

Missing Too Many Goals: Is the UN any longer fit for purpose?

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This paper is intentionally polemical. To provide readers with a different perspective, Honorary Professor Kris Valaydon – who has extensive experience of working for the UN – has been invited to write a rejoinder. Valaydon’s contribution immediately follows this article.

The United Nations was conceived in the darkest days of the Second World War. While battles raged in different parts of the world, sights were set on a more peaceful future. For all the difficulties of travelling safely to overseas venues, from 1941 onwards statesmen from different countries met at various times to draft a Charter that would one day serve all nations. The Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) were excluded from discussions but, when a final formulation was agreed in San Francisco in June 1945, eighty per cent of the world’s population was represented. Reflecting the balance of power amongst the Allied nations, a central committee (the Security Council) was proposed, with just five members: USA, United Kingdom, France, China and the Soviet Union. Even though the Charter had yet to be ratified, the act of reaching agreement was still a momentous occasion:

With this Charter the world can begin to look forward to the time when all worthy human beings may be permitted to live decently as free people.¹

Ratification followed in New York on 24th October 1945, the day which marks the birth of the UN. This paper acknowledges the significance of the event, heralding the arrival of an international body ostensibly with the interests of the world at heart. But it is also questioned whether, in its present form, the UN is any longer fit for purpose. Nearly eight decades have passed since its inauguration and in that time new wars have been fought – there has hardly been a day without – and the world has changed in far-reaching ways. As a result, the structure that was put in place in 1945 looks increasingly unsuited to tackle the very different alignments and challenges today. Taking the example of the setting in 2015 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the whole planet, and the disappointing outcomes to date, the case is made that it is surely time to overhaul the international organization. The stakes are too high to ignore an urgent need for change. As a first step, it is proposed that a dedicated unit be established to deliver the SDGs, which might itself offer a model for more far-reaching changes to the UN as a whole.

Exceeding its own capacity

The world looks to the UN to show vision in pursuance of its original Charter. Operating beyond the boundaries of national jurisdictions and not constrained by the short-term horizons of governments, it can afford to be expansive. Indeed, as the main custodian for the future of the planet, this is what is expected. That is why the announcement of seventeen goals (SDGs) for sustainable development across the world was widely welcomed as a timely and far-sighted initiative.² It was something that all nations could subscribe to, with the prospect of individual as well as shared benefits. The ambitious list of goals, it seemed, could offer something for everyone. It is only on closer inspection that doubts creep in and one soon asks whether it is anything more than a ‘wish list’. Such doubts are confirmed when one sees the poor record to date.³ There is failure looming under every heading.

UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS		UN REVIEW OF PROGRESS 2022* <i>*quotes are from the UN Report 2022, op.cit. note 3</i>
1	No Poverty	‘More than 4 years of progress against poverty has been erased by Covid-19’
2	Zero Hunger	‘Soaring food prices affected 47% of countries in 2020 (16% in 2019)’
3	Good Health and Well-Being	‘Tuberculosis deaths rise for the first time since 2005’
4	Quality Education	‘24 million learners may never return to school’
5	Gender Equality	‘...another 40 years for women to be represented equally in national political leadership’
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	‘At current rates, in 2030 1.6 billion people will lack safely managed drinking water’
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	‘Impressive progress in electrification has slowed due to the challenge of reaching those hardest to reach’
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	‘Global economic recovery is hampered by new waves of Covid-19, rising inflation, supply-chain disruptions, policy uncertainties, labour market challenges’

9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	'1 in 3 manufacturing jobs are negatively impacted by the crisis'
10	Reduced Inequalities	'The number of refugees outside their country of origin increased by 44% between 2015 and 2021'
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	'99% of the world's urban population breathe polluted air'
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	'Our reliance on natural resources is increasing – rising over 65% globally from 2000 to 2019'
13	Climate Action	'Rising global temperatures continue unabated, leading to more extreme weather'
14	Life Below Water	'Plastic pollution is choking the ocean – projected to double or triple by 2040'
15	Life on Land	'10 million hectares of forest are destroyed every year... almost 90% of global deforestation is caused by agricultural expansion'
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	'The world is witnessing the largest number of violent conflicts since 1945... a quarter of the global population lives in conflict-affected countries'
17	Partnership for the Goals	'Global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25% in 2020 – particularly amongst young people and women'

Commonly known as the 2030 Agenda, the UN identified broad-ranging goals and associated targets where action is urgently needed to restore the health of the planet – the welfare of its people as well as the environment.⁴ By 2030, just fifteen years from the date of their inception, it was anticipated that most of what was proposed could be achieved. Of course, when they were announced, these were just words and, in themselves, hardly a guarantee of the kind of radical change called for. But, coming from the UN, the foremost international body, words count. For the many individuals and agencies around the world working for the same cause, this kind of supra-national endorsement was important. Collective action was called for; with the weight of the international body behind it, the intention was that nations would no longer be left to act alone. Multilateralism was the order of the day; global shortcomings could be addressed with the full backing of the UN.

Beneath the well-formulated declaration, however, with its high-profile goals, one soon began to wonder whether good intentions were matched by the means to succeed. Initial hopes that the world could really come together to make things better soon began to fade. Eight years into the plan – just past the halfway mark – has anything happened to lift the spirits? One of the goals is climate action – probably the one that is most widely discussed – and yet there is scant evidence that individual countries are making the sacrifices needed to make a difference.⁵ When faced with economic challenges, fossil fuels still dominate the thinking of governments. Or, to take another example, the future of the ocean: on the basis of the main indicators, the situation over these past eight years has actually deteriorated. Under one heading after another, there is little or no evidence of progress. In the words of the UN's own watchdog, 'none of the goals is on track to be achieved globally by 2030'.⁶

As in any big match, it is goals that count. When the players emerged from the tunnel for the second half, the score was not even 0-0. The home side was already trailing badly and showing few signs of turning things round; like an ailing team, they were simply unable to score goals and seemed to be without a strategy to improve the situation. People speak of the SDGs as if they are already a done deal but that is proving to be far from the truth.

Things would have been different, contends the UN, if, during this critical period, there had not been the disruption caused by the global pandemic. Of course, that had a major impact on world development, as did other traumatic events during the period, like the implosion of Syria and the Russia-Ukraine war, not to mention the more recent situation in Israel. But the one thing that is certain is that events happen, whether in the environmental sphere, on the economic front, or through new military conflicts, which is why the element of risk should always be an integral part of any forecasts. It was as if, in 2015, the UN anticipated that nothing of substance would get in the way of the achievement of its SDGs. At the very least, that was an unrealistic assumption for a responsible body to make; it represented a serious failing in its calculations.

Another problem is that the agenda was drawn too widely in the first place. Ambition is a good thing but there is no merit in attempting the impossible. When the idea of sustainability first gained international currency in the 1980s, it was sharply focused on natural resources.⁷ In contrast, in 2015 it was stretched to cover most aspects of global wellbeing – embracing such goals as no more poverty, the eradication of hunger, a pristine ocean and the ending of wars. All laudable goals, but totally unrealistic in the time allowed and with the limited resources that were allocated. There is no glory in failure and one questions whether it would have been better to have restricted the range to, say, environmental sustainability and within that, to very specific goals. For instance, rather than anticipate the complete recovery of the ocean, why not a single objective such as the elimination of plastic waste? Pointing to limited areas of success would surely have been preferable to the prospect of wholesale failure. Once there is a taste of success it can encourage a commitment to achieve further steps forward; failure does the opposite.

At the same time as questioning the unrealistic scope of the list, another problem is that it omits at least one goal which would have been fundamental to success, namely, a strategy to stabilize if not reduce the rate of population growth. From the time that Thomas Malthus (at the end of the eighteenth century) ventured his view – that if the population of the world continued to grow at its then rate, widespread starvation would ensue – the issue has been treated with kid gloves. Even to suggest that population growth should be restrained offends different interests: religions, for instance, which see virtue in every living soul; businesses which rely on an ever-growing demand for their products; and nations which rely on new generations to join the workforce and which measure their importance in the world in terms of numbers of people. Malthus, of course, misjudged the impact of technological advances on agricultural productivity and distribution (especially refrigerated shipping), which brought a huge increase in food availability. But we are doing ourselves a disservice if we fail to acknowledge the inseparable link between numbers of people and sustainability.

The world's population has grown to a level that would not so long ago have been beyond most people's imagination. Just a hundred years ago, it stood at two billion; now it is fast approaching eight billion, with the sharpest rise being over the past fifty years. Two nations alone account for more than half the world's population. Yet, still the restraint of population growth is not seen by the UN as a sustainable development goal. Surely there are critical questions to be asked? Can globalization be relied upon to balance a shortage of food in one part of the world with potential supplies from another? How many people can the natural environment reasonably sustain, with demands from tourism alone in vulnerable locations increasing every year? Each day we generate mountains of waste at a faster rate than we can sustainably dispose it? The warning signs of relentless pressure on the planet are there to see but, far from putting this at the top of the list, we witness countries lamenting a fall in their population as an existential threat. It is hard to dispute the fact that most of the problems that stand in the way of a smooth transition to a sustainable Blue Economy would be less severe if there were fewer people, or at least not more. Because it is a potentially contentious subject is not a good reason to avoid it. On the contrary, it matters to everyone that it is properly addressed and, by omitting this as a legitimate target, the SDGs represent a missed opportunity.

Shades of Franz Kafka

The Czech writer, Franz Kafka, died in 1924 at the age of just 41.⁸ He saw very little of the twentieth century but his prescience enabled him to describe future forms of organization as if he were there in person. Combining fantasy with realism, he painted a disturbing picture of individuals reduced in stature and denied freedom in the face of evolving bureaucracies and latent authoritarianism. In addition to his writings, his name has endured through a noun, *Kafesque*, describing situations that are disorienting, frightening, and similar to scenarios described in his novels. Imagine yourself with a

mission to deliver a crucial message and setting off down an endless corridor, with doors on either side that are always locked, stairs that take you up and down for no obvious reason, and where there is no one to ask for directions. And then you wake up in a cold sweat. In his final novel, the destination of the narrator is a castle, shrouded in darkness and seemingly unreachable. The kingdom’s rulers reside within its walls but, for the villagers outside who live in awe of its presence, the goings-on inside remain a mystery. To add poignancy to the imagery, the author died before this novel was completed, with the key to entry to the castle lost forever.

What, one speculates, would Kafka have made of the United Nations? Established in 1945 as a compact organization with a clear purpose that chimed well with the prospect of a postwar world, it has since spread in all directions and grown out of all recognition. If describing it as Kafkaesque sounds too pejorative, a visit to the UN’s own website reveals a bizarre structure that immediately confirms one’s doubts. Embedded within a diagram entitled ‘The United Nations System’, one is at first reassured by the recognisable names of the General Assembly, Security Council and Secretariat.⁹ But, far from finding clarity under these familiar headings, one is then led into a maze from which there is no obvious escape. To take the example of the General Assembly, any hope of finding a logical explanation of what it stands for is promptly dispelled. Instead, one is confronted with a host of subsidiary bodies that are said to be related but without, in many cases, any apparent connections. The table that follows (taken directly from the diagram in question) vividly illustrates the point.

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY
<p>Subsidiary Organs Disarmament Commission Human Rights Council International Law Commission Joint Inspection Unit Main Committees Standing Committees and <i>ad hoc</i> bodies</p>
<p>Funds and Programmes UNDP United Nations Development Programme - UNCDF United Nations Capital Development Fund - UNV United Nations Volunteers UNEP United Nations Environment Programme UNFPA United Nations Population Fund UN-HABITAT United Nations Human Settlements Programme UNICEF United Nations Children’s Fund WFP World Food Programme (UN/FAO)</p>

<p>Research and Training</p> <p>UNIDIR United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research UNITAR United Nations Institute for Training and Research UNSSC United Nations System Staff College UNU United Nations University</p>
<p>Other Entities</p> <p>ITC International Trade Centre (UN/WTO) UNCTAD United Nations Conference on Trade and Development UNHCR Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNOPS United Nations Office for Project Services UNRWA United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East UN-WOMEN United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women</p>
<p>Related Organizations</p> <p>CTBTO Preparatory Commission Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization IAEA International Atomic Energy Agency ICC International Criminal Court IOM1 International Organization for Migration ISA International Seabed Authority ITLOS International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea OPCW Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons WTO1 World Trade Organization</p>
<p>Peacebuilding Commission</p>
<p>HLPF High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development</p>

The General Assembly is just one of the ‘principal organs’ of the UN system. Another key body is the cryptically-named ‘Economic and Social Council’. The rationale for this separate category is not easy to fathom; like the General Assembly, it includes within it a profusion of lesser bodies, no fewer than 39 in total, listed in different groups that reveal no obvious logic either in their existence or through possible connections. In turn, a third ‘principal organ’ is the Secretariat, which accounts for 29 separate departments and offices, not to mention a ‘catch-all’ footnote informing the reader that: ‘The Secretariat also includes the following offices: the Ethics Office, United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services, and the Office of Administration of Justice.’ And, just in case one thinks that is all, a further footnote points out that its chart does not include ‘all offices or entities of the United Nations System’. Why not include these in the diagram intended to explain the structure, one might reasonably ask?

At this stage, one can be forgiven for being reminded of another literary allusion, the triffid, a science-fiction plant (visualized early in the nuclear age, just three years after the formation of the UN) that grew from small beginnings into a monster capable of devouring all before it. Like the triffid, the UN has reproduced itself exponentially. With just 50 or so nations at the start of its life, the UN membership now numbers 193 and its labour force has grown to an estimated 44,000 (probably more if one includes all of the outliers). Dominating the HQ in New York is a 39-storey tower which houses the Secretariat, with separate structures on the same site for the General Assembly and Conference Centre. From there it has spread to numerous other locations around the world, with a significant presence for general UN matters in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and specialist agencies in cities like Addis Ababa and Paris, Tokyo and The Hague.

Is anyone there?

Where in all this, one must ask, is the engine room to deliver SDGs? Is there a discrete agency with responsibility for implementation or is the task deliberately shared between different departments? As one might expect, there are no direct answers. Rather like Kafka's visitor to the castle, the destination is hard to see across the river and there is no one willing or able to offer clear directions. One can only speculate what goes on within.

At the head of the organization is the Secretary-General, who in his (there has not yet been a woman in the leading position) term of office becomes a household name. The present Secretary-General, António Guterres, was appointed two years after the official start of the SDGs initiative and he has since become the voice of the project, exhorting nations to take it forward and bearing the brunt of criticism when interim targets are not met. But everyone knows that he is the figurehead and not directly engaged in making the project work. He is the captain of the ship, not the Chief Engineer. So, who is really in a position to drive the project forward?

Of course, for an outsider, the answer should be to turn first to the website chart showing the UN system. For such a high-profile activity one would expect this information to be prominently indicated. But that is not at all the case and one is soon lost in a labyrinth of agencies and projects, none of which points to the delivery mechanism for the SDGs. Without answers, one has to turn, instead, to a Google web search which leads to the cryptically-named UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (not to be confused with one of the principal organs of the UN, the Economic and Social Council), and within which there is a Division for SDGs. It has been a circuitous route to get there but at least one can now see that the Division in question acts as the secretariat for the project. Or does it? Unfortunately, it is soon apparent that its primary function is to serve as little more than a clearing house, 'providing substantive support and capacity-building for the goals and their related thematic issues', and playing 'a key role in the evaluation of UN systemwide implementation of the 2030 Agenda...'.¹⁰ In other words, it is a supportive

rather than a frontline unit, or, as a cynic might say, just another talking shop. So who is it that does the actual work? Where can one find the engine room?

As the following extracts illustrate, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and its subsidiary Division are a long way from any action. Rhetoric is the order of the day; a place for more talking rather than practical solutions:

- ◆ ‘System-wide *coherence* at global, regional, sub-regional and country levels...’
- ◆ ‘A broad-based *inter-agency coordination mechanism* is the Executive Committee of Economic and Social Affairs Plus (ECESA Plus), which brings together *50 plus UN entities* (including Funds and Programmes, Regional Commissions, Convention Secretariats, Specialized Agencies, International Financial Institutions, the WTO and IOM), as well as UN research institutes.’
- ◆ ‘The United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) continue to be instrumental in *coordinating system-wide follow-up activities* in their respective areas.’
- ◆ ‘Joint follow-up action by the United Nations system on specific thematic issues is also conducted through *collaborative mechanisms*...’
- ◆ ‘... *a new Coordination Segment* has been created to replace the Integration Segment and the informal meeting of the Council with the Chairs of functional commissions and expert bodies. The Coordination Segment brings together Heads of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and UN system organizations to provide forward-looking policy guidance to the upcoming work of ECOSOC and to ensure coherence and coordination and give direction to the policies and normative work of its subsidiary bodies and specialized agencies relating to the annual theme of ECOSOC and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.’¹¹

Little wonder, one might conclude from this emphasis on process, that practical targets are being missed. Words have their value but they can also be a distraction.

*Simply talking about SDGs can demobilise civil society by creating a false impression of action. Even as promised, transformations remain elusive. Idle talk acts as a smokescreen, hiding the reality of delay and stagnation.*¹²

Doubts in the efficacy of the operation are confirmed when one asks where the money is coming from to fund the SDGs. Given the above, it should not be a surprise to learn that this crucial function is lodged, not within the Division for SDGs but elsewhere across different parts of the UN system. Yet, if ever there were a need for a sharp focus, it is here. Finance can hardly be treated as a marginal issue. Without adequate funding, the SDGs will never be achieved and the sums required are clearly beyond the capacity of any one nation nor within realistic reach of worldwide levies. The full cost is measured each year in trillions of dollars; for developing countries alone, the annual figure is some US\$ 2.5-3 trillion.¹³

Understandably, there is no easy or single way of raising this kind of money but at least there is a consensus on what it is that constitutes sustainable finance, namely, the process of using what is available to leverage greater amounts. Issuing government bonds is one way to tap into private sector finance and individual savings, while at the same time investing in particular projects that will generate their own income. The existing use of blue and green bonds to fund environmental projects is illustrative of how this particular method might work if applied more widely. Additionally, a joint SDG Fund has been established but it depends on the willingness of member nations to play their own part.¹⁴ Nor is it an even process as the fulfilment of the goals calls for a major transfer of funding from North to South. Progress has been made with local projects but the scale of what needs to be done to address, on a global scale, the seventeen SDGs remains daunting.

So the unanswered question is to ask how the gap will be bridged. At least, if straight answers are hard to come by, one can always rely on the UN to offer plenty of advice, regular reviews and statistical analyses. One source, for instance, is the UN Development Programme (UNDP) which *inter alia* has produced a handbook on budgeting for the SDGs, showing how governments, the private sector and international financial institutions can accelerate financing for the SDGs.¹⁵ Expert insights are forthcoming but by September 2022 the disappointing conclusion was that ‘most of the UN Member States have yet to integrate SDGs into their policies, plans, budgets and monitoring and evaluation systems’.¹⁶

The main criticism of the UN approach as a whole (not simply for funding) is that, for all the rhetoric, SDGs have not really been prioritized by the parent body. There is no obvious way to harness the full potential of the organization. Instead, it is dependent on the coordination and cooperation of numerous of its own agencies and the 193 member nations. Expertise is not in short supply and considerable effort is expended in trying to make the existing system work. But if the system itself is obsolete, why continue to attempt the impossible? Surely, it is time to face the reality of designing a radically changed system, one where there is clear direction and with sufficient powers to deliver the SDGs.

No longer fit for purpose?

Reforming the UN has for long been on the agenda, acknowledged at a high level within the organization as well as by external critics. In the words of one critical observer, ‘...it is bedeviled by a litany of challenges, including gross underfunding, bloated bureaucracy, disunity, and geopolitical rivalry among the permanent members of the Security Council’.¹⁷

The fact is that if one were to be designing the UN now, it is highly unlikely that it would look anything like it does; it would be like launching a 1940s car at the latest motor fair. The UN has grown indiscriminately; it is asserted here that it is no longer fit for purpose

and is in urgent need of a 'reboot'. As indicated below, it is hamstrung by laudable but unrealistic aims, it has become unmanageable, its decision-making procedures are Byzantine, the membership of the Security Council is not a fair reflection of current geopolitics, and it is undisciplined in its use of resources. With these various shortcomings, it is hardly surprising that it will face difficulties in delivering something as important as sustainable development goals. In fact, without radical change, it is highly unlikely that any of its seventeen goals will be met.

Is the purpose of the UN realistic?

Article 1 of the UN Charter, in which the purpose of the UN is explained, could not be more explicit:

1. *To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;*
2. *To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;*
3. *To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and*
4. *To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.*¹⁸

The problem is not with the wording, nor the laudable intentions, but with an underlying lack of realism. From the time of its inception, the UN set itself a series of tasks which had never before been met: inspirational words culled, it would seem, from speeches delivered at the end of the Second World War. It is what people would have wanted to hear at the time; imbued with hope but without necessarily being called upon to specify the means to get there. Nearly eight decades later, it must be obvious that international peace has not been secured, that there is not a mutual respect for human rights and self-determination of peoples, nor that one looks first to the UN to harmonize the actions of nations. Full marks for vision and effort but not for achievement.

Goal 16, for instance, seeks to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'. But, at the time of writing, one only has to look at reports of the war in Ukraine, the breakdown of law and order in states in the western Sahel, the violence that is taking place in Sudan, and the tinder box that is the Middle East, to know that this is just one SDG that remains a long way from realization. Human nature is such that war is hardly going to disappear overnight.

Is the UN manageable?

Being a large organization and widely dispersed is not, in itself, a reason to be unmanageable. Were that to be the case, international corporations like Coca Cola and Microsoft, Toyota and Maersk would not exist. The difference with the private sector is that businesses are designed to achieve profitability; everything done is designed to support that aim. In contrast, through its SDGs, the UN is trying nothing less than to change the world – materially, morally, and physically through the environment. But it is trying to do so without a form of organization dedicated to the purpose.

Reference has already been made to the profusion of different agencies that have no obvious connection, one to another. Even allowing for separate units within the UN, with responsibility for individual SDGs, the structure as a whole can only be seen as a handicap, blocking rather than facilitating actions. It is hard to imagine that anyone with an interest in effective management would have consciously designed the present convulsion. Returning to the chart issued by the UN to describe its organization, the only feasible explanation is that it has grown haphazardly, one department superimposed on another, spread widely across the world to serve a complete spectrum of political interests. Little wonder the well-intentioned SDGs are not being met. And little wonder that it leaves itself open to the kind of criticism, not always justified but showing that goodwill is expendable. The problems of the UN have become legendary, well summarized in the single paragraph below:

... it has been dismissed as a shameful den of dictatorships. It has infuriated with its numbing bureaucracy, its institutional cover-ups of corruption and the undemocratic politics of its security council. It goes to war in the name of peace but has been a bystander through genocide. It has spent more than half a trillion dollars in 70 years.¹⁹

Is the UN's decision-making fairly representing all nations?

The answer to this question is that it is impossible to do so. One hundred and ninety-three Member States – two of which together account for half of the world's population, while some others are, in comparison, minuscule – present a quandary for the international body. With the aim of being fair, account has to be taken of every member's interests

Before taking action on a draft resolution, they spend hours discussing every word in the resolution in the hope of reaching agreement on the text. When consensus on the text is reached all of the Member States agree to adopt the draft resolution without taking a vote.²⁰

To an outsider, UN decision making is a tortuous process, at best advancing slowly at the pace of the most resistant member state. And, at the end of it, what is decided by the members is not binding; it is only with the approval of the Security Council that decisions achieve that status.

It was a major breakthrough to project the SDGs into the public domain but any suggestion that all of the Member States agree to all aspects would be wholly misleading. To take just one important example, namely, the present debate on the need to restrain a further rise in global

temperatures, powerful nations can pay lip service to good intentions but then walk away when it suits them. The UN may host the debate but is otherwise powerless to secure the desired outcome. At the end of the process, critical SDGs will be no closer to realization than they were at the start.

Is the Security Council a fair reflection of current geopolitics?

In principle, the idea of a hierarchy in which a small group of powerful members – the Security Council – can enact the wishes of the organization as a whole is defensible. Each of the five member nations which comprise this body were allocated a shared responsibility for ensuring international peace and security. The SDGs should have been agreed as a joint venture and one would have expected the chosen five to work together to achieve the desired outcomes. Unfortunately, there are inherent problems in the structure of the Security Council itself which have prevented this from happening.

When it was formed, its elite membership represented those nations which had done most to defeat the Axis powers. By now, though, this is hardly enough to give a voice to the world as a whole. There are no countries on this central body from Africa and Latin America, India has not been given a place, while Germany and Japan are still excluded. Moreover, any one of the five nations enjoys a right of veto, which, effectively, means that proposals agreed by the others can be blocked. For more than four decades, the Cold War stalled peacekeeping efforts and, even since then, the UN has been ineffectual in resolving major disputes. Without root and branch changes to the structure, it is unlikely that the UN can ever deliver its SDGs or other changes of this magnitude. And, even with such changes, the chances of an international consensus are slight.

Is the UN sufficiently resourced?

Finally, when it comes to backing its ideas with sufficient funds, the UN is between the proverbial rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the kind of change that is required to deliver its SDGs calls for funding on a scale that has barely been envisaged before. Ending poverty, slowing global warming, ensuring food security, and cleaning the ocean, are each dependent on complex and expensive programmes. Admittedly, the costs would not be expected to fall to the UN alone, as individual nations are expected to contribute, but central funding on an unprecedented scale will be needed if the seventeen goals are to be achieved.

In many ways, the SDGs require a major transfer of global resources from North to South and, some would argue, this is already being done. Seventy-two per cent of the UN's budget comes from member country contributions, of which most is from the richest nations – with, by far, the largest amount from the US. In his term of American presidency, Donald Trump regularly repeated his concern that this allocation was unfair and the UN could not rely indefinitely on the largesse of his own nation to keep the world's peace. As a critic of globalism, he maintained:

*We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism. Around the world, responsible nations must defend against threats to sovereignty not just from global governance, but also from other, new forms of coercion and domination.*²¹

In spite of this stance, he also reiterated his belief that there was an important place for the UN, albeit one that relied less on the US for funding and also one that was prepared to review its own form of organization. Money counts and transformational change might well have been forced through but, in the event, Trump's successor returned his country's stance to the previous status quo.

Delivering the SDGs

Arguments have been presented and the assertion made that the UN in its present form is not fit for purpose. This final section, endorsing the urgent need for change, is no more than a signpost indicating steps that can be taken in the short term to stand any chance of delivering the SDGs.

Firstly (seemingly against the flow of preceding arguments), it is accepted that there remains a need for an international voice for the planet. In principle, the identification of SDGs gives a good sense of what is important and the UN is to be commended for taking the initiative in the first place. One cannot seriously question the worthy aspirations within each of the goals.

Secondly, there needs to be an admission that, on present form, none of the SDGs will be delivered by 2030 and probably not at all. If the record of delivery is to be improved, radical change in the organization is needed. The brief for a new design should be nothing less than to dismantle what is there and construct a totally new model that reflects the world as it is, not as it was.

Thirdly, the task of creating something that is totally new should be given to a small group of international visionaries from outside the organization itself. There are too many vested interests within (jobs, national interests, political factions, etc.) to enable the kind of radical and dispassionate change that is needed.

Next, instead of an organization that is highly centralized, the UN should be adapted to empower local initiatives. Power should be transferred not simply to individual countries but, significantly, to community-level projects – to individuals, local NGOs and business startups. Projects which target, say, youth employment, food security, local democracy and a culture of non-violence are obvious priorities. The UN would then become primarily a source of funds, ideas and expertise that will result in early and far-reaching changes on the ground. The future will be defined by local change. But decentralization comes with a

price and will need to be accompanied by rigorous techniques for project management and accountability.

Finally, as time is of the essence, the changes that emerge (with proposals, say, within twelve months) would be focused sharply on delivering the existing set of SDGs. This short-term measure could then provide a template for a longer-term (years rather than months) reconstruction of the UN as a whole. It would also give new life to a waning belief that the UN might still play a vital role in global management.

Notes and references

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