

“UN70: A New Agenda”

Background:

The UN has for the last 70 years played a key role in developing, upholding and promoting the international legal order, which in turn promotes peace, development and human rights. It is not hard to identify concrete results from its work:

- Vaccinates 58 per cent of the world’s children, saving 3 million lives a year
- Promotes maternal health, saving the lives of 30 million women a year
- UN promotes peace with 120,000 peacekeepers in 16 operations on 4 continents
- Protects and promotes human rights on site and through some 80 treaties/declarations
- Use diplomacy to prevent conflict, from the Cuban missile crisis to Libya post-Ghaddafi
- Assists some 60 countries a year with their elections

The UN has a unique convening power for addressing global issues, for example how the UN works with 193 countries in the making of the new Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. The huge participation of world leaders at the opening of the UN General Assembly each September is in itself an illustration of the usefulness of the UN as a meeting place and arena for international politics. But the international legal order and the UN’s global role cannot be taken for granted. Geopolitical changes, global challenges and lack of political and financial stability impose new demands on international cooperation and on the UN’s ability to adapt and take on new tasks. How can multilateralism and the UN, with its limitations, solve tomorrow’s challenges? How can other parts of the world, who are less politically attached to the UN given its transatlantic creation, see the UN as a good investment for them?

Objective

We need to change and improve the UN as an intergovernmental arena as well as an actor in its own right. Norway wants to contribute in the work of securing the future relevance of the UN, and is launching the project “UN70: A New Agenda”. This is an initiative in support of preparing the UN for the next era. The project will analyse global trends and challenges and facilitate discussions on how the UN system can address these challenges. The discussions will centre around the three pillars of the UN: peace and security, human rights and development/humanitarian efforts and the linkages between them. The project will both look at institutional issues and the intergovernmental machinery. Norway will work together with states, researchers, civil society and others. The project aims at developing ideas for reform and present them to candidates for the appointment as the new UN Secretary General. These ideas will also develop and update Norwegian UN policy beyond the selection of a new Secretary General. The project is launched with a kick-off seminar on ‘the big questions’ on global challenges, international order, multilateralism and the UN.

Rationale: Link global challenges, international order and UN reform

Today's challenges are more complex than they were in 1945. This calls for a greater capability to manage complexity and to link agendas with responses. Is the UN fit to solve today's challenges – from terrorism to climate change? There is a growing gap between global challenges, the member states' willingness to seek solutions and collectively finance new and existing measures within the UN system, and the UN system's current capacity and ability to address the challenges.

We are heading for a multipolar world. Some countries perceive the existing structures of the UN as a mechanism that continues and enhances the influence of the traditional major powers. One of the challenges for a future world order is to make existing international organisations more relevant for the emerging powers and ensure their commitment to those organisations. The member states of the UN therefore need to identify the UN's strengths and weaknesses and decide on the role it should serve in global governance.

Furthermore, the UN is facing greater competition. New, informal groups like the G20, regional organisations, civil society and also private actors are becoming increasingly prominent on the international arena. This is not necessarily a negative development, as the UN simply cannot deal with all the issues on its own. But the unique representativeness and convening power of the UN should be safeguarded. The UN and the UN charter is still important in protecting the interests of small and medium sized nations like Norway.

The normative role of the UN has been key ever since 1945. The operational role of the UN has grown over the years. Do we need to re-balance, or find new formulas for how to combine these two aspects? Or is it more a matter of understanding the UN better as a whole, including the specialized agencies? New tasks are continually being imposed on the UN system, new organisational "boxes" are being established. Some mandates and some organisational structures are less relevant today than before. Can member states agree on something the UN should not do? There is a need for reform of the UN, to strengthen and modernise. Parts of the UN system needs to be made more effective, while other parts simply need more funding.

The member states have a general responsibility for how the UN functions, and must demonstrate the ability and political will to decide on necessary reforms. In these efforts there are three bottlenecks in particular: funding, leadership and partnership.

Funding is often a driving force behind fragmentation. There is also a growing disconnect between the mandates and the task that members states want the UN to fulfil, and the resources that member states are willing to provide. The idea of "doing more with less" should no longer be guiding policy. Non-OECD donors must be mobilized to support UN-activities to a larger degree for both financial and political reasons. Member states increasingly want to micromanage the UN and the Secretary General. In a world where speedy reactions to events are needed, the member states

must give the institution more leeway. The UN must be allowed to forge new partnerships that reflect a world in which many non-state actors are important players.

Possible questions and issues for the discussion:

- What has the UN meant for international politics and development the last 70 years?
- What global trends and world order do we see in the world today? What are the main challenges for the UN?
- Can we find a better formula for combining the normative and operational roles of the UN?
- Innovation and partnership e.g. with implementing partners (or the other way around in which the UN is implementing agency for global funding instruments), are already important for many parts of the UN. How can we promote partnership despite resistance in the GA?
- How can the UN become more relevant outside its transatlantic origin? Deepen the partnership with regional and sub-regional organisations?
- How can the main components of the intergovernmental machinery like the General Assembly, ECOSOC and the Security Council be reformed? What are the viable options?