

CHAPTER 19

The UN system

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DOI: [10.4324/9781003266365-24](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266365-24)

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The United Nations is one of the world's best-known brands. Recent surveys indicate that over 90 percent of the world's population is aware of the world organization, and around three-quarters see it as essential to tackling global challenges.¹ But only 40 percent trust the UN or think it has improved their lives.²

Questions about the UN's effectiveness have dogged the organization since its founding in 1945, as optimism for a new era of international cooperation faded with the onset of the Cold War. "The United Nations is dead" screamed the *Catholic Herald* in 1947,³ and versions of this headline have become a staple of discussions on the organization. Fervent advocates are disappointed that the UN shows no signs of becoming a world government; critics fear it already is.⁴

Perhaps the main reason for this perennial soul-searching is the organization's failure to live up to its lofty goals. Another is its complexity. Basic questions about what the UN is and does can be surprisingly difficult to answer. While its founding document, the UN Charter, implies a single entity governed by its member states, it is more accurately described as a "system." Some refer to "two UNs"⁵—the intergovernmental arena of its member

states and the international civil service that supports their work—or even three, adding a category of actors that are associated with the organization but not formally part of it, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics.⁶

In terms of functions, the UN is regarded as a platform for countries to debate and decide on collective action, a provider of global goods and services, and as the world's moral barometer. Small wonder that academic literature on the UN is vast and hard to navigate. At the same time, it is curiously deficient in some disciplines and lacking in diverse perspectives.⁷

This chapter seeks to illuminate the UN's entities, roles, and functions, by charting their evolution, discussing their achievements and challenges, and exploring prospects for the future.

Background

The origins and evolution of the world organization are essential starting points. The next paragraphs provide an overview of how the UN system emerged as well as the dynamics during its first decades.

Origins

Created at the end of World War II, the UN symbolized the hopes of a war-weary generation for peace and prosperity. So goes the founding myth of the organization. But the UN began life as a wartime alliance in 1942⁸—as much a tactic of conflict as an organizing principle for the post-war order. Its founders were influenced by the failure of the League of Nations⁹—dubbed the first experiment in world organization¹⁰—to prevent a second world war from breaking out. But its roots lie in the nineteenth century, when the conditions for an international organization started to emerge: from the growing reach of empires, technological developments, and the emergence of transnational political movements to the establishment of the International Telegraph Union (1865) and the Universal Postal Union (1874), which reflected the emerging need for global coordination in technical fields.

Through a series of conferences, the principal Allied Nations (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States) sketched out the UN's structure. Unlike the League of Nations, its composition was

to reflect *realpolitik*: combining broad membership with privileges for the victorious powers—notably through permanent seats with vetoes on the Security Council. The council's voting procedures and its ability to mandate the use of force prompted much debate among the broader alliance and remain controversial today.

The UN was also to have a wider set of objectives: spanning peace, economic and social progress, the rule of law, and human rights. Smaller states, including from what is now often described as the Global South, and civil society were instrumental in including this last goal in the Charter^{[11](#)} because human rights sit uneasily with Charter Article 2(7)—the founding principle of state sovereignty. Asserting non-interference in domestic affairs, this article is routinely raised by states wishing to avoid criticism or consequences.

Research by scholars such as Adriana Erthal Abdenur, Amitav Acharya, Fatima Sator, and Elise Dietrich has focused on the extent to which Southern agency shaped the UN, challenging another founding myth: that it was imposed by the West on “the rest.”^{[12](#)} While only 13 African and Asian countries were present at the San Francisco conference that finalized the Charter, they were instrumental

in crafting Chapters XI and XII on non-self-governing territories and trusteeship.

Furthermore, Latin American states supported the development of Chapter VIII on regional arrangements. Even the veto powers of the five permanent members (P5) were the result of a more complex bargain than conventional wisdom holds. Perhaps most importantly, smaller and less powerful states had an interest in making sure the major powers were committed to the new organization. Their outsized role and veto were a Faustian pact to ensure that the UN would not go the way of the League of Nations. As a result, the UN is highly constrained in situations involving P5 interests.

Evolution

The UN's honeymoon was cut short by the Cold War and divisions among the P5—raising questions about their role as guardians of the post-war international order^{[13](#)} at a time when decolonization was remaking the world. By the end of the 1960s, the UN's membership had grown from 51 to 126 states. New members pushed for a stronger focus on poverty alleviation and economic growth. State groupings such as the Non-Aligned Movement

(NAM) and Group of 77 (G77) marshaled arguments against neo-imperialism in areas such as debt and trade,^{[14](#)} while small island states were early advocates of climate action.

Human rights, too, were championed by states from the Global South that embraced civil and political rights as part of the struggle against colonialism and racism; they also stressed, along with the Soviet bloc, the crucial importance of economic and social rights. Their support for UN action on apartheid in South Africa—and later the Rwandan genocide—helped to reframe the principle of non-interference.^{[15](#)} While inviolable sovereignty remains a popular shield for Southern (and Northern) governments, several have been willing to act on the most contentious of issues: mass atrocities.^{[16](#)} African states also pioneered advances in child rights and collective rights and were critical to the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 1998.

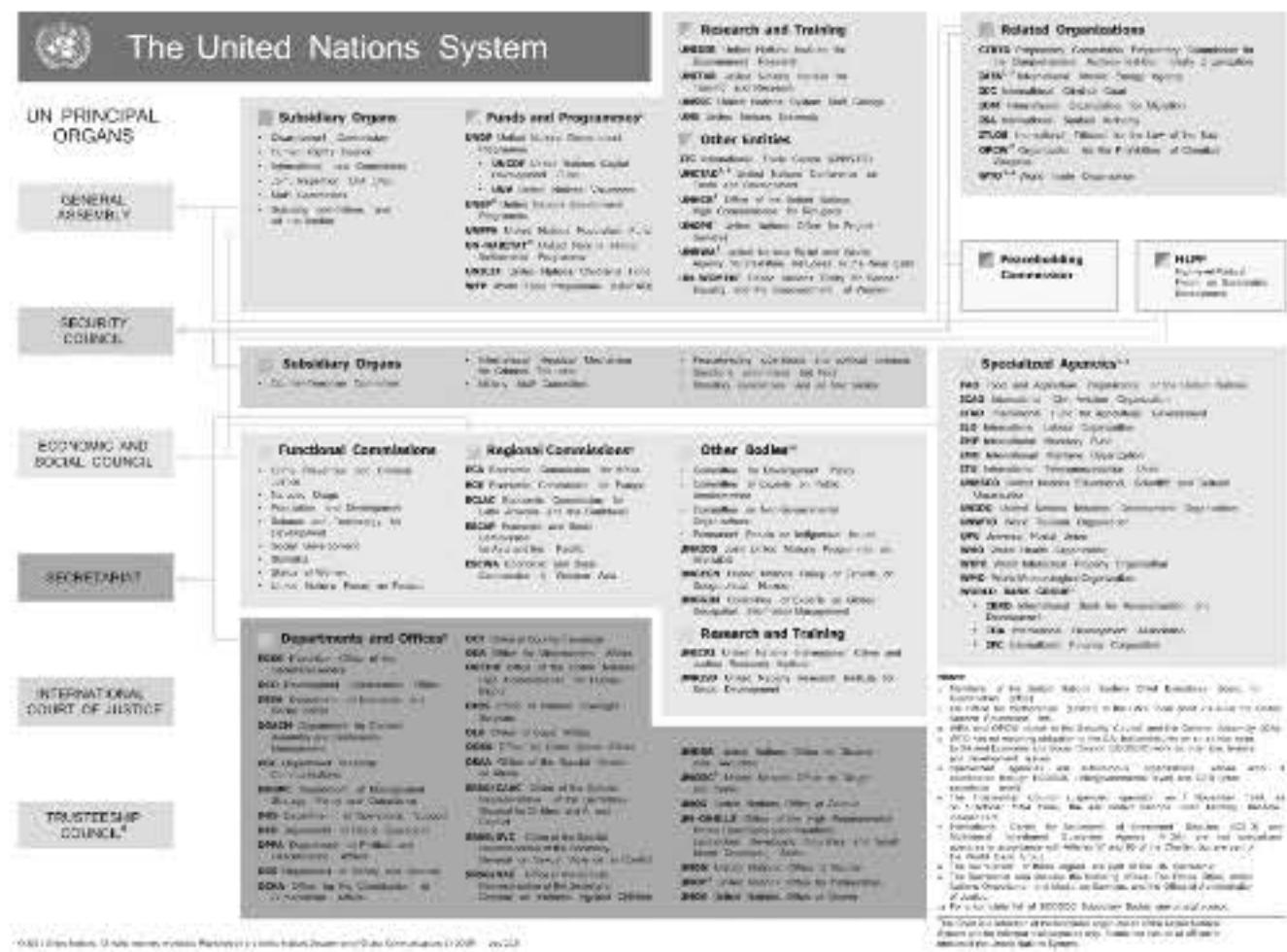
Perhaps most visibly, developing countries have provided an overwhelming number of UN peacekeeping troops in recent years. “You lead, we bleed” is a common criticism leveled by troop-contributing countries against those that mandate and finance peace operations. Southern states have

taken the lead on arms control and disarmament initiatives. South Africa was the first state to give up nuclear weapons voluntarily; Argentina and Brazil gave up developing them. Countries such as Lebanon and Mozambique championed treaties banning landmines and cluster munitions.

Developing countries have also helped to boost the role of the General Assembly—from demanding a greater say in selecting the Secretary-General in 2015–2016^{[17](#)} to tackling crisis situations when the Security Council is at loggerheads. For example, Arab states have galvanized action in the General Assembly on Palestine, which has been the subject of dozens of Security Council vetoes cast by the United States. In March 2022, Ukraine garnered the support of 140 states after Russia blocked the Security Council from condemning its invasion of the country, and the Assembly has since adopted further resolutions on the situation, covering humanitarian issues, Russia’s suspension from the Human Rights Council, Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and reparations.^{[18](#)}

Structure

Erskine Childers and Brian Urquhart argued that the original design of the UN system was “planetary,” a central organization around which independent agencies would gravitate.¹⁹ Others hold that decentralization as a conscious choice—a way to ensure that international cooperation on technical matters could continue amidst political impasses.²⁰ What has emerged is perhaps best understood as a constellation: a group of entities that are part of a recognizable pattern of international organization and share the “United Nations” name, as illustrated in [Figure 19.1](#).



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Figure 19.1 The UN system

Note: This Figure is also hosted online at www.routledge.com/9781032210124.

Principal organs

The Charter sets out six principal organs. First, the General Assembly—the UN’s main policy-making forum. Described as the closest we have to a world parliament or parliament for humanity, the assembly gives all 193 UN Member States a vote in global affairs. With some exceptions (such as adopting the UN’s budget), its resolutions are not binding on states, but they have normative value.²¹ It agrees the UN’s program of work, selects the Secretary-General, admits new members, and approves changes to the Charter, although most of these functions require the Security Council to make a recommendation for the Assembly to approve.

Second, the Security Council—the main body tasked with the maintenance of international peace and security. Comprising the P5 and the “E10” (or the ten non-permanent members elected from each regional group by the General Assembly for two-year terms), it can adopt resolutions that are binding on states. These decisions include terrorist designations, sanctions, the use of force, peacekeeping missions; and referrals to the ICC, even if the states concerned are not a party to the court. High-profile

failures have made it the UN's *bête noire*. While proposals for reform abound, member states have not been able to agree on a formula since 1963, when its composition was enlarged from six to ten non-permanent members.^{[22](#)}

Third, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which is made up of 54 Member States elected by the General Assembly. It has a wide remit, from studying economic issues to promoting gender equality; from accrediting NGOs to overseeing, at least on paper, the UN's various humanitarian and development bodies. Some scholars argue that ECOSOC should have been as significant as the Security Council.^{[23](#)} But its diffuse mandate and built-in majority of votes for developing states led industrialized countries to gravitate to other forums where the balance of power was in their favour, such as the international financial institutions (IFIs), where voting prerogatives reflect financial contributions.^{[24](#)}

Fourth, the Trusteeship Council, which was set up to administer non-self-governing territories. It suspended operations in 1994 after the last territory in its care, Palau, secured independence; but it has not formally been removed from the Charter, which is notoriously difficult to amend. Various

new functions have been suggested, including to support “governance of the global commons, delivery of global public goods and managing global public risks.”[25](#)

Fifth, the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Often called the “World Court,” its role is to settle legal disputes between states and give advisory opinions on questions referred to it by authorized UN bodies. Sixth and finally, the Secretariat—the term given to the international civil service headed by the Secretary-General. As of November 2021, the Secretariat comprised 36,827 staff from 191 nationalities.[26](#)

Funds, programs, agencies, and more

Beyond the principal organs, there are some 40+ funds, programs, specialized agencies, and regional commissions. Some predate the UN, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), which was created through the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Others were created in response to particular issues, such as the International Fund for Agri-

cultural Development—following the 1974 World Food Conference and major hunger crises—and the UN Environment Programme—following the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and ecological crises.

There exists a further set of “related” organizations on the periphery of this constellation, including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO). Beyond, there is a universe of stakeholders: the “Third UN” of academia, business, civil society, philanthropy, and other actors that work in areas traditionally confined to governments.

Multistakeholder arrangements are not new; the ILO pioneered a tripartite system of governments, employers, and workers more than a century ago. But public–private partnerships are increasingly seen as ways to provide more holistic and nimble solutions. For example, the Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, was initiated by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation working with the WHO, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and World Bank. It co-leads COVAX, the mechanism set up to support equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

Coordinating this constellation of actors has become an occupation in itself. The Chief Execu-

tives Board (CEB) “brings together the top managers of the UN system with the Secretary-General as the presiding officer ... to dispense information, voice suggestions and bargain about who does what and how.”²⁷ Coordination has also become a preoccupation, with ever more mechanisms created to address silos and duplication. UN Women is a rare example where four entities were amalgamated to provide a systemwide focal point on gender issues and women’s empowerment.²⁸ On the ground, the UN has been moving toward “delivering as one,” which aims to have one leader, one program, one budget, and, where appropriate, one office.²⁹

Furthermore, coordination has been particularly thorny in the development sphere, where the number of actors has increased significantly in recent decades. This proliferation, alongside concerns around national ownership and neocolonialism, has raised questions about whether the UN should continue to engage in tasks that can be done by local populations and others on the ground.

Functions

There are no clear divisions between the three traditional “pillars” of the UN system: international peace and security; human rights; and development—the third is now prefaced with “sustainable.” The authors believe that the existential nature of the climate emergency merits a standalone pillar, but there are many suggestions for what a fourth pillar should be, including humanitarian action, gender, the rule of law, and disarmament. However one chooses to slice the pie, most issues the UN addresses are cross-cutting in nature and require an inter-disciplinary and intersectional approach. In this chapter, for instance, we have integrated humanitarian action into all three pillars.

International peace and security

The UN’s peace and security work is multifaceted and evolving. It now spans everything from nuclear nonproliferation to counterterrorism, cybercrime, and the peaceful uses of outer space. But the Charter’s exhortation to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” is the organization’s mainstay; the Security Council, for all its flaws, is the body tasked with upholding this commitment.

Other parts of the system also have peace and security functions: the General Assembly can make recommendations to states, while the Peacebuilding Commission was created in 2005 to address what one might call the “attention gap” between conflict resolution and longer-term recovery. While the Charter states only that secretaries-general may bring matters that threaten international peace to the attention of the Security Council (Article 99), there is now an expectation that the top international civil servants act as mediators. For instance, Dag Hammarskjöld was the most prominent user of the Secretary-General’s “good offices.”^{[30](#)} Away from the limelight, his successor, U Thant, is credited with defusing the Cuban Missile Crises while Kofi Annan helped to resolve Cameroon’s dispute with Nigeria over the Bakassi peninsula.^{[31](#)} The latter also championed the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) populations from atrocities, after the UN failed to prevent the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and later Darfur. While not playing an official mediating role between Russia and Ukraine, António Guterres has been instrumental in securing progress through initiatives such as the Black Sea deal which saw Russia agree to grain leaving

Ukrainian ports, in return for measures to facilitate its own food and fertilizer exports.^{[32](#)}

During the Cold War, the UN played a significant role in four major crises—Israel-Palestine in 1948, Korea in 1950, Suez in 1956, and Congo/Zaire in 1960–1964—which laid the groundwork for the principles that guide the organization's work today, such as consent and impartiality in peace operations. Peacekeeping is not mentioned in the Charter but has become one of the organization's most prominent tools.

After 1990, the number of missions rose sharply, from 13 in the UN's first four decades to 56. As of November 2022, there were 12 ongoing peace operations, including the 1948 UN Truce Supervision Organization in the Middle East and the 2014 UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic—respectively the first and the most recent to be created.^{[33](#)} Their names symbolize the shift from peacekeeping centered on monitoring ceasefires and peace agreements, to complex operations dealing with civil war and transnational threats such as terrorism and organised crime. The latter continue to pose challenges to the traditional peacekeeping format: in 2022, for instance, some European countries an-

nounced they were withdrawing troops from Mali due to concerns over the government's use of Russian mercenaries.^{[34](#)}

Since 1999, almost all missions have been explicitly mandated to protect civilians. In 2013, the mission in South Sudan opened its gates to some 75,000 people to avert slaughter, while a regional intervention brigade neutralized armed groups in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), prompting questions about the UN's impartiality.^{[35](#)}

The end of the Cold War also saw the Security Council authorize the use of force to protect Kuwait from Iraq's aggression in 1990.^{[36](#)} The only previous occasion—the Korean crisis of 1950—had seen the Council refer the situation to the General Assembly following three Soviet vetoes, creating a precedent called “Uniting for Peace.”^{[37](#)} It has only been used 13 times in the past 70 years, most recently in relation to Ukraine. The use of force has also been mandated sparingly: The lack of a mandate has caused tensions in relation to the legitimacy of military action in situations such as Kosovo in 1999, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Even when the Security Council has agreed to use “all necessary measures,”

as it did in Libya in 2011, implementation has been contested.^{[38](#)}

While states remain reluctant to make full use of the UN's peace and security toolbox, they have come to rely on the organization's role in humanitarian relief—in conflict and other emergencies. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is the Secretariat body responsible for delivering a swift, efficient and systemwide response: from issuing funding appeals to delivering aid through agencies such as the World Food Programme, supporting refugees (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees), managing disease outbreaks (World Health Organization), and tracking countries threatened by food shortages (Food and Agriculture Organization). In 2021, the UN system provided humanitarian assistance to some 97 million people in 88 countries. The UN estimates this number will rise to 230 million in 2023, and has appealed for a record \$51.5 billion.

Human rights

This pillar of work, perhaps more than any other, sees the UN grapple with fundamental questions of legitimacy, universality, and sovereignty. From its early years, efforts to protect human rights have lagged behind efforts to promote them, reflecting many states' deep reluctance to be held accountable for human rights violations. Notwithstanding, the Charter paved the way for the creation of a Commission on Human Rights, which drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The UDHR has spawned dozens of binding instruments and all UN member states have ratified at least one of the nine core international treaties.^{[39](#)}

Dogged for years with charges of politicization, the CHR was replaced in 2006 with the Human Rights Council (HRC) as the main intergovernmental forum for human rights. The HRC is able to adopt non-binding resolutions, convene urgent sessions, set up fact-finding missions, and mandate independent human rights experts to monitor country-specific situations and thematic issues. It reports to the General Assembly, which elects its members and endorses its recommendations in relation to legal and normative advances.

The Security Council has increasingly engaged in human rights-related tasks. Since the 1991 mission in El Salvador, nearly all peace operations have had human rights components, e.g., support for policing and judicial reform. The Council also created the international criminal tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, which paved the way for the ICC, although three of the P5—China, Russia, and the United States—refuse to accept its jurisdiction.

Within the Secretariat, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is responsible for coordinating UN activity on human rights. It services the HRC, as well as the human rights components of UN peace missions, political offices, and country teams. Despite overseeing one of the UN's three pillars, it receives just 3.7 percent of the regular UN budget.[40](#)

Over the decades, human rights have become more central to the UN's activities, leading to significant advances on the ground and helping to reframe the concept of sovereignty—most notably through Francis Deng's work on "sovereignty as responsibility." Yet significant constraints remain, and the UN is too often confined to handwringing—or silence—in the face of egregious violations.

The UN's humanitarian work, for instance, is guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. While the principles call for "respect for human beings," human rights are not explicitly referenced in key documents such as General Assembly resolution 46/182, and humanitarian actors are expected to remain autonomous from the political, economic, military, or other objectives that any belligerents may hold.

This is not straightforward for the UN. Its political, development, and humanitarian arms are often headed by a single individual or "resident coordinator" on the ground, and the organization has been accused of gross negligence—even complicity with gross violations. Internal reviews into the UN's failure to respond adequately to atrocity crimes in Myanmar^{[41](#)} and Sri Lanka^{[42](#)} pointed to a lack of communication between those on the ground and those at UN Headquarters in New York, as well as a dissonance between the organization's human rights and development activities. Secretaries-General Ban Ki-moon (2007–2016) and António Guterres (2017–present) have sought to take forward the recommendations of those reviews, although serious deficiencies persist.

At the time of writing, supporters of human rights are again on the defensive. Rising geopolitical tensions and resurgent authoritarianism have contributed to a backlash against rights, exacerbating long-standing rifts at the UN where human rights have always been a source of contention, as well as new challenges—from rights in the digital sphere to the protection of rights during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw countries across the world enact sweeping emergency powers.

Sustainable development

Development is now the largest pillar of the UN, accounting for over 70 percent of the system's funding (\$42.2 billion in development funds, including \$24.7 for humanitarian activities),^{[43](#)} roughly two-thirds of its 109,000 staff,^{[44](#)} and around two dozen specialized agencies, funds, programs; eight functional commissions (Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice; Narcotic Drugs; Population and Development; Science and Technology for Development; Social Development; Statistics; Status of Women; and United Nations Forum on Forests); five regional commissions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin

America and the Caribbean, and Western Asia); six training and research institutes; and several offices and departments.⁴⁵ On the intergovernmental side, the General Assembly has two standing committees that deal with economic and social, and humanitarian questions, while ECOSOC has a coordinating function.⁴⁶

Mirroring the continuum from relief to development,⁴⁷ the UN humanitarian offices set up to deal with the humanitarian crises in Europe following World War II evolved into development agencies. The remaining resources from the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, for instance, were incorporated into UNHCR and UNICEF. As the UN's membership grew to encompass newly independent developing states, the organization shifted its focus to development. The 1960s was called the First UN Decade for Development, which set targets for economic growth and saw the General Assembly recommend that rich countries pledge 0.7 percent of GDP as overseas development assistance (only six states ever have met this goal).⁴⁸

In the 1980s, the focus on economic growth saw the emergence of the "Washington Consensus," which pushed free-market policies at the expense of government spending and resulted in dire

economic situations in several Latin American, African, and Asian countries. In the following decade, social and environmental issues became more prominent, with major conferences on women, population, and sustainable development.^{[49](#)}

The most ambitious development frameworks came in the twenty-first century with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They helped to galvanize political will and financial resources, but they were criticized as being too simplistic (quantitative rather than qualitative) and too narrow, excluding issues such as human rights and climate change.^{[50](#)} More inclusive and ambitious, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted after a global process of consultation, resulting in 17 Goals and 169 targets. Governments have agreed to align national agendas with the SDGs, and 2020 was supposed to kickstart a decade of action at all levels,^{[51](#)} but the COVID-19 pandemic and global fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine have caused significant setbacks to progress.

The SDGs can be seen as formalizing the UN's shift from "development" to "sustainable development," reflecting the growing importance of climate and environmental issues across all areas of

work. To date, states have adopted more than 1450 multilateral environmental agreements collectively⁵² and settled inter-state disputes on issues such as pollution at the ICJ. But they continue to find it challenging to reconcile the perceived tension between economic growth and environmental protection, despite increasingly alarming evidence that it may already be too late to stem the devastating consequences of global temperature rise.⁵³

In 1968, the General Assembly adopted its first resolution noting that “the relationship between man and his environment is undergoing profound changes.”⁵⁴ Four years later, the UN Conference on the Human Environment created UNEP (which later set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and the Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment—which laid the groundwork for the 1987 Brundtland Report on sustainable development.

In 1992, the UN Conference on Environment and Development produced three conventions—on climate change (UNFCCC), biodiversity, and desertification—and was heralded as creating a blueprint for action at the global, national, and local levels. But the pace of change has been slow, particularly in reducing carbon emissions. Developing coun-

tries point out their “right to development” and the West’s historical, and ongoing, responsibility for CO2 build-up. Meanwhile, emissions from emerging economies have grown rapidly. These tensions soured negotiations on a universal climate treaty for many years. In 2015, states adopted the Paris Agreement, which saw all countries take on binding commitments on “nationally determined contributions.” So far, these contributions remain inadequate. In 2022, developing countries celebrated a breakthrough as agreement was reached on “loss and damage” funding to support states that have already experienced severe or irreparable impacts from climate change.⁵⁵

Challenges

Since its founding, the UN has been a lifeline for millions of people, helping them to lead safer and healthier lives, and their governments to promote social and economic progress. It has helped to prevent and respond to crises and provided key services—from emergency relief to human rights monitors and peacekeepers. It has functioned as a platform for nations and, sometimes, other stake-

holders to convene and discuss global commons, goods, and norms.

However, major disparities remain within and between countries. One-fifth of the world's population still subsists on less than \$1.25 dollars of income a day, and billions lack access to basic needs. Over the past decades, civil wars have become more intractable; and high-profile failures to prevent mass atrocities have tarnished UN's reputation. More recently, the world organization has struggled to coordinate global responses to challenges such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, while playing a peripheral role in the peace and security sphere—often confined to dealing with the fall-out through humanitarian or peace operations. Among the many future challenges, two preoccupy us here: sovereignty and power; and reform of the system.

Sovereignty and power

There are several reasons for the perceived failures. The most important is political. The UN was designed with a two-pronged dilemma: national sovereignty as its underlying principle; and a monopoly of decision-making power by the P5, which use the threat of the veto to thwart action

—and even discussion—on matters ranging from prevention of atrocities to reform of the Security Council. There is no shortage of creative proposals to improve the UN system; some even enjoy a high degree of support from the wider UN membership. But no amount of reform can address political dysfunction, be it the lack of political will to tackle the climate emergency, the lack of major-power interest in a host of humanitarian crises, or the vested interests of the P5 (or other major powers).

While state sovereignty remains the bedrock of the UN enshrined in Charter Article 2(7), the system has not adapted to changes in the global power environment. UN frameworks are ill-suited to address geopolitical theaters such as cyberspace and social media; and its structures are too rigid to support nimble, multistakeholder responses. Indeed, they are increasingly hampered by widespread perceptions of an anachronistic organization. UN fora have not changed to reflect global power dynamics, which have shifted not only East and South, but also vertically—to the local and regional levels, and to the myriad actors that are now part of the organization's constellation.

This is particularly obvious in the digital sphere, but the UN's colonial and patriarchal origins are

still palpable across the system, from its staffing composition to its approach to development. On climate action, the conservatism of member states has resulted in humanity facing the threat of extinction. Even now, issues such as climate justice remain challenging with many believing that advances must be secured outside the UN system, as they were on areas such as landmines and cluster munitions.

Meanwhile, Russian aggression against Ukraine is the latest crisis to highlight the deadly consequences of the UN's built-in paralysis. The Security Council's repeated failures to prevent conflict and atrocities risk it being sidelined not only by the most powerful countries but by the wider international community of states and people. Groupings such as the G7 and G20 have not proved themselves as providing potential alternatives for global action, while regional organizations have geographic limitations. As we enter the third decade of the twentieth-first century, there is an increasing risk that states will flout the laws and norms built up since 1945, drawing comparisons to the periods leading to the twentieth century's two world wars.

Reform constraints

While UN supporters and critics alike bemoan the lack of reform, the organization has changed in profound ways since its inception. If we look beyond the Security Council, the constellation of UN entities has grown to address almost every dimension of human endeavor, many of which were not even on the minds of the UN's visionary founders. Reform programs have been initiated by all secretaries-general, as well as by member states, with major cycles of reform proposals occurring roughly every five years.⁵⁶ In areas such as conflict and technology, this pattern has seen the UN adopt reforms in relation to past problems, not current or future ones.

In his 2021 report, *Our Common Agenda*, Guterres proposed making foresight and analysis stronger elements of the UN's work. The report itself signals a possible shift in the UN's approach, drawing on the consultations held to mark the UN's 75th anniversary, which crowdsourced priorities and ideas for the organization. It calls for more "networked, inclusive multilateralism" and for the UN to do more on governance of the global commons and global public goods.⁵⁷ Ultimately, prospects for reform depend on leadership: by member states and, to a lesser—but not less impor-

tant—extent by UN officials. Guterres was the first Secretary-General to be selected following a more open process, which should be strengthened and replicated across the system. As Margaret Anstee noted: “People – the best possible people, in the right place – are a surer recipe for success than the most elaborate organogram.”[58](#)

Conclusion

Notwithstanding obvious constraints, the United Nations remains indispensable for problem-solving on our increasingly globalized, complex, and interconnected planet. Precisely because the world is increasingly multipolar and fragmented, the UN’s role as a universal forum is crucial. Through the General Assembly, it gives smaller and poorer states a platform and voice, and marginalized actors a means to air their grievances and seek justice through its human rights mechanisms. It remains the leading provider of development and humanitarian assistance, supplying vaccines to almost half of the world’s children, and protecting over 80 million people fleeing war, famine, and persecution.[59](#)

There is no obvious alternative for the UN's functions as a normative and legal leader; a locus of legitimacy for information or decisions on global public goods; a geopolitical stage and clearing house for peace and security matters through the Security Council, despite all the criticism; and a coordinator of global programs such as the SDGs. Nor is one likely to emerge.

The key question is not whether the UN is relevant, nor what should replace it, but rather how to best use its various forums, mechanisms, tools, and functions. This means paying greater attention to sequencing decision-making and implementation; creating, when needed, flexible and dynamic structures that are capable of evolving; and increasing the willingness to let the UN divest from a large number of tasks that are now better discharged by others. This would enable the world organization to focus on those areas where it can most add value and has a comparative advantage.

Long-suffering scholars and practitioners raise questions about the ability of the United Nations to rise to the challenge. Yet, its evolution and growth show that, unlike its predecessor, the world organization has proved resilient and adaptable, surviving repeated divisions among its members, and the

emergence of other multilateral bodies and informal groupings of states.⁶⁰

The UN's story is not merely that of its constituent parts. It is the story of the international community of states, peoples, and norms—an idea that would not exist with the UN, and that was far ahead of its time. The world has only now caught up to the levels of interdependence and technology that make this fundamental experiment in international organization and global governance viable and essential. Today, there is no problem without an international dimension and the UN, both flawed and indispensable, will continue to be relevant.

Additional reading

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Notes

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