

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL GENEVA IN THE UN 2.0

Manuela Tortora
Vice President, Greycells¹

Those who believe in the need for a stronger and more efficient UN are increasingly concerned about its future. The whole humanity should be concerned. The horizon shows growing selfish nationalisms and arms race, no appetite for more multilateral cooperation, and in particular a paralysed Security Council. While in the UN in New York pessimism seems to prevail, in Geneva, delegates, secretariats, NGOs and academics keep engaging. The atmosphere is not ideal, challenges are multiplying and getting more complex, budgets are being cut in all the institutions, and geopolitics contaminates the air in meeting rooms, but it is not as poisoned as on the other side of the Atlantic. The strong support of the host country and a positive, serious Swiss opinion help enormously.

Further to the Summit on the SDGs held in New York in September 2023, the next step is the Summit of the Future in 2024. There are already many papers and debates on the “UN 2.0” that could or should be envisaged. The wide majority focuses on two main issues: how to reform the Security Council (and in general, the political UN role in preventing conflicts and preserving peace) and how to address climate change and its catastrophic impact. No discussion: both issues are urgent and vital. But the agenda of the International Geneva is much broader and essential for any « UN 2.0 » that humankind can envisage if it survives. It should not be seen as a « collateral » piece attached to the political agenda. Let’s take a quick look at its main features and relevance.

1.- WHAT IS THE «INTERNATIONAL GENEVA» AND WHERE DOES IT COME FROM:

The ecosystem of the International Geneva encompasses 40 international organisations (including five UN specialised agencies and several UN entities), 180 Permanent Missions, 400 NGOs.² It is an amazing concentration of experts, delegates, negotiators, academics interacting daily on the multilateral issues, producing data, analyses, ideas. This intensive activity is capillary, with world-wide effects: it reaches decision-makers in the capitals as well as citizens concerned by the rules and policies resulting from this multilateral hub of knowledge and negotiations.

What makes Geneva unique among other UN headquarters is the scope and relevance of its agenda. From humanitarian aid, refugees and migrations to internet governance, from international trade to global health, from intellectual property to economic development, from human rights to biodiversity, from employment and social protection policies to climate change. Disarmament is also part of this picture, even if it belongs to a different category of multilateral activities. **Almost all the “non-military threats” and the “roots of current multifaceted crises”³ are addressed in Geneva.** Yes, the work in Geneva is highly «technical» or «functional» (see Mitrany’s theory), complicated but always relevant. It covers more than the 17 SDGs.

History does not repeat itself, but it matters: **the only survivors of the League of Nations’ system** were its economic, social, and humanitarian entities, that were transformed into UN entities, while the

¹ Greycells, Association of Former International Civil Servants for Development www.greycells.ch

² <https://www.geneve-int.ch/genevainternational>

³ https://www.foggs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/PRG-Booklet-on-An-Enhanced-Role-for-the-UN-in-Peace-and-Human-Security-Final10Sept2023_FOGGS-Papers-2023.pdf , p.42.

Council, the political arm of the League in charge of collective security, collapsed well before WW2– and we know why. Is this a forecast? In any case it is the demonstration that multilateral cooperation on non-military threats is indispensable and more resilient than multilateral mechanisms designed to avoid military conflicts. Considering the danger of a nuclear conflict, can we take the risk of a multilateral system driven by short-sighted political goals? Rather the other way around: economic, social, environmental and human rights goals should be the driving force leading political decisions.

2.- WHY INTERNATIONAL GENEVA MATTERS IN ANY DEBATE ON A “UN 2.0”:

Three key features make it highly relevant today and for the future, because they mirror the essence of the globalisation in the XXIst century.

First, the analytical, negotiating and consensus-building work done in Geneva is mainly normative and regulatory. It aims at establishing rules and mechanisms to manage the globalisation processes instead of leaving unregulated freedom to market forces and individual interests. The UN Charter values and the SDGs move from theory to reality each time a multilateral instrument is used in Geneva: a WHO regulation on global health, a Human Rights Council resolution, a WTO agreement on international trade, an ILO Convention on rights and obligations for workers and employers, an ITU debate on the “*terra incognita*” of artificial intelligence. A little bit of the daily life of the «*We the Peoples...*» is improved. There are many nuances and shortcomings in this normative landscape, from legally binding provisions (as in the case of the WTO) to «best endeavour» recommendations and purely symbolic declarations. The same diversity applies to the monitoring mechanisms: only a few ensure that the rules are embedded in national legislations or duly implemented by member States. In all cases, each multilateral norm entails a delegation of national sovereignty. International Geneva accumulated decades of experience whose political value has still to be fully assessed and understood beyond the technical content of this normative work.

Secondly, Geneva reaches the “country level” not only with the information, research, rules and standards it produces, but also with its role in transforming that work into concrete world-wide technical assistance through countless trainings, capacity building programmes, policy advice and advocacy. The role of Geneva in humanitarian assistance provided in emergency situations or in emergencies that are never ending (such as in refugee camps) is the most visible in the headlines. But whenever a policymaker says to a UN expert: « I changed my mind further to your training », the reward is more significant than a headline. Applied research, elaboration and dissemination of data on global issues, tailoring of expertise according to various situations: the assistance to individual citizens is generated by knowledge.

Finally, Geneva is a puzzle: it is the main multilateral crossroads of intersectoral, multidisciplinary issues characterising today’s increasingly complex globalisation and crises. The list of linkages among multilateral topics is very long: trade, food security and health; migration, refugees and climate change; human rights, health, employment and social security policies; gender, electronic commerce and economic development; intellectual property, access to vaccines and technology; labor markets and artificial intelligence; internet governance and digital economy; blue and green economies, supply chains and investments... In Geneva, delegates interact daily with secretariats, experts, and NGOs on these multifaceted issues, jumping over disciplines, shaping the understanding of evolving multilateral threats.

3.- HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE BRIDGES BETWEEN THE STILL-FUNCTIONING UN GENEVA AND UN NEW YORK:

What lessons can be drawn from the Geneva experience for the area of peace and broadly speaking political cooperation? **Can the trust being built on these «technical» topics be capitalised and transferred from Geneva to New York?** How can research and exchanges between experts and decision-makers lead to knowledge-based policies in all areas of UN work following the Geneva approach? How can *all* the global public goods – peace in the first place – be managed in a constructive way for the sake of common interests?

As in New York, there is frustration among the various players of the Geneva scene because geopolitics contaminates many negotiations. It is the same sort of frustration that a scientist feels when fighting against fake news that deny knowledge. Yes, Geneva is also affected by the crisis of trust and poor credibility of multilateralism, but the ambiance is still more positive as compared to New York, starting with the Swiss opinion and politicians that do not practice the sport of criticising the UN for the fun of it.

Some actions could stimulate a positive contagion of New York by the Geneva atmosphere and <<technical >> work.

First, there is a lot of talk about **resilience** these days. In Geneva, resilience means, in the first place, to keep hope and faith in multilateralism despite the geopolitical contamination and the cuts in **financial resources** of international organisations and NGOs, including those devoted to humanitarian aid. We rarely see headlines comparing the increase in military expenditures with the decrease in funds for multilateral cooperation. Many UN entities, starting with the humanitarians, will soon be unable to function without proper funding (i.e., untied and regular). Any UN reform should start here, with the budgets.

Secondly, the proposal to establish a **Global Resilience Council**⁴ as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly (or the Ecosoc) to address the << non-military threats >> deserves attention – particularly for International Geneva, grounded on these threats. The proposal of this Council, beyond political support, requires a solid and transparent articulation with the whole Geneva ecosystem, above the traditional interagency silos. Such a Council could be a strong catalyser to ensure, more than coordination, real coherence of values and ideas within the UN system.

Thirdly, **civil society has to be mobilised**. Where are the Greta Thunbergs willing to take to the streets to defend the UN values and work, shouting for a << UN 2.0 >> for the future generations? Debates among academics and diplomats on the niceties of the Charter are necessary, but weak and ineffective if they do not involve citizens with powerful, straightforward messages on peace and international cooperation in all its aspects. This includes the private sector: Geneva is well equipped to develop more dialogues and cooperation between diplomats, researchers and businessmen.⁵

Fourthly, **the players of both New York and Geneva should intensify their contacts**, at all levels, during the months leading to the Summit of the Future. They should take stock together of the SDGs, from the << technical >> and geopolitical perspectives. They should act together to disseminate UN values and raise awareness on the future of multilateralism. They should sit at the same table to identify,

⁴ The proposal was made by the Foundation of Global Governance and Sustainability (FOGGS), see https://www.foggs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/PRG-Booklet-on-An-Enhanced-Role-for-the-UN-in-Peace-and-Human-Security-Final10Sept2023_FOGGS-Papers-2023.pdf p.40.

⁵ GESDA, the Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator is a good example. <https://gesda.global/>

concretely, how the work done in Geneva would bring oxygen, substance and steam to the New York process. Darwinism also applies to international institutions: only those that adapt themselves will survive. Changes in the way New York and Geneva interact (or do not interact enough) are part of the solution.

Finally, two aspects deserve to be addressed honestly in any discussion on the future of the multilateral instruments. The first refers to the role of the **Bretton Woods Institutions**, usually hidden under the carpet or barely mentioned with the excuse that they were deliberately located at the border of the UN organigramme in 1944-45. Not only they belong to the system. They need to leave their « splendid isolation » to play a major role, implementing in a visible fashion UN goals and values, particularly in close relation with many UN Geneva-based entities. The second refers to **the role of civil society and the democratic values** conveyed by the Charter: how can the UN be revamped if civil society does not have a voice in many parts of the world, and if democracy is not a shared goal? Here too, Geneva and New York need to talk.