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## COVID-19, TRUST AND NEGOTIATIONS

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*“Every kind of peaceful cooperation among men is primarily based on mutual trust.”*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

The year 2020 is a milestone that shaped the 21st century, global governance and the global social contract that binds nations together. The management of COVID-19 reshuffled national and international political alliances and dealt a severe blow to the element of trust. International economic and political cooperation, multilateralism, the peaceful settlement of disputes, the global fight for climate change are all anchored on the element of trust, negotiation and diplomacy. Similarly, our capacity to govern ourselves on the national level also require trust in our institutions, trust in our political establishment and trust in one another as law abiding citizens.

Now that the year 2020 is behind us, one is bound, in the words of my dear friend Prof. Paul Berkman, to ask the right questions in view of developing a clear vision for efficient decision-making. What is the long term impact of COVID-19 on trust at the national and international levels? What type of global system will result from this stress test? Will nation states find refuge in nationalism, unilateralism and polarisation or leap faithfully into multilateralism and regionalism? However the most significant question that sits at the crossroad between trust and negotiations is how can we reinvigorate diplomacy and revitalise trust between the United Nations member states in uncertain times of unilateralism and when diplomats and negotiators are asked to remain physically distant from each other?

The three years that preceded the Corona pandemic were characterised with the crisis of multilateralism. Some powerful nation-states questioned the relevance and usefulness of multilateralism and international institutions as strategic long-term tools for the achievement of the national interest. When COVID-19 struck, this tendency for unilateralism at the expense of multilateralism was reinforced. This was evidently translated in deadlocked negotia-

tions in the governing bodies and intergovernmental machineries of many international organisations. Some organisations were even questioned in their mandate and funding.

The unilateral approach in dealing with COVID-19 also dealt a severe blow to the element of trust and the psychological pillars of international cooperation. How would we be able to overcome the challenge of climate change on a global scale if we are unable to cooperate on fighting COVID-19 on a local and global scale? At a time when COVID-19 cost the world economies between 12 to 20 trillion US Dollars, what is the UN member states' strategy for achieving the sustainable development goals when their private sector is also agonising from the effects of COVID-19?

The need for a new global social contract that anchors international cooperation on the element of trust and revitalises negotiation as the most efficient tool for the peaceful settlement of disputes and governance is needed today more than ever. The 1929 economic crisis created a vacuum in trust-building that led to the rise of nationalisms in the 1930s and the imbalance of political and economic powers that led to the second world war. The world cannot afford to harvest in the future a similar scenario that would result from the mismanagement of COVID-19 and the major global challenges ahead.

How to turn that vision into reality will require enlightened transformational global leadership capable of empowering negotiators and delegates in view of overcoming the challenge COVID-19 poses to human-to-human communication and interaction. When 95% of communication is non-verbal, negotiators need to be provided with the space to innovate and reinvent new tools and processes that would enable them to build trust and connect while maintaining distance.

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