



Foundation for Global  
Governance and Sustainability

# OPERATING THE UN SYSTEM UNDER CRISIS CONDITIONS

Insights Paper

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UN 2100 Initiative

In early June 2020 FOGGS convened the third in a series of online brainstorming sessions on the UN system's performance in response to the COVID-19 global emergency. As with the previous two sessions held in April 2020, this session was held under the Chatham House Rule. Participants included country representatives to the United Nations, current and former international civil servants, other country and regional organization officials, academics and civil society organisers. This Insights Paper attempts to reflect in a concise and structured way some of the many useful ideas put forward during the early June session and follows on the steps of the [Discussion Paper](#) entitled "The United Nations and the COVID-19 Global Emergency" and the [Action Plan](#) entitled "The UN System and the World Post COVID-19" that resulted from the previous two sessions respectively. All three papers, which should be read in conjunction, are part of a series of consultations held and papers produced under the [UN2100 \(UN to 100\) Initiative](#) of FOGGS, which aims to promote innovative and practical ideas towards a modern, more effective, ethical and people-centered United Nations.

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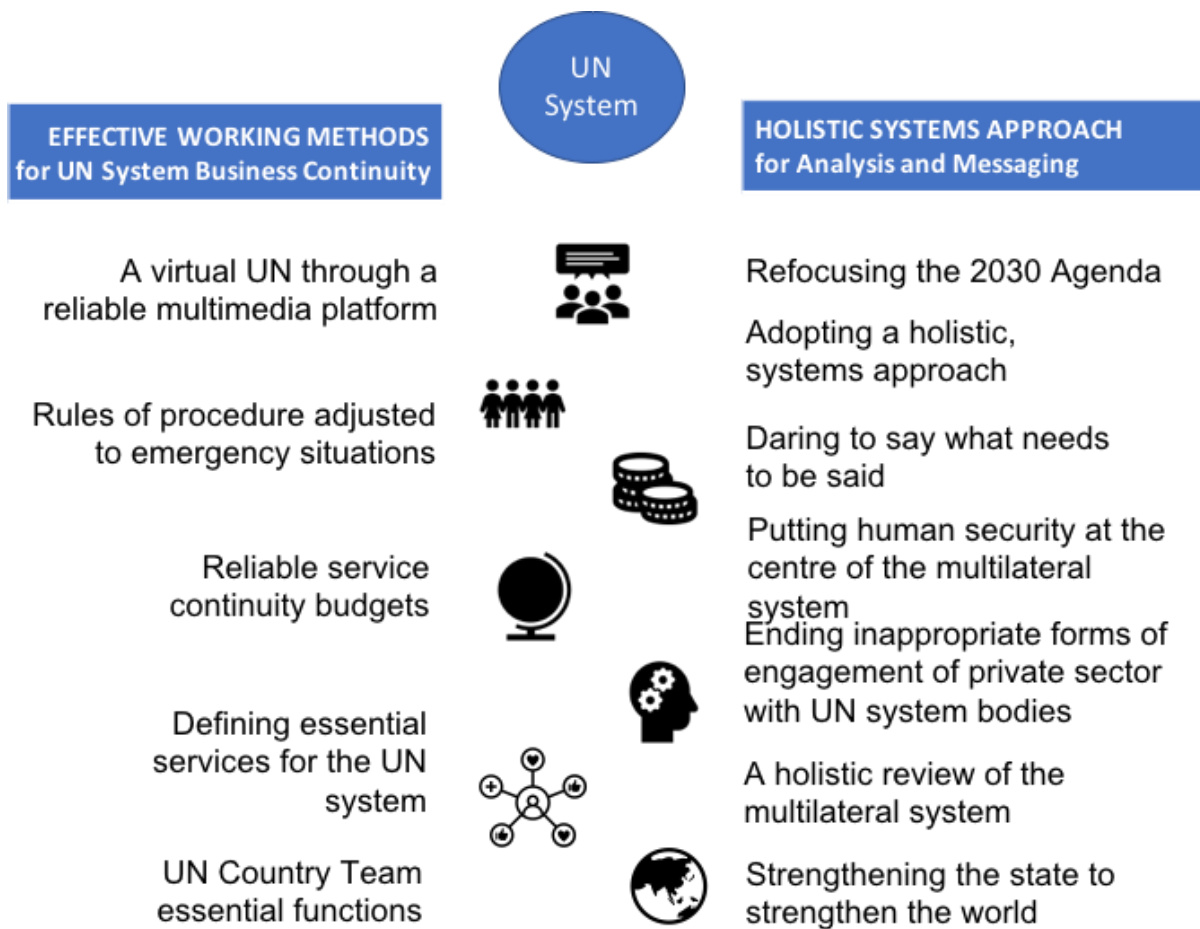
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# OPERATING THE UN SYSTEM UNDER CRISIS CONDITIONS

## HIGHLIGHTED INSIGHTS AT A GLANCE



# I. Effective working methods for UN system business continuity

The COVID-19 pandemic took the United Nations system by surprise. Despite the fact that the system had been dealing with disease outbreaks around the world like Ebola and SARS in the past, it was not prepared for an “attack” on its decision-making centres. A lot has been happening ad hoc since, with varied degrees of success. It is obvious that a proper **business continuity plan** is needed for the UN system to emerge from the crisis more resilient, cost-effective, impactful and eco-friendly. The elements presented below should be included in such a plan that cannot remain on paper for too long but needs immediate implementation. In this paper FOGGS offers recommendations on effective working methods primarily for the UN Headquarters and the intergovernmental organs based there, well aware that arrangements developed for New York often serve as a model for the rest of the UN system and other multilateral bodies.

## I.1. A virtual UN through a reliable multimedia platform

- Need for a reliable multimedia platform on which a fully functioning virtual UN will be based, as a meeting and decision-making space for governments and other stakeholders to come together when physical interactions are not feasible or advisable

Improvisation and ad hoc solutions may have saved the day at the initial stages of the COVID-19 driven lockdown, with intergovernmental body chairs, governments and UN departments convening online meetings on various platforms in their areas of responsibility to keep the work going. The best of these ad hoc solutions should be shared within the UN system and standardised for the UN system to emerge as a complete, unified structure at the virtual level too. This “UN Avatar” should replicate the functions performed in the UN’s traditional diplomatic spaces but also take advantage of opportunities created by the latest communications technologies. It is a key responsibility of the UN Secretariat and its conference services arm to ensure this happens in the next couple of months, hopefully with a full demonstration of the UN’s virtual capacities in late September 2020 (see our related [Action Plan](#) proposal II.1. (page 5) for an online summit of world leaders). That is the time of the new General Assembly session starting with the General Debate, the annual gathering of world leaders, who will not be attending in person this year, as already [announced](#). Thus, the celebration of the UN’s 75th anniversary due to happen in September could mark the official launch of an important complement to the physical UN system, a virtual UN system that could serve the world for many more years to come. Success and buy-in by the UN membership and the world depends of course on collective ownership of such a multilateral deliberations platform and in-built guarantees of an environment that is inclusive, equitable, secure and language sensitive. (See also next recommendation.)

## I.2. Rules of procedure adjusted to emergency situations

- Adjust the rules of procedure to allow for the electronic convening of formal UN meetings and the taking of decisions through voting online or physically in safe, credible and efficient ways

A precondition for the smooth functioning of any intergovernmental body is the existence of a set of agreed rules of procedure which govern the conduct of meetings, negotiations, debates, and decision-making. Working online has pushed the UN’s organs and membership into uncharted territory. Many of the rules could move by simple transposition from the physical to the virtual domain in a way that nobody would contest. This is not the case, though, for the process of textual negotiations previously done via face-to-face informal consultations nor for decision-making, including the need for an actual vote in the dedicated chamber of the body concerned. All this needs to be clarified beyond reproach in temporarily adjusted rules of procedure that offer legitimate options for emergency periods like a global pandemic. Such options should include high-security and verifiable electronic voting, secure virtual space for group meetings, and on-line opportunities for bilateral and small group negotiations. The effective closure of meeting rooms also creates a significant obstacle for civil society organisations (CSOs) that wish to share their expertise

and views with delegations. The emergency adjusted rules could thus also include a new portal for CSOs to share their research papers and policy proposals directly with delegations and the relevant UN system offices, in addition to continuing to address formal and informal meetings, according to established practice.

### I.3 Reliable service continuity budgets

- The UN system needs to be able to draw on reliable budgets for continuing the delivery of essential services to intergovernmental organs, member states and the world in times of crises

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 lockdown, the UN Secretary-General and the Executive Heads of the UN system bodies need reliable budgets to be able to pay the staff and to cover the basic expenses of their organisations for the foreseeable future. Otherwise, it will not be possible to ensure the delivery of essential services to intergovernmental bodies, UN member states and the world. Member states that are treaty-bound to bear each organisation's expenses (see Article 17 of the UN Charter for the central UN) should consider ways to guarantee the UN system's financial viability even when multiple financial obligations arise for member states to address multiple crises, as is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic, the associated financial crisis and the ongoing climate crisis. In the short term this could be arranged through emergency contributions, use of reserve funds, or even a government commitment to cover operating debt instruments. In the longer term, though, it may well be appropriate to formally recognize the UN system's stabilizing role for globalisation and re-open the longstanding debate on taxing international capital flows, international stock market transactions, and/or SWIFT settlement transactions to secure direct revenues for the UN system.

### I.4 Defining essential services for the UN system

- Identify and secure the core functions that the UN system uniquely performs and needs to continue to perform at a minimum in times of crises, along with the people who are needed to carry out those functions

The UN member states and the international secretariats need to jointly define a set of core functions that the UN system uniquely performs and needs to continue to perform even in a time of crisis. That would mean maintaining the ability of the principal organs to meet and take decisions, along with sufficient administrative and intellectual capacity and expertise to support their work, monitor key indicators on the ground and enable the Secretary-General and the Executive Heads of the specialized agencies to play their normative and convening roles. Controversially that may mean a reduction of operations on the ground, other than humanitarian ones, as they spread resources thin and make a big difference only in the smallest of countries. It might also controversially mean setting up a mechanism for a significant transfer of resources through the international system to correct systemic imbalances and ensure that no one is left behind. The selection and maintenance of personnel by the UN system under any scenario should continue to be determined on the basis of merit and with due attention to ensuring a range of specialisations and grades/ages, gender and geographical balance.

### I.5. UN Country Team essential functions

- Rethink the essential functions of UN country teams towards a “leaner and meaner” standard with emphasis on norms and knowledge, and ideally also finance

UN country teams are small in size and budget but rich in expertise. These country-based UN system offices could focus on advising and supporting governments by transferring good practices between countries and building capacity through the UN system network and tools. They would thus also help the promotion of a shared narrative of sustainability and resilience worldwide. Ideally, UN country teams should also have a central role in channeling and monitoring the use of financial flows from the international system in support of countries, including any large resource transfers for the correction of systemic imbalances (see I.4. above). For the performance of their roles, country teams should be able to count on the close engagement of the respective headquarters for knowledge sharing and guidance.

## II. Holistic systems approach for analysis and messaging

At a time of multidimensional crises, when a health emergency leads to an economic collapse, there is no justification for continuing to insist on a silo approach in terms of issues and structures in global governance. The temporal coincidence of the COVID-19 “perfect storm” with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations – to be observed at world leaders’ level in September of this year – offers an extra incentive to abandon sectorial fiefdoms for a new integrated narrative and action determined by holistic thinking, and open a dynamic conversation on the defragmentation of the UN system. Nothing less than boldness in thinking, messaging and acting is required of the UN system and its representatives at a time of shifting power dynamics among countries but also between the public and the private, the global and the local.

### II.1. Refocusing the 2030 Agenda

- As the UN75 anniversary and the COVID-19 induced crises collide, the UN system has an opportunity to relaunch the 2030 Agenda giving substance to the “build back better” call

The current convergence of crises and the need for a hopeful way out provide an opportunity for the UN to promote a narrative of hope that engages people’s imagination. In this light the coincidence with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN (UN75) offers an opportunity to refocus the 2030 Agenda through the prism of the pandemic response and the need for increased resilience. Ways of doing that could include convening the world’s top economists to give concrete substance to the call for a new economy for people and planet, and bringing together all relevant stakeholders to design the delivery of affordable and quality health services for all by 2030 (see more on such proposals in the [Action Plan](#)). Initiatives of this kind can revitalise the efforts towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), giving concrete meaning, with specific targets and indicators, to the “build back better” appeal of the UN Secretary-General.

### II.2. Adopting a holistic, systems approach

- The UN system should reclaim intellectual and moral leadership in mounting comprehensive responses to global challenges by ending silo thinking and adopting a holistic, systems approach

If another proof were needed, the COVID-19 emergency made loud and clear that crises are interconnected and the response to them needs to be multifaceted, from health to economics, food, jobs, trade, etc. The UN needs to take back intellectual and moral leadership by ending sectorial thinking and action within its own ranks – the UN system delivering as one at global and country level – and addressing issues holistically, with convergences and systems thinking. More interagency cooperation at the level of secretariats (in the framework of the UN Secretary-General-convened CEB – UN system Chief Executives Board for Coordination) and intergovernmental bodies (see [proposal](#) for UN General Assembly President to convene the heads of UN system governing bodies) is needed to address the inter-connectedness of issues and to share lessons learnt with the wider world.

### II.3. Daring to say what needs to be said

- More bold talking and leader and citizen coaching is needed on the part of the UN, to encourage clear collective thinking and effective action

The UN Secretary-General and other leading UN figures should boldly stick their heads out and say things as they are – even if one or the other major powers may want to keep these truths off the collective global agenda. The UN SG and the other Executive Heads have a significant repository of expertise within the UN system and access to the advice of other experts, on which to base their pronouncements. Government leaders and the broader public would draw inspiration from such evidence-based candour. The need to relieve developing countries from their heavy debt burden and to deal with the root causes of the repeated occurrence of the problem, the need to rethink global trade in terms of resilience and low climate footprint supply chains, the need to follow closely disease outbreaks and other signs of imminent health disasters, the danger of militarization and unruly private exploitation of outer space – all these are examples of issues that demand urgent global attention.



## II.4. Putting human security at the centre of the multilateral system

- A “Human Security Council” could be established in parallel to and eventually replace the Security Council (and ECOSOC?), to deal with all issues threatening human security, not only armed conflict

Security matters are no longer limited to armed conflicts. Collective human security could be declared as the paramount goal of the multilateral system, cutting across organisational agendas. The longstanding idea of an Economic Security Council could be revived in a broader sense, combining economic security with health security, food security, livelihood security, climate and environmental security, thus covering the wide range of interconnected challenges of today. This could be one UN system central body, serviced by the central UN along with all specialised agencies, funds and programmes, and meeting each time with specialised representatives from its member states. Proof in practice that such a body of reasonable size can work could lead to the eventual dilution of the Security Council (and ECOSOC?) into this body too.

## II.5. Ending inappropriate forms of engagement of private sector with UN system bodies

- Let the public and the private sector play their respectively appropriate roles in global governance, without “private multilateralism” or abrogation of public sector responsibilities

The private sector has to undertake its responsibilities for a just and inclusive international economic and social order. Special treatment, discounting of rules and systematic self-regulation, though, are not the way to go about this. “Private multilateralism” often facilitated through targeted private sector donations and partnerships that subjugate the public to the private should not be entertained by UN member states or secretariats. Otherwise the private sector is given the right to influence in self-serving directions issues like the ongoing negotiations on businesses and human rights or the [Food Systems Summit](#) due to be convened by the UN Secretary-General in 2021, while at the same time the public sector de facto abrogates its responsibilities and *raison d’être*. Bodies like the World Economic Forum and the UN Foundation should not be given preferential access to the intergovernmental process or to the UN system secretariats but should be treated like all other civil society organisations and stakeholder groups.

## II.6. A holistic review of the multilateral system

- Rationalise multilateral structures by reforming the UN system, bringing in other related organisations and rethinking mandates to ensure a nimble and holistic approach

The UN system has grown organically over time to address the challenges of the day and has been shaped primarily by the interests and the philosophy of the most powerful states from World War II till today. At this time of multiple crises a review is urgently needed to find the right configuration of international bodies that would meet the needs of the post COVID-19 world. A closer integration of the UN system as such, including the Bretton Woods Institutions and bringing in the Basel-based organisations, would help strengthen the defragmentation of multilateralism and the effective tackling of the interrelated climate, health, economic and other challenges. A rationalisation of mandates could eventually lead to the establishment of new technical or normative organizations that would absorb existing ones, bringing the total number of organisations down.

## III.7. Strengthening the state to strengthen the world

- A strong multilateral system can only be based on strong and well-functioning states and is a means for them to deliver better for their citizens

There should be no competition between the UN and its member states. Weak, poorly run states inevitably behave erratically on the internal and the international scene, create dangerous instability by contributing to the expansion of xenophobic movements domestically and internationally, often try to deflect attention from domestic problems through armed, trade or other confrontations internationally and thus can only lead to lose-lose situations. On the contrary, strong, democratic member states that abide by the rule of law and respect human rights are both a prerequisite for and a core *raison d’être* of a healthy multilateral system. Collective responses through strong multilateral institutions to global challenges support the performance of individual states towards their citizens’ well-being and resilience, while well-functioning states deliver for both their citizens and the world in a framework of shared norms and responsibilities.

## Epilogue

FOGGS continues to put forward proposals in the hope that they be taken up by or at least inspire the United Nations system – both its secretariats and its member states. The continuing upshot in activity by the UN Secretary-General and other actors from the UN system is certainly encouraging but far from enough to ensure the revival of multilateralism and have a major impact on the challenges at hand. We urgently need a transformed UN system that can operate efficiently under crisis conditions and effectively deliver on the tasks it can perform best. Will there be the political will and the moral fortitude for that to happen, for both the UN and the world to “build back better” in any substantive way? Only time will tell, and that time is virtually the coming couple of months.

### UN2100 Initiative

*Innovative and practical ideas towards a modern, more effective, ethical and people-centered United Nations.*

*For more on this FOGGS initiative see [here](#)*