



## UN Reform on the agenda in its 75th year

*By Elena Marmo*

Following the opening of the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and a series of High-level meetings and events parallel to the General Debate, the UNGA plenary and committees have shifted to a pattern wherein the Member States debate and negotiate resolutions on a range of topics.

Across the UNGA agenda, priorities include COVID-19 recovery, the UN Decade of Action--the final 10 years to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ---and the call for necessary reforms for the UN to be effective across management, peace and security and development. Reform to the UN Development System (UNDS) will be a prime agenda item of the UNGA Economic and Finance (Second) Committee negotiations, with an outcome resolution of its Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) expected in November or December.

### **Calls for UN reform at UNGA High-level meetings**

With concerns related to the relevance and trust in the multilateral system, in its 75th year, Member States and the UN itself, while decrying unilateralism and protectionism, have stepped up efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the system and address means to strengthen it. This was bolstered by discussion on reform during the High-level meetings in September 2020 and meetings through October.

In his opening remarks at the General Debate, PGA Volkan Bozkir, [urged](#): "We must be prepared to have a tough, honest conversation about where the multilateral system is failing, or where it is not adapting fast enough, to the ever-evolving challenges we face. And we need to act to implement the necessary reforms to ensure that the UN is fit for purpose and can deliver the future we want."

During the High-level week the PGA also noted that "the UN cannot be effective if unilateral actions are preferred over multilateral solutions. If the UN is starved of the resources to fulfill its vital mandates...if the resolutions of the Security Council are flouted at will." The President of the Republic of Turkey affirmed this, [stating](#): "We must rapidly implement comprehensive and meaningful reforms, starting with the restructuring of the Security Council. We must provide the Council with a more effective, democratic, transparent and accountable structure and functioning. Likewise, we should also strengthen the General Assembly, which reflects the common conscience of the international community."

The President of Equatorial Guinea stated: "We cannot accept either that after so many years, the Charter of the UN continues to preserve the primacy of the major powers who trample on the legitimate aspirations of the weak so that they can enjoy the advantages of the UN system."

The Minister of Foreign Affairs for Timor Leste urged action on both system-wide reform and Security Council reform, noting the role COVID-19 has played in uncovering inadequacies throughout the UN system: “We are also conscious that we need a reformed United Nations, so that it can be at its best to respond to today’s challenges. This includes the needed reform of the Security Council, so that its composition and membership may reflect more fairly the changes that have taken place since the founding of the UN to enable the Security Council to discharge its duty effectively.”

This was echoed by the Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs: “Rapidly changing times demand that we constantly reinvent our working methods and thus ongoing reforms by the Secretary-General are important for a more agile, effective and accountable organization. The three pillars of the United Nations-- peace and security, sustainable development and human rights--are equally important and interdependent, all three are needed for the existence of peaceful, healthy and free societies.”

Further, Japan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs reiterated calls for reform of the Security Council: “I regret to say that today the system designed seventy-five years ago does not fully deliver on the purpose of the Charter. I am convinced that Member States having the capacity and willingness to take on major responsibilities should hold seats on an expanded Security Council. Only then will the Council be revived as an effective and representative organ.”

The Minister also highlighted the importance of the UNDS reform and the upcoming negotiations on the QCPR: “Rather, we need to take serious steps in close coordination with the UN organizations to reform the UN for the post-COVID era. Secretary-General Guterres has been leading the effort to make the UN even more effective. Japan wants to see such reform make further headway this year. In this regard, the reform of the UN Development System is critical to make sure that the most vulnerable will not be left behind.”

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [highlighted](#) the role of the UN in promoting reform of the macroeconomic and financing mechanisms, central to the Decade of Action and delivery on the SDGs: “For too long, we have been underserved by our global financial architecture. We now have a chance to re-imagine global financing frameworks and put them at the service of humanity. This is the only way we will build a strong recovery from the pandemic and create communities and societies fit for the challenges of the future, from infectious diseases to the climate crisis and economic shocks.”

President of ECOSOC Volkan Bozkir also referenced this, calling on Member States to “look at ways in which we can begin to the process of institutional change and transformation, which is going to be required”. The Permanent Representative of Jamaica, co-convenor of the High-level Event on Financing for Development and COVID-19, also emphasized this broader need for reform in the context of macroeconomic institutions. He urged: “Fundamental reforms that are required to the international financial architecture via the democratization of global economic governance.”

Co-convenor and Permanent Representative of Canada went further, saying that “it’s a great effort to change global institutions and to make them more responsive...we must continue it by revitalizing UN institutions, both the World Bank and the IMF must respond more effectively, the regional banks must

respond more effectively, governments, through the G7 and the G20 and the OECD must respond more effectively. But also, the United Nations itself has to lead the way in bringing people together and helping make reform and change happen.”

### **Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) in Second Committee**

Concerns related to UNDS reform have been taken up as the main theme of the UNGA Second Committee in its consideration of the QCPR. This agenda item is focused on the Operational Activities for Development with the aim to equip the UNDS with the tools to deliver on the 2030 Agenda at the national, local and regional levels.

Deputy Secretary-General (DS-G) Amina Mohammed reiterated the importance of the QCPR, citing the urgency of the Decade of Action:

“The 2030 Agenda continues to be our *raison d’être*. To get there, each country will have a unique pathway. But we all know there are critical areas of high demand for support across developing countries. These are areas where the interlinkages are strongest and our impact in lifting people out of poverty and leaving no one behind may be the greatest – priorities such as climate change; economic transformation and employment; women’s empowerment; digitalization.”

Following the DS-G’s remarks, Member States delivered statements that will inform their positions and interests as they engage in informal negotiations on the QCPR resolution in the coming weeks.

The Permanent Representative of the Bahamas on behalf of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) highlighted the QCPR as a critical moment for the UNDS “to be more driven by a multidimensional approach based on national priorities and specific needs and vulnerabilities, while ensuring and strengthening national ownership and leadership”.

The Permanent Representative of Guyana on behalf of the G77 and China identified the need for the 2020 QCPR to address funding inadequacy, noting: “We reiterate that core resources are the bedrock of the UN operational activities for development. We are concerned over the continued imbalance between core and non-core resources. The system must urgently address this imbalance. At the same time, non-core contributions must be more flexible and align with national priorities and plans of developing countries.”

These concerns for adequate and efficient funding that aligns with the needs and priorities of developing countries were a key priority of the G77, Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), Association of Southeast Asian Nations, CARICOM and Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) statements. These statements also reflected an interest in recognizing the pivotal role of regional assets, Multi-Country Offices and the need to fund them accordingly.

The Permanent Representative of Korea directly addressed this funding concern, stating Korea’s belief that “flexible and predictable funding is essential for the UN’s agile and nimble response”. He added: “At the

same time, to incentivize donors to change their behaviour on a significant scale, progress on the UNDS side should be tracked and sustained.”

Citing this QCPR process as an opportunity to rethink development cooperation, the Permanent Representative of Kazakhstan on behalf of LLDCs stated: “The new QCPR resolution is very timely since under the gravest conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic it becomes apparent that many modern challenges are trans-boundary in nature. This requires enhanced and efficient cooperation among and between the UN agencies. It was a matter of time when we all could come to the same understanding.”

The Permanent Representative of Belize on behalf of AOSIS highlighted the need to revisit forms of growth measurement, as Middle Income Countries and Small Island Developing States slip further and further behind due to unsustainable levels of debt: “The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced our assertions that the current system remains inadequate to meet its challenges. Income only thresholds to determine access to finance is woefully outdated as a metric of need. The system would be better placed by adopting a multi-dimensional vulnerability index that guides access and eliminates the greater costs of inaction in the long term.”

The response to the QCPR process was less ambitious from donor countries, with the European Union mentioning, during the Second Committee General Debate that, “This year’s negotiations on the QCPR give us an opportunity to reinforce the UN’s response. For this reason, the European Union will actively engage to ensure that the UN Development System is well equipped to effectively support countries in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, and that the reform processes launched in 2018 are consolidated and reinforced.”

The Permanent Representative of Switzerland, in its role as facilitator of the QCPR negotiations, offered assurances that Switzerland “will undertake every effort to make sure that the Member States will give a comprehensive, balanced, forward-looking and realistic guidance to the UN Development System for the next two years. The 2030 Agenda and its implementation, the objectives of the UN reform and the urgencies of the Decade of Action will be the cornerstones as facilitators of the QCPR.”

A [draft resolution](#) that initiates the negotiating process has been issued by Guyana on behalf of the G77 and China. Negotiations proceed in informal meetings for at least another four weeks. The quality of the results will be a sharp indicator of how seriously Member States, notably the donor countries, view multilateralism and are prepared to close the gap between rhetoric and action.

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