

A Discussion with Maher Nasser on the United Nations at 75

Moderated by Alistair Edgar and Eric Tanguay

In October 2020, Maher Nasser, Director of the United Nations Department of Global Communications Outreach Division, engaged in discussion with the Multilateral Institutions Research Cluster at the Balsillie School. He discussed the UN at 75, the new challenges that the organization faces, how COVID-19 has impacted the work of the UN, and what it means for the future of the organization.

September 21st, 2020 marked the 75th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations (UN). While there is reason to celebrate the endurance and accomplishments of the UN, the vision of UN Secretary-General António Guterres is reflective, as well as future oriented. Before the disruptions of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Guterres warned of the [four horsemen](#), which he perceived as being the most pressing global threats. These included climate change, geopolitical tensions, sinister technologies, and the return of concerns about nuclear powers. What Guterres and the rest of the world were not anticipating was COVID-19. In the first months of 2020 leading up to when the World Health Organization (WHO) characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic in March, international travel came to a halt, economies around the world slowed down, and the reckoning of the fifth horseman was unleashed. While zoonotic diseases, such as Ebola and Zika, are almost commonplace, the rapid transmission of COVID-19 catalyzed unprecedented and unequal challenges around the globe.

Has the Pandemic Changed How the UN Works?

While the WHO, a specialized agency of the UN, took the lead within the organization on the health response to a global pandemic, the UN Secretariat was responsible for addressing the other global threats associated with the virus. Therefore, when cities and countries around the globe began to implement lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the UN issued an order for its staff in New York to work from home. Though the pandemic necessitated some modifications to the locations of UN staff, COVID-19 did not stop the fundamental work of the UN. In fact, the impacts of COVID-19 brought about increased dependence on several of the UN's humanitarian missions and efforts, such as the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#). In 2020 alone, the WFP provided food for over 20 million people, the largest number of people that the organization has ever provided for per annum. It is predicted that in 2021, this number will continue to increase as the impacts of COVID-19 persist.

Similar to the UN Secretariat and field services, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the Security Council (UNSC) have also continued their operations during the pandemic, albeit virtually. For both UN organs, 2020 marked the first time these bodies met outside of UN headquarters. Using digital platforms, the UNGA and the UNSC remained capable of adopting resolutions and declarations during the pandemic. One of the most notable being the UN75 Declaration, which was adopted by the UNGA on September 21st, 2020, and detailed the forward-looking objectives of UN Member States. Notwithstanding the absence of theatrics and

publicized confrontations between global leaders, the shift to the virtual realm, while unprecedented, has not been prohibitive to the progress of the UN.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Decade of Action

The resilience of the UN amid a global pandemic is further evidenced by its ambitious objectives for the upcoming decade. In September 2020, the UN initiated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [Decade of Action](#), which reaffirmed the international commitment to mobilize global action and meet the SDGs, which were endorsed in 2015 when world leaders committed to the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). Though COVID-19 has rendered it more challenging to meet the SDGs, Nasser suggested that this is not a reason to limit global ambitions nor to reduce the number of goals. In fact, Nasser emphasized that no one SDG is less important than another. Thus, the SDGs must continue to be addressed in a collective manner. Drawing on SDG 13: Climate Action, Nasser stated that even if all other SDG targets were met, their progress would be unsustainable if the targets related to SDG 13 were neglected. These fundamental intersections of the SDGs are also apparent in the UN's responses to COVID-19.

In addition to supporting SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being through the WHO, and SDG 2: Zero Hunger through the WFP, during the pandemic the UN has also made significant efforts to support SDG 4: Quality Education by addressing the spread of misinformation. While there is widespread awareness of the consequences of misinformation, Nasser highlighted how the dangers of health-related misinformation have increased during the pandemic. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the issue of misinformation and its impacts in relation to COVID-19 has been a prominent area of focus for the UN Department of Communications. To mitigate the dangers of misinformation, the Department has launched a series of campaigns during the pandemic. The two campaigns that Nasser discussed, [Verified](#) and [#PledgetoPause](#), are aimed at educating individuals about the spread of misinformation, as well as how to spot misinformation and abstain from sharing it with others. Though these initiatives concentrate on the online spread of misinformation, the Department is continuing efforts to share information through more traditional and accessible communication channels. In fact, the Department ensures that radio communications are distributed to rural areas and aspires to create content in numerous languages, in addition to the six official languages of the UN.

What is the Future of the United Nations?

When discussing the future of the UN, Nasser was prompted with a series of questions concerning the funding of the organization and the much-debated issue of reforming the UN. First, in terms of funding, while the UN can depend on receiving the assessed contributions from the Member States annually, prior to COVID-19 the UN was facing substantial budget cuts due to reductions in donor funding. Consequently, the UN has been recovering from a cashflow crisis that was further exacerbated by the financial demands of the pandemic. While the financial demands on the organization have increased because of COVID-19, there has not been a dramatic decrease in donor contributions since the onset of the pandemic. In response to this precarious balance, Nasser echoed the sentiments of the Secretary-General and suggested that now, more than ever, state and non-state donors must continue to contribute for the benefit of humankind.

Referencing the United States of America, the state with the largest number of infections, as well as the largest financial resources, Nasser highlighted the imperativeness of multilateral cooperation through the UN in responding to the impacts of the virus.

Second, regarding the UN's reform, Nasser identified two facets of the issue: the reform that can be implemented based on the power of the Secretary-General and the reform that must be initiated and implemented with the consent and consensus of the Member States. The reform which can be implemented by the Secretary-General concerns the institutional structure of the Secretariat and is reflected in departmental initiatives and hiring practices. In contrast, the facet of reform that is dependent on Member States concerns the UN's actual essence and structure. This facet includes challenging and controversial issues, such as Security Council reform and the reconsideration of the notorious veto power. Nasser also noted how this facet of reform is politicized and is reflective of broader geopolitical tensions outside of the institution. Notwithstanding political circumstances, once again, referencing the Secretary-General, Nasser reiterated the significance of international cooperation in times of crisis, as well as times of peace, to ensure that the organization can address pressing global and institutional issues.

Conclusion: What is the UN at 75?

In reflecting on the UN at 75, the organization's progress throughout the pandemic, and the prospective future of the organization, one thing is certain. The continuous evolution of the UN and its ability to adapt to humankind's changing needs and the state of the planet should not be understated. Though some skeptics of the organization might contest this claim, the response of the WFP during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the perseverance of the UN Secretariat as well as other UN organs, did not just prove but also reaffirmed the importance of multilateralism and the UN's fundamental role orchestrating it. In concluding the discussion, Nasser emphasized the importance of the [UN Charter's](#) first words, "We the Peoples," as a reminder that, while the organization has evolved from its foundations, improving the lives of current and future generations continues to be the organization's guiding principle.