

**Keynote Address at the “In Conversation with the Experts: The Future of the United Nations” Conference**  
**Birmingham City University, January 27, 2025**

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Distinguished guests, dear colleagues, students and future leaders,

As I stand before you today, we find ourselves increasingly confronted with gross and unfettered violations of human rights, total disregard for international law in many conflicts around the world, and threats to multilateralism and the post-World War Two rules-based global order, where unchecked realpolitik calculations reign supreme, and the sanctity of sovereignty is misappropriated in the service of exceptionalism and a rejection of the international rule of law.

We are at a defining moment when some of the most important architects of the Post-WW2 multilateral system are either the very same actors undermining their own creation, still-born, or are being tested on whether their true intentions and positions are driven by principle or rather, short-term political calculations often at the cost of international law and a rules-based international system.

It is indeed at this critical juncture in human history, as we gather to reflect, reimagine, and redefine the future of one of humanity's greatest and most ambitious endeavours—the United Nations. My deepest gratitude goes to the Centre for Human Rights at Birmingham City University for organizing this

profoundly significant event, and I warmly congratulate you on the launch of the BCU United Nations Society. In this room, I see not just an audience, but a community of changemakers, a gathering of minds poised to shape the world's trajectory.

As we meet here in Birmingham—a city renowned for its history of resilience and innovation—we confront a world both fraught with unprecedented challenges and brimming with unbounded potential. Our discussions on the Secretary-General's vision for “Our Common Agenda” and the “Pact for the Future” demand more than intellectual exercise; they require profound commitment, bold imagination, and above all, decisive action.

Allow me to frame this moment with a historical perspective. The United Nations was born in 1945, not out of convenience, but out of necessity. It emerged as a pact between nations, forged in the ashes of the Second World War, to declare with one voice: “Never again.” The UN represented humanity's collective resolve to turn its back on global conflict and to chart a course defined by peace, justice, and dignity for all. It was—and remains—a bold experiment in global governance, inspired by the highest ideals of humanity and tempered by the hard lessons of history.

Today, as we stand on the precipice of profound change, we must ask ourselves: What must the United Nations become to remain relevant, effective, and transformative in the 21st century? How do we bridge the chasm between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be? These questions are not academic; they are existential. For the challenges we face today—climate change, armed conflict, economic inequality,

and the erosion of human rights—threaten the very fabric of our shared humanity. To address them, we must envision a United Nations that is not merely a passive observer, but an active architect of global solutions.

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## **Reimagining Sustainable Development**

First and foremost, we must reimagine sustainable development, not as a lofty aspiration or a bureaucratic checklist, but as a moral imperative and a shared responsibility. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is a blueprint for human flourishing. It calls for the eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequality, respect for human rights and the rule of law and the protection of our planet. But let us be clear: achieving these goals demands more than rhetoric; it requires sustained, coordinated, and courageous action.

Progress depends on partnerships that transcend borders—partnerships between governments, private sectors, academic institutions, and civil society. It demands that we view each SDG not as an isolated target, but as an interconnected web of priorities. For example, combating climate change cannot be separated from efforts to ensure food security, provide quality education, and promote gender equality. These goals are not competing interests; they are mutually reinforcing pillars of a just and sustainable world.

Consider the pressing issue of climate change. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report underscores the urgency of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Yet, achieving this target requires more than ambitious pledges; it demands transformative action at every level of society. Renewable energy must replace fossil fuels, sustainable agriculture must feed growing populations, and urban planning must prioritize green infrastructure. But these solutions will remain elusive unless supported by robust international cooperation and substantial investments.

Equally important, we must place human dignity at the center of sustainable development. Dignity is not a policy goal; it is the beating heart of our shared humanity. When we speak of reducing inequality, let us remember that it is not just about statistics; it is about ensuring that every child, regardless of their birthplace, has the opportunity to thrive. When we commit to protecting the planet, let us remember that this is not merely an environmental issue, but a matter of intergenerational justice.

In this effort, the role of innovation cannot be overstated. Technological advancements have the potential to revolutionize our approach to development. From harnessing renewable energy to leveraging artificial intelligence for healthcare and education, innovation can and must be a catalyst for change. However, we must also guard against the digital divide, ensuring that no one is left behind in this era of rapid technological transformation.

This reimagination must extend beyond policies and strategies. It requires a paradigm shift in our understanding of progress—one that values the well-being of people and the planet above the relentless pursuit of profit. It demands that we redefine success not in terms of economic growth alone, but in terms of the health, happiness, and harmony of our societies.

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### **Strengthening the Foundations of Peace**

Second, we must recommit ourselves to the pursuit of peace—not as an abstract ideal, but as a tangible reality. Peace is the foundation upon which all human progress is built. And yet, in today's world, the specter of conflict looms large. From protracted wars to new and emerging forms of violence, millions of people—women, men, and children—continue to bear the brunt of instability.

The United Nations was established to prevent war, but as we have learned, peace is not merely the absence of violence; it is the presence of justice, the assurance of opportunity, and the promise of reconciliation. This requires that we address not only the symptoms of conflict but also its root causes. It requires investments in mediation, in dialogue, and in inclusive governance. It requires a robust commitment to international law and accountability, for impunity is the enemy of peace.

Let us reflect on the lessons learned from past and ongoing conflicts. In Rwanda, the world failed to act in time to prevent genocide, a failure that left an indelible scar on humanity's conscience. In Syria, the protracted civil war has displaced

millions and claimed countless lives. These tragedies are stark reminders of the human cost of inaction and the urgent need for the international community to act decisively.

Moreover, we must enhance the capacity of the United Nations to act swiftly and decisively. The world has witnessed too many moments where the paralysis of decision-making has cost lives. Let us resolve to empower the UN to fulfill its mandate to protect the most vulnerable, whether through peacekeeping operations, humanitarian aid, or targeted sanctions against perpetrators of violence.

Here, I wish to highlight the critical importance of women in peacebuilding. Evidence shows that when women are involved in peace processes, agreements are more likely to be reached and to endure. Women bring unique perspectives and priorities to the table, and their participation is not just beneficial; it is essential. The UN should make extra efforts to ensure that women are involved and engaged at decision making levels within the organization.

Additionally, peacebuilding requires that we address the structural inequalities that fuel conflict. Economic disparity, political exclusion, and social marginalization create fertile ground for unrest. By promoting inclusive development, equitable resource distribution, and participatory governance, The UN can build societies that are not only peaceful but resilient.

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**Revitalizing Global Cooperation**

Third, and perhaps most critically, the UN must champion global cooperation at a time when the forces of nationalism and polarization threaten to divide us. Let us not be deceived by the illusion of isolationism. The challenges of the 21st century—from pandemics to climate crises—do not respect national borders. Our survival depends on our ability to act collectively, not as rivals, but as partners.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stark reminder of our interconnectedness. It revealed the strengths and weaknesses of our global systems, highlighting both the potential for cooperation and the consequences of division. The rapid development of vaccines through international collaboration was a triumph of science and solidarity. Yet, the unequal distribution of those vaccines underscored the persistent inequalities that undermine our global health systems. Moving forward, we must build mechanisms that ensure equitable access to resources, recognizing that no one is safe until everyone is safe.

The United Nations must serve as the ultimate convener of nations, the stage where dialogue replaces discord, and compromise supplants conflict. But this requires not only structural reforms within the UN itself, but also a renewed commitment from Member States to uphold their responsibilities. The UN can only be as effective as the sum of its parts. If we fail to invest in multilateralism, we risk undermining the very institution that has the potential to safeguard our future.

Furthermore, the UN must continue to harness the power of civil society and grassroots movements. The voices of ordinary people—activists, educators, and community leaders—are indispensable in the fight for justice and equality. These voices must not only be heard but amplified within the corridors of power.

The UN must also embrace the potential of youth-led movements. Around the world, young people are leading the charge for climate action, social justice, and human rights. Their energy, innovation, and determination are reshaping the global landscape. The United Nations must create more platforms for young leaders to engage, contribute, and lead. Initiatives such as the Youth2030 Strategy are a step in the right direction, but we must go further to ensure that young voices are not just included but central to decision-making processes.

Distinguished guests, you will find it amiss if I do not address the future of the relationship between the ICC and the UN and how I have always advocated on how it could be improved during my tenure. This remains true today.

Discussions such as these offer a unique and unprecedented opportunity for reflection on the important relationship between, the International Criminal Court and the UN specifically the UNSC. The International Criminal Court which I had the privilege to serve was built on the lessons of history of unspeakable atrocities that for centuries reigned unchecked just like the UN.



The drafters of the Rome Statute, and the States that brought this treaty establishing the International Criminal Court so crucial to the fight against impunity to life, recognised the importance of this relationship in the preamble when they underlined that atrocity crimes constitute a threat to "the peace, security and well-being of the world." They continued to further entrench this relationship by endowing the Council with referral and deferral powers, respectively under articles 13(b) and 16 of the Statute. Indeed, in codifying this nexus between the UNSC and the Court, States, including participating permanent members of this august body, saw in the Council an important mechanism through which, the Court's jurisdictional reach could be further extended, where the aims of Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations and the Rome Statute so require, so as to avoid an impunity gap.

The respective independent yet complementary mandates of the two bodies - the ICC's pursuit of individual criminal accountability, with a view to contribute to the prevention of the most heinous crimes experienced by humanity in times of war and conflict, and the Council's pursuit of international peace and security - are at the heart of this relationship.

More interaction between the Court and the Council where these mutually reinforcing mandates converge is therefore not only conceptually consistent but necessary. Yet, referrals by the Council to the Court on their own are not enough to achieve the much-needed twin results of accountability and sustainable peace. More robust and tangible support to the ICC is needed

from the Council, and we can assure such by continuing to identify synergies between the respective mandates of the ICC and the UNSC and to develop and streamline working methods to better realise both institutions' shared goal of preventing atrocity crimes which threaten international peace and security.

The UN and the court can work on and improve this critical relationship for the benefit of both institutions and humanity writ large. For this to happen there must be more regular interactions between the ICC and the Council, beyond the OTP's biannual briefings in relation to the investigations in the situations referred by the Council – namely, Darfur, and Libya.

States parties must continue to come together to discuss this relationship with the hope of reenergising constructive debate on ICC-Council relations broadly and to engage in frank and open discussions over and above specific issues arising from referrals.

These discussions should not be about pointing fingers or scoring political points. It is about how the Council and the ICC, as two critical institutions, can meaningfully cooperate in the exercise of their respective different but reinforcing mandates. Victims of atrocity crimes embroiled in devastating conflicts all over the world, in communities where peace has for far too long been elusive, are looking to institutions such as the ICC and the UN with hope. Hope that the cold calculus of international politics does not abandon them, or worse, undermine humanity's shared values and common yearning for peace,

stability and the protective embrace of the law from the world's gravest crimes. My own personal hope has always been that both institutions shall not disappoint them.

### **Situations and themes of common interest**

Issues of mutual concern for both the ICC and the Council in many of these situations included, but were not limited to, mass killings, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based crimes; the use, indeed abuse, of children in armed conflict; attacks against peacekeepers; as well as attacks against cultural property. The absence of the rule of law provides fertile breeding ground for impunity. The adverse impact of unbridled and lawless armed conflict on society, infrastructure and development of nations is also well recognised. Two decades into this new century, and the world has already been marred with intractable conflicts where the law is absent from the equation and where atrocity crimes continue to leave behind a trail of death, misery and wanton destruction – on our watch. Now, more than ever, robust coordinated efforts between the ICC and the Council are necessary to effectively address these real challenges of our times.

On my part, in an effort to address some of these challenges, when I assumed office and during my term as Prosecutor, I found the crucial need to and adopted strategies and promulgated policies, which I made every effort to implement with varying but overall recognized degree of success.

The jurisprudence and judicial rulings being developed may be relevant to other actors, notably from the UN system, including

those on the ground, who work on issues such as conflict management, or UN mandate holders focused on areas of mutual interest and concern.

Indeed, I have encouraged and still do for the Council to invite Court representatives to participate in sessions where relevant discussions are taking place on the thematic issues, or on other matters deemed appropriate, where the Court's expertise and experience, as well as a greater awareness of its activities, may bring added value to the discussions and complex matters before the Council.

### **General cooperation and complementarity**

Under the umbrella of the UN-ICC Relationship Agreement, during my tenure, my Office regularly sought cooperation from UN entities, including through the signing of specific memoranda of understanding with field missions or peacekeeping operations, for the purposes of, inter alia, exchanging information of a contextual or crime-related nature, and for logistical assistance.

We established working relations, and shared expertise and lessons learned also with the UN ad hoc tribunals and specialised courts such as, the Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic. The ICC, based on its experiences and expertise and by virtue of its core-mandated activities, can contribute to closing the impunity gap through collaborative international and regional efforts and networks. Where appropriate and possible, these efforts can also help strengthen the national and regional capacities to deal with atrocity crimes.

In all these areas, more can be done with the Council's assistance and collaboration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With your indulgence, I would like to now present some reflections of principle concerning situations referred by the Council to ICC Prosecutor and offer some ideas how to advance the necessary collaboration between the two institutions in this regard. Some of these very central issues to the ICC-UNSC relations can be improved upon going forward.

### **Referrals**

To be sure, during my term, I have been steadfast and maintained the position throughout that a decision by the Council to refer a situation to my Office or not, was a matter entirely in the hands of the Council. I maintained the position that as Prosecutor, and the Court more broadly, we are not involved or would take any position on the matter, and will simply apply the legal framework prescribed by the Rome Statute from the moment a referral is received. Indeed, the Rome Statute provides for a legal process, starting with a preliminary examination by the OTP , during which I strongly believe situations may be rejected if they fail to satisfy statutory legal criteria for opening an investigation. Decisions I took on whether or not to proceed in any given situation are independent and are never influenced by political and/or other considerations including from the Council or any of its members.

Sustainable peace and effective tangible justice can only be achieved if States accept that UNSC resolutions impose binding legal obligations under international law, of which the Rome Statute now stands as a crucial pillar in the realm of international criminal justice. The failure of States to implement ICC Chambers' decisions taken pursuant to Council referrals tarnishes the image and credibility of both institutions by emboldening others to continue on their path of committing atrocities and threatening peace and security.

Against this backdrop, as a first suggestion, I wish to recall the guidelines issued by the UN Secretary-General in April 2013 on contacts with persons who are the subject of arrest warrants or summonses issued by the ICC. These guidelines can serve as a basis for a more comprehensive and consistent approach by ICC States Parties and the Council.

Secondly, the Council could consider the possibility of harmonising the designation criteria of sanctions mechanisms for the identification and freezing of assets. Consideration could be given to enabling the automatic listing of persons sought by the Court once a warrant for their arrest has been issued by the Court.

Thirdly, I recall the need for concrete follow-up in response to official communications and findings of non-compliance by the Court, in accordance with a proposal originally formulated by New Zealand, in December 2015. The Council's lack of response and failure to take concrete action on official ICC communications relating to matters of States' non-compliance needs to be addressed. I reiterate that the referral of such findings of non-compliance to the Council is codified in the

Rome Statute. The reasonable consequence of such referrals is some form of remedial action by the Council. The Council is encouraged to develop guidelines to help it deal with non-compliance based on the arsenal of measures in the Council's tool kit for dealing with such issues in analogous situations.

Fourthly, under article 115(b) of the Rome Statute, funds of the Court may be provided by the UN, subject to the approval of the General Assembly, in particular in relation to the expenses incurred due to referrals by the Council. I urge the Council to demonstrate its support and facilitate funding from the UN in relation to the two referrals it has already made to the ICC Prosecutor, and to give this matter serious consideration in any future referral to Court.

Fifthly and finally, I was pleased to see on my advocacy the designation of a focal point – or permanent mechanism – for interaction between the Council and the ICC outside the biannual reporting on referred situations. This has been a low-hanging fruit which has so far proven to be of great practical assistance and yield many benefits, including ensuring a more systematic follow-up to the Council's resolutions referring situations to the ICC Prosecutor Office. I hope this designation still exists and is carefully implemented.

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## **A Call to Action for the Next Generation**

Let me make a call to action to the students and young leaders present here today, and offer this: You are not merely inheritors of the future; you are its architects. The world needs your

courage, your creativity, and your conviction. The launch of the BCU United Nations Society is not just an achievement; it is a call to action. It is a platform for you to engage in the critical debates of our time, to develop the skills of diplomacy and advocacy, and to become the visionaries who will carry forward the legacy of the United Nations.

Remember this: history is shaped not by the complacent, but by the courageous. It is shaped by those who refuse to accept the status quo, who dare to imagine a better world, and who work tirelessly to bring that vision to life. The tools are in your hands. Use them wisely and boldly.

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## **Closing Reflections**

As we bring this discourse to a close, allow me to pause and reflect on the journey we have undertaken together throughout this speech. We have traversed the landscape of sustainable development, explored the unyielding pursuit of peace, international criminal justice and its proper collaboration between the UN and the ICC whilst reaffirming the importance of global cooperation. Each of these pillars is not an isolated ambition but an interconnected foundation upon which the future of our shared humanity rests.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us remember that the challenges before us, while daunting, are not insurmountable. They demand our unwavering attention, our collective resolve, and above all, our action. To achieve the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN with support from



all must act with urgency and purpose. The eradication of poverty, the preservation of our planet, and the promotion of equality are not distant aspirations but immediate imperatives. Each Sustainable Development Goal represents not just a target but a testament to what humanity can achieve when united by shared purpose and unshakable determination.

When we speak of peace, let us consider the profound truth that peace is more than the absence of conflict—it is the presence of justice, opportunity, and reconciliation. It is the foundation upon which all progress is built. Yet peace cannot thrive in a world where injustice prevails. It is incumbent upon us to address the root causes of conflict, to uphold the principles of international law, and to ensure that no voice is silenced by violence or oppression. As we reflect on the lessons of history, let us resolve that the failures of the past will not define the possibilities of the future.

And as we consider the state of global cooperation, let us be reminded that the forces of division must never eclipse the power of unity. The challenges we face—whether they be pandemics, climate crises, or threats to fundamental human rights—are borderless by nature. They demand solutions that transcend politics and nationalism. The United Nations, as a convening force for dialogue and action, must continue to serve as the beacon of hope and the guarantor of collective progress.

As I said earlier to our young leaders and students, I reemphasize, you are not merely participants in these discussions; you are the architects of the world we strive to build. The tools are in your hands, and the moment is yours.

Seize it with the courage to challenge the status quo, the vision to imagine a better future, and the commitment to make that vision a reality. Take inspiration from those who have come before you, but never hesitate to chart a new course when the path demands it. Your voices, your ideas, and your actions will shape the trajectory of humanity for generations to come.

In this moment, I ask each of us to reflect on the words enshrined in the preamble of the United Nations Charter: “We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person.” These words, written in the aftermath of unimaginable destruction, resonate as powerfully today as they did in 1945. They are not just a reminder of where we have been but a compass guiding us toward where we must go.

Let us carry forward the ideals of peace, justice, and dignity—not as abstract principles, but as living commitments that shape our every action. Let us leave this room not only inspired but empowered, knowing that each of us has a role to play in building a world worthy of future generations. Let us dare to believe that the challenges we face can and will be overcome through our collective will and determination.

The future of the United Nations—and indeed the future of humanity—is not written in the stars. It is written in the decisions we make, the partnerships we forge, and the values we uphold. Let us choose wisely. Let us act boldly. Let us stand united.

May the UN supported by all go forth with courage, conviction, and hope, steadfast in our quest for global peace and security without fear or favour.

Much has been done but we have miles to go still before we sleep.

Thank you.