

POLICY BRIEF
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FUNDING AND POWER AT THE UN: A DECOLONIAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF UN80 AND THE UN FUNDING ARCHITECTURE



Youth
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Narratives

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Funding and Power at the UN:

A Decolonial Contextualization of UN80 and the UN Funding Architecture

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ABBREVIATIONS

CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
DPPA	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
ERC	UN Emergency Relief Coordinator
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRF	The Immediate Response Facility
MPTF	The Multi-Partner Trust Fund
MONUSCO	The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in The Democratic Republic of the Congo
MINUSCA	The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
NIEO	New International Economic Order
OCHA	The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PBF	The Peacebuilding Fund
PBC	The Peacebuilding Commission
PBSO	Peacebuilding Support Office
PRF	The Peacebuilding and Recovery Facility
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programs
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UN	The United Nations
UN80	United Nations 80 Initiative
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
UNDP	The United Nations Development Programme
UNMISS	The United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
YTN	Youth Transforming Narratives

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current so-called multilateral crisis, and the following UN80 restructuring plan for the United Nations, represent material manifestations of issues in the international community that the Global Majority has long been calling out; that being colonial legacies and who yields influence through funding limiting the potential for fields of peace, security, and development to properly provide the services to the groups they claim to support. Through investigating historical financial crises in the UN, alongside formational background and internal structural analysis, this Policy Brief provides an unique angle with which UN80 is critiqued.

Despite the evolution of membership and representation within the UN made significant progress through the period of decolonization, new members were still joining into an organization whose funding architecture was decided without equal representation– and this funding architecture is yet to be fully reformed. Previous turbulent times in funding have additionally led to similar points and critiques about the relationship between funding and power, money and influence, at the UN without significant reform being realized.

Therefore, this policy brief proposes that despite the financial stress of the current crisis facing the international community, this moment offers a unique positionality for those involved in reform and evolution of peace and security. This work echoes important points put forward by advocates for continued and active decolonization in the international community.

To achieve this active effort towards decolonization, primarily in regards to financial control and representation in decision-making, the recommendations of this brief revolve around ensuring that decisions are made with proper, inclusive, and non-performative inclusion. The work ends with a crucial call to action: adoption of improved justice, reducing bureaucratic barriers to peacebuilding and humanitarian funding, as well as ensuring that a seat at the table is joined with the chance to be legitimately heard.

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1. THE ARCHITECTURE OF GOOD INTENTIONS

To understand what UN80 is – and why it looks the way it does – it helps to start at the beginning, because the problems the UN faces today were partly built into it from the start.

The United Nations was founded in 1945, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Two catastrophic world wars in thirty years had made it clear that some form of binding international cooperation was necessary. The League of Nations, the UN's predecessor, had failed largely because major powers – including the United States – never fully committed to it, or withdrew when it became inconvenient. The UN's founders were determined not to repeat that mistake.

Thus, fifty nations gathered in San Francisco to sign the UN Charter in June 1945. The ambition was genuinely multilateral. They envisioned an organization that would maintain international peace, protect human rights, and provide a forum for the world's nations to resolve disputes without going to war. These were ambitious goals, and the institution that emerged to pursue them was, in many respects, a real achievement.

But there is a less comfortable dimension to the founding that is directly relevant to what this policy brief is examining. Of the fifty nations present at San Francisco, the overwhelming majority were either Western states or governments aligned with Western powers. Most of Africa and Asia was still under colonial rule – not independent, and therefore not present. Only four African countries attended as independent states ([Kuwonu, 2020](#)). The institution that was meant to represent the peoples of the world was designed almost entirely without the participation of the majority of those peoples.

This created what might be called a foundational asymmetry. The rules, structures, and power arrangements of the new international order were established at a moment when the countries that would later form the Global Majority had no seat at the table. That asymmetry did not simply disappear once those countries gained independence. It remained embedded in the architecture of the institution itself, and it has shaped how the UN functions ever since. The rest of this section traces how.

1.1 The founding logic

The Charter's preamble opens with "We the peoples of the United Nations" ([UN Charter, 1945](#)) – a phrase that, read in 1945, referred to the peoples of approximately fifty states. The architecture that followed was consistent with this reality. The Security Council was granted primary responsibility for international peace and security, and within it, five permanent members – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union, and China – were granted the veto: the unilateral right to block any resolution, regardless of broader support.

The veto was framed as a pragmatic safeguard against the failure of the League of Nations, whose weakness had been the absence of great-power buy-in ([Better World Campaign, 2025](#)). The logic behind this arrangement was that major powers needed a stake in the system to participate in it. What went largely unexamined was the corollary – that a mechanism designed to keep the powerful inside the system would also keep the less powerful beneath it. As one analysis puts it, the veto was conceived to ensure major-power participation in global peacekeeping, but the debate over its reform has gained momentum precisely as the gap between who holds it and who is affected by it has widened ([Better World Campaign, 2025](#)).

Between 1945 and 1960, decolonization began to reshape the UN's membership dramatically. In 1960 alone – the 'Year of Africa' – seventeen new states joined, sixteen of them African ([Brooklyn Museum, 2025](#)). By 1965, membership had risen to 117, the majority now being postcolonial states ([Wiley Online Library, 2015](#)). The General Assembly began to look, at last, like something resembling the world.

The Security Council, however, did not follow suit. Its five permanent members remained the same five states that had held that position in 1945 – the US, UK, France, Russia, and China – and each retained their veto. Calls for Security Council reform, including expansion of permanent membership to reflect the changed composition of the international community, have been raised consistently since the 1960s and gained formal momentum through the G4 grouping (India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan), which has proposed expanding the Council from 15 to 25-26 members with new permanent seats for Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Western Europe ([ISS African Futures, 2026](#); [CSIS, 2025](#)). The African Union, through its Ezulwini Consensus (2005), has called for two permanent African seats with full veto rights ([CIVICUS, 2026](#)). As recently as April 2025, India's Permanent Representative reaffirmed the G4 reform model at the Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Council Reform, arguing that any expansion without new permanent members holding veto power would "perpetuate the existing imbalance and inequities" ([DD News, 2026](#)). None of these proposals have succeeded. Reforming the Security Council requires, among other things, the agreement of the current permanent members – each of whom holds a veto over the process. The structure, in other words, contains its own defense mechanism.

1.2 Membership and Financial Agency

The expansion of UN membership through decolonization was meaningful, but it arrived into an institution whose financial architecture had already been fixed. This is the central paradox of postcolonial membership at the UN. States gained a seat and a vote in the General Assembly, but the funding structures governing what the institution could actually do – and for whom – remained the preserve of a small group of wealthy donor states.

The UN operates through two types of financial contributions. Assessed contributions are mandatory dues calculated according to a member state's capacity to pay; they fund the regular budget and peacekeeping operations. Voluntary contributions are discretionary, with member states choosing whether and how much to give to specific agencies, programs, and funds. This distinction matters enormously. Agencies like UNFPA, UN Women, and UNICEF – whose mandates are disproportionately oriented toward the Global Majority Countries – depend almost entirely on voluntary contributions. The political implication is that donors can choose to fund what they approve of and withdraw from what they do not.

When newly independent states joined the UN in the 1960s and 70s, they joined this system. They could advocate in the General Assembly; they could pass resolutions; they could, as they did in 1974, adopt a Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), which explicitly recognized that the prevailing international economic order “was established at a time when most of the developing countries did not even exist as independent states” ([UNGA Resolution 3201, 1974](#)). But recognition is not the same as reform. The NIEO was adopted without a vote in 1974 – and when a reaffirming resolution was brought in 2022, it passed 124 to 50, with the Northern states and their allies forming the bloc of opposition ([Tandfonline, 2025](#)). The message was consistent across five decades – the Global South could name the problem; but it did not yet have the necessary decisional power to fix it.

1.3 The Neoliberal Turn and the Narrowing of Multilateralism

If the 1960s and 70s represented the high-water mark of postcolonial ambition within the UN system – the NIEO, the Group of 77, calls for technology transfer and debt relief – the 1980s represented its systematic deflation. The debt crisis that erupted in 1982 gave the IMF and World Bank, both effectively led by Western-appointed leadership, enormous leverage over more than seventy developing countries ([Explaining History, 2025](#)). Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) became the price of financial survival – centered around privatization, deregulation, cuts to public spending, and market liberalization. Neoliberal globalization, in one analysis, explicitly replaced the Third World's idea of a New International Economic Order ([Discover Society, 2021](#)).

Within the UN proper, this period introduced its own version of structural adjustment. The United States – dissatisfied with what it perceived as an overly politicized and profligate institution – withheld contributions, triggering the first major budget crisis in the organization's history and forcing significant internal reforms. The lesson encoded in that moment was that donor states with large assessed contributions held structural leverage over the institution, and they were not reluctant to use it.

1.4 UN80

In 2025, Secretary-General António Guterres launched the UN80 initiative – timed to the organization's eightieth anniversary – built around three workstreams: efficiency savings, a review of the UN's 4,000-plus mandates, and broader structural realignment. The scale is significant. The UN system could be 20-30% smaller by 2026 than it was in 2022-24 ([Democracy Without Borders, 2025](#)). The trigger is financial. As of July 2025, only 117 member states had paid their regular budget assessments in full, while the US and China – together roughly 40% of the regular budget – had not ([Global Policy Forum, 2025](#)).

The response, however, is familiar. Efficiency, consolidation, mandate rationalization – this is structurally the same as what happened in the 1980s, the 1990s, and after 2008. Each time, a funding shortfall driven by the decisions of powerful donor states produced internal reform rather than any renegotiation of the funding model itself. And each time, the mandates cut first were those serving Global Majority populations – a pattern that holds now. OHCHR, the UN's human rights office, faces a 15% budget cut in an institution where human rights already receives just 5% of the total budget ([IPPF, 2025](#)).

What UN80 does not touch is the voluntary contribution model that gives donor states agenda-setting power through selective funding, the veto architecture that keeps the UN Security Council insulated from broader accountability, or the structural asymmetry between who pays and who benefits. The sections that follow examine what has been tried before, why it has not worked, and where UN80 sits within that longer pattern. The brief's central contention, stated plainly – at the United Nations, funding and power have never been separate questions.

The following sections examine what has been tried before, why structural reform has proven so difficult, and where UN80 sits within that longer pattern.



The United Nations System

UN Principal Organs

General Assembly

Security Council

Economic and Social Council

Secretariat

International Court of Justice

Trusteeship Council⁴

Subsidiary Bodies

Main and other sessional committees
Disarmament Commission
Human Rights Council
International Law Commission
Standing committees and ad hoc bodies

Subsidiary Bodies

Counter-terrorism committees
International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR)
International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)

Functional Commissions

Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice
Narcotic Drugs
Population and Development
Science and Technology for Development
Social Development
Statistics
Status of Women
Sustainable Development
United Nations Forum on Forests

Regional Commissions

ECA Economic Commission for Africa
ECE Economic Commission for Europe
ECLAC Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ESCAP Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ESCWA Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Departments and Offices

EOSG Executive Office of the Secretary-General
DESA Department of Economic and Social Affairs
DFS Department of Field Support
DGACM Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

DM Department of Management
DPA Department of Political Affairs
DPI Department of Public Information
DPKO Department of Peacekeeping Operations
DSS Department of Safety and Security
OCHA Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Programmes and Funds

UNCTAD United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
• **ITC** International Trade Centre (UNCTAD/WTO)
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
• **UNCDF** United Nations Capital Development Fund
• **UNV** United Nations Volunteers
UNEP United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund

UN-HABITAT United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNRWA¹ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UN-Women United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WFP World Food Programme

Research and Training Institutes

UNICRI United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute
UNIDIR¹ United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research

Advisory Subsidiary Body
UN Peacebuilding Commission

Other Bodies

Committee for Development Policy
Committee of Experts on Public Administration
Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
Other sessional and standing committees and expert, ad hoc and related bodies

UNITAR United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNRISD United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNSSC United Nations System Staff College
UNU United Nations University

Other Entities

UNAIDS Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNISDR United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UNOPS United Nations Office for Project Services

Related Organizations

CTBTO Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty Organization
IAEA² International Atomic Energy Agency
OPCW Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
WTO World Trade Organization

Specialized Agencies³

ILO International Labour Organization
FAO Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHO World Health Organization
World Bank Group
• **IBRD** International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
• **IDA** International Development Association
• **IFC** International Finance Corporation
• **MIGA** Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency
• **ICSID** International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes

IMF International Monetary Fund
ICAO International Civil Aviation Organization
IMO International Maritime Organization
ITU International Telecommunication Union
UPU Universal Postal Union
WMO World Meteorological Organization
WIPO World Intellectual Property Organization
IFAD International Fund for Agricultural Development
UNIDO United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNWTO World Tourism Organization

NOTES:

¹ UNRWA and UNIDIR report only to the General Assembly.

² IAEA reports to the Security Council and the General Assembly.

³ Specialized agencies are autonomous organizations working with the UN and each other through the coordinating machinery of ECOSOC at the intergovernmental level, and through the Chief Executive Board for Coordination (CEB) at the inter-secretariat level. This section is listed in order of establishment of these organizations as specialized agencies of the United Nations.

⁴ The Trusteeship Council suspended operation on 1 November 1994 with the independence of Palau, the last remaining United Nations Trust Territory, on 1 October 1994.

This is not an official document of the United Nations, nor is it intended to be all-inclusive.

2. UN FUNDING BUREAUCRACY & COLONIAL LEGACIES

As established, the UN's financial architecture rests on two distinct types of contribution. Beyond the assessed and voluntary distinction outlined above, voluntary contributions are further divided in ways that matter for how power operates within the system. Voluntary contributions are divided into voluntary core (non-earmarked) which are untied and unrestricted resources, either monetary or in-kind, that can be flexibly utilized by an United Nations entity (Hita et al., 2025) and voluntary core (earmarked) which are funds provided by donors that are designated for specific projects, programs, countries or themes (Hita et al., 2025). 'Earmarking' is the practice of restricting the use of funds contributed to the UN and spent according to donor specifications only. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) further categorizes earmarked modalities into:



Softly earmarked: Financial contribution, but with exclusions about a small number of specific countries, within the boundaries of the strategic objective (e.g. health or education) or region (e.g. Africa) and directed to a specific Country-Based Pooled Fund, otherwise fully flexible (OCHA, 2025).

Tightly earmarked: Financial contribution, tied to certain conditions in terms of purchase restrictions, directed to a specific country/region and to a specific objective (e.g. purchase of so-and-so for a school feeding in country X). In-kind contribution directed to a specific country/region and to a specific objective (e.g. rice distribution in country X) and contribution coupled with the demand for a specific project in a specific country fulfilling donor priorities (OCHA, 2025).

Voluntary earmarked contributions have increased by 70% in the period from 2013 to 2023 and now account for 60% of total UN System revenue, as stated in a report by the Joint Inspection Unit of the UN (2025). Hence, member states and donors can use funding to express their priorities within the international system, creating 'anticipated donor preferences' in humanitarian aid, peacebuilding and development. Through the soft power of funding structures they can influence decision-making. But how did this external funding architecture roleplaying neo-liberal colonialism come into existence?

During the 1970s with the neoliberal turn discussed above, international financial institutions like the IMF, the World Bank (two specialised UN agencies) and the US Treasury encouraged global majority countries to address their economic deficits caused by oil shocks, cold war borrowing etc. through Structural Adjustment programs (SAPs). Unable to repay debts, they turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In practice, however, these US-based financial institutions promoted what British Economist John Williamson coined as ‘the Washington Consensus’ as conditions attached to the disbursement of loans through the SAPs. The Washington Consensus were Ten Standardised Economic Policies to help ‘developing nations’ recover from debt crises (Irwin & Ward, 2021). The Consensus used a one-size-fits-all approach for international loans which exacerbated wealth inequalities and left vulnerable economies prone to volatile global markets. The economic policies included States reducing public spending, healthcare spending, agricultural subsidies, educational budgets, and social protections. It significantly reduced national policy autonomy, locking the countries involved into a neoliberal policy that mimicked colonial-era power structures. The outcome led to privatisation of utilities like electricity, water, healthcare and transport in Global Majority countries. In one case, the privatisation of water resources led to the Bolivian (Cochabamba) Water War (1999 - 2000).

Governments of Zambia, Ghana, Peru, and Bolivia, lost institutional capacities during their population booms as states were instructed to adhere to the loan conditions of the SAPs. Continuing to trace these global economic power shifts, reduced state capacities in healthcare, education, agriculture, local governance and disaster response meant that when crises arose, governments had to rely on UN agencies, bilateral donors and international non-profit organisations (NGOs) instead of domestic institutions. As state institutions reprioritized due to loan conditions, their capacities weakened; international humanitarian agencies assumed responsibilities that were traditionally held by state governments, such as emergency shelter, food distribution, refugee management and primary healthcare. Countries like South Sudan, Afghanistan, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mozambique, which experienced repeated crises, became dependent on annual humanitarian appeals. Simultaneously, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank, UN agencies, IMF and bilateral donors (external funding architecture) became central to state functions and created a shift from state-led development to externally financed development. This reinforced a continuation of colonial economic relationships because policy decisions occurred outside of recipient countries. “Some local organisations and local academia see aid as a post-colonial legacy that fosters dependency” (Musiol & Crosson, 2026).

External funding architecture is criticized for perpetuating neo-colonial power dynamics, but it also became necessary for peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, and development in Global Majority countries. The Western earmarked contributions flowing into the United Nations Peacebuilding funding pool are disproportionate dictations of peace in Global Majority countries, undermining local agency, marginalising local peace actors and organisations. Aid without addressing historical inequalities and erasing structural critiques into digestible information for donor prioritisation is merely a surface-level solution for a much deeper and more significant problem. It is clear that the global aid system needs an overhaul (Musiol & Crosson, 2026), but there is little agreement on what that entails. Local organisations also have to navigate a gap in understanding local realities and are forced to navigate aligning donor directives with those realities (Kashyap & Dwivedi, 2025). This funding system allows the biggest donors to have the largest share in dictating the policy-making agenda.

2.1 Peacebuilding architecture of the UN

The United Nations' agencies address Peacekeeping, Conflict Resolution and Humanitarian Relief through the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The funding architectures are the **Peacebuilding Fund (PBF)** and the **Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)** under OCHA.

UN FUNDING ARCHITECTURE (PART 1)

Peacebuilding Fund

KEY ORGANIZATIONS



Department of Political & Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)



Peacebuilding Commission (PBC)

GOVERNANCE & MANAGEMENT



The UN Secretary General controls the fund and approves the allocation for specific projects in conflict-affected countries following requests from national governments or UN country teams.



The Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) Office of the UNDP manages the fund's finances and disbursements.



The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) manages day-to-day oversight.

FUNDING WINDOW

The Immediate Response Facility (IRF)

For rapid disbursement after a political opening, peace agreement, or crisis.

The Peacebuilding and Recovery Facility (PRF)

For longer, more strategic country envelopes.

AREA OF PRIORITIES

- 1. Peace Processes & Political Dialogue, Coexistence & Economic Revitalization, Essential State Services**
- 2. Formal Targets for Gender-Responsive Programming and for Youth-Focused Projects**

Eligible activities include support for political dialogue, security sector reform, transitional justice, reintegration of ex-combatants, women's and youth participation in peace processes, and cross-border initiatives.

FUND SOURCES

Voluntary contributions from UN Member States, international organizations, and private entities. It receives core multi-year pledges from dozens of nations, with Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands consistently among the largest contributors.

UN FUNDING ARCHITECTURE (PART 2)

Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)

KEY ORGANIZATIONS



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

GOVERNANCE & MANAGEMENT



The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs

controls CERF Funds under ERC mandate.

The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC)

controls the CERF donations.

FUNDING WINDOW

CERF contributions are controlled by the UN ERC and strictly redirected through two primary funding windows.

AREA OF PRIORITIES

1. Rapid Response

Provides fast cash to kick-start relief in sudden-onset or rapidly deteriorating crises.

2. Underfunded Emergencies

Supports critically overlooked, protracted, or “forgotten” humanitarian emergencies.

FUND SOURCES

CERF is funded by voluntary contributions. Since 2006, CERF has received more than \$4.5 billion from 126 UN Member States and observers, regional and local governments, private donors and individuals. A third of CERF’s contributors have also received support from the Fund.

The PBF’s flexibility comes from trust – donors trust the Secretary-General won’t waste resources, and the Secretary-General trusts that Advisory Group ‘guidance’ is genuinely advisory, not hidden conditionality (Schönrock et al., 2026). However, when donors withhold their contributions to express preferences, it creates a conditionality to humanitarian aid and a funding vacuum in which conflict-prone and fragile states are vulnerable. Therefore, the donor who fills this gap is potentially a decision-maker for peace.

As a potent example of this dynamic: in 1977, the Soviet Union announced in a brief note to the United Nations. In Jan 1977, their intention of withholding about \$4.4 million in contributions to the UN force policing the Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) policing the Sinai Peninsula. On the ground, without foreign aid, the Egyptian government had to cut food subsidies, which were 16.7% of their government spending, and raise prices to adhere to the standards of the IMF and the World Bank. These cuts led to the 1977 Egyptian Bread Intifada that resulted in 80 deaths and 550 injuries.

2.2 Previous Calls to Decolonize UN Peacebuilding

The impact of colonialism persists despite the end of direct colonization, evident in structures like the UNSC that perpetuate inequality and hegemony of certain countries (Siddiqui, 2024). The Global Majority countries, while resisting monopoly of decision-making, have made several previous calls to decolonize UN Peacebuilding. The foundations of anti-colonial principles can be traced back to the Bandung Conference (1955) organized by newly independent colonies. Built on foundational principles of anti-colonialism, non-alignment and respect for national sovereignty, the conference was attended by 29 global majority countries where they created consensus towards framing for equitable, democratic participation in UN-decision making. The United Nations in 1955, experienced the largest single-year expansion, looking closer to global demographics. The conference ignited the spirit of decolonization, leading to 120 'developing countries' banding together against taking sides during the Cold War, tensions between United States and China after the First Taiwan Strait Crisis and establishing the Non-Alignment Movement (1961) and finally the Netherlands signing the New York Agreement (1962) relinquishing its control over western New Guinea. While the conference had its successes, lack of operational enforcement, strategies and failing to host a second conference led to decreased cooperation between Asian-African countries by the start of the 1970s. "Nevertheless, Bandung gave a voice to emerging nations and demonstrated that they could be a force in future world politics, inside or outside the Cold War framework (United States, office of the historian, n.d)."

Following the founding of the Non-Alignment Movement, was the establishment of Group of 77 (G77), another multilateral grouping of global majority countries that encouraged them to voice and articulate their views and perspectives on political and economic issues in the United Nations and other international platforms (Timossi, 2015). But the call to decolonize did not wane here, the advocacy of G77 pushed for reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC is the most powerful organ, charged by the UN Charter with primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security but the authority to intervene and make decisions lied solely with the P5 founding members – The United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom and China, with the ability to veto any UN body's decision, agenda or resolution. G77 argued that the Council's current structure was a relic of the 1940s balance of power that inherently marginalizes global majority countries and reduces their voices in an institution designed against them. The council's sole expansion occurred in the context of decolonization and the Cold War, as the world's East and West factions jockeyed for support from newly independent states in a burgeoning 'third world' (Gowan, 2023).

The UNSC expanded to 10 non-permanent along with the P5 in 1965 but The controversies and asymmetries did not end here (EFSAS, 2018), therein lies greater vulnerabilities within the Council through the informal practice of 'pen holding,' While the P5 had exclusive power to draft resolutions, lead negotiations and shape Council actions on specific agendas, The United States, UK and France (P3) quietly assumed responsibility of country-specific and thematic peace agendas including calling emergency meetings, organizing open debates and leading observation missions. Several elected Council members pointed to the negative impact of the penholder system on the Council's ability to fulfill its Charter-mandated responsibility and on its dynamics but there is no indication of reform (Security Council Report, 2018).

The most recent attempt to rehaul the humanitarian aid system was ‘the Grand Bargain’ (2016) held in Istanbul by the World Humanitarian Summit. It was a reform agreement reached between major donor governments, UN agencies, international NGOs, and humanitarian organizations. It contained 51 commitments aimed at making humanitarian aid more efficient, accountable, and locally led (Red Cross, 2017). One of its most significant commitments was that donors would channel at least 25% of humanitarian funding “as directly as possible” to local and national responders, while reducing excessive earmarking and bureaucratic reporting requirements (Peace Direct, 2021). From a decolonial perspective, the Grand Bargain was important because it represented an acknowledgement that humanitarian aid and peacebuilding systems were excessively dominated by Western donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs. Yet a decade later, many of the same criticisms persisted that funding remains concentrated among a small group of donor states and international institutions, while local actors continue to have limited control over agenda-setting and resource allocation and money flowed back to Global North countries by hiring western development experts, consultants, administrators and purchasing foreign goods.

Decolonization is rhetorically endorsed but structurally constrained by financing arrangements and colonial era power structures persisting through the UN that perpetuate inequality. Collective responses are largely shaped by the Global North and they continue to preserve the sector as it exists today while calling for efficiency and restructuring through the UN80 agenda. Funding shortfalls for humanitarian aid, peacebuilding and development prove that peace can only persist when it is centered on inclusive dialogue, localized solutions and addressing the root problems of institutional structures. The pattern across these attempts is consistent. Decolonization is rhetorically endorsed and structurally constrained, with financing arrangements and institutional inertia repeatedly limiting how far reform commitments translate into changed practice. The following section examines how this pattern shapes the current moment under UN80.

Sala de los Derechos Humanos y de la Alianza de Civilizaciones

Salle des Droits de l'Homme et de l'Alliance des Civilisations

SALLE XX



3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF UN80

The 80th session of the UN General Assembly opened in September 2025 against a backdrop of a deep multilateral crisis. While the official theme called for renewed cooperation, escalating armed conflicts and sharp reductions in international funding have steadily eroded the UN's ability to deliver on its core mandates – from peacekeeping and human rights to climate action ([Council on Foreign Relations \[CFR\], 2025](#)).

In response, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched the UN80 Initiative representing one of the most comprehensive internal reform efforts in the organization's eight-decade history; a structural and financial overhaul designed to streamline operations, cut costs, and refocus the organization. On paper, UN80 promises a leaner, more agile UN. In practice, however, the reform is reshaping the UN's priorities in ways that may risk sacrificing fairness and inclusivity for institutional survival.



THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

The UN's current funding crisis is primarily driven by member states' failure to meet their financial obligations. By April 2025, unpaid contributions to the regular budget had reached approximately USD 2.4 billion, with the United States accounting for around USD 1.5 billion of these arrears. Significant outstanding payments were also recorded among other major contributors, including China, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela ([CFR, 2025](#)).

The situation has been further aggravated by reductions in funding from key donor states. In the United States, the Trump administration has cut financial support to several UN entities, including peacekeeping operations, UNICEF, and UNDP, while also withdrawing from bodies such as the Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization ([CFR, 2025](#)).

Financial pressures are compounded by longstanding administrative challenges, including bureaucratic complexity, overlapping mandates, and slow decision-making processes. These concerns have reinforced calls for institutional reform and provide the immediate backdrop to the UN80 initiative. However, as the following sections argue, the consequences of restructuring are not politically neutral ([CFR, 2025](#)).

3.1 UN80 Core Proposals

At its heart, UN80 seeks to transform how the UN system is structured, managed and coordinated, not by redefining what the UN works on and represents, but by modernizing arrangements, reducing bureaucracy, eliminating duplication and strengthening impact (CFR, 2025). The project operates through three interconnected workstreams: efficiencies and improvements, mandate implementation review, and structural changes with program realignment. These actively translate into 87 specific actions grouped into 31 work packages spanning peace operations, humanitarian response, technology, shared services and institutional mergers (CFR, 2025). The most consequential financial proposal is a 15% cut to the UN's regular budget for 2026, reducing it from \$3.7 billion to approximately \$3.2 billion, which would eliminate 2,681 jobs, nearly 19% of the UN workforce (Economic Times, 2025). Staff cuts span all three main pillars: peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development.

The current funding crisis does not affect all priorities equally. Budget reductions and donor conditionalities are systematically favoring certain agendas over others, in which what benefits the majority is not as impactful as the interests of the minority. Security prevention, counter-extremism and climate resilience have become "safe bets" initiatives aligned with Western strategic interests that continue to attract voluntary funding. By contrast, work addressing structural inequality, political reform and governance accountability finds itself chronically underfunded and deprioritized (CFR, 2025). By continuing this theme of further appealing to Western strategic interests across UN80 instead of taking this opportunity to structurally renovate and decolonize the UN, UN80 further entrenches UN operations into a hierarchy of colonial influence.

The job cuts reveal similar patterns. Although the UN claims to protect core functions, only 3% of top-level UN posts are set to be eliminated, translating in a lay off disproportionately affecting mid-level and junior staff, threatening departments including peacekeeping, disarmament, development, and human rights (Democracy Without Borders, 2025). This is a crucial reflection of the structural power imbalance that UN80 perpetuates. Meanwhile, at least 200 positions will be moved from Geneva and New York to lower-cost duty stations such as Nairobi.

The budget cuts hit peacekeeping especially hard. The United States has proposed eliminating all US funding for UN peacekeeping in 2026, citing mission failures in Mali, Lebanon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Asia Times, 2026; Reuters, 2025). Consequently, the UN has been forced to reduce its peacekeeping forces globally by 25%, repatriating an estimated 13,000 to 14,000 troops and police across nine of its 11 active missions (UN Geneva, 2025). The missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), South Sudan (UNMISS), and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) have been among the worst affected (Asia Times, 2026). MONUSCO, already weakened, has been forced to withdraw some of its peacekeepers and implement painful trade-offs (Africa Intelligence, 2025). In South Sudan, UNMISS has initiated plans to close field offices and reduce staff despite a fragile security situation (AFP, 2025; Africa-Press, 2025). MINUSCA, which has overseen significant peace gains, now sees its mandate delivery threatened by the funding crisis (DefenceWeb, 2025). The practical consequences for civilians on the ground are severe: fewer patrols to monitor fragile ceasefires, reduced protection for civilians, and diminished logistical and air support (Asia Times, 2026; Prothom Alo, 2025).

The UN80 Initiative emerges at a time when fewer than half of member states fully meet their financial obligations, and the US alone accounts for more than \$1.5 billion in unpaid contributions (CFR, 2025). Internal confidence in UN leadership is low (Economic Times, 2025). Unless the UN confronts the underlying political economy of its funding, and the implicit biases it embeds, UN80 risks achieving institutional survival at the expense of the very legitimacy and inclusivity it claims to serve. A leaner UN is not necessarily a fairer one.

3.2 Case Illustration

One of the clearest examples of the potential implications of UN80 is the proposed assessment of a merger between UNFPA and UN Women. UN leadership has framed the initiative as a way to protect progress on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in an increasingly challenging political environment (IPPF, 2026). However, the proposal has generated significant concern among civil society organizations and several member states, which have called for any restructuring process to be grounded in robust evidence and an independent assessment of both agencies' mandates and performance.

Critics argue that the rationale for consolidation remains weak. According to analyses by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2026) and Fòs Feminista (2026), only a limited proportion of the two agencies' activities (20-30%) overlap, while the majority of their mandates remain distinct. Both organizations warn that a merger could weaken institutional capacity on gender equality and SRHR, disrupt specialized expertise developed over decades, and reduce the UN's ability to translate international commitments into national level implementation.

To understand why this matters, it is worth briefly distinguishing what each agency does and where their work diverges. UN Women was established in 2010 with a mandate centered on gender equality and the empowerment of women, operating across normative standard-setting, intergovernmental support, and country-level programming (UN Women, 2024).

UNFPA, by contrast, was founded in 1969 with a specific focus on sexual and reproductive health, population data, and the elimination of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage (UNFPA, 2024). While both agencies share a commitment to women's rights broadly defined, their technical expertise, partner ecosystems, and operational footprints have developed along distinct institutional trajectories. A merger would not simply combine two organizations; it would require reconciling fundamentally different programmatic cultures, funding streams, and relationships with national governments, many of which engage with UNFPA and UN Women through entirely separate policy channels.

The timing of the proposal also warrants scrutiny. The suggested consolidation emerges at a moment when both gender equality and SRHR face intensifying political opposition globally, including sustained pressure from member states seeking to roll back existing commitments on reproductive rights and gender-based violence (Fòs Feminista, 2026). Civil society organizations have raised concern that merging the two agencies under these conditions could produce institutional vulnerability rather than resilience, creating a single, larger target for political contestation at precisely the moment when distributed, specialized advocacy capacity is most needed. As IPPF (2026) notes, the risk is not only organizational but strategic: consolidation could reduce the number of distinct institutional voices championing these agendas within the UN system, narrowing the space for norm protection and accountability.

More broadly, these concerns highlight a central debate surrounding UN80. While reform has been justified through the language of efficiency and streamlining, critics argue that restructuring efforts may disproportionately affect agencies operating in politically contested policy areas. In this view, the proposed merger reflects broader questions about whether current reforms are addressing the root causes of the UN's financial difficulties, namely chronic underfunding and unpaid member state contributions, or whether they risk weakening specialized mandates without clear evidence of improved effectiveness (Fòs Feminista, 2026; IPPF, 2026).

A second example of the effects of UN80 can be seen with UNHCR and general shifts in crisis response. The New Humanitarian expressed in their reporting on UN80 that discussion of a “humanitarian reset” has been underway, and much of the language utilized in UN80 continues to add to this discussion. Yet, reporting highlighted the risk pooled funding poses to local civil society and NGO groups. TNH shared how local civil society groups support the idea of pooled funding but there is an emphasis on regional and localized focuses. Keeping previous discussion of disproportionate staff cuts as well as political donor agendas in mind, these pooled funding approaches to aid funding risk worsening colonial financial structures (The New Humanitarian, 2025).

The annual report of UNHCR to New York in 2025 expressed how budget reductions continue to challenge the work of the organization. To further understand the analysis of financial underpinnings and policy shifts with UN80, a report from Health Policy Watch sharing a compilation of non-attributable suggestions regarding UN80 will be analyzed in parallel with reports from UNHCR. Firstly, Health Policy Watch shared that a major identified systemic weakness of the UN system was fragmented and overlapping mandates. The UN Secretary-General Report discussing UN80 changes, *Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver*, shared a similar sentiment. In regards to UNHCR, the report touched on program overlaps in “food, mobility, data, health and nutrition,” with a specific highlight of UNHCR and IOM sharing joint institutional approaches. Returning to the 2025 UNHCR report to the General Assembly, the report stated how severe funding cuts resulted in UNHCR having to reduce its global presence and workforce, leading to “profoundly negative impacts on the forcefully displaced” (A/80/12, 2025).



4. CONCLUSIONS AND STEPS FORWARD

Before turning to recommendations, it is worth pausing to draw the threads of this argument together.

The United Nations was built at a particular moment, by particular states, with particular interests, and understanding that origin matters for making sense of its current challenges. The Charter's promise of universal representation sat alongside a founding reality. Most of the world's peoples were under colonial rule when the rules of the new international order were being written, and the financial and governance architecture that emerged reflected, at least in part, the priorities of those who were present. The veto, the voluntary contribution model, the concentration of agenda-setting power among a handful of wealthy donors - these features have proven durable, and the difficulty of reforming them is inseparable from the fact that they continue to serve the states with the greatest influence over the process.

Decolonization expanded the General Assembly's membership without a corresponding redistribution of financial control. As Global Majority countries joined the UN system in the 1960s and 70s, they entered a funding architecture that had already taken shape in ways that often worked against their interests. The agencies most relevant to their populations depended on discretionary contributions from donor states, which meant that political shifts in Washington, London, or Brussels translated directly into operational capacity - or its absence - on the ground in Dakar, Kabul, or Port-au-Prince. The debt crises of the 1980s compounded this, as Structural Adjustment Programs redirected state capacity away from public institutions and toward externally managed development, deepening the reliance on international agencies that those same financial conditions had helped create. The calls to restructure this relationship - the NIEO, the G77, the Ezulwini Consensus, the Grand Bargain - each represented serious and substantive attempts at reform. That they produced limited structural change reflects, among other things, the difficulty of shifting arrangements from within a system whose principal beneficiaries retain decisive influence over its rules.

UN80 sits within this history. A funding crisis driven by the political decisions of donor states - the US and China together holding roughly 40% of the regular budget, neither having paid in full as of mid-2025 - has produced a reform process centered on efficiency, consolidation, and mandate rationalization. The proposed merger of UNFPA and UN Women is one illustration of where this logic leads. Two agencies whose mandates are distinct, whose technical capacity has been built over decades along different institutional trajectories, and whose work is already facing sustained political opposition are being assessed for consolidation on grounds of cost. The agencies most exposed to restructuring under UN80 are those whose mandates address structural inequality, gender equality, and the rights of forcibly displaced people - the same mandates that have always been most vulnerable to donor conditionality and political erosion. That pattern is worth naming clearly as it reflects the underlying logic of a funding system in which very specific priorities shape what survives.

None of this means the UN is beyond reform, or that the people working within it are not doing serious and necessary work. It means that reform language – efficiency, streamlining, realignment – can function as a way of managing institutional crises without addressing its causes. Chronic underfunding, unpaid assessed contributions, and the use of voluntary funding as political leverage are the structural roots of the current crisis. UN80, as currently framed, responds to the symptoms. The recommendations that follow take seriously both the constraints of the present moment and the longer horizon of what genuine structural change would require – not as an abstract ambition, but as a set of specific, actionable pressures on the features of the system that have proven most resistant to change.

I. To Donor Governments

Where reforms are proposed, evidence must precede decision: independent, transparent, and consultative mandate assessments should be a prerequisite for any merger or restructuring, not an afterthought. Particular attention must be given to protecting agencies whose work addresses gender equality, structural inequality, and the rights of forcibly displaced people, the mandates most vulnerable to political erosion and most consequential for communities in the Global Majority. Furthermore, this moment serves as an important opportunity to diversify the international landscape in terms of who is hosting important conversations and where. International conferences in cities such as New York and Geneva create geographical barriers before agendas are even published. By diversifying conference locations, regionalizing offices, and opening more doors to local actors, the UN can foster improved global participation and legitimate cooperation, rather than offering a symbolic seat at a table only a minority can access. Such reforms would strengthen global cooperation and knowledge-sharing systems.

The UNFPA–UN Women case illustrates why an evidence requirement cannot be treated as a procedural “checkbox”. Because the two agencies’ mandates diverged from their founding, UN Women concentrating on gender equality and women’s empowerment through normative, intergovernmental, and country-level work (UN Women, 2024), and UNFPA on sexual and reproductive health, population data, and the elimination of harmful practices (UNFPA, 2024), any assessment of consolidation needs to account for institutional history, development and specialization, not only present-day budget lines. Donor governments are therefore in a position to require that mandate assessments examine how each agency’s technical capacity was built over time, and what would be lost operationally if that capacity was merged into a single structure. This case also demonstrates the strategic cost of timing: because both agencies operate in a policy area currently facing sustained political opposition, IPPF (2026) and Fòs Feminista (2026) both warn that restructuring under these conditions could weaken, rather than protect, the UN’s capacity to defend existing commitments on gender equality and reproductive rights. Donor governments should weigh this timing risk explicitly when deciding whether to support or fund the proposed merger, rather than evaluating it on cost grounds alone.

II. To Civil Society and Youth-Led Organizations

The proposed merger between UNFPA and UN Women illustrates, in concrete terms, the risks and opportunities raised by UN80 more broadly, and points to several specific actions for youth and civil society organizations.

For youth and youth-led networks, this case study underscores the importance of engaging with restructuring processes at a technical, not solely rhetorical, level. The biggest challenge to the merger proposal has come not from broad objection but from specific analysis, namely the finding that only 20-30% of UNFPA and UN Women's mandates overlap. Youth organizations seeking to influence this process should therefore follow the mandate assessment closely, and press for formal consultation status within any independent review that is commissioned, rather than being consulted only after conclusions have been reached. Given the case study's warning that consolidation could create "a single, larger target for political contestation," youth networks are also well placed to build the kind of cross-border, coordinated advocacy capacity that could counteract this vulnerability, provided this coalition-building happens before a decision is finalized rather than in reaction to one. Beyond formal advocacy networks, young people have a role in shaping how this restructuring is understood publicly: reframing the debate away from a formal language of efficiency and toward the more precise question the case study raises, namely which mandates are likely to survive a funding crisis intact and which risk being diluted or absorbed.

Civil society and youth-led organizations, particularly those rooted in global majority contexts, must claim their place in this process as informed, critical, and organized networks. We call on these groups to monitor UN80 developments closely, to produce and amplify counter-narratives that centre the perspectives of those most affected by funding cuts, and to build coalitions across borders that can speak collectively to the political economy of multilateral financing. For young people who will inherit both the consequences of this reform and the responsibility of sustaining multilateralism, the call is not only to observe but to intervene, in policy spaces, in public discourse, and in the stories we tell about what international institutions are for and who they truly serve.

III. To Affected UN Organs

UN80 and the global financial crisis holds the possibility to serve as a pivotal turning point. Shifting mandates and staff cuts without doubt contribute very worrisome barriers to serving the international community in development and peace, yet learning from local organizations who have long been versed in managing shifting donor priorities and lacking financial transparency provide many valuable lessons. By increasing dedication to indigenous and local knowledge systems, strengthening regional cooperation, and defining clear mandates, this crucial focus point in international peace, security, and development can truly support the communities agencies claim to serve.

Given the case study analyzed in this policy brief, UNFPA and UN Women have each developed distinct operational relationships with national governments, funding streams, and partner networks (UN Women, 2024; UNFPA, 2024), and IPPF (2026) argues that combining these systems would require reconciling different institutional cultures rather than simply merging two budgets. For UN organs facing similar restructuring pressure, this suggests that preserving distinct operational relationships and specialized technical identity may be as important to effectiveness as consolidating shared functions. Fòs Feminista (2026) further cautions that restructuring justified primarily through efficiency language risks obscuring whether reform addresses the UN's actual financial weaknesses, chronic underfunding and unpaid member state contributions, or simply redistributes existing strain across fewer, larger structures. Affected UN organs undergoing their own reviews under UN80 may find it useful to ask the same question of their own proposed changes: whether restructuring is responding to genuine mandate overlap and evidenced inefficiency, or whether it is a structural response to a funding shortfall that leaves underlying financial causes unaddressed.

Decolonizing foreign funding requires a tectonic shift from hierarchical donor-recipient relationships. It requires implementation of structural financing reforms that have been proposed for decades but only partially realized. The global majority countries should advocate for revival of the Grand Bargain's 51 commitments, increasing formal reporting on progress of commitments agreed to by humanitarian donors, strengthening the Funding Compact, formalizing a resolution to decrease tightly earmarked contributions critical to peacebuilding and humanitarian aid, and increasing involvement of local peace actors and organizations to increase 'efficiency' of peacebuilding strategies and 'reduce costs', that the UN80 agenda aims towards.

Since the Peacebuilding Fund's rapid, flexible allocation comes with accountability issues with decision-making power concentrated with limited state members oversight, member states should advocate for reform to the Advisory Group of the PBF with more representation from global majority countries. With the informal pen holding practice in the UNSC, member states should push for non-permanent elected members to have pen holding over regional peacebuilding missions and for postcolonial member states to reduce colonial power legacies to increase representation, agency and inclusivity. The United Nations should adopt reparative justice models, simplify bureaucratic barriers in peacebuilding and humanitarian aid funding, create better accessibility for local peace actors to aid systems and increase accountability after implementations towards affected peoples rather than donors. Lastly, the UN should end performative conferencing. The impact of high-level conferences on peacebuilding strategies or humanitarian aid funding is low, inaccessible to many regions, populations, and remains concentrated in the Global North. Most conferences prioritize Western experts that fail to address structural problems and present surface-level solutions in the name of efficiency and cost savings.

At YTN, we believe that yesterday's systems cannot build tomorrow's futures. As young people, we recognize the urgent need to transform multilateralism and reimagine global institutions, not only to confront colonial legacies that have historically excluded our voices, but to build a future where every young person can participate meaningfully in shaping the decisions that affect our world. YTN continues to advocate for a future where we stand together, in inclusive decision-making spaces, advancing the rights, dignity, and aspirations of young people everywhere. This policy brief is only the beginning of our work.



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