

Concept Note

We Were There: Voices of Multilateralism

Capturing the Living Memory of Multilateral Diplomacy

- Draft for Consultations –

Permanent Mission of Samoa to the United Nations

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We Were There: The Multilateral Experience Initiative is a proposal of the Permanent Representative of Samoa to the United Nations and a Member State-led effort to capture and share the lived experience of senior diplomats concluding their service. It seeks to document their first-hand insights on multilateral negotiations, consensus-building, and the practice of diplomacy, in order to capitalize on this accumulated knowledge for the benefit of the diplomatic community, national institutions, and academic settings. Through a curated publication and further engagement with universities, the Initiative aims to ensure that this experience, shaped through direct participation and often left unrecorded, is preserved, transmitted, and used to strengthen multilateral practice.

1. Background and Rationale

Multilateralism is the arena in which states negotiate the terms of their collective life — forging agreements, constructing consensus, and elaborating the rules that govern international conduct. It is carried forward by Ambassadors who immerse themselves in its working rhythms: tracking how positions evolve, how coalitions form and fracture, and how the language of compromise is slowly shaped into binding commitments. This sustained engagement produces a quality of understanding that cannot be learned from the outside, an intuitive grasp of how the international system actually moves, as distinct from how it is formally described. Yet this knowledge is largely tacit, accumulated through experience rather than recorded in any systematic way. When Ambassadors complete their service, it tends to leave with them. Across decades of engagement at the United Nations, a vast body of diplomatic experience has been accumulated through the work of those who have participated directly in negotiations, built consensus across differences, and navigated the evolving dynamics of the multilateral system. This experience reflects not only formal mandates, but also the informal understandings, judgment, and trust that shape outcomes in practice.

Much of what diplomats know, they have never written down.

When senior negotiators conclude their service, they carry with them something that no document fully captures: an understanding of how multilateralism actually works. They know how consensus is built and where it breaks, which formulations carry political weight and which stall negotiations, which alliances hold under pressure and which dissolve when interests

diverge. They understand not only what was agreed, but why — the sequence of concessions, the moments of trust, the procedural maneuvers that made agreement possible. This knowledge is grounded in participation, not observation, and it resists easy translation into formal institutional memory.

Its absence has consequences. Without it, the multilateral system operates at a remove from its own accumulated experience. New negotiators revisit ground that has already been covered. Institutional learning is fragmented and uneven. Insights that could inform future engagement remain personal, held by individuals rather than shared across the system.

This gap is particularly visible at the present moment. The UN80 Initiative has placed reform at the center of the United Nations agenda, with ambitions that extend across efficiency, coherence, and institutional effectiveness. But structural reform, however well-designed, cannot substitute for an understanding of how multilateral processes function from the inside. Without access to lived diplomatic experience, reform risks being designed around an abstraction of the system rather than the system as it is.

2. Objective

To establish a structured initiative that captures, curates, and transmits the accumulated experience of departing diplomats at the United Nations - transforming knowledge that would otherwise be lost into a living resource for multilateral practice, institutional reform, academic learning, and the preparation of future generations of negotiators.

3. Core Idea

The Initiative rests on a straightforward conviction: before diplomats leave the multilateral stage, their experience should be recorded, reflected upon, and shared.

These reflections are not formal reports or negotiated texts. They are candid, practice-based accounts of how multilateralism actually works, particularly how negotiations unfold, how consensus is constructed and collapses, how trust is built across political divides, which strategies prove durable, and where the system struggles and why.

Individually, each contribution offers a window into a particular moment and context. Collectively, they form something rarer: a cumulative narrative of multilateral diplomacy grounded in direct participation rather than external observation.

4. Key Components

4.1. Diplomatic Reflections Series

The flagship output of the Initiative is a curated volume — or evolving series of volumes — bringing together contributions from departing Permanent Representatives and senior diplomats. Each contribution would follow a light structure, moving from personal journey through key

negotiations and lessons on consensus-building to broader reflections on what worked, what did not, and what the future of multilateralism may require. The tone would reward authenticity over formality, while remaining attentive to diplomatic sensitivities. Over time, this series would become a reference work for practitioners, scholars, and institutions serious about understanding how the international system functions from the inside.

4.2. Structured Reflection Dialogues

Before departure, diplomats would be invited to participate in moderated conversations designed to draw out insights that written contributions alone may not capture — the texture of a particular negotiation, the significance of a procedural moment, the dynamics behind a breakthrough or a failure. These dialogues would complement written reflections, add depth and context, and enable thematic synthesis across experiences. Where consent is given, recordings would be archived as part of the Initiative's long-term knowledge base.

4.3. University Engagement and Teaching Program

Participating diplomats would be invited to bring their experience directly into academic settings through guest lectures, short teaching engagements, participation in diplomacy and international affairs programs, and mentorship of students entering the field. This creates a direct transmission of practitioner knowledge to the next generation: unfiltered, experience-based, and impossible to replicate through textbooks alone.

4.4. Digital Knowledge Platform

A digital platform would serve as the Initiative's accessible, evolving repository — hosting written reflections, selected dialogue excerpts, and thematic syntheses organized around issues such as climate negotiations, peace processes, and development finance. Over time, it would develop into a structured knowledge resource capable of serving both active practitioners and researchers, searchable by theme, region, and period.

5. Contribution to UN Reform

The Initiative directly supports the objectives of the UN80 reform process, addressing a dimension that structural reform alone cannot reach: the absence of systematically captured diplomatic experience.

Reform efforts focused on efficiency, coherence, and institutional effectiveness depend not only on well-designed structures but on an accurate understanding of how those structures function in practice — how mandates are interpreted and implemented, where coordination succeeds and where it breaks down, what enables processes to move and what causes them to stall. This is precisely the knowledge that diplomats carry and that the Initiative is designed to preserve.

By making lived experience accessible, the Initiative reduces the need to relearn lessons already hard-won, supports mandate review with evidence drawn from practice, strengthens institutional

continuity across periods of transition, and grounds reform in the system as it actually operates rather than as it is formally described. In this sense, it contributes something the UN80 process cannot supply for itself: the accumulated wisdom of those who have worked the system from within.

6. Strategic Value

The Initiative addresses a gap that sits at the intersection of institutional memory, diplomatic practice, and the future of multilateralism. The knowledge it seeks to preserve is not archival in the conventional sense — it is living, practical, and directly relevant to the challenges the international system faces today. At a moment when the United Nations is undertaking its most ambitious reform effort in decades, the ability to draw on accumulated diplomatic experience is not a peripheral concern. It is a strategic necessity. An organization that cannot learn from what its most experienced practitioners know — about what works, what fails, and why — will struggle to reform itself in any meaningful sense. The Initiative exists to close that gap.

The Initiative offers distinct value across three communities.

For the United Nations, it preserves institutional memory, strengthens negotiation capacity across successive generations, and provides a foundation of experiential knowledge to support evidence-based reform.

For Member States, it captures national diplomatic experience that would otherwise disperse at the end of each posting, deepens intergenerational learning within missions, and affirms the role of Permanent Missions as holders of knowledge that matters beyond their own walls.

For academia and future diplomats, it bridges the persistent gap between theory and practice, provides unmediated access to how multilateral processes actually function, and offers the kind of orientation that no academic program can fully replicate.

7. Governance and Implementation

The Initiative would be led by a coalition of interested Member States, with Samoa playing a convening role. It would draw on partnerships with national and regional universities and academic institutions, UN training entities including UNITAR, and relevant think tanks and research centers. An editorial board composed of former diplomats, scholars, and practitioners would ensure quality, balance, and coherence across contributions.

Implementation would proceed in three phases: a pilot year focused on a first cohort of departing diplomats, initial publications, and early university engagements; an expansion phase scaling participation across regions and developing thematic volumes; and a third phase of institutionalization, establishing a regular cycle of contributions and integrating the Initiative into UN knowledge and training systems as a sustained flagship program.

8. Summing it up

Diplomacy at the United Nations is shaped as much by experience as by mandate. The knowledge that accumulates through years of negotiation - of how the system moves, where it holds, and what it takes to make agreement possible - is among the most valuable the multilateral world produces. It is also among the least preserved.

The UN Diplomatic Reflections Initiative offers a way to change that: to give this knowledge form, to make it accessible, and to pass it forward to those who will carry multilateralism into the challenges ahead. In doing so, it strengthens the foundations on which the international system depends — continuity, shared understanding, and the capacity to learn from one another across time.

9. Next Steps

The Initiative moves from concept to practice through a set of concrete and mutually reinforcing actions, designed to build momentum, establish habits, and create the infrastructure for a self-sustaining knowledge community.

9.1. Outreach to the Diplomatic Community

The first step is direct and personal. A formal letter of invitation will be sent to current and departing Permanent Representatives and senior diplomats at the United Nations, introducing the Initiative, explaining its purpose, and extending an offer to participate. This outreach is not simply administrative — it is an act of recognition, signaling that the experience diplomats carry has value beyond their tenure and that there is a community ready to receive and steward it. The goal is to establish, from the outset, a culture in which reflection is understood as a natural and expected part of concluding diplomatic service.

9.2. Embedding the Practice of Reflection

A core ambition of the Initiative is to normalize the act of written reflection among departing diplomats. A light, structured template will be made available to all participants, designed to be completed in the final months of a posting. Over time, the expectation that departing diplomats leave behind a written reflection will become a professional habit — as natural as a handover note, and considerably more enduring. These contributions will form the foundation of the Initiative's published output and knowledge base.

9.3. A Living Network of Former and Current Permanent Representatives

The Initiative will establish a dedicated platform connecting former and current Permanent Representatives — a space for ongoing exchange, collaborative thinking, and co-creation. This is not a passive alumni network. It is an active intellectual community in which experienced voices

remain engaged with the questions shaping multilateralism today. Through this platform, former diplomats will be invited to respond to emerging developments, contribute to thematic discussions, and collaborate with current negotiators navigating challenges they themselves have faced. The platform will be supported by regular convenings - virtual and, where possible, in person - designed to sustain connection and generate insight.

9.4. Podcasts and Public Engagement

A podcast series will bring diplomatic experience to broader audiences — practitioners, students, researchers, and engaged citizens. Each episode will feature a former Permanent Representative in conversation, exploring a specific negotiation, a defining moment, or a broader reflection on the state of multilateralism. The format rewards candor and depth, offering what formal publications rarely can: the texture of experience, recalled and reflected upon in real time. Episodes will be archived on the Initiative's digital platform and promoted through partner networks.

9.5. Book Development and Biannual Publication

The Initiative will publish a curated collection of diplomatic reflections twice a year, drawing on written contributions, dialogue excerpts, and thematic syntheses. Each edition will be organized around both individual voices and cross-cutting themes — consensus-building, institutional reform, climate negotiations, peace processes, and others as they emerge. Over time, these editions will accumulate into a reference body of work with genuine scholarly and practical value. The Initiative will also develop longer-form thematic volumes, co-authored or co-edited by former diplomats and academic partners, exploring specific dimensions of multilateral practice in depth.

9.6. University Teaching and Academic Engagement

Participating diplomats will be matched with universities and academic institutions for guest lectures, short teaching engagements, and seminar participation. A structured program will facilitate these connections, managing logistics and ensuring that engagements are meaningful for both diplomats and students. Over time, the Initiative aims to develop a recognized practitioner-in-residence model, embedding experienced diplomats within academic programs for defined periods. This creates a direct and sustained channel between the world of practice and the institutions preparing the next generation of international affairs professionals.

9.7. Resource Mobilization

Sustaining and scaling the Initiative requires dedicated funding. A resource mobilization strategy will be developed in parallel with the Initiative's launch, targeting a diversified funding base that may include contributions from interested Member States, partnerships with foundations and philanthropic organizations, collaboration with universities and research institutions, and engagement with the private sector where appropriate. A prospectus setting out the Initiative's vision, structure, and impact will be developed for presentation to prospective funders. The Initiative will also explore whether elements of its work can be housed within or supported by

existing UN training and knowledge entities, including UNITAR, to reduce costs and enhance reach.

9.8. Timeline and Milestones

The Initiative will pursue the following near-term milestones:

- **Immediately:** Issue letters of invitation to current and recently departed Permanent Representatives; establish the core coordination team and editorial board
- **Within three months:** Launch the former and current PR platform; develop the reflection template and concept note; identify the first cohort of participants
- **Within six months:** Publish the inaugural edition of the reflections collection; launch the podcast series; initiate first university teaching engagements
- **Within one year:** Complete the pilot phase; present findings and participant feedback; launch the resource mobilization prospectus; convene the first in-person gathering of the network
- **Ongoing:** Publish the reflections collection biannually; sustain the network platform; expand regional participation; develop thematic volumes in collaboration with academic partners

10. A Call to Begin

The Permanent Mission of Samoa to the United Nations, as the originator of this Initiative, will assume the convening role and lead the process forward in partnership with all Member States willing to join in this effort. Samoa's commitment reflects a conviction that the knowledge held by those who have served the multilateral system is a shared asset — one that belongs not to any single delegation or region, but to the international community as a whole. Member States wishing to associate themselves with the Initiative are warmly invited to do so, whether as active contributors, institutional partners, or supporters of its longer-term development.

As a first concrete step, a formal letter of invitation will be extended to Permanent Representatives and senior diplomats at the United Nations, introducing the Initiative and inviting their participation. Diplomats will be encouraged to contribute written reflections, engage in structured dialogues, and remain connected to the community the Initiative is building. No contribution is too modest; every voice adds to the collective record.

A dedicated editor, serving as the Initiative's curator, will work closely with contributors to shape their reflections into a coherent, accessible, and enduring body of work. The editor's role is not to sanitize or standardize, but to draw out the insight each contribution carries and ensure that it speaks clearly to the practitioners, scholars, and future diplomats who will one day depend on it.

What begins here as an invitation is intended to grow into something larger: a permanent feature of multilateral life, in which the knowledge that diplomacy generates is treated with the seriousness it deserves — preserved, shared, and passed forward. The multilateral system has always depended on the commitment of those who serve it. This Initiative asks, simply, that before they leave, they share what they have learned.

