



Permanent Mission of the Czech Republic
to the United Nations



High-level Meeting on the Sidelines of the 2024 High-Level Political Forum

Tackling Polarization and Disinformation in Pursuit of SDG16+

July 17, 2024 | Time: 10:00 a.m.–11:45 a.m. | 777 United Nations Plaza, 8th FL, New York, NY

[RSVP by Tuesday, July 16](#)



Amid the economic, climate, and health crises, as well as rapidly evolving socio-economic contexts and escalating conflicts, societies are seemingly facing a new major threat: fragmentation. [Polarization has increased in almost every region since 2005](#), and [the Edelman Barometer](#) reveals a widespread belief across 28 countries that the social fabric holding countries together has grown too weak to serve as a foundation for unity and common purpose. The latest [Human Development Report](#) identified that polarization creates a “new paradigm of uncertainty.” Confidence in our ability to collectively address climate change, resolve conflicts, and achieve sustainable development for all is eroded when building consensus, even on the most fundamental aspects of decision-making seems virtually impossible. Making matters worse is **the widespread [distrust](#) towards societal leaders** in government, media, business, and non-governmental organizations.

Polarization has not occurred in a vacuum. Promises of progress in the last few decades, including the United Nations (UN) “leave no one behind” assertion and the World Bank’s “shared prosperity” approach, have not been realized. Global survey data shows two-thirds of people feel insecure, [half feel they have no or limited control over their lives](#), and over two-thirds believe they have little influence on their government’s decisions. Since the 1990s, inequality has sharply risen in most countries, leading to unfulfilled expectations and growing insecurity for the global majority. According to [the 2022-23 Global Wage Report](#), global real monthly wages fell this year on average, marking the first decline in real earnings at a global scale in the twenty-first century.

The narratives we tell to make sense of this moment hold the potential to instill hope, encourage empathy, and popularize solutions, but they **can also be wielded as weapons**. As inequalities within and between countries rise, there has also been a concomitant rise in divisive narratives and tech-amplified disinformation used to pit groups, policies, and identities against one another. There are striking similarities across contexts, whether these narratives foment backlash against gender equality, break

consensus around climate action, or incite hatred due to differences in race, place, or faith. Today's media and information ecosystem is conducive to "divisive entrepreneurs"—actors driven by ambition and greed—to capitalize on hate, fear, and blame. They exploit differences and anxieties arising from the current political and economic system, normalizing prejudice for their own gain.

[Despite feeling more divided than ever, survey data](#) shows that most people, regardless of where they live, their gender, or class, are worried about the same issues. Polls across 15 countries—spanning every region—show that 43 percent of people share the cost of living as their top concern, followed by the state of the economy, healthcare, unemployment, corruption, climate change, and education. Another survey by the [Open Society Foundations in 2023 underscores the considerable agreement regarding climate action](#): a large majority of people agree that high-income countries should compensate low-income countries for the impacts of climate change and take the lead on reducing emissions.

Certain issues, often rooted in identity, have become flashpoints for division. These divisive strategies are paving the way for rolling back hard-won rights and existing legal frameworks while undermining efforts to implement inclusive and sustainable policy agendas. Adversarial narratives erode trust in one another, encouraging us to abandon not only the systems meant to support our communities but also the very idea of working together. Meanwhile, they distract us from addressing the root causes of inequalities, exclusion, and growing power imbalances that threaten the social fabric and institutions essential for building the peaceful, just, and inclusive societies envisioned in SDG16+.

While there is no single solution to these problems, actionable strategies exist and dedicated people are already working towards addressing these challenges. The meeting aims to consider the drivers and mechanisms of division, including the evolving information landscape, the role of the media, emerging technologies and political actors, and the grievances related to growing inequalities and exclusions. We will hear from those committed to building inclusive, peaceful, and just societies as they share timely lessons and effective strategies.

The objectives of this meeting are to:

- **Address vulnerabilities:** Understand what makes societies, communities, and individuals susceptible to divisive and polarizing narratives. This includes the connections between societal inequalities and power imbalances, growing distrust, and the lack of independent and diverse media and information ecosystems.
- **Promote solutions:** Develop diverse approaches and a comprehensive framework that feed into effective and inclusive governance principles, drawing lessons from different fields (tech-policy, peace-building, social dialogue tools, media), cultures, and contexts.
- **Foster dialogue and collaboration:** Bring together relevant actors across contexts and disciplines to discuss what it would take to craft a resilient global strategy that propels us towards achieving SDG16+.



Program:

High-level opening segment

- Moderator: Ambassador Martin Kimani, PhD, Executive Director, New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC)
- H.E. Mr. Petr Hladík, Minister of Environment, Czechia
- H.E. Ms. Kenyeh Barlay, Minister of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED), Sierra Leone
- H.E. Mr. Md. Akhter Hossain, Principal Coordinator (SDGs), Prime Minister's Office, Bangladesh
- H.E. Mr. Hugo Allan García, Vice Minister for Strategic Analysis for Development, Guatemala
- H.E. Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

Expert roundtable discussion

- Ms. Tonia Ries, Executive Director, Edelman Trust Barometer
- Ms. Sasha Havlicek, Co-Founder and CEO, Institute for Strategic Dialogue
- Mandeep Tiwana, Chief Programmes Officer, CIVICUS
- Professor John A. Powell, Founding Director, Othering & Belonging Institute, UC Berkeley
- Ms. Luz Mely Reyes, Journalist; Director, and Co-Founder, Efecto Cocuyo
- Dr. Daniel Rogers, Adjunct Assistant Professor, NYU Center for Global Affairs; Co-Founder, Global Disinformation Index
- Ms. Merle McGee, President and CEO, Everyday Democracy
- Mrs. Alissa Wahid, Founder, Gusdurian Network Indonesia (GNI)
- Dr. Rosana Pinheiro Machado, Professor, School of Geography, University College Dublin (UCD); Director, Digital Economy and Extreme Politics Lab (DeepLab)
- Ms. Raquel Jesse, Researcher, NYU's Center for International Cooperation (CIC)

The key themes and questions to be discussed include:

- **Trends and tactics:** What are the key trends and tactics used by disinformation campaigns? How have they affected work in critical areas like climate change, gender equality, and inclusive policies for populations such as migrants, displaced communities, and ethnic and religious minorities?
- **Improving access to information:** How can technology be leveraged to detect and prevent the spread of mis/disinformation? What are effective regulatory frameworks for addressing disinformation without infringing on freedom of expression? How can education systems promote critical thinking, dialogue, and media literacy to counteract disinformation?
- **Community resilience:** How can local communities, media, and policymakers be empowered to rebuild trust, resist divisive narratives, and build solidarity across groups? How can policymakers and civil society adapt their approaches to sustainable policy making in light of the new political

reality? Are there means to promote constructive narratives that make sense of the current moment and build bridges without scapegoating and dividing? How can a smarter, people-centered approach to policy making help address material inequalities, tailor policies to the needs of various groups, and redistribute power through localized efforts?

- **International collaboration:** What are best practices from different countries for combating disinformation and polarization and building cohesive societies? How can actors work together to disrupt these mechanisms, counter backlash, and redirect scapegoating to address the root causes of division and polarization? Who are some key actors, and what political opportunities can be leveraged to address polarization and disinformation?

