

Conference Report

sef: Policy Lunch March 2020

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The UN at 75: Europe's vision for the world organisation

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To mark the 75th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) in 2020, the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:), in collaboration with the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability (FOGGS), hosted a roundtable debate in Brussels on 3 March 2020. Practitioners from the EU and the UN, academics and civil society experts met in the Representation of North Rhine-Westphalia to the EU to discuss some of the challenges facing the UN today and visions for its future from a European perspective.

In 2020, multilateralism – and therefore the UN itself – is under attack. Powerful former advocates of a value-based multilateral order have withdrawn their support; some are even attempting to undermine

global cooperation per se. International standards and rules that were developed within the UN framework and were well-established for decades are being wiped away, sometimes by a simple tweet driven by nationalist populism, as sef: Deputy Chair Dr Gerd Harms said in his opening remarks. The continuing trend towards new forums and formats and non-binding agreements outside the UN also threaten to lessen its significance.

And yet in view of the tremendous challenges facing the world today, the UN is needed now more than ever, as Mr Hans H. Stein, Director of the Representation of North Rhine-Westphalia to the EU, noted in his welcome address. If the institution is to deal adequately with today's challenges, however, there is an urgent need to strengthen its capacities and find answers to well-founded criticism.

A crisis of legitimacy

Such criticism is aimed at the UN's institutional architecture, for example, which is called into question by increasing numbers of states and non-state actors alike. To some extent, this structure, inherited by the victorious powers after World War II, is responsible for the UN's frequent inability to act in critical situations, Dr Harms said. Speaking from the audience, South Africa's ambassador H.E. Dr Manelisi Genge added that the core challenge facing the UN remains its crisis of legitimacy, prominently including the non-representation of Africa among the permanent



Policy Lunch March 2020: Welcome address by Hans H. Stein



Policy Lunch March 2020: Podium with Anna-Luise Chané, Jibecke Joensson, Hilde F. Johnson, Georgios Kostakos, Silke Weinlich (l.t.r.)

members of the Security Council. “The UN’s lack of legitimacy can no longer be ignored,” he said, pointing to the long overdue reform of the Security Council.

While noting that we should not forget the UN’s many achievements, for example in the field of humanitarian aid, Dr Georgios Kostakos, FOGGS’s Executive Director, criticised a “lack of leadership in the UN” in terms of inspiration and guiding vision, as well as in terms of bold interventions in crisis situations like those in Syria and Venezuela.

Financial constraints threaten the UN’s impartiality

As a potential worst-case scenario for the UN’s future, Dr Kostakos painted the picture of a “death by a thousand cuts” when countries driven by populism steadily reduce their political support and financial contributions, eventually bleeding the UN to death. The seriousness of the UN’s current financial crisis was also emphasised by Ms Hilde F. Johnson, Norway’s former Minister of International Development and former Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan. Ms Johnson, now a Senior Advisor at the European Institute of Peace (EIP), informed the audience that the current arrears in the payment of assessed contributions by UN member states have already had serious consequences. Due to shrinking core funding, highly qualified staff are leaving the UN Secretariat in substantial numbers, and those who stay get increasingly demoralised. This weakens not only the institutional strength of the UN but also its impartiality. Historically, the UN had a strong civil service at its core. Now there is increased pressure from member states to position their own people in key posts – which, in effect, are being “bought” by states to represent their interests within the Secretariat.

How the EU could make a difference

Ms Johnson reminded the audience that reforms are already under way at the UN in the area of peace-keeping and peacebuilding, in the development system, and with regard to institutional management. These reforms need to become effective in the field, but this would require much more support from the member states. Core funding is one key area where member states and the EU could make a difference, Ms Johnson said. She called for an emergency financing mechanism and new ways of fundraising to overcome the current substantial funding gap. In response, Dr Jibecke Joensson, Policy Officer, Multilateral Relations focusing on the EU-UN Partnership on Peace and Security at the European External Action Service (EEAS), cautioned against focusing on just one member state or a group of states to fill the funding gap. This could threaten the impartiality of the institution. There has to be collective burden-sharing in relation to core funding, but alternative complementary funding avenues should also be explored, she said. Following up a critical comment from the audience regarding the growing influence of private companies at the UN, she mentioned the example of the Global Refugee Forum, where the private sector has made important pledges. However, Dr Kostakos warned against an outsourcing of key global governance functions. Private sector engagement requires close monitoring by the UN, he said.



Policy Lunch March 2020: Hilde F. Johnson

Ms Johnson also recommended that the EU should ensure that universally agreed norms are protected and benefit everyone. This is not always the case at present, as Anna-Luise Chané, Research Fellow at the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, demonstrated with regard to human rights. Generally, the EU’s contribution in the UN’s human rights institutions is quite substantive, she said, but the EU needs to be more proactive when it comes to addressing new and pressing human rights issues. She

had observed an increasing tendency of EU member states to operate outside of the Union and work with third-country partners instead – a development which she felt was likely to continue, considering the growing internal fragmentation of the EU.

Issue-based alliances and leadership as the way forward

Ms Chané and Ms Johnson both urged the EU to actively build new issue-based alliances and to use the UN as a vehicle to address the world's most pressing challenges, such as climate change, ocean pollution and digitalisation. By making substantial contributions to solving these issues, the UN could gain new legitimacy. The EU has already initiated a similar strategic reorientation, with the new leadership being very active externally and keen to forge new global partnerships, Dr Joensson explained. She noted a shift from traditional like-minded partners to issue-based partnerships. This can pose new challenges, though, as the normative foundation of new partners might not be the same as that of the EU. We need to balance this with our commitment to core values, she said.

Referring to the achievements of the Utstein Group – a loose association of six donor governments – Ms Johnson called for strong leadership. “If you have the right leaders in the right place, change can still happen,” she said. Dr Kostakos cautioned that change should not be forced at this historical juncture. For the UN75 summit, getting a strong commitment to



Policy Lunch March 2020: Anna-Luise Chané, Jibecke Joensson and Hilde F. Johnson (l.t.r.)

the UN in its present form would be a success in itself. By pushing too hard for large-scale reform, we might end up with something worse, he said. Instead, his recommendation was to use the anniversary to

start a process of rethinking how the UN could better put itself at the service of humanity in the digital age.

From votes to voices

Ultimately, however, we need to fundamentally rethink the UN structure so that it evolves from its post-World War II status, as Ms Chané pointed out. A route for citizens to communicate with the UN is lacking, she added, so some thought should be given to ways of reconnecting the UN to the world's citizens. Here, the EU could act as a laboratory and share its experience, given that it has to constantly address the challenge of democratic deficits as well. Specific proposals such as a UN Parliamentary Assembly or a World Citizens' Initiative are already on the table.

Going even further, one participant observed that we should no longer strive for multilateralism as it focuses too much on the nation-state. What is needed instead is multi-level governance in the form of “omni-lateralism”, with various stakeholders involved. “We need to come from votes to voices,” he added. Dr Joensson raised the question of how such a system would work in practice when it is already quite tricky to negotiate between the 193 UN member states. Furthermore, the more parties there are at the negotiating table, the more time has to be invested in making that process work and the more difficult it can become to bridge the gap to outsiders. At the same time, she agreed that it is essential to narrow the widening gap between the specialists within “the system” and people outside. Civil society and in particular youth organisations should be engaged more strongly and more meaningfully at the UN.

A new founding myth for the UN

What is sorely needed is a new narrative to unite people behind the UN, Dr Kostakos added. Current generations and the newly emerging powers no longer have any connection to the World War II genesis of the UN. A new “global narrative of hope” could inspire governments and nations at all levels and allow the UN to become a body that people everywhere can look up to. The UN should represent humanity and act as the “guarantor of the global commons”, such as Antarctica, cyberspace and outer space – for everyone's benefit. Wellbeing instead of GDP should be at the heart of this paradigm shift. We should remind states that they cannot secure the future of human beings on their own; they can only do so as a community, he concluded.

Imprint

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