

The UN, UK and UNA-UK in 2015

Natalie Samarasinghe, Executive Director UNA-UK, speech to UNA Twickenham and Richmond branch, 22 March 2014

It is a pleasure to be able to share with you some thoughts and some lunch today – thank you very much Brian for the invitation and all the arrangements.

I have been asked to outline my vision for UNA-UK, and what I hope the Association will be able to achieve at the UK and UN level. I would like to do so by looking first at the bigger picture – the global environment and the UN's role in shaping it, then moving on to the UK context, and finally situating UNA-UK within it.

This is a good time for us to be reflecting on our mission. 100 years on from the start of the First World War, the world feels volatile. While conflicts have raged in most parts of the world throughout the 20th century, since the creation of the UN and particularly since the end of the Cold War, the incidence of inter-state war has continued to recede and the likelihood of conflict between two big powers seemed remote. But in recent months, there have been tensions between China and Japan, P5 clashes over Syria, and now Crimea.

In such situations, the UN can often seem marginalised - is our post-WWII machinery for peace still fit for purpose? This is an important question as the UN approaches its 70th anniversary next year.

In many ways, the world has become a better place since the UN's inception. Deaths from conflict-related violence have plummeted and many people now live longer and healthier lives. Human development measures e.g. life expectancy, education, health and living standards increased globally by 18% between 1990 and 2010. Women, minorities and countries have gained freedoms.

The UN has been instrumental to these achievements, through the Millennium Development Goals initiative, human rights mechanisms, peacekeeping etc. And it continues to feed, shelter and protect millions around the world. The UN's frontline agencies, such as the World Food Programme and Refugee Agency, are a tangible and life-saving reminder of the crucial role it plays every day. When disaster strikes, the UN is often the first to respond and the last to leave, staying on long after the media attention has faded away.

It also goes where others cannot or will not. UN peacekeepers protect civilians in places where few, if any, will venture. High-profile scandals should not obscure the crucial role that some 100,000 peacekeepers perform around the world. This includes nearly 17,000 civilian officers who help to build up public institutions, report on human rights violations, and provide training to local law enforcement. Often thrust into situations where there is no peace to keep, with restrictive mandates and limited resources, they have helped countries like Timor-Leste to transition to independence, supported elections in Liberia, and ended conflicts from El Salvador to Cambodia.

This responsive work is matched by longer-term projects to build peace, prevent conflict and promote development. The very idea that peace, development and rights go together was popularised by the UN. Its wider impact on ideas and policies is often forgotten. It was the 1972 Stockholm conference that put environmental issues on the global agenda. It was the UN Development Programme that managed,

incrementally, to move away from a narrow concept of development as economic growth towards human development.

But much more remains to be done. Across the world, far too many people have been left behind by this wave of progress.

Development has been very uneven, within and between states. Despite progress, today, a child dies every 20 seconds from a disease that could have been prevented by a vaccine. Whilst global output has doubled, the gap between rich and poor has barely narrowed over the past 30 years, and many countries continue to be shackled by debt. If you exclude China from the calculations, the number of people living on less than a pound a day is around 1.8 billion, the same as it was 1981.

And progress is stalling, even reversing in many areas, as multiple crises converge. Climate change is already disrupting lives and livelihoods, and putting further stress on the world's natural resources, already under pressure from population growth and the food and fuel crises. The 2008 financial crisis hit millions of people in rich and in poor countries. Hard-won gains in the world's least developed countries have slowed due to the drop in tourism, investment and remittances. Official development assistance has declined by 3% per cent two years in a row.

There are severe humanitarian crises in places like Syria, South Sudan and Central African Republic, which are having a deep impact on those countries' neighbours. Lebanon, for example, has accepted one million Syria refugees. Its total population is 4.4 million.

Human rights violations persist and gender discrimination persist in all corners of the globe. A robust response to climate change continues to elude us. And despite the tragic lessons of Rwanda, of Srebrenica and Darfur, we have still not managed to make a reality of the words 'never again'.

Can our international system cope? Dealing with these challenges is unlikely to become any easier as we move through a period of instability. Many states are increasingly reluctant to look outwards, as leaders struggle to balance economic recovery with political stability, and freedoms with security. The sheer scale and pace of developments has put politicians on the back foot. They are struggling to catch up and often opt for inaction as the safest course. And there is a growing disconnect between people, governments and institutions. Public trust in financial and political systems has been eroded at a time when the popular voice is increasingly a force to be reckoned with. Together, these factors have produced a deficit in leadership. The international community increasingly multipolar and polarised.

The UN is therefore needed more than ever. But, of course, it faces major constraints of its own, from tensions between member states, the difficulties in reaching consensus and increasing pressures on resources. Cases like Syria demonstrate its limitations and inability to tackle some of the biggest challenges when powerful states don't agree. However, nearly 70 years after it was created, the UN is still here. It remains the pre-eminent platform for the world's countries. 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 its sanctions or intervention. Clearly, what the Security Council does still matters greatly.

For the most part, when asked why the UN hasn't done this or that, the answer is: because of its member states. But there is one area in which the UN is underperforming and where I believe it does have some room for manoeuvre.

The UN can exercise a leadership of its own. It should speak truth to power. There are times when quiet diplomacy is necessary but there are also times when the UN needs to use its bully pulpit. It also needs to do more to capture the public imagination. This is not a new challenge but it is increasingly important, particularly in countries where the UN does not have big visible operations that demonstrate its impact. The UN needs to publicise its successes, adopt a pro-active media strategy, seek to connect directly with people and speak out on those issues where governments stay silent.

So where does UNA-UK figure in all this? We can support the UN in reaching new audiences in the UK, in publicizing the UN's work and, in our role as a critical friend of the UN, encouraging it to speak out and use its moral authority. We should also keep producing ideas and lobbying the UK to support initiatives to strengthen the UN.

On 28 June we will hold our biggest event of the year: UN Forum. We want to use that opportunity to thrash out some of the biggest concerns and criticisms of the UN, and to take a sober look at Britain's role in today's world. We believe that the UK could, and should, play a more active role internationally. It should use its influence, networks and unique global position to provide leadership on issues (e.g. Foreign Secretary's Preventing Sexual Violence initiative), to lead by example in terms of its own international obligations and interactions with UN mechanisms, and to convene the various constituencies it is a part of to forge solutions and share ideas.

As Executive Director, my aim is simple: I want to give anyone who wants to understand global challenges and contribute to solutions the opportunity to get involved with UNA-UK. I firmly believe in our value as a policy-influencer and grassroots movement; and as a critical friend of the UN. We offer idealism on outcomes, realism on what is achievable and creativity in our approach. I hope that you all will be involved in our activities over the coming months.