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UN 2020: Will this be a Happy Birthday? by Fergus Watt

Anniversaries often mark an opportunity for stock-taking, renewal . . . and occasionally reform. The year 2020, marking 75th anniversary of the United Nations, presents advocates of a more effective UN the chance to call for measures to strengthen the world body. In 1995, at the time of the UN's 50th anniversary (and soon after the end of the Cold War) there was much advance study and anticipation of ways governments could act to improve the UN system. Remember the Commission on Global Governance? But major powers were able to suppress movement toward any progressive reforms.

However, ten years later, in time for the UN's 60th anniversary Secretary-General Kofi Annan led efforts that resulted in substantially upgraded UN Human Rights machinery, the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission, the advent of the Responsibility to Protect and other measures (enumerated in an October 2005 Outcome Document).

In addition to the 75th anniversary, the year 2020 will also be the occasion for several multiyear reviews of major treaties and processes, including the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. So why not capitalize on this important moment for the UN?

The UN2020 Initiative is canvassing the views of a variety of stakeholders -- civil society representatives, Member States and UN officials -- to explore the inclusion of a UN reform preparatory process in preparations for the anticipated UN 2020 Summit Meeting. A May 4, 2017 consultation involved discussions among over 30 New York-based NGOs. The campaign has also met with over a dozen key governments as well as UN Secretariat staff. Coordination for the project is provided by the WFM-IGP New York secretariat and WFM -- Canada's national office in Ottawa. Project partners include CIVICUS (the "world alliance for citizen participation"), The Stimson Center (a Washington-based think tank), and the Workable World Trust (Minnesota).

It is too early in the process to know whether the initiative will succeed. According to WFM Executive Director Bill Pace, "We're encouraged by the kinds of hearings we're getting. Senior officials and diplomats are taking the idea of a 2020 reform process seriously. Perhaps part of the interest is a reaction to Donald Trump and the U.S. Threats to cut funding for the UN. At a time when powerful governments are demonstrating less support for multilateralism and the benefits of international cooperation, there are also a number of small and medium-sized states not willing to sit idly by while the UN is further marginalized and diminished."

Fergus Watt is Executive Director of World Federalist Movement – Canada.

Documents, links, and other items referenced in the June 2017 issue of Mondial are available at <http://www.wfmcanda.org/mondial-links-june-2017/>