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UNPO Madeira Conference 2025: Reimagining Self-Determination for a Changing World

A UNPO CONFERENCE ORGANIZED IN COLLABORATION WITH

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Executive Summary

The Conference on "*Re-imagining Self-Determination,*" convened by UNPO and Quinta Da Palmeira in Madeira from May 9-11, 2025, brought together UNPO founders, grassroots movements, academics, and officials from international organisations to address the challenges facing unrepresented peoples in today's shifting geopolitical landscape. Despite being enshrined in international law, self-determination remains the least developed of all fundamental rights. Today's polycrisis of rising authoritarianism, democratic erosion, climate emergencies, and digital surveillance disproportionately affects unrepresented nations and peoples, making the conference's mission as pressing now as when UNPO was founded in 1991.

Conference participants reaffirmed that self-determination must be understood not merely as secession, but as encompassing the full range of political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental arrangements through which peoples exercise agency over their futures. At the same time, discussions acknowledged that decolonisation remains incomplete, with new forms of colonialism operating through resource extraction, digital surveillance, territorial ambitions, and institutional control. Genuine self-determination therefore requires what participants termed "epistemic emancipation", reclaiming authority over knowledge, narratives, and governance systems.

The conference emphasised that self-determination cannot be separated from protecting lands, waters, and ways of life. Environmental degradation and cultural suppression were identified not as incidental side-effects of exclusion but as deliberate mechanisms of domination. Community-led environmental stewardship and recognition of traditional knowledge emerged as essential components of meaningful self-determination. Equally important is the power to control narratives and representation in the digital age. Strategic use of terminology, documentation, creative storytelling, and digital tools enables communities to counter disinformation and build transnational solidarities.

Participants highlighted that disciplined nonviolent movements with robust internal organisation, representative structures, and prepared legal-diplomatic strategies can leverage geopolitical shifts to advance their causes. Success requires "structured agency", the capacity to act swiftly when opportunities arise during moments of systemic upheaval. With traditional multilateral spaces increasingly constrained by state interests, movements must pursue adaptive polylateral strategies, engaging special rapporteurs, leveraging thematic agendas around climate and culture, building local-regional alliances, and forming flexible, issue-specific coalitions that bring together diverse actors beyond rigid state-centric systems.

The conference underscored that self-determination draws its strength from depth and organisation rather than from diplomatic arenas alone. Intergenerational collaboration, youth leadership, cultural resistance, and strategic solidarity – when layered, issue-driven, and reciprocal – prove essential to sustaining movements over time. Ultimately, the Madeira Conference called for reclaiming self-determination as a dynamic, transformative right linking peace, justice, and resilience. Far from threatening stability, self-determination offers a vital framework for building inclusive, sustainable societies where diverse peoples can determine their own futures with dignity and agency in an increasingly fragile world.

Inaugural Opening of the Conference by UNPO President

10 May 2025

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, community leaders, scholars, and courageous voices from unrepresented nations around the world, welcome to the Re-Imagining Self-Determination Conference. We are gathered here not merely as delegates of separate causes, but as one global movement—united by shared histories, fortified by resilience, and bound by a universal truth: that every nation has the right to shape its destiny—peacefully, lawfully, and with dignity.

Today, across continents, the right to self-determination faces renewed threats. Authoritarian regimes suppress communities. Resource-driven conflicts displace families. Land dispossession, cultural erasure, and economic marginalization endanger the survival of historic nations and Indigenous peoples. And now, surveillance technologies, disinformation campaigns, and militarized governance threaten to silence voices before they are ever heard.

At the root of these challenges is a deeper systemic issue: a world order born in the aftermath of the two World Wars that recognized some nations while erasing others. Borders were drawn with power, not justice, and entire peoples were rendered invisible.

Today, we say clearly: that system has failed.
It is time for change.
It is time for justice.
It is time to reclaim our future.

Since 1991, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization has stood as a unique platform for those denied recognition—stateless nations, occupied territories, Indigenous communities, and peoples cast aside by geopolitical deals. We are not the margins of history. We are its rightful participants.

But the path to self-determination must not be marked by violence or chaos. It must be grounded in peace, legality, and legitimacy. That is why we call today for a global, peaceful framework for achieving self-determination, rooted in international law, aligned with the UN Charter, and informed by the lived realities of those silenced.

Let us not repeat the mistakes of former colonial powers who, even after granting independence, continued to steer, limit, or manipulate the destinies of once-colonized nations. Real solutions must be peaceful, but they must also be genuine, reflecting the democratic will of the people seeking self-determination. While doing so, we must never compromise on the fundamental obligation to protect human rights, including the rights of minorities, within the universal framework established by the United Nations.

This conference is not only about reclaiming a right.
It is about reimagining how that right can be pursued—with dialogue, diplomacy, and solidarity.

It is about restoring the legitimacy of self-determination, not as a threat to peace, but as its foundation.
And it is about putting unrepresented peoples where they belong—at the heart of global governance.

Our struggle is urgent because authoritarianism is expanding, the climate crisis is accelerating displacement, and digital suppression is outpacing diplomacy. If we do not act now, we risk losing entire peoples, entire histories, and entire hopes.

So let us rise—together.
Not as fragmented voices, but as a united force.
Let us turn our solidarity into strategy.
Let us transform our shared grief into global resolve.
We do not gather here to wait for change.
We are the change. We are the tide. We are the turning point.
Let this conference send a message that cannot be ignored:
The age of invisibility is over. The future will be self-determined—by us, for us, and with justice at its core.

Thank you.

Rubina Greenwood
UNPO President

Reflections from UNPO Secretary-General: Preface to Madeira 2025: Reimagining Self-Determination for a Changing World

The UNPO is built not only by individuals, but by peoples, peoples whose existence is denied, whose rights are dismissed, and whose identities are criminalized. That truth shaped our gathering in Madeira, and it is the clearest way to understand why this conference, and this report, matter now.

When our founding members, from the Australian Aboriginals to Crimean Tatars, from East Turkestan to Armenia, from Tibet, Kurdistan, Georgia and Estonia to West Papua, Palau, and many others, came together in 1991 they did so at a moment of profound geopolitical change. The right to self-determination was already anchored in international law, yet it was repeatedly denied in practice and treated as selective, conditional, or politically inconvenient. Our founders understood that this gap between law and reality was not only unjust; it was destabilising. Denial does not produce peace. It produces fragility, repression, and recurring conflict. From the beginning, UNPO's purpose has been to ensure that self-determination is a foundation for sustainable peace, democratic resilience, and dignity.

Soon after 1991, more unrepresented peoples from across the world joined the organisation. UNPO members' struggles are different, but not separate. UNPO members were, from the start, and still are, deeply diverse, yet united by a shared goal: to reclaim dignity through non-violent struggle, and to insist on the right of all peoples to decide their futures.

Our founders also understood something that remains profoundly relevant today: solidarity is not charity; it is strategy. Some members, only a few years after UNPO's foundation, were able to turn that solidarity into independence, including Estonia and Timor-Leste, victories shared by all of us. Others continue to face denial of rights and sustained pressure on their cultures, lands, languages, and collective memory. This report is written with those realities in mind, and with the conviction that they must remain visible, understood, and acted upon within a shared, principled framework.

That message carries particular weight today. We are again in a geopolitical shift where the denial – and manipulation – of self-determination is increasingly evident, while the costs of exclusion are rising: democratic erosion, repression, displacement, climate emergencies, and digital surveillance are converging. In this context, solidarity is not only a value; it is a practical strategy to push back against the denial of rights and to build a future that is inclusive, sustainable, and grounded in international law.

This is why the conversations held in Madeira were not symbolic. They remain urgent at a time when multilateral spaces are constrained by state interests, civic space is shrinking, and disinformation distorts reality. Self-determination cannot be treated as a legacy concept or reduced to a single outcome. It is one of the most practical tools we have to prevent conflict, strengthen resilience, and build governance that is legitimate because it is inclusive.

The report highlights three interlinked priorities. First, conceptual clarity: self-determination is not a synonym for secession, but a rights-based framework through which peoples exercise agency over

the political, social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions of their lives – opening space for nonviolent, democratic solutions. Second, the evolving forms of denial, including digital surveillance, disinformation, and the instrumentalisation of legal and policy frameworks – making it essential to protect the conditions that render self-determination meaningful in practice, including cultural security, documentation, narrative power, and digital sovereignty. Third, inseparability: land, culture, and environment cannot be separated from self-determination; for many communities, safeguarding ecosystems and traditional knowledge is central to survival, dignity, and the ability to shape the future.

Yet this report is not only a diagnosis. It is a call to renew and strengthen collective strategy. Too often, communities are forced to respond to urgent crises in isolation. When movements act alone, they burn out; when they are fragmented, impact is limited. The UNPO was created to change that: to connect peoples, coordinate efforts, and transform solidarity into long-term capacity. The challenges we face are global. Our response must be global too: connected, strategic, and bold.

The conference report you hold is not the closing of a discussion, but a tool for the next stage of work. It is also the first publication in UNPO's 35th anniversary "Re-imagining Self-Determination" series, through which we will continue to examine today's realities and bring solution-focused analysis and strategies to the table. The conversations deepened in Madeira are a continuation—and an evolution—of what was started more than three decades ago. As we turn these reflections into a body of work, the task ahead is clear: to approach self-determination with intellectual rigour, strategic unity, and practical ambition, treating it not only as a legal right, but as a roadmap for peaceful, democratic, and sustainable futures.

Acknowledgements

UNPO and myself want to warmly thank Eduardo Welsh and the team of Hotel Quinta Da Palmeira for the generosity, care, and commitment that made the Madeira Conference possible, and for hosting and sponsoring the gathering in a way that reflected its spirit.

I sincerely thank UNPO President, Rubina Greenwood, for her leadership and opening address, and to Dr. Paula Cristina Baptista Margarido, Madeira Regional Secretary for Inclusion, Employment and Youth, for joining and supporting the opening of the Conference.

UNPO Members and the Secretariat wish to honour and thank the organisation's founders and founding representatives, who anchored Madeira in the UNPO's origins and principles: Dr. Michael van Walt van Praag; Hon. Kalon Drawu Gyari Dolma (on behalf of Lodi Gyari); Erkin Alptekin; Maaja Mäll (on behalf of Linnart Mäll); and Tsering Jampa.

I am grateful to all session chairs, speakers, and facilitators whose intellectual rigour and practical insight shaped the conference.

A particular acknowledgement goes to Prof. Fiona McConnell for her guidance and steady support throughout, and for the collegiality and friendship she has shown – and continues to do everyday – to UNPO and to me personally.

Our thanks extends to the students and partner universities who supported the roundtables and strengthened our collaborative learning environment, including the University of Ottawa and the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy.

A special acknowledgement goes to Prof. John Packer for supporting the UNPO Photo Exhibition, and to Luca Catalano Gonzaga (Witness Image) for his continued collaboration and for the power of visual testimony.

Finally, I thank the UNPO Secretariat team, advisors, and colleagues who carried the organisational work behind the scenes, and above all the community representatives and participants whose lived experience, courage, and strategic clarity gave Madeira its meaning.

Mercè Monje Cano
Secretary-General, UNPO

"Because We Are"

Beaten and despised

Chased and dispersed

But weakened we are not

Despair is but a luxury

We can never afford

Why?

Because We Are

Determined

Focused and

Destined

To our

Self-determination

It's not a moment for tears

Neither for hopelessness

But the moment for the fight

As fresh as it was

After Berlin Conference

And on the fall of the wall

Not only in Berlin but of the wronged hearts

At the end the of war

Not only cold but rather dividing

When the iron curtain was ripped off

Yes, not the moment to mourn

But the moment of an oath

That we will never abandon

The noble path to our freedom!

Yes, because we are

Peoples of the lands

Sons and daughters of the soil

Branches of the very tree

Whose roots so deep gone

In the souls of our ancestors

And yes we are

And yes we will

And forever be

All for one and

One for all

Not only to survive

But

To strive

Because it's not over

Until it's over!

By Mohammed Khelef Ghassani, Zanzibari Poet and Multimedia Journalist

PART I – FOUNDATIONS AND FRAMEWORK

1. Context, Purpose, and Vision

This report presents the proceedings and analysis of the international conference on "*Re-imagining Self-Determination*" (hereafter referred to as the "Madeira Conference"), convened by UNPO and Quinta Da Palmeira, held in Madeira, from 9-11 May 2025.

Generously hosted and sponsored by the Hotel Quinta Da Palmeira, the gathering formed an essential part of UNPO's mission to advance the aspirations, rights, and responsibilities of unrepresented peoples in a shifting geopolitical landscape. Since its founding in 1991, UNPO has been the only membership-based organisation placing self-determination at the very center of efforts to build a more inclusive, sustainable and peaceful global system. Through its *Re-imagining Self-Determination Programme*,[1] it seeks not only to reaffirm the legitimacy of this right but also to strengthen its practical implementation. With 35 years of continuous work on self-determination, the Madeira Conference was built on the shared understanding – among experts, scholars and members – that the right to self-determination must be central to rethinking the current and evolving international system.

The objective of the Madeira Conference was to:

- To reopen discussions on self-determination's relevance in the face of rising global challenges, including neocolonialism, cultural assimilation, and climate crises;
- To gather grassroots movements, academics, international practitioners, UNPO founders, scholars, policymakers and communities to provide a safe space in order to allow reflections that will lay the groundwork for new strategies to reinforce self-determination as a mechanism for stability, justice, and peace;
- To provide an opportunity to foster alliances among communities, experts, and policymakers, aiming to counter states and multilateral bodies restrictive policies, and;
- To keep peoples' rights at the forefront of global discussions.

Together, participants of the Conference explored the meaning, challenges, and renewed relevance of self-determination, and considered how it can be applied in mechanisms of dialogue, mediation, and transitional justice, serving as a practical tool for inclusion, participation, justice, and sustainable peace.

2. Foundations of Right of Self-determination and Background of the Conference

The mid-20th century was a pivotal time as a new international order emerged – one that aspired to foster global solidarity, peace and cooperation. Self-determination was thus incorporated into the UN Charter (1945) as a foundational principle. Self-determination was initially defined by UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (1960). This framework focused on Western decolonization, offering certain territories that met specific state-prescribed criteria the options of achieving independence, association, or integration. The right was later broadened

[1] UNPO, *Re-Imagining Self-Determination*. https://unpo.org/campaing/re-imagining-self-determination/

and firmly established in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), recognising that all peoples have the right to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development, thus encompassing the internal aspects of self-determination. Subsequent instruments, including the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), further expanded and clarified the right, particularly its significance for Indigenous communities.

Nevertheless, many of these frameworks were created without the participation of the very nations and peoples they were intended to protect. Consequently, state interests remained central, positioning UN-recognised states as the dominant actors in the international system, often to the exclusion of peoples and nations. In response, representatives of these peoples and nations sought to build a more inclusive international order – one in which nations and peoples, rather than states alone, could shape their futures. As part of these efforts, the UNPO was conceived in 1991 in the Hague, providing a platform created by and for communities excluded from, or repressed by national and international decision-making processes, with the right to self-determination at its core.

Throughout its existence, the UNPO has observed the restrictive interpretation and misuse of self-determination, often framed narrowly through the lens of national security or state sovereignty. Dr. Michael C. Van Walt van Praag, UNPO founder and current UNPO Advisor, noted that nation-states within the UN often express considerable anxiety over self-determination, fearing its exercise may lead to fragmentation and separatism.[2] However, many of these same states are frequently those that violate the social contract with their citizens by denying certain peoples their fundamental liberties and rights.

The current global order, characterised by a polycrisis of overlapping conflicts, climate emergencies, digital surveillance, and a crisis of democratic legitimacy necessitates a renewed conception of self-determination for a more inclusive future. Amidst great-power rivalry and tensions between sovereignty and solidarity, and freedom and security, unrepresented nations and peoples are disproportionately affected, challenges that are exacerbated by rising authoritarianism, democratic erosion, and the shrinking of multilateral platforms.

For the UNPO self-determination is the cornerstone of peaceful and inclusive societies. It is about creating spaces – politically, culturally, environmentally, and even digitally – where peoples can decide their own futures. It encompasses the right to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect one's destiny, to protect ancestral lands from exploitation, to preserve language and culture in the face of homogenisation, and to resist both external domination and internal exclusion.

[2] Michael C. van Walt van Praag & Seroo, O. (Eds.). (1999). *The implementation of the right to self-determination as a contribution to conflict prevention: Report of the international conference of experts*, Barcelona, 21–27 November 1998. UNESCO Division of Human Rights, Democracy and Peace; UNESCO Centre of Catalonia.

Bridging UNPO's past and future, the Madeira Conference brought together UNPO's founders,[3] anchoring the longstanding relevance of the organisation's mission. Together with them and a diverse group of community leaders, grassroots movements, academics, officials from international organisations, and researchers, the conference explored collective responses to current geopolitical shifts with the goal to establish a foundation for new approaches. Participants aimed to build alliances, re-open discussions on self-determination and reshape existing narratives around this right. These discussions sought to reinforce self-determination as a vital mechanism for stability, justice, and peace, offering long-term solutions to the denial of and distortion of this right that for decades, have resulted in the erosion of identities, cultures, and resources.

As it became clear over the course of discussions in Madeira, the durability of peaceful and sustainable societies depends on whether unrepresented peoples are included in decisions and systems that influence their lives, identities, and histories. When excluded from political, cultural, environmental, social or economic decision-making, the result is systems that lack legitimacy, overlook lived realities, and reinforce long-standing inequalities. Such exclusion deepens grievances, weakens social cohesion, and undermines efforts to build inclusive and resilient futures.

Yet, it is unrepresented peoples who often maintain robust governance systems, cultural preservation, environmental management, and collective decision-making practices that have sustained their communities, identities and territories for generations. In a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape, recognising and integrating these systems is crucial for building more equitable, stable, and sustainable global systems. As emphasised by UNPO Advisor and Lecturer in the Discipline of Political Science at Columbia University, Dr. Tendor Dorjee, during his intervention as a panellist at the UN's Eighteenth Session of the Forum on Minority Issues, *"It is not the fulfilment of self-determination but the denial of self-determination that paves the way to secessionism, radicalization, even terrorism."*

3. Programme and Methodology: Framing the Discussion

The Madeira Conference took place over two consecutive days. Discussions combined formal plenary sessions and informal roundtables. The plenary sessions addressed the most pressing challenges to the right to self-determination in today's geopolitical landscape. Plenary sessions were followed by smaller, and more informal roundtable discussions, providing participants a safe space to explore concerns in depth and consider collaborative strategies. Each session was designed to build upon the last, creating a layered and dynamic exploration of ideas, experiences, solutions and strategies.

Beyond the formal panel discussions, UNPO members and participants were invited to present their personal accounts of resilience, collective struggle, and community-driven visions for self-determination. These sessions offered a powerful complement to the policy-focused components of the event, creating a space where lived experiences could inform and deepen

[3] UNPO was founded by Linnart Mäll of the Congress of Estonia, Erkin Alptekin of the Uyghur people, and Lodi Gyari of Tibet, together with Michael Van Walt van Praag, the international law advisor of the 14th Dalai Lama.

the political discourse.

A notable highlight of the cultural programme was the UNPO Photo Exhibition, supported by Professor John Packer, the Neuberger-Jesin Professor of International Conflict Resolution at the University of Ottawa, and Director of the Human Rights Research and Education Centre. The exhibition showcased the work of documentary photographer Luca Catalano Gonzaga of Witness Image.[4] This exhibition marked the launch of a new portfolio developed in close collaboration with the UNPO, further expanding Gonzaga's long-standing photographic engagement with unrepresented communities. UNPO has previously worked with Mr. Catalano Gonzaga on several visual storytelling initiatives that aimed to document the dignity, challenges, and aspirations of its member communities. The exhibition unveiled a series of newly released photographs capturing the peoples of Gilgit-Baltistan, alongside his previous photographs of the Batwa, Haratin, Mapuche and Montagnard communities.

For the complete conference programme, please refer to the appendix.

[4] *Luca Catalano Gonzaga Photographer*. https://www.catalanogonzaga.com/

Part II – The Right to Decide: Reimagining Self-Determination Amid Power Shifts in Global Politics

"This conference is not only about reclaiming a right. It is about reimagining how that right can be pursued, with dialogue, diplomacy, and solidarity."

UNPO President, Rubina Greenwood, opening address

1. Introduction

Part II of this report presents the main ideas, analysis and reflections shared during the plenary sessions and roundtable discussions of the conference, concluding with a synthesis of overarching conclusions and recommendations that emerged from these exchanges.

Rather than offering a verbatim record, the next section highlights the most significant themes, perspectives, and points of consensus raised throughout the conference. For the complete transcription of the plenary sessions, please refer to the appendix of this report.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, it revisits the conceptual and legal foundations of self-determination, emphasising the need to move beyond narrow, state-centric and secession-focused readings, while questioning the presumed immutability of borders in contexts marked by colonial legacies. At the same time the analysis aims to clarify how self-determination is being rethought in theory and practice under current geopolitical conditions. Second, it explores the profound interdependence between self-determination, environmental and cultural rights, and ongoing forms of colonial and extractive domination. Third, it analyses the role of non-violent, organised agency, narrative power, and digital arenas in contemporary struggles. Finally, it considers the crisis of traditional multilateralism and discusses polylateral, coalition-based and solidarity-driven strategies as crucial pathways for advancing self-determination in a multipolar world.

2. Self-Determination in a Time of Systemic Upheaval

"We must think in terms of changing paradigms".

Ogaden Representative

The contemporary international order is undergoing profound transformation. Authoritarianism is in resurgence, democratic institutions are weakening, and multilateral spaces, once designed to protect fundamental human rights, are increasingly politicised, securitised, and, in some cases, hostile to the very communities they are meant to serve. At the same time, transnational repression, digital surveillance, and globalised resource extraction are reshaping how power is exercised across borders.

In this context, the right to self-determination cannot be treated as a static or purely historical concept tied solely to decolonisation or statehood. Rather, it must be understood as an urgent

and evolving instrument through which unrepresented nations and peoples are able to secure greater recognition, as well as a means to survive, adapt, and flourish on their own terms.

To better understand the challenges and opportunities facing unrepresented peoples, this analysis builds upon conference discussions articulated by participants and are compiled from conference notes, session transcripts, and recorded discussions, presenting a condensed overview of the proceedings. These debates and reflections stem from exchanges among experts, activists, and community representatives, and can be read as a collective attempt to rethink self-determination both in law and in practice.

The analysis focuses on several core ideas:

1. Self-determination extends far beyond the question of secession. It encompasses a wider range of political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental arrangements through which peoples may exercise agency over their futures and development. At the same time, secession cannot be categorically excluded. In particular, in contexts where borders have been deeply shaped by colonial legacies, the presumed permanence of territorial boundaries must be critically reassessed. The rights of peoples cannot be subordinated indefinitely to abstract discourses of national integrity and sovereignty.

2. Self-determination cannot be separated from ongoing coloniality, that is, from the persistent patterns of domination, resource extraction, and identity suppression that outlive "formal" decolonisation.

3. Contemporary movements for self-determination are increasingly influenced by digital infrastructures, narrative power, and multilevel diplomacy, necessitating new and inclusive approaches to organisation, governance and solidarity.

3. Re-imagining Self-Determination: Beyond the Binary of Statehood

"Self-determination is not not only about borders or working rights, it is also about who gets to define how people think, understand, and remember."

Taiwan Representative

Self-determination retains a clear legal anchor in international law. Article 1 of both the ICCPR and the ICESCR, affirm that all peoples have the right to self-determination, encompassing the right:

- to freely determine their political status, and
- to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

Across the Conference discussions, participants made it clear that the language of self-determination in international law is unambiguous: *all* peoples have the right to freely

determine their political status, pursue economic, social, and cultural development, and dispose of their natural wealth and resources.

Self-determination is also about preserving and affirming peoples' identities, cultures, and languages, safeguarding their cultural heritage, and reclaiming their own narratives, an endeavour that lies at the heart of UNPO's mission and ongoing work.

Yet the gap between this broad legal formulation and its narrow political interpretation by practitioners, institutions and states remains significant. In practice, self-determination has frequently been reduced to the question of secession, thereby polarising the debate into a binary of independence versus territorial integrity. This reductionism serves state interests, enabling governments and institutions to treat any self-determination claim as a potential threat to stability and state sovereignty, even when communities are merely seeking greater recognition and autonomy, federal arrangements, or enhanced participation rather than full statehood. Such a constrained reading overlooks the wider ways in which peoples exercise self-determination.

As several contributors emphasised, a narrow interpretation of self-determination as only encompassing secession is both theoretically and practically problematic. It obscures other dimensions of self-determination, including economic, social, and cultural development, and disregards the vast array of intermediate and hybrid models: decentralisation, functional autonomy, shared sovereignty, cultural self-governance, and sub-regional arrangements grounded in interdependence. This narrowing of meaning is often reinforced by states themselves, which seek to reshape or dilute the concept, aided in part by legal nuances developed by lawyers that ultimately serve state interests more than those of the peoples entitled to self-determination. At the same time, an outright exclusion of secession is neither morally sound nor historically accurate. When borders reflect colonial legacies, treating them as unchangeable hides the injustices they still impose. Peoples' rights to representation, security, and survival cannot be indefinitely outweighed by abstract claims of national unity.

As Prof. Packer highlighted, with a significant number of states classified as fragile or failing, insisting on rigid, hierarchical, and centralised governance appears increasingly detached from empirical reality. Reframing self-determination thus requires a shift from binary choices toward problem-solving approaches rooted in inclusivity, interdependence, cultural autonomy and pragmatic institutional design. Prof. Timothy William Waters, Professor of Law at Indiana University Bloomington, drew attention to how false assumptions about the stability of fixed borders, and the risk that secession could encourage illiberalism, in fact limit the space available for nations and peoples to exercise their right to self-determination.

Dr. Van Praag underlined that legal clarity alone, however, is insufficient. The legitimacy of the right to self-determination must be actively restored and accompanied by effective narratives that translate legal claims into politically intelligible and morally compelling arguments across diverse fora, from international tribunals to public opinion. In re-thinking self-determination, it is necessary to surpass the notion that it is merely a process for breaking down states. Instead, Prof. Joshua Castellino, Founding Executive Dean of the College of Arts, Law & Social Sciences at Brunel University, suggested that self-determination should be understood as a right through which peoples can attain better and more meaningful representation.

There was broad consensus on defining self-determination as the inherent right of all peoples to choose their own destiny. Within the human rights framework, this right is a vital tool for ensuring human security and welfare. Self-determination is fundamental not only to political and social stability but also to protecting the elements of daily life, such as culture, language, heritage, and the environment. By granting communities control over their governance, resources, and development, it serves as the foundation for the full achievement of all other fundamental rights and freedoms.

4. Multilateralism, Polylateralism, and Adaptive Diplomacy

"The landscape is difficult. But it also makes spaces like this all the more valuable. We must come together, share experiences, support one another, and keep going".

Tibetan Representative

Prof. Fiona McConnell, Professor of Political Geography, Oxford University, noted the proliferation of conflicts and crises, the rise of authoritarianism, and the weakening of democratic institutions, underscoring the urgent need to rethink self-determination as a tool for peace across multiple levels. The crisis of traditional, state-centric multilateralism emerged as another key theme of Conference discussions. Institutions such as the United Nations are increasingly perceived as paralysed by geopolitical rivalries and unable to fulfil their human rights mandate. Yet they remain important spaces where international norms are developed, issues gain global visibility, and affected communities can seek recognition and a measure of protection.

Multilateral spaces have increasingly become constrained, with access largely shaped by state interests and procedural barriers that limit non-state actors (including unrepresented peoples) from meaningfully engaging. Some barriers include restricted access to procedural avenues, denial of consultative status, or efforts by some states to block or intimidate civil society actors seeking to raise rights concerns. This pattern of constrained participation has been documented by UNPO, including in the *Compromised Spaces* campaign, illustrating how states may manipulate procedural mechanisms to silence unrepresented voices in international forums.[5]

Contributors thus argued that abandoning these multilateral spaces would simply cede them to powerful states. To ensure that that unrepresented communities are able to continue engaging in these spaces, adaptive and multi-layered diplomatic strategies should be pursued , including:

- Engaging with Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts, and treaty bodies as alternative points of entry;

- Leveraging thematic agendas such as environmental protection, climate justice, and cultural heritage, which may offer greater openness to non-state actors;

[5] UNPO, *Compromised Spaces*. https://unpo.org/compromised-spaces/.

- Building alliances with local and national governments, municipalities, and regional organisations; and

- Developing partnerships with academic institutions, civil society networks, and professional associations.

At the same time, traditional advocacy tools such as naming-and-shaming through publicly exposing and condemning human rights violations, are increasingly losing their effectiveness. In today's international environment, the political and reputational consequences of criticism are not felt equally by all states, and some are willing to openly dismiss or ignore international scrutiny without meaningful repercussions.

For unrepresented peoples, the denial of their fundamental rights and limitation of self-determination means that they are misrepresented and overlooked in economic, social, cultural and political structures, an issue central to UNPO's work. To address these challenges, and in light of the pressure on international institutions and multilateral frameworks are facing, Prof. Costas M. Constantinou, Professor of International Relations, University of Cyprus, emphasised the need to strengthen polylateralism. Building on this, multilateral diplomacy must move beyond rigid state-centric systems toward a more adaptive model capable of embracing diverse actors, including stateless people, Indigenous nations, marginalised communities and unrepresented peoples. This does not mean excluding states from decision-making, but rather recognising that they need not always be the primary actors through which global challenges are addressed. Such an approach views diplomacy not simply as an instrument of state policy, but as a right rooted in autonomy, equity, and resilience. This shift entails forming more flexible, issue-specific coalitions that bring together the actors best placed to address particular challenges, rather than relying on fixed state- or region-based arrangements, thereby broadening meaningful participation and reimagining the practice of diplomacy itself.

5. Colonial Continuities and New Modalities of Domination

"We are living in a critical moment, marked by many changes, particularly in terms of government. One of the main issues is that people continue to be influenced by powerful actors, mostly American and Chinese."

Annobon Representative

Legacies of colonialism continue to shape the present, whether through geopolitical hierarchies, imposed borders, or divisive narratives. For many unrepresented peoples, these historical legacies are now compounded by new forms of colonialism, including exploitative development projects, resource extraction, renewed territorial ambitions, and the expansion of global control and influence through finance and technology. All of which limit self-determination and exclude communities from decision making, pluralistic democracies, diplomacy and the right to decide. This is despite the fact that, as highlighted by Prof. Nicolas Levrat, Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, that self-determination was built in opposition to empires, essentially as a way to dismantle them.

Conference discussions emphasised that colonialism is not simply a historical phase that ended with formal decolonisation. Rather, the process of decolonisation remains incomplete, with new and adaptive forms of colonisation emerging and evolving, operating through practices of displacement, identity and cultural suppression, and institutional control over political, economic, and cultural systems. Participants questioned the state-centric, Western liberal underpinnings of the international system. This system remains structured around sovereign states, many of them products of colonial histories, that continue to reproduce colonial hierarchies that privilege influential actors over peoples.

The so-called "salt-water doctrine",[6] holds that, to be considered non-self-governing (or colonial), the territory, a people must be geographically separate from the colonising power. In other words, it applies to territories that are separated from the colonial power by significant physical distance, or the presence of "blue water" between the colony and colonising country. This doctrine, which once confined decolonisation to overseas colonies (overlooking internal forms of colonisation), was identified as an archetypal example of how international law has historically served the interests of dominant states rather than peoples seeking self-determination and decolonisation. By effectively limiting recognition to territories separated from the metropolitan state by seas, the doctrine excludes nations and peoples under direct rule or within the territory of a colonising state from accessing the right to self-determination. In doing so, it reinforces existing power hierarchies, preserving territorial integrity over the rights of peoples, and legitimises the selective application of international norms. This may lead to a paradoxical tendency of states to protect colonisers residing in other states, rather than safeguarding colonised populations, as mentioned by Andres Herkel, Estonian journalist, politician and scholar. Similarly, Dr. Shona Loong, Senior Scientist in Political Geography at the University of Zurich, highlighted that colonisation should not be viewed as a historical process, rather that it is a long-term process that continues to evolve, sometimes spanning across generations.

Within this state-centred international order, realising self-determination requires not only new legal and political arguments but also a critical rethinking of the foundations of the international system. Contributors proposed turning to alternative historical and regional formations, such as sub-regional governance structures, federations, confederations, and Indigenous governance models that predate or exceed the Westphalian state. These structures can offer more flexible and relational understandings of political communities. Importantly, achieving genuine self-determination also requires an "epistemic emancipation". This suggests the emancipation of knowledge creation from colonial structures, empowering communities to challenge and dismantle the colonial legacies embedded within their knowledge, narratives, and governance systems. Furthermore, it enables these communities to reclaim authority over the interpretation and management of their societies and resources.

At the same time, new modalities of colonisation are emerging in digital, ecological, and economic domains. Digital manipulation, surveillance, and cognitive warfare extend the reach of authoritarian and colonial practices far beyond physical borders. Environmental colonialism, mediated by global supply chains, debt mechanisms, and climate policies, rearticulates old patterns of extraction in "green" or technocratic terms.

[6] Sometimes also referred to as the "Belgian Thesis" or the "Blue Water Rule".

Confronted with new challenges and evolving forms of colonisation, the struggle for self-determination adapts too.[7] From this perspective, self-determination must be seen as a plural struggle against layered forms of colonisation, where legal, economic, cultural, and technological vectors intersect. It is not merely a claim to create or modify states, but a claim to reshape the terms on which communities relate to power, territory, and knowledge.

6. Environmental and Cultural Rights: From Extractivism to Empowerment

"Our struggles are deeply intersectional. For example, China's activities in Latin America and Africa – including extractive industries and labour violations – have wide-reaching impacts. This connects many of our issues globally."

Uyghur Representative

When people's right to self-determination is limited, through restrictions on decision-making, exclusion from governance, or the persistence of neocolonial practices, the consequences are far-reaching. Dr. Liam Saddington, teaching fellow in Human Geography at the University of Cambridge, explained that "the denial of environmental and cultural rights has often gone hand in hand with the suppression of self-determination". These constraints impact the ability of peoples to protect their environment, sustain their cultures and maintain their ways of life. UNPO recognises the strong link between peoples' self-determination and management of the natural environment that sustains peoples, and condemns environmental destruction as a violation of this right.[8] Environmental degradation and land dispossession threaten the survival of distinct cultures, traditional knowledge systems, and the collective rights of peoples.[9] For many peoples, self-determination is not only about political governance but about the ability to shape the conditions under which they live.

A central contribution of the discussions was to locate self-determination within ecological and cultural struggles. For unrepresented nations and peoples, self-determination is inseparable from the ability to protect their lands, waters, and ways of life. Interestingly, this interrelationship is often overlooked, even though cultural rights are indispensable to sustainable development and effective environmental stewardship. Prof. Alexandra Xanthaki, Professor of Laws at Brunel University of London, underlined that effective stewardship is only possible through incorporating the tangible and living values and knowledge of the communities whose resources and lands are impacted. The erosion of environmental and cultural rights was therefore understood not as an incidental side-effect of marginalisation, but as a mechanism

[7] An example cited by Dr. Shona Loong is the Karen people in Myanmar who have resisted forms of colonialism through the Salween Peace Park. The peace park has created local guidelines for how society and ecology can be managed according to the will of the people, represented a reclaimed agency against intergenerational processes of colonisation and a new form of resistance to colonial practices. For more, see S Loong, *More-Than-Rebel Territory: War, Resistance, and Relations in the Salween Peace Park* (2025).Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24694452.2025.2478262.

[8] UNPO, *Self-Determination in Relation to Individual Human Rights, Democracy and the Protection of the Environment Conference Report*, 1993.

[9] UNPO, *Peoples and the Planet: Self-Governance, Land Rights and Climate Justice* (2025). Available at: https://academy.unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Peoples-And-The-Planet-1.pdf.

through which domination is exercised, underscoring why their protection is central to meaningful self-determination.

The intersection of environmental degradation and political exclusion poses a critical challenge for many stateless and unrepresented peoples. While the right to self-determination inherently involves control over natural resources and the environment, speakers noted that extractive economies, often justified in the language of development, security, or national interest, have historically targeted territories inhabited by Indigenous and unrepresented peoples. Today, the global “green transition” risks reproducing these colonial patterns and transferring burdens onto unrepresented peoples through land expropriation, dispossession, and environmental degradation in the name of renewable energy or conservation.

Examples from Indigenous territories and occupied regions, presented by Alim Aliev, Deputy Director General of the Ukrainian institute, illustrate how land control, demographic engineering, and cultural erasure are intertwined. The destruction or appropriation of cultural heritage sites, the suppression of languages, and the displacement of communities are simultaneously assaults on identity and instruments of geopolitical control.

Against this backdrop, Saddington emphasised how environmental and cultural rights should not be viewed as peripheral or secondary to self-determination. Rather, they are constitutive of it. Empowerment requires that environmental protection and sustainable development priorities be culturally grounded, self-determined, and community-led; that they actively reverse inequalities and challenge stereotypes through positive measures; and that they include:

- secure land and resource rights;
- recognition of cultural rights as binding obligations rather than optional add-ons;
- the decolonisation of knowledge production, including the validation of Indigenous knowledges and community-based environmental governance; and
- the building of transnational solidarities, particularly given how global financial flows, debt, and trade underpin local dispossession.

Dr. Asebe Regassa, Group Leader in Political Geography at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich, underlined that people's right to self-determination would guarantee them to exercise access to resources, and also to mitigate the impacts of environmental injustice, like pollution, land degradation, and other impacts. Recognising the importance of traditional knowledge – which is capable of responding effectively to the climate crisis and environmental challenges, and deserves equal recognition as a form of scientific knowledge – broadens the understanding of what is meant for a people to determine their conditions of existence. This includes shaping constitutional arrangements as well as exercising control over the material, symbolic and ecological foundations of their lives.

7. Language, Narratives, and Digital Spaces in the Politics of Self-Determination

"We believe that one powerful way to elevate our causes is for them to be written about, talked about, and studied. When our stories are present in academic literature and policy discussions, our visibility and legitimacy grow."

Sindh Representative

Whoever shapes the story wields power – narratives determine how communities are understood, remembered, and legitimised. In light hereof, self-determination should not be seen as only about political or legal rights. It is also about who has the power to define how nations and peoples think, understand and remember their own histories and identities. Language and narratives were identified as structural elements in the politics of self-determination. In the age of social media, the narrative of sovereignty itself is increasingly under attack, making control over stories and representation a central aspect of self-determination.

Evidently, labels such as "minority," "separatist," "extremist," or "terrorist" are often mobilised to delegitimise communities and circumscribe their claims. Terminology is often deliberately manipulated by state actors, including framing groups as minorities rather than peoples, as a strategy to weaken rights to self-determination. Similarly, symbolic erasure of peoples, such as the removal of names and territorial references from official records, amounts to a mechanism of cultural and political repression.

While the minority-rights framework can provide important protections, they may also obscure claims to peoplehood or national identity. It was emphasised that while minority forums can provide visibility and platforms for grievance, restrictive labels can constrain claims to nationhood if internalised or misapplied. Participants emphasised the need for strategic and context-sensitive use of terminology. Movements may sometimes adopt prevailing legal categories to gain access to specific procedures or institutions, while simultaneously defending broader visions of self-determination in other spaces. The core challenge is to avoid internalising externally imposed, restrictive identities.

Narrative struggles are particularly acute in the digital sphere. Social media platforms and algorithmic systems have become key sites for both mobilisation and repression. Authoritarian actors increasingly deploy cognitive warfare, disinformation, and online harassment to fragment communities, distort reality, and undermine trust. As underlined by Poyu Tseng, International Cooperation Director, Cybersecurity Institute, Institute for Information Industry (Taiwan) and member of the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee, Presidential Office of Taiwan, the proliferation of digital content also contributes to information overload – when individuals are overwhelmed with information, they are more susceptible to manipulation, less likely to participate politically, and less able to engage critically with narratives affecting their rights.

Contributors highlighted various ways to navigate narrative and misinformation campaigns. Loong emphasised the importance of documentation and research to counter falsehoods and safeguard the integrity of community narratives. Innovative storytelling through literature, film, social media, and other creative platforms was also identified as a key strategy for making advocacy relevant and compelling. When used strategically, digital tools enable communities to:

- document and archive human rights violations and histories;
- expose abuses globally;
- reach younger generations through films, short videos, interactive content, and creative storytelling; and
- experiment with forms of digital diplomacy, building transnational audiences and alliances without relying solely on traditional diplomatic channels.

The digital realm is ambivalent: it can democratise access to information and participation, but it also reproduces material inequalities and environmental burdens. Discussions drew attention to the ecological costs of digital infrastructures and artificial intelligence, which often fall disproportionately on regions already affected by extractivism and climate injustice. This further illustrates how self-determination struggles intersect with wider questions of environmental justice and global economic structures.

At the same time, peoples can reclaim agency in this space. By reclaiming the power to define their own stories, communities can counter disinformation, assert their rights, and strengthen transnational solidarities, laying the foundation for participatory, culturally grounded, and resilient approaches to self-determination.

8. Nonviolence, Structured Agency, and Preparedness

"What emerged clearly is that we do have tools. We can shape narratives, promote participation, and adopt new methods. We must be proactive in our diplomacy."

Catalan Representative

The above discussion makes it clear that we are living in unpredictable times. However, as Dr. Van Praag explained, periods of uncertainty often precede significant change. Through major turning points in history, opportunities emerge and it is within this context that the strategies through which self-determination is pursued become crucial. Discussions further emphasised the need to distinguish current struggles from the violent trajectories that accompanied many decolonisation processes in the twentieth century, some of which produced new forms of internal domination or exclusion.

Nonviolence is not merely one of many values upheld by the UNPO; it is a founding principle and strategic core of the organisation's identity and mission. From UNPO's inception in 1991, member nations and peoples consciously rejected the use of violence and terrorism as instruments of political change, affirming instead that peaceful resistance and civil engagement are essential to advancing collective rights and combating oppression. This commitment was

enshrined in the UNPO Covenant alongside other principles such as self-determination, human rights, democratic pluralism, and environmental protection.[10]

Dr. Dorjee presented nonviolence as both a moral choice and a strategic approach, capable of generating coercive power and forcing changes in regime behaviour and policy even when minds and hearts remain unconvinced. Its greatest advantage lies in participation. Disciplined nonviolent movements lower barriers to entry, attract diverse skills and knowledge, and increase the likelihood of elite defection from regimes reliant on institutional pillars such as the police, military, and media. Nonviolent action can disrupt entire systems, including economic or administrative structures, without alienating the broader public.

Empirical examples, from East Timor to the Baltic states, illustrated how disciplined, organised, and nonviolent movements, anchored in broad participation and coherent narratives, were able to seize opportunities in moments of geopolitical crisis. The concept of "structured agency" captures the idea that success rarely depends solely on external shocks or international sympathy. Rather, it requires:

- Robust internal organisation;
- Representative and inclusive structures;
- Effective coordination between actors inside and outside the territory;
- Preparation of legal arguments and diplomatic strategies; and
- The ability to act swiftly when unexpected windows of opportunity open.

By contrast, movements lacking this structured agency, have struggled to capitalise on similar international shifts, despite having compelling normative claims. Contributors also highlighted that states regularly retain the exclusive legal right to wage war, whereas ethnic, civil, and natural groups are constrained by existing norms, particularly within the liberal international order. Nevertheless, waves of democratisation show that political change is rarely linear or incremental, it often occurs in moments of massive geopolitical shock, which may include incidences of war or other systemic disruptions.

In such periods of structural upheaval, strategic campaigning and long-term plans must adapt accordingly. Whether transformations reinforce authoritarianism or advance self-determination will depend on which actors are organised, prepared, and capable of translating disruption into democratic change. By generating broad participation, diversity, and elite defection, nonviolent movements can leverage such moments of systemic instability to advance self-determination even within highly constrained international norms.

[10] UNPO, *Nonviolent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today,* 2026. Available at: https://academy.unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Nonviolent-Struggles-for-Peoples-Rights-Lessons-from-History-and-Today_UNPO-Paper.pdf

9. Grassroots Mobilisation and Strategic Solidarity in a Multipolar World

"By sharing our struggles and information, we come to understand each other's problems better and build strategic solidarity".

Chittagong Hill Tracts Representative

While high-level diplomacy and legal argumentation remain important, across the discussions, participants underlined that self-determination movements draw strength from diversity and organisation rather than diplomatic arenas alone. Diplomacy without a strong, organised base risks becoming symbolic or easily co-opted. Grassroots mobilisation can be understood as a dynamic process, shaped by shared experiences, cultural identity, community support and intergenerational dialogue, and transforming potential support into coordinated action and political agency.

Culture, expressed through oral traditions, poetry, music and storytelling, were highlighted as a means to preserve identity as well as a mode of political communication and mobilisation, particularly in contexts where formal political spaces are suppressed. In many contexts, culture itself is a form of resistance.

The transformative role of youth was central in the discussions. Young people are often at the forefront of digital innovation and social-justice movements, driving renewed forms of civic activism, yet the narratives and organisational structures available to them may not always resonate with their lived realities. Participants pointed to the need for genuine youth leadership, supported by educational initiatives that connect historical memory with contemporary digital tools and platforms, not merely symbolic inclusion. A key outcome was the call for stronger intergenerational collaboration, which would allow experienced practitioners and younger organisers to jointly develop strategies that are both well-established and adaptable.

In practical terms, movements are creatively combining traditional and low-cost tactics: local assemblies, digital campaigns, symbolic actions, petitions capable of triggering parliamentary debates, and cross-border alliances around specific issues such as mining, dams, or environmental degradation. Although these innovations have increased participation, they require careful internal organisation through clear roles, realistic timelines, and shared responsibilities to avoid burnout and fragmentation.

In a rapidly shifting geopolitical context and fragmented multipolar order, where recognition and support are often shaped by geopolitical calculations, alliances can both empower and compromise movements. Solidarity itself has become a strategic terrain. In deeply divided and polarised societies, it is increasingly important than ever for peoples to establish strategic solidarity to protect their rights. Unrepresented nations and peoples are united by a shared condition: they are denied equal representation in the institutions of national or international governance, despite living in significantly different societies and regions across the globe. In addition to establishing cross-community solidarity, strategic engagement with transnational networks can help movements secure greater visibility, influence decision-making and effectiveness of grassroots struggles.

On the one hand, support from unexpected or controversial actors may open doors and present opportunities. On the other, it can undermine credibility or entangle communities in broader geopolitical agendas. Recognition may therefore present both an opportunity and a risk, requiring careful ethical and political assessment.

In the face of possible opportunities and risks, participants emphasised that solidarity should be:

- Layered – involving cooperation across communities, civil society, academics, legal experts, and sympathetic states;
- Issue-drive – building coalitions around specific themes such as land rights, political prisoners, or digital repression;
- Intergenerational – ensuring that younger activists are not only included but empowered to shape agendas; and
- Reciprocal – avoiding instrumentalisation of one community's cause in the name of another.

In a context of shrinking legal pathways and entrenched structural inequalities, progress toward self-determination increasingly relies on the interplay between ideas, narratives, and networks, moving beyond institutional reforms alone. Movements are most effective when they articulate compelling and inclusive visions of shared futures that are ecologically sustainable, culturally diverse, and politically representative, and when they translate these visions into concrete practices of cooperation. This requires the capacity of communities to build credible narratives, strengthen transnational networks, and forge coordinated strategies for collective action.

10. Conclusion: Reclaiming Self-Determination as a Transformative Right

Self-determination remains a foundational principle of international law, yet its full realisation has been constrained by narrow interpretations, state-centric frameworks, colonial legacies, and evolving geopolitical interests. Throughout the Madeira Conference, discussions among participants reaffirmed that self-determination is unambiguously a right of all peoples to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, cultural and political development. However, its realisation has persistently been limited to narrow interpretations, often equating it solely with secession or fragmentation,

Reflections gathered suggest that reclaiming self-determination requires:

- Conceptual clarity – understanding self-determination as a right encompassing political, economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions and refusing its reduction to a purely secessionist question, while also acknowledging that, in some contexts, reconfiguration of borders may be necessary to remedy structural injustice.
- Historical consciousness – situating contemporary claims of self-determination within longer trajectories of colonialism, internal and new forms of domination, and incomplete

decolonisation.

- Practical innovation – developing non-violent, organised, and flexible strategies that align legal claims, narrative power, intergenerational collaboration and grassroots mobilisation.

- Ecological and cultural grounding – placing environmental stewardship and cultural survival at the heart of self-determination.

- Institutional engagement and re-imagination – engaging with and transforming multilateral and polylateral arenas to secure meaningful participation and strategic solidarity for unrepresented peoples.

- Strategic solidarity – weaving alliances that are principled, reciprocal, and attentive to the risks and opportunities of recognition in a multipolar world.

In a time of systemic upheaval, self-determination cannot be a static doctrine. It must be understood as a dynamic, relational, and plural practice, continuously negotiated and reinvented by communities striving to secure dignity, freedom, and responsibility for present and future generations. Far from being a threat to stability, self-determination, reimagined and reclaimed, offers one of the few remaining normative and practical tools capable of linking peace, justice, and resilience in an increasingly fragile world.

APPENDICES

1. Conference Programme

May 9, 2025 – Conference Inaugural Reception

Moderator: Mercè Monje Cano, UNPO Secretary General

Welcome Address
- Eduardo Welsh, Host Quinta Da Palmeira
- Rubina Greenwood, UNPO President
- Dr. Paula Cristina Baptista Margarido, Madeira Regional Secretary for Inclusion, Employment and Youth

Setting the Scene: Building from the Past Honoring the UNPO Founders
- Dr. Michael van Walt van Praag, UNPO founder and first UNPO Secretary General
- Honorable Kalon Drawu Gyari Dolma, Minister of the Department of Security, Central Tibetan Administration, on behalf of Lodi Gyari, UNPO founder
- Erkin Alptekin, Uyghur activist, UNPO Founder and Former Chairman and Secretary General of the UNPO
- Maaja Mäll, Daughter of Dr. Linnart Mäll, Member of the Congress of Estonia and UNPO Founder
- Tsering Jampa, former UNPO Deputy-General Secretary

May 10th, 2025 – Conference Day 1

SESSION I: THE RIGHT TO DECIDE: NAVIGATING POWER SHIFTS IN GLOBAL POLITICS

Chair: Prof. Fiona McConnell, Professor of Political Geography, Oxford University

Panelists:
- Poyu Tseng, International Cooperation Director, Cybersecurity Institute, Institute for Information Industry (Taiwan); Member of the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee, Presidential Office of Taiwan – *"Equal Participation in the Age of Digital Threats: Lessons from Taiwan's Democratic Resilience"*
- Prof. Costas M. Constantinou, Professor of International Relations, University of Cyprus – *"Multilateral Spaces: Re-thinking Diplomacy"*
- Prof. John Packer, Neuberger-Jesin Professor of International Conflict Resolution and Director of the Human Rights Research and Education Center, University of Ottawa – *"Finding Opportunities in Moments of Crisis: Towards Inclusive, Effective and Sustainable Peace"*
- Prof. Timothy William Waters, Professor of Law, Indiana University Bloomington – *"Reimagining Borders, Risks, and Opportunities in a Degrading Global Order"*
- Dr. Tendor Dorjee, Lecturer in the Discipline of Political Science at Columbia University – *"Non-Violence Strategies: Past, Present, Future"*

ROUNDTABLE A: Navigating Reality While Changing the Path We Are On

Facilitator: Dr. Michael van Walt van Praag, UNPO Advisor
Supported by the students from University of Ottawa

ROUNDTABLE B: Creating New Spaces of Conversation: Where and How to Engage?

Facilitators: Zumretay Arkin, World Uyghur Congress and Alexandra Gavilano, UNPO Advisor
Supported by the students from University of Ottawa

SESSION II: RESISTING NEW FORMS OF COLONISATION

Chair: Prof. Nicolas Levrat, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, and Professor and Director of the Department of Public International Law and International Organisation at the University of Geneva

Panelists:

- Dr. Shona Loong, Senior Scientist in Political Geography at the University of Zurich, Switzerland – *"Resistance to Colonial Legacies and New Forms of Colonialism"*
- Prof. Joshua Castellino, Founding Executive Dean of the College of Arts, Law & Social Sciences at Brunel University – *"Minorities in the Face of Colonialism"* (Online participation)
- Senator Paul Strauss, District of Columbia – *"Advocating for Self-Determination Within the Framework of Evolving Western Democratic Systems"*
- Andres Herkel, Journalist and Estonian politician and scholar – *"Facing Russia's Territorial Ambitions, Misinformation and Threats"*
- Dr. Michael van Walt van Praag, Executive President of Kreddha – *"The Right of Self-determination and its Spaciotemportal Context"*

ROUNDTABLE C: Navigating New and Old Tools of Colonialism: From Political Power to Technological Influence

Facilitators: Alim Aliev, Deputy Director General of the Ukrainian institute and Farhan Soomro, World Sindh Congress
Supported by the students from University of Ottawa

ROUNDTABLE D: Challenging Dominating and Exclusionary Narratives: How to Engage in Conversations in a Divided World?

Facilitators: Dr. Alex Manby, University of Oxford and Ambassador Kaysar Maxamed, Government of Somaliland
Supported by the students from University of Ottawa

May 11, 2025 – Conference Day 2

SESSION III: FROM EXPLOITATION TO EMPOWERMENT: LINKING ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS TO SELF-DETERMINATION

Chair: Dr. Liam Saddington, Teaching Associate in Human Geography, University of Cambridge

Panelists:

- Dr. Asebe Regassa, Group Leader in Political Geography at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich – *"Empowerment Through Land Rights and Environmental Justice"*
- Prof. Alexandra Xanthaki, Professor of Law at Brunel Law School – *"Identities at the Core of Self-determination: How to Protect Them?"* (Online participation)
- Alim Aliev, Deputy Director General of the Ukrainian institute – *"Culture, Identity and Resistance"*
- Devasish Roy, Raja Chief of the Chakma Circle in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh; former Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) – *"Defending Peoples Rights in a Time of Change"* (online participation)
- Alexandra Gavilano, Environmental Scientist and DRR Expert, Climate Justice and Societal Transformation Catalyst – *"Grassroots Tactics to Enhance Global Resistance"*

ROUNDTABLE E: New tactics of grassroots mobilisation: how to ensure our voices are heard?

Facilitators: Ariadna Heinz, Assemblea Nacional Catalana and Dr. Tendor Dorjee, UNPO Advisor and Lecturer in the Discipline of Political Science at Columbia University

Supported by Students from the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy at the University of Toronto

ROUNDTABLE F: Strategic Solidarity to Protect People's Rights

Facilitators: Rubina Greenwood, World Sindh Congress and UNPO President and Dr. Abdirahman Mahdi, Ogaden National Liberation Front and former UNPO Vice President

Supported by Students from the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy at the University of Toronto

2. Transcriptions of Speaker Interventions

a. Session 1: The Right to Decide: Navigating Power Shifts in Global Politics

"Equal Participation In The Age Of Digital Threats: Lessons From Taiwan's Democratic Resilience"

Poyu Tseng
International Cooperation Director, Cybersecurity Institute, Institute for Information Industry (Taiwan)

Today, I want to speak with you about a question that sits at the heart of this conference: *What does self-determination look like?*

In this talk, I want to divide my intervention in three parts: (1) how to deal with terrorism eroding participation; (2) how the current regime attacks narratives of sovereignty; and (3) how democracies, marginalised, and other unrepresented communities can fight back with proactive storytelling and narratives.

Let's begin with the participation. Digital aquariums weaken participation not through violence but by creating confusion, and distrust. We will work through three mechanisms:

1. Information overload. When people are presented with too much content, they disengage. Research shows this makes them more vulnerable to disinformation and information manipulation, making them less likely to participate in politics.

2. Platform logic. As we all know, social media algorithms reward outrage, not the truth. Emotional, sensational, and attention seeking content spread faster, amplifying division.

3. Cognitive warfare. This is the structuring of strategic efforts to erode trust in institutions and between citizens. I believe Taiwan experiences this most constantly.

China's tactics during the elections in 2024 followed three patterns:

1. Economic and trade propaganda. During this time, China spread a lot of propaganda, not only to Taiwan, but also to the world, promoting fear over trade, semiconductors and foreign investment, attempting to link Taiwan and China together in this tension.

2. Taiwan-U.S. skepticism. By raising scepticism, China sought to undermine public trust in Taiwan's alliance with the United States and other democratic countries.

3. Generative AI and defects. Based on my research, which spans over the past five years, and most recently after the 2024 election, China has increasingly relied on generative AI and deepfakes. These technologies make it much cheaper to create fake content and false narratives, which now spreads more widely than ever. Chinese information warfare is evolving rapidly, it is not just faster, it is more persuasive, it is difficult to detect, and is

more targeted to specific vulnerable communities in Taiwan. The more people are exposed to believing lies, lies let them disengage. This is the goal of China, to make democracies collapse from within by destroying trust.

Let's talk more about the narrative of sovereignty, the power to define our own story. Self-determination is not not only about borders or working rights, it is also about who gets to define how people think, understand, and remember. That is why the narrative of sovereignty is increasingly under attack within the age of social media. In 2018, Xi Jinping declared that China must tell China's story well. That was not just a statement of domestic ambitions, it is a signal to the world. China's leadership understands that whoever shapes the story shapes the power. This strategy unfolds in three ways, first through international organisations using UN resolution 275 and the one China policy to erase identities.

Another avenue is through media export with China Media Group. The trend involves journalists co-producing content and signing media-sharing news. It is not just in Asia, it is everywhere, examples include partnerships in Africa, the Balkans, and Latin America. For example, they have established centers in South America to train 500 journalists. These journalists are trained, funded to travel to China, and build relationships with the "jammers" in the region. The result is reports that appear to be independent news but actually reflect Beijing's perspective.

Another way of China telling their story is through social media. Coordinated by the international communication planning group under China Union Group or ICP, China recruits multi-language influencers to push Beijing's narrative while hiding their state affiliation operating across YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. This target has had a particularly significant impact on communities, with those in Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong among the most affected. Increasingly, there is growing evidence that Chinese resources influencers network exist in East Europe and Africa, where their influence may be less recognized but they remain active. In many of these countries, Beijing's message is framed as a neutral development corporation, making its strategic goal even harder to detect, especially as it aligns with the disinformation ecosystem of authoritarian partners like Russia and North Korea.

Media deals, ties and elite partnership have already shaped national policy and public narrative in a way they are rarely recognized. In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states, China's operation often lies across Russia, North Korea, and other authoritarian regimes, reinforcing each other's propaganda and weakening democratic institutions.

Finally, I want to discuss how we fight back, because oftentimes when we talk about propaganda and information manipulation, I will be asked this question. I do not have all the answers, but first of all, it is obvious that the fact checking we do not do it enough. It is not working. We have been doing fact checking since 2018 and while it is important, it is not enough. We need to go upstream, to define a story before disinformation takes over.

My suggestion is to build democratic narrative alliances, structured around three main points under these objectives:

1. First, democratic narrative alliances need to be diverse, because unrepresented peoples and marginalized voices must be included and there is often the first step in the

authoritarian regime and protecting their stories strengthens the entire democratic factor;

2. Second, democracy must be decentralized to go beyond the government to government level, and connect academics, businesses, civil society, and other entities into a democracy to be more resilient.

3. Finally, the most important one is fighting propaganda and disinformation must be proactive because fact checking is actually very responsive. So when you see propaganda, or when you see information and try to respond to it, it is always too late. If we do not speak first, we are always reacting. Proactive storytelling sets a frame and value early and crowds out of the area of lies before they are told.

The heart of strategy is if we do not fill the narrative space, especially online, our adversaries will and their regime will. They are already collaborating with each other, they are sharing strategies, amplifying one another's narrative and reinforcing each other's legitimacy. China's messaging often aligns with Russia, North Korea, cyber operations and many other practices. This coordination makes their influence harder to trace and more resilient across regions. If they coordinated to attack democratic norms then those of us who believe in freedom, dignity, self-determination must do the same.

We should always work with each other and share not only values but we must share our vulnerabilities, situations, and struggles. That means we must respond together in a proactive way and it is essential.

"Multilateral Spaces: Re-Thinking Diplomacy"

Prof. Costas M. Constantinou
Professor of International Relations, University of Cyprus

We know that the traditional institutions of multilateral diplomacy are experiencing considerable strain in this changing geopolitical landscape. Organisations like the United Nations, lack the ability to deliver strong, inclusive, and effective responses to governance. We also need to remember that the United Nations was designed to promote peace and security through collective action, and actually to promote human rights and foundational principles like self-determination. We need to recall that even before the United Nations, the League of Nations was very much concerned with democratizing the whole idea of monitoring the actions of states or the establishment of the legal nations international system. Nonetheless the United Nations still reflects nowadays the interest of the dominant powers, marginalizing colonialized communities and people without statehood.

What needs to be done is to change the system.

These changes can be clustered into five areas, which could help determine how we proceed on the issues already mentioned.

1. *Inclusivity*. By inclusivity we mean enhanced multilateralism. We can use *polylateralies* to include not just states but also non-state actors and to consider how we engage in the international system in a way that leads to meaningful participation. It is very important to include minorities, indigenous communities, movements, and civil society networks in the global dialogue. It is also important to note that the UN is aware of this and actively promotes the idea of enhanced inclusivity. In *Our Common Agenda*,[11] the UN puts forward more recent and future-oriented suggestions that include the idea of understanding, highlighting a move away from token participation toward meaningful participation as we know it. Most of you here, as practitioners but also academics, have some forums where minority communities participate on minority issues – for example you talk for two minutes once a year where you can raise your issue, without the ability to actually follow up afterward.

2. *Decolonization*. It is important to understand this not only in terms of the decolonizing states but also decolonizing institutions. Most of the international policies that we have are still outdated and continue to reflect power distributions rooted in colonial hierarchies. It is important to give greater voice to marginalised communities because we know about these inequities, and we know about the security system, but this structural imbalance can be found in many other forums, even those forums that are supposed to address the issue of structural violence. Like the problem of minority issues, what is interesting is that the UN has developed a mechanism to deal with this imbalance and inequality, but it has not really managed to do that. The idea of giving those communities that have the natural right to represent themselves on major problems or issues that directly affect them is very important to consider. This is part of

[11] UN, *Our Common Agenda*. https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda

a deeper form of decolonization, not just symbolic decolonization, but serious institutional reform, that would involve elevating such bodies from consultation to co-decision making, and integrating the insights of these forums into binding resolutions and settlement mechanisms. In short, this is where we need to see diplomacy beyond the state. This does not mean excluding the state from such decision-making, but rather recognising it should not necessarily always be the primary actor through which we engage with these issues. We as non-state actors or minority communities have to take the initiative or have the ideas, and then receive support from states.

3. *Digitization*. There is a need to enhance digital diplomacy and to harness the emerging technologies. As we pointed out, there are also negative effects. We need to consider in what ways minority communities and unrepresented peoples can make use of these technologies because diplomacy is increasingly taking place online – through virtual conferences, real-time data sharing, social media, and digital engagement. Digital platforms are becoming vital to the diplomacy of unrepresented communities, and to an extent, to address their representation. Digital tools have the ability to reduce the asymmetry of representation of unrepresented peoples or minority groups. However, it is important to remember that digital diplomacy is not just a tool, and digitisation is a new diplomatic space which can be cultivated. It offers new spaces for interaction. We have seen civil society organisations use these digital spaces successfully, particularly at times when major mass media might not have the right or ability to manage to handle all that is taking place in this society. At the same time, it is important to remember that digital divides remain a significant challenge, such as how many marginalised communities lack reliable internet infrastructure.

4. *Minilateralism*. This refers to specific coalitions that allow for more agility to raise concerns in multiple platforms and across issues. That is very important, and that is why the term *minilateralisation* has been coined. Small, purpose-driven coalitions addressing specific issues, where unexpected initiatives can come about. We previously discussed the weakness in the Human Rights Council and the role of smaller states. Even though they are small, they are still states that have a voice and it has more time in these organisations to raise an issue. Having said that, minilateralisation is very important. However, I will raise a caveat and keep in mind the downsides. Minilateralism is often viewed as an *à la carte* multilateralism: more tactical, opportunistic, and less long term. That is the danger, but that is also a challenge of how to manage minilateralism.

5. *Adaptive global governance*. When it comes to self-determination, adaptive global governance is very important. We need to consider how we negotiate autonomy, how we negotiate the right to self-determination, how we negotiate Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirms the right of self-determination. It is not just a given, and it is not only about secession or establishing separate sovereignty. In practice, the negotiation of autonomy and self-determination brings about real solutions to specific problems that can build greater rights and more freedom.

Finally, to conclude, multilateral diplomacy must evolve from a rigid state-centric system to a more open adaptive and minilateral one, embracing diverse actors including stateless people, Indigenous nations, and marginalised communities. This approach would enable more just

global agreements and the path towards not only reforming institutions, but also re-imagining diplomacy itself – not viewing diplomacy merely as for policies and as a state agent, but as a right to autonomy, equity, and resilience.

"Finding Opportunities In Moments Of Crisis: Towards Inclusive, Effective And Sustainable Peace"

Prof. John Packer
Neuberger-Jesin Professor of International Conflict Resolution and Director of the Human Rights Research and Education Center, University of Ottawa

I am going to raise the stakes a bit and challenge some of the presumptions around the purported right of self-determination or even the rights of assertion. The very advocacy of a right to self-determination is an oxymoronic proposition – nobody literally, unilaterally, determines anything. We live in a complex interdependent world. We cannot escape environmental realities, pandemics, cryptocurrencies and we do not know what an asteroid is going to cause in terms of a threat to the world. None of these things are solved by anyone acting on their own, so we live inescapably in close proximity and relationships.

Similarly the idea of sovereignty, often invoked, is also mythical. We are nearing 400 years after Westphalia, which was a myth, but today, it is even more so. One of the situations, in which I am actively involved is my role as an adviser to what began as president Zelensky's peace form, helping to find and negotiate peace arrangements in between Ukraine and Russia, an area in which I worked for many many years.

One of the sticking points is guarantees, another myth. There are no guarantees. Who is going to guarantee against asteroids? It is just not real. So, if you are wondering, or scratching your heads about what is going on with the USA and so forth, remember: in this whole discussion, there are no guarantees. There are degrees of confidence, there are degrees of reliability, and they all depend on elements of interdependence.

At last I am going to say this notion of nation, it is actually – even though it is called the United Nations – it is not an association of nations, it is association of states and it always was. The notion of nation is nowhere defined. Even political theorists cannot define it. One of the best definitions I have ever heard read was from Stalin, and I am not sure we want Stalin to be our reference point for the work we are discussing. So, what we are really talking about is political communities that have certain needs, interests, aspirations, they are subject to certain interposed situations that bear upon them and these are problematic and we need to analyze them in this context.

I want to think a little bit more about effectiveness and practicality, even though the very notion of the sovereign state is fundamentally premised on the notion of effective control. This is not an assertion, it was theorized. If we want to talk about theories, and Kelsen's idea of "efficacy", there is no law at all, pure theory of law, if there is nothing effective in it, it is only imaginative. So we have to think about this. The remarks I want to share are more about the way in which in real situations—that is to say actually existing conflicts, where there are assertions. The question is: how can one make constructive progress in a way that is, hopefully, peaceful and that is satisfying in degrees.

It says that by virtue of the rights of peoples – not states, not nations – and we do not quite know what "peoples" are either. By virtue of that right, they can freely determine their political status. It does not say "state", it does not say "autonomy", or political status. It is very elastic and very broad. It goes on to say peoples have the right to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. Indeed, these are prioritized elements that are also interrelated – your cultural development might be dependent partly on your economic abilities, for example your resource contributions and so forth. Development and maintenance may probably be contextually dependent. What prevails may differ by community. For example, I come from Canada, where one of the issues that has been present in our society involves French and English communities. The French speaking, principally in Quebec, though it is more complicated than that, is surrounded by an English-speaking majority. So, the cultural context here is influenced by the surrounding environment. In Estonia, even without the influence of the Soviet Union and Russia, the media landscape and cultural environment can be overwhelming. So, it is important to look at the structural conditions and possibilities in this threat.

My starting point in problematizing this is to think carefully about what the possibilities are. This also was as a matter of principle – if you think about justice and you think about John Rawls, he used the device of the "veil of ignorance", asking how we would imagine a just society if it was not conditioned on my specific interests or yours. But, in principle, in theory, we are ignorant, what would be that idea of the just society and there we can imagine possibilities. To make it practical, we have to move to feasibility, not possibility. Many things we can imagine are not feasible in terms of relationship to actual resources, time. space, and so forth. In that sense, they are probably not going to be politically possible, if not possible at all.

The next point in this is that real conflicts exist with regard to space, time, communities, and the environment. In all of these there is a diversity of needs, interests, and aspirations which conflict with one another, and that is what is actually conflicting. The primary observation is that diversity is in the first place a primary fact. We live in a world of factually diverse needs, interests, aspirations. This has partly been described in the globalized world in which we live, and there are many who do not like the globalized world. They are trying to turn it back. However, in that globalized world, we now do not just speak of crisis, we speak of a "*polycrisis*". We are living in an environmental crisis, a financial crisis, a resource crisis, and so on. Certainly this has urgency.

The three things that I have been asked to address are ideas of *inclusivity* amongst this diversity of facts, second is *effectiveness*, and the third is *sustainability*. I just have a few words on each one:

1. *Inclusivity*. Diversity, in order to be real, must be authentic and that raises questions about voice, about attribution, and we start to identify whether they are true? This raises a very problematical question about accuracy: who gets to identify analysis and so forth. But through the veil of ignorance, in principle, independent analytical resources can also be identified.

   There is an old joke you have probably heard amongst linguists: "What is the difference between a language and a dialogue? The answer is that a language has an army underneath". Linguists do not have a distinction, they do not have a scientific distinction

because languages and dialects believe in each other, there is no pure one. We borrow all the time and all sorts of languages, looking for example at Kurdistan and the multiple dials of Kurdishness. What we need to correlate is who are the authentic voices that genuinely represent and are based on elements that are discernible accurately.

If we are talking about inclusivity in this regard, I would like to put aside the notion of a fictional table. I have been, and continue to be, involved in numerous political conflict dialogues, and while there may occasionally be a table, that is not actually how things work. There are myriad forms of exchange and communication. What we are interested in here is the voices present and whether it is taken into account within the form of decision-making processes. We are looking for an authentic voice, but then we need to see if it is present, and if those voices are fully taken into account and inform decisions. There are different ways to do this, you can count on us but you do not need everyone physically sitting at the table, you need an instrument or a mechanism through which that voice is present and heard.

There are other ways to accommodate this. We can talk about jurisdiction, and we were talking about minilateralism and more specific problems. Many things are divided along jurisdictional lines, for example we have a terrible tendency to think only territorially. Territory is important, but in many issues, such as pandemics or the environment, it is not territory, rather they are identity issues. For example, Polish is a widely spoken language in Europe because of internal migration post-European Union. One of the largest ways Polish is used is through contemporary digital forms of transmission, reaching Poles who live in Romania, Spain, and maybe even here in Madeira. It is not territorially limited.

We have to think about sharing and collective decision-making. A lot of these things are actually shared and so it is not an *either* or a *paradigm*. Take language and identity, particularly in this regard. We might take certain principles from instruments like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example, which speaks about the best interest of the child as the primary principle of determination. Linking this to minority rights, Indigenous People's rights, and so forth, we can start talking about what are the community's best interests? In a cost benefit analysis, what are the costs of disregarding these voices and these interests? Then, we consider what is generally beneficial from a perspective of the insights, and what do you lose as a society as a whole? What does "the majority of society lose", for example, environmentally by suppressing authentic voices of indigenous peoples who know things about the environment that are crucial.

2. *Effectiveness*. I am a big fan of thinking before we act. I know that is not how we live but we should aspire to it. In many aspects of human organisation, we can think well before we act. What I am talking about here are the means of governance structures that constitute "good governance". Good governance is not necessarily democratic governance, it means structures include elements of foreseeability and reliability. Therefore, authoritarian governments can be "good" in this sense. They are not democratic, they are not "good" in the normative sense of necessarily contributing wealth, but they are good in the sense that they are *effective*. In many countries, partly in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, people lamented the loss of certainty, clarity,

authority after independence or liberation. They may have had little breath (or limited freedom), but at least they got their breath. This illustrates why effectiveness, the "good" in this sense, is important.

It is also important to note that the state is not the principal instrument of delivering good governance. In very many cases, if you look at things like the fragility index, roughly two-thirds of the world is now considered failing and fragile. Inadequate countries cannot simply deliver because of the character of global problems. So we have to rethink what are the complex forms of structuring governance that make systems effective. Part of this involves looking at forms of autonomy and decentralization, and a lot of it will be an issue. Decentralisation does not always need to be territorial. You can decentralize authority with regard to language, identity maintenance and so forth. In fact, it might be better to do that on an autonomy basis, such as cultural autonomy or similar arrangements.

3. *Sustainability*: If we turn to sustainability, and to stay on the same theme of identity maintenance, there are certain things that have to be put into structural forms. For example, the maintenance of language and learning over time requires curriculum development, teacher training and institutions to support it. It is not just parental capacity at home. If we are interested in maintenance and development over time, especially in the dynamics of the poorest interrelated and interdependent society, then we have to think about what instruments actually contribute to maintaining these processes over time. This usually requires forms of resource provision and giving more voice to those who are directly affected.

   In this regard, the story is actually a better story, involving the tremendous contributions of technology. I come from Canada, where historically there have been developments in long distance radio broadcasting. For example, indigenous groups, particularly northern and other groups, had languages that were not textually transcribed. Maintaining their language would have required physical proximity over enormous areas. Radio broadcasting revolutionised this, enabling distance learning. Today, through virtual classrooms, it is extremely easy and cheap, but it requires the effective group to be actively involved and have some authority over the burden on the training facility.

   The story in this regard is not all negative or depressing, there are actually today more opportunities to take a problem-solving approach which is more inclusive, more effective, and more sustainable. This requires an approach moving beyond either/or paradigms – such as independence or not, or "you win, we lose" – toward a more complex nuanced approach.

"Reimagining Borders, Risks, And Opportunities In A Degrading Global Order"

Prof. Timothy Waters
Professor of Law, Indiana University Bloomington

Today, I want to talk about two different sets of assumptions: (1) how we think about new states or the global order in general, and the difficulties that are assumed to attach to that; and (2) the global order. The world is changing fast, that is true and I want to talk about the distinct possibility that the fundamental norms of the system that underpins how we think about states and territory are shifting very dramatically and even degrading.

Those assumptions about new states are strongly focused on territorial integrity, not rights to secession and it is strongly discouraged, we cannot even see that this is a real possibility. If we look at the texts, self-determination is obviously a fundamental pillar of the global order, but what does it mean, it certainly does not mean anything to do with the right to make a new state, it is very focused on existing territories, extremely conservative in its reading, it preserves borders. There is no democratic component to the way we think about self-determination of units, it is all inside. Why is it that this is the frame that we have?

I suggest four assumptions that I see in the world that explain why we default to this territorial integrity model:

1. *Stability and Violence.* The assumption that these fixed borders are highly stabilizing, and that if we were to relax them we would have ethnic cleansing and endless fracturing;

2. *Process.* The idea that if we had a relaxed regime of territorial integrity this would lower the incentive for groups, such as minorities, to cooperate with the state;

3. *A Set of Value Commitments.* The belief that relaxed territorial integrity could feed illiberal states, and that only illiberal groups would try to defect; and

4. *A Claim.* That the existing system is actually quite responsive to the concerns of marginal and minority groups, through things like internal self-determination, minority rights, Indigenous rights and so forth.

As I wrote in my book, I am not sure these things are right. They might be wrong and I want to look at why they might be wrong. Maybe, in fact, fixed borders cause many of the things we think that they prevent, like instability and violence. So, I want to do this just by noting a few of the things that we can observe about the way the existing rule works and the problem with these assumptions.

First, on the idea of fracture it is true that creating new states actually makes smaller units, but there are actually very large numbers of integrative incentives. The world is a very dangerous place, as we all know, recently trade is a complicated process and there are a lot of economical scales. So, even when groups have a right or a possibility to exit they do not always take it. We know there are still 16 or 17 units on the UN's list of non-self-governing territories. These are groups that have a perfect right to exit, but have chosen not to do it. There are all kinds of

unjoining of sovereign units into larger groups because they see it in their interest, think about something like NATO or the European Union, these are integrative projects. When we worry about fracture, we are discounting the fact that there are incentives to integrate as well and buried in this claim of fracture is a real normative assumption which is that there is somehow a right number or size of states. I always love to give the wonderful, or ironic, example from the early 1990s when the Yugoslav state was collapsing. The European community, as it was at the time, sent a representative to the various Yugoslav capitals to encourage these units not to break away because as the message went they were too small and they are not viable, he said this in Ljubljana, for example. Of course, the representative that was sent was Jacques Poos of Luxembourg who was telling the Slovenes that they are too small. I am just not sure that there is such a thing as a small unit limit.

The second assumption about violence that is true is that there is often violence correlated with secession. However, it is very difficult to determine whether this violence is caused by secessionist claims themselves or by their suppression. If we think about places like Kosovo or even the Catalan elections, the question is, what is the source of the violence?

A third assumption concerns cooperation. It is true that a right of exit, or a secession right would indeed lower the incentives for minorities to cooperate with the state. But what is missing in that analysis is the fact that the current rigid territorial role lowers the incentives of majorities to negotiate with minorities. We always create incentives for groups to negotiate, right now, we are reading about a minimum set of negotiation incentives for majorities.

Lastly, this one can be stated very clearly. The idea that secession leads to illiberal states is simply a false assumption. We only need to think of the Baltic states or Slovenia, which emerged from exiting less liberal larger units. The claim that the existing system is responsive to minorities is really hard to maintain if we think about something like minority rights. These rights are a complex set of negotiations that take place in a closed, no exit context where minorities negotiate with states, without any guarantee of exit. Anyone who studies negotiations will know the kind of outcomes that result when bargaining occurs inside a closed space when someone else has more power. The key then is whether we think of human rights, or minority rights, or indigenous rights, or democratization.

All of these internal self-determination moves assume the existing state is the thing that needs to work and if it has problems, the default could be fixed – human rights remedies, harm and so forth. All of these assume that unit, they are really not capable conceptually of thinking about departing from that unit. So we really have an extremely limited space for external self-determination, indeed, we often think of secession as a failure as opposed to a change. It is what I described in my book as a period of decadence that ceases to have any regenerative force.

"Non-Violence Strategies: Past, Present, Future"

Dr. Tenzin Dorjee
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We know nonviolence is great but is it good? Does it work? Is it effective? These are the questions that people like us, all of us, we think about all the time. Especially for practitioners, this is a very important question, because there is a great deal of pressure, not only on self-determination seeking groups, but also on human rights groups, democracy groups, everyone. There is a great deal of pressure to abide by the norms of nonviolence. States can engage in war but groups cannot, ethnic groups, natural groups, civil resistance groups. Our hands are tied in that sense by the existing norms, especially of the liberal order.

Because of that, for us this question comes up again and again and we know that nonviolent resistance achieves different types of change, minimal change, small campaigns, but does it work when you are struggling for transformative political change, fundamental political change. Can it deliver that? Especially, in the case of regime change, or national liberation seeking autonomy, or independence.

There is the ongoing debate, structure versus agency. There are those who argue structure is more important, the international structure macro-level changes, those who really determine what happens to small conflict, war issues, and sub-national issues. Then, others who argue that agency is also really important, it is not just a structure. Sometimes if you do not exercise your agency as a group, if you do not strategize, if you do not work hard enough, then even when the structure changes, you will not be able to seize. For us it is always really important to think of both levels, both at the structural level and at the agency level. Groups that tend to succeed are the ones who are working at both levels.

When it comes to **structural changes**, there are two scholars who have spoken about how big changes, whether it is democratization, self-determination, or decolonization, happened at the structural level, or how they have historically tended to happen.

1. *Samuel P. Huntington* who talked about the waves of democratization and how the growth of democracy in the world is not necessarily linear, or not necessarily incremental, or not necessarily routine. It tends to happen in waves. If you look at the history of the last 200 years, there are certain periods where there is a wave of democratization that happens. Then, in that wave, a great number of countries, a great number of regimes tend to democratize, and make that transition. Each wave is followed by a recession or a negative wave, then after a wave of democratization, you end up having a reverse wave – where many of the democracies actually fall back into autocracy. Then that is once again that is followed by another wave. Huntington talked about three different waves during which these massive transformative changes happened.

2. *Seva Gunitsky* and he wrote a very interesting paper called *Geopolitical Shocks and Waves*. He tweaked Huntington's theory and said that these waves seem to happen when there is a massive geopolitical shock to the system and these shocks can arrive in the

> form of war. If you look at the inter-war years, the first world war, the second world war, each time there was a massive shock to the global system and that shock can create a moment of crisis or a moment of change where so many things are possible. A lot of times, those are the periods when really terrible things happen, but at the same time, they also *create*. That is because the old norms fall away, the old rules collapse, old boundaries may collapse during these eras and all of a sudden things that were deemed completely impossible, suddenly become possible.

The second question that is really important is **agency**. If we do not focus on agency, then conflict, crises and opportunities will come and go and nothing will change. On the topic of opportunity, one of the best literature on nonviolent resistance and how it works is by Gene Sharp, and I would recommend his book *From Dictatorship To Democracy*. He wrote it for practitioners. In 1973, he came out with *The Politics of Nonviolent Action,* and later in the 1990s, he worked in Burma, doing a lot of training with people on the ground, including activists. These activists said to him: "Can you please write something shorter, in ordinary people's language? Can you write something in a non-academic language?" They explained that as Burmese democracy activists, they had to hide in the jungle during the day to avoid the regime hunting them down and at night they had no electricity to read, so they could not read his books and asked that he write something short and accessible. That is why he wrote *From Dictatorship To Democracy,* only 100 pages. For practitioners, it is a really great place to start. It examines how nonviolent resistance actually works and goes into the mechanisms of change.

When we look at great practitioners of nonviolent business like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, there was a certain aura of mysticism in how they do their work. We can see the results of their work but we do not get to see the strategic thinking inside their work, we do not get to see the mechanisms of change, or how change actually operates, how each of their tactics actually delivers change. What Gene Sharp does is he basically opens the black box of political change and examines exactly how precisely each of these mechanisms function, how each works within a given context. I would highly encourage his book and consider one great insight from him, namely that nonviolent resistance is not only a method that depends purely on persuasion, it also produces coercive power. It is a method that can generate coercive power that can force a change in the behavior of the regime, and the policies of the regime, even when you have failed to convert their mind or heart. You are not seeking to change their mind, you are seeking to change their behavior and he says that it is possible to do so if we can expand and increase our own strength and power enough.

The last thing is another question: *Does nonviolent resistance work on average, at a general level?* We know that within a movement, within a particular conflict, sometimes it works and we see examples of it but if you step back and look at the global picture does nonviolent resistance work? Or does it often not work?

Two scholars, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, set out to test and examine just that question. They collected data on all campaigns, nonviolent campaigns and armed struggles, from 1900 to 2006. That was their first book, and then in 2008, they came up with their results in the form of a paper and a book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* . Their findings, based on examining 325 different campaigns, is that, on average, if you look at all the data, nonviolent resistance has a 53% chance of success. Over the course of 100

years nonviolent campaigns were successful, not just in achieving their small goals, but in achieving maximalist goals, 53% of the time and armed struggles succeeded only 26% of the time. Of course, this is not an iron law nor a physical law like gravity, where if we engage in nonviolent resistance we will have a 53% chance of success.

They go into the reasons that make nonviolent resistance successful: they have certain advantages. The number one advantage is participation. When you have a group that is engaging in nonviolent resistance and discipline, you get broader participation from the masters because the barrier to entry barrier to participation is lower. You get greater diversity in your movement, and greater diversity in the movement means more skills, more knowledge, more opportunities, more exchange. You also increase the chance of elite defection from the regime. The regime is dependent on pillars of support, institutional pillars of support, like the police, the army, media and other types of institutions. Without provoking elites from the regime to defect to your side it is very difficult to succeed and nonviolent struggles have a much better chance of provoking elite defection. You can also create disruption of the entire system, the economic system or otherwise, without alienating the public, if you have nonviolent decisions. These are some of the reasons that they go into.

A fundamental problem of self-determination struggles is the power asymmetry. There is an asymmetry of power balance between us and the regimes and until we can build more power our chances are very low. We need to build power, and building power takes building our numbers. building our movements, building our organisations, and building alliances. More alliances creates more opportunities. Just spending time in a room like this for a couple of days, even just that, opens us to new opportunities, new resources, new connections.

Further, building a positive narrative, especially for us and for the long cause-struggles, is really important to keep us alive, to keep the struggle alive. If we do not have a positive narrative, if we lose the narrative battle to the regimes, then it makes it very difficult to keep the struggle alive over the course of generations. At the same time, one example of positive narrative around the Otpor war is the 2002 documentary *Bringing Down a Dictator*, which tells the story of the peaceful resistance movement in Serbia in 2000 that led to the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević. If you watch the documentary on the Otpor war, Iman Marović talks about how they strategized, and how they actually shaped their narrative during the Otpor. He says, in the beginning, it was a very small organisation, they had only a couple of chapters and that is it. But when doing interviews, they used to say, they always said, we are a national organisation, we have more than 300 chapters across Serbia, they exaggerate and create these narratives. But two years later, they did become a national organisation. If you start by saying we are very small and we do not have resources, we do not have support, nobody is supporting us, then nobody will join, nobody will come to the table, nobody will support, nobody will start a new chapter. But because he was saying we are a national organisation and that kind of positive narrative actually created a desire on the part of everybody to actually join that group and then later truly became a national organisation. Thus, narrative and discourse is really important, especially for us. We do not have nuclear warheads, we do not have an arsenal but for us narrative is one of the key tools in the battle.

While building our movement, we have to keep in mind how conditions are changing because when structural order is changing or has changed in a dramatic way, then we should also be

changing our strategic campaigning long-term plans. We cannot stick to this same strategic plan that we devised 40 years ago, or 30 years ago, 20 years ago, when the entire structure has changed and the entire context and conditions have also changed. We must keep revisiting the plan every five years, every 10 years, so that our plan and our strategic campaigning, our goals, and vision is also in line with how global order is changing. When those changes happen, on the one hand, we lose resources, we lose certain things that we have taken for granted for years and years but at the same time, there might be openings for new opportunities as well.

b. Session 2: Resisting New Forms Of Colonisation

"Resistance To Colonial Legacies And New Forms Of Colonialism"

Dr. Shona Loong
Senior Scientist in Political Geography at the University of Zurich, Switzerland

I am an academic and also an outsider to the current context. I am also neither a political scientist nor a legal scholar, I am a political geographer and ethnographer and my research is really on one context, not only Myanmar but specifically on Karen people and Karen organisations and how they have resisted state violence over generations. The Karen are not part of the UNPO and they remain committed to arms struggle as a means of achieving self-determination but at the same time in my research I have tried to document how the arms struggle has also enabled other non-violent and democratic means of pursuing self-determination.

In this panel, I was asked to consider colonial legacies and to think about whether colonization is new. The answer that I have, in the context that I work in, is that colonization is not new or at least not exactly and this could resonate with much of what many of you have observed. For many people in the world, including in Myanmar, colonization is a very long-term process and in an individual's lives they never escape this but it continues, it evolves and presents itself in new forms.

In receiving these questions I thought about how in re-imagining self-determination, it is very important to hold these two facts in tension: *(1) colonization is a long-standing and intergenerational historical process; and (2) colonization can appear in unprecedented and unexpected ways*. Because both those things, the old and the new, shape how we understand self-determination movements.

Karen communities in Myanmar close to the Thai border are living through what has been called the longest civil war in the world which was triggered ironically when the Burmese state received self-determination after more than a century of British rule. The Karen National Union (KNU), the armed group, took up arms against the newly independent state in 1949, one year after independence. Since then, for 70 years, the conflict between the KNU and various Burmese regimes has waxed and waned. As many of you will know, since the coup four years ago, the civil war has also become more widespread as resistance groups all over Myanmar are now taking up arms against the Junta. War has been part of everyday life for Karen people, this has been the result of long-term colonization on two fronts:

1. First, the ongoing war is of course shaped by the British Empire. It is not only that the British conquered Burma but that it forever changed society and politics in what we know as Myanmar today. Because the British gave preferential treatment to the Karen and other minorities by recruiting them, but not the majority group, to the colonial army and the civil service, the majority resented the Karen and saw them as colonial allies. This is an old story of how the British divided society and it is still a backdrop to whatever we might call new forms of colonization.

2. Second, Karen people then experienced colonization by the Burmese military state. The Myanmar military first emerged as an anti-colonial army fighting for independence, it strengthened in Burma's early decades when different insurgencies reduced the state's control to main cities. For this reason, the military sees itself as holding the state together and because their main enemy is the military, many Karan remain committed to holding arms as a means of self-determination.

Furthermore, the Myanmar military not only attacked the KNU and Karen civilians but also forced divide and rule. The Burmese did not go further than creating divides between the Karen and other groups, but also tried to create divides within the Karen. Some people were assimilated and forced to integrate into the dominant culture. Others who kept the Karen language and culture alive in KNU areas endured armed violence on a massive scale. This has forced continual also internal efforts to hold self-determination together over decades.

Karen people have experienced colonization as a historical process, enacted first by the British, and then the Burmese military state, both of which have shaped what it even means to be Karen today. Today this historical process of colonization continues for the Karen with new actors however, among them the latest Burmese Junta that took power four years ago, and also a changing world that many of us have spoken about, in which western states, once perceived as allies of the Karen, appear to be turning away from the rest of the world.

Like many UNPO members, the Karen stand at a critical juncture in global politics while also understanding that they are enduring decades of struggle at the same time. Nevertheless, the struggle for self-determination adapts according to new challenges. In 2019, I had the privilege of visiting the newly established Sawin Peace Park in the KNU controlled Karen state, which is a 6,000 kilometer square territory in which Karen organisations, Indigenous leaders, and the KNU came together to create a new democratic governance of land and people. There are too many aspects of the Sawin Peace Park to discuss here, but one element is creating local guidelines in this arm group controlled area for how society and ecology can be managed according to the will of the people. Today, even after the coup and recent air strikes, the Sawin Peace Park continues. I see the Peace Park as a form of resistance to colonialism, including new manifestations of older processes in three ways:

1. First, the Sawin Peace Park reclaims Karen agency against intergenerational processes of colonization. It casts Karen people not only as drivers of political autonomy but also as a way of celebrating and of creating joy and community in spite of pain. These two things coexist, the trauma of war as well as efforts to build community.

2. Second, and at the same time, the Sawin Peace Park is a new response to colonization. It was launched almost 70 years after the KNU struggle began and why was this? There are many factors here, but one of them is that people involved in the Peace Park were wary that the armed group itself could introduce new kinds of domination and they wanted non-violent struggle to coexist against violence. They sought to balance the armed group's authority with democratic and customary processes, inspired by other Indigenous movements around the world that were evolving at the same time.

3. Third, as I mentioned before, colonization circumscribes the *self* in self-determination. It has shaped who counts as Karen and the extent to which they share experiences of oppression. The Peace Park is specifically for a subgroup of Karen people who live in key controlled areas, and who have managed to avoid assimilation. Sometimes when outsiders remark on this, they see it as a limitation but if we disregard the idea that self-determination has to occur with reference to a predefined group, it is also a strength. Through the Peace Parc I began to see self-determination, not only as autonomy for a group that has been defined, but also as the ability to define one's community and the relations it is embedded in. It is a relational and dynamic image of the *self*, in contrast or at least in coexistence with legal or more fixed ideas of self-determination.

Finally, a lot of my work in documenting or trying to understand current organisations has taught me to hold older processes of colonization and its new manifestations and forms of resistance in tension. What is the importance of doing this work at this current juncture?

Firstly, as again many people have remarked, we live at a time when different forms of domination are proliferating and, in this context, documenting historical and intergenerational struggles helps to build coalitions and connections as many of you are already doing, without downplaying the differences between them as well as the differences between relatively recent struggles and those that are more historic.

Second, increasingly there appears, rightly or wrongly, to be a growing consensus that the liberal order is coming undone. As people bemoan this, in many places, it is worthwhile for me to reflect on and learn from self-determination struggles that have persisted: (1) Amidst previous geopolitical upheavals; and (2) In spite of their lack of recognition at the highest echelons of global politics. Alternatives to the state and to the liberal order have always or at least have long existed and they have continually adapted and continue to exist.

Third, as a researcher I think about research as a basis for connection, especially when misinformation and attacks on different forms of knowledge are rife. Documenting a struggle over the long run creates a basis for connections across generations. Despite outside efforts to fragment marginalized communities, research also allows for connections across movements allowing for re-imagining self-determination as a result of conversations across many movements that occur historically.

"Minorities In The Face Of Colonialism"

Prof. Joshua Castellino
Founding Executive Dean of the College of Arts, Law & Social Sciences at Brunel University

We are having this conversation while two alleged entities that have emerged from self-determination are threatening to blow the world up. Apparently this is supposed to be a good thing that this is meant to be decolonization but of course at the heart of that particular Indo-Pakistan conflict is another question of self-determination as well that never got resolved by that process. In fact it is the *Radcliffe Commission* that decided the self-determination of India and Pakistan and not really India or Pakistan for that matter.

I want to reflect on three sets of comments: (1) to offer you a whole series of concepts that underpin this idea we are looking at; (2) the consequences of that; and (3) how we can re-imagine it.

The concept itself, we have talked about self-determination as being a westernized concept but let's not forget the system itself is a westernized concept. I define that system as a man-made, anthropocentric, patriarchal, hegemonic group of sovereign states, notionally built on the principles of the rule of law, and the inherent equality of its citizenry devoted to the pursuit of unlimited growth through heavy reliance on mass processes of extraction from nature with a view to generating wealth through mass consumption, accompanied by limited promises of its distribution across society. This is something that essentially makes the winner take all game of self-determination, a process by which entities that have not yet been recognized as states seek recognition as states, because states are the only game in town. There is nothing else you can be if you want to play in the international system of states. If you are an aspiring group, then you have to ultimately seek statehood, if you are not represented. I fully agree with what has been said that, in a sense, minorities are the flip side of that coin. You can have your decolonized states but please make sure you protect minorities. This is what the European Commission on Yugoslavia looked at when Yugoslavia was breaking up most recently, the protection of minorities. These were concepts that are all linked.

Now, what are the consequences of these concepts? That is something to bear in mind and there are five or six consequences I want to bring to your attention, none of which will be new to you, I am afraid.

The widespread fragmentation of various political bodies. You have communities cut across by lines on maps that no colonial power had ever trod, but lines were drawn and divided into sovereign states. The underlying idea is that it is only hierarchical power structures with a capital city and a state, a concept derived from western political thought, not all political thought of all time, but a very specific political thought that has been imposed on everyone. Inevitably, that involves a winner takes all process and the winner takes all essentially means that the group with the majoritarian access to power gets everything and everybody else is subject to how they will then define the space they have inherited. They move into the same palaces, they adopt the same legal systems, and of course, crucially, there is a promise extracted from them, and that promise is that they will believe in the system, hence the UN charter, hence membership of the UN community as well. It is very much a notion by which you have to

maintain that particular hegemony and of course it comes with the other aspect of it, which is the monopoly on the use of force. That monopoly on the use of force can give a huge boost to the arms trade, and former colonizers have made significant profits from the arms trade, based on the belief that democracies do not go to war with each other. Because ultimately you can see the process by which the militarization on both sides of a boundary creates a tinder box where war is an inevitable consequence. That is nothing new to any of you in a sense as scholars of self-determination. The question remains: how can we re-imagine this, in this particular scenario?

Inevitably, in working with minorities at Minority Rights Group International (MRG), we were, at the time I was leaving, involved in 41 interventions across 60 odd countries. In a sense, what we saw more often than not, were the synergies that existed between communities. If we think about self-determination as a process by which we break down political units into ever smaller entities, we see one set of consequences: a situation where identity politics runs the day and every single nuance of identity has to be accommodated.

If we go back to Resolution 1541, passed in those last few days of 1960, when Portugal had that big conversation with the UN? If you look at Resolution 1541, it talks about three options of self-determination. Of course it talks about free association with an existing state and whenever I teach this in international law, nobody can ever name an associated state, but they do exist of course. You can talk about integration with an existing state, and the Ghanaian example is one that is cited very often. You can also talk about secession from an existing state. So, self-determination essentially entails three options, but of course no freedom fighter wants to talk about option A or option B. I sometimes joke that it is not really a choice. It is like working on your computer and something goes wrong and you get a message saying “there has been a problem, all your files will be deleted” and the only option is to say “ok”. It is not really okay, but there is not much you can do about it. In a sense, it is not really a choice, and we need to re-examine what those other two options are.

Increasingly the idea that I would like to put forth is this notion of looking at an interconnected world of 17 sub-regions. Now, why 17 sub-regions? The way in which this perspective works is that the polar regions are one, because essentially there is less human interaction there, but if you look at the other 16 sub-regions in the world, there is an older history that goes beyond the European touch that actually needs to be legitimized. In Africa it is the easiest because the African Union already recognizes five sub-regions. It distinguishes East Africa, from Southern Africa, from Central Africa, from North Africa, from of course West Africa – the ECOWAS countries.[12] That is a fairly straightforward way of looking at it, and when you do so, you can see synergies that cut across and defeat the process of European line drawing.

If you also look at Asia, this is the biggest element here. I have joked for many years that Asia and the Pacific account for more than 60% of the world's population, but they are treated as a single region. That is like living in the basement of a house and calling the rest of the house the “non-basement”. Essentially, the only thing Japan and Jordan have in common is they start with the letter “J”, and that is in English, not necessarily even in Arabic. In reality, there is very little that is common across the region. When you apply a finer lens to Asia, it breaks down very

[12] Economic Community of West African States.

clearly into Southeast Asia as a region, South Asia as a region, East Asia as a region, Central Asia as a region, and actually what is called West Asia. Even the notion of the "Middle East" raises questions – in the middle of what, and the east of whom? The term was coined by Alfred Mahan in 1902 for the U.S. naval intelligence services, in the context of capturing access to the wealth in India and maintaining a monopoly over it. Understanding sub-regions is going to be key.

There is also a bigger imperative at play, and that imperative is climate change. We need to develop a new form of economy that is non-extractive and essentially is not based on a profit motive. The inevitable consequences of climate change will drive scarcity, which in turn will drive migration. Whichever way you look at it, whether we consider the need to combat climate change, the need to curb or manage migration, or whether you need to create a new economic system that is not based on extraction, the sovereign state no matter how big, may actually be too small. This leads us to think about regions. And if we take away the emotion of politics, we can already see this happening. We see it in the growth of customs unions. Many of the regions I have mentioned already have customs unions, at more or less differing stages of confidence in how they operate, but it has already been recognized that this is something that needs to be done.

Now, what happens to the aspiration of groups who want legitimate governance in the context of this? We can look at other systems of governance that are not based on the sovereign state, for example emirates, federations, or confederations. All of these processes have existed throughout history and Indigenous Peoples can tell you about governance systems like this. But they have just not been studied because, ultimately, political philosophy, which reads Western political philosophy, tells us that the only legitimate entity is the state.

If you want decolonization, the only option presented is statehood. Folks, decolonization has never happened. It is effectively the privatization of a colony where one colonial master has handed hegemony over to a handpicked group of people, usually from a majority community, who have moved into the same palaces, used the same legal systems, and pledged loyalty to the system. In return, they have been given carte blanche sovereignty over those areas.

In thinking about self-determination we need to break our own mold of seeing self-determination purely as a process through which you break down states in order to get, as much of my writing reflects, better representation. But how much better is "better representation" in reality? And how is it "better" defined when the lenses we use, like ethnicity, religion, language, are now incredibly hybrid and incredibly mixed? This idea of the purist does not really exist. Nationalism that we see, is a very much a male-dominated approach to maintain the patriarchy, and self-determination as a quest for freedom simply does not fit into that, it is simply a means to an end.

"Advocating For Self-Determination Within The Framework Of Evolving Western Democratic Systems"

Senator Paul Strauss
District of Columbia

Washington D.C. is home to over 700,000 people, we are a stateless people within the context of the United States. We are the capital of the United States but we do not have the same democratic rights: we are not represented with votes in the national legislature, but more importantly the local government that we elect is a permissive government. The Constitution of the United States gave exclusive control over the capital district to the Congress of the United States – a Congress that does not allow us to be represented. For almost 200 years, it was the Congress that ran the city as if it were a government agency, it retained full authority and in the current context there is even talk by the current president that that local government should be taken away and power returned back to the Congress. When our elected legislature passes a law, if Congress disagrees with it, they can overturn it and they have done that on multiple occasions. It is the Congress that controls the local budget of the District of Columbia.

During the initial American decolonization struggle we used the rallying cry that *taxation without representation is tyranny*. The British government taxed its colonies without giving them representation in Parliament, which was seen as justification for breaking away from colonial overlords and establishing our own country. But today, D.C. residents pay full federal taxes. We also pay local taxes to our government – if you work you get an income tax, if you own property you pay a property tax, if you drive too fast on the road and they write you a ticket or you park your car in the wrong space, you pay a fine. All of that contributes to the District of Columbia budget, that budget is controlled by the Congress. In fact right now, even though Congress approved our current 2025 budget in the last session, it has decided to reverse the approval and is holding $1.1 billion of locally raised taxpayer money hostage. This is because the House of Representatives has decided to lower our local spending, which is interesting because that is going to make us have to lay off police officers, school teachers, public health, things that are going to have a real impact on us.

In many ways, we are treated as second class citizens in our own country and it has real impacts on our ability to regulate our public safety, our public health. We are not unique in the United States, the United States, for a while, flirted with becoming an openly colonial power itself. In the first half of the 20th century, one out of every eight people who lived within the legal jurisdiction of the United States were not considered citizens with equality because they did not live in a state. At the time the United States controlled Alaska, Hawaii, which were not yet states, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa. We have made Alaska and Hawaii states, the Philippines is no longer part of the United States, but there are still a significant number of American citizens who are denied equal suffrage because they do not live within a state. All of these jurisdictions have something in common, and that is that the population of those jurisdictions, whether it is the District of Colombia, whether it is Puerto Rico, whether it is Guam, they are all majority non-white. Every part of the United States where the population happens to be majority non-white has no voting representation in the Congress; it is not admitted as an equal state. This is hardly a coincidence.

For us our self-determination struggle has nothing to do with separating from our nation state. It has nothing to do with breaking away from our national power, we actually want to join a different kind of self-determination struggle, where our goal is equality, and unity with our government, not to break away from it. What we want is the type of federal state sovereignty that you get by living within the federal system where your rights come from being a citizen of the nation but also a citizen of your own state. Right now, given the political hostility that we are facing within our national government, particularly this Congress, particularly this president, the stakes are becoming much higher.

When I first made the decision to encourage D.C. to seek representation in the UNPO, it was a very controversial decision. In fact, in some cases we were ridiculed. I had the interesting experience of re-reading one of the articles that was written from our Washington Post quoting a scholar who said that this was just ridiculous and I quote now: “that someone would compare the plight of the District of Columbia to some of these oppressed minority groups, just boggles my mind. These are places with terrible human rights records, especially for minority groups who have little recourse in the judicial system to protect their rights. To me it sounds like a political stunt and a bad taste”. That was back in 2015, the good old days, as we like to call them, anybody remember Barack Obama, he used to be president of the United States, it was a very different time. Even though the president supported D.C. statehood, and even though we had members of Congress that were supportive, we could not get it done. Republicans were concerned about adding two more Democratic votes in the Senate, and not just Democratic votes, but votes that represented a predominantly African-American community. A community of African-Americans maintains the plurality: D.C. has a higher than average population of Latino, Asian, and other immigrants. The idea that the United States Senate was so closely divided on so many issues, that it was felt that D.C. statehood could tip that balance. So, we were urged to actively oppose.

Things have changed. Nobody really doubts that we belong for some very tragic reasons. We have had our own insurrection. On January 6th for example it was the local D.C. police that had to come and rescue the capital because D.C was denied the ability to control our own national guard. Things in the United States are changing very dramatically, as we march towards authoritarianism. Just today, the president of the United States fired the librarian of Congress under the guise that she was pursuing DEI and putting “inappropriate” books in the library, despite the fact that all copyrighted books have to be put in the library. A judge was arrested in the state of Wisconsin and a legal resident of Maryland has become a disappeared person by being deported to El Salvador without a trial, and without due process, in a move that the administration admits was probably a mistake. Even though our Supreme Court, by a vote of nine to zero, has ordered his return to be facilitated by the administration, he remains a disappeared person.

Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski was asked whether or not she was afraid, her response and I quote was "We are all afraid. Okay, I am oftentimes very anxious, myself, about using my voice because the retaliation is real.” This is a Republican senator, whose father was the governor of a state, who currently sits in the United States Senate as we slide towards real authoritarianism. Our evolving democracy is really threatened but make no mistake this is not a movement just by one deranged orange man, this is a dangerous movement that is backed by the owners of our largest and most powerful corporations. I am talking about people like Elon Musk, who is well

known for controlling X, which used to be Twitter, a source of information that we all use far too easily. The people who control Meta and Facebook, Jeff Bezos, who runs Amazon, also owns the Washington Post, which has decided that it will no longer publish editorials. This is not the actions of one individual, there are deep and powerful forces at work that are threatening all of us. If we could be successful in our quest for self-determination, if we could get the right to vote in the United States Senate, then some of those close decisions could be reversed and we could hopefully then restore our democracy as we, in the capital city, hope to take our place in it.

"Facing Russia's Territorial Ambitions, Misinformation And Threats"

Andres Herkel
Journalist and Estonian politician and scholar

I would like to start by reflecting on yesterday evening, when much honor was given to my university teacher, Linnart Mäll, who was one of the founders of the organisation.

We had the opportunity to develop the work with small nations and even quite big nations living on the territory of the former Soviet Union, but especially in the Russian Federation. Unfortunately, when we spoke with Mercè in Tallinn, and when we saw the picture of former UNPO members this morning, we realise they all are the former members of the organisation and not on the same course as Estonia because we regained our statehood, but because the conditions for fruitful work has been demolished.

I started to think that we probably missed some opportunities along the way. Saratov's coordination center was no longer very active by the beginning of 2010. Some events did take place in the beginning, yes, but the last event we held in Tartu was in 2010, the small book about it and the commemorative conference for Linnart Mäll. Then, we realized that Putin's regime was growing. Some people did not come, some had hindrances, some still were there with us, but it really was the last opportunity to gather them in Estonia in that format, and it is a pity. We likely missed the opportunity to shift from working with communities within the Russian Federation to working with communities in exile which is necessary.

I am very thankful for this invitation. After so many years, to be in contact with UNPO, where so many people are represented in exile, and that speaks a great deal about the situation at home. It is a pity but it is the reality. There is the representative of Crimean Tatars but no representatives of Mari, Karelians, and Tatars, many nations who were very active in the very beginning of UNPO.

To move closer to the topic of minorities, I have had quite a similar experience as a moderator from the Council of Europe. I served as a deputy in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly for quite long periods and we know very well the formats in place, and how the protection of minorities and their rights are divided.

In my experience, there are two different questions: (1) the situation of small minorities or Indigenous People within the states, which as was mentioned, is really the issue. It can serve as a kind of substitute for self-determination, but we must still protect them; (2) when Estonia joined the Council of Europe, along with other former republics from the Soviet Union, we encountered another form of protection for minorities altogether.

Russia started to protect the Russian minority in independent states, raising questions about why they did not have the status of the state language, and inquiring about education, citizenship, and other issues. This is a tricky question, because if you have a nation of 1 million people and your neighboring state has 150 million people, including several hundred thousand living on its territory, efforts to protect their compatriots can be quite dangerous. We experience it as a form of crucifixion. Many of those that came during the time of occupation were not

actually citizens of the country, making the question very tricky. In other words, sometimes there is a tendency, particularly by large states, not to protect the people who are colonized but to protect the colonizers in other states. It is a type of paradox. For example, in 2008, when Russia invaded South Ossetia and a part of Georgia, prior sensitivities and narratives in other European countries about so-called minority rights violations in the Baltic states began to be pushed out. By this point, nobody took the narrative seriously anymore, but before that it was a very active task.

On misinformation, there are many facets to this concept and I will not go into all the details. There are, however, some very visible methods used to destroy neighboring societies and influence countries abroad used by the Russian Federation. One of these methods is to promote anger against the political elite and against state institutions. Sometimes, it is not an outright lie, it is a half-truth. States have corruption, states have problems, and the issue of migration in Europe, for example, is quite an important problem. These problems are used through misinformation, which then promotes aggression against our own states from within. This tool was invented when Russian propaganda started to see new allies in the radical right across European countries. Historically, during the Soviet Union there was a concept of so-called "useful idiots", who claimed everything hostile and were blind to the atrocities. Instead of leftist, they found some rightist “useful idiots”, who started to destroy the countries. The other question is the manipulation of elections. We have seen it in the United States, in France, more recently in Romania, and so forth.

To conclude, I want to outline one very important issue which became very visible during the so-called negotiations over Ukraine and Russia, but were negotiations between the United States and Russian Federation. It is a concept of: What was the reason for the war in Ukraine? It is a key question for the future. We see that it was Russian ambition, an attempt to consolidate power internally, to fear democracy, and to stop so-called color revolutions. It was apparently based on the false understanding of Ukrainian society and Ukrainian military capabilities, but it was like this.

The other issue was western limited reaction to the previous human rights and international rights violations in Georgia, Crimea and elsewhere. Over time, there was an alternative explanation. It is because of NATO expansion, Ukraine is the subject of history, it was not some kind of NATO conspiracy to move but it was our need to be protected from Russian imperialism.

"The Right Of Self-Determination And Its Spaciotemportal Context"

Dr. Michael van Walt van Praag
Executive President of Kreddha

Essentially, the direction I want to go in, when addressing self-determination, is about restoring legitimacy of self-determination. That is a juncture perhaps where we are and is a very important task. I will get back to that in a moment, but when we talk about colonialism which was one of the subjects of this panel, it is important to note that colonialism is not over. By saying that the break up of the Soviet Union or what followed was a third wave of decolonization, we have been taught that colonialism was something that European powers did in other continents and that decolonization ended sometime in the 70s, perhaps Portugal being one of the last colonial powers when it was decolonized.

Nick Bultmann, my colleague, and I are in the process of finishing writing a book on East Turkestan. In the process of looking at both the history and the current status of East Turkestan and the rights of East Turkestan, we have come to the conclusion that East Turkestan is a classical colony – not a new form of colonialism, not a neo-colonial, simply a colony in the way that so many colonies were created by European and other western powers. Therefore it should be treated in the same way. I am sure that is not the only case, there are many others.

We need to re-educate the general public and the international community to the notion that there are colonies today. For the same reasons as other colonies needed to be decolonized, and had the right to be decolonized, these colonies should also have the right. Hopefully the process will be better than the decolonizations that happened before because many of them happened in a way that only created new problems, but that we have learned from those. Perhaps, in the future, it can be more positive. The whole idea of this theory of colonialism having to have salt water between the colonial power and the colony is really an absurd idea that was invented because it was convenient for states in power at the time.

If you look at what self-determination is and we have discussed that at some length, I am a proponent of looking at the plain language of those articles and those legal sources where it states what self-determination is and who has the right to self-determination. Only if there are problems with that, because it is not clear, then you look at some other possible explanations for it. What has happened is that the language is very clear, both in terms of *all peoples* have the right to self-determination, and the language is very clear in terms of what that right entails, namely the right to freely determine their political status, and economic, social, and cultural development. That is a clear language.

Then, there is the language that says that all peoples may for their own ends freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice etc., again clear language. Of course, at some point this clashes with some other principles or some other norms of international law, either in the Charter, or in other resolutions of the UN. That is where states then try to modify the meaning, or reduce the effect of that meaning, and lawyers are partly to blame for developing nuances that actually serve the interests of states to some extent more than those with the right to self-determination. In other words, in trying to balance different interests, you then create a new interpretation of what the right to self-determination is instead of saying there are simply

some clashing interests and each time the differences between them need to be resolved, and we need to find an equitable solution for that.

In restoring the legitimacy of self-determination, we need to go back to the basic and original principles and intent, just as we would with some of the other basic principles of international law, pillars of international law that have existed since the Second World War at least, if not earlier. Then, some of you have already stated what in your opinions are some of the fundamental reasons for self-determination, or the basic ideology behind it: the inherent right to represent one's own interests, or a group of people's own interests to be part of determining one's own destiny. As some political philosophers have said, what is more fundamental than making the decision, if one believes in the principle of democracy, not the processes, the principle of democracy. Then, what is more fundamental than determining by whom one wants to be ruled? Your own people by a different state that lives across the water, or across the mountains. That is a very fundamental and basic principle that is tied to the principle of democracy. That is also one of the ways, perhaps when talking to people who believe that self-determination is a regressive backward-looking thing. Tying it to the very concept of democracy can be helpful and the need for all component parts of our global society of which all of you are part, which all of your peoples are part, to co-build the legal order which will emerge from perhaps the crisis that we are in now and not leave that only, once again, to the major power holders to recreate a strengthening of the status quo.

Language has been said to be extremely important and it is. I really implore everybody to be very careful about the language that is used also to describe your own situation. We just heard how minority regimes, the protection of minorities was created in a sense to counter or as the consequence of self-determination. So, if you are identified as a minority, there is a consequence. You cannot expect that as a minority, you can be recognized as having the right to self-determination. There are some discussions in that direction, but the right to self-determination is a right of peoples, that is how it is written everywhere, so do not let others define you as a minority if you are not. If you are a people, then own that, claim that, and correct those who do not.

I know there is also sometimes a weighing exercise when you go to the European Parliament, you try to get a resolution passed, the resolution passes, and you are very happy because they say all kinds of things that you want but it does describe you as a minority. Is that what you want? Which is more important, that people understand what the core issue is about, or that they state certain rights that you have that are extraneous to your right to self-determination? This is a weighing process that really is important to consider.

Finally, in terms of the outcome of self-determination, this is where the difference lies. The fundamental principle of self-determination, going back to the basics, is what we should be proponents of. As for the outcome of exercising self-determination, there are all kinds of possibilities. Resolution 1514 gives three alternatives, but if you look at the ICCPR, international covenants of human rights, and other documents, they define self-determination again in simple language: that you have the right to determine your political status. So, why should we prescribe three possibilities and nothing in between, that does not make sense. In my view, there are those three possibilities, plus any other status that makes sense, but that is the stage when it is not necessary to always be seeking separation. It is not always necessary to seek independence as

the best solution, there are many other solutions available depending on the time, on the conditions, on the situation that one is in. That is where compromises can be made rather than on the principle itself.

Sometimes we think, especially not in this configuration where everybody has a kind of solidarity and working together, but when you go back home and also the people back on the ground may feel that they cannot do very much, that they are alone against a very strong opponent.

I remind myself every day of a quote from South Africa, it says: *"If you think you are too small to make a difference then you have never spent the night with a mosquito."* This reminds me that we can continue with standing for those principles that we really believe in.

c. Session 3: From Exploitation To Empowerment: Linking Environmental And Cultural Rights To Self-Determination

"Empowerment Through Land Rights And Environmental Justice"

Dr. Asebe Regassa
Group Leader in Political Geography at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich

The topic I was given is empowerment through land rights and environmental justice. But because of my empirical research experiences, I reframed the topic in a way to better explain the context. What I would speak on is disempowerment through land dispossession and environmental injustice. I will also highlight how this idea of disempowerment, and practices of disempowerment could be reversed through different mechanisms. What is very fundamental in this case is the entanglement between land rights, environmental justice, and self-determination. People's right to self-determination would guarantee them to exercise access to resources, and also to mitigate the impacts of environmental injustice, like pollution, land degradation, and other impacts.

In this particular case, I want to conceptualize self-determination, not only as a political and legal entitlement and as a right, but also as epistemic emancipation—which I would also call decolonization of knowledge production. I argue that a political self-determination alone would not fulfill people's expressions of their rights. Even if they achieve a form of political self-determination, to the level of statehood, without decolonizing the way of knowing the narrative, the dominant narratives imposed and deeply rooted in colonial systems, it would not guarantee them what they aspire to be, and how they would govern their resources. Because there has been, and still is, the continuity of the colonial impacts throughout, I emphasise the importance of what I conceptualize epistemic emancipation when we talk about self-determination. But, I am not giving over all concepts about self-determination. My work is very empirical, I focus on some cases in East Africa.

Before moving to that, I want to give a little bit of a broader context, why self-determination is related to land rights and environmental justice, and why they are important. We all know that the continuity of colonial, and imperial legacies are still affecting many marginalized peoples, indigenous peoples, and minorities. At the same time, another very strong influence that these people are facing is because of the expansion of extractive economies through capitalist expansion, through which new areas are being turned into frontiers of resources, and accompanied by the practice of violence. Another emerging phenomena which is also a narrative that legitimize land appropriation and land dispossession in indigenous territories is the so-called global green transition, or the call for renewable energy. It is a narrative that looks nice, at a narrative level, but when we consider it empirically, it is a kind of a transfer of burden from a certain area to another one. In the renewable energy industry, for example, there are some areas which are open for extraction, for minerals. The impact of extractive industries on those societies is very stark but it is considered to be nationally, or internationally important. That is why now the question of self-determination becomes important. I will give only two cases, one from Ethiopia, and another one generally among pastoralist communities in East Africa.

The first one is about land dispossession through development interventions among pastoralist societies in Ethiopia, northern Kenya, and Tanzania, where I do my research. There is a big narrative about pastoralists' livelihood, and pastoralist territories, which consider pastoralism as a backward livelihood, and that their territories are empty and open for commodification to be converted into a new resource. It is in this narrative – what I mentioned before regarding the green transition and renewable energy projects – that millions of pastoralist societies are being dispossessed, making them vulnerable to many of the challenges, from famine, to conflict, and so on.

But there is another case which I want to emphasize. There was a case of mining in Ethiopia, in the southern part of Ethiopia, in the Oromia region. This is a mining right which was granted to a private company, called Midro, a Saudi Ethiopian billionaire. For 20 years, from 1997 to 2018, this mining company has polluted the rivers, the streams, and even the environment along that area. As a result, the local societies have faced a very serious health impact, including steel births, pregnancy miscarriage. There were a lot of reports about this and I want to put this not as an isolated incident but as a broader continuity of political oppression and marginalization that made these people to be exposed to the impact of this mining. The Ethiopian government did not respond to the call of the people, or the demands of the people, there was a protest, and then finally the people protested, and at least temporarily, suspended or forced the government to suspend the license of the company. However, still now because the government wants foreign currency, and the so-called development, it reopened and the impact still continues.

In a kind of summary, when we talk about the pride of indigenous peoples pastoralist minorities, it is not an isolated phenomena, it is part of the global capitalist expansion of extractive economies, particularly within authoritarian regimes like in Ethiopia. This makes the situation challenging, but the way forward could be resistance in different forms, which we discussed also over the last last day, through advocacy, through even using existing legal and political spaces, at least whatsoever there is. Alliance of different organisations and movements would lead to at least, the empowerment and access to land rights and to mitigate the environmental impacts of those developments or so-called development projects.

"Identities At The Core Of Self-Determination: How To Protect Them?"

Prof. Alexandra Xanthaki
Professor of Law at Brunel Law School

John Packer emphasized yesterday the importance of being realistic and pragmatic. So, I expect to be in the minority, perhaps a small one, at this conference. I question whether the concept of self-determination can be applied so broadly. Over the past day, self-determination has been discussed in terms of political, economic, social, and cultural control, which is certainly valid. However, it has been invoked for a variety of different claims, such as environmental justice. As someone trained in doctrinal law, I perceive a clear gap between the expansive scope of self-determination presented here and the current interpretation under international law.

The international law that comes from a eurocentric perspective needs changing, but it remains the best tool we have at the moment to realize our claims. International law views self-determination as a right, alongside an array of other rights that can be used in conjunction with it. This is what I am going to try to convince you of today.

The reason we should resist making self-determination the start and end of everything is that I am concerned that it could follow the same path as democracy, meaning everything and nothing, and allowing states to use grand words while really treating it as a right of states, which is not how it should be applied. Self-determination, as many have noted in this conference, means control, control over matters that affect the group. This is something that current international standards accept and recognize. Control is, of course, essential for the survival of a group and it is very important to consider self-determination when discussing nations, peoples, and their identity. Communities should be allowed to maintain their systems and have autonomy, whether it is in education or otherwise. One should also consider whether local sciences are being taught. This is the second issue that this conference has left me with.

Unfortunately, precisely because of the huge success of the transnational Indigenous movement in securing the recognition of their rights, I wonder whether self-determination today is primarily discussed with respect to Indigenous Peoples. While this relationship has indeed been recognised at the international level, at the national level self-determination still needs to be fully recognized. We should broaden the discussion to include all peoples in general, not only Indigenous Peoples. It is important that peoples within today's multinational states are allowed to maintain their educational systems and to teach their local sciences, not just the majority-oriented sciences. In matters of religion, we should resist when states suddenly invoke so-called neutrality in ways that prevent recognition or support for local religions and spiritualities.

In general, we should insist that nations should not be put aside, and their issues should not be treated as peripheral or irrelevant in ongoing state discussions. Of course, we should also have remedies when it comes to cultural rights and self-determination. In my view, these two rights are interlinked and should be applied together, whether for Indigenous Peoples or other local communities. States often overlook this connection. They tend to focus on cultural rights superficially, failing first to recognize their full scope and, second, to integrate them with the

values, priorities, and development goals of the peoples concerned. Crucially, states often fail to see cultural rights in conjunction with the right to self-determination.

I have been asked to talk specifically about cultural rights and sustainable development. Several UN General Assembly resolutions have repeatedly established the link between development and cultural rights but the reality is that cultural rights remain neglected in discussions on development and environmental issues. Economic rights are discussed, social rights are discussed, and, of course, environmental rights are discussed, but cultural rights are not mentioned once. Yet, in my reports to the UN General Assembly in 2023 and 2024, I have insisted that cultural rights are indispensable to sustainable development, which includes recognition and implementation of environmental control. Development can only be sustained if it is determined and infused by the meanings and values of the peoples that it involves, if it protects their resources, and if it draws on their heritage – tangible, living, and natural.

A cultural rights approach, with a strong consideration of the full array of values and priorities, must serve as the framework and guarantee of success for any environmental protection. When it comes to environmental protection in sustainable development, any priorities and any discussions should include cultural development, reverse inequalities and stereotypes through the adoption of positive measures, and be self-determined and community-led. Being culturally sensitive, or culturally appropriate as states often say, is not enough. Processes must be self-determined and people-led. They must be contextualized to specific cultural environments and fully aligned with the aspirations, customs, systems, and worldviews of the groups of peoples concerned. We must recognize that one size does not fit all, that this model does not work universally, and that approaches must ultimately be forward-looking and continually evolving.

Turning to participatory mechanisms in policy that involve Indigenous and minority communities, we see very few such mechanisms in practice. There is currently a failure of civil society actors working on conservation and those working on human rights to come together and operate in a coordinated way. Unfortunately, at present, human rights are often treated as being in contradiction with conservation approaches adopted by civil society actors and, of course, by transnational corporations.

The UN Environment Programme guidelines themselves were prompted by repeated revelations that major conservation organisations have been responsible for grave human rights abuses against peoples whose lands were taken for protected areas. Numerous abuses have been documented, including those committed by WWF-funded guards against the Baka people, as well as more recent abuses by African Parks rangers against communities in the Congo, alongside many other reported scandals. These issues must be directly addressed, and greater collective effort is required to ensure that environmental justice and human rights justice are aligned, rather than seen as being in conflict. This is of course what international organisations have to do as well. This is where they are failing at the moment, and we see that in Tanzania. The protection of World Heritage sites in Tanzania has been celebrated as a success because heritage was allegedly preserved; yet this protection involved the relocation of Indigenous Peoples, resulting in violations of their cultural rights. So the rights of the Masai, for example, were violated through this process and Tanzania is only one of many such cases.

We should stop looking at international organisations in a fragmented way. I often go to places where I am preaching the converted. We should insist, as many of you have been doing in the last decades, on bringing the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, in some framework, closer to these discussions. I am increasingly convinced that international governance on trade and finance has little understanding of the priorities of peoples, or of the need to include their priorities and worldviews. The World Bank has become a bit better after the adoption of the environment and social framework in 2018. However, the IMF and other bodies have shown neither sensitivity nor a willingness to engage, even with UN bodies, including my mandate on this issue.

The Chair asked, “Where do we go?” and “What are the steps to take?”. For me, the first step is to recognize that when we talk about cultural rights, we are talking about the priorities and values of nations. These must be included because they are specific, legally binding obligations that states have undertaken to respect; they are not merely aspirations. Cultural rights therefore must be part of the debate. Secondly, we should focus on a more comprehensive, and inclusive understanding of sciences. Thirdly, we should make use of the law, because the law has specific steps that allow us to go further. We should also use existing monitoring avenues. I am shocked that within treaty bodies these issues are so rarely discussed. Finally, we should examine environmental justice priorities and initiatives ourselves and insist that they are aligned at all levels with human rights and cultural rights, rather than treated as separate from them.

"Culture, Identity And Resistance"

Alim Aliev
Deputy Director General of the Ukrainian institute

I am Crimean Tatar. We are an Indigenous People of Ukraine, but I was born thousands of miles away from Crimea. I was born in Uzbekistan, like many Crimean Tatars of my generation, because of Stalin's deportation in 1944 during the Soviet era. Eleven years ago, many Crimean Tatars, like myself, left Crimea and are now spread across different countries and regions of the world because of the Russian occupation of Crimea that began in 2014.

Human right defenders documented more than 5,000 cases of human rights violations in Crimea, and the spectrum of these cases ranges from violations of religious rights to violations of freedom of speech. Approximately 80% of all violations are against Crimean Tatar people, and after the full-scale invasion, Crimea became a model of occupation for other territories of Ukraine.

The documented human rights violations represent only the tip of the iceberg, at the bottom lies a process of *recolonization* of the Peninsula. The most prominent Russian myth about Crimea is that Crimea is originally Russian land, but the main obstacle to this myth is the existence of the Crimean Tatars. That is why when I discuss this recolonization, I outline several dimensions of the process and how Crimean Tatars have faced and responded to it. Recolonization involves appropriation or destruction, there is no other option. Over the past 200-plus years, this is the third attempt of such colonization. The first colonization occurred in the 18th century under Catherine the Great. To illustrate the demographic impact: in the 18th century, 95% of all of the population of Crimea were Crimean Tatars; that proportion has since dropped to 13-15%.

Regarding the current situation and colonization, it includes principally military colonization. Crimea became a platform for launching missiles at other territories of Ukraine, but the recolonization also encompasses the militarization of consciousness.

1. First, there is a targeting a new generation of children. Russia launched paramilitary institutions and organisations in schools that glorify the war, openly support the Russian army and Russian invasion, and identify Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians as enemies. This system of course discriminates against Crimean Tatar children who refuse to participate in such activities. Since the beginning of the fullscale invasion, Russia has been trying to forcibly mobilize Crimean Tatars in the peninsula, which has led to a new wave of migration of Crimean Tatars.

2. Second, there has been an establishment of parallel institutions. The Mejlis of Crimean Tatars people is one of the main representative and executive bodies of Crimean Tatars. In 2016, the Mejlis were banned by Russia, which then tried to establish pro-Kremlin Crimean Tatar institutions in Crimea. These have been marginalized because of the Crimean Tatar national tradition of nonviolent resistance and the huge mandate for Mejlis to lead on political, social, and cultural rights of Crimean Tatars. A similar situation exists with the media; all of Crimean Tatars national media are now banned, but Russia established, for example, Crimean Tatars language media outlets that spread

Russian propaganda. Fortunately, it has not gained popularity . Russia tried to destroy the Crimean Tatar's identity that does not fit into Kremlin ideology. One important example; the Khan's palace in Bakhchisaray is the most important architectural and cultural heritage site of Crimean Tatars, and it is being destroyed under the guise of restoration.

3. Third, language suppression. The Crimean Tatar language is now listed as one of the endangered languages according to the UNESCO classification. In Soviet times, there was a practice where Crimean Tatars gathered their children at homes and taught them the language.

4. Finally, population replacement. During the past eleven years, more than 70,000 Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians left Crimea. While this may not seem a large number, it represents a "brain drain". The reverse trend is more significant: more than 800,000 Russians came to Crimea after the occupation, fundamentally changing the religious and ethnic composition of Crimea.

During this time, Crimean Tatars have maintained active resistance. When we are talking about cultural resistance, it is important to not victimize ourselves and to be competitive in the world. Regarding language, we organised a large-scale literature project that supports Crimean Tatar writers, poets, essayists, and translators and provides momentum to promote the Crimean Tatar language. In supporting contemporary Crimean Tatar culture, we support many artists. For example, Jamala, a well-known Crimean Tatar singer who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2016 has become one of the symbols of new Crimean Tatar culture.

After the full scale invasion, many Crimean Tatars became part of armed resistance in the Ukrainian army. There are separate battalions in the Ukrainian army including the Battalion of Noman Çelebicihan and the Crimean Battalion. There is also a volunteer resistance movement both in Crimea and outside of Crimea.

The strategy of our movement is divided into four points: (1) establishing a vision of the future; a Crimean Tatar national autonomy within the framework of the Ukrainian state; (2) conducting advocacy inside Ukraine and, internationally; (3) supporting resistance inside Ukraine and in solidarity with Ukrainians; and (4) reestablishing internal dialogue among Crimean Tatars, who are now spread around the world. The goal is to maintain one voice inside Crimean Tatar society and in the international community.

"Defending Peoples Rights In A Time Of Change"

Devasish Roy, Raja
Chief of the Chakma Circle in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh; former Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)

I am from the Chittigong Hill Tracts and I will give you a little bit of history and then I want to move on to two issues. One is how we are trying to exercise self-determination within the Bangladesh state, but also how we can explore ways, and means of exercising self-determination more broadly.

For example, the Chakma people were split across three provinces in India, and in Burma. At this moment with the war in Burma, we have refugees coming over from Burma. They are talking about territorial self-determination, non-territorial, and extra-territorial self-determination as we try to build bonds and work through networks across the border in Burma, across the borders with Burma and India, and also in two other provinces of northeast India where you have Indigenous peoples.

I also want to move to the question of how, in the case of Indigenous people, we may use our traditional knowledge, Indigenous knowledge on biodiversity preservation, etc. For instance, conservation of water resources and how we use that to our advantage. Looking at your title, "from exploitation to empowerment," how can we use our environmental knowledge in today's time of climate change where our knowledge is absolutely necessary, where Indigenous peoples occupy 80% or so of the terrestrial biodiverse forests of this world.

Now, there is also something as a matter of strategy. Sometimes we need to demystify but not diminish the right of self-determination which we have in the two common articles of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights which have been ratified by more than 80 countries, including Bangladesh.

However, that self-determination may mean the creation of an independent state or secession, but it does not always have to be. That is one thing I want to put on the table. A publication is going to come out soon from Thailand, where I wrote about Chakma self-government, indicating that while the Chakmas are split between three countries, I, as Chakma Circle Chief, whose ancestors were independent chiefs, kings, princes, and so forth, I do not have direct jurisdiction over all of Chakma territories. However, I have friendship, I have cultural contacts, I go to the Chakma territories in India and in Burma, and there is nothing to stop us. With the internet, we can build solid solidarity among the Chakma nation. We are nearly 1 million strong, we have a small diaspora in the west, but mostly have one autonomous territory in India, sharing borders with the Chakma Circle of which I am the chief. But now we have a very pluralistic system with limited autonomy. We have elected regional councils and the head of the regional council is now the head of the party which actually engages more with UNPO, directly. I work with them occasionally on international matters and local matters.

Now, coming back to the issue of the territorial, non-territorial thing. I took the example of his highness the Aga Khan. He came to Bangladesh and I was a minister in waiting. By accident of

history I was a minister for a little bit, but I am not a politician. I learned from him how the Ismaili community of which he is the head—his headquarters in Paris—whenever they have a conflict between them, they do not go to the civil courts of law of the state, the country where they live. They have arbitration, mediation, and so forth and they resolve it. It is a very close-knit community, in different countries of the world, and a very wealthy community.

I want to return to the issue of environmental matters—water resources, biodiversity. This is one handle, this is one tool. As I found out, I went to Glasgow, the climate change summit where there were people from Peru, to Sami, to Inouit, to Nepal, and a rich store of knowledge. One of my colleagues who heads a very big civil society movement in the Hill Tracks—we met in the previous parliamentary standing committee of the Ministry of Environment, Climate change, and Forest—and told them: "We, Indigenous Peoples, are offering our biodiversity knowledge, our conservation knowledge," because in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, 90% of our rivers are born in Bangladesh. They do not come from India, Nepal, and Tibet, unlike the rivers in the plains of Bangladesh. The Chittagong port depends on the hinterland which is the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Our communities, our indigenous village chiefs—karbaris—and the mouza headmen are in charge of handling the territory. We told them: "We want friendship with the state, but if you do not listen to us, and if you do not empower us, if you do not give us some sort of rewards, and support for the biodiversity that we are maintaining and for the water resources we are conserving, then you, the state, will suffer—everybody will suffer, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, alike." We have to seize that opportunity wherever it exists, but also, of course, of building alliances, strategic alliances with non-Indigenous civil society, with the United Nations, with other Indigenous nations, with other peoples, and environmental and climate change networks. Because of global warming, it is 38 degrees in Rangamati and my father would have a pit if he were alive and heard it. The hail storm was just going on a little bit earlier. Indigenous peoples have a lot to offer and humanity should accept it. Climate change discourse has to find ways and means of accepting our knowledge as "scientific knowledge." By the time you go through peer review in a university journal, or other such thing, you are going to lose lots and lots of traditional knowledge which is necessary for humankind.

Coming back to self-determination again—where the state is not directly acknowledging our people's self-determination, we will of course try to achieve it in some form of political and administrative arrangement, but even if that does not come, we cannot let our younger people down and say: "Hey, nothing is happening of a Chittagon Hill Tracts after 20 years of war." 250 years ago my ancestors fought the British East India Company whereupon we became annexed to the territory of Bengal. We have to give some sort of encouragement to our youth and say: "Hey, we have got vitality, we have got honesty, we have got integrity, we have got courage." We can use this and we are still using it.

I am very encouraged that half of the women's football team in Bangladesh is composed of Indigenous people, whereas our population is less than 1%. Our national hockey team is predominantly and we have 50,000 workers who work in ready-made garments factories in the plains. Thus, we have things to offer to the Bangladeshi state, but of course it is not just indigenous peoples who contribute.

I just end with one more thing—two aspects of the legal perspective. One is the eminent domain laws, the regalian doctrine in the Philippines, etc. The colonial laws, we have to challenge them

and show that we can have situations where the state should not always trump Indigenous rights. Second, similar to forestry laws. From my little knowledge, in Southeast Asia and South Asia, it is still very colonialistic, where the state assumes the right and is so arrogant to think it knows everything about how to maintain and run forests, etc.,whereas it is actually the people who live in the poorest Indigenous areas, who have this knowledge.

Self-determination is something we always have to nurture and assert, but of course, we have to do it. We should be doing it in creative ways and use strategy, networks, and all that.

"Grassroots Tactics To Enhance Global Resistance"

Alexandra Gavilano
Environmental Scientist and DRR Expert, Climate Justice and Societal Transformation Catalyst

I will speak a bit about how grassroots tactics can enhance global resilience—because I like to say if we all step into our own opportunities that we have on the ground but then connect as a mycelium around the globe, we are actually way more powerful and we can have a better resilience on a planetary level. That is basically the vision I am coming from. We already heard, why is there even a need? Because we know that the circumstances are different, we heard about colonialism, about neo-colonial actions, we heard struggles that are based on racism, patriarchal, and capitalist interests that lead to the fact that people on the ground need to resist and need to start organising.

One of the core points that I would like to focus on is: (1) what is at the origin of why we need to act?; (2) what do we also need to consider, taking into account that the world is changing?; and (3) how do we want to overcome this exploitation of nature and humans?.

It is not just self-determination, but we have to also link these thoughts on a better world—we know it is possible—into our thoughts. We have to reflect: where do we have to adapt and transform even in our own communities, in our own tactics, in our own way of thinking? It is an ongoing process that we have to lean into. This is also true with grassroots movements. We know there is a long history and we also heard it yesterday from Tender about the long struggle in nonviolent direct action. But now we are also in another world, we are in a world that is globally connected, where the oppressor might not be in the same territory that you are in. We have financial flows, so we have a lot of banks—many of them in Switzerland, as well—pension funds that benefit from exploitation of natural resources that might be in your territory. We do have to always have the wider picture, but also prioritize: what do we really need to see and what can we attack now? Where are the narratives coming from? I always like to say: let's not act in hate or in paralysis but let's rather sit with the emotions and try to transform them to actually then have a clearer view and act out of a heart space, out of a space where we are dedicated and we know what we want to preserve—to really start to have a dialogue within our communities, within the global communities, with those that stand with us to transform.

Let's speak about empowerment. First of all, we have to ask ourselves: who and how do we want to empower? As we heard yesterday, self-determination in times of ecological collapse is actually not indefinitely possible. Imagine a world—every community of the 70,000 will be self-determined but the fact is some of them want to make money, some of them might not care that they do not have all the resources anymore because they say: "Well as soon as we have money, we will just move onwards." Some of them really do have hate towards other cultures and they want to oppress, so maybe that is just one of their goals, as many of you also know within your own community. That is also a reality that we have to embrace and say: "Okay, what does it actually mean to act self-determined? But where are also the limitations that we also ourselves recognize? Where is my self-determination starting and where is yours? And where do we have a certain border?"

We also have to speak about how do we deal with that? And how do we mediate needs that

might not always go in line with each other because we are many in the same territory? Many of the territories globally are already mixed and so how do we deal with that as well in a time of global change and of mixture of people? Me, myself being Swiss-Peruvian living in another country, living in Venezuela—how do we deal with that? Recognizing that there are not anymore the cultures and identities as it used to be 600 years ago or even before for many cases as well. We always have to consider when we empower: who do we not include in this? And why? And who should we include in this?

This also goes towards intergenerational dialogues. I would say it is quite a mix here, but we also know we have some external volunteers, but if we look at the members then there is a bit of lack of youth representation also here. Where is the future lying that actually will have to deal with what is coming in 20, 30, 40, 50 years? We have to find new approaches..

In organising grassroots tactics, one principle is we always have people that are affected by the issue. It may be a bit surreal what I am saying when saying we have to connect to those that are on the land. For some cases, in some communities this might not even be possible anymore, but some may still have this direct connection. It is important to speak also and connect with those that are still living in those territories and also have it led a bit by what are their needs as well, because what we see is that multinationals and other states—they actually abuse the power that they have to split communities. Then they say: “Well the diaspora has these wild thoughts, but we give you money and we give you jobs, so you can actually benefit. How can you ensure that you stay united and have a joint narrative? It is all about identity: what is the identity of your movement? How do you want to organise beyond that? In that, go towards community organising. Be decentralized, but be clear. Where is your power? Where is your responsibility? Where, and how do you take decisions? UNPO members, I will tell you—do you really know who could actually support this UNPO network? Where are your NVDA trainers? Where are your IT cyber-security people? Maybe it would be really interesting for them to connect to other experts from other members to just have an exchange and speak about tactics and reintegrate that into your own movement.

On a regional level, how do you see the strategy in the longer term? We know water scarcity, food scarcity—this will be a global issue. Let’s talk strategy and tactics—it does not have to be the secretary general, but it can actually come within the members—connect and use this power that you already have. Also globally: how can we bring this narrative and this need to speak about how ecological destruction and human rights abuses are interlinked and that UNPO members are becoming champions of speaking about that? Everyone in the world, with the ecological collapse, will need the right for self-determination. More and more communities will be looking towards you. The UNPO can be a champion, basically showing how a long-term strategy and adaptivity has to come up and could be shaped. That means that we really have now a momentum of basically creating a new basis, of taking up spaces, and saying: “We have been organised over so many decades and now we are ready to also tell our stories to the wider world that will be watching towards us.”

To end, one part that I like a lot is how we can basically organise in a wider way and also be creative, look at things in other ways. We heard this great experience from you, but it is also in this booklet that I have, that I got from ONIC, which is an organisation in Colombia that unites 70 of the 115 indigenous communities. They made a booklet and their whole strategy is written in

it, so everybody can read it, and you can take notes. On every page, it says “Walk your words to go back to the origin.” Please also consider: we are all different but we all have something in common. So, the change in the strategy can and should be led by all of you.