

UN Special

MAGAZINE DES FONCTIONNAIRES INTERNATIONAUX - THE MAGAZINE OF INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVANTS



Interview with the Director
General of UNOG

Entretien avec Président du
Conseil d'État du canton de
Genève

UN at 70 by Director General
of WHO

Micro-trottoir, portrait croisés,
next generation and more



“There is not a single person on
the planet that is not touched every day
by something that happened in Geneva.”



GARRY ASLANYAN

Rédacteur en chef par intérim/interim Editor-in-chief

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**No matter what they say,
there is no alternative**

In this issue, it is only fitting and timely to focus on the 70th anniversary of the United Nations (UN). And what an issue we have got for you! Who is better to put things into perspective and share their views on this than the Director General of the UNOG, Président du Conseil d'État du canton de Genève and the Director General of the WHO?

As UN staff, we all have lots of reasons to celebrate. A lot has been accomplished during those years even though the achievements are uneven and the reputation is slightly tarnished. But I am sure, when you read all the stories and experiences in the rest of the magazine, you will conclude that there is no alternative to the UN. And it is ever true here in Geneva with its organizations and agencies that still serve as the main arena for global discussion on a broad spectrum of sectors. And it is very clear that the UN needs to undergo changes in order to quickly and efficiently respond to the rapid developments and new challenges: whether these are the regional conflicts, climate change, natural disasters, manmade disasters or economic turmoil and the ultimate challenge of meeting the new sustainable development goals. We have tried something different this time. The central page is a pull out poster which you can place in your office or home as a giant reminder of the work we do. I am sure you will also find yourselves reflecting that as staff who work here in Geneva there is no alternative to an enhanced collaboration within the UN family. There is no other way but to work together in order to continue making a difference.

**Quoi qu'ils en disent,
il n'y a pas d'alternative**

Dans ce numéro, il est pertinent et opportun de nous concentrer sur le 70^e anniversaire des Nations Unies. Et quel numéro nous vous avons préparé! Qui peut mieux mettre en perspective et partager ses vues sur ce thème que le Directeur-Général de l'ONUG, le Président du Conseil d'Etat du Canton de Genève ou le Directeur Général de l'OMS?

En tant que personnel des Nations Unies, nous avons de nombreuses raisons de célébrer cet anniversaire. Beaucoup a été accompli durant ces années, même si les progrès réalisés sont inégaux et la réputation un peu ternie. Mais je suis sûr que lorsque vous aurez lu toutes ces histoires et ces témoignages, vous conclurez qu'il n'y a pas d'alternative à l'ONU. Cela est d'autant plus vrai à Genève où les organisations et les agences servent toujours de scène principale aux discussions globales sur un large éventail de sujets. Il est clair que les Nations Unies ont besoin de changer pour répondre plus vite et plus efficacement aux développements rapides et aux nouveaux défis de notre époque, qu'il s'agisse de conflits régionaux, de changement climatique, de catastrophes naturelles, de désastres causés par l'Homme, de turbulences économiques ou du défi ultime de réaliser les objectifs de développement durable.

Nous avons essayé de vous proposer autre chose cette fois. La double page centrale est un poster que vous pourrez afficher dans votre bureau ou à la maison pour vous rappeler du travail que nous faisons. Je suis sûr que vous vous ferez aussi la réflexion en tant que personnel basé ici, à Genève, qu'il n'y a pas d'alternative à une amélioration de la collaboration au sein de la famille des Nations Unies. Il n'y a pas d'autre choix que celui de travailler ensemble pour continuer à faire une différence.

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des Nations Unies à Genève et de
l'Organisation mondiale de la Santé**

**Magazine of the international civil
servants of the United Nations at Geneva
and of the World Health Organization**

Reflections on UN at 70



© Khalil Hamdani

I started as a messenger and retired as a director in the United Nations (UN).

KHALIL HAMDANI

The satisfaction in a UN career is not how high up one goes but in what one accomplishes on the way up. The Vice President of a Caribbean nation put it well when she remarked at a dinner in Sao Paulo in June 2004: "I envy you because, each morning you go to work, you have the opportunity to change the world for the better." Every evening since, I have asked myself if I had changed the world.

My first job, fresh out of high school in 1964, was to sort the daily mail of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and deposit donations in a secured locker. It was a general service G-1 summer assignment. I did it for three summers while attending college. My ascent from G-1 to D-2 spanned 43 years and involved breaks for university, internships, government service, consultancies, and a series of fixed-term contracts.

As I moved up in the UN, I felt the UN move down in my area of speciality, economic affairs. As special assistant to three senior officials in New York for a decade (1982-1992), I played my part in shaping policy. The staff prepared timely reports on debt crises, multinationals and apartheid. The Economic and Social Council buzzed with activity. We thought we were doing well but the then Secretary-General thought otherwise: he shut us down in 1992. (For

the full story read our book on the *United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations*.) There was a major restructuring of UN economic sector, entire departments were consolidated and my group was transferred from New York to Geneva. Needless to say, a geo-political shift from the leftist 'New International Economic Order' to the market-driven 'Washington Consensus' was sweeping the globe and the UN had to adjust to remain relevant.

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Reminiscing, I often wonder where we went wrong. Governments and world events scuttled the North-South dialogue but could the secretariat have saved it by urging a better balance between compromise and confrontation? And if so, would delegates have listened? And if not, should we have stood silent on the side lines or stood up for what we felt was just? Watching Mandela walk out of prison, witnessing recurring debt crises and hearing renewed demands for regulation of big business, I do feel that, on most issues, we were on the right side of history.

The UN did not regain economic authority but the work continued. As the Japanese saying goes – “A river changes course when it hits a rock”. We regrouped the division, and steered it in new directions. We

made our mark in research and technical cooperation, and governments welcomed our advice on policy and institution building.

Changing the world means also adapting to change. The UN at 70 must adapt to the post-war world at 70, which is not that of the mid-40s or the 1980s. The UN family is increasingly working as one, doing credible work on operational activities and humanitarian support, and also in advancing normative issues, such as human rights, development goals and climate change. These are big challenges that require strong leadership.

The UN has a high moral imperative, and is called upon, by media and civil society, to exercise initiative and leadership on global problems.

The UN Charter established the Secretariat as a separate organ, independent of the Security Council. The UN staff at 70 should uphold its independence of member states. If the Secretariat does not push the boundaries, the world will not change. ■

Khalil Hamdani was former Director of the Division on Investment, Technology and Enterprise Development, of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). He is co-author of the book United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations: Corporate Conduct and the Public Interest (Routledge, 2015).



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