

# The United Nations at the Heart of 'Another World'

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**ABSTRACT** *Daniel Durand argues that with the crisis in Iraq, the United Nations is once again a focus of political debate. He asks what kind of new UN is needed for 'another world' and proposes a series of reforms that civil society is now beginning to debate.*

**KEYWORDS** *civil society; globalization; peace; security; financial and economic reform*

## **The changing world order**

The development of the UN System with its agencies, specialized institutions, treaties and conventions has generated the process of global governance. Two principal features mark this global governance today: the emergence of globalization and the prominent role of civil society. Globalization means the end of the rigid separation between the national and the international spheres at the economic technological, political, social and cultural levels. By ratifying the Charter (and by acknowledging its supremacy over any other treaty), and by creating the Security Council with the ability to resort to force if peace and international security were threatened, the founder states created a system of world collective security. Since 1945, dozens of international treaties in a variety of fields, the widening of competence of international, commercial and financial organizations have shifted the role of the 'nation state'.

Even though, paradoxically, in the wake of decolonization, and after the Soviet Union collapsed, many new very small states were born, the general trend is towards a more international world with less clearly defined borders. The formation of economic-political alliances (e.g. the European Union and Mercosur) and globalization of transport, communication, etc. has led to a complex world order.

## **The role of civil society**

According to the Cardoso Report: 'Not only are the commercial and financial markets more and more globalized but also the associations of civil society and the movements of citizens who, thanks to their flexible partnerships and their networks, reinforce their presence and their influence'.<sup>1</sup>

The UN Conferences in the 1990s, dedicated to children, environment, human rights, the population, women and social policy introduced new notions of sustainable human

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development, human security and a culture of peace. These large conferences supported organizations from the South shielding them from criticisms of their national governments. Through these debates, civil society has created a unique 'public space'.

This mobilization in the 1990s made way for the strong public opinion against war as a political tool as shown in the strong negative opinion of the US intervention in Iraq. For the USA as the sole superpower this is a new state of affairs. By seeking the Security Council's approval in 2002 to justify a war against Iraq, George W. Bush implicitly acknowledged the UN's authority even though he ultimately ignored the decision.

'It is not the UN which has changed, but the world' as a United Nations working document admits.<sup>2</sup> More and more voices are heard saying that 'the time has come' for change.<sup>3</sup> Kofi Annan has also clearly stated at the opening of the General Assembly in September 2004 that member-states should take 'strong decisions' in 2005 for the 60th anniversary Assembly. What changes? What decisions?

### Reclaiming our UN

The need for deep reform of the whole UN system, the Charter included, is posed by an increasing number of NGOs, Governments and UN officials responsible for UN agencies.

Reform is needed first to restore credibility to the UN. This requires meeting three challenges:

- *Fulfilling the objectives of the Millennium Declaration and Goals:*<sup>4</sup> this is essential to the UN's credibility. After four years there is little to see. The financing has not happened, in spite of the unanimous decisions taken at the Conference at Monterrey on financing development in 2002.<sup>5</sup>
- *Enforcing the Treatises and making them work:* improving the checking systems in the treatises is thus paramount; the debate on the efficiency of inspections in Iraq has been essential in this matter. Giving more material and technological means to the UN for these missions could be a goal of the European Union's foreign policy. It is

fits with the EU policy to support to multilateralism, to reinforce what already exists in the Constitution draft, but is too weak in practice. The potential weight of the European Union at the United Nations should not be underestimated. When the General Assembly session resumed in September 2004, the representative of the European Union, the Dutch Foreign Minister emphasized that as the number of members enlarged to 25, the Union represented 36 per cent of the UN budget. With its 25 member-states, the European Union represents 13 per cent of the members of UN and 30 per cent of world economy, 36 per cent of the current UN budget of Europe is a key to the future of UNO and to multilateralism.

- *Involving civil society:* the idea that associations and companies are the key-actors in world political and social affairs and that UN must allow them a more active decision-making role is the key finding of the governments the report established by a group of experts headed by the former President of Brazil, Federico Cardoso.<sup>6</sup>

This report estimates that the UN should reduce more actively the 'democratic deficit'. The greater integration of civil society and the reinforcement of a role for parliaments in international institutions would make it possible to tackle one of the chief incoherencies in the contemporary world, namely that the substance of politics is more and more international, whereas the political process (the way in which decisions are obtained) remains essentially national.

There are many means at the UN's disposal that are not used due to the political balance of powers between states. Nothing today in the Charter really checks certain decisions: it depends on our creativity and our ability in mobilizing opinion, in order to widen the interpretation of the Charter to reflect today's world order. This has, in effect, been done by the Security Council. As we have seen, it is sufficient to declare that an internal situation constitutes a 'threat for peace and international security' (Haiti, the Congo) for action to be taken. In the same way, without any structural reform, the workings of the General Assembly and of the Security Council could be improved.

## **Reforming and democratizing**

We need to find a new balance between the Security Council and the General Assembly. Some reforms are already being discussed. The most often quoted, including at the opening of the new session of the United Nations in September 2004 is the extension of the Security Council with a better geographical representation.

The introduction of collective responsibility of the international community, forcing the UN to act in serious situations with a risk of genocide, accompanied with strict criteria is another line of reform already posed by the General Assembly report of 2003.

Other demands from NGOs or developing countries will be more difficult to put into place: for example, to reinforce the role of the Secretary General in the coordination of specialized institutions, funds and programmes of the UN system. Some proposals contemplate the creation of a general Assembly of the Peoples' with compulsory consultative advice and right of recommendation.

## **Economic and financial reforms**

The major need for reform is for the UN to take on board world economic and financial problems. The creation of the WTO, the meetings of the G5 and G7 and the inordinate role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank has done little to solve deepening inequalities, indeed some would argue have enhanced them. The scale of world poverty makes it illusory to speak of world governance. The UN's link to world financial or economic institutions looks vague in the eyes of world public opinion. For a long time, the developing countries and the NGOs specialized in development cooperation have been lone voices alone. Since the 2000, some success such as the partial cancellation of the debt of poorer countries (Campaign Jubilee 2000 for example) and the widening of the influence of 'no global' groups has made the public more aware of the dangers of neo-liberalism and the current trade and financial regimes.

An increasing number of developing countries and NGOs ask for the democratization of interna-

tional financial institutions, their control and integration in the UN system. A UN coordinating mechanism of world financial, economic, social and environmental policies must be created. Several propose either to reform the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to convert it into an economic, social and environmental Security Council with some influence, if not authority on the agencies, funds and programmes of UN, the Bretton Woods institutions (International Monetary Fund and World Bank) and the World Trade Organization have been proposed.

Similarly, the IMF and the World Bank ought to take up their original missions. The IMF should only see to the monetary balance and world macroeconomics. The World Bank was in charge of financing reconstruction and development. Today, they impose deregulation and free trade on the South, while the North protects its economy carefully. The criticisms against WTO, created in 1995 are many ranging from its opaque functioning (arbitration made by anonymous panels of experts) as well as about to its aims. Many<sup>7</sup> wish, as a minimum, that these organisms should democratize the way they make decisions.

## **Making it happen**

A huge mobilization of civil society is necessary to reclaim the UN for the people, those working for peace need to join with the anti-globalization movement and those working for the reform of the UN. Let us learn from earlier successes such as the coalition for the elimination of land mines (a powerful network of NGOs, humanitarian institutions. International Red Cross and Handicap International, states like Canada and Sweden) or the coalition for the success of the International Criminal Court of Justice built on the same pattern.

'It is impossible to imagine how our world could work without the principles and the practices of multilateralism to prop it up' (Annan, 2000) and multilateralism is embodied by the UN system. It is time for the UN to play a truly 'central' role in international relations.

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### **Notes**

- 1 Civil Society and Global Governance, a study by Federico Enrique Cardoso, President of the Group of Eminent Personalities on the relations between the United Nations Organization and Civil Society, 2003.
- 2 The UN System and Civil Society – Inventory and Analysis of Practices, Information document designed for the Group of Eminent Personalities, 2003.
- 3 Appeal for the February 2005 WSF: 'reclaim our UN, time to mobilize the world society to strengthen and democratize the UN' was issued by the UBUNTU network (see Last Word in this issue of *Development*).
- 4 Seven priorities: to reduce extreme poverty, to insure primary education, to promote the equality of sexes, reduce the infantile death-rate, to improve maternal care, to fight against aids and insure sustainable development.
- 5 Centre for new UN: <http://www.org//french/newscentre>.
- 6 Group of Eminent Personalities on the relations between UNO and Civil Society, 2003.
- 7 This synthesis is largely inspired from the London Declaration adopted by the NGO network Ubuntu, 01/04/2004.

### **References**

Annan, Kofi (2000) *Millenium Report* United Nations General Assembly, 6–8 September.