

THE UNITED NATIONS

Peace, development and human rights for all – can the UN really achieve its aims?

By Natalie Samarasinghe, UNA-UK Head of Communications, with research and drafting by Helen Franzen, UNA-UK Communications Officer.

[This article is based on a feature that appeared in The Metro on 16 June 2010. [Click here to view](#)]

When the UN was set up in 1945, its founders hoped that it might be able to prevent the horrors of war from recurring. 65 years later, the UN is most commonly associated with Security Council resolutions, Middle East diplomacy and peacekeepers wearing blue helmets. But the UN's role has expanded greatly. It now also tackles problems such as climate change, HIV/AIDS and terrorism, which no one country can address alone.

Keeping the peace

The UN has helped broker over 170 peace settlements and has run 63 peacekeeping missions. Its interventions – in Cyprus, Liberia and Timor-Leste for example – have helped people to lead safer lives. Right now, more than 100,000 UN peacekeepers are deployed around the world, in places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo – home to the largest UN peacekeeping force – and in Darfur, which recorded its bloodiest month in two years this May. But the UN's ability to respond to conflicts is seriously stretched. It does not have a standing army of its own, and so relies on its member states to contribute troops, equipment and finance. These contributions are now threatened by the economic downturn.

Fighting poverty

This evening, one billion people will go to bed hungry. Most of them live on less than £1 a day. In 2000 the UN launched the 'Millennium Development Goals', eight targets for reducing global poverty and inequality by 2015. This initiative has already yielded life-changing results. Deaths of children under five have steadily declined, millions of people now have access to safe drinking water and new HIV infection rates have decreased by 30% worldwide. But not all goals are likely to be met, and it is important that rich countries keep the aid promises they make. The government recently reaffirmed its commitment not to cut overseas aid. The amounts involved are relatively small: the UK contributed £7.1 billion in aid in 2008/09, compared to £135.7 billion on benefits and pensions in the UK.

Protecting rights

Human rights often get bad press. In fact, they are meant to ensure that our basic needs are met and that we can fulfill our potential. UN human rights treaties – like the Convention against Torture – were created to protect people everywhere from having their rights abused by those in power. Once a government signs one of those treaties, it is obliged to incorporate the rights into domestic law. The UK's Human Rights Act is an example of this. It does not actually create any new rights but rather allows British people to seek justice in UK courts if their rights are breached. The UN regularly reviews countries' performance. When scrutinising the UK in 2008, it expressed concern about extraordinary rendition and the levels of child poverty.

The UK plays a key role at the UN. It is one of the 15-strong Security Council's five 'permanent members', which means it can veto major decisions and plays a key role in choosing the UN Secretary-General – the UN's chief administrative officer. The Security Council is the most powerful organ of the UN. It can establish peacekeeping missions and place sanctions on countries, and its decisions are binding on all the UN's member states. Decisions of the UN's General Assembly are not binding, but it is nonetheless a crucial part of the UN. It is an international forum for debate – one in which every country, no matter how large or small, rich or poor, has a vote – which enables the 192 countries that make up the UN's membership to cooperate on the most pressing issues facing the world. It is the closest thing we have to a world parliament.

The UN also has agencies working on the ground in nearly every country in the world. The UN World Food Programme feeds some 90 million people each year. The UN's Refugee Agency has helped over 50 million people to rebuild their lives. And the World Health Organization has helped to virtually eradicate polio.

Of course, poverty, conflict and human rights abuses persist and the UN is often accused of failing to live up to expectations. But as Dag Hammarskjöld, a former UN Secretary-General, pointed out: the UN was not

created to take us to heaven but to save us from hell. There are limits to what the UN can achieve. It is not a 'world government'. In reality, its member states finance its work and govern its activities. Decisions at the UN are therefore inevitably political – the result of haggling and arguing by the world's countries. Yet whether it is clearing landmines in Lebanon or working to stop communicable diseases reaching the UK, the UN continues to be a lifeline for millions of people around the world.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- ⇒ The UN's two-year budget for 2010-11 is \$5.2 billion - less than half of the cost of the 2012 London Olympics or Transport for London's annual budget
- ⇒ Both McDonalds and Coca-Cola employ more people worldwide than the entire UN system
- ⇒ There has never been a female UN Secretary-General
- ⇒ As it promotes a tobacco-free environment, the UN's World Health Organization does not recruit smokers
- ⇒ The longest speech ever made at the UN was 7 hours and 48 minutes by V. K. Krishna Menon defending India's position on Kashmir to the Security Council in 1957
- ⇒ At the visitor's entrance of the UN's headquarters in New York, a sculpture of a twisted gun is a tribute to John Lennon, who was gunned down in the city in 1980
- ⇒ UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon gave his own rendition of 'Santa Claus is coming to town' at an informal UN correspondents dinner in December 2006

BRITAIN AND THE UN

- ⇒ Legend has it that when US President Franklin D. Roosevelt coined the term 'United Nations', he was so excited that he burst into the bathroom to speak to the visiting Winston Churchill only to find Churchill in the tub. Apparently Churchill brushed aside FDR's apologies, saying 'the Prime Minister of Great Britain has nothing to hide from the President of the United States'
- ⇒ The UK is one of the top five donors to the UN's core budget, contributing 6.6% (£111 million) in 2009
- ⇒ The first meeting of the UN General Assembly took place in Westminster Central Hall in London in 1946, and the first meeting of the UN Security Council shortly afterwards in nearby Church House

THE UN AND YOU

The UN doesn't only work in developing countries. Its also makes a difference to our daily lives:

- ⇒ The UN's Children's Fund (UNICEF) works to ensure that children in Britain are protected
- ⇒ The International Labour Organization sets standards for equal pay and working conditions
- ⇒ The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization protects hundreds of heritage sites around the world, including Stonehenge, the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey
- ⇒ The International Telecommunications Union helps phone systems in every continent to connect
- ⇒ The Food & Agriculture Organization sets norms for additives and limits for pesticides – it was the first international body to recommend expiry dates on food packages

UNA-UK is Britain's leading independent source of analysis on the UN, and a vibrant grassroots movement campaigning for peace, development and human rights. For more information and to become a member, visit www.una.org.uk