

**June 2021**

Now 76 years old, the United Nations (UN), together with its complex mesh of agencies, programmes and related organisations, is at the heart of the multilateral system. The organisation has played a key role in shaping international relations since the end of the Second World War and in driving globalisation, but it has also experienced numerous crises in its history, most recently suffering attempts by the former US administration under President Trump to weaken it politically and financially. Recognising the need to make the UN more flexible, transparent, accountable and effective, the current Secretary-General, António Guterres, who has been at the helm of the organisation since January 2017, has launched sweeping administrative reforms. On 18 June 2021, Guterres was re-elected UN Secretary-General for a second term running from January 2022 to December 2026.

The EU is committed to supporting multilateral cooperation and has become a key player in the United Nations system. It enjoys observer status in many UN bodies and is the only international organisation to have secured enhanced observer status in the UN General Assembly. The EU leverages its influence through its significant financial contribution to the UN system, through its enhanced partnerships with various entities within the UN system, and through close coordination with its Member States and like-minded allies on positions to be defended in the organisation.

The United Nations and the role of the EU

The future of multilateralism and strategic partnerships

Briefing by Elena Lazarou, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2020

The defence and reform of multilateralism is one of the EU's key priorities under the current European Commission. This will require a more coordinated and autonomous EU foreign policy, a smart approach towards the escalating US-China rivalry, reinvigorated cooperation with major democracies, and mobilisation of the EU's foreign policy tools, in the broadest sense.

Understanding the financing of intergovernmental organisations: A snapshot of the budgets of the UN, NATO and WTO

Briefing by Magdalena Sapala with Sophia Stutzmann, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2020

Exploring selected aspects of the financing of three of the world's largest inter-governmental organisations – the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – this briefing presents the size and evolution of their budgets and also the main contributing countries to these budgets, with a particular focus on the EU Member States.

European Union involvement in the United Nations system: Broad partnership based on shared commitment to multilateralism

In-depth analysis by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2020

Over the years, the EU has become a key player in the UN system. It enjoys observer status in many UN bodies and is the only international organisation to have secured enhanced observer status in the UN General Assembly. The EU leverages its influence through its significant financial contribution to the UN system, through its enhanced partnerships with various entities within the UN system, and through close coordination with its Member States on positions to be defended in the organisation.

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United Nations reform

Briefing by Joanna Apap, European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2019

At the 72nd UN General Assembly on 18 September 2017, 120 countries expressed their commitment to the reforms proposed by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres. Since 1946, the UN has undergone a number of thorough or partial reforms. This briefing explains how the current reform differs from previous ones, in as much as it focuses on management and addresses criticisms of a lack of accountability and transparency, ineffectiveness, and the deficit in trust between the organisation and its member states in the current system.

The 2016 election of a new UN Secretary-General

Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2016

On 13 October, the UN General Assembly appointed a European, António Guterres, to the post of UN Secretary-General, after a selection process that was, in part, unprecedentedly transparent. For the first time in history, the nominated candidates had the opportunity to present their visions in public dialogues organised in the General Assembly with member states and civil society representatives. Guterres emerged somewhat unexpectedly as the chosen candidate – without much diplomatic wrangling in the Security Council, and defying expectations that the next secretary-general would be a woman and/or an eastern European, according to the principle of diversity that holds sway in the UN.

World Health Organization: Is it fit for purpose?

Briefing by Martin Russel, European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2020

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19, the disease resulting from the novel coronavirus SARS-COV2, a pandemic on 11 March 2020, putting the UN agency in the global spotlight. Critics argue that the WHO was overly accommodating of China, and thus failed to handle the pandemic effectively in its early stages. Its failures, both during the Covid-19 pandemic and in previous health crises, highlight long-standing problems: weakness, a lack of funding, and a complex organisational structure that can hamper effective action.

Peace and Security in 2021: Overview of EU action and outlook for the future

Study by Tania Latici, Elena Lazarou and others, European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2021

The EU's action for peace and security is guided by its own model of integration, comprehensive security and multilateralism and a commitment to the principles of the UN. Since its creation, the UN has pursued two parallel and mutually reinforcing goals: the elimination of weapons of mass destruction (biological, chemical and nuclear) and the regulation of conventional arms (in particular the illicit trade in small arms). The EU is committed to pursuing these goals through its status in the UN and through the participation of its Member States in the various UN bodies responsible for disarmament and non-proliferation.

UN action and bodies

Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its relevance for the European Union

'At a glance' note by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018

Seventy years after its adoption, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has achieved all the significance its drafters hoped for. It has served as the foundation for the legal codification of human rights, at global, regional and national levels. Even though it is non-binding in nature, it has shaped many national constitutions significantly, and many of its provisions have been incorporated into customary international law. The UDHR has also been an important guide for EU external policies and a reference for EU legislation.

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Indivisibility of human rights: Unifying the two Human Rights Covenants?

'At a glance' note by Joanna Apap, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, initially drafted in 1954 as a single document, are the foundation of the international human rights regime. However, in the light of the UN General Assembly's mandate seeking reforms to address fragmentation and improve transparency and accountability, more and more stakeholders are asking if it is time to overcome the Cold War era ideological rift and to codify the two Covenants in a single document.

United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)

'At a glance' note by Joanna Apap and Artur Mundil, European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2018

Since it came into being in 2006, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has actively defended human rights worldwide. Its robust mandate and unique set of mechanisms, such as universal periodic review and special procedures, provide a system for prevention, technical assistance and capacity-building, as well as a mechanism to respond to cases of grave violations of human rights. This note outlines the UNHRC's mandate, structure and functioning.

Fighting corruption globally: The link with human rights

'At a glance' note by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2021

The UN Convention against Corruption – the only legally binding international instrument for fighting corruption – was adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2003. Although it has been ratified by the vast majority of the states in the world, serious implementation gaps persist to this day. The harmful impact of corruption on human rights and on the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been widely recognised. In this context, UNGA was to hold a special session on corruption in June 2021.

United Nations Universal Children's Day and the protection of children's rights by the EU

'At a glance' note by Joanna Apap, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2017

The UN established Universal Children's Day in 1954. The UN adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child on 20 November 1959, and since 1990, the day has also marked the anniversary of the date that the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although the EU is not a party to that convention, it is guided by its principles.

Sustainable development goals

Understanding the Sustainable Development Goals

Briefing by Eric Pichon, European Parliamentary Research Service, December 2019

The UN adopted the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in 2015, to be attained by 2030. The SDGs and the broader 2030 Agenda for sustainable development of which they form the core, are based on the finding that human activities have triggered dramatic changes in the conditions on Earth (climate change and biodiversity loss), which in turn have contributed to the deterioration of human well-being. To reverse this trend, there is an urgent need to simultaneously address the multiple causes and consequences of environmental depletion and social inequalities, by developing synergies and managing trade-offs between the SDGs. The EU has been a leader in drafting and implementing the SDGs.

EU support for fighting global poverty: Implementing UN SDG 1 – 'Ending poverty'

Briefing by Marta Latek, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2019

Poverty affects more than a quarter of the world's population, and that is why erasing it is a principal objective for humanity, enshrined as the first of a number of goals (SDGs) on the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

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Peace, justice and strong institutions: EU support for implementing SDG 16 worldwide

Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2020

The 16th sustainable development goal (SDG 16) to 'Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels' represents a new milestone compared with the earlier millennium development goals.

Reporting on SDG implementation: UN mechanisms and the EU approach

Briefing by Eric Pichon, European Parliamentary Research Service, December 2019

Adopted by the UN in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – 'the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all' – clearly links the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) it introduced to a series of targets to be reached by 2030. The 2030 Agenda includes a detailed mechanism to monitor progress on those targets. At the core of this mechanism are a number of quantified indicators for each target.

Corporate social responsibility

Implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

Study by European Parliament's Policy Department for External Policies, January 2017

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) were adopted in 2011, but business-related human rights abuse is still a serious problem. In 2017, only 12 national action plans had been adopted, and better access to remedy and justice for victims was still needed. This study identifies challenges and opportunities regarding the implementation of the UNGPs worldwide, and offers recommendations for EU institutions, the European Parliament and EU Member States.

Towards a binding international treaty on business and human rights

Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018

To prevent human rights abuses by transnational corporations, the UN established an intergovernmental working group in 2014 to draft a binding treaty on human rights and business. After warning at the outset of the risk of undermining the UN Guiding Principles, the EU is now a strong advocate for a treaty encompassing all businesses, not only transnational ones. However, the treaty remains controversial. This briefing provides an overview of the debate and discusses the treaty proposal and stakeholders' positions.

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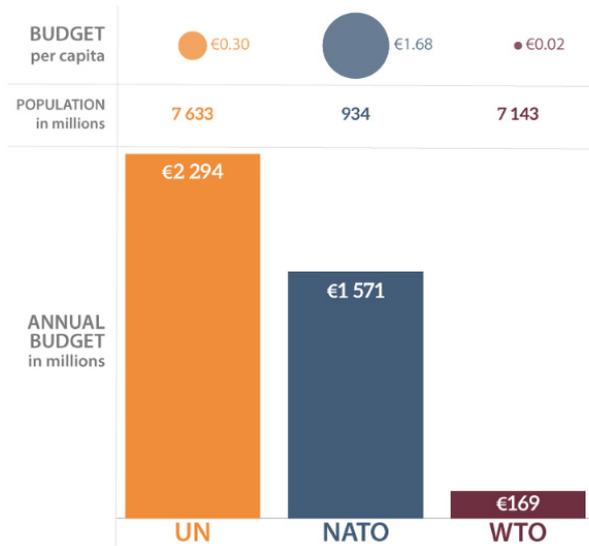


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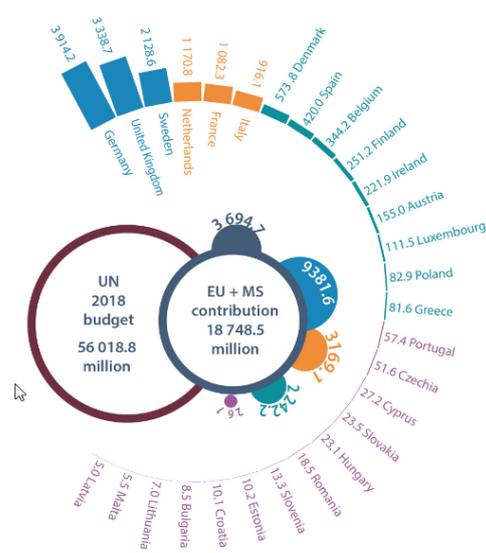
How big are the annual budgets of the IGOs?

Figure 1 – Total budgets and budgets per capita (€, 2018)



From Understanding the financing of intergovernmental organisations

Figure 1 – EU and EU Member States' contributions to the UN system total budget in 2018 (in US\$ million)



From European Union involvement in the United Nations system

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