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THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE COVID-19 GLOBAL EMERGENCY

Discussion Paper

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Background

In early April 2020 FOGGS convened a group of experts for a brainstorming session on the UN system's performance in response to the COVID-19 global emergency and the steps that could be taken to strengthen the system in the future. The online session was held under the Chatham House Rule. Participants spanned 11 time zones and included former international civil servants, academics and practitioners. This Discussion Paper reflects the main points raised in the brainstorming, enriched with further subsequent contributions. It is part of a series of consultations and discussion papers to support governments, the UN system, civil society, academics, and others concerned with the future of multilateralism.

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Key observations on the UN system response to COVID-19

This section presents an assessment of the UN system’s initial response to the COVID-19 global emergency.

National action and international cooperation in times of crises	
<p>The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated global economic recession are intrinsically global issues that impact efforts to advance the global environmental, social, gender, justice and equity agenda (2030 Agenda). Of course, the hands-on response had to be primarily national and sub-national. The importance of international cooperation, though, cannot be understated. This has re-emerged in the discourse, presenting an opportunity for the UN that stands for collective action.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Although a global challenge, COVID-19 has been mainly tackled at the national and subnational level
Except for the WHO, UN public presence has been underwhelming until recently	
<p>The UN system, except for the World Health Organisation (WHO), was absent in the first weeks of the crisis. Recently the more political UN has become noticeably more active, especially the UN Secretary-General, on topics ranging from appealing for a global ceasefire to asking for support for developing countries, to speaking out against increased incidents of domestic violence due to COVID-19 confinement measures. The dedicated UN COVID-19 web page is now more systematically presenting information on the UN system’s response.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It took a while for the UN system, beyond WHO, to start responding visibly to COVID-19
Even when the UN is present, it does more asking than delivering	
<p>Even in its more active phase the UN is seen to be asking others to provide high-level leadership and vision. For example, the G-20 was requested by the UN Secretary-General to address the economic fallout and developed countries are asked to provide aid to developing ones. Certainly, parts of the UN system like the World Food Programme and UNHCR have stepped up their efforts towards the populations they are responsible for, while appealing to donors for additional funding. On the outer limits of the UN system the IMF is offering a USD 1 trillion lifeline to countries seeking liquidity (important but a small percentage of what US and EU are making available to their respective economies).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Even the more active UN presence in recent weeks mainly consists in asking of others to do things, not delivering directly
The UN as an institution will be negatively impacted by the COVID-19 global emergency	
<p>With the UN system closed for a prolonged period due to COVID-19 measures, some governments might question whether it needs to be reopened. The UN’s financial difficulties are expected to be exacerbated as member states redirect funds to domestic economic and health crises. Even the WHO has seen a cut in its funding by the US Administration. Important events on the multilateral calendar, like UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow, are postponed till next year, leaving the climate negotiations and related action in limbo.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased concerns that the UN may not be fully reopened once COVID-19 measures end
Parts of the UN are actively considering post-COVID-19 options	
<p>How to deal with the economic fallout and bring about a more resilient and fair world? How to increase disaster preparedness and resilience? How to operate peacekeeping and ‘normal’ humanitarian relief efforts? How to maintain momentum on the 2030 Agenda? Pockets of the UN system are already working on these big questions. The Secretary-General’s call to “recover better” could be the inspiration for developing and presenting proposals on how this should be accomplished, thus giving a new meaning and a sense of new orientation to the UN’s 75th anniversary activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Secretary-General’s “recover better” call could lead to concrete proposals for post-COVID-19

Recommendations for a more robust UN response

Emphasis is put on suggestions for a larger and more impactful UN role in dealing with the remaining phases of the medical emergency and in shaping the post-COVID-19 world.

For the immediate- and short-term

1. Convene the world	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secretary-General to convene symbolic world leaders' meeting online 	<p>The Secretary-General could convene a virtual world leaders' meeting to give the symbolic sense of the whole of humanity working together to deal with the COVID-19 emergency. Such a meeting could help secure mutual guarantees of sharing equipment and medication for the immediate needs especially of developing countries, and initial commitments to strengthen health systems and calibrate economic systems after the crisis. This cannot wait for the UN@75 Summit, scheduled for 21 September 2020.</p>
2. Provide vision	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The UN could articulate a narrative of hope, pointing to a new beginning after the crisis, with investment in public goods and a new economy, tying also in the climate crisis and other interconnected global challenges 	<p>The UN Secretary-General and other senior UN system officials should be advocates for unity and hope for humanity, pointing to the possibility of creating a better world after the crisis. The significant rescue packages being elaborated in many countries offer the potential to invest in public goods and promote a "new economy", forcing a break from business as usual. This should be done in the context of the UN's 2030 Agenda and with increased emphasis on disaster reduction and preparedness, and community resilience. Health infrastructures and cooperation, information sharing, medical supplies, drug and vaccine development, as well as ensuring a basic income for all, advancing a social economy and reducing inequalities should be spelled out in a coherent and attractive whole. A narrative of hope, pointing to a new beginning along these lines, would also help tie in other interconnected global challenges, notably the climate crisis and food and water (in)security.</p>
3. Summon the troops and plan strategically	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secretary-General to convene UN system heads in emergency coordination meetings to visibly support the global effort against COVID-19 	<p>To demonstrate the UN's active engagement and showcase the contributions of the UN system to the COVID-19 "war" effort, the Secretary-General could convene (virtually and publicly) emergency coordination meetings of the whole or part of the UN system Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), which brings together the heads of UN system specialised agencies, funds and programmes. As a support measure, a UN system task force could be 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.</p>
4. Deploy as one at the country level	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The UN system through its country teams, with UNDP and WHO at the forefront, should deliver coherent support to developing countries in dealing with the COVID-19 emergency 	<p>Mobilizing support for developing countries so that they can adequately respond to the crisis and then proceed to recovery must be a top priority for the UN system. Through the country teams the system should muster all its internal resources and external expertise to support the WHO in providing advice to developing countries on how to deal with the medical emergency. Delivering as one with UNDP and WHO at the forefront, the UN system should also ensure public health systems are central in SDG implementation going forward. UNCTAD, UNDESA and Regional Commissions should provide advice to governments on the economic aspects of the crisis, in coordination with the IMF, regional organisations, and regional development banks. A new "Marshall Plan" could well be warranted for developing countries.</p>

5. Intergovernmental machinery, get back to action

- UN intergovernmental bodies should be looking at the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for their respective sectors and should review national recovery strategies and good practices in a coordinated manner

A Crisis Management Committee, consisting of high-level representatives of the governing bodies of the UN system could be established at the initiative of the General Assembly and/or ECOSOC Presidents. At a minimum an informal group of like-minded countries / “Group of Friends” could be established to push for coordinated action in intergovernmental bodies. One way or another, all intergovernmental bodies – including UNFCCC for climate, CBD for biodiversity, ICAO for aviation, IMO for shipping, UNWTO for tourism, etc. – should be looking at the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for their sectors and should review national recovery strategies and good practices.

For the medium-term

6. Bring in the experts

- Scientific expertise on Health and the Economy – a new economy – should be brought in systematically to advise UN member states

Following the model of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN principal organs could establish Intergovernmental Panels on Health and the Economy respectively. These should convene scientific expertise from across the UN system and beyond to advise governments on challenges in these two areas and chart potential ways forward. For the economy in particular there should be thinking out of the box. New norms should be set and operational tools devised to enable a new economy beyond GDP, with human well-being and resilience at its core, while respecting the planetary boundaries.

7. Monitor the state of the world

- UN system is uniquely placed for vital metrics monitoring on all key global challenges.

Combining the diverse expertise of the various parts of the UN system would provide a unique possibility to monitor global developments and keep track of vital metrics on all key challenges, from climate change to food security, disease control to economic inequality, with real-time updates during crises. This would be a way for the UN to advance its causes and attract media and the public’s attention on a regular basis. Respected scientific establishments from around the world could also be integrated into this effort.

8. A “health-keeping force”

- A standing UN system-wide force for early deployment of expert assistance to areas of medical, environmental or other types of crises

Like the blue helmeted peacekeeping forces that the UN deploys in areas of conflict it would be worth exploring the possibility of establishing health-centered UN system-wide contingents that could be deployed at short notice to troubled areas of the world. Such an arrangement could build on the experience of dealing with such emergencies in the past, like in the case of Ebola and tsunami relief efforts. In fact, a new UN system standing force could be gradually established, in cooperation with regional organisations and states having the necessary capabilities, for early deployment of expert assistance to areas of medical, environmental or other types of crises, thus also containing their effects.

Epilogue

A lot remains to be done by the central UN and the UN system as a whole in the context of the response to the COVID-19 global emergency. Even what is being done, which is not negligible, needs to be presented to the world in a coherent, understandable and practical way so as to be appreciated and have a greater impact. Deeper cooperation and mutual support among governance institutions at global and regional level is required for the value of multilateralism to be broadly recognised and isolationism to be kept in check. To that end the UN should also partner and/or excite the interest and get the support of social movements and online communities the world over, thus amplifying its message and mobilising millions of people, especially young people, around the world.

In difficult times, when countries are preoccupied with their own immediate problems, even if they are shared globally, the chronically underfunded UN system may find itself insolvent. It should be urgently looked into whether and how the necessary financial resources can be secured for the UN system to continue serving the world at a higher level of impact and efficiency.

In a world that is so interconnected and interdependent retreating to national frontiers and closing the fortress gates does no more good than the ostrich tactic of hiding the head in the sand when a threat is approaching. There is a need for structures, planning and action at all levels for humanity to emerge victorious from challenges like COVID-19, climate change and others already here or inevitably to come. Let us not abandon the boat of multilateralism and multilevel governance whenever a difficulty arises, just to rediscover it a bit later and at greater cost. Instead, let's use all tools at our disposal, in the best possible way and with the necessary adjustments and reforms to ensure the survival, resilience and well-being of all.

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