

# KEYNOTE ADDRESS

## Remarks

*Michael Møller*

**W**e are meeting on the eve of your colloquium, which is why — when I was kindly asked to kick-start our discussion this evening — I thought it would be constructive to take a step back and begin with more of a bird’s-eye view. Specifically, I would like to start by talking about the state of the world as seen from the vantage point of the United Nations; to trace the evolution of how we arrived at the present moment; what it teaches us about what we need to do next; and, most importantly, to connect it all with the role, responsibility and promise of universities.

### THE STATE OF THE WORLD

Start with the state of the world. I am often invited to speak to young students across the world, and I am always intrigued by a paradox they are facing.

On the one hand, they are seeing a world in deep crisis, a world that — ecologically, economically, politically — seems to be teetering on the brink of collapse.

They see a climate crisis wreaking havoc. Armed conflicts threatening millions and refugee flows at record levels. Rampant inequality both between

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and within countries. Escalating disputes over trade, sky-high debt, threats to the rule of law, attacks on the media and civil society. These ills affect people everywhere and they are all connected: climate disasters entrench poverty; poverty breeds conflict; conflict triggers refugee flows, and so on and so forth. Together, these threats are deeply corrosive. They generate anxiety and they breed mistrust. They polarize societies – politically and socially. And so we see many people turning their back on the “system”. And to be sure, not without cause:

- Can you blame people for questioning the legitimacy of an order in which 26 men own as much as the almost 4 billion people who make up the poorest half of the world’s population?
- And can you really expect today’s students to be optimistic about the future, if their generation faces — for the first time in a long time — the very real risk of earning and owning less than their parents?

Against these questions, explanations often sound like excuses — and it is not difficult to understand why faith in political and business leadership is waning; why trust in national governments and international organizations is eroding; and why populism is gaining traction.

But I mentioned a paradox a moment ago, and it is essentially this:

Against the doom and gloom of our time, there is a powerful counterpoint. By virtually every measure of well-being, humanity is better today than at any other time in its history.

It’s a fact. Living standards, life expectancy, literacy rates and education levels have never been higher across the world. Child mortality, the risk of dying from disease, from war or famine, has never been lower. Today, for the first time in history, infectious diseases kill fewer people than old age; famine kills fewer people than obesity; and violence kills fewer people than accidents.

All of this and much more happened over the course of just a few decades. And all that progress is real. It has been broad, and it has been deep, and it all happened in what – by the standards of human history – was nothing more than the blink of an eye. And now an entire generation — the generation of your students — has grown up in a world that by most measures and in most places has become steadily healthier and wealthier and less violent and more tolerant during the course of their lifetimes.

None of this is to suggest that things are just fine. They clearly are not. Rather, these data points highlight an intriguing contradiction, namely that we seem to be both living in the best of times and in a time of existential crisis.

How do you reconcile it?

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## EMERGENCE OF MULTILATERISM

I think the answer has a lot to do with the challenges faced by the organization that I work for, the United Nations. And more generally: with the fate of the multilateral system and the very idea of international cooperation.

Let's unpack it by going back in time. By going back, in fact, exactly 100 years. The First World War marked a watershed in many ways, and one of them was the bankruptcy of the old idea that balance-of-power politics could ever be a guarantor of peace.

Clearly, an alternative international order was needed and in this vacuum emerged the idea of multilateralism, finding expression in the League of Nations in Geneva. To be sure, the inability of the League to prevent a second world war has long made it a byword for failure, a graveyard of hopes.

Today, however, that simplistic, unfair view is giving way to the recognition that the League — despite its constraints and contradictions — nurtured the nucleus of a system that has since proven to be remarkably successful. For when the United Nations was created out of the remnants of the League in 1945, the multilateral order finally caught on.

The audacity of the ideas that underpins the multilateral architecture remains astounding: to replace violence with the rule of law as the basis for global governance; to give each state — whether rich or poor, large or small — one vote; and finally, to declare human rights unconditional and universal.

Of course, there were many places in which reality made a mockery of the ideal, where tyrants still ruled; where colonial regimes refused to give way to the forces of freedom. But they soon found themselves on the defensive.

And of course, the Cold War, and with it the terrible nuclear threat, cast a long shadow. But not only did we avoid open confrontation between the superpowers — and with it a third world war — war itself came to be considered “illegal”, an idea that would have seemed simply absurd to earlier generations.

And with these political changes came sweeping economic changes — leading to the incredible gains in global wealth, in life expectancy and opportunity, that I mentioned earlier.

It's no accident of history that the progress we achieved since 1945 coincided with the establishment of the multilateral order with the United Nations at its heart. There is a direct connection here. You can see the connection in measures small and large. Let me just mention three out of thousands of examples:

1. You can see it in conflicts prevented or defused across the world by the quiet workings of UN mediation — in places as different as El Salvador, Sierra Leone or Nepal.

2. You can see it in deadly diseases eliminated by actions led by the World Health Organisation — like the vaccination programs that eliminated smallpox.
3. You can even see it in the dialling codes you use to call colleagues and family abroad — a system developed by the International Telecommunication Union down the lake in Geneva.

All of the above is multilateralism in practice.

And yet, for all the peace and prosperity underwritten by the international structures put in place since 1945, today, we once again find ourselves engulfed in crisis. So what happened?

### A NAÏVE BELIEF

Sometime over the past decades, a complacency set in — a naïve belief as it turned out — that things would just invariably get better; that, despite some backsliding here and there, forward movement was inexorable and large-scale conflict a thing of the past. It was through this lens that many just assumed technological progress and globalization would produce benefits that, ultimately, would reach all.

This complacency bred inaction, and the twin forces of globalization and technological disruption — left unchecked — ultimately triggered the global backlash we are confronting today.

And so today, we hear troubling echoes of the past.

Some of these “echoes” I have alluded to already — from eroding trust in the democratic order to the outrage of rampant inequality. But the one I want to explore further has to do with the breakdown of global cooperation, with the return of international politics as zero-sum competition.

Today, we no longer live in a bipolar or unipolar world; we are increasingly in a multipolar world. And we are in a chaotic transition phase. The relationship between the three most important powers — Russia, the United States and China — has rarely been as dysfunctional as it is today.

And, related to that, medium-sized powers are increasingly acting autonomously from the big powers. It’s impossible to look at Syria, for example, and not recognize the role of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. And the same is true for other conflicts around the world.

So power relations are becoming unclear; with the fragmentation of actions; with impunity and unpredictability prevailing; and with national and isolationist agendas superseding mutual trust and international cooperation.

The point here is that we have been there before — and that should worry us. Because multipolarity without strong and accepted multilateral instruments — just as we saw in Europe in the wake of the First World War — might be a factor of some equilibrium, but it is certainly not a factor of peace.

It's inherently unstable, volatile, and dangerous. So that is another echo of the past we hear today. Yet to say that the world is poised on the brink of another 1914, as some suggest, is too simple.

International relations work differently today, and so does politics.

## AGE OF ENTANGLEMENT

One obvious difference is the diffusion of power. Power that used to be firmly in the hands of the state has metamorphosed into something much more diffuse: whether it's non-state actors challenging the state's monopoly of violence; or whether it's private corporations evading effective regulation by any one state — power in international relations today is altogether a more complex, messy affair.

One way to think about this change is as a contrast between hierarchy and order versus networks and entropy.

Whereas in the past, international relations were centralized — with core and periphery, with top-down commands and control — today, we live in an “age of entanglement”.

Global politics has been reconfigured. The traditional “chessboard” of inter-state diplomacy may still exist, but it is joined by a new web of networks made up of governments, companies, NGOs, terrorist groups, philanthropists — university rectors — and countless others — all wielding influence and cooperating or clashing at various points in time.

In response to all of this, multilateralism is changing, too. By necessity, it has to become more integrated, more networked, more inclusive — and the upshot is that everyone in this room today forms part of the networks that will define the way multilateral global governance will evolve. And these intricate connections are mirrored by the major existential challenges we face, which, as I said at the outset, are more and more interlinked; are more and more interfering with each other.

Let's take stock: We're facing a crisis of trust, challenges threaten to overwhelm us just as interests fragment, power is diffuse, and the only constant is disruptive change.

Where do we go from here? How do you react? Those are — in the broadest sense — the questions that have brought us together today. And the answer has everything to with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA

It is, quite simply, the most ambitious development agenda in human history, agreed by all 193 Member States of the United Nations.

We now have a detailed roadmap of what needs to be done.

It is firmly built on the following three bedrock principles: that the 17 goals are indivisible: you cannot deal with one or two of them without keeping the others in mind; that they leave no one behind and that everyone — the private and the public sector, academia, civil society, the rich countries and the developing countries, every individual — is responsible for achieving them.

The 2030 Agenda gives us the substance and the practical philosophy for a multilateralism fit for the 21st century — networked, collaborative, and inclusive.

It is our global blueprint for creating an adaptive — and agile — coalition that can respond at speed and at scale, something that neither national governments, nor individual companies, nor anyone else can ever hope to achieve in isolation.

Given that the stakes could not be higher, everyone needs to take a hard look at themselves and see whether they are part of the solution, or part of the problem. This clearly is no time for bystanders.

What does it mean for universities?

## EDUCATION A CORE ELEMENT

There are many ways to approach this, as there are many ways in which the contribution of universities is absolutely critical.

First, your role as providers of education. Education is the currency of the Information Age, no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success but a prerequisite. At the UN, we are spending a lot of effort on leveraging our actions to have the greatest long-term impact. That means not just chasing the latest headline-grabbing emergency, but tackling the root of the problem; addressing the cause, not just the symptom; it means focusing on prevention.

Indeed, the 2030 Agenda is above all a prevention agenda. And education is an integral, core element. That is why education is both a stand-alone goal (Goal 4) and linked either explicitly or implicitly to virtually all of the other SDGs.

Achieving equitable economic growth; reducing social and gender inequalities; empowering marginalized groups; driving innovation; promoting tolerance; enabling a life of dignity — any one of those begins and ends with one thing: education.

The question of course is — and this strikes me as particularly relevant for institutions of higher education — with all the disruption that already happened, and the disruption that is on the horizon; with so much that has changed: has education changed enough? Are you preparing your students in the best possible way for the world that's around the corner?

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I do not of course have clear answers to those questions, but I know that they go beyond the world of academia.

They are questions of content: what are the skills and the knowledge that will be critical going forward? Is it really just the sciences, is it nanotechnology or bioengineering? What if it is the humanities which actually teach you the adaptive, transversal skills that best position you to manage the disruption ahead?

A liberal education — as defined by Cardinal Newman in the 19th century — is a “broad exposure to the outlines of knowledge” for its own sake; it teaches you how to learn.

Looking at the ways in which technology and globalization are transforming our world, five years from now, your graduates may very well be working at a company that hasn’t been founded yet. In 10 years, they may work in an industry that doesn’t exist today. So that’s why curiosity and interdisciplinarity are so important: an ability to connect the dots across disciplines; to think holistically; to break down silos; an interest in other cultures, an appreciation for different viewpoints. The very principles the SDGs were built on.

Which is why we need to get much better at devising and implementing curricula that promote an integrated, transversal and multidisciplinary approach to education.

If we used to take the past as a guide for the present, today, we increasingly need to use the future. What will matter most will be to “learn how to learn”, much more than to learn lots of things. And it is clear that life-long learning will be the centre of education and training systems for vast segments of society.

And that means the questions you are posing yourselves over the coming days are also questions of accessibility:

Millions of jobs will disappear; millions of jobs will be created — but the vast majority of them will require some form of higher education. Universities — by becoming more open, more affordable, more inclusive, more flexible — will play a crucial role in the success or failure of our ability to manage the years and decades ahead.

Then there is the question in how far the value of an education should be measured against the yardsticks of ethics. Do universities have a responsibility to instil an ethical compass in students?

An early Facebook employee once famously remarked that “the best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click ads” — which, however lucrative or intellectually challenging a profession it may be, we can all agree it does not tackle the urgent threats facing humankind.

And everything I said about your role as providers of education is true also for your role as centres of research. It is not just that the research you fund and undertake will determine our ability to combat climate change,

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to harness the potential of technology for good, to fight diseases, and much more.

Your influence — and by extension, your responsibility — extends even further than that.

Preparing my remarks, I was reminded of the observation of John Maynard Keynes, who once said that: “Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. Indeed”, he went on to say, “the world is ruled by little else.”

So whether he was purposefully exaggerating here or not, the fundamental point still stands:

The complacency in recent decades I mentioned earlier — was it not the upshot of a belief in the promise of unregulated free markets that first emerged in academia?

And by the same token, the comprehensive shift towards sustainability — does it have a chance if it is not buttressed by academic thought?

All of which is to say: your role and responsibility in our collective efforts in the face of truly existential challenges are enormous. We have the means and the skills to create a world that is fairer and more peaceful, that is ecologically sustainable, and in which the incredible riches of our world benefit not just the fortunate few, but lift the fate of the many.

But we can only hope for success if every single one of us fully commits and buys into this effort. And we need to get better at acting together, we need to start speaking the same language and work towards the same goals. That is what will make or break our whole endeavour.

Thank you and I look forward to our conversation.