The UN and the COVID-19 Global Emergency:
Proposals for meaningfully surviving beyond UN@75

By Georgios Kostakos,

The context: An UNflattering impression of the UN and the world under COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have caught the UN system by surprise. From the competent body dealing with health issues, the WHO, to the political UN in New York and most other agencies around the world the pandemic created a storm that shook the whole edifice of multilateralism exposing its swallow foundations after years of rhetoric and process worshipping, substance and leadership scarcity, political squabbling and unpaid dues. Who would have thought that the angel of doom would arrive in the form of a tiny virus of the Corona family that would tear the world apart and shake multilateralism to its core?

The COVID-19 pandemic did not happen in a vacuum. With nationalist leaders reaching the highest levels of power in several countries, notably the US, the global commitment to multilateralism had started to wane well before the virus struck. The Trump Administration had already given formal notice of US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change, had left UNESCO, had defunded UNRWA and UNFPA. The fact that in July 2020, in the middle of the global medical emergency, the US Administration gave notice of leaving the WHO too should not really come as a surprise.

In the US and other my-country-first environments an apparent inability to consider the long-term consequences of events and incompetence in managing difficult situations was papered over by fervent rhetoric against anybody who would warn about the negative consequences or would advise in favour of painful but necessary measures. A pre-existing vilification of science for the bad news that it had brought about climate change intensified in view of the COVID-19 warnings, and the same fate was in store for collective response mechanisms, notably the UN system of organisations. All in the populist "logic" that if you shoot or outvote the messenger you make the bad news disappear.

The apparent origin of the virus in China invariably played into the US-China trade wars and geopolitical competition, with rekindled racism as a side effect. The fight for scarce resources like masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) at the start of the pandemic saw an ugly return to protectionism even within the single market of the European Union. After a slow start in taking the pandemic seriously border fences began to rise up within the EU and the world over, making for a cacophony of necessary but unilateral and often appearing as retaliatory travel restrictions.

In parallel, a race began to come up with one or more effective and safe vaccines primarily for one's own population in the shortest possible period of time. In the free-market, liberal democracy West this was pursued through deals with pharmaceutical companies, betting on the successful conclusion of their vaccine development process with often undisclosed amounts of taxpayer money involved. All kinds of seduction and arm-twisting tactics were used by governments to get precedence over others, so that their citizens and voters get vaccinated first. This is what the term "vaccinationalism" came to describe, a contribution to the debate by UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, who warned against it in his address to the opening of

the virtual high-level segment of the UN General Assembly in September 2021.[1] The ACT-Accelerator public-private partnership launched by WHO and partners in April 2020 and its vaccine pillar, COVAX, are supposed to help deploy the tests, treatments and vaccines needed to address the pandemic worldwide, with special provisions favouring low- and middle-income countries. However, the huge funding gap and the labyrinthine financial and governance arrangements don't allow for much optimist, for the short-term at least.[2]

While the developed and credit worthy countries of the West in particular were spending significant amounts to address the medical emergency and a lot more in supporting their failing companies and individuals because of the economic freeze brought about by the pandemic lockdowns, low- and middle-income countries were struggling to cope with their weak health systems and scarce financial resources. No fiscal space for them to print new money for their internal needs, for all the equipment and other supplies that they had to secure from abroad, and for servicing their debts. The IMF offered a USD 1 trillion lifeline to countries seeking liquidity,[3] an important but still small amount compared to what the US and the EU have been making available to their respective economies.

In January 2021, when this chapter was finalised, the situation remained volatile, with the EU, the US and Latin America continuing to have high rates of infection and death; new more aggressive variants of COVID-19 appearing in the UK, South Africa and Brazil; renewed lockdowns and bickering with pharmaceutical companies about priority access to vaccines among developed countries of the West. At the same time, countries in the Asia – Pacific region and big parts of Africa apparently suffered less from the virus and several were planning on making use of cheaper and more readily available vaccines from China, Russia and India, only tenuously connected to the COVAX framework, in another indication of a divided world.[4]

The rest of the chapter focuses on proposals put forward to the UN system by the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability (FOGGS) in response to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposals were originally published in a series of FOGGS papers that followed brainstorming sessions with country representatives to the UN, as well as global civil society representatives, academics, former and current UN system and other intergovernmental organization officials in the period April to August 2020.[5] This is the kind

---

[1] See Antonio Guterres, Address to the Opening of the General Debate of the 75th Session of the General Assembly available online at https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-09-22/address-the-opening-of-the-general-debate-of-the-75th-session-of-the-general-assembly

[2] See "The Access to COVID-19 Tools (AC) Accelerator" on the WHO website: https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator (last accessed on 31 January 2021).

[3] "IMF says it's ready to mobilize its $1 trillion lending capacity to fight coronavirus" by Thomas Franck, *CNBC*, 16 March 2020 - https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/16/imf-says-its-ready-to-mobilize-its-1-trillion-lending-capacity-to-fight-coronavirus.html

[4] See "Covid vaccines: Russia, China, India…Who is supplying Africa?" by Marie Toulemonde, *The Africa Report*, updated on 27 January 2021 - https://www.theafricareport.com/61188/covid-vaccines-russia-china-india-who-is-supplying-africa/

[5] See, inter alia, *The United Nations and the COVID-19 Global Emergency – Discussion Paper*, FOGGS UN2100 Initiative, April 2020; *The UN System and the World Post COVID-19 – Action Plan*, FOGGS UN2100 Initiative, May 2020; *Operating the UN System Under Crisis Conditions – Insights Paper*, FOGGS UN2100 Initiative, June 2020 – all available online at https://www.foggs.org/un2100initiative . Several parts of this chapter draw heavily on these FOGGS publications and on related research and writing that the author of the chapter did with his FOGGS colleagues, particularly Harris Gleckman and Richard Kinley. Their important contribution to the content of this chapter deserves to be acknowledged. Some of these ideas have also been included in the article by Harris Gleckman and Georgios Kostakos entitled "The Coronavirus vs. Multilateralism: Who Will

of proposals / recommendations that we hope to see in the report that the UN Secretary-General will submit to the UN General Assembly by September 2021 as requested in the "Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations" adopted by world leaders on 21 September 2020.[6]

Establishing the facts and warning accordingly: a global early warning system

As expected, in view of the medical nature of the COVID-19 emergency, the initial response came from the WHO. Following official notification by China of a cluster of atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan on 31 December 2019 the WHO procedures were set in motion. The declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), came from the WHO, in late January 2020. This delay and even the apparent delay in the original notification by China have given rise to accusations of WHO partiality and capitulation to Chinese interests, notably by the Trump Administration in the US.[7] A WHO team charged with establishing the facts about the origins of the pandemic was eventually deployed in the city of Wuhan in late January 2021, following extensive negotiations with the Chinese authorities. Whether there will be a clear and objective outcome remains to be seen, in view of the scientific challenges and geopolitical influences.[8]

Despite such complications, the UN system is uniquely placed to monitor vital metrics on all global challenges, from disease spread and climate change to food security and inequality. The diverse scientific and technical expertise of the various parts of the UN system offers the basis for doing that, with real-time updates and a system of alarms for impending crises. This would be a way for the UN to advance fact-based decision-making on all fronts – social, environmental, economic, human rights, humanitarian and governance-related – and attract media and the public's attention on a regular basis. Respected scientific establishments from around the world and grass roots organisations could also be integrated into the data gathering and early warning work.

Still, despite early warning functions spread around the UN system, each specialised organization with its own focus, process and intensity, there is no comprehensive data pooling and processing and no central node to compile a real-time complete picture of the state of the world as it confronts multidimensional and interrelated crises. If the political will were there such an early warning center could be rolled out in a short period of time, using existing mechanisms, a dedicated internet site and a couple of other easy to meet requirements. In the meantime, the World Economic Forum's "Global Risks Report" stakes a serious claim on

Win", *PassBlue*, 4 June 2020, available online at https://www.passblue.com/2020/06/04/the-coronavirus-vs-multilateralism-who-will-win/ Of course, the responsibility for the selection of text and ideas to be included in this chapter remains with its author.

[6] "We request the Secretary-General to report back before the end of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly with recommendations to advance our common agenda and to respond to current and future challenges.", para. 20 of UN Doc. A/RES/75/1 of 28 September 2020 available online at https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/1

[7] See Tapio Kanninen and Georgios Kostakos, "Global Responses to the Pandemic: Assessing the International and National Actors", Part I, New Zealand Centre for Global Studies Blog, https://nzcgs.org.nz/international-advisory-panel/the-global-response-to-the-pandemic/

[8] See "Covid: WHO team probing origin of virus arrives in China", 14 January 2021, *BBW World* website,

fulfilling that role, as it is more comprehensive, analytical and forward-looking than the fragmented reporting produced by the UN system, from the WEF's viewpoint, of course.[9]

To be effective, an early warning system has to be connected to mechanisms of early (re)action. Fact-finding missions to assess evolving medical, environmental or other situations should be possible to deploy swiftly, using standby expert capacities with "laissez-passer" prerogatives. From there the next step would be to set up a UN system early deployment force, in cooperation with regional organisations and states having the necessary capabilities, to provide expert assistance in cases of medical, environmental or other types of crises, helping to contain their effects at an early stage. This could be built on existing disaster management and humanitarian response capabilities but its systmetization and centralization could be a step too far for UN member states to take at the moment.

Convening the world to deal with the global emergency: global village (virtual) meeting(s)

Convening world leaders

The moral authority of the United Nations and the fact that the UN system addresses virtually all areas of human activity and encompasses the whole of humanity allows the UN to convene the leaders of the world to bring them before their responsibilities for addressing shared challenges. This has been done in the past but interestingly was not done in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic and social crises. The UN Secretary-General could/should have convened an online world summit at the early stages of the pandemic, as a symbolic show of unity as well as a concrete way to align the actions of states and ensure collective global action to "build back better". An often-sited set of virtual meetings on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond, co-convened by the Prime Ministers of Canada and Jamaica and the UN Secretary-General, in that order, would not qualify as such, thematically and politically.[10] Nor would the virtual gathering on 21 September 2020 to celebrate the UN's 75th anniversary with pre-recorded leaders' speeches.

Convening scientists

Beyond the political leaders the UN Secretary-General could have also convened a group of renowned experts in health, economics, finance, information technologies, agriculture, public administration, business administration, global governance, etc. from around the world to advise the UN system and member states on an urgent basis on how to deal with the multi-faceted COVID-19 crisis. Such a "Global Emergency Task Force" could be supported by UN system experts, as well as specialised institutes, think tanks and civil society organisations from around the world and encouraged to put forward innovative ideas like the issuance of new Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) by the IMF or other body, swiftly deployable medical emergency forces, joint R&D for treatments and vaccines, etc.

Convening the UN system itself

---

[9] See the latest report in the series, *Global Risks Report 2021, 16th Edition*, WEF, 2021 available online at https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/global-risks-report-2021/

[10] For details on the meetings and the FFDI initiative see https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/financing-development

Under normal circumstances the UN Secretary-General convenes twice a year the heads of UN system agencies, funds and programs in the context of the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). In emergency situations like the pandemic a coordination meeting should have been scheduled exceptionally and visibly in support of the global effort against COVID-19. Eventually the first regular session of the CEB took place virtually in May 2020 but apparently did not lead to any tangible initiative.[11] A UN system task force could have been established under the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, inviting the relevant organizations to send experts to advise on recovery design on the basis of the 2030 Agenda, peace, security, and humanitarian priorities. Perhaps next time?

Providing moral and intellectual leadership: a narrative of hope for the world

In the middle of the darkness brought about by the pandemic, one would expect from the UN, the one and only body entrusted with speaking for the common good of humanity, to articulate a hopeful message on the way out of the crisis. The UN Secretary-General's repeated calls to "build back better" were indeed in this direction. References to people's wellbeing and resilience, supporting the most vulnerable, reducing inequalities, respecting planetary boundaries and advancing the 2030 Agenda as a whole, despite the setback caused by the pandemic, have been a staple in the Secretary-General's statements.[12]

Nevertheless, a more complete "narrative of hope" still needs to be put forward, to engage leaders' and ordinary citizens' imagination and establish a coherent framework for action, including elements such as the following:

Health as a global public good, with affordable health care for all. Governments individually and collectively need to ensure that all citizens enjoy the global public good that is health and have access to affordable health services. Health infrastructures, information sharing, drug and vaccine development and medical supplies need to be secured worldwide through cooperation and mutual support, as the health of all depends on the health of the weakest link in the global system.

A resilient and equitable economic system as a core global public good guaranteed by every country, region and the world collectively, as it underpins the functioning and enjoyment of most other public goods, health included. The economy cannot be seen as "something else", beyond the categories of good and bad, beyond comprehension by the average citizen and ultimately beyond control. Many of the problems of social and environmental sustainability are caused by a system that worships GDP-measured growth and prioritizes monetary profit and share value above all else, irrespective of the destructive effects that this single-mindedness is having on people and the planet. We need to return from a deification of homo economicus to the realignment of economic tools and rules towards generating sustainable wealth that supporting a decent life for all. This would mean combining the global and the local as

---

[11] See report of the 14 May 2020 CEB meeting in doc. CEB/2020/1 of 4 September 2020 available online at https://unsceb.org/session-report-260

[12] See recent UN Secretary-General statements, for example his "special address at Davos Agenda" on 25 January 2021 (https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-01-25/secretary-generals-special-address-davos-agenda-delivered) and his remarks at the Handover Ceremony of the Chairmanship of the Group of 77 and China on 18 January 2021 (https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-01-18/secretary-generals-remarks-the-handover-ceremony-of-the-chairmanship-of-the-group-of-77-and-china-delivered).

necessary for human resilience and well-being, and allowing for redundancies that may make the difference between life and death in cases of crisis and supply chain disruption.

Cyberspace as a global commons that needs enforceable rules for universal, affordable and safe access, with public regulation of its management and human rights guarantees. This virtual space is for all intents and purposes a global commons, where people from all over the world meet to socialise and work, even more so when physical movement is constrained for legitimate reasons such as avoiding infections. This parallel world helps people stay sane, allowing meetings with friends and family without travel, distance learning, tele-working and online shopping. Not everybody in the world has access to this commons as of now, not even in the developed countries, so there is a digital divide that has to be bridged with affordable access to the necessary infrastructures and technologies. Proactive engagement of public authorities at various levels is needed to ensure that this public space is safe for all users, its use and its management are regulated through clear rules, all human rights are respected, and actual cyber-policing and public complaint recourse mechanisms are in place. The UN system should not shy away from addressing all this and should definitely work to avoid the splintering of the virtual space along the national and alliance lines of physical space, which is an unfortunate possibility if geopolitical competition turns a bit uglier. A narrative of hope should at least preserve human unity in cyberspace.

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. This is also connected to the need to rethink global trade in terms of individual well-being, community resilience and sustainable supply chains all around, as part of an equitable and resilient economic system, as described earlier.

A clearly articulated narrative of hope along the above lines, and concrete measures to advance all its elements, would allow the UN system to reclaim the intellectual and moral leadership it seems to have lost on the global stage, helping billions of real people in the process.

Ensuring the UN's own business continuity, coherence and effectiveness

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, depending also on the organisation in question. It is obvious that a proper ***business continuity plan*** is needed for the UN system as a whole to emerge from the crisis more resilient, cost-effective, impactful and with a smaller ecological footprint.

For one, it should have been expected of the central, political UN to already have – or focus on quickly developing at the early stages of the pandemic – an electronic platform that would replicate in cyberspace all physical meeting servicing functions that the UN offers to the various deliberative bodies. Instead, a sort of denial prevailed, wishing for the physical constraints to go away and in the meantime relying on a mixed bag of existing commercial platforms often operated by the member state(s) chairing the respective intergovernmental bodies. Occasionally, a physical presence was required at UN headquarters, to cast ballots in elections (election of the non-permanent members of the Security Council and the General

Assembly President) or to introduce the pre-recorded messages of leaders at high-level meetings.

The system keeps limping along like this but a long-term solution does not seem to be coming any closer. Such a long-term solution would involve a complete virtual UN Headquarters, connected to UN specialized agency and other body headquarters, offering meeting, voting, translation and interpretation services to all member states, even those cut off from Western internet applications. It would also ensure at least as extensive a civil society participation as in physical meetings, as well as the possibility of quieter bilateral or group meetings and consultations, side events, etc.[13] This would not only allow a smooth functioning of the intergovernmental machinery while the pandemic continues but would also help in case of other disruptions in the future, because of natural or human-made disasters, that will most probably come. Of course, a major internet / telecoms disruption could not be tackled with such a plan, but some arrangement should be made in the UN system's business plan for such an eventuality to be addressed too, so that the world can convene and reach collective decisions as necessary.

What is also markedly missing from the UN system, in the physical space as well as in cyberspace, is an authoritative intergovernmental body that could mount a "whole of government" response to the main global challenges of today, which are of a multi-dimensional, cross-sectorial nature. The current multilateral system, however, is composed of organizations whose legal and functional basis in limited to a single dimension. Take climate, for example: after the Paris Agreement further negotiations in the UNFCCC framework have been ironing out technical details but cannot command the authority to give guidance to and demand compliance from the international financial institutions, the international private sector, states or even other intergovernmental bodies which undertake actions that exacerbate the underlying crisis. A way has to be found to elevate select global challenges to another mechanism or body that would be able to make binding decisions like the UN Security Council does on matters threatening international peace and security. Matters that threaten the Earth climate system, or the lives of millions like a pandemic, should not be treated with lesser resolve or authority. The time may have come for the establishment of a Global Resilience Council, like a Security Council for non-classical security threats. This is a proposal by the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability (FOGGS) currently being elaborated with academic and other partners.[14]

An UNflattering conclusion with elements of optimism

In a world that is so interconnected and interdependent, retreating to national frontiers and fighting for equipment and vaccine supplies is neither efficient nor effective. One might rephrase that by saying that it is actually immoral and self-destructive, in the medium- to long-term. For humanity to emerge victorious from COVID-19, the health emergency but also the associated economic and social crises, there is need for long-term thinking, planning and action. To abandon the boat of multilateralism and multilevel governance every time a

---

[13] See FOGGS Briefing Note of 28 July 2020 entitled "Issues Associated with Hybrid and Virtual Working Methods of UN System Intergovernmental Bodies under COVID-19", available online at https://www.foggs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Briefing-Note-on-UN-system-working-methods-under-COVID-19-from-FOGGS-28-July-2020-Brainstorming-Final-3-Aug-2020b.pdf

[14] For updates in the Global Resilience Council proposal visit the FOGGS UN2100 Initiative page at https://www.foggs.org/un2100initiative

difficulty arises would only lead to rediscovering its usefulness a bit later and at greater cost. Instead, we should use all tools that such a system puts to our disposal, in the best possible way and with the necessary adjustments and reforms to help ensure the survival, resilience and well-being of all.

That said, the multilateral system that we currently have, a product of World War II, needs an urgent transformation, so that it can operate efficiently under crisis conditions and effectively deliver on the tasks it can perform best. The proposals presented above are made with that in mind. They can hopefully be taken up or at least inspire the United Nations system and its member states to mount a more robust response to the COVID-19 multidimensional crisis, while not forgetting the ongoing climate crisis either, nor the food and water insecurity, or the threat from nuclear and conventional armaments. Much more than wanting to ensure another 25 years for the UN to celebrate its 100th anniversary, it is about ensuring that our world continues and improves on the record of relative peace and prosperity that have characterized the last 75 years of our shared existence.