The United Nations and Belgium

1. Introduction

The United Nations Organisation was founded in 1945 in San Francisco in the aftermath of WWII, as the successor organisation to the League of Nations. The initial objective of the organisation was to prevent wars between countries and create a more secure world, based on stable international relations. Representatives of 51 countries (including the Kingdom of Belgium) signed the United Nations Charter, thereby confirming their commitment to maintain international peace and security and promote human rights, better living standards and social progress. The first official Secretary General was the Norwegian Trygve Lie and the first president of the General Assembly was the Belgian politician Paul Henri Spaak. At present the UN has 192 Member States and is active in many domains. The activities of the UN have a stronger impact on the daily lives of people that one would assume at first sight. The examples below clearly illustrate that the work of the United Nations covers a vast range of action domains. The UN publications, initiatives, norms and operations influence the situation of people all around the globe.

Since its inception, the UN has displayed a strong convening power. By bringing together important actors from all over the world, setting an agenda and letting them carry out coordinated activities related to a certain theme, great results have been achieved throughout history. By defining goals, values and norms, the UN displays a clear normative power. Some of the most tangible UN-norms come in the form of treaties, which are legally binding for the countries that ratify them. These treaties enable the UN to enforce and monitor international law. The UN has exercised these powers throughout different fields of action, covering many thematic issues. Although the examples outlined below are by no means intended to be exhaustive, this text will touch upon several important thematic areas in which the UN is active.

The United Nations at a glance

- Founded in 1945 (San Francisco)
- 193 Member States
- Constituting instrument: UN Charter
- Secretary-General since 2007: H.E. Ban Ki-Moon
- Areas of work: peace and security, development, human rights, humanitarian assistance, disarmament and international law
- Main bodies: General Assembly, Security Council and International Court of Justice
- More than 30 affiliated organisations
- 6 official languages
- Headquarters: New York, Geneva, Vienna
- Currently 15 peacekeeping operations (~120,000 personnel)
2. **Thematic issues**

**Peace and Security**

The principle of Member States working together to promote the maintenance of international peace and security is enshrined in the UN Charter. The prevention, containment and management of conflicts therefore belongs to the core activities of the UN. The examples below illustrate different ways through which the UN promotes the maintenance of peace and security.

The prevention activities can take the form of political, diplomatic, humanitarian or institutional activities. The UN has often succeeded in neutralising tensions by agreeing on peaceful settlements. The Security Council, through Sanctions Committees, can also decide to exercise pressure on a State or entity which threatens the international security by taking enforcement measures (such as the freezing of assets of political elites or arms embargoes).

In conflict and post-conflict areas around the world the UN has established field operations, named UN Peacekeeping Operations or blue-helmet missions. Over the years, more than fifty peacekeeping missions have been deployed, of which there are 15 currently in place in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Haiti. The missions carry out different activities, depending on their mandates that have been issued by the UN Security Council, always carefully designed to respond to the needs of the country in conflict. UN Member States contribute financial resources and police and military personnel which serve in these peacekeeping operations. The UN also focuses its attention on strengthening the transition between peacekeeping and peace building, in order to support the countries that emerge from conflict by elaborating strategies of post conflict recovery. Such activities might include the guidance of an electoral process, capacity-building or rule of law assistance. The UN Peacebuilding Commission works on the prevention of recurrence of conflict and supports peace efforts in countries emerging from conflict. Through its Country-Specific Configurations, the PBC is particularly active in Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic and Liberia.

**Developmental issues**

During the past decades, the UN has succeeded in creating a global consensus on a shared vision of development, thereby creating a global agenda. Many conferences and summits have laid the basis for today’s Millennium Development Goals which aim at addressing the UN development agenda. All these gatherings have generated declarations and plans of action which provide the international community with a framework to act upon these issues. It is important to stress that not only governments but also actors from civil society (e.g. NGOs) and the private sector are actively involved in these meetings.

This UN development agenda includes issues such as poverty reduction, health, employment, education and human rights. Although the development agenda clearly focuses on different areas of action, the overarching aim is to address the inequalities that harm the situation of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable population, thereby recognising the interconnectivity of all these elements. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) plays a large role, but many other agencies, funds and organisations are equally involved. Relevant activities and projects include
reducing mortality rates and increasing life expectancy (e.g. World Health Organisation - WHO), alleviating malnutrition and guaranteeing food security (e.g. Food and Agricultural Organisation - FAO), improving education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESCO) and establishing international labour standards (International Labour Organisation – ILO).

An example of results achieved by the UN in the development area is linked to the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS organised in 2001. This conference signified the first global political commitment at the highest level by recognising AIDS as one of the global issues of our time. This session led to a partnership that created collective responsibility among governments, civil society and other key players. Based on the targets and performance indicators that were endorsed by 189 countries, a global strategy to combat AIDS was shaped. Since that gathering in 2001 new infection rates have fallen by almost 25%, clearly demonstrating the impact of the UN’s convening power.

Sustainable development is another core topic that falls under the header of economic and social development. The concept of sustainable development entails the mutual dependency of nations about the protection of the environment, international economic cooperation and social development. The themes related to sustainable development cover a wide range of issues including bio-diversity, sustainable fisheries, climate change, disaster reduction and renewable energy. A framework for the current international cooperation on these issues was designed during the UN 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Rio+20 conference, which will take place in 2012, aims at a renewed political commitment at the highest level and will also assess the progress to date.

**Human rights**

The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 marked the beginning of a strong commitment of the UN in the promotion of human rights. Since then, many comprehensive agreements on political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights have been reached, both in general and specific areas. The work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) focuses on identifying and developing responses to human rights challenges. The OHCHR also provides support to the UN human rights mechanisms, such as the Human Rights Council (HRC) and helps the Member States to implement international legal standards. The UN also particularly envisages the improvement of women’s lives. Last year, the General Assembly approved the creation of UN Women by merging several relevant UN entities. This new entity seeks to strengthen institutional arrangements for gender equality and women empowerment. The rights of children are another example of a UN human rights objective, which is largely advocated by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Recently, the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council voted in favor of a declaration that expressed “grave concern” about abuses because of sexual orientation, finally agreeing on a subject that divided the global body for decades.

**Humanitarian issues**

Since its inception, the UN has provided humanitarian aid to the victims of conflicts, including refugees. The organisation also offers emergency relief in response to natural disasters when the national capacity is insufficient. Through its operational
agencies, the UN humanitarian action is carried out based on a long-term assistance strategy, including food, shelter, medical supplies and logistical support. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has the mandate to strengthen the coordination among several relevant UN bodies (in particular the UN Development Program, UN Refugee Agency, UN Children’s Fund and the World Food Program), in order to operate more efficiently in the field.

**International justice**

Nearly one hundred and fifty bilateral disputes – such as territorial issues or issues of non-interference with the internal affairs of a State – were settled by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which is one of the six main bodies of the UN. In addition, the International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) for the former Yugoslavia and the ICT for Rwanda were set up in order to prosecute serious crimes committed during these two major international crises. This determination to fight against impunity was also reasserted by the establishment of several Ad Hoc Tribunals – for Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, and most recently for Lebanon. While the International Criminal Court (ICC) is an independent judicial institution, the Security Council, through its unique relationship with the ICC, has recently considered the possibility to refer cases to the ICC. The situation in Darfur and the one in Libya are the two cases that have been referred so far but this practice will most likely develop further in the future.

3. **Belgium’s contributions to the UN**

The success and failure of the UN depend on the will of governments to move forward within this multilateral framework. As a founding member of the UN and a staunch defender of the principles of effective multilateralism, the Kingdom of Belgium expresses its support for the UN System not only in terms of true political engagement and belief in the Organisation but also in terms of sustainable and predictable financial support. The policies and objectives of the UN, its specialized programs, funds and agencies correspond to the broad guidelines of Belgian foreign policy and development cooperation, its values, interests and principles. At the UN Headquarters, Belgian diplomats defend the national priorities by representing the country during UN meetings and conferences. As a member of the European Union, Belgium also coordinates its position on many topics with the other 26 Member States.

Conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding are essential elements of Belgian foreign policy. During 2011, Belgium contributed to peacekeeping missions in the countries of Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast and Sudan. However, the promotion of peace and security require multifaceted and multidimensional measures in different fields, such as counterterrorism, the fate of children in armed conflict and non-proliferation and disarmament. In the latter field, Belgium has played a particularly visible role in the negotiations leading to the so-called Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines. Belgium will continue to pay close attention to these weapons, as well as to the more general issues of small arms and light weapons and unexploded war remnants. Belgium is also an active member of the Peacebuilding Commission and currently serves as president of the Country Specific Configuration for the Central African Republic.
When it comes to political engagement, the promotion and protection of human rights are essential elements of Belgium’s foreign policy. Therefore Belgium takes an active part in the work carried out by the relevant bodies at the UN-level. The Belgian mission participates actively in the activities of the Human Rights Council as a member and collectively through the European Union membership. For more than 20 years, Belgium has been a traditional member of the Commission on the Status of Women, a body that is exclusively dedicated to gender equality and the advancement of women. In addition, Belgium is an active member since 2011 of the NGO Committee, a forum where important debates among Members States regarding the role and independence of civil society and sensitive human rights topics take place. The role of the committee consists of granting consultative status to NGOs, allowing them to take part in UN conferences and meetings. In other forums on human rights, Belgium devotes special but not exclusive attention to the abolition of the death penalty, the freedom of religion and belief, the fight against racism and other forms of discrimination or intolerance (cf. Durban Process) and the protection of human rights in the fight against terrorism. The issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation, trafficking in human beings and the rights of the child are also important.

With regard to financial contributions, the total contribution of the Kingdom of Belgium to the wider UN System amounted to € 283 million in 2009. The funds are administered mainly by the Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. A small fraction of about 5% is channeled through the regions. There are two different ways in which Member States contribute to the budget of the UN System. Each Member State pays a mandatory contribution (“assessed contribution”) based on the share of its economy in the world economy. These assessed contributions fund the regular Program-Budget of the UN and the Peacekeeping Operations. In addition, Member States also make voluntary contributions as donors to the United Nations, the different specialized organisations, agencies, funds and programs. Belgium’s assessed and voluntary contributions represented respectively 24.4% and 75.6% of its total contribution in 2009.

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