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# The 2030 Agenda: A Catalyst for the Enhancement of the Peace and Development Nexus at the United Nations

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## ABSTRACT

*The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promoted a period of common understanding regarding the importance of improving the normative guidance of the United Nations towards peace, development, and human rights. The commitments to build peaceful, just, and inclusive societies that protect human rights were possible due to the decades of work that preceded this paradigm-shifting document. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda fomented the emergence of the concept of sustaining peace, an approach to enhance the capacity of societies to prevent conflict and address its root causes. These developments proved that a holistic approach to building sustaining peace and sustainable development became essential to address the evident interlinkages between insecurity and underdevelopment.*

## A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, the nexus between peace, development, and humani-

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tarian action as well as human rights has been strengthened at the United Nations (UN). Member States, as well as the UN Secretariat, have aimed to continue to establish and reinforce the normative guidance in the negotiation and adoption of resolutions and other UN documents that consider and enhance this nexus to ensure changes and progress for people on the ground. In other words, Agenda 2030 has served as a catalyst of norms that guide multilateral negotiations to break siloes in development and security-based negotiations.

However, it has not always been this way. The work of the United Nations (hereinafter also referred to as “the Organization”) revolves around three pillars: peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights. The Organization’s primary purpose is to maintain international peace and security, protect human rights, deliver humanitarian assistance, promote sustainable development, and uphold international law.<sup>1</sup> Throughout most of its history, the UN mainly performed those responsibilities without necessarily focusing on the nexus between these issues. The UN has generally, and traditionally, worked in siloes. The Security Council, for example, previously refrained from getting involved in traditional developmental issues, as they were yet to be deemed ‘root causes’ of conflict and addressing them was not yet seen a way to prevent conflict from emerging and escalating.

In its seventy-five years of existence, the work of the Organization has evolved, and its normative and institutional architecture has evolved along with it. Despite the declarations of the preamble of the Charter of the UN, in which its founders state that the Organization shall “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war... reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights.... promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,”<sup>2</sup> they did not necessarily envision that the principal organs created for those objectives would inevitably work together in a coherent manner and avoid siloes.

The concept of development that emerged in 1945, particularly in the eyes of the United States, held that economic issues and international cooperation for development would not be addressed profoundly by the United Nations. Rather, the Bretton Woods institutions would undertake these economic issues, because they were specifically designed to strengthen market-oriented solutions for development.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the vision remained that the three pillars of the UN were pursued in parallel, but “often by different parts of the world Organization.”<sup>4</sup>

This vision would prevail for a large part of the life of the Organization, and despite a slight shift starting in the early 1990s, it was not until 2005,

in the “World Summit Outcome” document, that leaders first recognized the nexus between peace, security, and development.<sup>5</sup> In this resolution, Member States of the UN explicitly acknowledged and recognized “that development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing.”<sup>6</sup> This recognition was the precursor for further discussion on the normative and rhetorical shift for Member States and the Secretariat in the United Nations, and the beginning of more inter-linked work between the three pillars. In other words, the acknowledgement began a more intense discussion within the work of the UN about the interlinkages between peace and development broadly.

The lack of integration between the pillars of the UN, and in turn, between the work of its main organs—such as the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)—can be illustrated by the fact that the Security Council did not address the nexus between security and development until 2011. Under the presidency of Brazil, the Council held a debate entitled, “The Interdependence between Security and Development,” in which then Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, highlighted that nine out of ten countries with the lowest human development indicators had experienced conflict in the previous twenty years.<sup>7</sup> This debate was the beginning of the Security Council’s better understanding of the nexus, and set the stage for the adoption of resolutions that expressed the clear link between a development issue and its impact to international peace and security.

This essay will examine the situation regarding the nexus between security and development before and after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It will also address the possible setbacks, the criticism of the nexus, and a possible way forward. It will argue that despite the setbacks and conceivable criticisms, the progress made after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in terms of integration and interlinkages between the three pillars of the UN has enhanced its work towards making its main objectives a reality by promoting sustainable development, protecting human rights, delivering humanitarian assistance, upholding international law, and sustaining peace.

#### **THE NEXUS AT THE UN BEFORE THE ADOPTION OF THE 2030 AGENDA**

As stated in the previous section, the UN has mainly worked in siloes until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Progress began in the early 1990s and officially took off in 2005, culminating with the World Summit in 2015. Before then, the interlinkages between development and peace

were recognized but not fully implemented in the work of the Organization and the normative development of resolutions and documents.

During the Cold War, these linkages were hardly recognized. For example, preventive diplomacy was not used to address the root causes of conflict, such as lack of development. Rather, preventive diplomacy only referred to mediation and “good offices”—in other words, negotiation or mediation to obtain a peaceful outcome. One example is the diplomatic outreach performed by then Secretary-General, U Thant, to avoid conflict by interceding during the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>8</sup> Without a doubt, these good offices helped to avoid a war, but this is nonetheless an example in which the peace and development nexus was not addressed, or even referred to when describing the concept of preventive diplomacy. At that time, development was linked to security concerns, such as the power struggle between two superpowers or global competition between differing socio-economic systems.<sup>9</sup>

However, just after the end of the Cold War, the interlinkages between development and peace in the mandate of the UN was present in an implicit manner, with statements from Member States and the Secretary General, that affirmed that promoting social and economic development and promoting human rights were indirect approaches to peace.<sup>10</sup> In 1992, then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali affirmed that the most severe causes of conflict were economic despair, social injustice, and political oppression.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the Secretary-General’s assertion was made in a report responding to a meeting of the Security Council on preventive diplomacy for peacekeeping and peace-making. In this report, Boutros Boutros-Ghali signalled that the Security Council and the General Assembly shared the responsibility to maintain peace and security under the dispositions of the UN Charter, and added that each principal organ has a “special and indispensable role to play in an integrated approach to human security.”<sup>12</sup> These assertions came after the launch of the Human Development Report in 1990, which brought together human development, peace and security, democratic governance, sustainable and equitable development, and human rights, presenting their “conceptual and operational links.”<sup>13</sup> The Human Development Report “introduced a new approach for advancing human wellbeing” by providing a people-centred approach and focusing on the wellbeing of the individual, as opposed to that of the economy.<sup>14</sup>

Especially after the terrorist attacks of September, 11, 2001, conventional knowledge among diplomats was that the division between economic and social development and “war and peace” issues was no longer sensible.<sup>15</sup>

Despite this new wisdom, the work of the UN did not fully respond to the realization that security and development were inherently linked. For instance, the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), set in 2000, did not reflect the nexus between the two. In fact, they reaffirmed multilateralism and respect for international law, but did not go beyond a “basic-needs approach.”<sup>16</sup> The eight MDGs made no reference to the relationship between security and development, or the role that insecurity and violence play in hindering development. The relationship between security and development during the MDG era was circumstantial at best, with projections from the Millennium Development Project recognizing that fragile states were the farthest from achieving them. For example, twenty-two out of thirty-four poor countries farthest away from reaching the goals were in conflict or emerging from conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding the lack of interlinkages between peace and security or a development agenda with the MDGs, around this time, the Security Council did begin to take up more issues that were traditionally left for the General Assembly or the ECOSOC, due to their nature as purely developmental issues, such as global health—indicating that a greater shift would soon be underway. A first example occurred in 2000, when the Security Council adopted Resolution 1308 in which it stated that HIV/AIDS, “if unchecked, may pose a risk to stability and security.”<sup>18</sup> The resolution also clearly emphasized “the important roles of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council in addressing HIV/AIDS”<sup>19</sup> as a way of ensuring that these two organs would attend to the issue in its entirety. The second time that the Security Council addressed a global health crisis was in 2014, with the adoption of Resolution 2177, in which it went farther than it had in the case of HIV/AIDS. In this resolution, the Security Council stated that the “unprecedented extent of the Ebola outbreak in Africa constitutes a threat to international peace and security,”<sup>20</sup> making it the first time that a Security Council resolution, adopted by all its Members, explicitly labelled a traditional development issue as a threat to international peace and security.

## THE ADOPTION OF THE 2030 AGENDA

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015 was the result of decades of work and progress in the field of sustainable development. Its origins can essentially be traced back to 1972, with the UN Conference on Human Environment,<sup>21</sup> but it continued with the 1992 Earth Summit, the Millennium Summit and the MDGs in 2000, and the UN Conference

on Sustainable Development in 2012 (also called “Rio+20”).<sup>22</sup> These developments culminated in the adoption of Resolution 70/1 entitled “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” This progressive document was considered by some to be a “paradigm shift in international development,”<sup>23</sup> because unlike previous development goals, the 2030 agenda is universal and applies equally to all UN Member States, regardless of their level of development. This universality made the resolution more people-centric than its predecessors, under the precept of “no one left behind,” a principle now frequently cited at the UN. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda incorporated the three pillars of development that came out of the Rio+20 Summit: environmental, economic, and social. At the heart of these pillars are five critical dimensions: people, prosperity, planet, partnership, and peace. These last two dimensions are what made the 2030 Agenda so unique. By including both economic and social elements, the agenda built upon the previous traditional approaches to development and established the nexus between peace, security, and development, while also ensuring that it addressed this nexus effectively.

In 2030 Agenda, the connection between security and development was fully established in the development framework, and this connection

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..... would guide the UN’s work in these areas for the next fifteen years. Issues of peacebuilding, conflict prevention, governance, and human rights began to be widely recognized as being connected to economic and social progress.<sup>24</sup> The 2030 Agenda begins its first paragraph by establishing a plan for people, planet, and prosperity, and seeking “to strengthen universal peace.”<sup>25</sup> The document further recognizes that there cannot be sustainable development without peace and—vice versa—considers that peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development.<sup>26</sup>

The 2030 Agenda was made possible largely in part due to the work of civil society and international organizations, who participated in the working groups that fed into the negotiations of the document. There were also numerous academic studies that clearly illustrated the strengthened links between security and development that convinced the agenda’s drafters to include them. One of these studies, from the “Geneva Declaration Report” summarized by Lisa Deney, showed that higher poverty levels tend to go

“hand in hand with higher levels of violence.”<sup>27</sup> However, these studies did not necessarily find a correlation between peace and development—rather, the link is stronger between violence and lack of development. Nevertheless, the paper quoted concludes that the “inclusion of a peace and justice goal [in the 2030 Agenda]... is a welcome acknowledgement of the negative impact of insecurity and injustice on development progress.”<sup>28</sup> The inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 16 “marks the intersection between sustaining peace and the 2030 Agenda.”<sup>29</sup>

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda forged a common understanding regarding the importance of peaceful societies to sustainable development and with that, the emergence of the concept of “sustaining peace.”<sup>30</sup> This concept was agreed by consensus by all Member States in 2016, in what became known as the “twin resolutions” on the peacebuilding architecture. These two resolutions are identical, but were separately adopted in the General Assembly and the Security Council. They reiterate the concept that was widely adopted in 2005 on human rights, peace and security and development being interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Before the definition of “sustaining peace” in these twin resolutions, there was not a consensus among Member States about the interlinkages between peace and development. They defined “sustaining peace” as follows:

“a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development and emphasizing that sustaining peace is a shared task and responsibility that needs to be fulfilled by the Government and all other national stakeholders, and should flow through all three pillars of the United Nations engagement at all stages of conflict, and in all its dimensions, and needs sustained international attention and assistance.”<sup>31</sup> (sic)

This definition of “sustaining peace” addresses not only the outbreak of conflict, but also the importance of prevention before conflict breaks out. “Sustaining peace” and the 2030 Agenda have been described as frameworks that share common principles, such as national ownership, universality, and a coherent approach to implementation across all three pillars of the United Nations.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the Secretary-General presented a series of reforms in 2017 to ensure that the recently adopted documents, like the 2030 Agenda and the “sustaining peace” twin resolutions, became internalized by the

core structure of the Organization. The reforms entailed improving the UN Development System (which entail all the UN agencies, funds and programmes that work in favour of development), so that it could better respond to the 2030 Agenda with a new generation of country teams and resident coordinators. On the other hand, the peace and security reform would prioritize prevention for sustaining peace and the management reform would, among other aspects, improve accountability and transparency. Secretary General Antonio Guterres asserted that the three-way reform would “achieve the cultural change we need for greater collaboration across pillars and tangible results for people on the ground.”<sup>33</sup>

Continuing this consolidation of the nexus within the work of the UN, the Security Council has renewed its address of topics that would generally be considered traditional development issues, such as climate change, food insecurity and conflict, and global health. This last topic could not remain outside of the purview of the Council as of the year 2020, considering the multifaceted and expansive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a new presidential administration in the United States—and its re-joining of international agreements and organizations, such as the World Health Organization—adopting a Security Council resolution on this last topic was less challenging. In February 2021, the Security Council adopted

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Resolution 2565 (2021), which considered that “the unprecedented extent of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security.”<sup>34</sup> It also recognized that conflicts could exacerbate COVID-19, and that, in turn, the pandemic could also aggravate conflicts.

These developments show that the United Nations has progressively reinforced and consolidated the nexus between its three pillars to better serve the people and continue to prevent conflicts, foster development, promote

human rights, and preserve peace. However, despite impressive progress, challenges and setbacks to implementing the nexus remain.

## CHALLENGES, SETBACKS, AND CRITICISM

One of the main criticisms of the nexus, despite the enthusiasm from policymakers and diplomats for the concept, is the denominated ‘securi-

tization of development.’ Critics argue this nexus may work in theory but does not work in practice due to this securitization. The ‘securitization of development’ is defined as development being “co-opted by security actors to deliver security objectives.”<sup>35</sup> Even before the progression and consolidation of the nexus within the work of the UN in the early twenty-first century, critics believed that it did not contribute to peace. As explained by Sasha Jespersen, a researcher on the security-development nexus, after the genocide in Rwanda, “it was recognized that development assistance could reinforce social cleavages and actually cause conflict if wrongly distributed.”<sup>36</sup> Other critics charge that development has become politicized to serve the security of the donor state. In the strategies of Great Britain, for example, the link between its security is explicitly and intentionally tied to its aid and development projects around the world. In 2010, the government of the United Kingdom established that “projects in the developing world must make maximum possible contribution to British national security.”<sup>37</sup> These examples show that critics of the nexus see its drawbacks in two distinct ways—development aid may prolong conflict, and that development aid may be politicized for an outside actor’s security.

Other criticisms of the nexus charge that it is not applicable in contexts that are not relevant to the developing world or in conflict-affected areas. In other words, the mutually reinforcing nature of the nexus does not work in a situation where neither peace nor development exist. In that regard, some scholars argue that “in contexts where neither security nor development... is attainable, the mutuality crumbles.”<sup>38</sup>

The above criticisms generally believe that the security-development nexus is imposed in countries with low levels of development or affected by conflict. In other words, it is viewed as a concept developed by policymakers and diplomats that does not improve the lives of people, but rather imposes specific points of view or national agendas of powerful countries. Critics also argue that these are just theoretical concepts whose meaning, ontologies, and empirical realities do not coincide with what happens on the ground and in the lives of real people. Nonetheless, even critics admit that there is a growing consensus around the notion that peace and security and development are interconnected and that the disregard for development is not imposed, rather it is generated in national contexts and through national ownership. These last two concepts are tenets of both the 2030 Agenda and the “sustaining peace” agenda.

## CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

Despite the mentioned criticisms, it is evident that the consensus

around the security-development nexus has emerged and progressed in the work of the United Nations. It is no longer feasible to assert that issues like pandemics and global health will not have powerful implications for peace and security, or that climate change is not an existential threat. These general agreements among the international community are evident, as previously mentioned, by the recent adoption of the Security Council Resolution 2565 (2021) on COVID-19, which was adopted unanimously by the Council and that received more than 100 co-sponsors. Moreover, recent debates in the Security Council have included the impacts of climate change and food security, hunger, and conflict. There are some Member States who continue to have reservations towards the Council addressing these issues. China, Russia, and even some currently-elected members, like India, believe that climate change is fundamentally a sustainable development issue that should be addressed by bodies such as the General Assembly and ECOSOC, rather than the Security Council. Nonetheless, most countries lean towards accepting and reinforcing the self-evident interlinkages between the two concepts.

In other bodies at the UN, such as the ECOSOC, the nexus has strengthened with the observance of meetings such as the humanitarian affairs segment (the name of these meetings of the ECOSOC) and the meetings on transition to development, as well as the operational development activities segment. These meetings take place subsequently, which reinforce these interlinkages.

More needs to be done to operationalize the nexus at the UN, so that the theory can be translated into practice, and normative progress can also mean progress on the ground—transforming actual human lives, not just rhetorical documents. Only by ensuring genuine positive

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outcomes in people's lives will the criticism of securitizing development for national interests be addressed. While the reforms of the Secretary-General regarding peace and security, development, and management were aimed at ensuring that the 2030 Agenda and the sustaining peace agenda reinforced each other, research recognizes that

progress still needs to be made. As Agathe Sarfati writes, "operationalizing the sustaining peace agenda should focus not only on improving the effectiveness of the UN's tools for delivering programs, but also on their impact on prospects for lasting peace."<sup>39</sup>

However, there is no doubt that conflict and underdevelopment are linked. In 2002, studies pointed out that eight out of ten of the world's poorest countries are either going through conflict or have gone through one.<sup>40</sup> More recently, the Secretary-General stated in a Security Council meeting on conflict-induced hunger that at the end of 2020, more than eighty-eight million people were suffering from acute hunger due to conflict and insecurity.<sup>41</sup> This essay has portrayed how the rhetoric and negotiations at the United Nations—like this Security Council meeting—are progressing towards a less siloed approach towards development, peace, and security and human rights. In that regard, we must ensure that the theoretical approach translates into concrete results on the ground wherein peace, security, and development reinforce each other, and development translates into truly peaceful and inclusive societies.*f*

#### ENDNOTES

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