

: Conference Report

International sef: Expert Workshop 2019

sef:

The Essential World Organisation Reinvigorating the UN at 75

Michèle Roth

In 2020, the United Nations (UN) will celebrate its 75th anniversary. Looking back on a turbulent history, today it is under pressure once again. However, the current transition to a new world order may also offer opportunities to reinvigorate the UN and to achieve a breakthrough in reforming its structures. But what exactly should the UN's role be in the future? How do its structure and working procedures have to change to increase its impact? And where do we see new coalitions to enable the UN to live up to its Charter?

The International sef: Expert Workshop, organised jointly with the Institute for Development and Peace (INEP) at the University of Duisburg, brought to-

gether around 30 experts from different professional backgrounds and world regions in September 2019 to discuss these questions.

The UN – the best institution possible?

On 1 January 1942, representatives of 26 countries, united by their fight against the Axis powers, signed the “Declaration by United Nations” in Washington D.C. The Declaration – one of the key documents preceding the founding of the UN – can be seen both as a clear commitment to multilateralism and as a demonstration of the power of a collective problem-solving approach, one speaker argued in the opening session of the workshop. The signatories eventually established the UN as a “powerful mix of realism and idealism”.

Has the UN changed the world for the better? Looking back at the UN's history, one certainly finds many examples where it substantially contributed to the common good and human progress, e.g. with regard to decolonisation, women's rights, health issues and climate change, the same speaker added. But there are also substantial deficits, in particular with regard to the UN's failure to prevent or end violent conflicts. Perhaps the UN could have done much better if states had acted more cooperatively and with less self-interest. In fact, one of the biggest threats to the UN and the multilateral order in general is the current US president, who constantly insists on national sovereignty and thinks in terms of win-lose instead of win-win categories, as the speaker pointed out. In



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contrast, when the UN was founded, it was not seen as conflicting with national interests, but as the best way to realise national priorities.

Focusing on the benefits of multilateral cooperation could be a starting point for reawakening the UN, he argued. This should be accompanied by a management reform that leads to the elimination of duplicate structures and curtails the excessive autonomy of some UN bodies. It is futile to expect anything better than the UN, he added, as institutional sprawl will not be the answer to today's problems. Another speaker referred to the mobilising power that the UN still has; even Trump spends a lot of effort making his case in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). States have different perceptions of the UN, and they use it for different purposes, as is completely legitimate, she added. First of all, the UN is a place to solve issues peacefully.

...or stuck in a post-World War II order?

Not all experts concurred with this positive assessment of the UN's early history. Those who were not represented in Washington D.C. and later in San Francisco took the view that many deals merely served the interests of the victors of World War II. Many countries of the Global South have experienced the so-called "liberal order" as truly illiberal. Decolonisation, for example, was not a success achieved by the UN, one speaker emphasised. Indeed, it was not won by multilateralism at all, but by the peoples themselves who had to struggle for self-determination.

When countries like India still support the UN despite such shortcomings and biases, they do so to have a say in global policy-making, she added. There is a widespread understanding in countries of the Global South that many global and regional challenges can only be solved multilaterally; furthermore, there is a feeling that the countries of the Global South need the UN more than the Global North does. However, 20th-century institutions do not serve 21st-century needs, representatives of countries of the Global South agreed at the workshop. The old world order – and the UN in particular – needs transformation. For example, the composition of the UN Security Council is no longer acceptable, and the same applies to the process for selecting the UN Secretary-General and the heads of other UN institutions. These practices simply do not reflect the weight of countries such as China and India. This is also true of decision-making procedures within the UN.

Resignation with regard to UN reform

However, there is still a lack of clear ideas on what a new world order might look like and how such a vi-

sion might be realised. There is a widespread feeling among countries of the Global South that there is no suitable forum to promote ideas for UN reform, particularly given that new ideas often fall prey to inertia within the UN's existing power structures. Instead, the so-called emerging powers have joined other fora such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and built up new institutions like the BRICS Bank to gradually make progress on alternative policy ideas.



Neelam Deo

Such a grim perspective was rejected by a number of experts. One argued that there is not one UN but many. States pick and choose which parts of the UN system they support. Many UN institutions are doing great work on the ground. Furthermore, the stabilising role of existing institutions should not be underestimated. Others added that there are so many ways of showing leadership in the UN. It does not have to be the Security Council that brings about change and it does not take a lot of money to do so. Some felt that most states are playing to the gallery when they argue for reform but actually they prefer the status quo. One speaker suggested not shaking up the system by rearranging the seats in the Security Council but building new alliances instead. Yet the question of who is in and who is out still makes a big difference, another speaker reminded the participants.

New leaders on the horizon

Can we count on China for a reform of the multilateral system? The country is still learning to be a global leader, one speaker explained. As a member of the UN Security Council, China undeniably has a special role among the (re-)emerging powers. It is already the second largest contributor to the regular UN budget and to UN peacekeeping. The Chinese government strives for a new type of international relations but has yet to come up with a clear vision for this, he said. Its concept for "a community of shared future for mankind" remains diffuse (despite having found its way into

several UN documents); its international actions are inconsistent due to the lack of coordination among different government branches and agencies.

As a future world power dedicated to the rule of law and international cooperation, India could offer crucial support to multilateralism, one speaker said. But on the question of human rights, the country does not accept much criticism from abroad. Some of its norm compliance appears to be forced from outside. Making matters worse, the West itself does not have a credible human rights record. Generally, the speaker said, she would prefer a rules-based order – but then the question is who makes the rules? Taking the example of the SDGs where India was very active and successful in developing the Agenda, she explained that India prefers voluntary commitments without strong external monitoring, for example when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs. This is also the case because India's aspirations sometimes exceed what it can fulfil in reality.

From a Chinese perspective, economic and social rights come first; political rights are secondary, another speaker explained. People in China largely concur with that view – and so do a lot of other developing countries, he went on. This difference in priorities, however, does not translate into a genuine Chinese version of global governance rules. What China does instead is to simply revise existing rules to better serve Chinese interests.



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Is BRICS so much different from other forms of multilateral cooperation, another expert asked? Or does it not simply replicate existing governance principles at the regional level? Theoretically, it could well be used as a lever against the West's resistance to any kind of substantial UN reform, one speaker replied. But in practice, it does not work because China has outpaced the other members. Others were even more sceptical: BRICS has not developed an alternative vision of international cooperation so far. Its mem-

bers are too different to speak with one voice. As a result, it merely serves as a talking shop, one expert concluded.



Jinghan Zeng

Overcoming the dichotomy between the Global South and the Global North

Small and medium-sized countries in particular should have a strong interest in a rules-based multilateral order. In a world where the big powers – and especially the United States – seem to have taken their leave of multilateralism, could new coalitions of middle powers change the game? Or, as one speaker asked: “Will they do something to save the system that served them so well?” Certainly, they are not the ones to rule the world. It is also hard to come up with a list of today's middle powers or to precisely describe the kind of order they want. Referring to the example of Denmark, one expert explained that although the country sees itself as a responsible member of the international community, it identifies most strongly with the Western community. So for Danish elites, the relationship with the EU and NATO is the number one foreign policy priority, while the UN comes a fairly long way down the list. This reflects the fact that multilateralism is not exclusively a UN concept, as one expert reminded the participants. International cooperation at the global level cannot and must not exclude or distance itself from other multilateral fora, eg at a regional level.

One crucial step forward would probably be to overcome the dichotomy between middle powers of the Global South and those of the Global North. Discovering a common project would be key in this regard, one expert said. At present, the countries of the Global North are blocking many norm-building initiatives by countries of the Global South. Current examples are the negotiations on a treaty on business and human rights and the G77 initiative to strengthen tax cooperation.

As a positive example of a new coalition-building project, the Alliance for Multilateralism – a Franco-German initiative – was mentioned. The idea is to offer an open forum for flexible collaboration on joint objectives in various fields, including climate change, cyber security and human rights. So it is not about club diplomacy; there are no limits to membership as long as countries agree on the common goal. However, quite a few countries are reluctant to join the initiative because they fear this could be perceived as anti-American. Part of the problem might be its name – an “alliance” is usually intended to be “against” someone or something, some experts said. There was broad agreement, however, that whatever new coalitions look like, they will need to agree on a basic set of common principles.

Underlying norms for a new world order

The liberal world order is often described as a rules-based order founded on principles such as human rights, open markets and multilateralism. The latter concept is neither simply a tool nor a question of numbers only. It is a normative way of doing things, embracing principles such as treating each other as equals, acknowledging that there is a common interest and taking each other's interests into account. In that sense, it is different from the transactional deal-making approach espoused by Trump and others. How can multilateralism withstand the attack by

ceased to be the number one principle in world affairs, one speaker said. This is because China has not only developed power projection capacities: it is also investing more and more resources overseas and wants to protect its investments. He therefore suggested that China, as one of the crucial powers in a new world order, will gradually give up on the idea of non-interference.

Sovereign equality was always a legal fiction, another expert said. But the UN was founded on that fiction and for some decades it was overwhelmingly accepted among states. Why should the situation be different now? Is it by coincidence that several presidents no longer respect this principle? Do we just have to wait for their time to pass – or is there something deeper going on?

The United Nations of the future: possible scenarios

With a new world order looming on the horizon and immense global challenges such as climate change, inequality and digitalisation, the UN will have to adapt its role. One expert suggested that the UN might continuously lose weight and eventually collapse. Or it could become a community of illiberal democracies, bullying smaller states and eventually turning against each other. Ideally, the UN would develop into a global norm-setting body focusing on today's major challenges. In this scenario, the UN's role would be to raise awareness of global challenges and to monitor measures to cope with them, without engaging in implementation policies itself. The UN would also need a common vision to unite all its separate organisations and inspire the world towards a common goal.

Another speaker preferred a scenario in which the UN would become a world government ‘lite’ so that it would eventually be able to live up to its Charter, based on the analogy that a state without a government is a failed state. The existing UN Charter was not intended to be a lasting solution, he said. Instead, Article 109 provided for a Charter review after 10 years. But the world is still waiting for this process to get started. In his view, a renegotiation of the Charter is urgently needed now. A minimalist outcome of this process could be new institutions such as a court or a trusteeship council for the environment; as a maximum outcome, this process could be a “constitutional moment”, introducing “revolutionary” elements such as a UN citizens’ parliament.

Others warned against striving for a new constitutional moment, reminding the audience of the debate about global democracy in the 1990s. We cannot claim authority to rethink global constitutionalism unless we understand the failures of the past, one expert said. In contrast to the early 1990s, we live in a multipolar world, in an era of strong-man leader-



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populist and nationalist forces and prove its viability in the coming decades? What might the basic norms of a transformed world look like?

Looking back on the controversies surrounding the responsibility to protect, should we go “back to basics” and re-establish non-interventionism and mutual respect as the guiding norms of a future world order? For China, non-interference has already

ship with strong nation states, another expert said. These are highly unfavourable circumstances for demanding transfers of sovereignty to the UN and other visionary measures. Is there any chance of reinvigorating the UN at this crucial moment? Yes, but we should not rely on member states, one expert answered. We need to engage with the people and use appropriate technology to connect with them.

Another expert urged the participants not to underestimate the power of the UNGA. It has been important for consensus- and norm-building, he said, but it has also initiated hard law (e.g. with regard to the ICC and the Small Arms Treaty): “It is messy, but it



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works.” Governments of small and medium states should use the full spectrum of possibilities offered by the UNGA, collaborating with civil society organisations and other stakeholders on new processes and working methods. Fair enough, but we are already stuck in and overburdened by complex processes, another expert replied. We urgently need to decomplexify the UN. This requires many small steps instead of a “one size fits all” strategy.

Broad conversation on “The UN We Want” needed

Most participants agreed that we need a responsible conversation among leaders about the future of the UN. But this is not enough. To get the UN moving in the right direction, we need to overcome the discrepancy between the interests of people in the UN and its importance, one speaker said. Member states and national elites have a responsibility to communicate the value of UN membership to domestic audiences. UN issues should not only be talked about on UN TV; they should also be discussed by the BBC and CNN. It is important to talk to different kinds of audiences, one speaker added, e.g. by going into schools in disadvantaged areas. The UN itself needs to have a direct relationship with the people, something that

was best personified by Kofi Annan who had a “rock star” quality. But since then, the media environment has changed completely. There is lot of hate speech within the UN; member states are bullying each other in the General Assembly; the UN has not found ways to capture public attention. One speaker proposed a global UN Day as a public holiday. Another expert suggested that the power of the Secretary-General should be expanded and that the UN should modernise its communications instead of becoming bogged down in paper. Furthermore, the UN should build far stronger relationships with local communities, several experts said. The effects of disruptions in the global arena are felt locally, one participant added, so it is important for regional and local entities to take action and get involved, also to increase the impact on the ground. Others warned that the UN as a global body will no longer be productive if too many actors are involved, as we can see at the climate summits.

What citizens think about the UN

Survey research suggests three main findings. First, trust in the UN has on average declined during the 1980s and 1990s, and then remained relatively stable from 2010–2014. New World Values Survey data to be released in 2020 will show how this trend has evolved since then. Second, the UN is more trusted than other national or international institutions. Third, there is a gap in elite-citizen opinion, with elites having more trust in institutions than the public at large. Perceptions of UN legitimacy are not in decline overall (with exceptions in some countries such as Argentina, South Africa and the USA). What is worrying is the fact that negative communication on the UN has a bigger effect than positive communication. Anti-global populism à la Trump is therefore a potential threat to the UN’s legitimacy that should be taken seriously. However, there are also reasons to be optimistic: there is some evidence that improving institutional qualities of the UN will increase its legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Civil society campaigns to strengthen the UN

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have always been widely supportive of the UN and of multilateralism. Some 500 CSOs have currently joined forces for the UN2020 Initiative, a campaign that urges the United Nations and its member states to use the 75th anniversary for stocktaking and examining measures to strengthen the UN. The campaign achieved an initial success with the adoption of the Resolution on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations by the General Assembly on 14 June 2019, providing for a meeting of heads of state and government on 21 September 2020, among other things.

After a first phase of mobilisation, the campaign now focuses on thematic plenaries with the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Preparations for the Commemoration of the United Nations' 75th Anniversary. It aims to include the voices of civil society in the declaration adopted at the UN75 summit. But if the UN75 process is to be a success, more is needed, one speaker urged. Middle and small powers should engage as well and help to build momentum for a continuing new reform process.

The Secretariat's contribution

The UN Secretary-General sees the UN75 campaign very much as his initiative, another speaker explained. The challenge will be how to integrate the plethora of actors engaged in this area. With that aim in mind, the campaign is currently looking for partners at all levels and from all groups of actors. The Secretary-General is convinced that only by joining forces can the current crisis of governance and of trust in institutions be addressed and the attacks against international law and norms halted. The UN75 campaign therefore aims to become the biggest ever global conversation. The idea is to hold structured citizens' assemblies that connect different constituencies across the globe.

The starting point of the debates will be to ask what future people want for their children, business or country. They will then discuss ways to close the gap to today's situation and explore possible actions at different levels, from local to global. Through the debates, people will see how their lives are affected by global developments, and they will get a sense of the value of global governance and the UN.

The debates should not be used to celebrate the UN's anniversary but to look at deficits in the UN. Key issues from the perspective of the Secretariat might

be the very stubbornly state-centric system with no delivery so far on the partnership side of SDG 17, or the role of the UN on the ground where other actors might be much more efficient and trusted. The issue of human rights and the UN standing up for them is very difficult and is not being dealt with properly, so practical proposals are needed on how to do better. Furthermore, the UN is largely underfunded, its work is not prioritised properly, and the whole system still feels very Western. The results of these dialogues will then provide an evidence base for the Secretary-General to use in the dialogue with member states.

Several experts expressed their doubts whether it really will be possible to engage non-state stakeholders beyond New York, in particular disaffected citizens who feel left behind, and create a true dialogue. A facilitated dialogue with a representative group of citizens could be the way to go (citizens' assemblies). Another challenge will be how to reconcile local perspectives/preferences with the bigger picture/issues.

Working methods for a polycentric world

Initiatives by CSO alliances and the UN Secretariat clearly show that the way in which global politics is shaped has changed fundamentally over the decades. The variety of actors has increased substantially. Today's buzzword is multi-stakeholder governance. A people-centred UN would reflect the views of different stakeholders, not just member states, and treat civil society organisations as equal, e.g. in programme development. Dialogues, for example, should not only be used to inform on policy-making; they should also contribute to it. As a specific example, one speaker mentioned public opinion surveys in UN peace missions, which should be taken into account in planning and implementation. If people are invited to identify common challenges and to co-create programmes when working on the ground, this leads to innovation, she continued.

But then, the concept of multi-stakeholder governance is also a challenge to multilateralism, another speaker said. It is an institutional challenge to democracy as participants are either self-selected or selected by dominant actors who bring in the CSOs, academics etc. they like. The fact that many multi-stakeholder initiatives try to co-opt democratic features (by involving different constituencies) cannot conceal that they lack democratic accountability.

This is a cause of concern, also because the ties between the corporate sector and the UN seem to be getting ever closer, one expert said. The agreement signed between the UN Secretary-General and the World Economic Forum in June 2019 to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is the most recent example. In the view of civil society, this could delegitimise the UN. Some experts warned against



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putting the fox in charge of the henhouse. Should transnational companies really be integrated as partners instead of being regulated? There is a clear danger that companies are taking over and fostering the types of solutions that best serve their narrow economic interests.

We should not take the WEF cooperation as representative of multi-stakeholder initiatives, another speaker argued. Multi-stakeholderism is also an answer to the gridlock in international cooperation due to the global power shift – in other words, global governance has already slipped away from the UN and the question is how to bring it back in. If done properly, multi-stakeholder initiatives can be a positive-sum game and contribute to solutions. Standard-setting bodies, for example, can be legitimate, depending on how they are designed. Structural inequality is certainly an issue, but this is true of any form of (global) democracy.

He did not see the necessity for the UN to create another agency to oversee this kind of initiative. Rather, the UN should use its convening power for an exchange to learn from experimental forms of governance. Unfortunately, there is no evidence so far that the UN is ready to learn from its experience with public-private partnerships. Studies show that there is no real interest in this kind of meta-governance at the UN, one expert told the audience.

Navigating between authoritarianism and capitalism

Another expert added that the multi-stakeholder approach will not work everywhere. In China, for example, civil society does not play a major role. Furthermore, the Chinese government does not want the UN to talk about civic and political rights. Others said that China is a good example of why the UN needs multi-stakeholderism in the first place. States are not per se democratic; their involvement does not automatically lead to accountability. Through multi-stakeholder initiatives, accountability can be improved beyond democracies.

Nevertheless, we should examine the multi-stakeholder response more thoroughly before we make it a default choice, one speaker urged. Too many issues are still unresolved and accountability standards are usually very low. We should also be aware of the huge elephant in the room: capitalism, one expert said. We do not talk about it in the SDGs, in human rights,

in climate change ... We want to change the system without attacking the elites. But we need to change the social contract: the question is how to do that in a way which is acceptable to the mainstream without branding the UN as being leftist.



Louise Riis Andersen

Finally, we should not forget what nation states can do that others cannot, another expert added. They have the authority to set and enforce rules. We still need both regulation and enforcement mechanisms. The UN, therefore, should aim to further develop international norms and embed them in domestic law.

International sef Expert Workshop 2019: Participants

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