



Is it Time to Create a UN Political Body for Climate Change?

August 2021 TGCI Blog Post by: Thalif Deen

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UNITED NATIONS, Jul 26 2021 (IPS) - As a wisecracking cynic once remarked: “The sun would never set on the British empire because God wouldn’t trust an Englishman in the dark“. Perhaps it was an uncharitable remark because most of the British colonies have long gone.

But when i quoted this witticism to a British journalist, he countered: “I am sure it was told by a Scotsman.“

Since Scotland is not a colony, its demand for independence is not a matter of decolonization, which is virtually dead on the UN’s political agenda.

The United Nations, at its very inception 76 years ago, created a Trusteeship Council, one of its main organs, with a mandate to supervise the administration of trust territories as they transitioned from colonies to sovereign nations.

But as colonialism and trusteeships gradually came to an inglorious end, the Council suspended its activities in 1994, when Palau, the last of the original 11 trust territories, gained its independence.

With the start of the fourth International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism in June 2021, however, the UN’s Special Committee on Decolonization approved draft resolutions reaffirming once again the right of territories to self determination.

But this was confined to peoples of the remaining 14 Non-Self-Governing Territories, including New Caledonia, American Samoa, Tokelau, Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, French Polynesia, Guam, Monserrat, Pitcairn Islands, Saint Helena, Turks and Caicos, and the US Virgin Islands.

However, it may be a long way off before the administrative powers overseeing these territories would concede independence—if they ever do.

But is there still a need for a Trusteeship Council, which has remained inactive for nearly 27 years?

Interestingly, there is an attempt to revive a longstanding proposal to re-purpose the Trusteeship Council to address issues relating to the environment, climate change and population.

The recent changing weather patterns worldwide– including the devastation caused by forest fires in 13 states in the US and Siberia, heavy rains and severe flooding in central China and Germany, severe droughts in Iran and Madagascar and a drought that has ravaged southern Angola– have once again put the spotlight of climate change which has taken added significance at the United Nations.

Adam Day, Director of Programmes at United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, told IPS there have been proposals for a range of initiatives to address issues related to future existential risks like climate change, and to represent the needs of future generations more directly in the multilateral system.

One such proposal, he said, was to repurpose the Trusteeship Council, which has been inactive for some time, to address issues of the environment and/or future generations.

“This would be a significant move and could require action by the General Assembly, so it remains to be seen whether that will materialize.”

Another idea, he said, is to create an envoy or commissioner tasked with representing future generations. Like the Envoy on Youth, or thematic envoys across the UN, this would be the kind of role that could be created by the Secretary-General without action by the General Assembly.

“I think this is more likely to be taken up. The bigger issue, however, is how this might affect how the broader system works,” said Day.

Will Member States be willing to rethink big concepts underlying economic growth models, potentially moving away from GDP as the sole indicator of success, and offering global wellbeing and sustainability as an equally important indicator?

Will wealthy countries be willing to take seriously the fact that future generations will overwhelmingly be born in lower income countries, which will require major shifts of resources if we are to take their needs seriously?

“Those are the challenges facing the multilateral system, and I’m hopeful that the Secretary-General’s Common Agenda will help to advance this discussion,” declared Day.

But the lingering question remains: is the Trusteeship Council, and its empty chamber, ready to be converted into a special UN political body on climate change, population and the global environment— despite the existence of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA)?

Joseph Chamie, a consulting international demographer and a former director of the United Nations Population Division, told IPS as climate change and the environment are matters of great and urgent concern worldwide, redesigning the UN Trusteeship Council to address those two vital issues is certainly a worthwhile, timely and a necessary undertaking.

Given their intimate relationship, he argued, discussions of climate change/environment should not avoid world population.

He said thousands of scientists worldwide have included among their urgently needed actions the stabilization of world population. While reducing high rates of population growth alone would not resolve climate change and environmental degradation, it clearly plays a critical role in mitigating the many negative consequences.

“In brief, a redesigned UN Trusteeship Council to address climate change and the environment must not leave population out in the cold”, said Chamie, author of numerous publications on population and related issues, including climate change and the environment.

The proposed new UN body on climate change, environment and population should deal with political dimensions given that existing UN agencies are focused on social and economic aspects, he noted.

Without global political decisions on those critical issues, achieving meaningful and effective progress will be unlikely, he cautioned.

Moreover, there’s no time to waste in making those necessary global political decisions to address climate change, environmental degradation and population growth, Chamie declared.

Meanwhile, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said last week that water-related hazards dominated the list of disasters in terms of both the human and economic toll over the past 50 years, triggered by climate change.

Of the top 10 disasters, the hazards that led to the largest human losses during the period have been droughts (with 650,000 deaths), storms (577,232 deaths), floods (58,700 deaths), and extreme temperature (55,736 deaths).

With regard to economic losses, WMO said, the top 10 events include storms and floods. The data shows that over the 50-year period, weather, climate and water hazards accounted for 50 per cent of all disasters, 45 per cent of all reported deaths and 74 per cent of all reported economic losses at the global level.

WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas said that “no country – developed or developing – is immune. Climate change is here and now. It is imperative to invest more in climate change adaptation, and one way of doing this is to strengthen multi-hazard early warning systems.

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What if Humans Just Can't Get Along Anymore?

August 2021 TGCI Blog Post by: Farhad Manjoo

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At the broadest level, human history is a story about cooperation. Individually, we big-brained, hairless primates are fairly ridiculous creatures, easy pickings for any dad-bod Simba roaming the plains. But get us together and we achieve dominion over land and sky.

Reluctantly, violently, often after exhausting every other possibility, people keep stumbling toward one another to get pretty much everything done. From the family to the village to the city, nation-state and global mega-corporation, cooperation and coordination among groups of increasing size and complexity is, for better or worse, how we all got to now.

But what if we've hit the limit of our capacity to get along? I don't mean in the Mister Rogers way. I'm not talking about the tenor of our politics. My concern is more fundamental: Are we capable as a species of coordinating our actions at a scale necessary to address the most dire problems we face?

Because, I mean, look at us. With the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, humanity is contending with global, collective threats. But for both, our response has been bogged down less by a lack of ideas or invention than by a failure to align our actions as groups, either within nations or as a world community. We had little trouble producing effective vaccines against this scourge in record time — but how much does that matter if we can't get it to most of the world's people and if even those who have access to the shots won't bother?

Global failures of cooperation are, of course, nothing new; we did have those two world wars. But now we're facing something perhaps even more worrying than nationalist enmity and territorial ambition. What if humanity's capacity to cooperate has been undone by the very technology we thought would bring us all together?

The internet didn't start the fire, but it's undeniable that it has fostered a sour and fragmented global polity — an atmosphere of pervasive mistrust, corroding institutions and a collective retreat into the comforting bosom of confirmation bias. All of this has undermined our greatest trick: doing good things together.

It is true that each of us is affected differently by a changing climate and Covid-19, but with both, our fates are linked; what happens to each of us is tied up with the actions of others. Often the links are blurry. Deforestation in the Amazon rainforest could well affect the sea level in Florida, but it's probably difficult to forge much common cause between poor farmers in Brazil and retirees in Boca Raton.

Sometimes, though, our fates are so obviously intertwined, you want to scream. Vaccines work best when most of us get them. Either we all patch up this sinking ship or we all go down together. But what if lots of passengers insist the ship's not sinking and the repairs are a scam? Or the richest passengers stockpile the rations? And the captain doesn't trust the navigator and the navigator keeps changing her mind and the passengers keep assaulting the crew?

I should say there is a good chance my take is too dreary. There has been a great deal of scholarship on how humans coordinate their actions in response to natural threats, and a great deal of it has echoed my pessimism — and been wrong. In 1968 the ecologist Garrett Hardin published a famous essay arguing that because people tend to maximize individual utility at the expense of collective good, our species was doomed to blindly exploit the world's resources. He called this the “tragedy of the commons,” and in the following years he was among a group of intellectuals who advocated tough measures to avert the coming “population bomb,” among them curtailing the “freedom to breed.”

But Hardin was proved wrong both on the theory and on the prediction. (He was wrong about a lot of other things, too: He opposed immigration and global famine relief, and he maintained an interest in eugenics. The Southern Poverty Law Center says that white nationalism “unified his thought.”) The population bomb never went off. The world's birthrate declined as the poorest people were lifted out of poverty. And as the pioneering political economist Elinor Ostrom showed over a lifetime of research, there are countless examples of people coming together to create rules and institutions to manage common resources. People aren't profit-maximizing automatons; time and again, she found, we can make individual sacrifices in the interest of collective good.

Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009. In her prize lecture she wrote that “humans have a more complex motivational structure and more capability to solve social dilemmas” than rational-choice economists have given us credit for. The key to unlocking these capabilities, she said, was building the right institutions. Capitalist markets and nation-states had taken us only so far. Now, she suggested, we needed to imagine new kinds of groups that could improve how humans innovate, learn and adapt together to take on looming environmental challenges.

She died in 2012, so she did not witness what came next: the rise across much of the world of conspiratorial alternate realities and intense polarization that have hampered progress on so many global problems. As a species, we are still searching for the institutions Ostrom predicted we'd need to focus humanity's collective power. I hope she was right that we are up to the task — but I can't say I'm optimistic.

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Revamped UN System Crucial for a Changing World

August 2021 TGCI Blog Post by: Trevor Page

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LETHBRIDGE, Canada, Jul 29 2021 (IPS) - From an international humanitarian perspective, the first half of 2021 has been disappointing. We're no further ahead in ending the conflict in Syria and Yemen. From the fledgling democracy that it had become, Myanmar has descended into what most of its people had hoped was a bygone era of military rule. And in Ethiopia, where its Prime Minister, Ably Ahmed, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, armed conflict in Tigray is preventing the 2020 winners of the very same prize, the World Food Programme, from delivering the food needed to stop at least 350,000 Ethiopians from starving to death.

These are not the only conflicts raging in 2021. There are many in Africa and a few still linger on in Asia and South America. And once again, Afghanistan, the country that defied Alex the Great, the Brits, the Russians and now the Americans and NATO, is set to move center stage on the humanitarian front.

Since its founding in 1945, Canada has always looked to the United Nations to head off armed conflict and to alleviate the human suffering that it causes. That includes preventing the use of hunger as a weapon of war. Canada's contribution to UN peacebuilding has dropped considerably since 1970, when its proposal for 0.7% of a donor country's GNI was accepted as the target for foreign aid. Nevertheless, it is still among the top five donors to the World Food Programme. Canadians expect the UN to do its job.

UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres and WFP Executive Director, David Beasley, have repeatedly warned that unless war and armed conflict is ended, people could starve to death in several countries. They have appealed to the leaders of opposing sides and those fighting proxy wars to let UN humanitarian workers and their NGO partners do their job. In early February 2021, soon after the fighting started in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, David Beasley visited Addis Ababa. He was assured that immediate access to Tigray would be granted for WFP and other humanitarian workers, as well as safe passage for its convoys of food aid trucks. Well, that didn't happen for months. The first WFP plane with humanitarian workers only landed in Makelle, Tigray's capital, on July 22. As for the convoys of WFP food aid trucks, they're frequently attacked or blocked en route and don't have anything like free passage.

So why is the UN so ineffective at ending conflicts, or even getting access granted for humanitarian supplies? It's all to do with the principles on which the UN was founded: noninterference in the internal affairs of sovereign States. So, are UN humanitarian workers just supposed to stand by when a government decides to attack and kill off some of its citizens, or let large numbers starve to death when famine looms? No, not since the World Summit of 2005, when governments unanimously adopted R2P or the Responsibility to Protect.

In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda genocide and the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan insisted that the traditional notions of sovereignty had been redefined: “States are now widely understood to be instruments at the service of their peoples”, he argued. In his report “We the People” on the role of the United Nations in the 21st Century, he posed the following question: “If humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?”

Yet despite the widespread human suffering in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar and Ethiopia, the Responsibility to Protect has not been invoked. More work needs to be done on R2P, including an expansion of its scope. So too on “humanitarian intervention”, which does not always require the deployment of foreign forces to mitigate human suffering. And the voluntary agreement by P5 Security Council members (Britain, China, France Russia and the United States) to withhold their veto power when resolutions to stop genocide and crimes against humanity are being considered is another ad hoc effort to prevent the wholesale slaughter of humankind. But with more and more ordinary people around the world standing up and making it known to their governments that crimes against humanity and dying from starvation is not acceptable, it is clear that the piecemeal approach that we’ve cobbled together over the last half-century falls well short of today’s expectations. A total overhaul and reorganization of the UN humanitarian system is required as a first step.

In September, when the UN General Assembly reconvenes, Antonio Guterres will be reconfirmed as UN Secretary General. For the next 5 years, he will have the opportunity to bring about some the changes to the UN System that he keeps speaking about without having to worry if any of the P5 will oppose his second term in office. He will have to move fast on Agenda 2030, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. With less than a decade to go, these are far from being attained. We must reduce inequality; it’s a major cause of conflict.

Covid-19 is the biggest challenge the world has faced since the Spanish Flu, a century ago. It has affected everyone and everything we do. It has increased the number of food insecure people around the world by 149 million, according to WFP; so close on 1 billion of us now go to bed hungry. And despite anti-Covid vaccines having been developed in record time, variants will keep emerging and we’ll be playing catch-up for years to come.

Climate change, an even bigger challenge, is already on us and is set to intensify. Extreme weather has devastated parts of north-western America and neighbouring Canada this Spring resulting in unbearably high heat and wildfires. Abnormal floods in China and Germany have resulted in unusually high mortality and devastated towns and cities in both countries.

So, while 2021 will end up as a disappointing year for multilateralists, the challenges that lie ahead in 2022 and beyond will be even greater. Despite the odds, UN humanitarians and their NGO partners have already saved many lives in 2021. But years of experience show that a revamped United Nations System is critical if we are to deal effectively with the challenges of the 21st century.

Trevor Page is a former Director of the World Food Programme. He also served with the UN refugee agency, UNHCR and the UN Department of Political and Peace Building Affairs.