



All Souls College
University of Oxford



DIPIR CENTRE FOR
INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES

UN Governance and Reform



**UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY**

From “learning lessons” to strategic planning: new ways to use knowledge in the UN system

A Symposium held at All Souls College, Oxford, 29 June – 1 July 2018

Conference Report

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1. Executive Summary

Introduction

Among many reasons given for the decline of confidence in the United Nations, one that has perhaps received insufficient attention is the organization's failure, despite many so-called "lessons learned" exercises, to make efficient use of the vast pool of knowledge accumulated within the UN system, and especially to channel it into coherent strategic planning. Accordingly, in June 2018, two parts of Oxford University (All Souls College and the Oxford Project on UN Governance and Reform) came together with the United Nations University (UNU) to hold, at All Souls, a symposium entitled "*From 'lessons learned' to strategic planning: new ways to use knowledge in the UN system*", which brought together current and former officials from various levels of UN policy and research units, think tanks, universities, and the governments of the UK and China.

The symposium highlighted major challenges facing those working for or with the UN in the peace-and-security, development and humanitarian fields. It identified specific knowledge deficits and defective internal processes in all three of those fields, addressed the role of new technologies, and produced several concrete recommendations for future action.

Challenges

The main challenges identified were the following:

- A. The relatively technical and procedural nature of current **reform** efforts, which may produce improvements, but do not address the deeper structural problems in any of the three sectors examined.
- B. The tendency for those occasional reform proposals which are genuinely bold and innovative to be **watered down** during processes of consultation with member states, and/or approved without the additional funding required to implement them.
- C. The failure of the UN to **engage** meaningfully with other important global actors, including notably people with relevant academic expertise, and municipal authorities.
 - The former often do not have access to relevant staff in the UN system, and/or find it difficult to communicate usefully with them owing to differences in language, conflicting presentation styles and ideas for research; mismatch in timeframes between academic research and the UN's policymaking cycle; and lack, in many UN agencies and units, of the capacity, knowledge or drive to establish relationships with academia.
 - The latter are charged with managing the towns and cities – often mega-cities – in which a rapidly growing majority of the world's people now live; but the UN has yet to devise the mechanisms and processes it needs to engage with them in a systematic and structured way.
- D. The lack of any coherent forward-looking **communication** strategy within the UN to highlight 'good news' about it (even though some agencies, funds and programmes are very well equipped to do this on their own sectoral activities) or to articulate its overall purposes and strategies and its relevance to the problems that both governments and peoples are struggling to confront. As a result of this, the UN is often ignored by news media, and when it is mentioned negative news stories tend to predominate.

- E. The UN's failure to keep pace with the revolution in collection and processing of **data**:
- Current verification mechanisms are often too weak to ensure the reliability of field data, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states.
 - There is a risk of focusing too much on quantitative data as an end in itself, at the expense of securing important qualitative data.
 - The risks to confidentiality and security from the use of biometric and other data; inconsistent guidelines on the collection, storage and dissemination of data; and the question of who has access to it and who controls it, all need to be addressed more seriously at the international level.
 - The UN's conservatism in absorbing unofficial and unstructured forms of data inhibits its capacity to keep up with the advantages to be drawn from multiple data streams. To shape better and more sophisticated analysis, and improved communications with the public, it needs access to much wider sources of data, notably those that lend themselves to improved visualisation techniques.

Recommendations

A. To the UN in general, and its member states:

- ***Data and new technologies:***
 - Continue to support the development of a normative framework for new technologies and consider involving the UN in advocacy for minimum acceptable international standards on the development of artificial intelligence.
 - Use new technologies to draw on existing institutional memory, lessons-learned reports, etc., in a more systematic way.
 - Use innovative and low-risk methods of learning, such as those used by technology companies, to prepare for future developments in technology.
 - Take the lead in gathering data in fragile and conflict-affected states and on diaspora remittance flows, working with academic experts in that field.
 - Continue to use and improve data to hold member states to account on delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals.
 - Facilitate dialogue among countries to better understand and articulate capacity gaps in technology, and the need for technology transfer between countries.
- ***Partnerships and collaborations:***
 - Establish more meaningful partnerships with new development actors, including notably China, India and other rising countries.
 - Forge better connections with the private sector, in part by encouraging more investment in poorer areas.
 - Collaborate with information and technology corporations in a more structured and consistent way to strengthen the UN's ability to benefit from new technologies, thereby allowing the UN system to make more effective use of its existing knowledge¹.

¹ The discussions and recommendations of the Secretary-General's High Level-Panel on Digital Cooperation, co-chaired by Melinda Gates and Jack Ma, announced on 12 July 2018, may help with this.

- **Expand sources of knowledge:** Gather information and knowledge from those most affected by policies, through a bottom-up participatory approach, using local sources of information to improve policy design and speed up service delivery.
- **Bridge the gap between academia and the UN system:** By creating academic advisory boards and in-house think tanks in UN agencies, encouraging secondments of personnel within the UN and between the UN and academia, and possibly establishing a structured interface ('nudge unit') between the two communities.
- **Improve capacity:** Provide dedicated teaching capabilities to improve evidence-based ways of working, through universities and UN training institutes like UNITAR and the UN Staff College
- **Foster greater engagement:** Work to make it less risky for the private sector to invest in development, through greater due diligence and innovative financial instruments, such as social impact bonds and pool funding mechanisms.
- **Shift objectives:** Step back from overall development delivery and focus on specific areas where the UN enjoys some comparative advantage in delivering results, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and fragile or conflict-affected states.
- **Youth:** Engage with and employ more young people within the UN, using them to explain how it can better answer the needs of their generation, and as messengers to make the UN's work better known through social media and other internet platforms².

B. Recommendations specifically directed to the UN Secretary-General and Secretariat:

- Revamp the Secretariat's overall communication strategy to be more forward thinking and articulate the vision of the Secretary-General.
- Be frank in managing expectations regarding peacekeeping operations with the Security Council and beyond, including being willing to 'say no' when member state-driven initiatives seem likely to fail or simply serve as fig-leaves for sub-optimal policies of convenience or neglect, as advised in the "Brahimi Report" eighteen years ago. Recent Secretaries-General were timid about this, but earned little gratitude from the permanent members of the Security Council, who have kept the UN mired in questionable strategies that often incur costs well beyond what was anticipated or budgeted for.
- Work with developing country champions and the G77 to revitalise watered down processes such as Financing for Development.

² The UN Secretary-General has appointed a capable Youth Envoy, Jayathma Wickramanayake, but the supporting resources and infrastructure that would allow her to be fully effective seem lacking. This is a missed opportunity.

2. Conveners, etc.

Conveners

Edward Mortimer, Distinguished Fellow, All Souls College

Sam Daws, Director, Project on UN Governance and Reform, Centre for International Studies, Department of Politics and International Relations, Oxford University.

David M. Malone, Rector of the United Nations University, Under-Secretary-General, United Nations

Organisers

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Alexandra Ivanovic, Senior Manager, United Nations University

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3. Background and Approach

When the United Nations was established in 1945 it was endowed with core purposes that still remain relevant today, with unique powers in the field of peace and security, and with considerable support from member states over time. The infrastructure, expertise and legitimacy of the organisation built up over time has enabled it to serve as an institutional framework allowing the international community to achieve great things – many of them through treaty-making by member states. The Security Council has, at times, acted boldly, effectively and successfully. The UN continues to serve as a significant decision-making and norm-developing forum for addressing urgent global security challenges. It is a source of numerous development initiatives, the most recent example being the Sustainable Development Goals and the related 2030 Agenda; has made meaningful efforts to promote human rights; and made normative breakthroughs, albeit in slow-moving ways, on potentially grave challenges to world order, safety, health and prosperity.

Despite this, there is still widespread concern with the organisation's future prospects even though the recent election of António Guterres as Secretary-General has been widely welcomed. Personal failures by staff and episodes of UN dysfunction, an inefficient and too often ineffective internal bureaucracy, all too often feckless and self-involved member states, as well as an inability to tap into new knowledge, has impacted the UN's capacity to adapt to new threats and tackle emerging policy challenges. Over time, public confidence in the organisation has been undermined and today the core purposes of the UN seem ever more endangered by tensions not only within the UN system itself but also by developments arising beyond multilateral diplomacy.

Against this background, All Souls College of Oxford University, the Oxford Project on UN Governance and Reform, and the United Nations University, convened a symposium from 29 June to 1 July 2018 titled *"From 'lessons learned' to strategic planning: new ways to use knowledge in the UN system"* at All Souls. The symposium gathered over 30 participants, including senior and younger members from UN policy and research units, think tanks and universities working on UN issues, as well as several senior government officials at involved in UN related work. Participants at the symposium sought to explore the reasons wider knowledge is not more systematically cultivated and accessed within the UN system, and to discuss some of the internal dynamics affecting knowledge within the UN. Concrete recommendations for future action were advocated.

4. Peace and Security Challenges

The first session focused on the challenges and uncertainties currently facing UN peace operations, often viewed with scepticism or as being in crisis. This is further fuelled by recent scandals of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of local populations by peacekeepers, and arbitrary threats of cutbacks to funding from member states. Internally, frustration abounds over the complexity of peace operations, with peacekeepers facing increasingly hostile and

deteriorating security environments (leading to a higher number of peacekeeper fatalities³), often simmering with ethnic tensions, in regionalised conflict settings, and facing complicated relationships with host governments, all the while trying to deliver on overly ambitious mandates.

Reform initiatives

An overview was provided of a series of UN reforms initiated by the Secretary-General to address these issues. The Action for Peacekeeping framework⁴, calls on Member States, the Security Council, host countries, troop- and police-contributing countries (TCCs and PCCs), regional partners and financial contributors to take collective action to strengthen peacekeeping operations. The goal is to reach a formal agreement by the end of 2018. Independent experts have also been appointed by the Secretary-General to review current peacekeeping missions. The Secretary-General's proposed reforms to the UN's peace and security architecture were praised as logical and helpful, however modest in scope, focused on emphasising the role of peacebuilding.

Some participants, however, considered that while these more technical solutions would lead to incremental improvements, they do not tackle deeper structural problems such as addressing the complex, political nature of conflict in civil wars. Participants also called for more fundamental questions to be addressed related to mandate specificity, prioritisation and duration, including overcoming 'Christmas Tree' or 'accordion' mandates, as well as managing mission expectations. Peace operations, seen as a 'wasting' asset, particularly in internal civil wars where the risk of the peacekeepers being drawn into a conflict was higher, made these concerns even more pressing. One participant cautioned against continual reforms falling subject to group-think dynamics, and the need to consider whether all stakeholders were being heard during these reviews.

The importance of data

The use of data has been embraced by the UN's Departments of Field Support and Peacekeeping Operations (DFS/DPKO), as a source to better inform evidence-based decision-making. Data is used to provide consistency in reporting and evaluation across missions for comparative analysis and has been used to further reforms relating to SEA, gender parity, and peacekeeping performance capability reviews⁵. In academia, scholars are working on projects to assist the UN's peace and security sector to more effectively utilise the data it collects⁶.

Some participants highlighted the need for stronger verification mechanisms to ensure the reliability of field data on which decisions are so often based. Others were concerned reliance

³ An independent review on this issue identified key drivers as: poor training, inadequate or inappropriate equipment, and problems with mind-set and leadership at the military level. https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/improving_security_of_united_nations_peacekeepers_report.pdf

⁴ Discussing reform in 3 areas: refocusing peacekeeping in line with realistic expectations; making peacekeeping missions stronger and safer; and mobilizing greater support for political solutions and for well-structured, well-equipped, well-trained forces, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/action-for-peacekeeping-a4p>

⁵ SEA: a database of offenders; Gender Parity: a data-based approach to reaching a set of graduated annual targets by 2028; DPKO/DFS Performance reviews: a data-based project assessing how TCCs are doing on various metrics as well as evaluations of individual units.

⁶ See 'Making Peacekeeping Data work for the international community' <https://www.hcri.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/making-peacekeeping-data-work/>

on quantitative data could become an end in itself, at the expense of essential qualitative knowledge including the geographic, societal, political and cultural context in which missions were operating. Too much focus on aggregated data plays against the need to understand contextual issues of those in mission settings. Other participants, however, highlighted the need for data as a baseline of information to be used to compare and contrast information across missions – data was just one element of information, not the only tool available to decision-makers.

Another question raised was how the UN's peace and security architecture could better prepare for future developments in technology including artificial intelligence and big data - preparing for the 'known unknown'. One important vector of learning is through low-cost incubation and testing of new ideas, as used by Silicon Valley corporations. (See the section on New Technologies below).

Communicating 'success stories' and barriers to engagement

The general public perceives UN peacekeeping as one of the most valued aspects of the UN's work, yet it is also one of the areas most criticised, with negative stories tending to dominate public discourse, especially the actions of peacekeepers with respect to SEA of local populations. Participants noted the challenge was how best to communicate 'good news' stories of the UN to the broader public and donors, with the UN urged to do more to promote the more positive narrative of peacekeeping. One participant noted that the stories about UN peacekeeping that resonated on social media and other platforms were those that more honestly portrayed the complexities and challenges that UN peacekeepers faced. UN strategic communications needed therefore to become better at creating story lines featuring twists and turns that grip the attention of audiences more than traditional "puff pieces". There was a call for a more forward-looking communication strategy across the entire UN system. This was not a challenge principally for the Secretary-General's spokesman and his colleagues, seen as performing well, rather one for the UN's various public information staffs.

Participants also discussed barriers to effective engagement between the UN peace and security actors and academic and research communities. Useful contact exists between the two communities in some areas of peacekeeping⁷, and a few organisations⁸ act as gateways between academics and policymakers. However, academics with little or no knowledge of the UN system, or with no personal contacts in New York or Geneva (particularly those from developing countries), have trouble accessing the right staff and policymakers, though they may have specific expertise on a particular conflict situation of value to UN decision makers⁹.

Differences in language, skills, presentation formats and incentive systems can also hinder interaction between the two communities. Policymakers want short, pointed policy papers preferably in bullet form (but usually no longer than an executive summary) whereas researchers are trained to write long papers engaging with and contributing to academic literature.

⁷ One participant noted that some think tanks (IPI, Rand, CIC, RUSI, UNA, etc.) have worked on issues like pre-deployment training in some depth. Peacekeeper training has improved, including through an enhanced breadth of subject areas, an increased number of training institutes and a greater focus on up-to-date techniques of adult learning and skill development for military practitioners.

⁸ See for example, the UN Foundation's Better World Campaign seeking to foster a stronger partnership between the UN and USA: <https://betterworldcampaign.org/>

⁹ See the UNU-hosted "Strengthening the UN's Research Uptake" Conference Report, Geneva 2016: <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/2218/Geneva-Conference-Report-v-1-0-2.pdf>

Academics are also trained to write papers with direct arguments leading to a single conclusion, while policymakers prefer options papers. Even on key issues, academics may have ideas at odds with those held within the UN: for example, one participant pointed out that a scan of recent academic publications on the use of force in peacekeeping revealed scepticism on this option by researchers. Such differences may inhibit academia's ability to support policy discussion on the UN's priority topics. On the other hand, researchers could well be right to view the use of force as carrying greater than benefits for the UN's strategies and for actors on the ground.

Preserving institutional memory and information management

Institutional memory and real-time lessons-learned are vital tools for improved decision-making in peace operations. Yet reports are often poorly conceived and prepared, and the sheer number can be overwhelming, impeding implementation of lessons-learned efforts. Member state delegations frequently lose the asset of institutional memory when new delegates are appointed, inevitably delaying some processes and sometimes undermining the quality of decision-making. Consideration should be given to how best to draw more often on the institutional memory of experienced delegates and Secretariat members.

Speaking 'truth to power' in a politicised environment

Participants acknowledged the challenges faced by the Secretary-General and the Secretariat in managing expectations regarding peacekeeping operations within the Security Council, as well as those of non-UN communities, especially those in host countries. The Secretary-General was encouraged to be frank on these matters, including being willing to say 'no' to member state-driven initiatives that seem likely to fail or simply to serve as fig-leaves for suboptimal policies of convenience or neglect. While the failure to accommodate key concerns and priorities of leading member states carries costs, the danger inherent in accommodating bad ideas and decision-making are worse, eventually rebounding on all involved.

5. Humanitarian Work

During the second session, participants were asked to consider how humanitarian organisations could better assimilate and process knowledge, as well as make positive operational changes to enable swifter and more effective aid delivery.

Political analysis and the 'politicisation' of humanitarian work

The work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was used as a model to demonstrate the challenges faced by UN humanitarian organisations. UNHCR, a high-performing agency with a proud history, faces the tension of an ostensibly non-political mandate while operating in a highly charged environment politically - the allocation of rights to non-citizens. And this in an era of politicisation of refugee and migrant issues in global discourse, often impacting on the work of UNHCR and related humanitarian organisations. Participants urged UN humanitarian agencies to reclaim this space in a way that enables them to discuss politics without being charged with politicising the issues at play. Agencies need to conceive strategies to improve political communication to de-stigmatise such "hot" topics.

Yet, even though it operates in a political space, UNHCR lacks capacity to conduct political analysis of its surrounding environment and those affecting its field operations. Integrating knowledge and understanding of the political economy in its overall analysis would lead to a better understanding of the constraints of the organisation, as would engaging more with political scientists.

One suggestion on how to address this problem affecting several key agencies is to establish effective or more effective internal political analysis and strategy units, similar to those utilised in governments and ministries.

A 'theory of change'

Participants discussed the adequacy of UNHCR's strategic vision to stay abreast of the rapidly changing developments in the current global political environment including the rise in populism and nationalism, an emerging multipolar world, and more competitors for funding. To keep pace the agency needs structural reform to make real, practical changes in management and operations. The recent consultations around the Global Compact on Refugees¹⁰, was a missed opportunity for UNHCR to develop a much-needed 'theory of change'¹¹. Discussions related to the reform of the agency, the interrogation of existing laws and principles, and the revisiting of the 1951 Refugee Convention were rejected in favour of preserving the status quo.

Another challenge for UNHCR (and similar UN agencies) is how its high-cost business model of operation impacts on funding opportunities¹². Donors, being accountable to their governments and constituents, take these cost factors seriously and tend to favour low-cost, high-impact models. Unless it is willing to overhaul its current business model, the agency, and other humanitarian organisations in similar situations, risks receiving a smaller portion of available funding, and having change forced upon it in unfavourable circumstances.

Data and knowledge production and sharing

Data is an important information and advocacy tool used by humanitarian organisations¹³. Its positive features include: the ability it supports to provide more accurate information to enable greater understanding of the scale and direction of refugee and migrant flows and better decision-making; disaggregated data to provide insights into specific assistance and protection of certain groups; and, as a communication tool, the ability to help inform the public of the scale

¹⁰ <http://www.unhcr.org/towards-a-global-compact-on-refugees.html>

¹¹ A few participants expressed reservation about the term 'theory of change' which, while favoured in academia and by donors, was not widely understood by practitioners at the operational level, nor used at the crucial decision-making level of member states.

¹² Over the past decade, UNHCR undertook a great deal of management and administrative reform, redeploing administrative support functions away from high-cost Geneva. Many more staff were redeployed from headquarters to the field, which needs to be UNHCR's focus of principal concern. However, since then altered geo-strategic conditions and other factors have challenged UNHCR, including the completely different and lower-cost business model of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) which is unburdened by the UN's heavy internal regulatory framework. Its strongest supporters in the USA and Western Europe have found themselves on the defensive in domestic debates over growing perceptions of refugees as threats rather than sources of (needed) population growth and useful contributors to economic growth.

¹³ For example, UNICEF asserts that protecting children on the move starts with better data; the IOM established a Global Migration Data Analysis Centre in 2015; and the Global Compact on Migration noted the need to utilise data as a basis for evidence-based policies.

of problems. However, participants cautioned that large amounts of data do not necessarily translate into greater knowledge (allowing for improved decision-making). UNHCR for example, it was reported sympathetically at the symposium, has huge amounts of data but lacks the knowledgeable staff and resources to better utilise it, often by default relying on third parties to provide information that is not specifically tailored to its needs.

Using data as an advocacy tool does not always lead to a better understanding of the best way to deal with issues either – one example is the way data informs the public of the scale of the refugee problem yet does not provide a sense of whether the overall situation is getting better or worse, often leading to pessimism and a feeling of helplessness by the public.

Some participants expressed wariness about embracing the new enthusiasm for ‘data-driven humanitarianism’¹⁴ particularly given confidentiality and security concerns surrounding the use of biometrics by humanitarian agencies. Also worrying is the risk of hacking and the use of such information against individuals by authoritarian states for nefarious purposes. Other concerns included the inconsistency of guidelines across agencies on how to collect, store and disseminate data, the risk of aid diversion driven by poorly understood data, and the question of who will have access to and control of all of this information. Also highlighted were the pitfalls of relying too much on the findings of aggregated data to inform decision-making, at the expense of collecting and analysing disaggregated data, which could lead to vastly different and better conclusions and policy decisions.

Participants noted the need to balance quantitative with qualitative data. A heavy reliance on quantitative data could impact on how UN agencies interact with refugees and other aid recipients on a human level, with concern that data could become an end in itself. Other types of information should be gathered, drawing on the knowledge of those most affected by policies, including current and former refugees and migrants. This could be incorporated into the UN’s knowledge systems through a bottom-up participatory approach involving affected parties.

Access and engagement between academia and policymakers

The relationship between academia and policymakers in the humanitarian field has been idiosyncratic at best, usually in the form of “consultancies”, but with no system in place to enhance these collaborations. Many staff members, including excellent ones, also lack the background in, or sustained relationship with, academia required to foster better connections. As with the peace and security sector, significant challenges exist in presenting information in a way that increases accessibility to and for policymakers.

One suggestion for improving the interaction between academia and policymakers was for humanitarian organisations to create academic advisory boards¹⁵ and in-house think tanks. Another suggestion was to encourage secondments of personnel within the UN, and between the UN and academia, possibly by also establishing a structured interface (‘nudge units’) between the two communities.

Learning and evaluation

¹⁴ See: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/beware-notion-better-data-lead-better-outcomes-refugees-and-migrants>

¹⁵ Although one participant cautioned that some academics may use such boards to gain rather than transmit knowledge.

Agencies can display a top-down approach to processing knowledge, usually based on narratives derived from the organisation's communication strategy, rather than being evidence-based. Existing hierarchical structures leave little scope for, and do not incentivise, innovation at the junior and mid-career levels. To improve capacity, dedicated teaching and learning capabilities would be helpful to enhance evidence-based ways of working, for example, through universities and UN training institutes like UNITAR and the UN Staff College. The need to maximise the impact of policy evaluation was also seen as a means to generate knowledge and change behaviour in humanitarian organisations. Some helpful steps have been taken in recent years in this direction.

Service delivery

Improving delivery of services by humanitarian actors could be achieved by better interaction with smaller local NGOs that tend to be low-budget yet have close links to the local population. Those most affected by policies, such as current and former refugees, should be involved to improve policy design and the speed and effectiveness of service delivery. The private sector should be urged to invest in the building of local economies. However, the risk to such investment needs to be assessed, managed and reduced, probably requiring greater due diligence and effort by humanitarian organisations.

6. Development

This session considered the changes the UN needs to make in the development field to better equip it to serve a rapidly developing and differentiated Global South. Participants also discussed whether a normative approach through the SDGs was sufficient or whether other key improvements at the operational and programme level could have an equally large or greater impact.

In the development field the UN has three main roles: 1) as a 'norm setter', the UN has clear legitimacy and can be considered indispensable - as the SDGs, which sets out a coherent if perhaps over-complex framework through which development can take place through from 2030, demonstrate¹⁶; 2) as a 'deliverer of services', UNDP is the main UN actor in the development space, however as only one among many - the UN's role is not particularly unique here¹⁷; and 3) as a 'coordinator' through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as through the Resident Coordinator and UN Country Teams system.

Reform of the UN development system (UNDS)

Participants saw reasons to be optimistic regarding the current state of development and its future direction. There were more positive prospects for Africa, a highlight being the fact that Ethiopia did not experience famine this year - a mark of major improvement. The success of China in lifting 800 million people out of poverty, its unique approach to development through its One Belt One Road initiative and its new Development Assistance Agency were also emphasised, while risks inherent in each were also flagged.

¹⁶ Other examples of the UN as a norm setter include the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development both from 2015.

¹⁷ In fact, some participants suggested the UN should consider stepping back from overall development delivery and instead focus on specific areas where the UN could in unique ways have an impact such as Sub-Saharan Africa and in fragile and conflict-affected states.

Indeed, lessons could be learned from failures and not just success stories. Donors were urged to accept some level of failure in their programmes - too much prudence and risk aversion would hinder meaningful change in future aid and development programmes.

On reform, most participants considered the UN General Assembly's resolution in May 2018 on repositioning of the UN development system (based on 7 proposals for reform submitted by the Secretary-General¹⁸) as a step in the right direction, but not particularly radical. One participant cautioned against unrealistic expectations for reforming the UNDS, instead urging more clarity on defining 'success' and identifying how progress on these reforms should be measured.

The significance and challenges of the SDGs

The SDGs are internally considered a crowning achievement for the UN with the notable involvement of civil society, the private sector and individual citizens the world over. On the whole, participants praised the SDG framework for its broad and integrated nature, universality, new voluntary mechanisms of accountability (with civil society more actively holding their own governments to account), embrace of partnerships, and the role of signalling new sustainable investment opportunities for the private sector.

There was some disagreement amongst participants on the significance and challenge of the large number of goals and targets of the SDGs with some expressing concern that 17 goals and 169 targets could potentially overwhelm developing countries, inevitably forcing them to make difficult choices on how to comply. Others however, defended the SDGs as workable, as many development countries did not see the large number of goals and targets as burdensome when spread across a number of ministries. They also viewed the SDGs as a mechanism to enhance integration and coordination amongst government departments and as enabling broader economic development.

One participant pointed out that implementation of the SDGs, with its integrated and interdependent approach, could lead to innovative ways of improving coordination across the UN's fragmented development system, long criticised for discouraging effective and efficient delivery of development aid across agencies.

Engagement with other actors

Engagement with a wide array of actors was seen as necessary to improve implementation of the SDGs, including greater engagement with new and rising donors like China and India to ensure the most effective uses of new investment allowing the UN and these countries to learn from each other. In particular, tripartite collaborations (donors, recipient and multilateral actors) were seen as a very positive way to move forward on tackling development challenges.

Participants highlighted how rapid urbanisation and population growth¹⁹, with 90% of future growth expected to come from Africa and Asia, places small, medium and mega-cities at the centre of future sustainable development. The UN, as an organisation made up of member states, has no clear mechanism for including sub-national actors in its system, yet it is vital that

¹⁸ The resolution drew on 7 proposals put forward by the Secretary General focusing on: reinvigorating the Resident Coordinators system; a new generation of UN Country Teams; a phased approach to revamping UN development efforts at the regional level; improvement of ECOSOC oversight; stronger partnerships; a framework for a funding compact; and an overall guiding vision of a "One UN" approach to the SDGs.

¹⁹ See: <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-KeyFacts.pdf>

new ways be conceived by the UN to engage with local governments and unlock the potential of these cities for the future²⁰.

A few participants raised the uneven engagement of the UN with regional organisations, encouraging closer collaboration in this sphere. Some actors were singled out for praise, including the African Union, Regional Development Banks, and a few of the UN Regional Economic Commissions²¹, considered important in part or whole, for supporting developing countries on implementation of the SDGs. Given the wide variance in capacity and capabilities of regional actors, participants encouraged greater coordination, even consolidation of regional organisations, to enable more effective, joined-up approaches for working with donors.

To increase funding for development, participants recognised a need for the UN to engage with other actors, in particular the potential for much greater investment by the private sector. However, this was limited by a lack of strategy to de-risk investment for these actors. Some participants thought the private sector could be brought more formally into the development fold to ensure its relationships in developing countries were more than transactional, focusing also on the broader development goals. Innovative financial instruments such as social impact bonds and pooled funding mechanisms could help achieve this.

Finally, engagement between academics and policymakers was highlighted in this session as well. More so here, participants felt that academia needed to shoulder greater responsibility in making efforts to bridge the divide between the academic and policy world. Some argued that academia has become increasingly inwardly focused, used unintelligible language and impenetrable research methods, known only to a few, thereby becoming increasingly divorced from policymakers. Greater efforts could be made by academics to design their research outputs (or at least some of them) to be more accessible and useful to wider publics (including in policy-making circles), as a relatively small number of kinetic and engagement-driven academics do, notably in the USA and UK.

Data for development

This discussion on data focused on the following: the UN's role as a norm setter; how it utilises data as a monitoring mechanism, and the gaps in data the UN could potentially fill. On the normative front, some participants argued that the UN should be involved in not only the creation of a new normative framework for data for the SDGs, but a framework on *all* data (but see later discussion in the New Technologies section). On monitoring, the UN's ability to utilise data to hold member states to account was discussed but considered by some to be inadequate. The UN evinces an aversion to unstructured, unofficial and new forms of data that are not produced by the statistical offices of its member states or the UN's own statistical agency. This is a missed opportunity as new forms of data, such as data visualisation tools, could meaningfully inform policy debates. Efforts to embrace this type of data should be encouraged.

Two gaps in data were potentially significant: in conflict-affected and fragile states where data is notoriously difficult to obtain; and specifics on diaspora remittances, which make up a large and growing segment of investment flows in these and other countries but of which too little is

²⁰ UN Habitat would be the logical UN actor to provide platforms of interface in this regard but has not yet meaningfully done so. Its new leadership provides an opportunity for Habitat to re-boot.

²¹ ECLAC and ECA were singled out as particularly helpful.

known. As there is little commercial incentive to gather data on such topics, the UN could be well-placed to step in and work with academia to generate further vital information.

Funding: balancing national interest with the normative values of the UN and of the SDGs

Participants discussed the tension between agencies seeking funding based on value-driven motivations and donors (and other governments) that must balance values with national interest and accountability to constituents. This challenge, while real and enduring could be overcome through creative reframing of issues to better align multilateral value-driven agendas with national concerns. They are not incompatible.

Revitalising initiatives impacted by the UN bureaucracy

The UN's various stakeholders often seek to row back on important initiatives advanced by the Secretary-General and others. In the development sphere, much of the innovative financing analysis and proposals contained in the Addis Ababa Action Agreement on Financing for Development (FfD), which were formally endorsed by the UN General Assembly, have subsequently been watered-down or ignored in the General Assembly's subsequent disappointing, often formulaic debates on these important issues. The challenge to maintaining momentum on agreements like the Addis Ababa text is the challenge of building upon change-oriented breakthroughs in conservative and politicized environments, such as that of the GA. Implementation, of course, suffers. Participants called for new approaches to keeping new ideas alive, such as developing country champions willing to resuscitate the FfD process as agreed at Addis Ababa, with China and rising powers of the G77 potentially playing a big role and opening space for the Secretary-General to revitalise the UN's internal approaches to these issues, often timid and stodgy at best.

7. New Technologies

This session considered whether the UN can play a meaningful role in developing international norms for new technologies including artificial intelligence and blockchain.

The UN's role in new technologies

The speed at which new technologies were developing made governance of this field akin to the norm-free 'wild west'. Artificial intelligence, blockchain, and big data were all reshaping business in real-time with both positive and negative fall-out now becoming clearer. Positive aspects include the speed of knowledge dissemination as well as the availability of new data visualisation tools to facilitate use of complex data. However, anxiety about the risks inherent in automation and artificial intelligence, for example in relation to cyber security and cyber warfare, is also widespread.

As a result, there was lively discussion on whether the UN should serve as a norm creator in this field or adopt a facilitator approach by providing support to evolving and developing norms. Participants acknowledged the need to *do something* about the data revolution as its speed has far outstripped the capacity of government policies to regulate relevant areas of related endeavours in keeping with social norms. Some participants believed the UN should be encouraged to play a lead role in some manner of norm development, although the way forward

was hard to sketch²². There was consensus that the UN should not attempt to be a regulator of new technologies. But it should advocate for minimum acceptable international standards for development of artificial intelligence, considered by some as potentially offering transformative solutions to global problems, yet also presenting the biggest challenges.

But caution was also expressed on the UN's role in this field as the organisation needed more time to gain knowledge and earn legitimacy on technology before it could profess to lead any charge on the matter. These participants saw the UN best cast as a facilitator – as a platform for supporting dialogue on creating a framework for normative development. This approach is reflected in the Secretary-General's 2018 Strategy on New Technologies²³, an internally-focused UN-wide strategy aimed at senior managers inviting them to commit, *inter alia*, to: increasing internal literacy on new technologies; support to member states to develop their capacity; and support of the development of norms in this field.

A role for the UN as a builder of relevant networks is already demonstrated by the establishment of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, a global network of 350 members including governments, NGOS, the private sector, and civil society organizations that help stakeholders across countries and sectors to fully harness data to achieve the SDGs. This platform was created following recommendations of an expert group created by the Secretary-General, through partnerships and with the UN system but remaining outside of it.

The role of new technologies within the UN

The UN has little choice but to embrace new technologies and become more aware of and acquire tools that are available to protect data. However, there is a wide variance within the UN of knowledge and capacity to utilise new technologies. In terms of data use and innovation, according to one participant, the UN is in better shape than generally perceived, with UNICEF and WFP leading the way internally. Nevertheless, resistance to new technologies and sources of data are obvious within the UN's existing statistical architecture. If it wishes to become and then remain relevant in this field the UN as a whole, which it currently is not, it must strive to do better, as the Secretary-General has advocated²⁴.

Capacity gaps

Participants highlighted the disparity in technological understanding and knowledge between developed and developing countries and discussed how best to reduce them. Gaps exist not only between countries, but also between private and public sectors within countries, as well as between the communities making up societies. Some participants called attention to how conversations regarding technology gaps and transfer were being framed, with developed countries focusing on privacy and security risks, while poorer countries focused on access to technology and knowledge transfer (as has been the case for over 60 years now). Both sets of concerns need to be addressed, but in new, more creative and productive ways.

²² Three options offered were: 1) leave data and technology to market forces, leaving producers of technology to fill the vacuum left by governments; 2) governments to continue to regulate as they see fit, with a risk of regulations being unevenly applied; 3) adopt a people-centric approach considering data and technology global commodities, which possessed both a social and commercial function, regulated by laws but underpinned by a strong human rights framework. The third option was seen as the most desirable at the symposium.

²³ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/united-nations-artificial-intelligence-social-good/>

²⁴ In managing its intellectual property, the UN can and must modernize, spurred by new technologies. There is a crying need for this in management of its own archives.

Young people were mentioned as a source of talent in the field of new technologies, so far largely untapped by the UN. The UN needs to develop strategies to fight the ageing and calcification of its staff, making way within it for a new generation, which can provide new expertise in these areas.

8. Conclusion and Next Steps

This final session focused on providing some broader concrete recommendations and courses of action for the UN.

The UN's communication strategy

The UN's current communication strategy should be more forward thinking, adapting its tools and output more rapidly to contemporary needs, and spend less time reacting (not always effectively) to bad news stories. Some agencies, funds and programs do have effective communication strategies as do some senior staff within the Secretariat. However, a better, more modern approach is urgently required overall.

On the broader issue of communicating success stories and progress on important initiatives like the SDGs, participants suggested using more graphic presentations rather than primarily textual narratives. Further, much greater engagement with social media is required – the way in which the ICRC tells compelling stories via social media was suggested as a useful model to emulate. Greater focus on the positive trends in development rather than just peace and security issues could be a way to refresh the public perception of the UN.

The youth voice

Including young people's perspectives within the UN should become more the norm. Hearing from younger communities, such as Young UN and Restless Development would help the UN and also thought leaders within these groups, who likely will be future leaders in the UN system and more generally. Moreover, the UN should encourage, in a greater variety of ways, young people with a passion for the principles of the UN to become its messengers to the broader (and younger) public, and capitalize on their familiarity with social media.

An Opportunity: Cities

In conclusion, one refreshing feature of the symposium turned out to be a sustained focus on the growing role of cities as platforms for innovation, growth and social change. The need for the UN to engage with cities in more structured ways (which member states may not initially welcome) was reiterated, with the Secretary-General urged, possibly but not necessarily in cooperation with UN Habitat and others, to articulate his own vision of how the UN conceives of the growing role of cities and the opportunities they present, and how their engagement within the UN could be better framed and utilized for the benefit of their residents.

A Continuing, Intensifying Risk: A UN adrift in its own concerns, heedless of their consequences?

One challenge for the UN that underlay much of the discussion is its growing isolation from its various existing or potential constituencies, partly for reasons of physical security at a time when it has been repeatedly targeted by terrorists, but partly also because of its formality, its superior tone and its failure to convince that its outreach efforts are more than *pro forma*.

Its physical remoteness unfortunately translates a wider disconnect with publics around the world that threatens its medium-term utility and credibility. This conundrum is not easy to solve, but urgently needs to be. Nothing currently is much less welcoming than UN premises the world over. How the UN presents itself, and often introduces itself, to the wider world requires a radical re-think. The Secretary-General's informality and skill at engaging interlocutors needs to be emulated by more of his colleagues in the system.