

Desperate Hope

Reflections on Survival Pathways for Civilisation

By

Francis M. O'Donnell



Human civilisation is in decline everywhere, evidenced by wars, widening gaps, and growing displacement of huge populations, with up to a half-billion projected to flee in coming years. Our world is truly sick and our global institutions, the rule of law, security and multilateralism are failing. There is no time left. Yet, collectively we have the means to correct this course, and survive – but we cannot without ethical and accountable leadership, and broad, equitable citizen empowerment and participation.

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Also by the same author

The O'Donnells of Tyrconnell - A Hidden Legacy
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"Big Fish Eat Little Fish"
(*Grandibus exigui sunt pisces piscibus esca*, 1557)

by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1526-1569),
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with annotation to "Hieronymus Bos, inventor"

Albertina Museum, Vienna (with copies elsewhere)

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Preface

Human civilisation is much older than most people realise. It is not just an invention of ancient Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks or Romans, let alone the cultures of the Indus, archaic Mesoamerica, or the Yangtze. Even long before Göbekli Tepe, humanity was engaged in sophisticated collaboration, producing the palaeolithic Acheulian, Mousterian and Aurignacian industries, art and ornament going back hundreds of thousands of years, and evidence of musical instruments, cultures and spirituality, including by our Neanderthal predecessors in central Europe.

The point of this recitation of antiquity is to debunk the exceptionalism claimed by some, notably now the ‘Third Rome’ (Moscow), in its neo-imperialism. There can be no room left today for unique claims to ancient heritage let alone modern supremacism, whether in Kievan Rus, Jerusalem, Cairo, Brussels, Capitol Hill or any Forbidden City. Only lately have we achieved a global civilisation ruled by agreed norms and laws, with common global institutions, after hundreds of thousands of years of human effort. But our “progress” has led us to mass extinctions, as human domination exhausts our ecosystems and biosphere, and as a few egoistic strongmen dominate humanity itself.

Yet genetics tells us we ALL descend from ancient civilisations of a thousand years or more ago. Ancient migrations with the inter-weaving generations of DNA and the exponential magnitude of our ancestral genealogy as we multiply two by two by two, etcetera lead us to realise that, generally, for any individual alive a thousand years ago on any continent, either no descendants survive today, or all of those on that continent are so descended. We all have Jewish, Celtic, Roman, Gothic, Slav, Muslim, Crusader, and Barbarian roots. We all descend from the Varangians and people of ancient Rus, etc. Beyond cherishing our heritage, we must preserve the inherent human dignity of all peoples, through the institutionalised solidarity painstakingly developed through decades of successful multilateralism. We are more than our nations, more than our myths, and need a globalisation of compassion not of instrumentalization of the person.

Multilateralism, which underpins the institutional expression of dialogue, negotiation, compromise, and common prioritisation on a global scale, espouses *common values, as universal*, and aspires to *pluralism through diversity*. We may think: much of this is in question today, but it *has always been*. The challenge is to understand the relative strengths, the trends, and the factors that play in *determining interim outcomes, for there is no ultimate result – we are in a world of flux and of continuous evolution* to a point, theoretical if not teleological, let alone theological, a fulfilment we know not, although Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Vladimir Vernadsky had some thoughts on that, in their *Noosphere*. Our time horizons are also paramount determinants and benchmarks, as we set goals with targets, the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, de-carbonization by 2050, and so on. Our experience tells us we *can* progress, even if we falter presently.

An era of huge biodiversity loss and mass extinctions is upon us. Our oceans and seas are polluted, with dead zones growing. Our atmosphere is increasingly toxic. Our water is scarce. Polar ice caps are melting and glaciers disappearing. In human development terms, in the last two years we have lost seven years, falling back to the position in 2016, but are heading for a quarter-century decline, if not worse, by 2025. Another deadly pandemic of catastrophic proportions looms as well as the increasingly pervasive intrusion in all life forms of toxic PFAS “*forever chemicals*”.

There is grave urgency, the risk rendered more acute by Russia's abandonment of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (2010), on top of its launching the biggest war since World War Two, at the very heart of Europe, in Ukraine. We need a new global human security architecture that would guarantee resilience in the face of mounting existential threats posed equally by mass extinctions and biodiversity loss, climate change, pandemic disorder, migration upheavals, and growing geostrategic instability due to erosion of the rule of international law, and failures of global governance. We also need to ensure the permanent service and subordination of artificial intelligence to human control and our responsible authority.

In this regard, we need to *explore the dynamic* between populism, liberalism and multilateralism; but also the core values of the UN system; the evolving role of the inter-governmental processes, and the complementarity with civil society and other vectors of influence, including corporate, as these affect the global commons on land, sea, and in air and outer space. These factors together will determine our priority challenges, and the consequent imperatives for structural and constituency reforms and resources of the UN, and indeed the Bretton Woods institutions, and other global instruments, at global and subsidiary levels. We need shared ethics for common laws.

The United Nations and other world institutions require radical surgery, greater representativity and democratisation, and dramatically-boosted resources to restore global trust, security, and stability. Now seemingly too-far from urgency, the '*Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow*' (SOTF) proposed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his report '*Our Common Agenda*' for 2024, is to uphold and reaffirm the UN Charter, restore trust between Member States, and reinvigorate multilateralism. With human development now in sharp decline, it aims to reinforce and expand existing commitments, building on an SDG summit in 2023.

A preparatory ministerial meeting will be held in September 2023 to precede the Summit of the Future. Together with the recommendations of the High Level Advisory Board (HLAB) on Effective Multilateralism, various policy briefs will advance work for the Summit. The HLAB has already sketched out its '*six transformational shifts*' in global governance to help deliver on the most urgent challenges in peace and security, the triple planetary crisis, growing economic inequalities, and a widening digital divide. A civil society-led Global Futures Forum (GFF) in New York in late March 2023, reviewed three dozen reform proposals and urged reforms for an improved United Nations with strong multi-stakeholder engagement. The ACUNS 2023 Annual Meeting on the theme of "*Making, Keeping, and Sustaining Peace*" marks the 75th anniversary of the advent of both special political missions and UN peacekeeping, and will be held in Washington, D.C., in June 2023.

Following on their appeal to the UN Secretary-General last 15 April 2022, a group of former UN officials joined forces in a "*Peacemaking Reflection Group*" (PRG), to actively advocate UN System reform and address imperatives for peace and justice provoked by Russia's war on Ukraine, and other existential challenges. In tandem with involvement in other networks, including those of current/former heads of state/government, this work has been facilitated by the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability. The PRG lately submitted a paper to the UN Secretariat in contribution to the UN Secretary-General's "*New Agenda for Peace*".

Introduction

Where there's hope, there's life. It fills us with fresh courage and makes us strong again.

- Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*¹

This paper tries to sketch out urgent measures to secure human sustainability in light of the growing existential threats mentioned. It argues that the accelerating pace of political, economic and technological change can only be managed - and catastrophe avoided – under conditions that include an explicit reaffirmation of universal norms, rapid resolution of all local conflicts that threaten systemic shocks, the restoration of global stability and the negotiation of globally-binding security guarantees within a framework of reformed global governance for the resilience of human civilisation.

The paper therefore explores perceptions and consequences of globalisation and makes the case that notwithstanding many benefits, there are diminishing returns from certain aspects of globalisation, under neo-liberal conditions. There is increasing competition and rivalry between great powers, and diminishing corporate diversity and competition in increasingly concentrated markets. It should be the other way round.

Diverging cultural values and trends complicate the need to converge on remedies let alone ideals, and can hamper effective multilateralism. Even before the Covid19 pandemic struck, social inequality has been rising in tandem with increasing polarisation, and a gross deterioration in the quality and courtesy of political discourse. Degraded rhetoric and growing demonisation reflect a loss of ideals, amplified by social media and fake news leading to a tangible and dangerous decline in the politics of compromise and cooperation, not just nationally but globally.

In this context this paper also explores the problem of market concentration as it affects free and fair competition, the changing nature and role of the media, media independence, and the quality of journalism. It is argued that globally-dominant monopolies and oligopolies distort markets, constrain entrepreneurship, and ultimately undermine good governance by engaging in regulatory and state capture. Massive concentrations of individual wealth enjoined by growing inequality and three major erosions of authority in developed countries (political, religious, and scientific) fuel populist extremism and manifest clear and present dangers. Combined, they threaten the fabric of our societies and global stability, dramatically worsened by the COVID pandemic impact and aggravating onset of near-irreversible climate change.

This raises a challenge to states, especially as governments increase their economic management both in the aftermath of the pandemic and the energy and trade crises, and to international or supra-national institutions, of preserving institutional integrity, democratic processes, the rule of law and of restoring social equity. It calls for active citizen engagement, amplified by social media, to hold leaders accountable, and to direct political change, transforming democracy into the rule of collective statecraft imbued with historic wisdom. But convergence can only prevail if capacities for peaceful negotiation, arbitration, and dispute resolution – rather than autocratic propaganda -

¹ Frank, Anne (1929-1945). *The Diary of a Young Girl*, 1947, first published as *Het Achterhuis* (literally, "the back house"). A young Jewish girl who wrote her diary in hiding from Nazi persecution in Amsterdam, she and her family were eventually deported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, and with her sister Margot, she was further transferred to another at Bergen-Belsen, where they died.

underpin efforts at consensus-building. This requires huge effort, now. At the same time, now is the moment to not only reform the veto-power and membership aspects of the UN Security Council, but to also develop a global convention settling the question of the international legal standing of multinational/global corporations, mandating an obligatory code of conduct with the necessary mechanisms for independent review, enforcement, and regulation of competition.

A similar convention should tackle the issue of the growing impunity of trans-national Ultra-High Net Worth Individual billionaires, and prevent the practice of speculative “*disaster capitalism*”. Eradicating corruption and money-laundering, and obliging corporate and individual social and environmental responsibility should lie at the core of these conventions, which should also set limits on the accumulation of individual power and wealth, and explore the possible disqualification from public office of those whose wealth or income exceeds a specified level but whose disregard for the rule of law and democratic accountability induces flagrant abuse of economic, social and/or human rights, if convicted. This will also require some measure of reform of capital markets and international financial institutions, based also on the lessons of the past decade since the sub-prime crisis and the Great Recession of 2008, and the depressing effect of the current pandemic, the energy crisis and trade disputes.

The deadly earthquakes that lately struck south-east Turkey and northern Syria exposed the inadequacy of international emergency preparedness, despite pandemic struggles and humanitarian imperatives of the devastating conflicts in Syria itself, as well as in Ukraine and elsewhere. We need a *global resilience network*, parts of the architecture of which are actually already in place, but not yet converted to civilian use. Globally, humankind has the search & rescue capacity, the airlift infrastructure, the financial resources and the humanitarian laws and competencies to enable rapid rescue and relief, and reconstruction. What is lacking is the political vision and will, the protocols, and the leadership to convert current military and civil defence assets (“MCDA”) for humanitarian purposes .

Yet it is now thirty years since the UN, the Red Cross, NGOs and military leaders met in Brussels to chart a way forward. As the world ratchets up defence expenditures into a risky new arms race, political leaders need to face their responsibilities and ensure that MCDA infrastructure, assets, and personnel, are geared also towards human rights protection, natural and technological disaster prevention, mitigation and response, and emergency support to civilian populations. Converted military bases should become hubs of humanitarian awareness with personnel trained to save rather than destroy lives. Base conversion should enable creation of *global stability nodes* to assist in also managing mass displacement/migration, humanitarian corridors, safe havens, status determination, and unarmed civilian protection. This must be a global network, not just local or regional, and be part of a new *global resilience architecture* designed to tackle humanitarian crises, disasters, and the devastating impacts of climate change.

Much of the content of this essay has been presented in the author’s prior talks offered in the annual Global Baku Forum of world leaders hosted by the Nizami Ganjavi International Centre, in the Inter-Action Council of former world leaders, at the International Berlin Forum on Lost Universalism, and to the Association of Schools of Political Studies of the Council of Europe, and the Indiana Council on World Affairs, and in recent published articles on the urgent imperatives of more robust UN political engagement and institutional reform of global governance.

What reviewers have said about the full text

Desperate Hope – Reflections on Survival Pathways for Civilisation

Ambassador Francis Martin O'Donnell has summarised his vast and varied experience in world politics and international organisations into a powerful message - the message of imperative of hope. While the international community is going through one of its most difficult moments in recent history, the possibility for real solutions of the many of the world's problems continues to exist. Ours is not the time for despondency or despair. The critical reflection on the achievements of the past and the capacity of humankind for the future should be enough for the holders of political responsibilities to understand that it is in everybody's enlightened self-interest to work together, to be open to civil society and to build the institutions of international cooperation to new levels. The contribution of the architects of international cooperation, such as Ambassador O'Donnell, should be fully integrated into this effort.

Danilo Türk,

President of the Republic of Slovenia (2007-2012)

Francis O'Donnell's book "Desperate Hope – Reflections on Survival Pathways for Civilisation" is timely and useful reading, proposing an interesting perspective on the topics of sustainability and survival of our civilisation against the backdrop of growing existential threats.

It is a comprehensive study of all aspects of today's state of our deeply polarized world - political, socio-economic and existential, accentuating the need for a return to our erstwhile universal norms; to reaffirm them and to rebuild the resilience of our civilisation. The author highlights the ways to achieve this: by resolving conflicts, establishing security guarantees and promoting responsible global governance with "ethical and accountable leadership, and broad, equitable citizen empowerment and participation".

"Desperate Hope – Reflections on Survival Pathways for Civilisation" is a well-written book which would be of interest to those concerned with the current comprehensive global crisis and the development and sustainability of our civilisation.

Petar Stoyanov

President of the Republic of Bulgaria (1997-2002)

Francis O'Donnell touches a raw nerve in his work titled "Desperate Hope – Reflections on Survival Pathways for Civilization". Considering what is happening all around us at this point in time, we certainly find ourselves in a what appears to be a truly desperate situation. The world around us seems to have chosen a path that is leading nations and peoples towards conflict even when history should have taught us to place the future of our children at the foot of the altar dedicated to peace.

The last century taught us the horrors of war but it also presented us with instances when nations came together and understood that at the end of it all "sharing is caring". The birth of the European Union brought to us all more than half a century of peace and stability in Europe together with solid economic growth that changed peoples' lives. And at the dawn of the new millennium the pandemic proved to us all that working towards a shared objective can produce results that initially appeared to be beyond our reach. Of course, these positive instances were sometimes obscured by an evident lack of solidarity towards the most vulnerable but generally speaking they were all beacons of hope highlighting the value of the common good.

This is why Francis O'Donnell's treatise is not one that focuses on desperation but it is one that focuses on hope – hope that the nations of this beautiful planet can indeed choose those pathways that will guarantee a better future for our children. His overall analysis and especially his final chapters are replete with some concrete suggestions that deserve our full attention and that challenge us all to discover the courage and the political will to change what can and needs to be changed. Chief amongst these is the realisation that our fight to defend Human Rights needs to be complemented by our commitment to honour our Human Responsibilities.

Lawrence Gonzi

Prime Minister of Malta (2004-2013)

"Desperate Hope" the book by Francis M. O'Donnell is important in envisaging the necessity of inclusive politics and the requirement for broader consensus-building to embrace diversity and enhance gender equality. His book brings out the importance of building globally a movement to empower civil society more effectively through civic education and political liberalisation. I saw this first hand as I engaged with civil society to find a framework for inclusive politics to work through power-sharing and respect for each other's views, during the negotiations and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Bertie Ahern,

Taoiseach/Prime Minister of Ireland (1997-2008)

"Desperate Hope – Reflections on Survival Pathways for Civilisation" by Francis M. O'Donnell is a very interesting and important contribution to the discussion of the challenges that humankind is now experiencing. It focuses on many, many serious and demanding challenges with important references to many sources. It is my hope that it will be read in wide circles and in particular by politicians and people with responsibilities for the manner in which the world should be governed in the future. There is a great number of elements in this book that should be highlighted. For my part, I am focusing specifically on his reference to Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. O'Donnell stresses that the targets for SDG 16 "Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions" are particularly important for civic education, human rights, and good governance. I could not agree more.

In the past, I have often referred to SDG 16 and its targets 16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all and 16.5 Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms and made the point that achieving SDG 16 is a precondition for achieving all the other SDGs. Against this background, I warmly recommend Francis M. O'Donnell's book in combination with Rule of Law – A guide for politicians, which is a publication of some 40 pages freely available on the web in 26 languages. See <https://rwi.lu.se/publications/rule-law-guide-politicians/>. It is my sincere hope that this combination will result in that O'Donnell's recommendations and suggestions for a way forward will bear fruit.

Ambassador (ret.) Hans Corell

Former Legal Counsel of the United Nations

"Desperate Hope" ... it is a real tour de force combining so many insights in economics, diplomacy, security and philosophy, plus up to date citations from the most relevant recent research reports.

Thomas S. Axworthy

*Secretary-General, InterAction Council
Distinguished Fellow, JFK School, Harvard*

"Desperate Hope" is insightful and provocative. It provides a convincing analysis of global developments and an imaginative approach to emerging global challenges. Any sustainable solution to global challenges requires a change in the mindset and perspective of national and community leaders and peoples based on recognition that the human being has an animal instinct needing to be controlled... on a global scale.

Sukehiro Hasegawa

*Distinguished Professor, Kyoto University of the Arts
former Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Timor-Leste and
former Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Timor-Leste, Rwanda, and the South Pacific*

All the meaning and political sense of the book is summarized in its title "Desperate Hope". With the contradiction of these two words - despair and hope - author O'Donnell's thinking and approach to our World cannot and shouldn't be ignored. On the contrary! Based on his vast professional experience and life in various regions of the world, before and after the end of the Cold War, "Desperate Hope" deserves attention, support and follow up from all leaderships, public and private as well.

Ahmedou Ould Abdallah

*Co-founder of Transparency International
former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mauritania
former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General*

“Desperate Hope” offers a thought-provoking and sobering assessment of our collective conscience and the urgent need to secure a planetary civilisation. The author reminds us of the historic decline in conflict and violence, as well as the remarkable improvements in human development indicators, but also cautions against complacency in the face of current challenges such as rising inequality, environmental degradation, and the erosion of fundamental authority. The call for greater citizen activism and multilateralism is both timely and compelling, as it offers a path forward for achieving a more inclusive, sustainable, and peaceful world. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the complexities and opportunities of our globalised world, and the responsibilities that come with it.

Jordan Ryan

Vice-President for Peace Programs, The Carter Center,
former UN Assistant Secretary-General

O'Donnell has offered us something unique, a bridge between the despair we can feel and the hope we deserve. Over one hundred rich pages he provides an all-encompassing, near encyclopaedic, overview, of how hope drove multilateralism forward since the beginning of our era of the United Nations. Anyone having views on hope and despair in our time needs to know precise sources. This is a work of reference, as much as a call for change. O'Donnell's own sense of duty took him through half a century of front-line multilateralism. Through the hope of innovation and the despair of lost opportunity, by showing us breadth and depth of our civilisational challenges, he guides us into what we must do next. Securely anchored in international rule of law, he calls out not only for its current legal practice but for the values for which charters and treaties were framed. As in our time they have been trampled upon, even by the members of the Security Council, we know that the time has come for new societal and national forces to affirm what is right and what is wrong. With a historic civilisational perspective, O'Donnell anchors us in our human condition, right now. Our time is a crucible: either the destructive forces will win - despair - or the generative forces of renewal will - hope. Francis O'Donnell in his analysis and recommendations offers a path.

Mats Karlsson,

former Vice-President, World Bank,
former Director of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs,

This is a magnum opus, a book-size essay on contemporary geopolitics, big-picture human history, spirituality and more, and very inspiring for that.... concern with increasing power concentration, the uncontrolled power of multinational corporations, US-China relations, the future of humanity in the era of AI, the purpose of multilateralism, certainly resonate.

Georgios Kostakos,

Co-Founder & Executive Director, Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability, Brussels

O'Donnell's paper is the most comprehensive statement on a feasible alternative approach. What he writes is fascinating, at times gripping. He expertly captures all that needs to be done, which can be done, in order to change, what needs changing. He rightfully puts the emphasis on the choices we have. We now need the courage to make those choices, which will reverse the course of human activities in the political, social, economic, ecological, and indeed spiritual field. I sincerely hope that his essay will find a wide audience and help inspire us all to move forward to create a world, in which will be room for a decent life for all living beings.

Dr. Kerstin Leitner,

Potsdam University,
former Assistant Director-General, WHO

This is an outstanding overview of our global issues and a remarkable inventory of the ways to deal with them. The need to set international principles, standards and rules is continuously emphasized. This could become an agenda for governing the world in a more human, inclusive a respectful way, including the badly needed reform of the United Nations.

Ariel François

former UN Resident Coordinator & Director, and author of
Let's Get Rid of Growth – Moving Away from Capital-led Globalization, 2016

For those of us with decades-long careers in international development and peacebuilding, we greatly value and appreciate the impressive sweep of interconnected issues, laid-bare problems, and aspirations that Frank O'Donnell's Desperate Hope explores and reveals with honesty, unusual insight, and a genuine passion that we share. In his vision of essential fundamental UN reforms and actions for more realistic and impactful peacemaking and development, he calls for a more inclusive global governance that fully engages civil society and the corporate world. In doing so, he challenges and inspires us as facilitators to ensure these energies are used at long last to truly empower and benefit the people most in need.

Michael Heyn

*former UN Resident Coordinator/UNDP Regional Representative (Asia),
former UN Special Coordinator for Emergency Relief Operations (Liberia),*

& Suvira Chaturvedi

former UNIFEM Head of Office (Kosovo),

A masterful and visionary reflection of the state of present global governance, and the multiple pressures which threaten a sustainable future for the planet and its citizens. O'Donnell has used his extensive experience as an international civil servant and thinker to provide a profound and cogent historical analysis on how we have arrived at our present state, and what we need to address present trends so as to 'secure human sustainability in the light of growing existential threats'. His recommendations are radical but full of common sense, which decision-makers should ponder upon in depth and act upon boldly.

Michael Askwith,

*former UN Resident Coordinator,
former Coordinator, UN Career Records Project, Bodleian Library, Oxford*

We now live in times of reckless deviations from charted in the 1990s common future. Among many other effects, these deviations generate vertigoes and disorientation among leaders, intellectuals, and wider audiences. This book is a therapeutic tool that brings our thinking back — or deep? — to the roots, to the point, from which both human survival and humanity's development can again get clear ends and means. Human life moves on in cycles of hope and desperation, and O'Donnell shows that this movement can be back on track of the spiral of progress.

Mikhail Minakov

*Professor, The Free University; Visiting Professor, Pavia University,
Editor-in-chief, Kennan Focus Ukraine, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

I commend the author for his erudition and research - The essay is long and covers lots of ground. In the early part it takes a multi-millennial perspective and for most of the rest it is more contemporary. Analysis of the Security Council is very strong and especially references to the UN Charter, use of the veto. ... In sum, he has written half of a book and several long articles!

Stephen Browne,

*Founder and co-Director, FutureUN.org
Visiting Lecturer and former UN Resident Coordinator*

I find the essay very interesting and fully agree with the analysis. The problem starts when we look for therapies. Civic empowerment is essential and we have to promote civic involvement on all levels of the political order.

Ambassador Dr. Emil Brix

Director, Vienna Diplomatic Academy