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IN CONVERSATION WITH THE EXPERTS: THE FUTURE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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Introduction

Good afternoon. Let me first thank the Centre for Human Rights, College of Law, Social and Criminal Justice, Birmingham City University for the invitation. I am very happy to be amongst you today.

I have been working for the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs for the past 24 years, over 15 of which has been for the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations in Geneva working on human rights. For 2025, I am at the Office of the President of the Human Rights Council. The following remarks are more of a personal contribution than an official position regarding the topic at hand.

I have been granted 30 minutes to make my presentation. Truth is, at the Human Rights Council, statements usually range from 90 seconds to 2.5 minutes and even less during the UPR (sometimes 50 seconds). It is nice to have more time to share some reflections including on the experience of the Human Rights Council. I really would like to ensure enough time for questions.

The Future of the United Nations

This is such a complex topic given the current challenging times. The international system is under severe pressure. There are a record number of crises / armed conflict around the globe (at least since the end of the cold war). There is much pushback on the rule of law, on civic space, on women's rights. Democratic spaces, including in Western societies, are also increasingly being challenged.

Regarding the United Nations, there are increased accusations:

- of lack of representation (especially of the Security Council, with increased calls for reforms);
- of lack of meaningful action (especially due to veto at the Security Council),
- of double-standards (in all fora with explicit split between Ukraine and the Occupied Palestinian Territory);
- of inefficiencies (including the system working in silos) and/or redundancies;
- of incapacity to deliver (especially in conflict zones).

This situation isn't helped when States actively contribute to undermine international law and international institutions.

Nor when partisan views lead to misinformation, disinformation, and the outright denial of facts.

How is the United Nations really doing? How is multilateralism actually valued? What could happen if influential countries were to actively leave the United Nations? Or follow the examples of some that want to see a United Nations "à la carte" – or I should say multilateralism "à la carte" since this is wider than the United Nations itself?

The United Nations remains important for the majority of States. It is essential for finding common solutions to collective problems. I can see the United Nations being forced to adapt. Yes, there is some criticism of the United Nations as a whole. This is why it is important to concentrate on its mandate and avoid being selective about it. The mandate of the United Nations, in accordance with the Charter, is to: Maintain international peace and security; Develop friendly relations among nations; Cooperate in solving international problems and promoting respect for human rights; Serve as a center for harmonizing the actions of nations. It is a package deal.

We are approaching the *80th anniversary of the Charter of the United Nations*. 2025 will hopefully provide ample opportunities to reaffirm the interconnectivity of human rights for the peace, security, development and prosperity of humanity, as well as the importance of respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter, which is above all a promise made by States to their respective peoples. The United Nations has a big role to play in this regard.

Experience at the Human Rights Council

The Human Rights Council is the main intergovernmental organ of the United Nations for the promotion and protection of human rights. Human rights are not a luxury, they are a necessity, they should be made a priority.

The mandate of the Human Rights Council is an important one. Its effective contribution is beyond doubt and deserves to be further valued and promoted.

What do Permanent Missions do at the Human Rights Council? We negotiate resolutions, we set the agenda. We exchange formally through statements, participation in panels and interactive dialogues. We also engage in side-events and other informal formats. As states, we are subject to reviews (Universal Periodic Review, special rapporteur visits), as well as Treaty Bodies also (but TBs don't fall within the purview of the Human Rights Council).

We could certainly spend time debating the strengths and weaknesses of the Human Rights Council, as well as the threats and opportunities in the current climate. We should never forget that the Human Rights Council is composed of States and tends to reflect to some extent the international context. One must therefore resist what we see as increasingly transactional diplomacy.

This being said, the Human Rights Council has worked well despite it being, along with the whole UN human rights pillar, being underfunded (or under financial strain). And its overall positive performance comes from the multiplicity of stakeholders taking part in its work, the active involvement of civil

society, the very precious expertise that the Geneva ecosystem provides, but also the flexibility of the institution.

As for the United Nations as a whole, it is important to recall and focus on the mandate of the Human Rights Council: normative development, preventing and responding to violations, providing technical assistance and capacity-building. On this last point, despite past efforts, more connecting the dots, especially linking development actors and human rights work, is needed to be able to provide such support for countries that are willing to work on their human rights landscape and record. Something to consider also for the implementation of UPR recommendations.

For the HRC to perform better, efforts will have to be made to rationalize the program of work, aim for less fragmentation of the human rights agenda, more quality of initiatives and debates, as opposed to quantity, and never lose sight of the right-holders.

And while there is 2021-2026 Review on the Status of the Human Rights Council to consider, major reform of the system is not currently on people's mind.

Pact for the future

I heard that the Pact for the Future is of interest to you.

A limited number of Geneva actors were mobilized to contribute to the Pact for the Future negotiation.

Gianni has already outlined the importance elements of the Pact for the Future in the field of human rights + the need for the centrality of human rights in the future of the UN.

The Global Digital Compact is certainly also of interest as a whole on the governance level.

In the next months, there is going to be interest in the follow-up to the Para 74 (a) and (b) of the Pact for the future:

- (a) Recall the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as outlined in resolution 48/141 of 20 December 1993, and request the Secretary-General to assess the need for adequate, predictable, increased and sustainable financing of the United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, for efficient and effective mandate delivery to enable them to respond to the range of human rights challenges facing the international community with impartiality, objectivity and non – selectivity;
- (b) Enhance coordination and cooperation among United Nations entities working on human rights and avoid duplication of activities, within their existing mandates, including through closer coordination with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.