

The United Nations, Explained

From famines to human rights, from climate change to cultural preservation efforts, the UN's mandate and operational scope is simply staggering, and it is forced to act on all fronts with woefully inadequate resources at its disposal. Yet, even without sufficient resources, the organization's work positively affects the lives of millions on a daily basis. In this newsletter, we will look into those achievements and identify ways in which the international community can strengthen the UN. Improvements from within, as well as realistic assessments of the UN's capabilities and achievements should form the core of a healthier and fairer debate on its true value and global importance.

1.1 What is the UN?

The UN, as such, does not exist. The UN is a platform, a network of different states that facilitates contact, provides help when needed, but barely ever acts alone. Member states propose resolutions, fill up the UN's coffers and provide troops to peacekeeping missions. To engage in even the smallest action, the UN usually has to rely on its member states.

At an operational level a distinction should be made between two levels of the UN family. The first one is the interministerial level composed of the Security Council, the General Assembly, ECOSOC, and all other bodies that gather ambassadors, ministers or heads of state together in intergovernmental forums. This first level is the one that is likely to have a large and dramatic impact on the world by making decisions that are implemented either by the member states collectively or by the UN secretariat on their behalf.

The second level is the so-called 'effective' level of the UN: the World Food Program, UNICEF, UNESCO and all other specialized agencies. These agencies were established by member states and are funded mostly by country donations, but are increasingly able to act on an independent basis. This second level puts decisions made at the interministerial level into action on the ground. It is the level that provides food supplies in countries like Guatemala; it works to secure our cultural world heritage and actively promotes better cultural understanding between nations. This level builds schools in Gaza, provides a better life to the children of Tajikistan, and clears landmines in Angola. Even the overly ambitious Millennium Development Goal program has already positively affected the lives of 1.6 billions of people who have gained access to safe drinking water since 1990. Further, in two out of five global regions, primary school enrolment is at least 90 percent, and 80 percent of children in developing countries now receive measles vaccinations.

We should also recognize that with a budget that in 2006 was one thousandth of the world's military spending, which was \$10 billion dollars in the same year, the UN really is a remarkably effective

global actor. The total number of civilians working for the United Nations is a little more than 14,000; a third of the number of people working for the Swiss national administration. The other difference is that the UN is administering activities in 194 countries, while by comparison Switzerland has the relative luxury of working with such resources on its own territory only.

This organization, with a relatively tiny budget and a small administration, has to cover and address an incredibly wide range of issues and challenges and, in effect, manages to be present in nearly every country in the world. This global presence is perhaps the first (and arguably one of the finest) achievements of the organization.

1.2 Structural Weaknesses versus Effectiveness

What is currently lacking is a strong interministerial level. It is this first level, often blocked by narrow and short-sighted political interests (at the Security Council level in particular), that failed in its mission to prevent some of the worst atrocities of the past decades: the Rwandan genocide and the Darfur conflict, to name just a few.

As far as structural weaknesses are concerned, we can identify five main challenges: overdrawn budgets, slow reaction capacities, lack of representative governance, corruption and a heavy bureaucracy. To quote the German Development Institute: “The weaknesses outlined here fall within the responsibility of the member states. These weaknesses are the logical outcome of a politics that places short-sighted national egoisms above the common interest in seeking collective solutions to world problems.”

To overcome at least some of these weaknesses – and to put the UN on a more solid footing in the future – member states should commit more resources and political capital to the UN’s work. The international community as a whole, as well as the member states themselves, will ultimately benefit from a more robust multilateral framework. While the effective level could also be strengthened by a robust reform process, the main priority is the interministerial level. Implementing reform in the Security Council seems particularly important; permanent representation needs to be expanded in order to regain legitimacy and transparency.

Clearly UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon cannot act alone. Member states, and the five permanent members of the Security Council in particular, need to push for major adjustments in the system. As the most powerful members of the UN, they have a responsibility to tap into the momentum for reform and institute a new and improved UN system, fit for the 21st century. No one wants the failure of the League of Nations to be repeated. Indeed the UN has never been as needed as it is today.

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1.3 Resources

1.3.1 Intergovernmental Organizations

Reform at the United Nations, by the UN

This is the official UN Website on the current reform process.

Towards a Regional World Order, by Luk Van Langenhove

This paper by Luk Van Langenhove, Director of the Comparative Regional Integration Studies at the United Nations University, analyzes the character of a reformed United Nations system.

Nongovernmental Organizations

UN Security Council, by Global Policy Forum

Global Policy Forum is an independent policy watchdog that monitors the work of the United Nations and scrutinizes global policymaking. GPF works particularly on the UN Security Council, the food and hunger crisis, and the global economy.

The Security Council Report, Monthly Forecast September 2009

The vision for Security Council Report stems from the belief that the lack of consistent, high quality, publicly-available information about the Council's activities—and those of its subordinate bodies—is a consistent barrier to the effective performance of the Council itself as well as constituting a major handicap for the member states at large, and the wider public.

1.3.2 Academia

The United Nations and its Limits, by John C. Whitehead School of Diplomacy and International Relations

This paper by the John C. Whitehead School of Diplomacy and International Relations discusses the scope of the UN's authority, its mandated functions and the breadth and modalities of its actions in the development field.

The United Nations: Challenges of Our Time, Russia in Global Affairs

This chapter discusses global threats to security and stability and the potential of the United Nations to counter them. The author, former Foreign Minister of Russia, argues that the UN Charter provides for all possible ways to collectively counteract dangers such as terrorism, weapons proliferation, poverty, and diseases.

A Better Globalization: Legitimacy, Reform and Governance, by Center for Global Development

This publication by the Center for Global Development puts forward a 5-point plan for the reform of international society at the beginning of the 21st century.

1.3.3 Media

A Bigger Security Council, With Power to Act, by the International Herald Tribune

This article explores reforms needs in the Security Council. In light of recent events, the authors believe that the Security Council could and needs to play a bigger role in world politics.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come—and Gone? by the Economist

This article presents the new Responsibility to Protect (R2P) Concept developed at the UN and that should, according to supporters, be included in the reform of the UN.