OCTAGON 2020

The irrefutable meta-crisis:
challenges and opportunities
after COVID-19

Madrid, Spain | 20 November

OCTAGON

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PRESENTATION

The Common Action Forum (CAF), a transnational, non-profit organization founded in Madrid, Spain in 2015, serves as a global network. It convenes both renowned and emerging experts from diverse backgrounds, including academia, politics, journalism and activism.

Advocating for alternative narratives oriented towards fair, global cosmopolitism, CAF establishes and promotes independent platforms of cooperation, research, innovation and advisory. It seeks to encourage alternative solutions, supporting an active citizenry and forming a new social contract in the process. In doing so, CAF addresses urgent issues including neo-fascist politics, increasing inequalities, the social impacts of technology and the environmental limits of the planet.

Since its founding in 2015, CAF has organized a forum annually, examining a series of progressive issues with a view towards expanding a productive conversation oriented towards change. In 2019, CAF extended this to a program of two annual events, allowing for even further exchange and action among relevant experts and actors. In normal circumstances, the OCTAGON event described in this report takes place in Madrid in November, and is meant to allow a candid, invite-only debate among its participants that shapes the CAF annual agenda. The second, CAF's Annual Forum, is hosted in Mexico yearly in October and is open to the public.

CAF's past annual forums offer background and context for the trajectory of CAF's mission and work. In Madrid on December 5th and 6th of 2015, the roundtable conference 'Steps of Progress in Times of Crisis,' represented the first gathering, addressing the inequalities and conflicts that surface alongside transnationalism, international exchange, mobility and mobilization. The following years of annual forums continued to seek alternative solutions in narratives, with 'The Rise of Global Fear: Why is the World Becoming Less Tolerant and More Radical?' from November 5th to 6th 2016, and "the Limits to Inequality: seeking a sustainable society" from November 3rd to 5th, 2017, both held in Madrid. The 2018 forum "Global Racial Polarization and the Rise of Right-wing Politics," was then held in Johannesburg, South Africa on November 10th and 11th.

The year 2019 then marked the first of several years of forums to be hosted in Mexico, with "A New Path to Development" taking place on October 14 in Mexico City. In light of the topics explored in the Forum, this event was followed by the inaugural OCTAGON, "The Era of (In)security: Urgent matters and self-defeating prophecies." Held in Madrid from November 22-24, 2019, the OCTAGON represented CAF's annual, official gathering, with its members and invited guests in attendance.

The closed-door sessions, later made visible via the OCTAGON report, provided an environment in which participants could share their views and contribute freely.

Finally, in 2020, in adapting to the consequences of the global pandemic, CAF celebrated a virtual annual forum, which was skillfully hosted by the Government of the State of Chiapas and the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH) and opened by the Mexican Chancellor, Marcelo Ebrard. "New dynamics in urban planning and international cooperation in the context of COVID-19," offered a space in which to publicly discuss the impacts of the pandemic against the backdrop of crisis responses in Mexico.

Similarly, the ensuing OCTAGON called for modified circumstances, which advantageously allowed for even further dissemination of conference ideas. The exceptional event gathered experts and CAF collaborators to speak to their respective fields of expertise, in an overarching discussion compiled into a video shared with the public. In follow up to the 2020 Forum, CAF's second OCTAGON, "The irrefutable meta-crisis: challenges and opportunities after COVID-19" explored multiple dimensions of the crisis in more depth. It addressed how the COVID-19 pandemic reaches far beyond a mere health crisis, noting its causal relationship with environmental destruction, economic shock, amplified social inequalities, and multiple (geo)political consequences. Conducted over a series of days in the months of November, this unique second OCTAGON event allowed members of CAF's Boards, Thematic Clusters, Executive Team, and distinguished guests to address dimensions of the crisis particularly related to their expertise, converting the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic into an opportunity for thought revolution. This report outlines not only the insights available in this year's exceptional video compilation, but also speaks to the entirety of the conversations that took place, outlining the OCTAGON's significance within CAF's overall mission.

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Introduction

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, global societies were already experiencing profound social, political and geopolitical tensions. However, the year of 2020 marks a turning point in modern history: it has ushered in both great uncertainty and intense demand for change. Meanwhile, throughout this unpredictable time, a hopeful global citizenry is calling for societal transformation.

The path towards such transformation remains complex, and there is a risk of succumbing to superficial solutions. Beyond health, the COVID-19 pandemic bears consequences that are compounded by the weaknesses of democratic systems, the precipices of the digital revolution, the worsening of social inequalities, the strengthening of speculative financial forces and the staggering manifestations of an increasingly palpable environmental collapse. In essence, civilization is facing a meta-crisis.

As it stands, the global situation is fertile ground for reinforcing the securitization processes discussed in the previous OCTAGON. Coupled with these processes is rhetoric that engenders political polarization, isolation and xenophobic nationalisms. Less visibly, the geopolitical race between competing global powers is tense and amplified. Finally, authentic commitment to environmental challenges remains elusive. One of the greatest economic crises in modern history looms on the horizon, alongside the visible consequences of industrial relocation and further entrenched social stratification. As such, questioning the current hegemonic model is more salient than ever, although the wave of mobilizations that began in 2020 did not achieve their goals. Confronted with all of these considerations, communities are also experiencing acute psychological fatigue as they are inundated with phenomena like scientific denial, fake news and post-truth.

At the same time, every crisis can also serve as the necessary impetus for thoughtful transformation. Substantial change may be just as possible as the substantial dimensions of this crisis. Can we leverage this shock in order to reconceptualize our civilization's priorities? How can we re-envision the functioning of our institutions and organization of our communities? Can we take advantage of this meta-crisis to reimagine the world, to build a new common narrative, and a more just and equitable society?

It seems that other societal configurations remain within our reach, and the current situation presents an opportunity to embark on the path of necessary change. This requires providing meaning to discourse, mobilizing opportunities and mitigating risks, in an attempt to salvage and rework a social pact.

The crisis in conversation: a series of perspectives

Sami Zeidan, CAF Board of Directors member and Al Jazeera Senior Presenter, provided an address to preface the virtual presentation of the 2020 OCTAGON, noting how exceptional circumstances had precipitated the event's open, virtual format, with reflections of CAF members and guests shared publicly. He pointed out how as a result of the crisis, other preexisting phenomena have assumed an unparalleled magnitude, including the return of nationalism, a rise in xenophobia or neo-fascism, peaking technological revolution, scientific denialism or the so-called "post-truth." Given the current crisis and those yet to come, he reminded how it is incumbent upon us to find a way, together, to reimagine and build the future.

SESSIONS

Derived both from the OCTAGON_2020 video compilation and the totality of the conversations held in November, the following is a synthesis of reflections and insights as to various facets of the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications.

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01_ THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL SCENARIO: LOOKING TOWARDS MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

Celso Amorim, CAF Advisory Board member and former Brazilian Minister of Defense and Foreign Relations, CAF's Gaspard Estrada Geopolitics Cluster Chair, and Herta Däubler-Gmelin, CAF Advisory Board member and former German Minister of Justice, approached the crisis with a view to the macro level. They addressed the crisis' widespread ramifications, but also the opportunities presented to rectify current, asymmetrical power systems that monopolize the globe.

Combatting reactionary governance and setting productive goals

Political unrest and challenges were in full swing before the crisis, but were especially highlighted during its height. Populism has been on the rise for several years now from the Americas to Europe, and the rise of right-wing extremism has resulted in cementing ideologies of exclusive nationalisms. These fractures complicate any progress made in international collaboration, and represent a global trend in deteriorating democracy. However, as noted in earlier CAF forums, there is the possibility of power realignment on the world stage in order to advance the agendas of more progressive governments, instead of working within traditional hegemonies helmed by actors including the United States or China. Regions and nations with progressive agendas in Latin America, Europe and Africa, could potentially collaborate in a way that challenges current global power configurations.

Initiatives like the Paris Climate Agreement serve as an example of vehicles by which nations can work towards a common goal and even create further avenues of cooperation. While national interests will continue to remain a reality, achieving common ground on issues of global impact like environmental health can begin a dialogue that can result in realizing further collective goals. In short, the consequences of the crisis essentially rationalize the efforts towards progressive alternatives to the current status quo.

Horizontal cooperation to combat neoliberal architecture and concentration of power

In a time where solidarity became essential, the nature of problematic liberal economic regimes is even further exposed. In fact, large companies like Amazon and global tech companies profit even further from the crisis situation, while the majority of populations face intensified economic hardship. Redistributing wealth, or at least slowing the exponentially increasing wealth gap, requires a multilevel strategy.

At the global level, it is clear that it has become important for multilateral cooperation in ensuring that monopolies do not continue to form, and to supervise that such companies are fairly taxed, and neoliberal globalization is duly checked. Especially in the case of the rapidly advancing technology that allows for unprecedented stratification of wealth, regulation is sparse or non-existent. One way in which to remedy this is via further empowering multilateral, international institutions. The awareness of social issues triggered by the pandemic becomes an opportunity, and it is important to maintain the momentum.

02_
DIVERSITY AND DISCRIMINATION: ACTIVELY SEEKING SOLIDARITY AND EQUALITY

Indeed, activism, dialogues and thought processes were inspired during the pandemic, and carried out by a diverse global society. In particular, the crisis brought into sharp contrast the pre-existing inequalities that thread through intricate community and global-level societal fabrics. This introduces the question of active equality efforts and mobilizations in order to combat intersectional discrimination and inequalities. CAF's Diversity and Identities Cluster Chair Colleen Boland, as well as its Advisory Board members John Ralston Saul, philosopher and novelist, and Emad Shahin, Dean of the College of Islamic Studies at Hamad bin Khalifa University, spoke to these themes.

Physical and symbolic borders: the detrimental effects of rejecting difference

Thanks to interrupted human mobility and exacerbated othering, the crisis has provoked current discussions of discrimination, stigmatization and xenophobia. While the virtual barriers were broken via innovative methods during a time of physical social distancing, the symbolic barriers of difference remained under continual construction. Refugees and asylum-seekers particularly suffered from restrictions on mobility, as well as anti-migrant or xenophobic discourses that were fomented in the climate of uncertainty and fear that accompanied the pandemic.

The potential for diverse perspectives, innovative ideas and new voices are lost when blame is cast on the "other." Migrants, foreigners or unfamiliar populations become stigmatized in order to create a closed, insular version of a safe or secure space. While some migrants or "foreign" countries were blamed or criticized for the pandemic, it has been clearly demonstrated that migrants are a vital part of the workforce and societal functioning. Meanwhile, they undergo disproportionate exposure to the pandemic and its effects in order to continue this work.

The crisis as a revelatory reckoning with systemic inequality and discrimination

In this vein, the systemic nature of intersectional discrimination and inequality appears more pronounced. At the same time, racial, ethnic, gender, class and other dimensions of unequal power relations have become more entrenched over time as a result of societal passivity, and unconscious acceptance. Riding the wave of globalized processes, the biases and faults of local, national and international systems have persisted or amplified, largely unchecked and un-critiqued in any major or influential manner. For example, while the 2008 financial crisis demonstrated a flawed international financial system, strides taken towards rectifying or challenging that system have been largely impotent and few, and future crises loom on the horizon. Unimaginative, utilitarian creeds and behaviors balk reform.

The pandemic, meanwhile, has brought many of these processes to a halt, forcing a conscious reckoning with systemic imbalances. Rocked by the multiple repercussions of the current crisis, individuals and communities have articulated discontent with the deepening societal divides, including among racial, ethnic and class lines, as with the U.S. Black Lives Matter movement. Most obviously, outcry has surrounded how national public health systems have progressively suffered or never achieved efficacy, while the elite of these respective countries continue to amass wealth. Throughout this, the more dramatically affected by continually widening divides includes the most vulnerable populations. How can we reverse this trend? Ultimately, this dialogue pointed to the possibilities of truly participatory, democratic citizenship.

03_ EMBATTLED DEMOCRACIES: REVIVAL FOR A NEW WORLD ORDER

Also exploring the crucial role of participatory citizenship included Ramzy Baroud, journalist and Palestinian Chronicle Editor, CAF's Alternative Economy Chair Andrés Lomeña, CAF Advisory Board member and former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, Adolfo Pastor of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Alfonso Zegbe, head of the Strategy and Public Diplomacy Unit at the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They engaged in further deconstructing the current state of affairs and troubleshooting global dysfunction and deteriorating democracy. The idea of a post-populist global political scenario and what this would resemble was also envisioned.

Collaborative and participatory decision-making in organizing our global society

It is difficult to arrive at solutions to multilevel conflicts due to the very complexity of our globalized world. Local, regional and global communities are all interlinked with each other in varying ways, and the potential of citizenship to rebuild and newly construct a working societal model lies in the participation of all. The puzzle will never be complete, and nothing will ever be comprehensively resolved. However, we can certainly make inroads towards progress if we recognize that diverse democratic (and undemocratic) systems have become dysfunctional in similar ways. A lack of representation has upset the equilibrium, and it is imperative to pursue such representation in order to restore it. Reestablishing legitimacy and accountability via true participation and representation can assist in returning focus to the general interest and the commons.

Examining which international institutions are positioned for effective governance

As previously mentioned, populist elements have surged in the crisis, characterized by shifting blame on the other and calling for isolationism as a solution to the various challenges of the pandemic. An example includes the U.S. Trump administration's blaming of China for the virus and announcing it would begin the process of the nation's withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO). These events have demonstrated the fragility and tenuous power of institutions like the WHO, UN, IMF, World Bank, OECD, and WTO.

In moving forward and addressing political instability and fragile alliances, international institutions need to be reoriented towards delivering progressive social and environmental outcomes. The interdependence of the world's communities is all the more evident, and the provision of global public goods can only be achieved via strong multilateral frameworks bolstered by effective institutions. One way to achieve this includes not only involving state actors in such institutions, but also opening the cooperation to non-state actors like civil society, in order to more closely approach a balance of interests.

Scientific institutions as a mechanism to reinforce democracy

Agendas for the provision of global public goods have recently been very focused on improving health, but other key improvements are simultaneously necessary in the areas of development, education and climate. In this context, scientific research has stood out during the pandemic as a key element in societal functioning. The value of research and development, and the scientific institutions that conduct this, can be relative to their independence and autonomy. Just as other democratic institutions including the judiciary must remain independent and respected, our scientific institutions should be supported in their work and protected from undue influences.

04_
TOWARDS A HEALTHY SOCIETY: PURSUING SCIENCE AND GLOBAL HEALTH

In follow up to the importance of scientific institutions, undoubtedly, health and wellbeing emerge as a focal point in this series. CAF Board of Directors members Thembisa Fakude, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies Researcher, and Bilaal Hoosein, Director of Programmes for Al Jazeera English, as well as CAF's Global Health Cluster Chair, Rafaela Rodrigues, analyzed current global health systems, exploring how to surmount current challenges with a view to the future.

Sustainable health systems underpinned by a long-term vision

The health emergency created by the pandemic has multiplied into many other emergencies, including political, social and economic. At the moment, quick fixes are put into place by virtue of the urgent situation, including temporary arrangements of erecting hospitals or morgues in whatever public, and even private, space is available.

This should not become a pattern, however, in the continued efforts towards developing and improving international health infrastructures. A two-fold effort is required: it is essential of course to ensure that both regionally and internationally public health receives proper investment and priority on the one hand; however, to accomplish this, there must also be a facilitation of community trust in health systems and scientific institutions, on the other.

The pandemic has illustrated the power of knowledge sharing, with vaccines being developed at unprecedented speed, and scientific publication and information being produced and shared rapidly and diffusely. In tapping into such cooperation and collective human capability, there is potential to build sustainable health systems with global reach.

The right to health for all: understanding health as the great equalizer

Health remains a fundamental human right, recognized in our international human rights frameworks. Of course, many do not enjoy access to this right or are actively deprived of it. Our interlocutors pointed to the imbalances in relation to health, exemplified in, but not exclusive to, the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic affected the vast majority of nations and communities, but a select few have prioritized access to treatment, including newly developed vaccines. Populations in rural areas of the Global South, undoubtedly poorly informed, have even been subject to risky testing for vaccines or drugs to which the Global North then later enjoys practically exclusive access. Low-income nations can be constrained within WHO or WTO policies to commit to unaffordable drugs or vaccines, or remain unable to manage inflated economic prices and asymmetrical global economic regimes over which Big Pharma reigns.

Beyond the crisis, however, populations in low-income nations throughout the world have remained and continue to remain unable to access decent health care. Even within higher-income countries, access to health is often hierarchical. As the pandemic has illustrated how all can be affected without exemption, similarly, communities, regions, and international institutions and organizations must together assume a global responsibility for safeguarding the right to health.

05_
THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS: SETBACKS, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE GREEN NEW DEAL

The environmental crisis still receives considerably less attention than is proportionate, as it resembles a more existential or abstract threat than a global pandemic. However, we truly face environmental emergency, and it is inextricably linked with a multitude of other globally significant issues. CAF Advisory Board member and former Minister of Foreign Affairs for Ecuador Guillame Long, French politician Franck Pupunat, CAF Advisory Board member and legal practitioner Ayo Obe, and CAF Environmental Policy Cluster Chair Fernanda Ribiero, tackled this vital subject matter.

Recognizing that environmental crisis leads to compounded crises

Currently, policy is often assessed or conducted based on the neoliberal economic models and systems, marked by unbridled consumption, which are critiqued both throughout these exchanges and in past CAF gatherings. Just as the current system of prioritizing capital over humanity is unstainable for humanity, the same system of consumption means an unsustainably planetary home.

A 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services has signaled how 75% of the earth's land surface has been significantly degraded, with 87% of wetlands affected in the past 300 years. The loss of diversity and its effects on climate directly impact use of and access to food, water, energy and medicine, and vulnerable populations are often those that are most frequently and significantly affected. In fact, some areas are already uninhabitable or become uninhabitable for various periods throughout the year, and the phenomenon of climate migration is mounting.

In measuring countries by GDP and only the market value of goods and services, what falls by the wayside is measurement of environmental degradation, rising emissions, and a snowballing chronological footprint, alongside the inequalities between regions and communities. All of this, of course, is devoid of a long-term vision and runs contrary to a sustainable framework oriented towards global wellbeing. What is more profitable, or a "sign of development," can often bear long-term consequences that will eventually reverse the progress humanity has achieved thus far. The use of plastic is a good case in point: in many instances, its use has allowed for the distribution of food, for example. But now, and in the near future, its abuse bears significant consequences.

Strategically addressing and communicating the environmental challenge

And so, in essence, environmental issues are simultaneously a developmental issue, linked to global disparities, and the future of the planet is intrinsically tied with the wellbeing of populations. In recognizing that this is an urgent matter for policy priority, some indicators have been developed with an aim to achieve a more sustainable approach, including the Gini index, the UN Human Development Index, and the Happy Planet Index.

At the same time, there is still a lack of incentive to govern in this manner, and populations remain uninformed about or unconnected to these issues. Questioning environmental degradation goes hand in hand with questioning wider social disparities, and perhaps this is a way to engage popular support and mobilization. Environmental education directed towards sustainable societies is a global responsibility, but it must be tailored to the regional level. This can make the consequences of environmental crisis more relatable.

06_ LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES: AVOIDING THREAT BY CONTEMPLATING DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

In communicating and educating our global society regarding environmental sustainability and more, technology can be leveraged as a useful tool as well, and can ultimately improve the wellbeing of global citizens. At the same time, it can reflect human biases or the societal inequalities we construct. CAF's Digital Citizenship Cluster Chair Patricio Cabello, CAF Advisory Board member and São Paulo University Professor Arlene Clemesha, Madrid City Councilwoman Maysoun Douas, and CAF's Media and Arts Cluster Chair Mi You, discussed both the risks of new technologies, as well as the opportunities they present.

Emerging trends in technology-facilitated networks: creating connection

Just as knowledge sharing among the international scientific community has recently made great strides in light of the current situation, technological progress can also be a collaborative effort leveraged for the benefit of otherwise marginalized populations, or to solve social challenges. Examples abound. The Arab Spring and other popular movements demanding change demonstrated the potential of new communications and social media. In the case of the pandemic, hackathons were organized to coordinate the dissemination of information, designing applications and platforms to help communicate with citizens. Traditional networks can be combined with technology-facilitated networking and community-building in order to provide public assistance and recourse.

Remaining critical and vigilant in the wake of technological advances

At the same time, the so-called power of technology must be approached with caution and deliberation: social stratification can often be intensified by these new technologies. Again, the pandemic serves to underline cleavages that already prevailed in everyday life. For instance, throughout the world, some children could continue their education given their access to technologies, while others could not. This forms part of a larger problematization in terms of education, as technological literacy can put some children without resources, as well as adults and entire communities, at an even further disadvantage. Meanwhile, educational and developmental processes require in-person efforts that many children cannot afford, and their public institutions do not provide them. In this manner, technology cannot be the total solution to a lack of basic needs.

Citizenship through the lens of technology: the future of community and civic life

Moreover, recently, whistleblowers (or simply advocates for transparency) have signaled the way in which tech companies can monetize human users, and quantify or manipulate behaviors. It is argued that this has had an impact on democratic systems, with elections and citizens manipulated for private gain. Indeed, managing behaviors comes to the fore in a new layer of digitized ecosystem. In adapting to a form of modified social contract in light of the new technological or digital frontier, public, civil and private collaboration could solve accompanying challenges, including the re-organization of work. How can human creativity be exploited as automation takes over? How can we better organize ourselves as a society, given the opportunities these new technologies present?

07_

FIGHTING FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES: BEYOND PANDEMIC IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

Continuing in the vein of threats to rights and democratic citizenship, the emergency situation has allowed already authoritarian power structures to legitimize their actions and claim even further power and control. The pandemic is only a short-term phenomenon, however, against the backdrop of more extensive and insidious challenges to civil liberties and individual rights. CAF's Board of Directors member and human rights lawyer Renata Avila and CAF's CEO and Co-founder Rafael Heiber contributed in this regard. Spain's Navarro government Minister Eduardo Santos, along with Valeska Teixeira and Cristiano Zanin, both Co-founders of the Lawfare Institute and members of former President Lula da Silva's legal defence team, spoke to these points.

Pandemic impacts versus gradual deterioration of individual rights

Especially in a globalized system continuously trending towards capital as the end goal at the expense of human wellbeing, ensuring individual rights guaranteed under universal human rights frameworks is a constant effort. We have witnessed the degradation or deprivation of these rights in new or unprecedented ways during the pandemic, including in how systems of power or governments took advantage of an emergency situation to further securitize and infringe upon civil liberties that were already under threat. Checks and balances or the rule of law could be skirted in the name of the public interest, but in fact were infringed upon due to political interests.

This was a temporary assault on individual liberties, and not all provisional emergency measures were ill-intentioned, or exercised a long-term impact on individual rights. However, there are long-run patterns of encroachment on rights, especially in the area of digitization and security. New technologies, in the hands of the wrong actors, allow for unprecedented levels of surveillance and present opportunities to control and manipulate, and the ethical challenges are multiple. This becomes particularly difficult to regulate as private interests and forces align or interact with traditional state power. It is important to actively monitor and challenge these new forms of domination. While individual rights are at stake, our collective liberty is in peril at the same time.

Lawfare as a manifestation of less perceptible, new methods of domination

An example of this blended form of public and private power contestations at the expense of rule of law and transparent democracies includes the practice of lawfare, a worrying phenomenon for which CAF has worked to raise concern. Companies, private individuals and public officials can be subject to this weaponizing of legal systems for political ends. Those without the private resources to combat this public mechanism become victims. Given how it takes place within the judicial system, lawfare often manifests under a cloak of legitimacy, and goes unnoticed, in a similar way to how new technologies can imperceptibly and gradually violate rights. Achieving justice and transparency requires proactive vigilance, in order to both preserve and promote universally agreed upon human rights frameworks.

08_ LEARNING FROM THE PANDEMIC: THE MOMENT FOR REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

While societal faults and the pandemic as a catalyst for change have been outlined, this conversation spoke to the possibility of radical change, truly stepping outside of the box and replacing rather than reconfiguring old systems. Argentina jurist and CAF Advisory Board member Eduardo Barcesat, Argentinian journalist and sociologist Pedro Brieger and CAF's Projects Manager Irene Lopez envisioned potential scenarios.

Maintaining the pendulum swing of power on the progressive side

Political cycles may allow for temporary progressive policies or governments, but often, power is restored to elite conservative interests far from invested in reform. In the case of Latin America, political, military, judicial and media powers can throw their weight behind these economic interests, acting in tandem and mutually benefiting. The phenomenon of lawfare, or using the judiciary as a political weapon, allows conservative regimes to even jail or legally persecute progressive forces when the political cycle returns to their favor. The only way to combat such wasteful and damaging cycles, and pursue true change, is via democratic processes and institutions, strengthened via the will of the people.

Breaking with old systems via political will for change

Agendas and proposals for progressive change that may have not garnered sufficient consideration, political will, or societal mobilization now become viable options to pursue. Some of these include proposals for a Universal Basic Income, a Green New Deal, condemning and rectifying the external debt imposed on less wealthy countries, and obligating wealthy individuals and companies to do their part in contributing to collective resources. While some countries and regions may have adopted similar proposals, they have remained elusive in the majority of cases, until now.

IN CLOSING

The OCTAGON concluded with an optimistic view to the future, as CAF Co-Founder and President Wadah Khanfar sustained. Past pandemics have also served as vehicles for change, and the exceptional circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 crisis have likewise given rise to public consciousness and outcry, as discussed. During this pandemic, for the privileged, collapse did not always occur, and they did not suffer hunger or food shortages that many other communities experienced.

Global North countries could still enjoy food and resources from the Global South while the Global South themselves had no access to the same. However, lives were disrupted enough to draw attention to the privilege that is enjoyed, and this is precisely why it is an opportune time to leverage public awareness and direct public protest in support of a revolutionary project for the collective good.

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Andrés Lomeña holds degrees in Journalism and Literary Theory, as well as a PhD in Sociology. He is a philosophy professor whose publications include Ficcionologia (2016), El Periodista de partículas (2017), Rescoldos Mentales (2018) and the script of the awarded short-movie Psicopolis. He is also a regular contributor at Huffington Post.

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Alfonso Zegbe currently heads the Strategy and Public Diplomacy Unit at the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is an expert in Environmental Law and International Relations, and has worked on energy and environmental diplomatic agendas for Mexico City, Washington DC, Ottawa, Paris, Brussels and the OECD. Between 2017 and 2019 he was Mexican Ambassador to Iran as well as served as ambassador in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Arlene Clemesha
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Arlene Clemesha is a renowned academic, TV commentator and professor at the Centre of Arab Studies at São Paulo University. She has written several books on the Middle East and is a member of the Coordination Committee of the UN International Coordinating Network on Palestine (ICNP-UN).

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Bilaal Hoosein is former Director of Programmes for Al Jazeera English. With a background in political science, he has nearly two decades of experience as a journalist, producer and an international broadcast market sales and acquisitions expert.

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Celso Amorim was Minister of Defense (2011-2014) and Foreign Relations Minister (2003-2010) of Brazil. A career diplomat, he was also a member of the Group of Experts of the United Nations (UN) Security Council. In 2009, the journal Foreign Policy recognized him as the "Best Foreign Relations Minister."

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Colleen Boland holds a PhD in Sociology of Migration at the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain. She formerly worked as a Managing Editor of an international public health quarterly at Johns Hopkins University, USA. She obtained her MA in Middle East Politics from SOAS, University of London.

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Emad Shahin is Dean of the College of Islamic Studies (CIS), Hamad bin Khalifa University, Qatar Foundation and a Senior Fellow at Georgetown University. He formerly served as Editor-in-Chief of The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics.

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Franck Pupunat
Participant

Franck Pupunat is a French politician, advisor on Freedom of Expression and Media Development at the French National Commission for UNESCO. Co-founder and former member of the Parti de Gauche, he is also one of the instigators of the association Mouvement Utopia, a sustainable social transformation project that cuts across political parties.

Gaspard Estrada
Participant

Gaspard Estrada is Director of the Political Observatory of Latin America and the Caribbean at Sciences Po, France. His research focuses on political communication, electoral campaigns and French foreign policy in Latin America.

Guillaume Long
Participant

Guillaume Long is a French-Ecuatorian politician and academic, who served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ecuador, as well as Minister of Culture and Heritage and Coordinating Minister of Knowledge and Human Talent under the Correa government.

Herta Däubler-Gmelin
Participant

Herta Däubler-Gmelin is a German lawyer, academic and Social Democratic politician who served as Germany's Minister of Justice and as a member of the Bundestag. She continues to practice law, as well as teaches political science at the Free University of Berlin.

Irene López
Participant

Irene López has a degree in International Relations and a Master's in Human Rights. She has worked as chief of staff, analyst and consultant for political parties in both Spain and Ecuador. She served as an international aid worker in refugee camps and headed political advocacy at various organizations.

Javier Solana
Participant

Javier Solana is a Spanish physicist and former Secretary General of NATO. Solana currently serves as Chairman of the Aspen Institute in Spain, and has held a number of positions in the Spanish government, including Minister of Culture and Minister of Education and Science.

John Ralston Saul
Participant

John Ralston Saul is a Canadian award-winning philosopher, novelist and essayist, and author of The Collapse of Globalism, which predicted the 2008 economic crisis. He is Co-chair of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship and President Emeritus of PEN International.

Maysoun Douas
Participant

PhD in Physics, Maysoun Douas is an innovation and entrepreneurship expert. An ecosystem builder for the innovation Hub LaNave in Madrid (2017-19) and European Commission Evaluator for the H2020 program, she currently serves as councilwoman at the Madrid City Council.

Mi You
Participant

Mi You is a curator and academic staff at Academy of Media Arts Cologne (Germany), where she lectures on media theory with a social-political perspective. PhD in Art and Media Studies, she is Fellow of Zentrum Paul Klee (Switzerland) and Independent Curators International (New York). Mi is also a member of the Academy of Arts of the World.

Patricio Cabello
Participant

Patricio Cabello is Researcher at the Center for Advanced Research in Education at the University of Chile. He holds his PhD and MAs in Anthropology and Social Research Methods. Leading several projects, he has consulted for UNESCO and UNICEF.

Pedro Brieger
Participant

Pedro Brieger is an Argentinian journalist and sociologist, and Professor of the Sociology of the Middle East at the University of Buenos Aires. He directs Nodal, an online media resource focused on socio-political and cultural news in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Rafael Heiber
Participant

Rafael Heiber is the Co-Founder and CEO of the Common Action Forum. Geographer and Climatologist with a MSc in Territorial Planning and a PhD in Sociology, his expertise includes the political links between technology, space and citizenship. He participates in academic activities and publishes in the international media.

Rafaela Rodrigues
Participant

Rafaela Rodrigues is a political scientist and a researcher. She holds an MA in International Politics and her research focuses on global health, international cooperation and public policy. She formerly worked for the United Nations as well as for other institutions on south-south cooperation initiatives.

Ramzy Baroud
Participant

Ramzy Baroud is an US-Arab journalist, writer, internationally-syndicated columnist, Editor of Palestine Chronicle and former Deputy Managing Editor of Al Jazeera. He is the author of "These Chains Will Be Broken" and other three books.

Rodolfo Pastor
Participant

Rodolfo Pastor de María y Campos is a Honduran-Mexican political scientist, diplomat and politician. Former Minister of Political Affairs and Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy of Honduras in Washington, D.C.; he currently works as Information and Strategic Analysis Director in the Executive Directorate of Strategy and Public Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) of Mexico.

Renata Ávila
Participant

Renata Ávila is an international lawyer, expert in human rights and technology. Member of the legal team that advocates for the freedom of Julian Assange and Wikileaks as well as member of DiEM25, she serves on several boards, including Progressive International, Article 19, Creative Commons and CAF. She is currently the Executive Director of Fundación Ciudadanía Inteligente in Latin America.

Thembisa Fakude
Participant

Thembisa Fakude is a Researcher at the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies as well as a contributor and analyst for several newspapers. He is former Bureau Chief of the Channel's Media Network in Southern Africa and former Chairperson of the Foreign Correspondents Association of Southern Africa (FCSA).

Valeska Teixeira
Participant

Valeska Teixeira serves on Brazilian President Lula da Silva's legal defence team. Co-founder and Executive Committee member of the Lawfare Institute, she is also a member of the Brazilian and International Bar Associations.

Sami Zeidan
Participant

Sami Zeidan is an award-winning Senior Presenter with Al Jazeera English. He has worked with a number of the largest broadcasters in the world, interviewing several legendary world leaders, including Nelson Mandela, as well as reporting high-profile events.

Tristán Torrejón
Participant

Tristán Torrejón has a degree in Literary Theory from the Complutense University of Madrid and a master's degree in Cultural Management from the Carlos III University. With extensive experience in the organization of forums and high-level conferences, he was a program assistant at the diplomatic cultural center Casa de América.

Wadah Khanfar
Participant

Wadah Khanfar is the Co-Founder and Chairman of the Common Action Forum. Former Director-General of the Al Jazeera Network, he was named one of the "Young Global Leaders" in the 2008's World Economic Forum and was first in Foreign Policy's Top 100 Global Thinkers of 2011.

CAF extends its warmest thanks to all of its collaborators in this OCTAGON. This event and the totality of our work would be incomplete without the collective inspiration and action that our diverse network provides. Thanks to this year's participants, we were able to develop these fruitful insights and continue our conversation forward.

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