

A Rejoinder to the Preceding Article – *Missing Too Many Goals: Is the UN any longer fit for purpose?*

Kris Valaydon

The polemical approach adopted in the article by Professor Hardy, critically examining the performance of the United Nations, particularly in its endeavour to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is commendable given the complexity of the subject matter, involving a myriad of facets and dimensions, bearing on the relevance or effectiveness of the institution, and which makes adopting such an approach not only laudable, but also imperative in the pursuance of objective thinking. Polemicizing paves the way for debates and discussions that are instrumental in understanding the complexities of our modern society. By fostering a culture of open discourse on the United Nations, we enable the evolution of thought and the development of ideas and beliefs; and in the present case, it triggers a progression that is essential for a deeper, more balanced judgment of the institution's mission at the global level. Promoting the open expression of contradicting views and positive brainstorming contributes to enhance the diversity of perspectives, boosts the quality of discourse, leading to a more impartial examination of the institution's efficacy.

The UN under the spotlight

The UN is a topic which has been attracting a lot of comments for many years, and not only regarding its endeavour to achieve the SDGs but also in respect of other global issues that the institution has been called upon to address on behalf of its Member States. A one-sided interpretation of the UN's performance in respect of the SDGs or of any other of its multiple mandates, would lack a much-needed, intellectual consideration of the structural factors that explain, or otherwise determine, the manner in which the institution generally carries out its mission. And throughout any exercise to scrutinize the work of the UN, it is useful to bear in mind that there exists no other institution on the planet on which devolves the responsibility, not to say the burden, of guiding the future of the world, geared essentially to the, perhaps elusive, goals of safeguarding global peace and promoting sustainable development worldwide: a perhaps overly ambitious wish embraced by the institution's founders and its member states.

Contextualizing the UN's performance

The purpose of the present rejoinder is not so much to refute, paragraph by paragraph, each of the arguments contained in the article under reference, nor does it try to justify why the United Nations development system has not been able to respond adequately to the ambitions expressed by member states in the formulation of the SDGs. Our intention

is essentially to contextualize the process of implementation of the SDGs, so that the exercise of examining the institution's performance does give due consideration to the economic, social, cultural, and political and environment in which the UN development entities operate. A more objective appreciation of the UN's performance can be achieved by integrating into the analysis the structural balance of power that pervades the UN, the constant interplay of diverse and conflicting interests among its Member States, which undeniably shapes the outcome of follow-up actions to the adoption of the SDGs.

Agenda 2030: a shared responsibility

At the outset, one needs to acknowledge that the attainment of the SDGs is what can justifiably be called a shared responsibility: a burden that does not rest solely on the shoulders of a singular institution, either as regards implementation of measures or answerability. Rather, achievement of targets set necessitates the active engagement and participation of all Member States, civil society actors, the private sector, and individuals alike. The multiplicity of stakeholders is a basic requirement in any development endeavour, this is more so especially when considering its scale, as is the case with the development goals contained in Agenda 2030.

In line with the logical reasoning of a multi-stakeholder involvement and responsibility in a development agenda, one will reckon that in the event of inability in achieving goals, a fairly conducted scrutiny should concern all relevant actors. One cannot obviate the importance of national commitment and underscore the political agendas of individual Member States, their priority-setting philosophies, and their effective contribution towards implementing their national development agendas.

As in case when there is a successful outcome crowning a development endeavour, similarly, all major actors bear a share of responsibility for any shortcomings identified. It becomes therefore incumbent upon us, when judging performance in the pursuit of the SDG targets, to objectively assess the commitment of each stakeholder and their effective involvement in the implementation of initiatives that are put in place to improve development indicators and achieve the targets set.

Kafka and the intensity of human activity

The suggestion that the organization and operations of the United Nations system can be likened to a story worthy of Kafka seems to us to be an exaggeration. But it is understandable that this is felt by those who do not know the United Nations system well enough, those who have not been in contact with the organization through having worked for it, those who are not knowledgeable of its structure, its entities and their mandates, and who are obviously unfamiliar with the terms of reference of individuals

whose job it is to run the United Nations system. For outsiders, it is a nebulous organization from which a resolution sometimes emerges, which the big five, the members of the Security Council, may choose to discard. Or, it could be commonly known as an institution whose presence on the ground is visible either in conflict and post-conflict countries, with Blue Helmets and humanitarian aid convoys, or, in more stable countries, with cars with blue or green plates bearing UN markings, transporting programme and administrative staff of the development agencies.

It will be noted that the allusion to a Kafkaesque world is also, and more usually, made when describing the workings of a state; of a government whose dysfunctional and heavy bureaucracy suffocates and poisons the progression of a society, and which subjects its citizens to treatment that can only be described as the paragon of absurdity. With no attempt in mind to justify this pernicious situation which predominantly characterizes huge and tentacular organizations, whether national or supranational, it has to be acknowledged that the complexity and intensity of human activity and the sophistication of a society always lead to the setting up of structures, mechanisms and procedures which alienate the layperson. The United Nations is no exception to this logic, given that it is a supranational organization with a gigantic mission to fulfil, of which achieving the development objectives of Agenda 2030 represents only a tiny part of its remit.

On a different plane, but still from a Kafkaesque point of view, the article and the present rejoinder on the performance of the UN in achieving the SDGs, may look absurd in light of the present events that are unfolding in the world and which are showcasing the powerlessness of the UN. Reference is made here to the escalating genocide in Gaza, happening right now, and which also bears the imprint of the super powers and particularly their respect for human rights and the Geneva Convention.

Multiplicity of UN entities

In Professor Hardy's article, reference is made to the multiplicity of agencies or entities of the United Nations and an observation that it is difficult to understand why so many of these are in place and that their attributions are almost unknown. This sentiment may be understandable especially from those who, as stated earlier, are not familiar with the structure of the system and its operational mechanisms. But, one must bear in mind the complexity of the mission expected of the UN, an organization operating at a geographical level that cannot be compared with any other one that has a global membership and mandate. The mission conferred on the UN is multifaceted, and the multiplicity of bodies entrusted to mobilize resources and translate into practice decisions and resolutions adopted by Member States, are not only of technical but also, of political relevance.

Various UN agencies are involved according to their respective mandates to achieve the SDGs. It is true that some of the agencies are more popularly known than others, this is due to their presence on the ground, with their offices and staff, within what is known as the UN country team, entrusted with the responsibility of delivering expertise, policy advice, resources, and to promote knowledge transfer and sharing to assist countries in the implementation of measures to fulfil their functions as decided by Member States.

Virtually all UN agencies have a role to play in some aspect of the SDGs, given the interconnectedness of the goals. Poverty cannot be eradicated nor development targets reached without addressing issues pertaining to economic development, population dynamics, employment, education, health, food security and sustainable agriculture and so on. Just as mentioned above, the achievement of SDGs entails the participation of all development agencies of the United Nations. There is not one single agency that can claim the exclusive responsibility for such a major multi-sector endeavour.

Donors politics and philanthropy

Beyond the technical reasons of specialization, expert knowledge sharing and provision of specialist services and support, there are also political considerations in play. Major donor countries may not want, or may not feel comfortable and willing to provide support in a particular area that would contradict their own national policies, as for example, environment projects that would limit gas emissions or population programmes that would give a choice to women regarding pregnancy.

Further, the major donor countries do not act through sheer philanthropy and do not provide support unconditionally. Even if they proclaim that their acts of generosity come without strings attached, they invariably seek recognition and expect that whatever resources they provide to developing countries is known to the world. Putting resources in the same basket of the United Nations, where all Member States contribute, does not provide them with the recognition and visibility, and also political leverage, they aim to obtain when providing aid.

In the demarche of major donors, one cannot belittle the political considerations that underlie their preference for bilateralism through which they seek control of the assistance they provide through the projects or programs they want to support. Donor countries aim at aligning their assistance with their own national interests, they tend to obtain a control over aid-requesting countries, in some instances a reminiscence of the colonial era, promoting their own political or economic ideologies. Bilateralism allows donors to focus on projects or countries that are strategically important or have resources that are of value to them. And it would be appropriate here to ask: where are the questions raised on the effectiveness of the bilateral aid in support of the SDGs?

To the proposition contained in the article to the effect that Agenda 2030 is anything more than a 'wish list', one can legitimately also add that Agenda 2030 represents an undertaking based on wishful thinking on the availability of the substantial resources needed to materialize the wish list, and on an enthusiastic generosity of donor countries. Here, surges the paradox: we observe the stance of superpowers and the wealthiest nations, driven by aspirations of global dominance which at the same time, is not genuinely matched by the commitment to effectively eradicate poverty and achieve the sustainable development goals. We need only to compare their budget for expenses on armament and warfare and their contribution towards eradicating poverty worldwide.

The issue of resources is crucial for any development endeavour to succeed. In this regard, the UN has been constantly alerting Member States on this basic requirement for achieving the SDGs. For a more thorough understanding of the situation, it is advisable to peruse the 2022 Financing the UN Development System report to get an overview on how United Nations resources are generated, allocated and used.

Population growth

In terms of population growth, one must acknowledge that much progress has been made over the past decades, and the overall growth rate of the global population is slowing. Yet levels of fertility remain high in the poorest countries, while some countries are faced with a fertility rate below replacement level and even negative population growth. It is to be noted that world population conferences have been held, almost every ten years, since the 1950s in Rome, Belgrade, Bucharest, Mexico City, Cairo. The last one, the International Population and Development (ICPD) held in 1994 in Cairo was a landmark as its broad philosophy departed in a singular manner to that of preceding conferences. The ICPD 1994 shifted the paradigm of population issues from an almost neo Malthusian perspective of the need to control population growth, to one which was much more focused on choice and rights. This reorientation of global policy on population growth entails that the new direction of population policies was to be geared towards reproductive rights and advocated that couples freely decide on the number and spacing of children and that they should be given the means to achieve their choice.

Conclusion

The United Nations is a subject that has given rise over the years, and one can say since its creation, to an abundant rhetoric centred on questioning its effectiveness and efficacy, and also on its relevance. But, we need to remember that the UN as an institution exists because Member States so decide, and whatever it does, it is but the sole expression of the latter's wishes. And obviously, among the Member States, prevails the sacrosanct

rapport de forces, and the lip service to commitment which inexorably undermines the chance for change!

***Kris Magalingum Valaydon** holds a Ph.D in Demography from the University of Paris (following presentation of a thesis on population, development and international aid at La Sorbonne), an MPhil in Political Studies from the University of Aix-Marseille, and qualifications in Law and Economics. He has had a long career with the United Nations Population Fund prior to joining the University of Seychelles where he was Senior Lecturer (Law) for the University of London External Programme. He was also founding editor of the University's publication 'ISLAND STUDIES – Indian Ocean/Océan Indien' (2014-2018), and is currently an Honorary Professor of the University. Prior to joining the UN system, he served in the Mauritius government information and communication services, and also at the Parliament. Kris is presently a Barrister-at Law and an international consultant. He is a legal and political analyst, contributing regularly to the local media.*