

THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM: THE UNITED NATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

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There are two conflicting realities in today's world—realities which must guide the way the United Nations works, but which often seem far removed from its procedures and negotiating rooms. The first reality is the crushing poverty and lack of security that mark the everyday lives of so many of our fellow human beings, a reality that detracts from what the UN Charter calls the “dignity and worth of the human person.” The second concerns our peoples' aspirations, expectations, and dreams for the kind of United Nations they want to see—visions which, though they currently exist only as hopes, we are endeavoring to transform into a future reality. The United Nations Summit of September 2005 and the reforms and progress that followed it have marked a progressive step toward realizing these hopes. This step, based largely on the ideals of multilateralism, should be regarded not only as an endpoint but as a milestone on the road toward transcending poverty and advancing human dignity.

I saw the hellish reality of poverty and conflict when I went to Somalia in 1992 as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. I witnessed United Nations and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) staff handing out bottles of water to people in desperate need. A woman was handed a bottle, and I was struck by the look in her eyes—a look that told me how something as simple as a bottle of water meant the difference between life and death. It was the difference between doing a productive day's work and walking miles for a bucket of polluted water with the

risk of being raped along the way. This human reality in Somalia tells us something profound. The poorest and most vulnerable in the world need an international system that makes a difference in their daily lives. They needed it in Somalia in 1992, and they need it today in many other places where conflicts have deprived people of security, dignity, and livelihoods. We now conclude that in order to meet the aspirations, expectations, and dreams of the people, governments and the international community have a responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. This is a critical advance and a crucial realization for the cause of human security.

We also need the multilateral system in countries like Burundi and Liberia, countries where, after years of civil war, there have been democratic elections and there is now the best chance for peace in a generation. This is the second reality—the reality of aspirations, expectations, and dreams. The people of Burundi and Liberia expect that the international community will help them rebuild their shattered countries. We are all well aware, however, of the fragility of this dream. In the recent past, of those countries that have emerged from conflict, almost half have relapsed into fighting within five years. This trend must be reversed. The need for an effective multilateral system is thus most clearly felt by the poorest and most vulnerable people. However, the poor hold no monopoly on such a need. I firmly believe that all nations, including the richest and the most powerful, need effective multilateralism.

Let us consider some of the major threats in the beginning of the twenty-first century: global disease outbreaks, chronic poverty, natural disasters, climate change, terrorism, organized crime, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. How would the world deal with these threats if there were no multilateral system—no regional organizations, no World Bank, and no United Nations?

Over the last year, natural disasters have taken an enormous toll, from the Southeast Asian Tsunami to Hurricanes Katrina

and Rita to the flooding and mudslides in Central America. To this toll we must add the losses accrued from the recent devastating earthquake in South Asia, a disaster in which more than 50,000 have been confirmed dead, one million have been left in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, and three million remain without shelter. International responses to natural disasters must complement the work of individual governments and peoples. We need a functioning multilateral system with the authority to ensure that the spontaneous outpouring of assistance each time a disaster strikes is effectively synchronized and delivered. Only a multilateral system could give us a Global Emergency Fund with funds ready to be called upon the moment a disaster strikes. The United Nations is close to having such a fund in operation.

Meanwhile, there are the 'silent tsunamis' of disease, hunger, and poverty occurring every day, largely unnoticed across the world. Every month HIV/AIDS kills the same number of people as those who died in the tsunami last year. Every thirty seconds, a child in Africa dies of malaria, even though treating the disease is cheap. In Sierra Leone, every third child will die before the age of five. We cannot afford to ignore these statistics. We cannot afford a world in which the few get ever richer while the many are ever more aware of these riches but are unable to even aspire to them. Such a world is in nobody's interest. The lines separating the rich and the poor can only hold for so long in this age of instant communication and growing global interconnectedness.

We need a multilateral response to world poverty. Failure to bring this about will result in an ever more fractured and unsafe world. The same case can be made for the other global challenges of our time. Multilateralism is needed to bring to justice the perpetrators of international terrorism and to prevent attacks, to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and to bring about disarmament. I believe we are now at an important juncture in history. In a world of much insecurity and mistrust, do we redouble our efforts to create a multilateral system that can deal with today's challenges? Or do we retreat behind our

borders, trying to build up our defenses against the modern-day threats?

Perhaps it is harder to place our faith in multilateralism when many of the world's institutions are under attack or in a state of self-doubt. This critical scrutiny is faced by many multilateral organizations beyond the United Nations. For example, the fate of the European Union constitution is an indicator of the immense difficulty international institutions encounter when attempting to define their roles and to reconcile those ideas with popular sentiments.

The United Nations has had particular problems of late. We are aware of the disgraceful conduct of a small minority of United Nations peacekeepers. And in the past year we have heard the serious criticisms of the United Nations raised by the Volcker Report on the Oil-for-Food Program. There is an important process underway in the General Assembly and the Secretariat to work out how the needed changes and reforms should be made. This work is important, and must be carried out seriously and thoroughly but in the midst of it we should not forget that across the world, the United Nations and its agencies and programs are making a real difference on the ground. They helped 8.4 million Iraqis vote in the referendum on the new constitution. They provided food aid to two million people affected by the tsunami. They are helping vaccinate millions of children. They are inspecting nuclear and associated facilities in over 140 countries. They are currently running peacekeeping operations in 16 countries. And behind the scenes, mediation efforts are increasingly leading to pacific settlement of disputes. One recent report noted that the United Nations has led a "remarkable explosion" in conflict prevention since the 1980s.

These facts alone do not prove the case for the United Nations. But it is hard to think of another body that would have the legitimacy to tackle these global challenges. We should recognize that much of what is wrong with the United Nations is a reflection of what is wrong in the world. It is sometimes easy to turn to the UN to resolve problems knowing that its member states may

not allow it to do so. It is all too easy then to criticize the institution for failing. We must escape from this Catch-22. I would argue that the UN General Assembly can continue to do so in the next coming years. In order to realize our potential in this session, we must accomplish several concrete goals.

First, we need to keep up the momentum in the fight against poverty and make sure the commitments made this year are implemented. Here the Economic and Social Council has an important role to play. Second, we must continue working on creating a functioning Peacebuilding Commission. This should finally ensure that places like Burundi and Liberia get the help they need to make a lasting escape from conflict and an emergence from poverty possible. Third, we have a mandate to conclude a comprehensive convention on international terrorism. We should do so before the end of this year. And we must also give attention to the development of a counter-terrorism strategy. Finally, as I have already mentioned, there is an important agenda of management reforms to be taken forward.

For members of the General Assembly, this is a great responsibility but also a great opportunity. The 191 permanent representatives and their staff here in New York are a knowledgeable and determined group of professionals. They recognize the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable; they understand that it is in their enlightened self-interest to do something for them. They see the need for reform and adaptation of the United Nations to meet both today's and tomorrow's threats. They are supported by their capitols, which are growing increasingly aware of the need for global solutions. And they know that the Secretary-General and the United Nations agencies, programs, and staff can and will help make change possible.

These institutions also need the support of world public opinion. They need the support of students, academics, faith groups, business and trade unions, NGOs, and members of civil society. There can be no better illustration of the power of civil society than the global Make Poverty History campaign. Look at what it has helped to deliver: a doubling of aid for Africa and a historic

step forward on debt for the world's poorest countries. Above all, the ultimate test of our work must be in the field. It is when we see the lives of ordinary people improving that we will know that we are doing the right thing—when we know that women in Somalia and many other countries do not have to risk their health each day for want of that most basic commodity, clean water.

It is still possible—and important—to conclude on a positive note. Indeed, one of the worst traps into which we can fall is that of hopelessness and despair. The challenges we face can be overcome. Consider our fight against poverty. One hundred years ago my own country, Sweden, was desperately poor. Much more recently, great strides have been made by many nations.

The potential rewards from this effort are great. If we can achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, we will lift 1.5 billion people out of extreme poverty, save 300 million people from hunger, prevent 30 million children a year from dying before the age of five, stop two million mothers from dying in childbirth, give 350 million more people access to safe water, and give hundreds of millions of women the chance to have an education. We know this can be done. We need to make sure we mobilize and work together to reach these goals.

Already, nearly half of Africa's governments have agreed to have their governance reviewed by their peers. Across the continent there are governments taking action to stamp out corruption at all levels. This African renaissance is beginning to bear fruit. Average GDP growth in 2004 was the highest in 8 years. Mozambique, a country which was on its knees when I was there in the early 1990s, has cut poverty by a third in the past 15 years and has doubled the number of children in schools. Rwanda has emerged from the dark shadow of genocide to face the future with confidence. It is empowering its women; the proportion of women in the Rwandan Parliament is the highest in the world. African leadership, backed by international support, has done all of this. The African Union itself has been leading the way in trying to resolve the conflicts that have scarred Africa. Indeed, the Darfur conflict provides an urgent example of how important

international cooperation is to successful conflict resolution.

Today's challenges can be overcome. But we have to face them together. And we need a mechanism to do so. The world needs the United Nations, just as the United Nations needs the world. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity. If we cannot help the United Nations to rise to the challenge, nations will instead implement solutions with less legitimacy and less support.

In 1960, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld said, "We have too much in common, too great a sharing of interests and too much that we might lose together, for ourselves and succeeding generations, ever to weaken in our efforts to turn simple human values into the firm foundation on which we may live together in peace." This session of the United Nations General Assembly is truly a test of multilateralism. If we use the 2005 World Summit results to take steps to improve the lives and destinies of the peoples and nations of the world, we could help pave the way for a new age of multilateralism. This policy of cooperation is sorely needed. This task goes beyond the halls of the United Nations General Assembly. It must be embraced by governments, regional organizations, civil society, and individuals all around the world. The United Nations Charter opens with the words "We the Peoples." We the peoples can—and must—make a difference together.