

Making the UN more inclusive and democratic

by Jo Leinen

The United Nations is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year. Secretary-General António Guterres has invited everybody to discuss and propose measures for "renewing and strengthening" the world organisation. Notably, a UN Parliamentary Assembly and a World Citizens' Initiative could increase its democratic base.

Many papers and debates around the United Nations' 75th anniversary (UN75) focus on reform of the existing UN institutions: the role and power of the Secretary-General, the efficiency of the General Assembly, and above all the reform of the Security Council. All of this is important, but it is not enough. Business as usual does not reflect the many changes since the creation of the UN in 1948, nor does it reflect today's global challenges. UN reform needs fresh ideas and a new footing.

A MORE DEMOCRATIC UN WITH A NEW UN PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY (UNPA)

The UN Charter begins with the promising words "We the peoples". However, no clause can be found in the document that specifies a means by which ordinary people can play a role in the organisation's deliberations and decision-making.

The bodies of the UN are occupied by officials who are appointed by the executive branches of national governments. Given the many challenges with direct effect for the citizens, this is no longer sufficient. The intergovernmental

order has failed again and again because of egoistic interests and veto positions. **Global problems need global politics, and global goods need global institutions.**

A United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) would, for the first time, give elected representatives a formal role in global affairs. The proposal has been around since the 1920s, when the League of Nations was set up. As an own body, the UNPA would directly represent the world's citizens and not national governments.

An UNPA could be established without changing the UN Charter. It could be created with a decision of the UN General Assembly under Article 22 of the Charter, as happened years ago with the establishment of the Human Rights Council.

The UN would evolve from what many believe to be a generally inefficient talking shop into a viable and vibrant democratic body. Initially, states could choose whether their UNPA members would come from national parliaments, reflecting their political spectrum and gender equality, or whether they would be directly elected. Starting as

a largely consultative body, the UNPA would have the right of information on all UN matters and action, the right to scrutinise the budget and spending, and it would of course serve as a platform to discuss relevant global problems and make proposals. The UNPA could create committees – for example, a committee on Human Rights, Peace and Security, which would monitor the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals or inquire about tax havens and money laundering. The assembly would act as an independent watchdog of the UN system, and as a democratic reflection of world public opinion.

Alternatively, the UNPA could be created through a new international treaty. To enter into force, the treaty would have to be

► *The UN Charter begins with the promising words 'We the peoples'. However, no clause can be found that specifies a means by which ordinary people can play a role in the organisation's deliberations and decision-making.*

ratified by a certain number of countries across the continents. Rights and functions with regard to the UN would be confirmed through a cooperation agreement adopted by the UN General Assembly.

The Appeal for a UN Parliamentary Assembly is now supported by numerous NGOs, more than 1,500 parliamentarians, a number of national parliaments, the European Parliament and the Pan-African Parliament.

| A WORLD CITIZENS' INITIATIVE (WCI)

Citizens should have a voice in the UN. In a globalised and connected world, many problems have a direct effect on people everywhere on the planet.

- ▶ *Global problems need global politics and global goods need global institutions.*

Many studies and surveys prove that humans have similar feelings, aspirations and expectations: living in peace, having a healthy environment or a decent job. These basic needs cannot be expressed on the global stage because they are blocked and fragmented by other interests and power games.

A World Citizens' Initiative would be a dynamic new instrument to put proposals from citizens of all continents and many countries on the agendas of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council. The experience of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) and lessons learned from it could be the starting point for debate.

- ▶ *With a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, the UN would evolve from what many believe to be a generally inefficient talk shop into a viable and vibrant democratic body.*

The WCI would have an organising committee that is geographically representative. This committee would register citizens' initiatives and open the procedure for collection of support. Proposals would only be eligible if they are in line with the purposes of the UN as laid out in Article 1 of the UN Charter.

A WCI would qualify within 18 months after registration if it has collected a certain quorum of signatures in representative parts of the world. Robust digital tools could facilitate the collection of support. Verification would be undertaken based on random samples, residency information and date of birth.

A successful WCI would be automatically placed on the agenda of the General Assembly (UNGA) or, depending on the proposal, on the agenda of the Security Council (UNSC). It would oblige the UNGA or the UNSC to draft a resolution in response, and to vote on this resolution. States would be required to publish an explanation of the vote, whether they vote in favour of the resolution or not. This would create transparency for world public opinion and for global citizens.

A World Citizens' Initiative in a reformed UN system could be created without changing the UN Charter. Like an UNPA, a WCI could be established under Article 22 by a vote of the General Assembly. **Global politics could then start a more citizen-centred agenda and would have a human face. This would improve the credibility of the UN enormously, helping to guarantee its survival.**

Jo Leinen, Member of the European Parliament (1999-2019), President of the Union of European Federalists (1997-2005)

