

THE UNITED NATIONS: REFORM OR REFORM!

by Josep Xercavins i Valls*

It is said that the very day after the United Nations was created there was talk of the need for its reform. Aside from almost certainly being true, it is vital that such reform should take place and not simply be talk! The United Nations could be the 'jewel in the crown' of the global society. However, since it is a jewel built by humanity, it will undoubtedly take a long time to be finished.

Without being too abstract we should remember how 2nd April last, the final communiqué of the G-20 stated, almost in its opening lines, 'a global crisis demands a global solution'. If it is so clear that there are global crises that require global solutions, then these must entail global answers. Answers that come from everyone. These global answers from all need a global system of democratic governance. Something that resembles this in a miniscule, but vital way, is the United Nations. We are really lucky to have the UN; even though, at present, not even the G-20 appear to remember its existence.

In the famous, oft-quoted preamble to the United Nations Charter one can read, 'We the people of the United Nations determined... to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom'... 'and for these ends... to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples', we 'have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims... have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an in-

ternational organisation to be known as the United Nations'.

If we are still so far off achieving such ends we must in effect need a profound change in the organisation. Once it takes place, it should be able to solve the main questions and challenges of the present day. By being able to analyse the recent past and, as a consequence, imagine the future in the mid-term, humanity must be braver than ever. It needs, in a political sense to confront the challenges presented by the crisis of civilisation that hides within the irreversible dynamic of globalisation. In order to do so we must transform the United Nations in order that it can achieve its original aims.

Reforming the United Nations: the construction of Global Democratic Governance (GDG)

The world has come a long way since 1945. It is somewhat curious therefore, that during the current globalisation crisis we are experiencing, we have begun to look around and re-examine the events of those years.



Knotted Gun sculpture, by Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, given to the UN by the Luxembourg government in 1988

From the original 51 states that founded the United Nations, the organisation has grown to include 192. An example of the contradictions in the current arrangements is the fact that China and Andorra carry the same voting weight when choosing, say, a member of the Human Rights Council.

Aside from such oddities, from 1945 to the present day the world has undergone more changes than in practically the entire history of humanity. The changes have taken place in all areas: population size, knowledge, technological capacity and so on. However, the changes have occurred with such speed, everything is so complex and complicated, everything is so uncertain, that political inertia (which is more than ever of a conservative nature) hamper attempts to put politics, and more importantly democratic politics, above the problems that present themselves.

The United Nations was created when nation states were still key political actors on the world stage. That was back in 1945, however. In 2009, many international corporations have a great

deal more power than any present day nation state. The United States, the 'empire state', is in serious decline. More importantly, the majority of problems facing humanity are on a global scale. The G-20 itself acknowledged this fact in the above quote. All our problems are without doubt global problems, whether they are related to food, energy, the environment, economics, finance or other factors.

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For all these reasons, when the UN Charter states, 'the organisation is founded on the principle of the equal sovereignty of all its members', something that had meaning in 1945, nowadays does not stand up. When the world is in its current state, the sovereignty of states cannot be maintained as the fundamental principle of an international organisation whose founding Charter has such a preamble and, therefore, the objectives it claims to possess.

Such considerations can be summed up by clearly stating that the much-needed reform of the United Nations needs to be essentially a move towards transforming it into a system of Global Democratic Governance. Governance, not a euphemism for government, since its role in the world needs to be much wider and important than that held by the government of a state at present. Democratic, because only with the legitimacy granted by a system of representative democracy of the sovereignty of the world's citizens can this system operate with any strength, speed and effectiveness at the present time.

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A decisive move in this direction can probably only occur by opting for a two-chamber system: the current General Assembly as a peoples' assembly and a new World Parliament as a chamber for citizens. The advantage of creating a World Parliament is that it is a process that can only happen through the undertaking of a global citizens' movement of broad dimensions.

Reforming the United Nations: constructing a system of GDG that functions effectively

Those of us that believe in and defend the United Nations nevertheless do not fail to see its current great weaknesses. In fact we need to admit and understand them well, better than anyone, so that any reform to the system does not fail to function perfectly.

In reality, to a large extent the UN fails to function for the same fundamental reasons we have already exam-

ined. However, from the point of view of effectiveness, for the solving of problems and the defining and elaboration of improvements, it is also necessary to see what other inherent aspects in the characteristics of great (at least the largest) organisations are, poorly thought through, in the UN's case. Such characteristics will also need to be included in the profound reform process.

In the dimensions of this contribution I would like to mention two of those I consider to be the most important. One is a strictly organisational problem and the other is a financial one.

The historical development of the executive branches of the United Nations in the form of a variety of agencies, programmes and funds (each containing a multiplicity of individual characteristics resulting from specific events and processes arising from a particular moment in time) fails to function. A Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), like a form of United Nations for food and agriculture (with the status of a historical agency with its own general assembly of states), a World Food Programme that answers to the General Assembly and the Secretariat and the World Trade Organisation (WTO¹) that tries to define the 'rules' of global agricultural commerce. As is apparent to anyone with common sense, this situation produces a large number of contradictions and overlaps that in turn induce more inefficiencies and errors than humanity in the twenty-first century can possibly allow to continue.

What is more, only a reform that moves towards a new system of governability that truly works will achieve the prestige required by any human organisation in order that it can generate the required confidence and hope among

¹ The creation of the WTO: one more 'enigma' to add on the road to the construction of 'the jewel in the crown' that lies outside the crown!

the citizens of the world. Without such reforms it would be impossible for any system to function with any effectiveness.

The result of this profound reform process also needs to lead to a radical change in the mode of financing the new system of GDG. One of the main problems of the United Nations is the failure to implement the measures it approves: something that has come to be known as the ‘implementation gap’, since the summits of the 90s. To a significant extent this is due to the organisational factors already mentioned. Nevertheless, in this case its financial model is also behind the problem.

An organisation of states in which budgetary matters are essentially resolved with contributions of its member states in proportion to their wealth, necessarily has virtually two sovereignties. There is that of the General Assembly (1 state, 1 vote) and that of those countries which make a major contribution to the organisation’s budget (the USA, Japan, Germany, Great Britain and France, whose combined contributions have provided some 61% of the UN’s ordinary budget in recent years). Obviously, although it ought not to be the case, it is not difficult to understand why, when an action plan is approved by the United Nations that is of little



interest to these nations, it is difficult to get it implemented.

Sculpture by Arnaldo Pomodoro, gift from Italy to the UN

Fortunately, new problems also often have new solutions. Globalisation, principally in its financial aspect in this case, means that financial capital has lost its ‘national’ character, to become clearly global. This means, among other things, that the majority of capital is not at present paying taxes anywhere. This is totally unjust. A new global fiscal system needed to resolve this injustice while, at the same time, contributing to seriously reducing the purely speculative nature of this financial world, would provide more than enough money to operate, almost without problems, a new system of GDG. It would not only be able to provide for its ordinary budget, but also to fund the budgets of many of its programmes as well.

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