



# Renewing the UN system

Taking stock after 75 years



**UNA-UK**



## About us

Founded in 1945, the United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK) is the country’s foremost advocate for UK action at the UN; the UK’s leading source of analysis on the UN; and a vibrant grassroots movement of 20,000 people from all walks of life.

We are the only charity in the UK devoted to building support for the UN amongst policymakers, opinion-formers and the public. We believe that a strong, credible and effective UN is essential if we are to build a safer, fairer and more sustainable world. We advocate strong government support for the UN – political and financial – and seek to demonstrate why the UN matters to people everywhere.

UNA-UK derives great strength from its members and supporters, and UK-wide network of community and university branches. Together, they form a critical mass of support for the UN in the UK and beyond.

Our recent successes include: the [1 for 7 Billion campaign to change how the UN selects its Secretary-General](#), our call for [more UK peacekeeping troops](#), and our push to [keep the UN on the national curriculum in England](#).

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# Introduction

This is a report written by Fred Carver for UNA-UK, on the occasion of the UN's 75th anniversary as a stocktake of the Organisation as it stands, and as a guide for the United Kingdom as to how they might go about reforming it. We are grateful to the Labour party of the UK for approaching us asking for our input to their inquiry on this very question and have shared an early draft of this report with them by way of a submission to their consultation.

A conversation on this matter is long overdue, in spite of the recently published [Integrated Review](#) of security, defence, development and foreign policy, the UK's relationship with the United Nations has not been discussed in either full house of Parliament since a House of Lords Debate in 2015.<sup>1</sup>

While the views here are those of UNA-UK staff, we did ask our network of friends and contacts for their perspective to inform our own, and we are grateful for the responses we received from Spogmay Ahmed, Marissa Conway, Sam Daws, Danica Damplo, Jonathan Glennie, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Richard Gowan, Lord Hannay of Chiswick, Angela Kane, Mona Ali Khalil, Gerrit Kurtz, Ian Martin, Wasim Mir, Mandeep Tiwana, Ramesh Thakur, Paul Williams, and others who contributed anonymously who have enriched the report below.

We firmly believe that the main reforms the United Nations needs are not to do with the internal structure or processes of the Organisation but the tasks it is put to. The UN must strengthen its work on climate change, public health and pandemic responses, economic justice, arms control and many other issues besides. Such questions regarding the nature and substance of the work the Organisation does matter far more than questions of how it is structured or what mechanisms it employs.

That having been said, our area of knowledge and expertise is with respect to the internal working of the Organisation. Therefore, while we touch upon the substantive questions of *what* the Organisation should do, much of our report concentrates on the more technical questions of *how* it can more effectively do it. This is not, and should not be interpreted as, indicative of the relative importance of these matters, but merely of where we feel we can add the most value with our expertise. We would urge those considering the question of UN reform to augment this report with expertise from specialists in those substantive areas and ensure that they spend more time on questions of policy substance than on questions of organisation and process.



The flag of the United Nations outside the Houses of Parliament in London for UN Day which takes place on 24 October. © FCDO/Flickr

<sup>1</sup> There have been a number of committee inquiries, and indeed a Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry on the matter is ongoing.



Our report starts with a brief introduction for UK policymakers on the “three United Nations”<sup>2</sup> they have to work with:

1. Member states, which comprise the Organisation’s membership, fund its work and decide on its agenda. This includes political forums such as the General Assembly and Security Council, but also the governing bodies for UN agencies such as the World Health Organisation, which are made up of states.
2. UN staff, who support member states and carry out mandates assigned to them, including the running of UN offices and programmes, peace missions and other field offices.
3. The wider ecosystem of non-state, civil society, academic, private sector and public engagement with UN processes and programmes, and around UN issues.

Many of the criticisms of the UN suffer from a lack of clarity with respect to which part of the UN it addresses; blaming the bureaucracy for the attitudes of member states, for example. Our report therefore seeks to inform UK policymakers as to how they can most effectively engage with the three UNs to achieve reform.

This is followed by a chapter on each of these constituencies. Within the first chapter we consider each of the six principal political organs of the UN with the exception of the ICJ on which we have less expertise and believe the UK’s interests would be best served asking the opinion of judges and judicial scholars of international and regional courts. Within the second chapter we discuss the principal challenges the Organisation faces: leadership, structure and funding, and then discuss the three key areas of the Organisation’s work: peace and security, human rights, and development. The third chapter then discusses how the UN fits into the world around it, before a final conclusion lists our recommendations. Our report is not exhaustive, but we have sought to touch upon the main strands of the UN’s work.

As we make clear, reform of the United Nations is far from straightforward, particularly in the absence of anything approaching a global consensus on the purpose or value of a global system. However, the current crisis, and looming future crises, do demonstrate the need for bold thinking. Furthermore, in the UN’s “[world’s biggest conversation](#)” on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, and in the “Common Agenda” follow up process mandating the Secretary-General to report back to member states with reform proposals, there is now a pathway to pursue some of these ideas. We must make the most of it.

<sup>2</sup> This term comes from a 2009 paper from Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, and Richard Jolly: “the Third United Nations”.



A view through a smartphone of the Preamble of the UN Charter, signed by member states to commemorate the UN's 75th Anniversary.  
© UN Photo/Manuel Elías

## Talking about reform

Changing the UN is difficult, but it is vital. The need for an organisation such as the UN has never been more apparent, and reforming the organisation we have is a far more effective and credible strategy than attempting to invent something new (a gambit which in any instance would be likely to recreate many of the same shortcomings from which the UN suffers).

The United Nations we have undeniably needs reforming. It is a product of the political conditions of 1945 and needs updating to reflect the realities of 2021, not to mention the tumultuous decades that are to come. It is underdelivering on core elements of its agenda such as the upholding of human rights standards and the ending of military occupations; it has not risen to new challenges such as the climate crisis or the digital economy; and it appears unprepared for those on the horizon such as the rise of artificial intelligence.

Many people, both in the UK and globally, feel alienated from it, with isolationist and unilateralist sentiment increasing towards the end of the previous decade. These concerns should not be minimised.

Nevertheless, it is important to maintain a sense of perspective when discussing the shortcomings of the United Nations. Otherwise one risks feeding into a narrative of failure which itself produces a barrier to effective engagement.

The UN is a successful organisation: it was created to prevent world war three and it has succeeded in that mission for 75 consecutive years. It convened efforts that led to the elimination of smallpox, oversaw a step change in global levels of absolute poverty and literacy, protected the ozone layer, oversaw the abolition of landmines and developed the global human rights system.

The UN provides a platform for cooperation with regards to almost every aspect of human activity. Pew's annual Global Attitudes Survey shows widespread and consistent support for international cooperation across the world.

Furthermore, while there are valid criticisms to be made of the Organisation, many of the most commonly articulated complaints make the mistake of blaming (to borrow a metaphor from Richard Holbrooke) the design of the football stadium for the performance of the players on the pitch - blaming the UN for the shortcomings of world leaders, their failure to adhere to international law, and the absence of far sighted international policymaking.

***It is important that conversations on UN reform be focused, and pragmatic. The scale of ambition must match the scale of the problem and the frustration felt by the public at the performance of the Organisation, but this ambition must be targeted at what can be meaningfully changed.***

Many of the problems the UN faces are the problems of the world itself; these problems are better addressed directly than via the circuitous route of reforming the UN.

Furthermore, we must be honest about the fact that, at present, major structural reform of the Organisation requiring changes to the UN Charter is likely to be a non-starter. There is not the political will, nor is there the form of progressive global consensus around the core issues of peace and security, human rights and development that would allow a 1945 style moment to occur. Indeed, there is a real risk that re-opening such discussions could lead to worse outcomes - as we have seen happen with recent conversations on Women, Peace and Security at the UN Security Council. Instead therefore we must look at what changes not requiring Charter amendment, or not even concerning structure at all, could allow for a better circumvention of the insurmountable problems of structure the Organisation faces - and, ultimately, better delivery of its objectives.

Among the experts and practitioners we consulted, there was a general sense that the approach should

perhaps focus less on "reforming" branches of the UN, and instead on innovating, strengthening and upgrading aspects of its work. Such work should be focused on improving performance, not redesigning systems, and it must move beyond problem identification and towards solution implementation.

The UK also needs to be mindful of its own role and how it is perceived at the UN. The UK makes significant contributions to the UN system - through its generous funding for development, through its skilled diplomats and experts, and as a permanent member of the Security Council and "penholder" on many key issues. However, the UK does not always receive a warm international welcome when discussing UN reform. Reasons for this include the resentment caused by having that permanent seat, the UK's imperial past, the UK's current waning power - exacerbated by Brexit - the UK's many historic (Suez, Iraq) and ongoing (Chagos, Yemen) transgressions of international law, and a certain perception of entitlement in tone.

The UK should take lessons from other mid-level powers who can be more effective in making themselves central to the UN reform agenda, particularly those that punch above their weight (the Nordic nations, Liechtenstein, Jordan, Switzerland, Costa Rica, Qatar, and Singapore to name a few) but also those with whom the UK has significant policy overlap (Japan, South Korea, Canada, many EU states). Successful countries are keen to work by consensus and in coalition, not to attempt to dictate unilaterally, and they ensure that they have always earned their right to speak on an issue through substantive contribution. Effective reformers like the Nordic states bend over backwards to avoid any sense of entitlement in their advocacy for reform.

Norway's strategy for the United Nations,<sup>3</sup> for example, starts with a lengthy explanation of how global cooperation benefits Norway, and is modest about its own standing in that system (inaccurately describing itself as a minor economic power). It then briefly states:

***"Norway has a number of tools at its disposal to promote Norwegian and common interests in the multilateral system, including international political and financial contributions, partnerships, police and military contributions, candidacies, board memberships and the recruitment of Norwegians to international organisations."***

<sup>3</sup> [Norway's Role and Interests in Multilateral Cooperation](#)

Its recommendations are then couched in terms of how it can use those tools.

Likewise, for the UK the question should not be so much what reform the UN needs, but, in the first instance, what role the UK could play in improving the functionality of the UN by leading by example and being a model nation state and, in the second instance, by leading from behind: adding to and building cross regional coalitions in support of reform.

Reform of the United Nations can often be a lengthy and largely thankless process of unglamorous incremental gains. However, big shifts are possible and when they come, they may come in a deluge. For example, 2005 saw the creation of the UN Human Rights Council, the UN Peacebuilding Commission, and the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect. In 2010 UN Women was created and the processes that would develop the Sustainable

Development Goals, the Paris Climate Agreement and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons commenced. So far 2020 has yet to create similar initiatives but may through its follow up processes.

***Regardless of the pace and difficulty of reform, it is a vital task. Neither the world, nor the UK, have the option of allowing the UN to fail.***

Existential risks from climate catastrophe to world war three can only be successfully mitigated via an effective UN. Meanwhile the position of privilege within the system the UK inherited in 1945 makes the UN an incredibly effective tool for projecting UK influence and protecting its national interest.

In recent months we have seen a renewed interest in “minilateralism”: smaller sub-UN coalitions



Barbara Woodward, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations, reads a press statement on Myanmar.

© UN Photo/Mark Garten

of like-minded states. Such coalitions can be powerful tools for increasing UK influence at the UN and can shoulder some of the work of convening and caucusing for a reform agenda. However, unilateralism cannot take the place of multilateralism, or of the UN, and attempts to do so are dangerous for reasons of both perception and substance.

In terms of substance unilateral initiatives lack the universality of the United Nations, and thus investing in them represents an investment in the inequality within our global system, furthering the risk of “two speed” global governance whereby some states and communities are better served by, and therefore more invested in, our global system than others who, alienated, are more likely to turn spoiler. In addition, if the UK only caucuses with like-minded states, it loses the ability to influence the states where pressure most needs to be brought to bear. Furthermore, many issues cross traditional unilateral lines. The allies of the UK on an issue like human rights are not the same as the allies of the UK on an issue like climate change, for example, as the last few years have demonstrated.

In terms of perception, unilateralism among the like-minded frequently looks like neocolonialism when viewed from the global south - a small group of invariably rich white countries attempting to dictate terms to the rest of the world. This perception in turn weakens the UK's diplomatic capabilities across all agendas.

Unilateralism in the current context also risks playing into a new cold war dynamic, with a Manichean “us” and “them”, occasionally centred on Russia, more usually nowadays on China. While UK priorities and values are very different to those of the Russian and Chinese governments a cold

war is in nobody's interests - least of all the UN's which can achieve little when there is an impasse between permanent Security Council members. This became painfully apparent in the previous cold war and already we see great power rivalry causing many important parts of the UN system to grind to a halt. Furthermore, as the US clearly demonstrated over the last four years, when one disengages with another country or institution one has less ability to influence it in a positive direction. Finally, when it comes to diplomatic initiatives at the UN at least, the UK is unlikely to come out ahead in any stand-off with China, who have far more resources and thus enjoy far more support from crucial caucuses such as the G77 at the UN General Assembly than the UK.

Without compromising upon UK values and priorities the UK should therefore be looking to increase detente between rival great powers and advance opportunities for collaboration on matters of shared interest. As one of the few forums where great powers still maintain constructive diplomatic relations the UN could be a powerful enabler of that process; it will most certainly be a casualty if that process falters.



Outside the United Nations Headquarters, flags fly in the north end of the building, on a sunny fall day. © UN Photo/Mark Garten.

## IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should prioritise reforming its own behaviour with respect to the UN and being a model permanent member.**
- **Beyond that the UK should caucus with progressive states such as the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) coalition to push their reform agendas and should not seek to push reform unilaterally or in a manner that suggests anything approaching entitlement.**
- **The UK's priorities for reform should be improving member state approaches towards the UN, followed by reforming recruitment and performance management approaches at the UN. Structural changes to the UN system should be a third priority - an opportunity for demonstrating ambition and aspiration, but an area in which progress is unlikely.**



UN Headquarters preparations for staff returning during the COVID-19 pandemic.  
© UN Photo/Manuel Elías

# The first UN - political

## Security Council

Any conversation about UN reform has to acknowledge that the political heart of the United Nations, the Security Council, is dated and dysfunctional. Dated because it was designed to reflect the power dynamics of 1945, themselves the product of conflict and empire, and in no way reflective of the world in 2021 or of the more equitable world we might wish to build. Dysfunctional because the right of the five “permanent” members to veto action, coupled with the current political hostility between these members, means that the Council is frequently gridlocked.

A nuanced critique would also recognise that, these shortcomings notwithstanding, these same characteristics are most likely the reason the UN has achieved its primary objective of preventing world war three: the veto ensuring that five of the countries most likely to start such a conflict rarely circumvent the Council. For all the problems with the veto the absence of such an instrument was one of the primary reasons for the failure of the League of Nations.

Nevertheless, it is important, particularly for a country such as the United Kingdom which has benefitted so disproportionately from the rules, to acknowledge the legitimate grievance the rest of the world has with regards to the makeup and

power vested in the Security Council. Furthermore, airing criticism of the veto is useful in increasing the political cost of its use.<sup>4</sup> The UK must acknowledge that its privileged position in the UN is unfair and set out a strategy for how it intends to use its permanent seat to benefit international peace and security.

It should seek to be a model permanent member: upholding its own obligations under the Charter and addressing its violations of international law (notably with respect to the Chagos Islands); listening to, representing and empowering the voices of non-permanent members, civil society and the conflict affected themselves; supporting changes to working methods (even if that means it relinquishes “the pen” on certain issues); advocating for greater transparency and inclusion (building on its role in securing changes to the Secretary-General selection process, for instance); and maintaining and advocating for its longstanding principled objection to the use of the veto.<sup>5</sup> It could also set an example by making clear that - in principle - it would be willing to place its permanent seat on the negotiating table in the interests of a more equitable and effective mechanism.

There are a number of models for Security Council membership reform, none of which have yet found consensus within any region, let alone the broader

<sup>4</sup> [The various proposals for limiting the use of the veto are therefore important and should be supported](#)

<sup>5</sup> While the UK hasn't officially used the veto since 1989 the threat of use of veto can also shape negotiations on outputs.

UN membership. Many argue that the models put forward in 2005 by Kofi Annan<sup>6</sup> came close, but negotiations have continued to stall since then. It appears there is appetite to revisit this issue again in the context of the “common agenda” UN75 follow-up process.

Without wanting to outline a specific proposal for Security Council reform we suggest any blueprint for a future Security Council consider the following issues:

- Membership of the Security Council needs to balance being representative of the wider world with the quality of member countries as assessed with respect to willingness and ability to ensure global peace and security. To this end reformers may wish to consider<sup>7</sup> the model of the UN peacebuilding commission whereby some members are elected and others appointed as an automatic consequence of being one of the top contributors to the United Nations either financially or in terms of UN peacekeepers.
- While there are clearly problems with the veto there needs to be some mechanism to ensure the commitment of powers with the capability to start a world war. Other mechanisms which include qualified majority voting, a “half veto” or a regional veto<sup>8</sup>, have their own shortcomings too and so reform in this area will have to be carefully developed in negotiation with permanent and non-permanent members. Currently there is no appetite for reform in this area, but it cannot be entirely overlooked when considering the shortcomings of the Security Council.
- While no state should be entitled to permanent membership, membership terms should be significantly long to allow for the development of expertise and continuity. In electing members, the Council could adopt some of the practices from other parts of the system, for instance, the Human Rights Council, where the General Assembly has generally better applied its obligation to take

states’ records into account, or the practice of holding informal hearings with candidates. Rules on candidate lobbying should also be more strictly upheld.

- Some regard must be paid to the fact that power is now held more broadly than at the level of the sovereign state, with a formal role provided for regional organisations and sub/non-state actors.

However, we do not recommend that reformers spend too long designing a better model for the Security Council since this conversation, while morally vital, is unlikely to yield any progress in the short or medium term. Reform of the Security Council requires amendment to the UN Charter which in turn requires the support of two-thirds of the members of the UN (not to mention ratification by their domestic legislatures) and no objection by any of the current five permanent members. That level of consensus is unlikely to emerge any time soon, and even if it did the political currents currently in the ascendant mean that any agreement that was reached would likely be weaker than that reached in 1945.

A smart approach to the question of Security Council reform is therefore to note that it is a moral necessity, note that it is not on the table, and to then pursue a two part approach to compensating for that fact: working around the Council where one can and strengthening the council where one cant.

Working around the Security Council is an inevitable consequence of a failing Security Council. The question of whether or not it is desirable is somewhat moot; the challenge is to keep such circumvention within the bounds of international mechanisms for collective maintenance of international peace and security, and so avoid the disastrous consequences of major powers taking actions - such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq - which entirely bypass these mechanisms. Such unilateral actions facilitate the wider and more reckless use of force and the erosion of the international standards that keep us safe.

<sup>6</sup> Both models called for the Security Council to be expanded to 24 members. Plan A would have created six new permanent members: two each from Africa and Asia, and one each from Europe and the Americas. These new permanent members would not be given a veto. In addition, the number of elected members would be increased to 13. Plan B would create no new permanent members and increase the number of elected members to 11, but a third category of eight semi-permanent members would be created. These members would be elected for four-year terms and these terms would be renewable, allowing powerful and popular nations to be re-elected perhaps indefinitely.

<sup>7</sup> There are strengths and weaknesses to this idea that merit further discussion. Appointment reduces diplomatic accountability by preventing nations from selecting from, and thus vetting, their peers. However currently states frequently shirk this responsibility by presenting uncontested slates for election to the Security Council, and so alternative mechanisms for ensuring the quality of candidates may be required.

<sup>8</sup> A half veto is when the negative vote of any two permanent members is enough to veto a proposal but a single negative vote on its own is not. A regional veto is when a permanent member’s right to veto a proposal is limited to resolutions regarding matters that pertain to their UN region - in recognition of the state of our world where regional hegemony has started to replace global superpowers. Both ideas are not without their problems, but both look to dilute the problematic power of the veto while still maintaining enough of the strength of position permanent members require in order to predominantly refrain from circumventing the Security Council with unilateral action.

Working around the Security Council whilst remaining within the international system can take the form of making greater use of the “Uniting for Peace” mechanism for moving discussion from the Security Council to the General Assembly when the Security Council fails, or of strengthening the right and capability of alternative elements of the international system (be they the Peacebuilding Commission, the Human Rights Council, or the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) to consider matters of peace and security. The UK has commendably backed some work in this regard, including giving the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) power to name perpetrators of chemical attacks, but more work is needed. The Security Council failed to discuss the Coronavirus pandemic or agree the Secretary-General’s Covid-19 global ceasefire for three months and yet there was no attempt to invoke Uniting for Peace.

The UK should understand that pursuing such a strategy might be seen to be weakening their influence but that even if that was the case this is a price worth paying. Even if the question is only considered in terms of narrow national interest the UK is better served by being an ordinary member of a functioning international system than by maintaining a position of privilege within a broken one. Furthermore, in many ways such an approach would strengthen UK influence, through cultivating a broader base of support at the General Assembly. And finally, threatening, and occasionally following through with the threat, of taking such an approach would motivate the UN Security Council itself, and its more reluctant members, to take a more flexible approach. The end result could therefore be a more effective Council which finds itself at a stalemate less often.

Strengthening the Security Council involves increasing its capacity and reforming its working methods to make it the best institution it can be without the need to amend the UN Charter. UNA-UK would commend a report we commissioned as part of our Together First initiative, “[Reforming the UN Security Council](#)” by Mona Ali Khalil, and the various reports of our colleagues at Security Council Report, all of which contain strong recommendations in this regard. To highlight some of the recommendations these reports make and to add some of our own:

- The Security Council should consider the matter of peace and security more holistically: understanding its relationship with climate change, human rights, inequality, global public health, gender<sup>9</sup> and other issues, and making room for those matters on its agenda. Procedural votes, which cannot be vetoed, can be used to ensure that this happens. If it does not the Secretary-General should be much more assertive in using the threat or actuality of his Article 99 powers to shape the Security Council’s agenda - in accordance with the UN’s Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs (DPPA) horizon scanning.
- The Security Council should be more creative and strategic in its use of collective measures short of armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> Sanctions should be used in a more strategic way and, when they are issued in relation to peace processes, linked to clear criteria so that listed individuals can understand and act to improve their behaviour. While Russia and China in particular are highly averse to any generalisation of practice when it comes to the use of collective measures, it is important that consistency is demonstrated in such actions. For the UK to establish and utilise objective criteria on what measures it would advocate for and in what circumstances would also be welcome.
- The capacity and aptitude of Security Council members, especially but not exclusively, elected members, must be enhanced through skill sharing and training to revitalise the lost tradition of constructive and creative diplomacy, and savvy use of process to deliver rather than thwart diplomatic initiatives at the Security Council. To this end the UK should set a good example by appointing Permanent Representatives for long terms and discouraging the use of Security Council meetings for theatrical politics. Elected members should be given a longer lead-in time before starting their term, and a permanent secretariat for elected members should be established, similar to the office of the President of the General Assembly.
- The informal system of “penholding” by permanent members of the Security Council should either be abolished, or the “pen” shared with the elected members, as the UK has commendably started to do. The practice of agreeing resolutions between the P5 before sharing them with the E10 must be ended.

<sup>9</sup> For recommendations from WILPF on how the UNSC could be more feminist see [here](#)

<sup>10</sup> There should, for example, be automatic consequences for states listed in reports of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, those of UN Commissions of Inquiry, and the Secretary-General’s reports on child soldiers and sexual exploitation and abuse, to name a few. Such consequences should include a suspension on that nation’s ability to contribute to UN peacekeeping. One could also consider whether removing a state’s right to speak on certain symbolic occasions might be a suitable sanction, although care should be taken not to diminish the UN’s primary quality as a forum where states can converse on terms closer to equality.

- The Secretary-General should be more willing to involve themselves personally in Security Council diplomacy, should recommend concrete measures and should work with Security Council members to find agreement.<sup>11</sup> A formal and regular Security Council retreat, hosted by the Secretary-General, and greater use of the Secretary-General's "good offices" function to establish diplomatic consensus, could help in this regard.
- The Security Council should make itself more open to legitimate non-state actors and those affected by conflict – their voices are essential to understanding and resolving conflicts.
- The Security Council should also hear from civil society. It can do this, in part, through enabling a greater use of remote meetings and allowing remote participation.

Once again, we would emphasise that the key element for the UK to consider here is not what an ideal system would look like but how it could reform its own actions to facilitate some of the above by acting as a model Security Council member, providing voluntary funding to strengthen capacity, and using its position to represent currently underrepresented interests and voices. Insofar as it wishes to advance a structural reform agenda this should be secondary, and should be something it does not attempt alone but by working with longstanding caucuses of states working on this agenda such as the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) group of states.

## IN SUMMARY

- The UK should establish as a position of principle that the membership of the Security Council needs to be reformed, to better reflect the political realities of current and future moments, to increase its representative legitimacy, and to resolve the problems caused by the veto - while still maintaining the qualities that have allowed the Council to thus far prevent a third world war. However, given the lack of likely movement on this agenda the UK should not devote significant resources to reform of this kind.
- The UK should support states in the Security Council and General Assembly in making greater use of the Uniting for Peace mechanism to move discussion of matters of peace and security to the General Assembly, and generally adopt an approach of trying to use parallel global governance mechanisms like the GA or HRC to move forward agendas if they become stuck in the Security Council.
- The UK should support the strengthening and capacity of the Security Council, particularly among the elected members, and support increased lead in times for elected members.
- The UK should encourage the greater and more creative use of collective measures short of war, including by ensuring there are automatic consequences within the UN system for states listed in reports of the High Commissioner for Human Rights or the Commissions of Inquiry of the Human Rights Council as well as Special Representatives of the Secretary-General on Children in Armed Conflict and on Sexual Violence
- The UK should encourage and give political support to the Secretary-General in getting more personally involved with mediating in the Security Council and using his Article 99 powers to shape the Security Council's agenda.
- The UK should push for a more holistic understanding of global security problems and encourage discussion at the Security Council of other agendas which overlap with peace and security.
- The UK should push for greater non-state actor, conflict affected community and civil society involvement at the Security Council.

<sup>11</sup> Boutros Boutros-Ghali for example designated one UN Under-Secretary-General to attend every meeting to the Security Council. Whilst unpopular with staff this initiative demonstrated the Secretary-General's immediate willingness to become personally involved and was thought to be successful.

## General Assembly

The UN General Assembly (GA) is the most important part of the political UN of member states - the forum where all countries meet as equals. Its strength is in its universality and its inclusivity; its weakness is in the difficulty of reaching agreement, in the largely non-binding nature of its pronouncements,<sup>12</sup> and in the hostility of powerful coalitions of member states to human rights and civil society. However, even in this regard it performs better than the UN Security Council due to the lack of a permanent member veto.

While the GA's power to take collective measures is limited it does have some: it can mandate peacekeeping missions, divert funding, commission investigations, recommend - if not demand - sanctions and the expulsion of members, and while there is debate over whether it has the power to establish legal tribunals or to authorise the use of force it can certainly take steps in that direction, by establishing evidence gathering and safeguarding mechanisms and providing a mechanism for what Dapo Akande called "collective international endorsement...of the need for military action".<sup>13</sup> But even without the ability to use such collective measures, which in any instance are only supposed to be used in a last resort, the General Assembly has a powerful ability to set international standards or "norms", as it demonstrated in the case of apartheid.

In this section we focus on how the capacity of the GA could be improved, how the UK and like-minded states could more effectively caucus at the GA, on the kind of work the GA considers and could consider, and finish up with reflections on elections to political bodies within the UN: elections to such bodies mostly occur in the GA but these reflections are also more generally applicable across the system.

One relatively straightforward way to increase the capacity of the General Assembly would be to strengthen the Office of the President of the General Assembly (PGA), through predictable funding and bringing greater permanency to the office. At

present, PGAs, especially those from developing countries, are forced to expend considerable effort on fundraising and on putting together a team, over the summer period, from missions and UN departments willing to contribute staff. This leaves little scope and time for continuity and planning and ensuring that the team has the necessary expertise.

A longer lead in time, and a different election cycle from the rest of the GA, would also help. At the moment the new PGA is immediately plunged into the maelstrom that is overseeing a high-level week organised entirely by their predecessor, the moment their term starts. Ideally the PGA would serve a longer term than a single year, but this would require amending the Charter. For now, simply moving the start of their term to the end of high-level week rather than the beginning so that high-level week ends the previous session rather than starting the new one, would make a great deal of sense.

Greater administrative support could ensure greater coordination between the currently rather siloed discussions in the six subcommittees of the General Assembly. As part of this strengthening process the GA's "expert committees" and other advisory bodies could also be rationalised and the degree of expertise they hold increased. Finally, but vitally, the GA needs to enhance its capacity and increase the opportunities to hear from non-state actors, non-self-governing and non-member states, civil society, indigenous communities and youth.

The General Assembly also needs to be used more effectively by member states with a progressive attitude to human rights and civil society. The UK in particular has historically neglected the General Assembly in favour of the Security Council<sup>14</sup> and done much of its lobbying work in the GA through the EU - an ability it no longer possesses (although close alignment with the EU position, as employed by Norway and Switzerland, could help increase the UK's leverage). The UK should work to strengthen and augment existing coalitions of states, and to build alliances with progressive states in the global

<sup>12</sup> The difference between the elements of the UN that are binding and non-binding can be overstated. So-called binding resolutions frequently lack enforcement mechanisms, and the threat of enforcement against a sovereign entity is limited by the international community's willingness to resort, in the last instance, to military action in the face of continued recalcitrance. Binding measures are therefore frequently only binding upon those with relatively little power. Non-binding resolutions meanwhile carry lesser, but still significant, normative weight, being internationally agreed standards of behaviour that over time help formulate and establish customary international law. So it is important not to overestimate the power of binding resolutions or underestimate the power of non-binding resolutions: the difference between the two is smaller than one might expect.

<sup>13</sup> [The Legality of the UK's Air Strikes on the Assad Government in Syria](#)

<sup>14</sup> As evidence of this see the parliamentary inquiries held into the UK's failure to secure a seat on the ICJ or a report UNA-UK commissioned from Leeds University: "[Global Britain in the United Nations](#)".



south, to ensure that the powerful G77 and NAM groups of states do not always caucus with the so called “like minded” group of states hostile to human rights.

Assuming the General Assembly can be so strengthened, it should overhaul its areas of work to take on a more substantive role in the political business of the United Nations but do so in a more structured way. It should take more care to avoid duplication between, for example, the work of the third committee (human rights, social and humanitarian affairs) of the GA and the Human Rights Council, and should have more discipline with respect to bringing projects to a halt rather than continuing them indefinitely in an open ended fashion. The passing of resolutions should not be seen as the metric for success but rather the implementation of resolution recommendations. The passing of regular annual resolutions should be avoided; where such resolutions are necessary they should be made tri-annual. In this manner the workload, particularly for small states, can be made more manageable.

This increased capacity and more manageable

workload can be used to take on a stronger role on peace and security, taking over responsibilities from the Security Council. It can also be used to enhance the UN’s focus on prevention, and the integration of the UN’s work on peace and human rights with its work on development. It can demand the greater role that was originally envisaged for it, and which is laid out in the Charter, in appointing the Secretary-General. And it can support the GA’s ability to consider emerging areas of work such as the regulation of the internet and artificial intelligence.

A final word on elections. Many of the most important elections within the UN system, such as elections for the Human Rights Council and for the Security Council, take place under the auspices of the GA. Many of the failings of the political elements of the UN can be traced back to the fact that so many of these elections are uncompetitive. “Clean slate” elections allow states who are ill equipped for the role they aspire to or who have political attitudes or human rights records that should be disqualifying, to be elected unopposed. Recent civil society campaigns to prevent the election of such states have had little success due to the lack of credible alternative candidates.

A better mechanism for election might help alleviate matters. The UN Charter only specifies that states be elected by two thirds of the membership of the GA,<sup>15</sup> not how. Changes to the voting method could therefore take place via a simple GA resolution. Abolishing the secret ballot and having states have to make their votes public would increase the transparency of the appointment process, discourage horse trading for votes, and increase the political cost of backing states with problematic records.

Further, the mechanism used for the election of judges to the International Criminal Court (ICC) could be utilised for elections elsewhere in the UN system. Most elections in the UN system take place via separate ballots within each of the UN regional groups, each of which elects a certain proportion

of the available seats. However, this requirement is nowhere to be found in the UN Charter, or the resolutions mandating organisations such as the Human Rights Council, which only states that “due regard [be] specially paid... to equitable geographical distribution”. The ICC pays due regard to geographic distribution (and to distribution of gender and technical expertise) without adopting this rigid regional model by having one global election but placing various requirements on voting to ensure that at least a minimum number of votes are cast for candidates of each region (and additional criteria). In this manner the results of the election never allow representation for specific regions to drop below certain minimum thresholds, but a degree of inter-regional competition dramatically reduces the possibility for clean slates.<sup>16</sup>



Gonaïves, 11 November 2018. Joint patrol of the Haitian National Police (HNP), Jordanian FPU and UNPOLs based in Gonaïves.  
© Leonora Baumann UN/MINUJUSTH

<sup>15</sup> The UN Charter in fact says nothing at all about elections to the Human Rights Council or other mechanisms established after the Charter was written. These elections are governed by General Assembly resolutions only and can be modified easily.

<sup>16</sup> For example this year the General Assembly elected 4 members from the Africa Group, 4 members from the Asia Pacific Group, 2 members from the Eastern European Group, 3 members from the Latin American and Caribbean Group and 2 members from the Western European and Other group to the Human Rights Council... all in separate elections. If instead they had used something akin to the ICC process, they would simply elect 15 members in one competitive election. Elections would still be held in the same manner: if there are x seats to fill, voters get x votes, and candidates must both come within the top x and gain more than half the number of votes available to be elected, with additional rounds of voting held as needed. However, requirements would be placed on the ballot to ensure that representation from each group never fell below a minimum threshold. So for example if it was established that at least 10 states must come from Africa then - because there were 9 African states on the Human Rights Council at the start of voting, electors would be required to cast at least one of their votes for an African state - a requirement which would continue to apply through subsequent rounds of election until it was fulfilled. In this way a degree of inter-regional competition is permitted but a certain proportion of the votes would be locked up within African candidates, ensuring that at least one African candidate is ultimately elected, and so the Human Rights Council continues to have at least its mandatory 10 African states.

A more straightforward, if more extreme, approach, would be simply to abolish regional slates entirely, and elect members from one global slate. It would then be up to member state to self-police to ensure that results are regionally representative, just as it is currently up to member states to self-police to ensure that those elected meet other subjective criteria mentioned in the UN Charter such as the requirement to pay due regard to the states' contribution to the maintenance of international peace and security.

Such reforms would dramatically improve elections to all elements of the United Nations but are likely to be highly unpopular with transparency averse and self-interest protecting member states. Thus, we should expect elections to be fought under the current system for some time to come. Elections can still be made more competitive by encouraging allies to run for election, even if only as stalking horse candidates, whenever an uncontested election looks to be a threat. Providing funding for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in particular to run for election could increase competitiveness and level the playing field for these otherwise excluded voices. In the final alternative, the UK could make a powerful statement of principle without loss of influence, and ultimately perhaps force change through the denial of quorum, if it adopted the policy of refusing to cast a vote in any uncontested UN election.

Lastly, there is one election (or "selection") process for which the UN General Assembly has a unique role, assigned to it by Article 97 of the UN Charter: the appointment of the UN Secretary-General. The General Assembly, and its President, played a crucial role in the ground-breaking reforms which led to the 2015/16 selection process being the most transparent and inclusive in the UN's history, but unfinished business remains. The Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly has yet to specify in detail how the 2015/16 process should be implemented in a situation where an incumbent Secretary-General is standing for a second term in office. It has determined to explore further this issue, with many member states wishing to consider and potentially agree on two further reforms: (1) the General Assembly picking the Secretary-General from a list of multiple candidates recommended to it by the Security Council (at present the convention for the SC to suggest just one); and (2) the appointment of Secretaries-General for a longer non-renewable term to avoid the compromises made by a UN

leader seeking reappointment. These reforms, supported by UNA-UK, (and others) are covered in more detail under the following heading: "The second UN - administrative: Appointments and performance management" as well as on the 1 for 7 Billion website.<sup>17</sup>

## IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should encourage an increase in capacity at the General Assembly, particularly when it comes to matters of peace and security, and fund the strengthening of the Office of the President of the General Assembly.**
- **The UK should work to convene states at the General Assembly to caucus in support of civil society and human rights.**
- **The UK should encourage the General Assembly to take a greater role in discussions on peace and security and in interlinking the UN's work on peace, human rights and development.**
- **The UK should encourage reform of electoral methods in the General Assembly, including abolishing the secret ballot and potentially reducing the absolute nature of regional slates. Unless and until this happens, the UK should campaign hard to make elections in the General Assembly more competitive by encouraging more states to run for election.**
- **The UK should work with the ACT coalition to support a stronger and more refined role for the General Assembly in the selection of the UN Secretary-General, including through calling for the Security Council to suggest multiple candidates, the appointment of a single, longer term, and refinements to the format of informal dialogues with candidates to allow for a more free-flowing discussion with more input from civil society.**

<sup>17</sup> [Now Is The Time To Plan For The 2021 Selection Process Of The Next Un Secretary-General](#)



## Peacebuilding Commission and Human Rights Council

The GA and Security Council have established various subsidiary bodies and entities. Of these two of the most innovative and effective are the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and Human Rights Council. These institutions have dramatically improved the efficacy of the political institutions of the UN when it comes to peace and security and human rights respectively. Further strengthening of their capabilities is therefore desirable.

One suggestion that is frequently made is that these bodies should be elevated to “core body status” to make them of equivalent rank to the General Assembly or Security Council. Were we designing a system from scratch we would

doubtless recommend this. However, the reality is that doing so now is highly unlikely without the expenditure of significant political capital, if then, and in exchange the bodies would receive no meaningful powers they particularly need or do not already possess. So, we would not recommend that energy be wasted on this endeavour.

Rather, these entities can best be strengthened by strengthening the secretarial elements of the UN with which they integrate - the UN’s peace and security and human rights architecture, discussed in the program activity sections below - or by strengthening elections to these bodies to improve the calibre of states represented on them - discussed in the General Assembly section above.



There are however a number of incremental reforms which could significantly increase the efficacy of these institutions. To this end we commend recommendations made by the Igarape institute<sup>18</sup> and the International Service for Human Rights.<sup>19</sup> These recommendations include:

- Support for the “Irish principles” whereby action is taken at the Human Rights Council in accordance with objective criteria.
- A greater focus of accountability for the perpetrators of violations against those who seek to engage with the Human Rights Council itself, as part of a wider strategy to counter reprisals against those who engage with the UN.
- For discussion of reform of the Human Rights Council to be led by an expert report, prepared jointly by the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner, with inputs from States, civil society, national human rights institutions and other relevant stakeholders.
- Enhance the PBC’s capacities to host discussions about cross-cutting issues, such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and

Security (YPS) agendas, as well as the role of natural resources in conflict.

- Strengthen the PBC’s advisory role to the Security Council (UNSC), particularly with regards to peacebuilding elements of peacekeeping and political missions’ mandates, as well as during reconfigurations, drawdowns, and transitions.
- Bolster the PBC’s advisory role to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), with a view to promote greater coherence among development and peacebuilding actors in the field. The PBC needs to be given a strong link to the UN’s Resident Coordinator System

## IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should encourage the strengthening of these bodies through greater resourcing, political support, and through support for detailed proposals made by the Igarape Institute and International Service for Human Rights**

<sup>18</sup> [Giving the Peacebuilding Commission \(PBC\) a More Prominent Role at the UN Peace and Security Architecture](#)

<sup>19</sup> [HRC40 | Strengthening Human Rights Council needs political will, not bureaucratic review](#)

## ECOSOC

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) never lived up to its originally envisaged role in steering the world's developmental and economic governance and in coordinating the UN's specialised agencies. However, we would guard against attempting to reform ECOSOC. For one thing ECOSOC reform is not an agenda with any momentum behind it. Secondly, the important task of providing leadership on development and economic governance and increasing the cohesiveness of the specialised agencies is not one which would benefit from politicisation or the overt interference of Member States. Thus, we find that progress on these topics would best be advanced by other methods, particularly through the work of the UN Secretariat as detailed below, not by a strengthened and invigorated ECOSOC.

There are some worthwhile areas for reform with respect to processes ECOSOC oversees. Most importantly ECOSOC has responsibility for the most influential of the two processes for accrediting NGOs to the UN. Both are entirely lacking in transparency and are highly politicised with human rights NGOs accreditations being delayed for years or refused without reason. Secretarial support is provided by UN DESA, the head of which, Liu Zhenmin, has publicly boasted of how he has effectively blocked Uighur rights groups at the behest of the Chinese government in direct contravention of his oath as an international civil servant to not take instructions from his country of origin. The UK should robustly engage with the ECOSOC NGO accreditation process in order to advocate against the blocking of human rights organisations and to shed light on misconduct. The UK should campaign to improve the transparency of

the process by having proceedings be made public and webcast, and should itself share information regarding proceedings until they are.

The correct framework for ECOSOC's original mission of steering the world's developmental and economic governance is now provided by the Sustainable Development Goals. ECOSOC interacts with the SDGs through the annual High Level Political Forum (HLPF). While the HLPF represents a welcome initiative, and has brought success, it is too state centric an affair and does not reflect the fact that the SDGs represent an agenda for the whole of society, not just the member states of ECOSOC. The UK should work to open up the HLPF to a wider array of stakeholders and ensure their meaningful participation. The Pathfinders Initiative has some useful proposals in this regard.<sup>20</sup> In addition useful lessons could be taken from the way in which the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process allows civil society to engage with their process.

Countries should be encouraged to use their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the HLPF as a planning tool of domestic policy not a matter of presentation for an international audience. Thus domestic agencies, not foreign offices, should be encouraged to own and drive them. The UK can set an example by having the Cabinet Office, not FCDO, present its VNR.



## IN SUMMARY

- The UK should work to increase the transparency of the NGO accreditation process overseen by ECOSOC, including by webcasting proceedings.
- The UK should work to open up the HLPF process for the SDGs to more external stakeholders
- The UK should use its VNR as a domestic planning process, not a diplomatic matter of presentation. A domestic department, such as the Cabinet Office, should be tasked with preparing the VNR, not the FCDO.

<sup>20</sup> [SDG16+ and the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies](#)

## Trusteeship council

The Trusteeship Council no longer exists. It ceased operations in 1994 and maintains an existence on paper only in that references to it have not been removed from the Charter.

In its life it served to oversee the process of shepherding certain UN trust territories to full independence, under the guidance of guardians. With the independence of Palau, a trust territory previously administered by the United States, its work was completed. While the United Nations does recognise 17 non-self-governing territories, 10 of them British colonies, and while the UN's special committee on decolonisation continues to advocate for the full independence of these territories, this is probably not a productive avenue for reform, and is a highly problematic one for the UK.

If the Trusteeship Council was ever to be revitalised it could be for a different purpose. This idea was first proposed in a 1994 report "Our Global Neighbourhood" by the Commission on Global Governance, championed by Kofi Annan and subsequently developed by scholars including Bharat Desai, Kul Gautam and Saira Mohamed. This is for the Trusteeship Council to provide a forum for the oversight of the shared trusteeship of global commons and shared public goods such as the world's rainforests, oceans, coral reefs, Arctic and Antarctic regions, the atmosphere, and outer space. The Trusteeship Council as provided for in the UN

Charter is a body well suited for this purpose. The body could act as a forum for the oversight and discussion of the manner in which use of these global commons has consequences for all, and provide a deliberative mechanism for establishing principles and standards for their use.

Such a proposal would need to be carefully handled, and the UK should probably not lead on it, given the risk of it being seen as a mechanism for states of the global north to further intervene in the national sovereignty of states in the global south. Instead global south champions should advance the argument that it could serve as a means of ensuring that the consequences of abuse of the commons, which primarily impact the south, are fully understood and those that abuse those commons, primarily states in the global north, are held to account. If and as the idea gathers momentum the UK should support it.

### IN SUMMARY

- **The UK might like to explore proposals in the long term to re-establish the Trusteeship Council to provide oversight and accountability to use of global commons.**



Secretary-General António Guterres (left) and Mark Lowcock, Emergency Relief Coordinator, take part in a high-level pledging event for the humanitarian situation in Yemen.  
© UN Photo/Evan Schneider

## The second UN - administrative

### Appointments and performance management

Much of what needs fixing with the United Nations is with respect to the political UN of member states, and as we have discussed in the first section, primarily concerns the behaviour of those states rather than the structure of the Organisation. The programmes and the bureaucracy of the Organisation itself is generally of secondary importance when considering why and when the UN fails to deliver. Invariably the Organisation is blamed for things that lie outside of its control.

That said, the Organisation does need to improve in various ways. It is often risk averse, inefficient, irresponsible in its failure to manage expectations, uncommunicative, and unresponsive to the public or to stakeholders that are not nation states. It needs to be reinvigorated and strengthened.

Much of this work does not require restructuring but better leadership, better performance management and a better institutional culture to restore the lost art of creative problem solving at the United Nations so that obstacles to progress can be circumvented as opposed to taken as an excuse for inaction. As Dame Margaret Anstee once said,<sup>21</sup>

“The organisation is so regularly overhauled that it is a miracle it functions at all... The only way forward is through specific changes that would have a multiplier effect, such as a more rational way of selecting the Secretary-General, and executive heads of agencies, based on qualifications and experience, rather than political horse-trading; single, though longer, tenures for top officials, so that political jockeying for re-election would be eliminated; and a consolidated budget for the whole UN system... People - the best possible people, in the right place - are a surer recipe for success than the most elaborate organogram.”

Here therefore we outline some suggestions for reform of the UN's appointment and management processes to create a more effective and better motivated workforce that can better compensate for the UN's structural deficiencies. We start with the selection process for the Secretary-General, before considering other senior appointments, then other human resources issues.

With respect to the appointment of the Secretary-General, significant improvements were made due

<sup>21</sup> Anstee, Margaret Joan. *Never Learn to Type: A Woman at the United Nations*. Germany, Wiley, 2005. p. 517.

to the “1 for 7 Billion” campaign that UNA-UK led. Candidates were required to be formally nominated by a government, outline their platform in a vision statement hosted on the President of the General Assembly’s website, and represent themselves in front of the General Assembly, and the votes and proceedings of the UN Security Council in considering them were leaked promptly and comprehensively. However these improvements need to be institutionalised and formalised for future contests. In particular there is a real risk that a less rigorous process will be followed in 2021 because a reappointment of a sitting Secretary-General will be seen as requiring less scrutiny. This could damage the precedent for future years.

In addition to ensuring these changes are institutionalised the UN should champion further changes that were not adopted, including the idea of the Secretary-General serving a single longer term, and the Security Council doing as the Charter requires and nominating a short list of candidates (which we believe should include at least one woman<sup>22</sup>) for the General Assembly to choose from, not presenting it with a *fait accompli*.

There will be significant pressure for countries such as the UK - one of the strongest and most effective advocates of the 1 for 7 billion campaign - to avoid rocking the boat in these troubled times by acceding to a simple process of renewing the Secretary-General’s appointment now that he has made his intention to re-stand clear. This pressure must be resisted and an argument made that the Secretary-General’s position will be strengthened, not weakened, by an open, robust and competitive process through which a groundswell of support can be accrued. The current Secretary-General, who benefited from such a process in 2016<sup>23</sup>, should respect that process - and acknowledge that that same process included many states and civil society voices calling for him to only serve one term - by agreeing at bare minimum to report back to the General Assembly and public with his vision and rationale for a second term.

The recruitment of other senior officials must also be overhauled. Currently too many are “political appointees” seconded (officially or otherwise) from government service as a favour to the state in question. Furthermore, many of these appointments are informally ringfenced for certain nationals. For

example, the head of UN Peacekeeping is invariably French, the head of the World Food Programme American, the head of the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs British.

This practice is not geared towards the best person for the job and is highly deleterious to the legitimacy, and therefore effectiveness, of the offices of the post-holders. A number of rules and approaches to recruitment could provide better outcomes such as a “cooling off period” between the time a person is in government service and the time they can be recruited for a UN post (and vice versa), a requirement that any senior appointment can never go to an official of the same nationality as their predecessor (to eliminate post ringfencing - and as demanded by the General Assembly in resolution 46/232) or a moratorium on appointment of officials from the P5 (given they already have excess influence over the UN and given the extent to which weak political appointees from P5 nations are one of the Organisation’s most significant problems).<sup>24</sup>

It must be noted that all such reforms are likely to be unpopular, particularly given the - largely unsubstantiated - concerns many Member States have about China or Chinese proxy countries increasing their influence at the UN by capturing senior roles. However the UK can and should act as an exemplar by not lobbying for the appointment of its nationals, pushing for appointment solely on the basis of merit, and resourcing and supporting a global search for the world’s best talent - particularly talent from the global south and from the private sector and civil society, not just retired diplomats or failed politicians.

However, while the UN should develop a greater ability to appoint senior officials from among the knowledgeable and effective staff that have risen up the ranks internally, this will only be a positive step if internal promotion is made more meritocratic with advancement occurring on the basis of performance and aptitude, not just time served.

Indeed, performance management within the UN system needs to be overhauled and the organisational culture changed. To quote Margaret Anstee again, “No punishment is meted out or sanctions are applied when basic United Nations principles are transgressed.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This is already a stipulation, although often ignored, for all other senior appointments at the UN, and is in line with the Secretary-General’s gender parity strategy.

<sup>23</sup> [Guterres Poised To Become Next Secretary-General](#)

<sup>24</sup> Evidence of the overrepresentation of the P5, and the actually still fairly limited increase in Chinese posts, is available on NYU’s senior leadership dashboard <https://cic.nyu.edu/UN-Senior-Appointments-Dashboard>

<sup>25</sup> [Strong UN. Better World.](#)

The combination of a pervasive blame culture and the lack of any true sanctions against transgressions within the UN leads staff to be risk averse and to look for reasons not to do things. Taking a risk and failing is punished, inaction and lethargy is rewarded. There is a lack of meaningful accountability but in its place is a paranoia, the result of which is a stultifying need to have everybody present at every meeting, to copy everyone into every email. While there are some truly incredible exceptions, the result of this stifling atmosphere means that too often it is only those who break the rules who can achieve results, and this prevailing culture means that, for the most part, it is men, particularly older, white men, who feel protected enough to be able to do so. The fact that these individuals are then often portrayed as heroes or role model “mavericks” only further damages the institution’s culture in terms of accountability, effectiveness, diversity and respect.

The UN needs to move to an outcome focused performance management and appraisal mechanism where the taking of risks and the use of creativity in problem solving is encouraged, even if it is not immediately successful, and where inaction, inappropriate behaviour and demonstrative compliance are not seen as grounds for advancement.

The UN also needs to take special additional actions in the field of unethical behaviour, harassment, sexual exploitation and abuse, whistleblowing and gender equality:

- On sexual exploitation and abuse the main problem is that the UN sees this as a human resources issue rather than a human rights issue. Our Mission Justice campaign made various concrete proposals in this regard.

- On whistleblowing the UN needs to adopt global best practice standards for whistleblowers as articulated by Transparency International.
- On gender equality and women’s rights, the UN should fully implement the Feminist UN Campaign’s six recommendations for a stronger, more inclusive and accountable UN system.<sup>26</sup>

## IN SUMMARY

- The UK should push for the institutionalisation and expansion of reforms to the selection process for Secretaries-General, including an enhanced role for the General Assembly, and starting with an open and competitive selection process in 2021.
- The UK should push for senior appointments to be made on merit not nationality, should refrain from campaigning for nationals of specific states, and support the institution of a global search for the world’s best international talent.
- The UK should encourage the UN to overhaul its performance management processes in line with international best practice.
- The UK should push the UN to adopt international best practice standards on whistleblowing, sexual exploitation and abuse, and gender equality.



Candidates for UN Secretary-General take part in public hustings as a result of UNA-UK’s 1for7 Billion campaign in 2016. © UNA-UK/Zoë Norfolk

<sup>26</sup> [Progress Stalled For Women’s Rights, Time For A 2020 Jumpstart](#)

## Structure and architecture

As discussed, most of the problems with even the institutional United Nations are not to do with the structure of the entity. Furthermore, as mentioned at the start of the previous section the UN is an over-reformed organisation: reforms are not given time to bed down, reforms are not fully implemented, major structural changes are not followed by the technical and managerial changes required to make them work, and the Organisation spends so much time restructuring itself it has little time to do its work. The last round of reforms in particular have left staff morale low.

The UK should therefore avoid looking to further restructure the Organisation in the short term. Insofar as it does engage with the ongoing conversation around restructuring it should look to ensure that the most recent management reform agenda of the Secretary-General is fully implemented and supported. This reform agenda might not have been perfect, but it was generally strong - and it is the absence of full implementation of reform agendas that so often sap their long term efficacy.

That said, since this is a perennial conversation at the UN, we offer these general observations on principles to inform future reform conversations

- Reform cycles frequently add new processes and mechanisms and never take them away. Furthermore, over the years budgets are cut and the scope of mandates increased leaving these mechanisms hollowed out and overextended, but none are ever put out of their misery. Any further reform agenda should start with a comprehensive auditing of UN offices, agencies, institutions, mechanisms, systems and processes and the shuttering of elements that are archaic, redundant or have never been allowed to fulfil their potential.
- Such an overhaul should also look to consolidate programmes and reduce duplication, a process currently so rampant that the Secretary-General recently established duplicate offices to reduce duplication: the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance and the Department of Operational Support.<sup>27</sup>

- Such an overhaul should also take as a guiding principle an opposition to “mission creep” and the fact that if something can be done outside of the UN it is better done outside of the UN. The UN should look to do less, and to delegate tasks to non-UN stakeholders.
- The UN’s financial oversight and budget appropriation processes should be overhauled to meet international public sector best practice guidelines, and the recommendations of Transparency International should be implemented.<sup>28</sup> The recommendation of the UN’s Board of Auditors should also be implemented in full and where member states vote to strike out recommendations they should be implemented anyway on a voluntary basis.
- The Secretary-General also needs much more operational flexibility. Moving members of staff from one part of the UN to the other, or outsourcing activities, should not require approval from the General Assembly. The role of member states in approving operational and managerial elements of the work of the secretariat should be dramatically cut back. In mitigation of this, the budgetary processes of the UN need to be made much more transparent to allow for civil society scrutiny and input. There is very little tracing of UN spending on human rights<sup>29</sup> and gender in particular, especially within UN trust funds and agencies.



UN Security Council members on a field mission to Colombia co-led by Uruguay and the United Kingdom. © UK Mission to the UN/Lorey Campese

<sup>27</sup> Another place where some consolidation is likely necessary is in the UN’s work on economic policy. The UN has three separate large organisations that work on this issue: the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the network of UN Regional Economic Commissions. In addition, much of these organisations’ work duplicates that done by UNDP or outside of the UN by the WTO or the Bretton Woods institutions.

<sup>28</sup> [Corruption Risks And Un Peace Operations](#)

<sup>29</sup> Despite being one of the “three pillars” of the UN’s work, human rights spending is not even one of the five functions for which spending is tracked by the UN Secretariat’s coordination board.

A final perennial issue in reform, and worthy of longer discussion, is that of coordination. The lack of inter-agency co-working and communication across the UN family has been a problem from the first day of its existence. Many proposals for reform have been suggested but remain either unimplemented or have failed to bring greater cohesion to the UN project. Seemingly common-sense measures, such as the reconciliation of the budgets of the UN Secretariat, peacekeeping, programmes, trust funds and specialised agencies into one single budget are resisted by so many stakeholders as to make them unviable in the short-to-medium term. As mentioned previously ECOSOC does not provide any solutions here, and indeed most structural solutions add to process but do not lead to meaningful collaboration.<sup>30</sup>

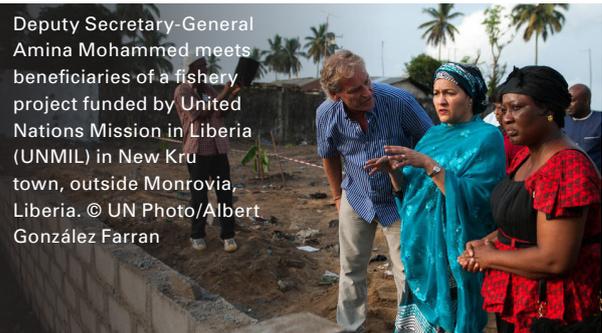
Most recently, and perhaps most effectively, rather than attempt a grand redesign of the system the Secretary-General has tasked the Deputy Secretary-General with acting as a convener and envoy: a go-between between different elements of the UN family. The Deputy Secretary-General can do this effectively as she is a very senior official within the Organisation but, being slightly removed from the maelstrom of the UN's day-to-day work, has the capacity to work for the long term in a more strategic fashion. This lends itself effectively to the role of coordinator for the wider UN system particularly as the Sustainable Development Goals, which the Deputy Secretary-General is closely associated with, provide the shared agenda to allow for effective collaboration. The Deputy Secretary-General also chairs the Sustainable Development Group bringing together senior officials from different UN entities in a more effective manner than before.

The UK should support this effective endeavour and ensure that it is maintained through future changes of leadership. The UK should also call for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to be given a stronger role within the Sustainable Development Group, particularly by granting them a permanent seat on the UNSDG advisory group.

The UK could also encourage the Deputy Secretary-General to investigate how the Sustainable Development Group could more effectively and regularly engage with non-UN non-state SDG stakeholders without waiting for the HLPF.

## IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should not prioritise structural reform of the UN but should instead encourage the full implementation of the Secretary-General's and other previous reform processes.**
- **The UK's attitude to future structural reform conversations should be to increase coherence and consolidation, not to simply add new mechanisms, and to strengthen the Secretary-General's flexibility to act, but also strengthen oversight.**
- **The UK should encourage the work of the Deputy Secretary-General in bringing greater coherence to the work of the UN's agencies and work to ensure that it survives future changes of leadership.**
- **The UK may wish to consider support for the development of reform proposals to make the UN more regional**



<sup>30</sup> One possible suggestion for a grand restructuring of the UN system which is in itself worthy of merit and further consideration is the idea put forward in two reports commissioned by the Deputy Secretary-General from the Cepei think tank. This is for a "regional" United Nations where the primary bureaucracy of the organisation is concentrated not in New York, where it is too far from the field and too dominated by geopolitical considerations, or in country, where it is too hamstrung by host state relations and unable to work internationally, but at the regional level. Jonathan Glennie argues that while global level multilateralism is made increasingly difficult by big power rivalry, given that nationalism cannot solve international challenges we could be entering an era of increased regional cooperation. To capitalise upon that, and to place the UN bureaucracy in its most effective position, the UN could be reorganised along regional lines, perhaps by using the UN regional economic commissions as a framework or by having the Deputy Secretary-General chair rotating regional Sustainable Development Groups. Simple working level reforms such as regular meetings between the chairs of regional economic commissions and the regional UNDP and UN human rights offices could provide a start. The idea has challenges: UN regions are not geographically aligned to regional organisations (except in the instance of Africa and the African Union) and there is a risk that this reform would introduce another level of bureaucracy without meaningfully shifting power away from HQ. But it would be worth the UK engaging with the Deputy Secretary-General on the idea and encouraging it where appropriate.

## Funding

Many of the shortcomings of the institutional UN are due to a lack of funding, cash flow shortfalls caused by the unpredictability of funding, and distortions caused by the provision of ringfenced voluntary funding.

In the long term many experts believe it would be best for the UN to have access to a direct source of revenue such as a financial transactions (Tobin) tax. This might not be as farfetched as it sounds: the EU only narrowly decided against the adoption of a Tobin tax in 2012 due to the objection of the United Kingdom.<sup>31</sup> The UK could usefully signal its support for the idea. However due to the likely strong objection of various states including the United States, other measures are likely to be needed in the short to medium term.

The primary need for the UN is to avoid the cash flow pinch points caused by the late payments of certain member states, notably the United States. Because the UN's regular budget and peacekeeping budgets operate on different financial cycles, granting the Secretary-General the ability to cross borrow between these two budgets would eliminate many of the cash flow problems. In addition, giving the Secretary-General discretion to move funding between budgets over the course of the budget period, indeed giving the Secretary-General more budgetary discretion in general, would make spending more effective.

Funding decisions need to also be more closely aligned with operational decisions. For example, many of the issues in peacekeeping are caused by the fact that two separate bodies - the Security Council and the General Assembly's fifth committee - are responsible for tasking peacekeeping missions and funding them. An institutional reporting

requirement whereby the Security Council were informed of the operational consequences of fifth committee budgeting decisions would go a long way here.

In the absence of financial reforms the UK could achieve a lot by being a model donor state: providing unringfenced voluntary funding, particularly to underfunded elements of the UN's work like its human rights mechanisms and communications work, encouraging states of the global south to make voluntary payments, even if tokenistic, to important new initiatives to demonstrate a broad spectrum of support for them, and providing predictable, regular, multi-year funding. Doing so will be effective in increasing the UK's soft power as the US withdraws from the international stage (a long-term dynamic the Biden administration cannot reverse entirely) and to counter Chinese influence.

### IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should look to be a model funder, providing more, predictable and unrestricted funding to underfunded elements of the UN system such as human rights.**
- **The UK should support the Secretary-General in being able to cross borrow between his budgets.**
- **In the long term the UK could signal that in principle they would support a Tobin Tax to fund the UN system.**

<sup>31</sup> [Taxation of the financial sector & EU financial transaction tax 'madness': Cameron](#)

## Programme activity: peace and security

The UN's peace and security work is currently highly siloed, with peacekeeping, peacebuilding, mediation and capacity building work done by totally different parts of the Organisation. The UN's High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations report (the Hippo report) recommended that this siloing be dismantled and instead the UN consider a peace operations continuum, with political missions and peacekeeping missions run by the same department and funded out of the same budget.<sup>32</sup> This has not happened and should. However, given that the Secretary-General tried and largely failed to do so when reorganising the UN's peacebuilding and political departments, the solution here in the short term is likely not to be structural but a change in approach and attitude. The UK has an opportunity to push for this at the Seoul peacekeeping conference in December.

With respect to peacekeeping we would like to make the following recommendations:

- Force generation needs to be made more meritocratic. Rather than taking the troops they are given the UN should be able to competitively tender for the resources it wants, with the successful award of a contract being a highly prized honour not an expectation. Regular pledging conferences and the work of the Strategic Force Generation and Capability Planning Cell in the Department of Peace Operations mean that force generation is more meritocratic than it was, however the desire not to cause offence by turning down contingents, and a misguided belief in the political necessity of allowing core stakeholders in a peace process to provide significant contingents mean that competition is limited. The UK should provide political cover for a paradigm shift in force generation towards a competitive tender process.
- The UK could dramatically increase its troop contribution to UN peacekeeping<sup>33</sup> - this would

be good for the UK armed forces, good for UN peacekeeping, good for the reform agenda above and good for UK influence. At the last general elections most mainstream political parties made a commitment to maintain support for peacekeeping<sup>34</sup> and Labour pledged an increase in that support<sup>35</sup> but the UK could contribute significantly more, in particular in the field of UN policing.

- UN peacekeeping missions are too closely aligned with the agenda of the host state and not with the host community. This is particularly a problem as in many places peacekeepers are deployed the primary threat the host community faces is from the host state. The potential solution to this is to be found in what the EPON network calls "people centred peacekeeping" i.e. ensuring that peacekeeping missions answer to their communities. The UN already has an alphabet soup of different mechanisms for engaging with local communities (CLAs, LPCs, CANs, CBCMs, and TCRMs for examples) so it's not clear if we need to create something new, or simply to determine which of these mechanisms is most effective and then to increase its capacity and authority. Further research, building on EPON's work, is needed potentially in the form of pilot or A/B testing of different programmes followed by upscaling of successful initiatives. This is roughly the approach of the UK's successful "what works" initiative on Gender Based Violence. The UK could support a "what works" for people centred peacekeeping.
- There is a longstanding argument about how "robust" peacekeeping mission should be. If peacekeeping missions are not robust enough they risk allowing human rights violations and massacres to occur. However, too robust a mission posture may intensify the conflict and diminish peacekeeping's primary value as a de-escalatory mechanism. It may also increase

<sup>32</sup> The P5 would object to this being the peacekeeping budget because they would then have to pay a greater share. But so they should: noblesse oblige.

<sup>33</sup> One suggestion was that the UK work with France and China to adopt a normative standard that all members of the P5 should at all times be contributing at least 1000 peacekeepers.

<sup>34</sup> [EXCLUSIVE: Political parties' approaches to international cooperation and the UN](#)

<sup>35</sup> One of the primary barriers to making further contributions is financial. The UN reimburses the UK's costs for deployments but at a flat rate which doesn't cover actual costs, so countries such as the UK who field expensive troops make a loss on deployment. In relative terms these losses are pretty small – they vary hugely depending on location but a rough rule of thumb would be that every 100 UK UN peacekeepers costs about £10 million a year more than the UN pay for them – but the issue the UK has is there's no clear budget from which this money can come. Labour promised to solve this problem by ringfencing a fund of £100 million for supplementary costs of deployment – a fund which would, broadly speaking, put the current level of UK deployment on a stable financial footing and perhaps allow an additional company or small battalion to be deployed. Unfortunately this pledge was slightly misworded when entered into Labour's 2019 manifesto as "we will increase our funding of UN peacekeeping to £100 million". UK funding of UN peacekeeping is of course around £300 million.

the risk to the mission and place the UN in the position of warfighting which it is neither equipped to do nor very good at. Clearly there is a balance to be struck and striking the balance correctly cannot be done from New York. We recommend therefore that force and contingent commanders be given greater flexibility with respect to mission posture: peacekeeping should neither be more robust nor less in totality but more locally differentiated according to the conditions it finds itself in. The experience of NORDBAT in Bosnia, and their doctrine of “mission command” (placing the completion of the mission task above all but the most fundamental of the rules of engagement) had its shortcomings but may provide instructive lessons. The UK could usefully signal its willingness to support force and contingent commanders who exercise creativity in their attempts to successfully complete their mission from undue criticism in New York.

- The UN tends to establish peacekeeping missions when member states have no better idea. Therefore, many modern peacekeeping missions are doomed before they start: given sprawling mandates covering a grab-bag of insurmountable problems connected to a multifaceted or intractable conflict. The UK should give the UN political backing in exercising its right, as articulated in the 2000 Brahimi report on peacekeeping, to say “no” to impossible missions - where there is no peace to keep or where the role of the UN strays into counterinsurgency, a task for which the UN is not suited. That said, in many of these instances a peacekeeping mission, while it cannot “succeed” in achieving its mandate and building a lasting peace, still does some good by its presence - particularly by protecting civilians - and so is better than its absence. Therefore, invariably the UN could and will say “yes” even when mandates are unachievable. But by providing political support for the UN’s right to refuse the UK can help the process of expectation management for what UN peacekeeping can achieve.
- Regular special reviews of such missions can also help to avoid “mission creep” and continuously question what such missions are for and if they are still doing good or merely maintaining an unsustainable situation.

- The UN should invest more in peacekeeping that can succeed: small technical and observational missions, and missions in creative partnership with regional peacekeeping missions.

Beyond peacekeeping the UN Secretariat’s work on peace and security would benefit from a greater protection and prevention focus across all areas of its work. Ensuring there is a strong contingent of human rights staff in all political and peacekeeping missions is an important element of this. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and their Human Rights up Front Initiative, and the work of Peace and Development Advisors (PDAs) are particularly important here and we touch on them in the sections below.

Finally, as discussed in the section on the Security Council above, the Secretary-General should become much more personally involved in mediation, making better use of his “good offices” function to convene peace talks and develop coalitions for peace. The Secretary-General must in particular become more comfortable negotiating with non-state actors and non-state armed groups. He must make clear that peace is only possible when one engages with all parties to a conflict, but that such an engagement must be clear eyed and rooted in a comprehensive understanding of relative power and how it can be used.

## IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should support the full implementation of the Hippo report’s recommendations including the desiloing of work on the peace operations continuum.**
- **The UK should contribute more troops to UN peacekeeping and encourage the reconceptualisation of troop contributions so that the right to deploy contingents are awarded to states as the outcome of a competitive tender process.**
- **The UK should encourage reform of UN peacekeeping to make it more flexible, context specific, and people centred - answering to its host community.**
- **The UK should help to strengthen the Secretary-General’s work on mediation**

## Programme activity: human rights

The UN's human rights mechanisms require three major reforms: a greater commitment to human rights through the UN's political human rights apparatus such as the Human Rights Council (we discuss this in the human rights council section above), deeper integration with the UN's work on development and peace and security through strong support for the Human Rights up Front initiative (we discuss this a little below and also within those respective sections) and support for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

On Human Rights up Front we commend the recommendations in a report from the Universal Rights Group<sup>36</sup> and urge states such as the UK to give political support for the initiative: mention it in speeches and link it to the Secretary-General's Call to Action on human rights. The process itself could be strengthened by improving regular scanning and discussion mechanisms for risk analysis at the field level, building on experience in countries such as Somalia or the Regional Monthly Reviews at the UNHQ level, where all relevant UN entities are represented, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Department for Peace Operations (DPO), Department for Peacebuilding and Political affairs (DPPA), UN Development Programme (UNDP), and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

To strengthen OHCHR we would recommend the following steps:

- The UK should increase funding to this, one of the most important but least well-funded parts of the UN system.<sup>37</sup> The UK's current funding of \$10 million makes it the 9th largest donor - the largest donors, the EU and Norway, only give \$20 million. An extra \$10 million a year here would probably increase the UK's impact and standing at the UN more than any other equivalent amount of spend in any other area.
- The UK should also help fund large human rights offices attached to peace processes. One of the reasons the Colombia peace process succeeded when many others failed is because of the effective engagement of OHCHR and one of the reasons OHCHR was able to engage effectively was because of their large and well-resourced

Colombia office - at a cost of around \$10 million a year. For the UK to fund a strong human rights office for Libya or Yemen, for example, would be invaluable.

- The UK could help build bridges between the currently overly siloed worlds of New York and Geneva - encouraging the Secretary-General to ensure strong representation for OHCHR in New York and acting as a go-between between the Human Rights Council, the Security Council and General Assembly's third and fifth committees.
- The UK could act as a model exemplar state in the Human Rights Council by rigorously applying the "Irish principles" of utilising objective criteria rooted in the positivity of engagement with OHCHR when deciding what country specific resolutions to support at the Human Rights Council.
- The UK could adopt a joined-up protection strategy whereby its embassies and missions were tasked with safeguarding human rights defenders who interact with UN mechanisms and processes, filling a need that has emerged since the US stepped back from this work.
- There is a perennial call to transform OHCHR into a more field-based organisation. Successive High Commissioners for Human Rights have tried and failed to do so. In principle OHCHR should of course become much closer to the field however internal restructurings rarely have that intended effect. The best way for the UK to support this process therefore may be, as above, by funding strong field offices.

We would finally like to make recommendations with respect to the UN's human rights treaty mechanisms and with respect to Special Rapporteurs.

With respect to treaty bodies we would be happy to share the recommendations we made to the UN's treaty body review. In brief we consider that the fact that members of treaty bodies have to be nominated by member states overly politicises their appointment and bars good candidates from applying. Candidates should be allowed to self-nominate as Special Rapporteurs do. In

<sup>36</sup> [Policy or aspiration: shedding light on the current status of the UN's Human Rights Up Front initiative](#)

<sup>37</sup> [In October 2020 for example a group of NGOs came together to warn that OHCHR cashflow shortfalls had effectively caused the UN treaty body system to grind to a halt](#)

Participants warming up at the Place des Nations, Geneva before the 6th edition of the Training Course de l'Escalade.  
© UN Photo/Adam Kane



the long term the fact that they are appointed by member states would also appear to be a conflict of interest and the UK and UN should explore consultations with other states parties as to if an alternative mechanism for appointment could be used. For example, states could be asked to ratify or reject a nomination from the UN Secretariat (as the Secretary-General appoints Special Representatives) or serving treaty body experts themselves could vote on replacement candidates (as the judges to the ICC elect their President).

With respect to Special Rapporteurs the current process is somewhat odd. Special Rapporteurs are supposed to be entirely independent of the UN but they speak on its behalf; they have authority without accountability. Furthermore, Rapporteurs are supposed to be entirely independent from member states and yet states appoint them and renew their mandate.

If we were starting from scratch we would doubtless do things very differently: either by having them as a truly independent academic mechanism under the auspices of the UN University or by accepting that if they are going to speak for the UN they cannot ever be entirely independent and so providing some form of oversight and/or democratic accountability. (If direct elections for the position give member states too strong a hold over the appointee a more exotic appointment mechanism could perhaps be utilised: for example the Rapporteur could be appointed by a committee of member states chosen by sortition, or the Rapporteur could themselves be chosen by sortition from those academics who apply and are certified to be of sufficient quality and with relevant expertise).

However, it must be noted that the Special Rapporteur system is widely regarded to be working well and therefore one must refrain from trying to fix something that is not broken. Instead, the UK should concentrate on trying to find regular pooled funding from diverse sources for Special Rapporteurs as the fact that the role is unpaid compromises its independence, capacity and the diversity of those who can apply.

## IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should increase funding to OHCHR by at least \$10 million a year, including by funding a significant field presence in conflict affected countries.**
- **The UK should be an exemplar country on human rights, intervening according to objective criteria.**
- **The UK should help to strengthen the bridge between New York and Geneva on human rights.**
- **The UK should develop a global strategy with its in country posts to protect those interacting with the UN system from reprisal.**
- **The UK should push for reform of the treaty body system to allow candidates to self-nominate.**
- **The UK should encourage the funding of UN Special Rapporteurs**

UN Staff members stand outside the SDG Action Zone ahead of the 74th General Assembly.  
© UN Photo/Laura Jarriel



## Programme activity: development

The UK's significant development spending makes it well positioned to lead on the issue of development. The UK is one of the world's most generous funders of development, and of the UN, giving more than three times the amount of funding to the UN system than its closest diplomatic peer at the UN - France. However, the loss of the UK's development department, and the abandonment of the UK's 0.7% Official Development Assistance target hampers the UK's credibility on this agenda. Nevertheless, the credibility that remains is still considerable.

The main issues with respect to development have to do with coordination and the need to delegate responsibility and are picked up in the structure and

architecture section above. Here we just wish to make two further points: the importance of Human Rights up Front, and the importance of data to transparency.

The UN's organizational complicity in recent atrocities in Myanmar and Sri Lanka (and arguably controversy regarding its humanitarian role in Syria) has, in no small part, been due to the UN placing service delivery - development - ahead of its political work and thus its commitment to peacebuilding and human rights. In response the UN set up the Human Rights up Front initiative to establish that human rights must always come first. Human Rights up Front originated in the response to

the UN's failures in Sri Lanka; it was in place during the UN's failings in Myanmar and did not prevent them.

We and the UN argued at the time that this was due to the failure of the UN to make the structural changes to allow the agenda to succeed. Country offices were still run by the UNDP for example and the UNDP's priorities and expertise are in the field of service delivery not human rights or a wider political agenda. The Secretary-General pledged to change this, but his changes were strongly resisted by member states, as a result of which a compromise was agreed whereby Resident Coordinators (country leads) do not directly answer to UNDP but to the Deputy Secretary-General, but UNDP are assured a lead role within country teams.

While these reforms were therefore more limited than would have been ideal they have still been broadly positive. The UK should support the Secretary-General in seeing them through, in particular in further reducing the role of UNDP, securing long term independent funding for RCs and making greater use of the highly effective mechanism of appointing Peace and Development Advisors (PDAs) to advise on the political implications of service delivery.

Finally, the UN could do more in the field of data. In many cases, as ever, the best role for the UN to perform is not to deliver services directly but to monitor and thus provide the function of standard setting, accountability and ultimately the creation of new global norms. The UN could do this more effectively by investing heavily in the research and accessible publication of highly credible disaggregated<sup>38</sup> data to provide rolling and in some cases real time information on the implementation of state and other stakeholder commitments. It could particularly do this in relation to implementing the SDGs but also with respect to climate change, biodiversity and with respect to other international agreements. The SDGs global dashboard attempts to do this, but it is difficult to navigate and counterintuitive, poorly promoted and has not captured the imagination of the civil society campaigners, scholars and other secondary analysts of the information in the manner required to turn it into a campaigning tool.

Resources must be allocated to allow the dashboard to be radically overhauled, improved and deepened, and to reach out to campaigners and civil society

activists to create that campaigning community. Such radical transparency would provide accountability for these states and institutions and enable political forces, the public and civil society to then hold them to account and demand action.

The Secretary-General's data strategy<sup>39</sup> is a welcome intervention in this regard and should help ensure the collection of more useful data in more useful ways. The UK should support it. However, data can only provide accountability if activists use the data to do so; the Secretary-General's data strategy therefore needs to connect with, enthuse, and respond to the needs of the global campaigning community.



Journalists work inside the Media Centre at UN headquarters during the 2019 General Assembly high-level week. © UN Photo/Manuel Elías

## IN SUMMARY

- The UK should signal its ongoing political support for Human Rights up Front.
- The UK should support the Secretary-General's data strategy and encourage and resource an overhaul of the SDGs global dashboard, in consultation with civil society campaigning groups, to allow it to be used as a tool for accountability and radical transparency.

<sup>38</sup> Data must be disaggregated according to gender and other indicators of vulnerability and also disaggregated regionally, nationally and sub-nationally to map to responsible political authorities.

<sup>39</sup> [Secretary-General's Data Strategy](#)



A staff member at the UN Bookshop arranges inflatable globes.  
© UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

## The third UN - global

### Stronger engagement between the UN and the wider world

The degree of access of civil society to different parts of the UN system varies widely. Civil society organisations have been able to make a major contribution to the UN human rights system. But access is often limited, and much of the system is not proactive in seeking civil society engagement. The UK should support the Secretary-General in implementing a strategy for stronger engagement with civil society he announced as part of his Call to Action on Human Rights. CIVICUS have made recommendations to this end<sup>40</sup> and OHCHR and UN Women have advanced proposals for protecting and increasing civil society space. UNA-UK (as part of our Together First campaign) are campaigning to establish a civil society champion at the UN<sup>41</sup> which is both an important proposal in its own right but can also hopefully act as the totemic idea to promote a wider agenda for protecting and opening civil society space at the UN.<sup>42</sup>

The UN also needs to improve its direct communication with the public, building on the work of the UN75 initiative and the improvements in webcasting proceedings and holding virtual events allowing for a more diverse range of contributors. All UN events should be webcast, and all UN events should give thought to how they can better reach offline groups. The diversity of participants in UN events should be monitored - a potential task for the civil society champion - and an action plan created to use virtual contributions to increase the diversity of participants in sections of the UN's work where it is lacking. The UK should fund and support the UN in engaging with and providing support for partners on the ground and increasing its outreach to offline groups. They should also develop their in-country presences including by reopening the UN Information Centre in the UK.

<sup>40</sup> [Civil society at the international level](#)

<sup>41</sup> [The case for a UN civil society champion](#)

<sup>42</sup> This does not preclude, and must not cover for, increased engagement with civil society by the Secretary-General themselves. Indeed, the civil society champion should facilitate greater engagement from the Secretary-General.

Moving beyond communication and participation and into governance: the UN is currently very smitten with the idea of “Multistakeholder partnerships” - formal coalitions of international institutions and private and third sector entities such as Gavi: the global vaccines alliance. These partnerships can be highly effective and given that the SDGs are an agenda that is much larger than the UN or member states it is right that the partnerships developed to deliver them go beyond those institutions too. Doing so also helps wean our global system off its current overemphasis on the institution of the nation state and prepare it for the later part of this century and beyond where the importance of the nation state will doubtless diminish.

However, at the moment the notion of a multistakeholder partnership is nebulous and the UN would do well to codify and formalise the concept. Furthermore, there is some concern about the absence of accountability and legitimacy with respect to such arrangements - and a concern about the increasing corporate influence at the UN. The UN should be encouraged therefore to ensure that multistakeholder partnerships be developed as coalitions not just of those delivering the service but those who the service is delivered for and those who speak for them. Representatives of affected populations, indigenous groups, trade unions, elected representatives at the local or national

level and civil society advocates should comprise at least half of the governance structure of any multistakeholder partnership to ensure it is fully accountable and has popular legitimacy.

## IN SUMMARY

- **The UK should support the Together First proposal for the UN to appoint a civil society champion.**
- **The UK should resource and encourage the UN to do greater public outreach work, building on UN75’s “world’s biggest conversation”.**
- **The UK should encourage the UN to reopen a UK based information centre.**
- **The UK should encourage the UN’s support for multistakeholder partnerships but should work to ensure these partnerships are codified and that they are accountable and answerable to those they serve: 50% of seats within multistakeholder governance mechanisms should be reserved for representatives of the public, trade unions, civil society and indigenous groups.**

# Conclusion and recommendations

The United Nations is a difficult organisation to reform, but doing so is crucial, particularly now at a time when the pandemic has swept away old certainties, exposed risks but also opportunities, and demonstrated once again the vital importance of an effective mechanism for facilitating international cooperation. As the Secretary-General consults with experts, practitioners and civil society to establish the content of his reform agenda it is right that the UK - a key part of the global system - take part in that conversation.

While there is a temptation when reforming an organisation to start with its institutional structure, when it comes to the UN this is both the most difficult and perhaps the least effective form reform can take. The shortcomings of the United Nations primarily concern the behaviour of member states, and insofar as they are shortcomings of the Organisation itself they primarily concern political interference and a

lack of principled leadership. For the United Kingdom work on UN reform also needs to be grounded in an understanding of the levers the UK has available to it, the impact the tone taken by the UK with respect to UN reform has on global perceptions, and the need to work in partnership with others.

We therefore think the UK should prioritise reforming its own behaviour with respect to the UN, and being a model permanent member. Beyond that the UK should caucus with progressive states such as the ACT coalition<sup>43</sup> to push their reform agendas and should not seek to push reform unilaterally or in a manner that suggests anything approaching entitlement. The UK's priorities for reform should be improving member state approaches towards the UN, followed by reforming recruitment and performance management approaches at the UN. Structural changes to the UN system should be a distant third priority.

## An overview of our policy recommendations

### FOR THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

- The UK should establish as a position of principle that the membership of the Security Council needs to be reformed, to better reflect the political realities of current and future moments, to increase its representative legitimacy, and to resolve the problems caused by the veto - while still maintaining the qualities that have allowed the Council to thus far prevent a third world war. However, given the lack of likely movement on this agenda the UK should not devote significant resources to reform of this kind.
- The UK should support states in the Security Council and General Assembly in making greater use of the Uniting for Peace mechanism to move discussion of matters of peace and security to the General Assembly, and generally adopt an approach of trying to use parallel global governance mechanisms like the GA or HRC to move forward agendas if they become stuck in the Security Council.
- The UK should support the strengthening and capacity of the Security Council, particularly among the elected members, and support increased lead in times for elected members.
- The UK should encourage the greater and more creative use of collective measures short of war, including by ensuring there are automatic consequences within the UN system for states listed in reports of the High Commissioner for Human Rights or the Commissions of Inquiry of the Human Rights Council as well as Special Representatives of the Secretary-General on Children in Armed Conflict and on Sexual Violence.
- The UK should encourage and give political support to the Secretary-General in getting more personally involved with mediating in the Security Council and using his Article 99 powers to shape the Security Council's agenda.
- The UK should push for a more holistic understanding of global security problems and encourage discussion at the Security Council of other agendas which overlap with peace and security.
- The UK should push for greater non-state actor, conflict affected community and civil society involvement at the Security Council.

<sup>43</sup>The Accountability Coherence and Transparency (ACT) coalition is an effective coalition of member states pushing for a more effective UN Security Council.



Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has a bilateral meeting with the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres. © Pippa Fowles / No 10 Downing Street

#### **FOR THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

- The UK should encourage an increase in capacity at the General Assembly, particularly when it comes to matters of peace and security, and fund the strengthening of the Office of the President of the General Assembly.
- The UK should work to convene states at the General Assembly to caucus in support of civil society and human rights.
- The UK should encourage the General Assembly to take a greater role in discussions on peace and security and in interlinking the UN's work on peace, human rights and development.
- The UK should encourage reform of electoral methods in the General Assembly, including abolishing the secret ballot and potentially reducing the absolute nature of regional slates. Unless and until this happens the UK should campaign hard to make elections in the General Assembly more competitive by encouraging more states to run for election.
- The UK should work with the EU bloc to support a stronger and more refined role for the General Assembly in the selection of the UN Secretary-General, including through calling for the Security Council to suggest multiple candidates, the appointment of a single, longer term, and refinements to the format of informal dialogues with candidates to allow for a more free-flowing discussion with more input from civil society

#### **FOR THE UN PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

- The UK should encourage the strengthening of these bodies through greater resourcing, political support, and through support for detailed proposals made by the Igarape Institute and International Service for Human Rights.

#### **FOR ECOSOC**

- The UK should work to increase the transparency of the NGO accreditation process overseen by ECOSOC, including by webcasting proceedings.
- The UK should work to open up the HLPF process for the SDGs to more external stakeholders.
- The UK should use its VNR as a domestic planning process, not a diplomatic matter of presentation. A domestic department, such as the Cabinet Office, should be tasked with preparing the VNR, not the FCDO.

#### **FOR THE TRUSTEESHIP COUNCIL**

- The UK might like to explore proposals in the long term to re-establish the trusteeship council to provide oversight and accountability to use of global commons.

## Overview of recommended reforms for the UN Secretariat

### ON STRUCTURE

- The UK should not prioritise structural reform of the UN but should instead encourage the full implementation of the Secretary-General's and other previous reform processes.
- The UK's attitude to future structural reform conversations should be to increase coherence and consolidation, not to simply add new mechanisms, and to strengthen the Secretary-General's flexibility to act, but also oversight.
- The UK should encourage the work of the Deputy Secretary-General in bringing greater coherence to the work of the UN's agencies and work to ensure that it survives future changes of leadership.
- The UK may wish to consider support for the development of reform proposals to make the UN more regional.

### ON APPOINTMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

- The UK should push for the institutionalisation and expansion of reforms to the selection process for Secretaries-General, including an enhanced role for the General Assembly, and starting with an open and competitive selection process in 2021.
- The UK should push for senior appointments to be made on merit not nationality, should refrain from campaigning for nationals of specific states, and support the institution of a global search for the world's best international talent.
- The UK should encourage the UN to overhaul its performance management processes in line with international best practice.
- The UK should push the UN to adopt international best practice standards on whistleblowing, sexual exploitation and abuse, and gender equality.

### ON FUNDING

- The UK should look to be a model funder, providing more, predictable and unrestricted funding to underfunded elements of the UN system such as human rights.
- The UK should support the Secretary-General in being able to cross borrow between his budgets.
- In the long term the UK could signal that in principle they would support a Tobin Tax to fund the UN system.

### ON HUMAN RIGHTS

- The UK should signal its ongoing political support for Human Rights up Front.
- The UK should support the Secretary-General's data strategy and encourage and resource an overhaul of the SDGs global dashboard, in consultation with civil society campaigning groups, to allow it to be used as a tool for accountability and radical transparency.

### **ON PEACE AND SECURITY**

- The UK should support the full implementation of the Hippo report's recommendations including the desiloing of work on the peace operations continuum.
- The UK should contribute more troops to UN peacekeeping and encourage the reconceptualisation of troop contributions so that the right to deploy contingents are awarded to states as the outcome of a competitive tender process.
- The UK should encourage reform of UN peacekeeping to make it more flexible, context specific, and people centred - answering to its host community.
- The UK should help to strengthen the Secretary-General's work on mediation.

### **WITH RESPECT TO THE UN'S PLACE WITHIN THE WIDER WORLD**

- The UK should support the Together First proposal for the UN to appoint a civil society champion.
- The UK should resource and encourage the UN to do greater public outreach work, building on UN75's "world's biggest conversation".
- The UK should encourage the UN to reopen a UK based information centre.
- The UK should encourage the UN's support for multistakeholder partnerships but should work to ensure these partnerships are codified and that they are accountable and answerable to those they serve: 50% of seats within multistakeholder governance mechanisms should be reserved for representatives of the public, trade unions, civil society and indigenous groups.



**UNA-UK**