

The 'Third' UN: Imagining Post-COVID-19 Multilateralism

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Abstract

If the United Nations system is to remain relevant, or even survive, the thinking to re-imagine and redesign contemporary global governance will come from the Third UN. This article focuses on the ecology of supportive non-state actors – intellectuals, scholars, consultants, think tanks, NGOs, the for-profit private sector, and the media – that interacts with the intergovernmental machinery of the First UN and international civil servants of the Second UN to formulate and refine ideas and decision-making in policy processes. Despite the growth in analyses of non-state actors in global governance, the 'other' or 'Third' UN is poorly understood, often ignored, and normally discounted. Some advocate for particular ideas, others help analyze or operationalize their testing and implementation; in any case, many help the UN 'think' and have an impact on how we think about the United Nations.

Policy Implications

- Out-of-the-box thinking for UN deliberations should rely on independent analysts rather than just government officials and international civil servants.
- Governments and philanthropies should provide more core and voluntary UN budgetary resources for global norms, standards, policy, and advocacy in order to move away from short-term sound-bites and toward evidence-based policy.
- Public-private intellectual and policy partnerships should be expanded to re-imagine how we work, communicate, and think in a complex, interconnected, and anxious world.
- New nationalisms and populisms are metastasizing, which requires taking advantage of the post-COVID-19 moment, along with climate change, to emphasize meaningful international cooperation.

Politicians, pundits, professors, and people on the street are alternatively sounding the alarm about or applauding multilateralism's demise. While it may not yet have collapsed, the rules-based international order is increasingly untethered, lacking a lodestar. The host of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) that emerged immediately after World War II, or subsequently in response to discrete problems, are struggling to remain credible. The postwar order was borne of progressive liberal values, yet it has also produced deep structural inequalities both within and among states.

We can debate whether the United States and the West are declining, absolutely or relatively, but agree that the post-Cold War unipolar moment was short-lived. George Magnus (2010) described the 'uprising', the current moment of extraordinary change in the organization and structure of the international system, as resembling the transformations after the two world wars. Antonio Gramsci's (1972, p. 276) classic observation is apt: 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in

this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.

The COVID-19 pandemic etched in stark relief the extent of our increasing interdependence and the acute need for global cooperation when enthusiasm for it is in short supply. With a global depression (\$10 trillion or a 10 per cent drop in global GDP) brought on by the pandemic, the planet will remain hard pressed to respond to current and future threats without more robust intergovernmental institutions. The growing US-China competition for global leadership and the rise of the digital age have ushered in paradigm shifts in how we work, communicate, and think in a complex, interconnected, and anxious world. The turmoil of 2020 echoes what Alvin Toffler (1970) described a half century earlier in *Future Shock* – populations disoriented, dislocated, and stressed from rapid social, economic, and technological upheavals.

The COVID-19 era also has produced new forms of association and social justice movements and highlighted the need for a new kind of citizen politics. Is the UN, as a state-

based institution, structured to meet the trans-national crises of the day? Is it nimble enough to adapt and respond to new realities? The short, yet generous, answer is 'not yet'. How can the UN adapt for the future, especially when change approaches at warp speed? The UN Charter has proven flexible for some changing realities – for instance, the invention of peacekeeping. However, adaptation let alone transformation will require creative thinking to help turn the UN super-tanker fast enough to meet global challenges. Could our plight catalyze a rethinking of the 75-year-old experiment and ensure that the UN is around to celebrate its centenary in 2045?

If the world organization and the UN system are to become more effective, or even survive, the thinking to re-imagine and redesign contemporary global governance will come from what we described a decade ago as 'the Third UN'. (Carayannis and Weiss, 2021; Weiss et al., 2009) If past is prelude, new thinking will come neither from the polarized First UN of member states nor the Second UN of secretariats – lenses Inis Claude (1956) first used in his classic text 65 years ago. In fact, as the pandemic ravages economies worldwide and rhetorical battles between governments escalate, scientific communities are coming together. 'While national leaders play the blame game,' Francis Fukuyama (2020, p. 31) wrote, 'scientists and public health officials around the world are deepening their networks and connections'. Or as the *New York Times* noted, 'While political leaders have locked their borders, scientists have been shattering theirs, creating a global collaboration unlike any in history'. (Apuzzo and Kirkpatrick, 2020, Section A, p. 1, in print edition).

If the 'whole UN' is to reflect the complexity of actors necessary to address global problems, new ideational and normative coalitions are necessary. What kinds of partnerships are required to build a multilateral system that can respond adequately to pernicious challenges? Does the United Nations have a comparative advantage in idea-mongering? If so, why are so few core and voluntary budgetary resources (at most, 10 per cent) devoted to global norms, standards, policy, and advocacy? (UNMPTFO and DHF, 2019).

Throughout its three-quarters of a century, the United Nations has confronted bureaucratic challenges and major changes in world politics; none has yet been lethal. Multilateral organizations today reflect an era when consensual cooperation among states could address many problems needing international collective action. COVID-19 and climate change, however, are threats of a scale that defy action by a single state or even a group of states working in concert. Indeed, the pandemic has given us some sense of what a truly global crisis means, one that disrupts everything from working or shopping, to visiting parents or other countries, to attending schools or weddings. As such, it has revealed the limits of the UN's structure, which solves transnational problems only when the most powerful sovereign states assent. In fact, at this juncture major and even minor powers are circling the wagons, the very opposite reaction from the one required to address the transnational existential threats to public health and the human environment.

This article begins with a profile of the Third UN. It then explores the politics of the 'post'-COVID-19 world and the dimensions of multilateral governance. It concludes with how a fitter-for-purpose, 'whole' UN could think about that world.

What is the third UN?

Think tanks, knowledge brokers, epistemic communities, public-private partnerships, and expert networks (Andonova, 2010; Haas, 1992; Meyer, 2010; McGann and Sabatini, 2011; Abbott et al., 2016) are phenomena found in both the academic and policy lexicons, but their intellectual role remains marginal to analyses of the workings of such IGOs as the United Nations. Texts on the UN, of course, discuss non-state actors. (Weiss and Daws, 2018; Weiss et al., 2019) However, the bulk of analytical attention has concentrated on nefarious non-state actors in violent conflicts and the difficulties in the UN's response to threats to peace and security. While the operational role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) particularly as sub-contractors for IOs in development and humanitarian action has been explored (Weiss, 1998), the ideational role of knowledge institutions in these activities has not, despite discussions about transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

We emphasize the dynamics of ideas and norms and, more particularly, the impact of a subset of non-state actors on how the UN thinks, and how we think about the UN. The Third UN is the ecology of supportive non-state actors – intellectuals, scholars, consultants, think tanks, NGOs, the for-profit private sector, and the media – that interacts with the intergovernmental machinery of the First UN and international civil servants of the Second UN to formulate and refine ideas and decision-making in policy processes. Our analytical toolkit must provide the means to move beyond the binary frame of member states whose directives are carried out by international civil servants; it must capture accurately the politics of knowledge and norm production that shape those directives and the ideas and narratives that drive them.

The Third UN's roles include research, policy analysis, idea mongering, advocacy, and public education. Its various components put forward new information and ideas, push for alternative policies, and mobilize public opinion around UN deliberations and projects. They also can impede progress, by deploying the same methods; the polarization that afflicts geo-political dynamics and left-right, secular-religious societal battles are also reflected across the Third UN's ever-changing network of networks that helps the UN 'think'. Some Third UN actors advocate for particular ideas, while others help analyze or operationalize their testing and implementation. Participation varies with issues and geographic focus as well as timing. At any given time, any of these non-state actors can be a member of the Third UN. There are no barriers to entry or exit, and no permanent membership.

As noted above, the literature on the advocacy and operational roles of NGOs is relatively well developed. While we

do not address the operational role of non-state actors, the lessons from this literature echoes our own conclusions about their intellectual role in making the UN more effective by helping it think. As with operational NGOs, the various intellectual actors in the Third UN tend to be more flexible, act more quickly, and are less constrained by the status quo or government-imposed orthodoxies of the day. Their budgetary independence compared to UN secretariats also makes autonomy and distance from conventional wisdom a plus rather than a minus.

Despite the growth in analyses, the 'other' or 'Third' UN is poorly understood, often ignored, and typically discounted, even though some non-territorial players in issue-specific global governance are more influential than many territorial states. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for the laws of war and humanitarian principles; the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (or FIFA) for the world's most popular sport (football, or soccer); and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) for the internet. Similarly, business corporations have come together to participate in the development of governance systems either at the urging of international organizations, such as the UN's Global Compact, or in shared recognition of the need for new systems of coordination, such as the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT). Moody's Investors Service and Standard & Poor's Ratings Group renders judgments that are authoritative enough to cause market responses. Individual experts serving on the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or eminent persons on other panels and commissions have altered narratives and public policy.

The distinct value-added of informed scholars, policy analysts, and activists is to push out intellectual and policy envelopes, to venture beyond what passes for conventional intergovernmental wisdom. They provide crucial knowledge and often counter-hegemonic ideas. For example, economists Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen pioneered human development ideas – which placed people rather than commodities at the center of the development process – and found their way into UNICEF's *Adjustment with a Human Face*, challenging the orthodoxies of the day. Full employment, basic needs, and universal human rights were ideas first developed by Third UN actors and agreed in UN forums. Universities, independent commissions, expert groups, NGOs and other Third UN actors have helped shape UN development thinking for 75 years, decade by decade – from the euphoria of the founding in 1945 and the First Development Decade of the 1960s, to technical cooperation, the struggle for a New International Economic Order, various debt crises, human development, human security, and resistance to the so-called Washington Consensus, globalization, and global governance. It is impossible to ignore that such 'outsider-insiders' or 'insider-outsiders' are integral to the world body. What once may have seemed insignificant now is central for world politics and multilateralism.

The argument does not dispute state sovereignty as the predominant characteristic of world politics. Indeed, with the emergence of new nationalisms and populisms, it is

back with a vengeance. Analyses of world politics acknowledge the extent to which the stage is crowded with a variety of actors, which is why 'global governance' emerged in the late twentieth century as the term of art to encompass multilateralism and public-private partnerships. (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2019) For Barnett and Duvall (2005, p. 1), it has 'has attained near-celebrity status', leading Michael Zürn (2018) to calculate in 2018 that the growth rate of new titles about global governance surpassed all others in international relations.

Over the past century, a marked increase has taken place in the number and the scope of international actors on the world stage. The *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Union of International Associations, 2018) provides the time-series data over the 20th and 21st centuries. Their data dramatically demonstrate the changing landscape of international organization. The total of 213 organizations in 1909 quadrupled by 1951 and reached 71,397 in 2018. Think tanks have seen their numbers worldwide rise dramatically in the last 20 years, coinciding with the rise of the knowledge economy and a greater demand (and reliance) on intellectual and social capital. By one estimate, over half of think tanks globally are located in North America and Europe, but with Asia now registering the fastest growth. As of 2018, India and China follow the United States as the top three countries with the most think tanks. (McGann, 2018; McGann and Sabatini, 2011).

While our emphasis is on groups that foster multilateralism, Charter values, and UN norms, these growing numbers fail to convey a mixed picture, as the persecution of scholars and indigenous, feminist, and LGBTQ groups illustrates in many parts of the globe. (Goetz, 2020; Mason, 2019) In the for-profit sector, the number of transnational corporations (TNCs) and subsidiaries has also grown; in the 21st century, they merit inclusion in the Third UN whereas earlier they had been on the UN's periphery because of their perceived negative impact and image in the Soviet bloc and much of the Global South. The UN Global Compact brought business into UN discussions, although skeptics point to the leverage of corporate financing, and argue that many corporate actors, for example, fossil-fuel and garment producers, work against such UN norms as those on climate change and child labor. (Adams, 2021).

A skeptic might ask, 'What's new?' Our answer, at least in part, is that 'more is different'. (Anderson, 1972, pp. 393–396) Our argument is not the more-the-merrier. Rather, to what extent do increased numbers in the Third UN reflect an enhanced capacity to contribute to better global governance and strengthened multilateral institutions? The growth in the kinds and numbers of actors permits – indeed, requires and facilitates – a networked structure of global interconnections, where various types of partners contribute to global governance. The quantitative growth of IGOs, NGOs, and TNCs over the 20th and 21st centuries and of think tanks over the last few decades constitutes a qualitative change in global governance. Earlier, many problems had only a few or even no non-state actors active in analysis, advocacy, or operations within an issue area. The

quantitative and qualitative growth in network means that global challenges now have a complex web of international stakeholders working to understand and address them. Moreover, technology has accelerated the nature and speed of growing interactions. As Abbott et al. (2016) remind us, intergovernmental organizations are no longer the dominant nor fastest growing global governance institutional form. Recent years have witnessed an expansion of networked forms of public authority that may not include IGOs or states at all. They provide opportunities to apply new knowledge and ideas to solve intractable problems and shape political orders; they can help decentralize the UN system by providing entry points for private actors to participate in global governance; they can at times overcome the political gridlock paralyzing states and UN secretariats.

Public-private partnerships are not new to the United Nations. In fact, most organizations of the system maintain some kind of public-private partnership program. As non-state-led governance has grown exponentially in some sectors, particularly the environment, so has the academic literature about these authorities. In discussing environmental governance, Liliana B. Andonova (2010, p. 25) defines these partnerships as 'agreements for collaborative governance between public actors (national governmental agencies, sub-national governments, or IOs) and non-state actors (foundations, firms, advocacy organizations, or others), which establish common norms, rules, objectives, and decision-making and implementation procedures for a set of policy problems'. Anne Marie Goetz (2020, p. 166) writes that '[f]eminist engagement with international institutions is ... a paradigmatic example of how a relatively power-deprived social group' by building partnerships with states willing to champion gender equality can 'challenge the power of sovereign states'.

UN activities are diverse and members of the Third UN are as well – intellectuals, scholars, consultants, think tanks, NGOs, the for-profit private sector, and the media. The Third UN is anything but monolithic; it does not have the clear and coherent definitional boundaries of member states or international civil servants. Membership in the Third UN varies, depending on topics and timing. The International Olympic Committee is not active in the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, but the Gates Foundation is. FIFA is not engaged in follow-up to the Paris Agreement, but the Earth Institute at Columbia University is. For many actors in the Third UN, informing UN decision-making is not their only, or even their primary mandate; but for us, it is an essential feature. The Third UN's non-state-led governance in its various forms has much to offer the UN in terms of ideas, technology, and practical solutions.

Knowledge brokers and brokering

The UN has a decades-long history of originating, incubating, consuming, and disseminating powerful ideas and social knowledge – from human rights to full employment, from climate change to the limits of GNP as a meaningful measurement of development (Jolly et al., 2009; Weiss et al.,

2005). The Third UN as knowledge system has been an intellectual partner of the intergovernmental machinery since the organization's inception (Svenson, 2016). The three UNs together can be usefully understood as a progressively evolving and symbiotic knowledge economy whose accumulated experience since 1945 has been harnessed with varied success to address some of the world's most complex challenges.

While 'expertise' is a relative and value-laden notion, the need for the UN Secretariat's staff in headquarters to improve its analytical capacity and strengthen its knowledge management for development, humanitarian action, and international peace and security has long been recognized by thoughtful international civil servants. This need figured notably in the 2000 *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (the 'Brahimi Report'), but it has remained aspirational. The opposition to the Second UN's enhanced wherewithal for political analysis goes back to Dag Hammarskjöld's rejection of efforts to build an intelligence capacity within the Secretariat; for him, it was exclusively the First UN's realm – he may have been particularly uneasy to ruffle superpower feathers at the height of the Cold War (Urquhart, 1994). In the 1990s, the outgoing head of the (then) UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and former under-secretary-general of the (then) Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Marrack Goulding (1997), highlighted the need for analysis and proposed an Interdepartmental Policy Analysis Group in a report to Secretary-General Annan.

This debate was revived due to the profound policy and operational challenges posed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq following the attacks of 9/11 and the global war on terror, accompanied by a growing recognition of complex policy challenges along the relief-to-development spectrum. They require more multidisciplinary analyses – linking political, security, economic, and social issues. Both Brahimi and Goulding argued that the effectiveness of Secretariat analyses was limited by a narrow focus on political issues, which neglected, for example, political economy. That UN policy makers place high priority on context-specific knowledge and analysis was further underscored by the conclusion of a 2003 DPA-led evaluation of knowledge management for strategic planning. The 'Knowledge Project' – a Rockefeller Foundation-funded collaboration with the Social Science Research Council's Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum (SSRC/CPPF) – recommended streamlining the internal policy process and strengthening the UN's ability to draw on external expertise by calling upon research institutions and think tanks.

A decade and a half after the Brahimi Report, the 2015 reviews of UN peace and development operations and architecture – the High-Level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations (HIPPO) and the Advisory Group of Experts on Peacebuilding (AGE) – both reiterated the requirement for a greater capacity to think. They returned to questions about what the UN can effectively do in contemporary crises, and what analytical resources were needed. They also asked whether the UN's knowledge resources drew on

sufficiently diverse perspectives and were equipped to understand issues that cut across regions and bureaucratic boundaries.

On his appointment in 2017, Secretary-General António Guterres committed to seeking expertise from outside the normal insider UN channels: 'We will be open to new ideas ... drawing on and commissioning research and inputs from a wide variety of internal and external sources ... [and] ensure that fresh thinking and outside perspectives are introduced into the policy making process' (UN, 2017). In modest ways, that has been the case. There is more integration and coordination than two decades ago. The Secretariat has established in-house mechanisms to improve information-sharing and decision-making among different parts of the UN system as well as between headquarters and the field. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have underscored the links among such seemingly disparate issues as politics, economics, human rights, public health, the environment, technology, and media. The COVID-19 aftermath will only reinforce the requirement for multidisciplinary perspectives; everything from the rotation of peacekeepers to the priorities in humanitarian and development projects are affected.

The need for real-time intellectual inputs has given prominence to external partners – knowledge brokers from the Third UN, especially those seasoned observers (sometimes former staff members) who know how to navigate UN corridors. One reason that UN staff respond – and sometimes listen – to policy advice provided in expert briefings by trusted brokers is that policy makers are bombarded with information and are unable to dig as deeply into issues as they would like; daily firefighting invariably takes precedence. Demand for analysis is also high because civil servants rotate – from field to headquarters, from the UN Secretariat to other parts of the system. Such staff movements may be beneficial for multilateral diplomacy, inter-agency cooperation, lessons-learning, and morale; but they make it harder to acquire and retain in-depth understanding of specific issues and places. It also can be useful for imaginative UN staff to seek a 'cover' for proposals – pointing to an outside source, permits bureaucrats to have plausible deniability.

It is thus preferable for UN policy making to speak about 'knowledge brokers' rather than think tanks because not all think tanks broker and not all brokers think. Knowledge brokerage at the UN comes in many forms, including the 'revolving door' of human capital. As Barnett and Finnemore (2018, p. 54) observe: 'Many UN staff and field personnel have varied careers and move back and forth between UN appointments, jobs within their own governments at home, and positions in the private sector, universities, and NGOs'. Many individuals are 'shape-shifters' whose membership at any moment in one of the three UNs reflects the extent to which they are embedded in larger social networks.

The use of knowledge brokers has been on the rise in the last two decades in all sectors: they are 'people whose job it is to move knowledge around and create connections between researchers and their various audiences' (Meyer,

2010, p. 123). More specifically, they facilitate the transfer of knowledge between policy or academic researchers and practitioners; their positions inherently entail tensions. Systematic interactions with UN staff create opportunities for these actors to inform and shape policy; understanding UN constraints can also help outside institutions and individuals shape their own policy work. Brokers need to be close enough to policy makers to understand in real time their requirements but distant enough from policy processes to maintain analytical legitimacy and independence. Unlike advice from many 'hired-gun' consultants, effective knowledge brokers – to paraphrase the Brahimi Report – are not there to tell the UN what it wants to hear, but what it needs to hear.

Knowledge brokering is multidimensional (Kislov et al., 2017). In addition to *producing* knowledge through in-house research, knowledge brokers are responsible for *moving* knowledge, from the academy and NGOs to governments and UN secretariats. This often requires identifying and curating research products that might be useful to bring into UN policy discussions and facilitate the transfer of what brokers understand to be necessary knowledge for policy makers to effectively address specific problems.

Knowledge brokers also pursue the twin processes of translating and convening, which often go hand-in-hand with mobilizing evidence. Translation has two elements. First, it requires taking complex ideas and jargon and making them readable, digestible, and operationally relevant for practitioners. Such 'translations' are often done through research digests and literature reviews, expert briefings, convenings, and policy memos. Second, translation requires reframing ideas in research papers and academic publications into actionable recommendations. It is often said that scholars are good at telling practitioners what is broken but terrible at helping them think about how to fix it. The translation function of the knowledge broker is thus critical. Some observers have argued that successful brokerage, in fact, produces a new type of knowledge. 'Brokered knowledge' makes available 'more robust, more usable knowledge that 'serves locally' at a given time; knowledge that has been de- and re-assembled' (Meyer, 2010, p. 123).

The ability to bring actors together and facilitate conversations that are problematic in formal settings is another crucial brokerage function. Cynics dismiss many UN gatherings as empty talk shops, but ideas are precursors for action. Convening UN policy makers around a shared analysis is critical to making research and external ideas accessible. It also contributes to coordination and policy alignment. Everyone agrees with the need to transcend UN bureaucratic silos, but it remains as hard as ever. The role of knowledge brokers, and particularly those considered trusted 'honest brokers' helps determine when the First and Second UN will act on the information and ideas provided by external actors because they know the timing and relevance of such analysis in a policy process. Effective brokers can maximize uptake by ensuring that there is a demand for external policy advice in the first place, and often by observing and accompanying the uptake process itself.

The politics of knowledge – what is produced, consumed, transferred, and valued as well as how the UN is informed and by whom – reflect the tensions and competition between different types and sources of knowledge. Output is important not only for UN policy making but also for international norm development and dissemination. Whose knowledge is most valued, and why? The push for evidence-based policy making has raised the political stakes of who exactly within the Third UN gets to help the First UN and the Second UN think. A testament to that reality is the outcry about the ‘influence’ of alternative voices from emerging powers on UN thinking (Lynch, 2019).

That knowledge and power are linked is not new. As Hans N. Weiler (2009, p. 487) reminds us, ‘reciprocal legitimation’ between power and knowledge is clear accompanied by the ‘ever-increasing degree to which political decisions are justified by reference to a particular body of knowledge’. The bulk of scholarship about the United Nations and the main substantive issues on its agenda emanate from universities, specialist research institutes, and learned societies in North America and Western Europe (Gordenker and Jonsson, 2018). During World War II, the notion that the UN would be a major instrument of Washington’s foreign policy attracted support from US foundations. For example, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace actively promoted research on a new organization by scholars and by officials from the League of Nations, which was helpful for the post-war expansion of multilateralism (Lavelle, 2020). Such private support has continued sporadically since, including the \$1 billion gift from the business leader Ted Turner in 1997 to create the UN Foundation and Better World Fund. Two professional associations, the Society for International Development (founded in 1967) and the Academic Council on the United Nations System (founded in 1987), are part of policy research networks focused on the problems and prospects of the UN and multilateralism more generally.

Think tanks and knowledge brokers around the UN have an ethical responsibility to be particularly attuned to the politics and hierarchies of knowledge, and to their own positions within the knowledge hierarchy. Self-reflection is as essential to the credibility of the Third UN as it is to all social research – that is, the process of questioning continually the research process, and of examining and consciously acknowledging the assumptions and pre-conceptions that researchers (or their funders) bring to any study. Knowledge brokers work at the edges of the academy and policy. They thus constantly must scrutinize their practices, their brokering devices, and the benefits and drawbacks of their ‘double peripherality’ because ‘they are partially connected to the two worlds they bridge’ (Meyer, 2010, p. 122).

Trends for funding research complicate reflection. Philanthropies increasingly shun funding basic research. Previously generous member states are tightening their belts and are under pressure from taxpayers to justify investments in applied research. The growing tendency to call upon ‘consultants’ and research-on-demand has dire repercussions for research design and practice. Contractors compete with

academic institutions for dwindling funding. Donor-driven research and high-impact philanthropy are setting agendas and demanding quick results that often are incompatible with the pace and process of scientific inquiry.

Funding challenges, together with the information revolution, mean that research institutions need to change how they do business. What will happen to longer-term perspectives and to independence, and to the relationship between evidence and policy? From where will funding come to support a variety of research, especially if evidence runs contrary to donor wishes and perspectives? The Third UN will need to create a demand for basic research from within the First and the Second UNs, make persuasive cases to funders for the value of evidence, and be more transparent about sources and conditions.

Two decades ago, the Washington-insider Ann Florini (2000, p. 3) noted: ‘Although the state system that has governed the world for centuries is neither divinely ordained nor easily swept away, in many ways that system is not well suited to addressing the world’s growing agenda of border-crossing problems’. The presence of alternative inputs other than from states and international civil servants has become integral to the UN system’s policy processes and deliberations. Knowledge and normative production would simply not be the same without the Third UN.

Re-imagining the future of global institutions

The dynamics of change invariably involve the creation, refinement, and implementation of ideas. Explanations for continuity and change also entail technology, politics, and economics; but at a minimum, ideas matter in opening space for experimentation and innovation.

Indeed, both individually and through new alignments such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), emerging powers are engaging more directly in key normative debates about accelerated development and poverty alleviation; how international interventions for peace could and should be conducted; and how major UN organizations could and should contribute to a more just order. Research suggests the extent to which the Global South has long been a source of global norms (Acharya and Plesch, 2020; Ayoob, 2020; Helleiner et al., 2014; Weiss and Roy, 2017).

If the trend lines are governments’ flexing their sovereign muscles and escalating popular nationalisms, it is researchers, intellectuals, and epistemic communities worldwide who will need to come together to define the new global order that we want and need. In many ways, research collaborations and conversations are underway. The global project to redefine multilateralism, however, must become more multi-disciplinary and inclusive; it also must avoid the politicization of critical issues that has impeded cooperation, and lately even conversations, by governments. The decision-makers from UN-friendly member states and philanthropies who believe in the multilateral project would do well to augment support for research cooperation and access to knowledge.

A sub-set of the Third – particularly think tanks, academics, research NGOs, and other 'norm entrepreneurs' – traditionally has helped the First and Second UNs think, and this task looms large as the future is defined by speed and interdependence. Significant innovations in technology accompany an era of increasing inequality, new security threats, and looming environmental and health disasters. Understanding the cause-and-effect results of information technology, inequality, and insecurity will be crucial to understanding geo-politics. How we research, collaborate, mobilize, and organize will be shaped by technology in the digital age, aptly labeled the 'fourth industrial revolution'.

If the world organization is to survive and remain relevant, the vast bulk of ideas necessary to meet these challenges will come from the Third UN. Successful international cooperation increasingly is perched on a three-legged stool. Member states and their governments remain essential, as do international secretariats. However, they cannot ignore the complementary analytical and advocacy skills of actors and mechanisms of the Third UN; states and international civil servants simply must collaborate with the bevy of performers on the world's stage.

As we argue above and elsewhere, the power of ideas is an underappreciated UN legacy. Ideas change the way that we perceive and talk about issues. They permit the redefinition of interests – that is, what matters and why – as part of setting agendas and prioritizing actions. They provide the basis for the formation of new coalitions and networks. They find homes in institutions and are reflected in budgetary and personnel allocations. Former businessman and UN under-secretary-general Maurice F. Strong led the Canadian International Development Research and Policy Task Force, which over two decades ago determined that networks of think tanks, academics, and research NGOs contribute to more effective policy:

[T]hey generate new knowledge; they generate 'operational' knowledge; and they disseminate knowledge locally. The first contribution is a function of the interdisciplinary quality of the networks ... The second is related to the mixture of academic and non-academic work that the networks perform. And the third is related to the constant interaction between distant colleagues and global disciplines ... and local activities ... These three qualities of interdisciplinarity, operability, and contextualization are each important to the production of knowledge (Quoted in Stein et al., 2001, p. 20).

Non-state actors are key to local governance, especially where the state is weak or predatory. The Third UN can – as it has historically – play not only a significant but also a more formidable role in shaping international public policy and also in monitoring commitments. An important current example is 'naming and shaming' for the SDGs; the Second UN by itself cannot do neither adequately. As noted earlier, many actors in the Third UN are smaller, more flexible, better networked, and less bound by the constraints that dictate deliberations in the forums attended by senior and

junior officials from both governments and secretariats. Moreover, the Third UN's think tanks and knowledge brokers serve not only as bridges between knowledge and policy; but increasingly they also span policy makers and their publics – essential to bringing reluctant governments along.

States, especially major powers, need to be pressured to listen and act because inertia is the easiest path. Secretariats need to be open to ideas, but the costs of being ahead of the conventional wisdom can be not only embarrassing but potentially costly to career advancement. Third UN actors need to know when to bring ideas in, when to make noise, and when to allow members of the First and the Second UN to take credit for initiatives. In short, brokers are also essential to either be a creaky wheel or to grease one.

That said, we should recognize the clear limitations of non-state actors in global governance despite their ability to network across national borders. By themselves – that is, without state sponsors and secretariat facilitation – they cannot eliminate poverty resulting from globalization, fix global warming, or halt mass murder and migration. Governments, especially, but UN officials as well, need to take their responsibilities seriously.

The current context is grim. The onslaught against multilateralism is a fact of international life; it will continue and perhaps become more intense and widespread. The new nationalisms and new populisms are metastasizing, not diminishing. Nativist-populist 'ages' are everywhere: of Trump, Putin, Erdogan, Xi, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Netanyahu, al-Sisi, Orban, Maduro, and rising right-wing cabals worldwide. In addition, an ancient, yet newly pernicious, challenge is the relationship between the First and Second United Nations. The P-5 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) control discourse and purse strings; their ideological competition impedes cooperation and innovation. The temporary respite immediately after the end of the Cold War and prior to China's rise has given way to growing polarization in the Security Council and a tighter grip on the Secretariat. These geo-political constraints are unlikely to dissipate any time soon; moreover, we are unlikely to see a UN Secretary-General with any degree of independence in the near term.

Yet, optimism is a prerequisite for this business, which all three United Nations can nourish. They can recognize the absolutely essential roles played by the others – and reach out where appropriate to encourage and assist them to play their roles more effectively. The First and the Second UNs, in particular, can provide better information about proposed actions and easier access to meetings and facilities, which help the Third UN to circulate, rattle bureaucratic cages, and mobilize support.

More particularly, the Second UN can make better use of outside knowledge networks, as demonstrated conclusively since 1987 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It is crucial to draw on networks of first-class intellectuals worldwide who understand the impact of international policy. Following the IPCC model, three principal organs (the Security Council, General Assembly, and ECOSOC) could have established in 2020 an intergovernmental

panel on health, inequality, and the economy to respond to the pandemic's effects – and they still could pull together scientific expertise from across the planet. The Third UN's value-added is to utter what the Second UN cannot or will not – reflecting the ever-present danger of self-censorship to avoid offending key governments or regional groups.

There is an ongoing requirement for UN secretariats to regularly open their proverbial windows and let in fresh air. Secretaries-general have sought to foster a culture of prevention, but we now require a culture of evidence and innovation, which requires more than better digital technologies, as Guterres has advocated. It demands data (and not just big data) for decision-making and innovation in how the UN system catalyzes, mobilizes, advocates, and consumes evidence. Policy cannot be informed through reductionist approaches from disciplinary or organizational silos. In no context, let alone global problem-solving, can business as usual continue.

We are not suggesting necessarily the need for more formal mechanisms. Far from it. The process of social knowledge production is ad hoc, messy, iterative, and cumulative. This is often how research and ideas are born. We need a shift to a post-bureaucratic, less hierarchical, more networked organizational policy model that decentralizes thinking to all levels of the policy-making process. Such approaches would permit coordination rather than centralization of strategic thinking, and encourage a system-wide consumption of knowledge. The experience of some national bureaucracies suggests that such approaches would 'devalue hierarchy and strengthen horizontal relations', but 'require a rich knowledge-based environment to function successfully'. (Stein et al., 2001, p. 17).

The First UN and Second UN would be well served to invest substantially more in, and strengthen ties with, knowledge networks. The Third UN's emphases would usefully shift to what many of its most creative members do best, namely generate facts, figures, and knowledge as well as advocate alternative policies to address trans-boundary problems that threaten human dignity and survival.

The most fundamental step forward is to strengthen partnerships among the First, Second, and Third United Nations. In particular, lessons emerge from history about experience with how best to exploit intellectual inputs from the Third UN.

There is a compelling need to strengthen partnerships not just in states that have been traditional supporters of multilateralism but also challengers to the liberal status quo. The impetus will not come from states; UN secretariats in close collaboration with the Third UN will have to jump into the fray and rethink orthodox notions about what partnerships can make a difference. The underlying principles, approaches, and values that shape global governance institutions and norms will be partly determined by who is setting the rules, and more specifically who is contributing new thinking to help shape and encourage respect for those rules. Some western officials fear opening floodgates to ideas 'not invented here'. Yet, diversifying the voices within the Third UN with access to UN policy debates is necessary

not only because ideas should reflect the planet's diversity, but also because Third UN actors can help build bridges between pertinent stakeholders. These bridges span secretariats and governments, and governments and their publics.

The evidence-collection abilities of non-state actors have vastly improved with the information revolution; but in order to reap the benefits, decision-makers require assistance in navigating information overload to make better decisions. In discussing how to train US defense industry analysts, an insider summarized: 'The paralyzing issue for today's policy leaders is how to figure out which data-driven claims are credible and which are not'. (de Mesquita et al., 2020) This generalization certainly applies to decision-makers in UN member states and secretariats. Governments require research, which is why many have used their operational visibility in the UN (including increased investments and troop contributions) to grow the demand for research from their own nationals and provide greater visibility and a bigger platform for research to be consumed by all three United Nations.

A compelling need is to rethink research funding. Private philanthropy needs to return to financing basic and applied research rather than abandoning this critical function to powerful states that prioritize pay-offs for their foreign policies. The increasingly onerous conditions governing policy research are often at the opposite end of the accountability spectrum from public funding's priorities, the near-term objectives of national security and economic growth. Of course, private and corporate philanthropy is not devoid of self-interest and can be as opaque and unaccountable as government funding.

Instead, a new 'research compact' among research institutions, governments, philanthropies, and business would better harness the potential of the social sciences for improving human lives. (SSRC, 2018) It could help set research agendas, guide funders, and encourage more equitable collaborations, while mitigating political blow-back. Third UN actors across the Global South could also leverage the research compact to mobilize resources at the regional and international levels to help shed light on the power imbalances between their national governments and the wealth and influence of corporate interests, especially from media and technology conglomerates. Moreover, as repositories of data and key actors in the new ecosystem of research, social media companies have a particular responsibility to participate in supporting research by the Third UN and making data widely and freely available for social research. At the same time, the Second UN needs to open itself and its data to researchers who can help with experimentation and new thinking. The move to improve and integrate the UN's data collection systems would make such partnerships more plausible and feasible.

Vehicles for ideas also matter. For example, commissions of eminent persons and high-level panels should be demand-driven so that there are ready-made consumers for the products. The most effective ones have occurred when governments were searching for alternative approaches. For

example, the concrete normative and operational decisions about the 'responsibility to protect' by the 2005 World Summit reflected ideas launched by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, was staffed by a university-based research directorate. That experience was distinct from blue-ribbon groups that focused on disarmament, prevention, or human security whose research and interpretations had little immediate policy impact.

Less visible and off-the-record deliberations also have their place in helping the UN think; often they have been crucial and out of the limelight. A crucial and never-ending challenge – indeed, a bottom-line for successful reform – is to establish and maintain an environment in which creative, multidisciplinary thinking and policy analysis can flourish. As such, the Second UN needs to regain a capacity to 'think'. This means strengthening the institutional capacity to generate and disseminate original ideas, to create spaces within secretariats to think creatively. For a culture of evidence and innovation to take hold, the Second UN must recruit and retain professionals of outstanding quality and provide incentives to think and write independently; support research adequately; reward originality as opposed to routine report writing or diplomacy; strengthen multidisciplinary and multi-agency dialogue; enrich analysis with field experiences; and avoid orthodoxy. Such experiences and skillsets are absent from the numerous personnel reports that emphasize geographic distribution, gender parity, and age profiles. In short, the Second UN needs to return to intellectual leadership. As such, partnerships with Third UN actors will be essential.

Conclusion

The International Commission on Multilateralism (2016) sought to understand where the UN fits in the broader international system on the eve of the current Secretary-General's mandate. More important than their concrete suggestions was the portrayal of a humbling reality: the United Nations is often a minor player. With the Security Council deadlocked – as it was in the face of the political and humanitarian disasters in Myanmar and Syria, and then the COVID-19 pandemic – the search for other multilateral solutions is inevitable. To what extent will this undermine the UN? Enthusiasts who celebrated the 75th anniversary, even if remotely, should have asked: If the dimensions of global governance are determined outside the United Nations, what are the implications for the UN at 100? If it exists, will it be more a relic than a vital part of world order?

We write as a lethal pandemic has fundamentally challenged both contemporary thinking about global governance – its constitutive elements, internal constitution, and outcomes – as well as how it can be improved. In the midst of an economic calamity and fears about additional waves of COVID-19, it is hard to imagine that one needs to make the case for urgently rethinking global problem-solving. But we do. Current efforts, in both the scholarly and policy worlds, are too bound to the constraints of the contemporary international system – including the feeble

UN system. The world has figuratively if not literally shut down.

But the 21st century is not the 19th or 20th; there will not be less interdependence and globalization, and certainly not fewer pandemics. The most urgent task is to reinforce the UN system's crumbling foundations and build intellectual coalitions. Patrick Soon-Shion – the surgeon, inventor, scientist, and owner of the *Los Angeles Times* – emphasized this requirement: 'The COVID-19 pandemic is a health nightmare but also a scientific dream. It has prompted scientists from across the world to collaborate in real time as never before with the understanding that we are all in this together' (Harari et al., 2020). We could envision similar collaborations across the social sciences, philanthropy, and business at a moment when the need to reimagine more just, more representative international institutions could not be greater.

The next few decades are likely to bring unprecedented economic, political, social, health, and ecological upheavals; they also will bring opportunities. New evidence and new insights necessitate calling into question shibboleths about what works and what does not. The 'whole UN' should recall the comment reportedly made by John Maynard Keynes when asked about inconsistencies in his thinking: 'When I get new information, I change my views. What do you do, Sir?'

Consistency and rehashing formulas from the past in the face of new problems or new data is the hobgoblin of little multilateral minds wherever they exist – in the First, Second, or Third United Nations.

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