

20 February 2017

**71<sup>st</sup> session of the General Assembly**

**Statement by H.E. Peter Thomson,  
First Meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization  
of the Work of the General Assembly**

Ambassador Drobnjak of Croatia,  
Ambassador Nusseibeh of United Arab Emirates,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here for the first meeting for the 71st Session of the Ad-hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly.

I thank Ambassador Drobnjak of Croatia and Ambassador Nusseibeh of the United Arab Emirates for taking on the responsibility of serving as co-Chairs of the Ad-hoc Working Group, and for facilitating these important discussions on how we can enhance the role, authority and working methods of the General Assembly. I take this opportunity to thank Ambassador Emvula of Namibia for his two years of sterling service as Co-Chair of the Ad-Hoc Working Group.

Revitalization of the General Assembly is a process that is at the core of our collective responsibilities to the United Nations. Through this process, we have the opportunity to ensure that the General Assembly is best positioned to discharge its Charter mandate, and to respond to the increasingly complex demands of our rapidly changing world.

It is also a process of constant improvement for the organization, and one that requires all of us to engage thoughtfully and thoroughly across the four broad themes of the Group's work with a view to building on the significant strides that have been made through recent GA revitalization processes, and as reflected in resolutions 69/321 and 70/305.

Indeed, the recent historic selection and appointment process for the Secretary-General demonstrated the importance of the reforms that are possible through this Ad-hoc Working Group.

That process was marked by unprecedented levels of transparency and inclusion. The outcome served to increase the legitimacy of the decision-making process, and the United Nations Organization as a whole.

With the Secretary-General selection process having now concluded, I urge the Ad-hoc Working Group to reflect on the process that was undertaken, focusing on lessons learned, areas that require further improvement and to capture these reforms so that they may be embedded for selection processes to come.

Excellencies, the Ad-hoc Working Group also made considerable progress in strengthening transparency, accountability, and institutional memory of the Office of the President of the General Assembly during the 70th session.

Reforms such as the timing of the election of the President, the administration of the Oath of Office, and the introduction of a Code of Ethics, have been positive developments.

I encourage this Group to consider ways to build on those efforts to ensure the President's Office is able to work effectively, transition between Presidencies smoothly, and support the ever-increasing number of mandated processes.

This includes the building of continuity between sessions. I have requested my Office to provide you with further details and proposals on this theme, as the revitalization process continues.

Excellencies, with respect to the third theme of the Ad-hoc Working Group's agenda – the 'role and authority of the General Assembly' – I wish to note the strong cooperation and collaboration that has been occurring with the other principal organs of the United Nations during this Session.

I have convened regular meetings with the President of the Security Council, the President of ECOSOC, and the Secretary-General, circulating a reporting memo to Member States following each meeting.

Consistent with the call in resolution 70/305 for Presidents of the General Assembly to periodically brief Member States on their activities, I have also held multiple briefings with Member States on my plans and activities for the Session, and will convene another such briefing this afternoon.

Excellencies, in the area of working methods, I see a number of opportunities for progress this session.

Firstly, as you are aware, in line with paragraphs 22 and 23 of resolution 70/305, I have appointed the Ambassadors of Australia and Argentina to lead intergovernmental consultations, aimed at enhancing synergies and coherence, and reducing overlap, in the agendas of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and their subsidiary bodies, in light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

While this process remains on-going, the discussions are of relevance to the work of the Ad-hoc Working Group, and I therefore encourage you follow this process.

Secondly, as I have previously stated, the standards of decorum during the General Debate have been slipping in recent years. The General Debate is the high point of the annual calendar. It is unacceptable that there are disturbing high levels of noise around the Hall when our national leaders are speaking. It is disrespectful that low levels of attendance are often experienced when national leaders are speaking. It is disrespectful to each other when speaking-time limits are ignored.

Perhaps the proliferation of high-level events being scheduled at the same time as the General Debate needs to be rethought. These events often over-burden leaders and delegates and detract attention to the General Debate itself.

I encourage you to consider our overall approach to High-Level Week as part of the revitalization process, and to identify what steps can be taken to make the General Debate more engaging and, ultimately, more effective at advancing the objectives of the Organization.

Thirdly, I wish to comment on ethics.

The efforts made by the Ad-hoc Working Group during the last Session to strengthen ethics, accountability and transparency were highly commendable. Indeed, I have sought to strengthen these efforts further by continuing the practice of disclosing all financial and travel information for the Office on the OPGA website. Also, you will have noted that all contributions to the financing of the President's Office in the 71st Session have been placed in the UN's Trust Fund.

It is in our common interest that we strive to maintain highest ethical standards at the United Nations. The world is watching us and we must not disappoint. It is thus that I encourage this working group to continuously examine the rules and regulations we have in place for appointments, elections and other campaigns. Attention is also required on due diligence processes to block any illegitimate or reckless initiatives, activities, or individuals from our Organization.

Lastly, on stakeholder participation.

Notwithstanding the inherently intergovernmental nature of the General Assembly, the important role of civil society at the United Nations is well-established – they expand the expertise available to us as decision-makers, raise awareness of key issues, and their contributions over the years have led to such critical global achievements as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It is also clear, however, that an inordinate amount of time is spent by the General Assembly each year determining the modalities for civil society participation in relevant General Assembly meetings. It is a process that is often fraught, time-consuming, creates inconsistent outcomes, and which civil society organisations themselves have asked me to help address.

Bearing in mind that the changing focus of each GA meeting may necessitate different stakeholder participants, I would like to encourage the Ad-Hoc Working Group to consider exploring ways to improve this longstanding issue.

Excellencies,

In conclusion, today marks the start of a new opportunity for the General Assembly to build on past reforms, and improve the functioning of the General Assembly, and by association, the entire United Nations system.

I therefore urge you to make full use of this opportunity, and to bring to the discussions a drive to succeed for the collective good.

I wish you all the best for your discussions this session, duly led by the two outstanding Co-chairs who have been appointed for the tasks ahead.

I thank you.