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Strengthening the UN to confront collective challenges

Policy Brief for G20

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Preamble

A sustainable, efficient, and thriving modern global multilateral system needs a functional and proactive the United Nations (UN). The UN represents the hopes and aspirations of millions of people around the world for a better life. Consequently, it is imperative that the UN is fully capable of setting and executing the required collective global multilateral agenda. This objective has not yet been fully achieved, and numerous bodies and critics have been calling for a fundamental reform of the UN for a number of years. This policy

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brief is the result of expert consultations focused on identifying necessary, near-term reforms for the United Nations (UN) which are both feasible and capable of obtaining wide support. The list of consultation members and their short bios can be found in **Annex**. The proposed reforms aim to improve the functioning of the UN as a body and to ensure better global governance in response to humanity's shared global challenges.

This policy brief has been coordinated by International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA). Located in Austria and supported by 22 national and regional member organizations, IIASA conducts policy-oriented research into pressing concerns that affect the future of all of humanity, such as climate change, energy security, population ageing, and sustainable development. A systems analysis approach, convening power, and political independence help IIASA to coordinate knowledge synthesis and co-development of policy recommendation efforts, including this policy brief.

Context and challenges

With its universal and inclusive mandate to ensure peace and security, and facilitate human rights and sustainable development worldwide, the UN has been playing a pivotal role in tackling critical global challenges, from conflict resolution to poverty alleviation and reducing inequality.

Since its creation, the UN has undergone several reforms aimed at strengthening its ability to better fulfil its mandate. The current suite of reform proposals are driven mainly by: (a) concerns about what are perceived as emerging challenges to multilateralism and to the UN as a key institution of the multilateral system, and (b) concerns about the efficiency, transparency, and effectiveness of the UN as a change agent. Multilateralism is challenged by the growing geopolitical tensions, increasing political polarization and social divisions, and the ongoing transformation of socio-economic systems caused by the rise of artificial intelligence technologies. A slow progress in the global development and poverty eradication, conflicts, migratory movements, violations of human rights, further excacerbate these trends and create threats to human and national securities.

In the area of efficiency, transparency, and effectiveness, the current efforts of the UN Secretary General are focused on the reform of the UN Development System (UNDS) (Resolution 72/279), UN management reforms (Resolution 75/201) designed to simplify policies and procedures, and restructuring the UN peace and security infrastructure (Resolution 72/525 and Resolution 72/199) aimed to prioritize conflict prevention and improving the capacity of peacekeeping operations to bring stability to countries emerging from conflict. The ongoing efforts to reform the UN Development System are considered the most far-reaching. They are designed to respond to concerns about fragmentation and inefficiency of the UN work at the country level. And most importantly, to empower the UN to be better equipped to support the implementation of Agenda 2030

and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The main reforms include a new generation of UN country teams that can help the UN system to work together more efficiently and effectively. This includes efforts to involve and benefit from cooperative regional institutions, a new and more effective budgeting process to ensure predictability, giving more importance to partnerships, and improving oversight of the country level activities. While these current efforts of the UN reform have received considerable praise, many also feel that these do not yet go far enough. Many actors see the forthcoming 2024 UN Summit of the Future as an opportunity to accelerate the task of strengthening the UN global governance structures to make it more fit for purpose and capable of leading our collective response to the challenges of our time. The call for the Summit of the Future was triggered, among others, by major global shocks that include: the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, and what is referred to as the "triple planetary crisis" - climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution that are collectively challenging the global community, institutions, and the UN.

Drawing on expert inputs to synthesize various previous proposals on UN reforms, this policy brief presents recommendations of several reforms that are intended to strengthen the organization and its critical functions, boosting our readiness to face future threats to global peace, security, and sustainable development.

Key recommendations

1. Strengthen the UN's Sustainable Development pillar

The leadership of the UN in establishing the SDG framework was invaluable, notwithstanding the fact that the world is not presently on track to achieve the targets set for 2030. The SDGs made a dramatic difference to shape perceptions of the public and decision-makers about the importance of focusing on social inclusion and environmental sustainability, and underscored the integrated nature of sustainable development. The UN also plays a crucial role in monitoring progress towards achieving the SDGs globally and supports capacity development in countries which need assistance to implement SDG-focused policies. To strengthen the UN's Sustainable Development pillar, the following can be recommended:

1.1 Strengthen coordination across geographies and sectors

The SDG agenda is a complex undertaking, encompassing a wide range of tradeoffs and uncertainties and necessitating difficult decisions and compromises. Balancing competing priorities and navigating uncertain outcomes becomes imperative. Accounting for complexity, tradeoffs, and uncertainties inherent in the SDG agenda is essential for designing effective strategies and making informed decisions that maximize positive impacts across multiple dimensions of sustainable development.

Acknowledging these challenges, deeper coordination of efforts across geographical and sectorial scales is essential for further facilitating progress towards the SDGs in a more holistic way. This improved coordination must involve multiple stakeholders from different sectors and regions, including governments, private sector entities, civil society organizations, and communities. It should aim at i) synchronization between national, regional, and global efforts; ii) identifying activities to maximize synergies among multiple goals (so-called co-benefits), iii) facilitating stronger collaborative frameworks, and iv) identifying areas of attention where the action is most urgent and pressing. The UN, with its global mandate, must play a crucial role in coordinating these efforts across different scales.

Furthermore, the UN should enhance its partnerships with competent knowledge partners (e.g., IIASA, OECD, PIK, SDSN Network, SRI, WRI, among others), who can offer the most advanced scientific knowledge and insights, and develop viable implementation pathway options for political consideration.

1.2 Prioritize topics of common interest where collective action is both urgent and feasible

In the current turbulent times, there are several broad challenges relevant to the sustainable development pillar that have the potential to unite countries and foster multilateral cooperation. These themes include (a) the triple planetary crisis, (b) new digital technologies including sustainable and responsible use of artificial intelligence, combating misinformation, and enhancing cybersecurity, (c) education, and (d) health. The UN should be empowered in its bridge-building work in these areas to facilitate international dialogue and cooperation, which would, besides their direct impact, in a longer run also aid the restoration of trust among the UN members.

1.3 Strengthen and consolidate the UN capacity in the area of sustainable development

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) should be strengthened and empowered to effectively fulfil its mandate as a coordinator and specialized body for facilitating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda[2]. The ECOSOC should be playing a leading role in identifying emerging challenges, promoting innovation, and achieving a balanced integration of the three pillars - economic, social and environmental - of sustainable development.

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[2] https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/content/ecosoc-and-hlpf-reviews.

1.4 Facilitate the alignment of the global finance system with the sustainability agenda

Implemention of the SDGs faces major challenges of mobilizing adequate flows of financing for critical transformations including education, healthcare, zero-carbon energy, sustainable food systems, urban infrastructure, and digital access, among others.

Mobilizing financing for poorer countries is always a challenge, yet recently it has become even harder than usual due to the increasing global costs of food and energy, the escalating debt crisis in low-income countries, and the rising severity and frequency of climate change-induced disasters, among other factors. Amidst tightening monetary policies in developed countries and a strengthening U.S. dollar, the business-as-usual approach is leading to a reversal of the SDG gains[3]. The UN Secretary-General called for a radical transformation of the global financial system to align it with the aspirations of the sustainability agenda and the Paris Agreement[4]. The goal is to ensure that all countries have access to affordable long-term financing to scale up investment in development, decarbonization of the economy, building resilience, and enhancing public health and education. According to some estimates, the SDG financing gap increased from 2.5 trillion USD annually before the COVID-19 pandemic to between 3.9 and 7 trillion USD today[5].

The SDG Stimulus proposed by the UN Secretary-General makes several concrete suggestions on how to mobilize various sources of funding for projects that can deliver substantial SDG-related co-benefits[6]. The UN should maintain and further strengthen its pivotal role in developing viable frameworks for addressing the debt crisis; scaling up financing for development, notably through Multinational Development Banks (MDBs); expanding contingency financing; and fostering inclusive and effective international tax cooperation[7].

Novel sources for financing the SDGs could be explored. These may include finances emanating from the efforts to combat illicit financial flows and corruption as well as revenues from taxes on international financial transactions and on international aviation

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[3] https://www.foreign.gov.bb/the-2022-barbados-agenda/.

[4] https://www.un.org/en/desa/un-secretary-general-calls-radical-transformation-global-finan-cial-system-tackle-pressing.

[5] https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/new-economic-paradigm-common-good-market-shaping-by-mariana-mazzucato-2023-05.

[6] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/SDG-Stimulus-to-Deliver-Agenda-2030.pdf.

[7] https://press.un.org/en/2023/ecosoc7121.doc.htm.

and maritime fuel use[8]. The UN could help to develop viable frameworks for reorienting these flows for financing the SDGs.

1.5 Increase resources and support for the UN

The UN cannot fulfil its mission and effectively confront the challenges of the 21st century without adequate funding and strong political support of major countries. Improving funding quality, predictability, flexibility, and accountability, as well as de-linking it from the in-country political dynamics is necessary. New sources of funding for the UN could be explored, for example, countries could allocate a fixed part of indirect taxes on goods and services such as VAT to finance the UN[9].

To further optimize the use of the available resources, the UN should strive to enhance coordination among its established bodies using existing forums such as the Chief Executives Board (CEB) and others.

2. Strengthen the UN systems to navigate collective security challenges of the Anthropocene

Anthropogenic changes in the Earth System, growing vulnerabilities in food, water, and other life-support systems as well as critical infrastructures, growing social inequalities, and rapid technological/digital changes present new and novel security challenges that do not fit within traditional, military-focused security frameworks. The notion of 'human security', promoted by the UNDP[10], captures multiple diverse threats to people's lives and livelihoods against the backdrop of the new socio-technological and biophysical realities, and calls for increased attention and concerted collaborative efforts by nations and international bodies to address these non-military threats, or threats without enemies[11].

2.1 Promote the importance of human security to national and international agendas

Major nation-states continue to increase their already substantial military spending in response to perceived military threats. According to SIPRI, global military spending continued to grow in 2021 for the seventh consecutive year, reaching an all-time high of 2.1 trillion USD[12]. NATO members have renewed their commitment of spending at least 2% of their total expenditure on military security. This state-centric and negative security

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[8] Financing Instruments for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation. A GCF Report (2021). Stockholm: Global Challenges Foundation.

[9] Lopez-Claros, A., Dahl, A., & Groff, M. (2020). A New United Nations Funding Mechanism. In Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century (pp. 264-290) https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108569293.

[10] https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/srhs2022pdf.pdf.

[11] Prins, G. (1993). Threats Without Enemies: Facing environmental Security. Earthscan, UK.
12 SIPRI Annual Review. https://sipri.org/news/2023/sipri-releases-its-annual-review-2022.

mindset is at odds with fostering the aforementioned human security. The G20 nation-states could show leadership by improving funding directed at fostering human security, including developmental aid and food security. This will help to mitigate longer-term security threats stemming from impoverishment, failed states, forced migration, resource depletion and other factors.

2.2 Empower the UN system to efficiently mobilize a global response to human security threats

In addition to playing a critical role in ensuring military security and peace, the UN system should be the key agent to mobilize a global response to global threats to human security. For that, it is important to recognize, anticipate, and account for complex interactions between various 'threats without enemies' (e.g., global change, poverty, social inequalities, digital risks and divides) and their potential to lead to hot conflicts.

The UN system should initiate and coordinate integrated risk assessments of the global threats without enemies, develop governance frameworks to reduce the risks posed by such threats, and build preparedness to lead a global response accordingly, especially if such a threat is developing very rapidly. This requires coordination of activities across numerous other UN agencies including UNFCCC, UNDP, UNEP, FAO, WHO, and others.

2.3 Enhance the knowledge base on human security

To be able to effectively coordinate the global response to global threats to human security, it is critical that the UN system possesses timely and comprehensive data necessary for analyzing, planning and expediting the response. A global hub, to which all countries, relevant UN agencies, and other stakeholders would provide relevant data at the appropriate geographical and temporal scales could be established. To support this endeavor, significant strengthening and enhancement of the UN statistical services would need to be undertaken. Member states and regional bodies would be able to draw upon this common pool of data for their respective national and regional planning, and program implementation. The data hub would greatly expand the capacities in real-time satellite-based data, Earth-based geographic information systems, and relevant flows of Big Data (e.g., regarding daily patterns of transport, air quality, natural hazards, and other data). A particular challenge would be to provide incentives for the private sector to supply data to this hub. Furthermore, the UN should enhance its partnerships with competent knowledge partners who can offer cutting-edge expertise to lead the analysis and response design, based on the data collected[13].

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[13] Multilateral research institutes such as IIASA, UN-linked bodies such as the UN Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN), and global scientific networks such as the InterAcademy Partnership, are examples of knowledge partners for the UN and UN member states.

3. Enhance effective and equitable representation in the UN system

The nation-state sovereignty model, commonly known as the Westphalian system, has long been considered the foundation of global order. However, its conventional form, which originated in 19th-century Europe and spread to other continents, is becoming increasingly outdated to address (and survive) the many complex global challenges of the 21st century. The global order solely based on the conventional nation-state sovereignty model needs to be carefully and gradually reconfigured. The new configuration should promote the principles of subsidiarity, and effective and equitable representation of the interests of major stakeholder groups. The UN is the only legitimate global institution to lead the development of a novel model, which in turn would require reforms of the major institutions of global governance[14].

On the occasion of the 75th Anniversary, the UN Secretary General and Heads of State promoted the idea of more inclusive global governance and broader participation in global institutions including the United Nations. This could be progressed through several channels including the following:

3.1 Strengthen the UN General Assembly

The power of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) should be strengthened with an enhanced oversight of the UNSC and other UN bodies, recognizing that it is a unique global institution representing the interests of all nation-states with equal representation. Notably, the oversight of the UNSC is in line with the 'Uniting for Peace' resolution (Resolution 377(V)), which states that "if the Security Council, because of lack of unanimity of the permanent members, fails to exercise its primary responsibility to act as required to maintain international peace and security…, the General Assembly shall consider the matter immediately with the view to making recommendations to Members…in order to restore international peace and security."

Holding the permanent UNSC members accountable for the use of veto combined with obligating members to listen and engage in the related discussions, as per Resolution GA/12417[15], is in line with this desired development.

There are many other steps which could enhance the UNGA effectiveness. The UNGA oversees financing for sustainable development, but currently lacks the pertinent tools to

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[14] For example, proposals include giving the ICJ obligatory jurisdiction in all UN member states https://www.sef-bonn.org/fileadmin/SEF-Dateiliste/04_Publikationen/GG-Spotlight/2021/ggs_2022-01_en.pdf.

[15] "General Assembly Adopts Landmark Resolution Aimed at Holding Five Permanent Security Council Members Accountable for Use of Veto (GA/12417)" (UN Press, April 2022) https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12417.doc.htm.

play a leadership role in coordinating the multilateral institutions, including the Bretton Woods Institutions and the regional development banks, around the UN agenda (notably the SDGs, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the other multilateral environmental agreements). The role of the UNGA in overseeing and reforming the Global Financial Architecture needs to be strengthened, including through the work of the ECOSOC as a vital organ of the UNGA.

Furthermore, the implementation of recommendations from the Ad Hoc Working Group on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly[16] is indispensable. The support of major groupings such as the G20, and regional bodies such as the European Union, African Union, and ASEAN, can help to ensure that those bodies also support the work towards the UNGA revitalization.

3.2 Enhance the UN Security Council

Ongoing surge of confrontation in the global politics, escalation of violent conflicts and geopolitical rivalries demand a more effective UN Security Council (UNSC). It is essential that the UNSC is viewed and respected as a global guarantor and promoter of peace. For that, the UNSC needs a stronger technical capacity and institutional mandate to address core issues that cause, prolong, or exacerbate wars and violent conflicts.

An effective UNSC is not possible without enhanced legitimacy, which requires effective representation, as well as broad acceptance and scrutinization of the frameworks for the unilateral veto use.

The continued debate over the historical legacy-based membership of the UNSC, which does not adequately reflect the current demographic, political, technological, and military realities, has been a prominent topic for the past two to three decades. In particular, the absence of a permanent seat of India, the world's most populous nation and one of the world's largest economies, and of any African nation, are the most frequently discussed issues in regard to the composition of the UNSC. The failure to expand and reform the UNSC is certainly among the most glaring areas of discontent of many UN member states with the current UN structures.

3.3 Increase participation and voice of citizens

To increase participation and the voice of citizens from across the world in the global governance, various longer-term reforms of the UN architecture should also be considered. For example, alongside the one-country, one-vote structure of the current UN General Assembly, a bicameral architecture could be adopted, by analogy with the parliamentary models of many nation-states. At some future date, a world parliament

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[16] https://www.un.org/en/ga/revitalization/outcomes.shtml.

with a careful allocation of seats could function as a "second house" of the UN legislative branch to bring the voices of "We the people" alongside the governments. A global assembly of parliamentarians could be one possible model in an initial phase[17], with a gradual expansion of the mandate of such a group.[18]

Another avenue to enhance citizen participation and amplify their voices is by strengthening the involvement of Major Groups[19] to the deliberations and activities of the UN. This structure was introduced at the Earth Summit in 1992 to give voice to business and industry, children and youth, farmers, indigenous peoples, local authorities, scientific and technological community, workers and trade unions, women, and non-governmental organizations in the UN.

3.4 Support countries in collaborating on the topics of common interest

The UN should support and enhance the opportunity for country coalitions to advance topics of their common interest. For example, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) already plays an important role in carrying out advocacy for small island states to influence international environmental policy.

3.5 Promote a more equitable distribution of UN agencies across countries

The UN agencies and their headquarters could be more evenly distributed across countries. The presence of the UN and its staff in low-income countries could be increased.

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[17] For example, https://www.unpacampaign.org/

[18] Leinen, J., & Bummel, A. (2018). A World Parliament: Governance and Democracy in the 21st Century. Democracy Without Borders.

[19] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/aboutmajorgroups.html

Annex

Participants of the consultation that informed this brief:

Nitin Desai was Under Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs in the UN, where his major contributions included the organization of a series of global summits, notably the Rio Earth Summit (1992). He oversaw the creation of the Commission on Sustainable Development in the UN. Before his work with the UN, he served as Chief Economic Adviser and Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, in the Indian Ministry of Finance (1988-90).

María Fernanda Espinosa was President of the United Nations General Assembly for the 73rd session from 2018 to 2019. She served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Equador from May 2017 to June 2018. She also held several other Ministerial posts prior to that, including as Minister of National Defense.

Maja Groff, Esq., is an international lawyer based in The Hague, and is the Convenor of the Climate Governance Commission, which seeks to propose high-impact global governance innovations adequate to meet the climate challenge. She serves as Co-Chair of the Coordinating Committee for the International Anti-Corruption Court (IACC), as well as on The Canadian Task Force Against Global Corruption. As a Principal Legal Officer, she has previously worked on the development and administration of multiple multilateral treaties.

Vuk Jeremic was President of the United Nations General Assembly for the 67th session from 2012 to 2013. He is currently the President of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), an international think tank based in Belgrade and New York. He served as Serbia's Foreign Minister from 2007 to 2012. In 2007, he chaired the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers.

Anastasia Likhacheva is Dean of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow, Russia. Until 2021, she was Director of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International relations (HSE). She is an author and co-author of more than 50 academic papers, briefs and working papers published in Russia and abroad. Her key area of expertise includes international political economy, development studies and international freshwater problems.

Roman Nikishin is Advisor to the Academic Supervisor of the Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow, Russia. Prior to taking this position in early 2022, he served in leading analytical functions at the Russian Parliament and different capacities at the Russian Ministry of Foresign Affairs.

Antonio de Aguiar Patriota is the current Ambassador of Brazil to Egypt and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brazil from January 2011 to August 2013. He previously held various diplomatic posts as an Ambassador of Brazil.

Lisa Sachs is Director of the Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment. Since joining CCSI in 2008, she established and oversees CCSI's robust and interdisciplinary research portfolio and advisory work on the alignment of investment law, investment practice, and investment policy with the sustainable development goals. She is a globally recognized expert in the ways that laws, policies and business practices shape global investment flows and affect sustainable development.

Thomas Stelzer is Dean of the International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA) and its Executive Secretary of the Assembly of Parties. He has previously been a member of the foreign service of the Republic of Austria. He has served as Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations Office in Vienna, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization Preparatory Commission

Marc Uzan is Executive Director and founder of the Reinventing Bretton Woods Committee, a non-profit organization established in 1994 that is internationally recognized for its work addressing issues related to the international financial architecture.