

The United Nations at 70: has our global experiment worked?

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to open the 2015 – 16 Ebor Lecture series on 'Global Security and the United Nations: 70 years on'. I am very grateful to Reverend Canon Dr Collingwood for hosting this meeting, to Professor Sebastian Kim for inviting me and to Suzanne Parkes and her colleagues for their wonderful hospitality and assistance.

As an unashamed economic migrant to this country, I'm particularly delighted to have had the chance to visit the beautiful city of York for the first time. This city hosts a fantastic sister organisation of UNA-UK, International Service, which does great work in enabling young people to volunteer overseas.

This city also has a proud tradition of welcoming those who, unlike me, did not have the luxury to decide whether or not to leave their homes. All of us at UNA – UK were encouraged to read that York Minster has offered to take in refugees and that people in this city have offered to open their homes to those fleeing violence and persecution.

The United Nations has its roots in one of the darkest episodes in our history – the Second World War. Marking its anniversary each year necessarily challenges us to consider whether our actions – as an international community, as governments and as individual global citizens – have been sufficient to avoid such a catastrophe happening again.

Many of the world's people, including those on our doorstep in Eastern Europe, have not been spared the devastation of war and deprivation during the past 70 years. But many of us, particularly those fortunate enough to be born in the West, have thrived during this long period of relative global peace, and there have been remarkable improvements in living standards the world over.

Sadly, these gains – in no small part the product of our 'global experiment' in international cooperation, the United Nations – are now under serious threat. I commend York Minster, York St John University, the Carmelites and the Methodist Church York & Hull District for providing, through this lecture series, an opportunity to reflect on the United Nations.

I believe my contribution to this series should be to set the scene. In my remarks, I will sketch out some of the UN's achievements and the challenges it faces, to assess if, when, how and why our global experiment has or has not worked. I will then seek to make the case for why we must persevere with this experiment, considering arguments of compassion, responsibility and self-interest. In this, I will place particular focus on the UK, before closing with a few words on UNA-UK's own efforts to maintain the health of our international system.

I will no doubt touch on many issues that merit deeper consideration, and will make statements with which some of you may take issue. I look forward to discussing these issues with you later this evening, when I hope we will also tackle the question of whether we *want* our global experiment to work and if so, whether our mind-sets and actions really reflect this aim.

While landmark birthdays – whether of individuals or institutions – are prone to provoking bouts of self-reflection, the UN's 70th anniversary calls for more than a routine exercise in measuring progress to date. Every decade of its existence has seen achievements and challenges – the 60th anniversary in 2005 saw the Organisation, still reeling from the diplomatic fall-out from Iraq, struggling to galvanise action to stop genocide in Darfur. Ten years prior to that, it was the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, and before that, the 40th anniversary in 1985 took place in the context of a divided Cold War world.

But today, we see a confluence of crises driving instability across the globe. Exacerbated by long-term challenges such as climate change and inequality, new conflicts have erupted. Old ones continue the cycle of simmering low-level violence punctuated by deadly flare-ups. We face many challenges the UN's founders could not have imagined – cyber warfare, global warming – but arguably the biggest problem it is confronting today is the same as it was in 1945: mass displacement, as millions flee bombs, guns, torture, rape and starvation. Last year, 42,000 people per day were displaced – up from 11,000 in 2010, already a staggering number.

Our globalised world has boosted opportunities for trade and travel, as well as our vulnerability to shocks, from bank defaults to disease outbreaks. It has also reduced the ability of our governments to tackle traditionally domestic issues, such as fiscal balances and job creation. Our interdependence has increased our opportunities but it has also narrowed our horizons. Many of us have become more fiercely local, discriminatory and, at the extreme end, violent.

The UN is struggling to deal with this grim picture. On the ground, it is working wonders to feed, shelter and protect millions of people. But severe funding shortfalls have forced it to scale back its efforts in recent months.

Many of the UN's frontline agencies do not receive regular income through state contributions. They have to raise funds year on year, making forward-planning extremely challenging and leaving little room for manoeuvre when new crises emerge. Donors have provided less than half of the UN's humanitarian budget needs this year. As a result, over 70 emergency health clinics have been closed in Iraq and food aid has been suspended or reduced for more than a million people. The World Food Programme has had to drop one third of Syrian refugees hosted by Middle Eastern countries from its food voucher programme – the number has plummeted from 2.1 million at the beginning of this year to 1.4 million, and the value of the vouchers has gone down too, to just \$14 a month for many refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

At the policy level, the UN is working hard to improve the international community's ability – and appetite – to tackle these challenges. But leadership has been in short supply.

Preoccupied with problems at home, governments have been reluctant to produce the global solutions needed. Worsening relations between big powers have compounded this leadership deficit.

As a history student 15 years ago, I could not have imagined that I would see the phrase “annexation of Crimea” in a newspaper rather than a textbook. Even a few years ago, the prospect of big power conflict seemed remote. But the refusal of Russia to follow UN norms in the Ukraine crisis is more than a straw in the wind. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has, albeit with notable exceptions, been careful to respect the letter, if not the spirit, of its international obligations because it believed that the UN system constrained the West. Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and the eastward expansion of NATO have soured this belief and provoked the Kremlin into a more aggressive power projection.

Against this depressing backdrop, the UN can seem marginalised, unable to do more than shout from the sidelines and put a band aid on the wounded. Has the UN failed in its quest for progress? Have its efforts over the past seven decades amounted to no more than a sticking plaster on the world's sores?

To answer this question, we should start by looking at the world today, compared to 1945. Despite the horrific headlines we see every day, the world has, at least until recently, become a better place by almost every objective measure (environmental issues are the big exception).

The number of inter-state conflicts has steadily declined since 1945. Conflict-related deaths, including from civil wars, have plummeted. In the 2000s, the average annual death toll from warfare was a third of what it was during the Cold War.

Most people today live longer, healthier lives. Globally, life expectancy, education, health, income and living standards have improved by 18 per cent over the past 20 years.

The world is also freer. In 1945, almost a third of its people lived in territories that were not self-governing. Since then, over 80 countries have gained independence. The vast majority of states have accepted international human rights laws. In 1945, women had equal voting rights in just 30 countries. Today, Saudi Arabia is the only UN member state that does not have female suffrage. Technology has empowered individuals and civil society movements.

The UN has played a key part in this story, from feeding children whose families have been uprooted by war, to helping entire countries transition peacefully to independence.

Far from being a ‘talking shop’, the UN provides life-saving assistance to millions of people around the world. Everyday. The World Food Programme reaches around 90 million people a year.

The UN has helped to eradicate smallpox and has vaccinated more than half the world's children against deadly diseases, saving some three million lives a year.

When disaster strikes, the UN is often the first to respond and the last to leave. It goes where others cannot or will not. UN peacekeepers protect civilians in places where few, if any, will venture. Last month, thousands of people in the Central African Republic were sheltered in the UN peacekeeping compound, almost certainly averting a slaughter.

Behind these figures are stories, often harrowing, of people for whom the UN has been a lifeline. Last year, a three-year-old girl called Nyakhat Pal walked for four hours to lead her blind father to a UNICEF-World Food Programme rapid response centre in South Sudan. She had heard that the UN was providing food, water and medicine there. To reach it, she and her father walked through harsh and dangerous terrain, through a safety zone created by the UN peacekeeping mission. After reaching the centre, they got the supplies they needed and headed back to their village.

This story goes to the heart of what the UN stands for and what it tries, albeit imperfectly, to achieve.

This frontline work is complemented by the UN's long-term projects, such as addressing the root causes of conflict through development. The Millennium Development Goals, the UN's most ambitious anti-poverty initiative due to end this year, has not been perfect, but it has delivered real gains in terms of reducing child mortality, driving school attendance, providing safe drinking water and reversing the march of HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB. A new set of goals, to be adopted later this month, provides an opportunity for the international community to build on these gains.

And the UN is still the pre-eminent platform for the world's countries. When I am asked "what is the value of the UN?", I usually speak of its frontline agencies and the life-saving support they provide. But more and more, I try to emphasise the important purpose the UN serves as a forum for states – a talking shop. At the UN, even states with poor bilateral relations get together to discuss problems, create laws and agree joint programmes of work. Despite all the other bodies – the G20, the EU, the BRICS – the UN alone has the universality and therefore legitimacy to make decisions.

In the General Assembly, all countries, rich and poor, have one vote. Its decisions may not be binding, but they represent the weight of world opinion. For all its deep flaws, we still turn to the Security Council to provide the legitimacy for robust action, whether it's sanctions or intervention. What the Security Council does still matters greatly.

We must remember too when we are frustrated by its inaction, such as the failure to stop bloodshed in Syria, that such failures are political. There are times when the UN has been too slow or too timid, but for the most part, it is not the UN that has failed us but governments.

And we must remember that the Security Council, though it certainly needs reform, is often able to take effective action. It has agreed over 1,500 resolutions since the end of the Cold War, overseen an expansion in peacekeeping and created international frameworks on children in armed conflict and on increasing the involvement of women in peace processes. Even in Syria, its work on chemical weapons has been successful and vital – just imagine if these weapons stockpiles were still there now?

And the UN does all of this on a shoestring budget. The whole system – its officials, its political and human rights departments, its development and humanitarian agencies, its peacekeeping missions – cost about \$40 billion a year or £26 billion. This seems like a lot of money but it pales in comparison with military spending worldwide – well over a trillion dollars – and with fossil fuel subsidies – over five trillion a year. It is also less than the NHS budget, than Bill Gates' net worth and about the same amount spent by consumers in the UK last Christmas.

We should not downplay these successes. The Guardian is currently running an interesting series of comment pieces and profiles to mark the UN's 70th anniversary, which I encourage you to take a look at. While the series pays tribute to the UN's achievements, I must confess I was dismayed to see a headline reference to the estimated cost of the UN system over the past 70 years: half a trillion dollars.

In the context of the figures I just mentioned, I hope you'll agree that this seems like an excellent deal for seven decades of work. But I take issue with the focus on cost. Even if the UN had spent 10 times this amount, it would still be value for money. Should we really try to put a price on the millions of lives it has saved, on the conflicts it has prevented, on the standards and mechanisms it has developed to protect us and make our lives easier, from human rights to aviation regulations to functioning mail and satellite systems?

But I completely agree that there is a need for critical appraisal. The extent to which the UN deserves credit for the achievements I have outlined is debated. Many would point to the impact that economic growth in China has had on reducing global poverty. Many would argue that the doctrine of nuclear deterrence has helped to prevent big power conflict.

However, there are areas where the UN's added value is obvious, from the promotion of dialogue between adversaries, to the eradication of smallpox, and to the system of international agreements that now governs almost every aspect of human endeavour and planetary resource.

On the ground, UN success has depended on clear, achievable mandates. Targeted development campaigns, on maternal and infant health and on school enrolment for instance, have worked. Those seeking broader social transformation, not least on gender equality, have some way to go.

Peacekeeping missions have been most effective in smaller countries like Lebanon and Sierra Leone, especially when big powers have showed sustained interest.

At the highest political levels, the UN has fostered the concept of an international community, expected to solve problems peacefully, to cooperate on shared challenges and to take action to prevent atrocities. This idea has gained wide acceptance amongst global citizens, who want their governments to abide by shared international standards.

It is this very concept that is now under threat. Whilst things have improved for many people, too many of us still die each year from violence, disasters and

deprivation. It is still the case today that every 20 seconds a child dies from a disease that could have been prevented by a vaccine.

And the progress I described earlier is stalling, even reversing, in many areas. After falling for nearly 70 years, the number of conflicts is increasing again. Civil wars and attacks by governments and armed groups on civilians have risen for the first time in a decade.

Climate change is disrupting lives and livelihoods. The financial crisis hit the poorest countries the hardest, and the proportion of aid to those countries has fallen. In Syria, the conflict has set back development progress by some 30 years and triggered food shortages in the region.

Polio, on the verge of eradication, has resurfaced in Somalia, Afghanistan and other conflict-ridden states. More than 60 million people have been forced to flee their homes, uprooted by violence or disasters – this is the highest number since records began.

And, if you allow me a quick aside, despite what many people in the US and Europe believe, the vast majority – 38 million – are displaced in their own countries. If they leave, they mostly go to neighbouring states. Ninety per cent of refugees are hosted by developing countries. Lebanon, for example, has taken in a quarter of Syria's four million refugees; a quarter of its population is now Syrian. Jordan and Turkey have also taken in over a million. Ethiopia is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, with some 200,000 people from South Sudan alone.

Very few refugees go on to Western states. In fact, very few go anywhere at all. The average time a refugee spends in a camp is now 17 years. The reason that numbers coming to Europe are rising is in part because these camps are now at breaking point and UN agencies are broke.

So has our global experiment worked? The answer is: "yes, sometimes".

The fact remains that on the hardest issues – when powerful states have particular interests, such as Syria; when too many states are not interested enough, such as the early stages of the Ebola crisis; or when too few states are willing to fulfill their international responsibilities – the UN is unable to make headway.

This is because the UN has a built-in catch. It is an organisation of member states and from day one, it has needed to balance its long-term collective goals with the narrow short-term ones of its members. It is the UN's 193 member states who set its agenda, determine its structure, its budget and decide what it can and cannot do.

Before we criticise the UN, we must remember what it is we are criticising. We must remember that the Secretary-General does not have the luxury of saying "no" when the UN lacks the funds or capacity to respond. Would it ever be acceptable for the UN to say it can't respond to the violence in the Mali because it is overstretched due to Syria? Or to ignore Ebola because of the looming food crisis in the Sahel?

And we must remember that the UN is not a world government. Dag Hammarskjöld, considered by many to have been the most effective Secretary-General of the UN, put it much more eloquently than I could when he said:

“We often hear it said that the United Nations has succeeded here, or has failed there. What do we mean? Do we refer to the purposes of the Charter? They are expressions of universally shared ideals, which cannot fail us, though we, alas, often fail them. Or do we think of the institutions of the United Nations? They are our tools. We fashioned them. We use them. It is our responsibility to remedy any flaws there may be in them. It is our responsibility to correct any failures in our use of them.”

One does not need to be an expert in international relations to see that the need for the United Nations is now as great as it was in 1945, but that our international system will not endure unless we consciously will it to last.

The stark truth is that international compromises, of the kind that made the establishment of the UN possible seven decades ago, continue appear too costly when measured by the familiar criterion of national interest. Unless that changes, unless governments – and the publics to whom they are accountable – embrace the need to use and refresh those institutions, we will have learnt nothing from the previous, and finite, eras of peace.

So how can we secure this change?

A good starting point is looking at the conditions in which the UN was first created: a combination of far-sighted leadership by governments and mass support from their publics. It was both an aspirational endeavour – a vision of a better world – but also a pragmatic response, weighing up the downsides of compromise and cooperation against their benefits, and against the heavy cost of war. It is this blend of factors that is needed today.

UNA-UK was founded in the same year as the UN to connect people in the UK to the Organisation's work and values. Our mission today is to make the case for the UN and for this country – its leaders and people – to play a constructive role in finding global solutions and in strengthening our international system.

We make this case by looking at three inter-linked factors: compassion, responsibility and self-interest. The refugee situation has rekindled the debate about the UK's moral responsibility to help others, which has been flaring up with increasing regularity since the economic downturn. Shouldn't this country look after its own first?

I often speak to people who give generously to charity but who are wary of taking in refugees and who believe that aid money should be used in the UK. I can understand their arguments. But while they are natural reactions, we simply cannot afford them anymore.

The problems we face – climate change, extremism, pandemics – do not respect borders. They cannot be solved by one or a handful of countries. Even so called domestic issues – jobs, the cost of living – all have a global dimension. Today, a flood in Bangladesh could damage crops, causing food

prices in this country to rise. It could damage clothing factories, hurting local companies here. We just don't have the luxury of saying what happens in other countries doesn't affect us.

And it's in our interest to help. At an individual level, we must recognise that compassion is at the core of what it means to be human, not just morally, but in practical terms of preserving our species.

To quote the Dalai Lama: "Compassion is not religious business, it is human business. It is not luxury, it is essential for our own peace and mental stability. It is essential for human survival." It is not enough for just those who happen to be the richest or strongest to survive. The challenges we face require different talents, perspectives and knowledge.

At a national level, we must recognise that we have a stake in building stable and prosperous countries. Such countries are less prone to violence, terrorism and displacement.

We must recognise that overall, migrants and refugees are net contributors who can plug gaps in our own workforce, in care, for example, and enrich our communities culturally. In Germany, ministers have made the case for taking in Syrian refugees by pointing to its shrinking and aging population and the need for skills – 40 per cent of them are graduates.

And we must recognise that global instability is such that we ourselves may need shelter one day, from the effects of climate change, for example.

Internationally, we should see that investment in the global system is an investment in our collective future, and that short-term compromises – having a little less so that we all can have more in the future – are a worthwhile choice.

The language of humanitarianism must shift from charity – something to be dropped when times get tough – to responsibility, recognising our own role in many of the conflicts around the world, through our action or inaction, and acknowledging our legal responsibilities and international obligations.

Britain has benefitted enormously from the global rules-based order it did so much to create. The breakdown of the international system would have serious consequences for the UK's national security and prosperity. It would also diminish the UK's global role and standing. The UN remains an indispensable tool for realising the UK's international objectives. It is in Britain's interest to preserve this system and to make it fairer, so that others too have a stake in preserving it.

Of course, we at UNA-UK recognise that the UN system needs to change. We make the case for the UN but we do it as a critical friend. At the moment, we are supporting a renewed push for restraint of the Security Council veto in cases of mass atrocity and we are driving a global campaign called 1 for 7 Billion to improve the opaque and outdated way in which the UN selects its Secretary-General – a reform that would have great practical and symbolic value.

And we believe that the UK can be a force for good and for positive change at the UN. There is often talk of Britain punching above its weight; that it is no longer a global power. Britain's role in the world certainly has changed, but it is still, by most measures, a powerful country, with a higher GDP than states like India and Russia and a top five ranking in terms of military power. It has a seat at the top table at the UN. It is a major aid donor. It continues to have a unique position of influence in global affairs, a historical legacy but one it has maintained carefully.

There are growing calls for emerging countries to shoulder more global responsibility, financially, diplomatically and militarily. But it will be some time before they are able – and willing – to do so. In the meantime, we need the UK to step up and engage in a concerted and consistent way with all parts of the UN system.

The UK should acknowledge the importance of an effective United Nations to the UK's national security and prosperity. It should develop a proactive and imaginative strategy for increasing the UN's effectiveness. It should provide greater practical support for the UN, notably to peace operations – where UK personnel numbers are at a 20-year low. And it should set out its vision for the system going forward.

UK foreign policy has been based on the view that we should deal “with the world as it is and not as we wish it were”. This is undoubtedly true but without a compelling vision, foreign policy risks, at best, preserving the status quo.

Vision and idealism can have practical benefits. A policy to maintain stability in a region without addressing underlying issues can only ever be an interim measure. Instead of just managing situations, idealism encourages us to picture our desired results and work backwards, which could yield different approaches to what is prioritised in a conflict situation, for example, or in the construction of refugee camps.

If the reality is that people stay in such camps for 17 years, we cannot persist in equipping them to be stop gaps, places where only basic needs are met. Instead, they must be places where people can learn and develop, so that they can build their future and that of their countries. Vision must lead policy.

UNA-UK is working hard to build political leadership and public support for this approach, through our advocacy efforts, work with schools and universities, and community initiatives run by our grassroots network of supporters.

We believe that we all have a responsibility to tackle the growing gulf between politics and reality, people and institutions, and challenges and solutions. Public debate is overwhelmingly shaped by chronic short-termism, driven by opinion polls and headlines.

There is little appetite for plain speaking about the challenges facing this country, and the actions needed to secure its long-term future. Issues like immigration are spoken about, but are we getting a balanced picture? Does the level and amount of reporting on the impacts of climate change reflect what is happening? How often do politicians give us the hard facts about the changes we need to make in our own lives, and to our economies and societies if we are to respond adequately?

The result? People switch off. They don't trust what is being said and don't feel their voice is heard. And then they are unprepared to cope with the challenges that arise.

We at UNA-UK believe that we all have a stake and a responsibility to do better, and I hope that you will join us in this endeavour.

I have brought with me some literature about our work – our special UN 70 issue of our magazine – as well as some supporter cards. Signing up through the cards – or online at www.una.org.uk – is simple and absolutely free, and the easiest way to find out how you can contribute to global solutions.

I have also brought some flyers for our UN 70th anniversary celebration, which will take place at the London Guildhall on 9 October and will feature the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zeid, on his first visit to the UK.

And we have produced poster versions of the UN Charter, also on display here, that we hope will be put up in local communities around the UK on United Nations Day on 24 October. Do get in touch with us about this.

We hope that the UN's 70th anniversary – and the crises it is currently seeking to address – will spark meaningful debate in the UK, not just about what kind of country we want to be, but what kind of world we want to build.

This vision must include a healthy, effective and widely supported United Nations. Achieving that depends on states' willingness to work together, and states will not act without a mandate from their publics.

I would like to end with a quote from the Queen, who is, of course, celebrating a milestone of her own today, as Britain's longest-reigning monarch. In her address to the United Nations in 1957, she said:

"The future of this Organization will be determined, not only by the degree to which its members observe strictly the provisions of the Charter and cooperate in its practical activities, but also by the strength of its people's devotion to the pursuit of [its] great ideals."

Thank you very much.