

## Watching Brief WB15-8: The United Nations at 70

*This report contains notes based on a recent conference about the United Nations and its Future, hosted by the United Nations of Australia (UNAA) and held at the Australian National University in Canberra. It also includes some recent reflections from the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO). The ongoing active role of Quakers within the UN system is part of the expression of the peace testimony 'to take away the occasion of war'.*

### Background

The United Nations was formed in the wake of WW2 in 1945 with 51 states as members. This has now expanded to 193. Its purposes, put briefly, are to maintain international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations, to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems, and to harmonise the actions of nations in attaining these common ends. The UN Under-Secretary-General for Public Information, Cristina Gallach, pointed out recently (speech at US Archives on 28 July) that today the priorities for the UN's work are peace and security, human rights, and development.

### UNAA Conference

On 21 and 22 August 2015, the UNAA held its annual national conference in Canberra. Within the overall theme 'Shaping the Future' the topics covered included the role of the UN as part of international governance and multilateralism, peace and security, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, sustainable development, climate change, human rights and justice, and Australia's role in the United Nations. What follows is a summary of points made by the various speakers and in discussion among participants.

Dr Russell Trood, national president of UNAA and a former Senator, reminded the meeting that the vision of the United Nations was that the world could be different. The organization remains an imperfect instrument in an imperfect world.

The keynote speaker, Professor Gareth Evans, former Australian Foreign Minister and now Chancellor of ANU, took as his topic 'Is there a future for the UN?' He said the vision for the UN was strong and had been reinforced by his own experience of it over the years. Some specific examples that of this were (a) peace in Cambodia, (b) the chemical weapons convention, and (c) the adoption of the 'responsibility to protect' policy. At the same time, there have been lows including the negative impact of great power rivalry on the Security Council, the empty rhetoric of the General Assembly, and the inefficiency of some aspects of administration. He spoke of four areas of particular significance to the future of the UN:

- *Knowledge*. The importance of detailed case studies and research in order to devise appropriate conflict prevention strategies.

- *Normative*. A willingness to act within established international standards. The periodic UN Summits on different themes are important in creating such normative markers. Even the G20 could support this more.
- *Institutional*. There is a need to develop greater capacity to reinforce decisions of the Security Council, and regional organisations need strengthening. Reform of the UNSC must be addressed.
- *Compliance*. There is a gap in the ability of the UNSC, the Court of Justice and the Criminal Court to enforce their decisions.

He emphasised the modest cost of the United Nations which employs 41,000 people for less than the budgets of many individual countries. Overall, including peacekeepers, the UN family numbers 236,000 people. He spoke of the importance of sharing positive stories about multilateralism, including the impact of the specialised agencies on the lives of millions of people. He affirmed Australia's contribution as a member of the UN Security Council in 2013-4, and encouraged us to see our role as that of 'good international citizen' – an approach that also has positive spin-offs for our image.

H.E. Ma Zhaoxu, Chinese Ambassador to Australia, gave China's perspective on the UN. He spoke of the progress made over the years, especially in peace and security, human rights and development. After the great losses China suffered in WW2, it has played a constructive role in the UN, and is committed to peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation among nations. China has signed on to over 400 multilateral treaties, contributed very substantially to peacekeeping missions, achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals, and given support to poorer countries through foreign aid. China would like to see greater representation of African and small to medium countries on the Security Council.

Gary Quinlan, former Australian Ambassador to the United Nations and now a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), described his experience representing Australia on the UN Security Council in 2013-4. He affirmed the need for a robust multilateral system in the face of intense conflicts and crises in many parts of the world. More civilians are affected by disturbances, and there are more peacekeepers than ever. However developed countries are more inclined to give money than personnel for such missions – Australia is a good example, ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in its funding and 87<sup>th</sup> in providing forces. He said that there were high expectations of Australia as a member of the UN Security Council, and some valuable successes were achieved – including better standards for the police role in peacekeeping, controls on small arms, special attention to the future of Afghanistan, monitoring of Iran sanctions, and gaining humanitarian access to Syria. Given the experience, he felt that Australia should stand again for a seat on UNSC. He urged UNAA to continue its public awareness role to maintain a high level of support for the United Nations.

Sir James McLay, immediate past New Zealand Ambassador to the UN, gave his perspective. New Zealand has followed Australia onto the Security Council, and is continuing to offer strong support to multilateral engagement. Reform of the Council is hard to envisage at present, but some procedural changes have helped (e.g. allowing more voice for those countries that are the subject of UNSC attention). New Zealand will seek to ensure also that there is a greater awareness of the needs of small island states. One reform he supports is the reclaiming by the General Assembly of the selection process for the UN Secretary-General rather than leaving it to the UNSC.

Bob Carr, former Australian Foreign Minister, gave an assessment of where Australia stands in relation to issues of peace and security. He said that, despite our voting record on some

issues (e.g. Israel-Palestine), we got a seat on the UNSC because we are seen as a good international citizen. He was especially impressed that the Australia Delegation had managed a breakthrough on Syria, ensuring a 'medical pact' to meet humanitarian needs, and ensuring that child protection staff are being engaged to work in refugee camps in Jordan.

Professor Ramesh Thakur (ANU) looked at the future of efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament. He emphasised the two major threats to humanity - climate change and nuclear weapons (currently 16,000 in the world). The effectiveness of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is at risk because of the stalemate with the 9 nuclear weapon states who refuse to disarm. The recent agreement with Iran is a positive step, but further initiative is needed to get North Korea to disarm. For progress to be made he sees three approaches as worth pursuing by Australia with the nuclear weapon states – declarations on no use of nuclear weapons, no possession of them, and no production of them. The US and Russia – which have managed to reduce stockpiles significantly through bilateral agreements - could reduce their holdings to 500 each without affecting their security.

Christopher Woodthorpe, director of the UN Information Centre in Canberra, outlined the UN role in moving from the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) to the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030). He spoke of the current transition as regenerating the development agenda through three significant summits – the Financing for Development conference held in Addis Ababa in July, the forthcoming Summit on Sustainable Development Goals in New York in September, and the Climate Summit in December in Paris. The SDGs are more extensive and more targeted than the MDGs, and will be universal in application. Each government will be expected to set its own policies within the international framework, in cooperation with civil society. (See website [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/) for full details of SDGs)

Natasha Smith from the Multilateral Division of DFAT gave the Australian Government perspective on the SDGs. She pointed out that, whilst the MDGs emerged from within the UN system following many different international meetings, the SDGs are the result of wide consultation with governments and civil society. Funding will be a big challenge because of the scope of the new goals, and new avenues of taxation, tapping of capital markets, and devising of new aid programs will have to be explored. The Pacific will have to be a particular area of focus, as progress there with the MDGs was slower than most other areas of the world.

Stefan Hajkowicz, Principal Scientist at CSIRO, spoke on global development trends as researched by CSIRO in an ambitious program to engage people from many parts of society. He identified in particular that (a) food distribution will be a major challenge, (b) recycling will transform life, (c) new anti-biotics will emerge for treating disease, (d) services will replace industry increasingly, (e) population ageing will raise the demand for health services, (f) digital development will be enormous, (g) organisations will become more dis-aggregated, making individuals free agents working for different organisations. Nevertheless face-to-face contact will remain vital. Networks will replace hierarchies, and this will affect the governance of the United Nations system.

Marc Purcell, Executive Director of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), highlighted the important role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). He spoke of the different views of the future – one that sees a positive development of technologies and economies (especially in Asia) and one that is more sceptical. NGOs see the future as influenced mainly by climate adaptation, disaster reduction, human survival, and refugee flows. As a result, traditional concerns such as education, health, and gender

equality might be crowded out by issues of inequality, poverty, violence and climate change. During the negotiations for the SDGs, ACFID gave priority to advocating for inclusion, human rights, good governance, and peace and security. Given the low level of public awareness of the SDGs, there is scope for a campaign such as the 'Make Poverty History' one that was effective in earlier years. ACFID will be working with MPs and other stakeholders to build strong support within Australia for the SDGs. Hopefully the Australian Bureau of Statistics will assist by building new data bases relevant to the goals.

Professor Will Steffen from the ANU Climate Change Institute reminded the meeting of the well-established science around climate change, and the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in showing that, in order to stop further warming of the planet at 2 degrees, we must act rapidly by reducing fossil fuel emissions. The implication for Australia is that we are a high emitter by world standards, and that most coal must be left in the ground. Internationally, China is making better progress in setting targets than most countries, and even the USA is now moving more significantly in its targets. The Climate Change Authority proposes a 40-60% for Australia by 2030, and the Government's announced target is much less, reducing our reputation and causing us to miss out on investment opportunities for renewables.

Catherine Hunter spoke about the UN Global Compact, by which companies agree to abide by agreed international standards of behaviour. It has 8000 businesses signed up internationally, 70 in Australia. Its impact has been to raise the commitment of corporates to measuring their performance against the standards. The Human Rights Commission works with KPMG to run 'business and human rights' dialogues to support the process. Some firms are now mapping their strategies to fit with the SDGs.

Michael Bliss, from the International Organisations Branch of DFAT, explained how international humanitarian law (IHL) has developed over the years to be a more comprehensive set of standards for behaviour in conflicts. But implementation remains a problem, as only the UN Security Council has the power to enforce decisions. Protection of civilians has become a priority in peacekeeping operations, and in some cases UN bases are being opened to accommodate desperate refugees fleeing from violence. The UNSC has made some advances, such as stopping chemical weapons in Syria, and codifying the abuse of human rights in North Korea. The French initiative that Permanent Members of UNSC refrain from using their veto in cases of mass atrocity is welcome, although it has not yet been taken up by others.

Professor Ramesh Thakur (ANU) returned to explore the relevance of the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) today. Since it was adopted ten years by the UN, R2P has had a significant influence on global responses to crises, and has challenged the assumption that national sovereignty is supreme. Non-intervention is now seen as an inadequate response. However, the concept of R2P has been undermined to some extent because the NATO forces exceeded their mandate in Libya by moving beyond protecting civilians to regime change.

Professor William Maley (ANU College of Diplomacy) focussed on asylum seekers. He pointed out a trend whereby many states refuse to accept responsibility for refugees from other states, and that this is against the terms of the Refugee Convention. UNHCR relies on voluntary funding contributions from states who may be reluctant to accept asylum seekers. There is a large gap between the 900,000 who are currently assessed as refugees and the 80,000 resettlement places on offer. Domestic policies distort resettlement policies against the neediest and towards picking the 'cream' of potential migrants.

Michelle Burgis-Kashala from the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, looked at the future of the International Criminal Court (ICC). There has been a gradual move from treating states as the perpetrators to singling out individuals for prosecution. The UNSC established the special tribunals on Rwanda and Yugoslavia, and the Rome Statute established the ICC. There is a bias towards African perpetrators at present, and counteracting this may require referral from UNSC to overcome. This will be a difficult task when referrals remain subject to veto. The ICC's credibility will be diminished if Syria cannot be referred.

The final session of the conference enabled a panel of the earlier speakers to reflect on Australia's priorities in the United Nations. One specific point that emerged was the idea that the UN Secretary-General could assume a more assertive role by referring issues - where the UNSC is stalemated - to the General Assembly (under Article 99 of the Charter). The importance of UN reform, and the need for better training of peacekeepers, were highlighted also.

Overall the conference was a valuable opportunity to check the pulse of the United Nations and to enable participants to share stories about UN experience, attitudes to multilateralism, and options for action to enhance Australia's involvement in the UN system.

### **The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO)**

With offices in Geneva and New York, Quakers have had a longstanding involvement in the United Nations. Speaking at a UN70 event in Beijing in July 2015, Andrew Tomlinson from the New York office referred to the current agenda of concerns before the United Nations and said the following:

One of the significant shifts that is starting to become visible is the centrality to so many of these discussions of the imperative for the international community to find better ways of supporting the needs of societies affected by violent conflict and institutional frailty. To name just a few of the places where this is coming up:

- In the context of the post-2015 and related *development* conversations, research has shown that the effort to eliminate extreme poverty must of necessity address the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies. By 2030, countries affected by conflict, exclusion and lower institutional capacity will be home to the majority of people living on less than USD 1.25 a day. These are the environments where existing MDG approaches have failed to bring either peace or development, and currently ODA flows are not reaching the right countries or the right sectors to build peace.
- In the *humanitarian* space, well over half of those in need of humanitarian assistance worldwide have been impacted by conflict, whether as IDPs or refugees or as a result of economic and political disruption. The growing emphasis among those working on humanitarian issues and disaster relief is on fostering resilience, and that approach is increasingly reflecting lessons learned from work by peacebuilders and others in conflict-affected areas on strengthening the fabric of society, and is leading to a greater emphasis on prevention.
- Within *peace and security* discussions, the report of the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations has stressed the need to shift resources and attention to conflict prevention, particularly through emphasizing political solutions and linking peace operations to sustained efforts to build peace. The report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture has focused on the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing the drivers of conflict. Even within the context of terrorism, we are seeing the UN's approach being framed as prevention.

Putting all these pieces together, the message is coming across that if we don't find better ways of engaging with the root causes of conflict, both within countries and systemically, then the grand ambitions of this year's many multilateral processes will stand little chance of materializing. Which brings us to my thesis today, which is that when it comes to the issue of the UN's role in maintaining

international order, the sweet spot and perhaps the area of the UN's greatest comparative advantage, is in taking the lead on coordinating efforts to prevent violent conflict and foster the growth of peaceful, resilient and inclusive societies supported by a just and effective system of global governance. And that this perspective requires us to think well beyond security-based approaches and to address root causes.

## **Responses**

The United Nations has its own comprehensive website [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)  
Quakers who are not already members of the UN Association may consider joining by going to the UNAA website for details of its activities round the country. Other relevant groups are the UN Young Professionals Group, and UN Youth. See their websites also:

[Www.unaa.org.au](http://Www.unaa.org.au)

[www.unaa.org.au/young-professionals-network.htm](http://www.unaa.org.au/young-professionals-network.htm)

[www.unyouth.org.au](http://www.unyouth.org.au)

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