

# Retaining the focus on human rights and development to protect normative values

Ramiz Alakbarov



**The ice axe.** Sherpa Norgay Tenzing and Edmund Hillary became the first men to reach the summit of Mount Everest in 1953. Tenzing gifted Dag Hammarskjöld an axe from the climb with the inscription: 'So that you can climb to even greater heights'. Hammarskjöld hung it by the fireplace in his private apartment in New York. Just as Tenzing's encouragement spurred Hammarskjöld on, Ramiz Alakbarov calls on UN leaders to show resolve and principled leadership amidst the on-going erosion of norms. Steadfastly advocating for human rights and development is a fundamental basis for the protection of normative values.

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As the designated representative of the United Nations Secretary General at the country level, the role of a United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (UN RC/HC) is challenging at best, carrying broad responsibilities and facing high expectations from many quarters.

Upon carrying out their functions, the RC/HC is expected to consistently uphold normative frameworks, including the principles of the UN Charter. Upon reflecting on the issue of normative erosion and the way its trajectory affects multilateralism and its credibility to work with today's global and urgent challenges, three factors come to my mind.

Foremost we are currently witnessing a paralysis in global decision-making and a challenge of inclusion. The lack of consensus and subsequent decision-making paralysis in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on a range of geopolitical issues, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, makes a pressing case for reform of the UNSC.<sup>1</sup>

Inclusion in global decision-making saw a big win for the Global South in 2023 with the adoption of the African Union (AU) into the Group of Twenty (G20), but the AU still lacks a permanent seat in the UNSC.<sup>2,3</sup> In this context it is often argued that a 'stronger multipolar world' with many players implies 'weaker multilateralism', and that existing multilateral structures merely reflect prevailing power configurations and do not cater to the needs of emerging powers.<sup>4</sup>

While the time for reform of global governance structures, such as the UNSC, in my view is long overdue, I do not agree that a stronger multipolar world undermines multilateralism. On the contrary, new realities give multilateralism a chance to be even stronger, especially if

we maintain an impartial and normative based stance and play the role of principled and honest broker in all forms of multilateral affairs.

Secondly, politicians, think-tanks and the general public increasingly perceive that UN Member States and institutions apply 'double standards' towards human rights and norms in order to suit their interests. Major media sources such as Euro News and Al Jazeera cover such reports regularly, and the sentiment is only augmented by social media, especially as there is no end in the sight to the on-going conflict in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, liberal democracy values are on the decline. Some portray liberalism as a pathway for neocolonialism while others question moral grounds and intent of the Members States playing a traditional role as the guardians of international norms.<sup>7</sup> Equally, questions are raised about impartiality, politicisation, and instrumentation of international institutions by global powers.<sup>8,9</sup>

In response to the arguments dominating today's public and social media, I maintain that it is not acceptable neither from a factual, normative, nor moral perspective to portray the UN and humanitarian relief efforts assisting populations in conflict zones as an enforcement of any party to a conflict.

Further, funding of aid programs focusing on humanitarian aid and provision of social services and goods must be free of any excessive conditionality beyond basic principles of accountability and transparency.

Lastly, results of global efforts to create better socio-economic conditions and a more prosperous life for millions around the globe have fallen short of expectations.

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The disenchantment of ordinary citizens caused by lack of economic and social progress is seen as a larger failure of liberal democracy and is a driving force of normative erosion.

It is further fuelled by climate change, conflicts, growing poverty, hunger, inequalities, and the weakest economic growth observed in decades.<sup>10</sup> Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is stalling, and urgent action is required to rescue the goals and to restore faith in the multilateral system.

#### **The role of UN leadership in resisting the normative erosion**

One way for the UN to resist and counter the current erosion of previously agreed norms is for the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (UN RC/HC) and the Designated Official for Security (DO) to exercise autonomous norm-based and self-applied leadership.

In this context I want to share an example from my own experience when making a personal choice as UN RC/HC and DO in Afghanistan during the evacuation in August 2021, to remain in the country to lead the relief operation and crisis response. This included ensuring that colleagues who stayed in Afghanistan considered this a personal and a voluntary choice just as much as the call of duty, factoring in critical safety and security risks.

Staying and delivering in this high security risk environment was a conscious choice made by every staff member who remained in the country. In this specific context, we collectively delivered one of the world's largest relief operations reaching over 20 million people and our presence in the country enabled the continuation of work on monitoring human rights.<sup>11</sup>

The UN Secretary-General has shown the importance of maintaining a principled position about the unacceptable human and humanitarian costs of war, for example in

Gaza and Ukraine, and the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

At the country level the UN RC/HC leads communication and action based on principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence enabling access to affected communities.

Here in Ethiopia, the leadership of the UN RC/HC is critical to making sure that as the aid reaches the people of Tigray, it is equally accessible to the most vulnerable communities in all regions.<sup>12</sup>

Strong complementarity of principled action between the country and global level is a must to ensure access to the people in need with no accusation of a political bias. But advocating and speaking up is not enough in terms of leadership. The link between peace, humanitarian, and development work must be recognised and political, financial, and technical resources must be mobilised. To be able to lead in these contexts, leadership must always recognise and work for this holistic approach across sectors and pillars.

#### **Transformative leadership based on evidence and knowledge**

Development failures increase the humanitarian caseload as much as failures of maintaining peace. Support for the exercise of fundamental human rights to attain development must be freed from excessive political conditionality and be linked to strong evidence and knowledge leading to the benefit of ordinary citizens.

United Nations RC/HCs must defend the fundamental right to development and build inclusive frameworks to ringfence social services such as health, education, and livelihoods to protect the individual's right to development, preserve gains threatened by political and security changes, and avoid repeating and deepening humanitarian cycles of crisis.

## ‘Our ability to protect directly depends on the independent stance by the foundational principles of the UN.’

The World Bank notes that least developed countries often require considerably larger investments in socio-economic development than in the past, and institutional transformation to modern systems of values requires sustained efforts.<sup>13</sup> UN leaders must make sure that our planning strategies of partnership with these countries contain a realistic reflection of the path to peace and development through well-defined theories of change with correct estimates of funding and timing underpinning political decision making.

The inability of leadership to withstand political pressure and take decisions that are not based on evidence may result in the need to undertake repeated efforts, as is illustrated by the 2023 UNSC decision to re-deploy a UN security mission to Haiti, a country where I served for four years following the devastating earthquake on 20 January 2010.

To sustain funding and create impact the UN must seek broad collaboration and partnerships with, for example, academic institutions. In addition, sound economic models are required.

One example I can share in this regard is work undertaken in 2019, as Head of Policy and Strategy for United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in leading the organisation's costing exercise for the strategic plan presented at the ICPD@25 Nairobi Summit, the 25th International Conference of Population and Development.<sup>14</sup>

This study underpinned that broad partnership with Member States and civil society have proven essential to scaling up and safeguarding support for the reproductive health and population programs at the time of push-back on women's rights.

In conclusion, the UN operates in an increasingly multi-polar world and attempts to influence the institution are not uncommon. Our ability to protect directly depends on the independent stance by the foundational principles

of the UN. It equally depends on our ability to expose root causes of erosion through evidence, to build coalitions for action, and to raise resources to address drivers of erosion. This means protecting all aspects of human rights, including the right of every person to development, regardless of adversity and political change.

In doing so we may still be the last best hope humanity has. ■

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Mubita, 'Africa's Demand for a Permanent Seat on the UN Security Council', (Saarland, LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2012), retrieved from Mubita, Charles. Africa's Demand for a Permanent Seat on the UN Security Council <https://akb.au.int/handle/AKB/26115>.
- <sup>2</sup> Catherine Davison, 'African Union's G20 inclusion a big win for global south — and India' (Online, Devex, 18 September 2023, <https://www.devex.com/news/african-union-s-g20-inclusion-a-big-win-for-global-south-and-india-106207>).
- <sup>3</sup> See Note 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Monish Tourangbam, 'Multilateralism in a Multipolar World', *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* Vol.14, No.4, October–December 2019, pp 301-308, <http://www.associationdiplomats.org/Publications/ifaj/Vol14/14.4/IFAJ%20-%2014.4%20-%208%20-%20ARTICLE%205%20-%20MTourangbam.pdf>.
- <sup>5</sup> Mared Gwyn Jones, 'Double standards' undermine EU legitimacy in Global South: Human Rights Watch chief, 26 October 2023, online, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/26/double-standards-undermine-eu-legitimacy-in-global-south-human-rights-watch-chief>.
- <sup>6</sup> Idea International, 'The Global State of Democracy 2023', (Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023), <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/>.
- <sup>7</sup> David Williams, 'Liberalism, Colonialism and Liberal Imperialism', *Brill* pp, 94-118 (Leiden, Brill, 2018), [https://brill.com/view/journals/eceu/45/1/article-p94\\_94.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/eceu/45/1/article-p94_94.xml).
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- <sup>9</sup> Michael Barnett, book review of Antonio Donini (ed), *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 94 Number 887 Autumn 2012, (West Hartford, Kumarian Press, 2012), <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-887-book-review-donini.pdf>.
- <sup>10</sup> World Bank, '2023 in Nine Charts: A Growing Inequality', (Washington DC, World Bank, 2023), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/12/18/2023-in-nine-charts-a-growing-inequality>.
- <sup>11</sup> United Nations, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 'Statement by Dr. Ramiz Alakbarov, United Nations DSRSG, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator on UN Staying to support aid response in Afghanistan', (Afghanistan, United Nations, 2021), <https://unama.unmissions.org/statement-dr-ramiz-alakbarov-united-nations-dsrsg-resident-and-humanitarian-coordinator-un-staying>.
- <sup>12</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia' A/HRC/54/55, (New York, United Nations, 2023), [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/chreethiopia/A\\_HRC\\_54\\_55\\_AUV.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/chreethiopia/A_HRC_54_55_AUV.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> World Bank, 'World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development'. (Washington DC: World Bank, 2011).
- <sup>14</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 'Costing the Three Transformative Results', (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2019).