez Margalef, in chapter six, draws parallels between the critiques and constraints that affect both the UN and the European Union. In the context of growing contestation, both organisations must accelerate their reforms to cohere their strategies and preserve a rules-based multilateral system.

The second part of the report seeks to advance proposals and suggestions for a renovated UN. In chapter seven, Emmanuel Comte critiques the strict measures of state control of international migration flows. He then
proposes a new global migration regime organised around a liberal theory of justice that considers the inequality of opportunities created by closed borders. In chapter eight, Hannah Abdullah discusses the challenge of cultural diversity in a globally interconnected world. She calls for renewed investment in UN programmes and policies in the areas of cultural heritage and intercultural dialogue to enhance the UN’s peace and sustainable development agendas. Along similar lines, in chapter nine, Eva Garcia-Chueca explains how local governments, in their capacity as representative institutions, should play a larger role in the international governance agenda.

In chapter ten, Eduard Soler argues that unilateral impulses are a threat to the global rules-based order and to regional organisations around the world. He evaluates the extent to which regional cooperation may be the saviour of multilateralism and help us cope with global challenges such as the current climate and health emergencies. In the last chapter of the volume, Marie Vandendriessche draws some parallels between the climate and the COVID-19 crises, such as their planetary scope, need for international cooperation, and the economic and social costs involved in addressing them. In her view, climate change action must find a way to work rapidly, effectively and collectively to address a critical problem with a long-term horizon.

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