

Functions of Small United Nations Member States

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ABSTRACT

The situation of small member states of the United Nations shows that smallness is far from insignificant. Small UN member states are well prepared, competent, and essential partners for significant and large members for the work in the General Assembly, notably adopting resolutions recommending the action to take of the entire international community. They work closely with others, assisting one another and sharing insights and knowledge on UN matters. They form networks through which they can cover the entire range of activities of the United Nations. They are short-staffed, however, and getting through valuable information issued by the UN to do their job presents a challenge (Christensen, H. 2024).

Keywords: *small member states, impact on United Nations, United Nations General Assembly, the UN Security Council*

Introduction

The information presented here is based on published sources and insights from intermittent work at the UN over the past four decades.

Opinions differ on what a small UN member state is. Several definitions exist. The World Bank, for instance, defines it as states with up to 1.5 million inhabitants. If this upper level is applied, some very active UN member states could get attention for what they are known for. Luxembourg, for instance, with a population of about 650.000 (List of countries, 2023), played a crucial role for years as co-chair of the Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Council reform in the United Nations General Assembly (IGN, 2022)). Council reform is of utmost importance to scores of UN member states, including members of the Council, as mentioned in speeches by France and the USA at the General Assembly in September 2023. Yet it would not consider the importance of a member state such as Sweden (about 10,5 million inhabitants, Wikipedia), which for years was considered a major humanitarian player at the UN, as the proposer of General Assembly resolution A/46/182 of 19 December 1991: A groundbreaking resolution that prescribed a transition from emergency assistance to development aid. The message was to provide the transition as a continuum of assistance measures tailored to one another. Sweden has been hosting sizable numbers of refugees during past decades, including 277.000 refugees registered with the UNHCR at the end of 2022. The country endeavored to improve UN humanitarian assistance programming for years in the General Assembly, paving the way for a 2016 UN Conference, the World Humanitarian Summit, and the Agenda for Humanity on humanitarian assistance with linkages to development aid.

In contrast, the Forum of Small States (FOSS) sets the limit at 10 million, which covers 100 small UN member states, Luxembourg and Sweden inclusive, and several essential voices of African and Asian states. The definition applied here refers to the one by FOSS and considers the life in the General Assembly and the Security Council rather than fixing an arbitrary number.

The UN membership counts 193 member states. More than half include states with up to 10 million inhabitants (100), and the category of small member states is used here as a yardstick, defining various states scattered worldwide (Wikipedia). Some are rich in terms of economic

resources, others poor. What signifies them all is an ability to exert influence in the General Assembly, particularly, more so than others in a situation of one vote for each state, whatever the size of the population, whether rich or poor or consequential. Hence, the General Assembly, considered the most democratic organ of the UN system, has its touches of differentiation. Small member states are known to exercise their weight with an impetus beyond their size by acting in a way that influences UN matters and decisions, though not as the only ones.

What marks small UN member states?

The role they play in the far-reaching decision-making of the international community, far beyond what their size accounts for, sets them apart. They possess a diversity of perspectives and shared opportunities and practice how to make profitable use of both, linking up with one another in close collaboration across the General Assembly and advocating their cause in clear, straightforward language. An example is the contribution of Egypt to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where at a point when negotiations sanded up, the country took the floor and spoke up for the developing countries, many of whom still under colonial rule, and insisted on an article be inserted upfront proclaiming that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Egypt stood so firm on its formulation that it ended up as the first and catching article in the Universal Declaration. It informed those of the two subsequent International Covenants on self-determination that turned the Universal Declaration into international law (International Covenants, 1966). Today, this phrasing is still “a catcher,” used in many contexts worldwide, with its straightforward language formulating people's fundamental freedom, whomever they are.

From 1946 to 1948, the period it took to agree on the contents and phrasing of the Universal Declaration in the newly established Commission of Human Rights, small member states succeeded in being instrumental in defining, subsequently adopting it on 10 December 1948 in close collaboration with and using the significant contribution by Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Roosevelt and president of the Commission of Human Rights. She was in charge of the negotiations as its chairperson. She was the original proposer of the Declaration, championing it internationally so successfully that it became part of her legacy to the United Nations. The memorial of her, a granite curved bench in the Sculpture Garden at the UN Headquarters in New York, reminds us of that, as do photos on the inside walls of the building—a woman UN pioneer among scores of men at the time. Likewise, in 1966, the two international covenants on human rights turned the Universal Declaration into international law. They, too, were driven by small member states to enter into force in 1976. Some twenty years later, small member states were in action again in UN affairs as prime movers of the International Criminal Court in collaboration with a coalition of significant NGOs, such as the World Federalist Movement, ensuring that the Court came into function in 2002, four years after the statute was adopted by the General Assembly in 1998. It was a quick process, considering that the two International human rights covenants took ten years each to reach that stage. Most recently, in 2023, Denmark (5.8 million inhabitants), in collaboration with the United Arab Emirates (9.4 million), ensured mention of the out-phasing of fossil energy usage, as yet without an expiry date, in the end-document of the COP28 climate negotiations to ratchet up climate action before the end of the decade. All this is for the betterment of humanity.

The small member states' success in the human rights field was marked by shifting coalition participants. These states took the lead in negotiating the cause, taking turns, and substituting one another. When one member state ran out of steam, another revitalized the process by bringing new energy to the fore as needed.

The process of small member states involvement in UN affairs continues. In recent years, the Gambia, for instance, with a population of about 2.7 million inhabitants, strived to catalyze the

scope and application of universal jurisdiction, a central task of the United Nations, as the proposer of the resolution pertaining hereto developed under the Sixth Committee of the General Assembly, the law committee of the Assembly (A/RES/74/172, 2019) The resolution decided to establish a working group of the Sixth Committee to discuss the subject thoroughly. It also invited member states and relevant observers to submit information and observations on the subject, including the relevant applicable international treaties, their national legal rules, and judicial practice. The resolution was agreed upon without a vote, meaning the Gambia got the entire General Assembly (193 member states) on board for adopting the resolution. In this light, the country has somewhat tasked itself with keeping an eye on the extent to which UN member states adhere to universal law treaties to which they are parties and have ratified. A watchdog for treaty adherence, in a way. There is a vital role to play in the case of significant treaties.

When the Charter of the United Nations entered into force on 24 October 1945, the UN had 51 member states, which in 1959 had increased to 82. The increase counted small UN member states. In the General Assembly, with its emphasis on one nation and one vote concerning the sovereignty of each member state, a new voting situation emerged. The majority required for resolutions to get passed increasingly included many young states. Reportedly, significant politicians in the West saw this as a token pointing toward chaos challenging to navigate with myriads of opinions to be heard and taken into account for resolutions to get adopted and were reportedly scared by the possibility that Africa and Asia could be able to control the Assembly in the future if assembling on a united front (Lash, 1961). As it happened, this fear proved unfounded, as shown by the development of the human rights instruments. New member states assumed responsibility in line with those already members in 1945, during which distinctions among member states tended to evaporate. A process of belonging to the same category took hold, the Member States of the United Nations at work for the betterment of humanity, manifesting itself since then on many occasions. Numerous Assembly and Council resolutions urging for considerate handling of the World's poor and disadvantaged testify to that, though public opinion may not have taken that respectfully into account. What one sees may not always reflect what happened. There is a subjective aspect of human perceptiveness involved. We are live conscious human beings with all that it holds of sound and unsound judgment.

Independent appraisal of Small UN member states

The International Peace Institute (IPI), a research entity of the UN family, issued a report in 2014 investigating the strengths and restraints of small UN member states, which came up with several conclusions and recommendations, some of which are now outdated (IPI, 2014). Based on what prevails and the observation of others, the following recommendations relating to the working methods of small UN member states are listed below.

One: Despite a lack of resources of their own to run a mission with adequate all-round UN expertise attached at the UN HQ in New York, in Geneva, and other cities with central UN Agencies, Funds, and Programs as concerns the minor section of the small member states, they generally tend to prioritize their work strategically, develop deep niche expertise, combine their resources, and engage actively in information-gathering and -sharing in various fora, such as the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), the Forum of Small States (FOSS), the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), etc. In this sense, they are a part of a system of information channels, covering a large part of the activities of the entire UN system (Ibid). That setup can save them from investing substantially in staffing and office costs. They function to some extent with assistance from others, facilitated by close ties of collaboration, including sharing premises, which in the case of a New York location is quite costly. Hence, this mode of cooperation can keep costs down. News can travel fast, enabling recipients to react swiftly. That is a trademark of small UN member states. It's not restricted to

them, though. They were also found to be less bureaucratic than larger member states, with little distance between the various layers of civil servants and quick decision-making.

Second: Small member states can, if they assemble on united fronts, bargain with significant member states, using their sheer number of votes in the General Assembly and the Security Council as bargaining chips and hence, for instance, contribute to promote what is held to be more in accord with the UN charter by prevailing expertise, which quite often happened in the past¹. They can also seek to promote favorite issues in a proposed text or work against what they disagree with by abstaining from voting, which may or may not be desirable to other member states. General Assembly resolutions need at least half or two-thirds of the votes in favor of important ones in the Assembly for adoption (according to the UN Charter article 18), depending on the contents, and in the Security Council nine. However, it is attainable only if one or more P-5 refrains from voting against a proposed decision while up to nine non-permanent members vote in favor. Hence, small member states with up to 10 million inhabitants are crucial for adopting resolutions in the Assembly regardless of the contents.

On a more constructive note, small states can contribute to possible modification of the language used in draft resolutions when they are not in total agreement with it (A/RES/74/172). The latter is a preferable strategy, especially as consensus is desirable both in the Assembly and the Council. Decisions are often most robust when the entire UN membership acts in agreement—and is sought for determinedly. Decisions backed by all member states stand a greater chance of being implemented by all, with their message of being the product of the entire United Nations.

All onboard leave no one behind, as the slogan of the global Sustainable Development Goals agenda emphasizes. The United Nations was established to serve all member states operating within the framework of the Charter. In turn, membership in the United Nations requires ratification of the UN Charter by the state in question.

However, in theory, what exists is only sometimes reflected when other issues play a part. To be able to do so may be far from always desirable. Other considerations may be preferable and given priority. Critical problems are as follows: Can small UN member states cooperate across differences of opinion? Can they build bridges between antagonistic views? Can they reconcile hostile attitudes before talks end by blowing up in anger? Do they possess a distinctive power of persuasion, and to possess that, can they operate on a neutral basis without taking sides? If small member states master this, there is as much need for them in a wide array of UN activities as that of significant states with such abilities, in peacemaking, for example, a field that needs reinforcement considering the widespread of conflicts around the globe brought to us daily the media – primarily if they can provide a good example. Numerous cases of small member state involvement in peace talks exist. Perhaps the time has come to review why successful cases did not take a wrong turn. Was it a question of good chemistry amongst all negotiating parties? Was it because the population was heard about the negotiation results or the reverse? Parliamentarians say that not all societal matters are equally suited for a referendum exploring the degree of consent within the population. Peace accords may need time to work before they are presented to a referendum, provided this is anticipated in the peace accord, and the UN will monitor this. It could be handled by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, a function first introduced in the UN Secretariat by the second UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, in 1959 in the conflict situation in Laos (Lash, 1961). Since then, it has remained with the Organization in conflict situations where close supervision with Secretary-General involvement is required. This is the situation where the Secretary-General needs an eye on each fingertip to

know what is moving to perform the job. It is part of the picture that the special representatives are ascribed a high status within the UN Secretariat. Their words count.

The UN-brokered peace accords in Cyprus and Colombia are examples of peace accords negotiated over several years when in a referendum rejected by the population shortly after completion, whereafter violence resumed. Fresh elections could benefit from not being set into motion following a peace accord before it had time to prove its relevance, usefulness, and importance as a peacemaker to make room for thoughtfulness and possible revision, which would make new suggestions taken into account. In issues marring populations for a protracted period, the dust may need to settle, and feelings may be given a chance to decline in intensity before significant alternations gain momentum, which could be incorporated into the peace accord, as required. In the meantime, referenda could be more prepared to the extent possible in collaboration with peace-focused NGOs working for the betterment of the population of conflicting parties and recognized as such by public opinion.

Third, small member states highlight that a state's position in the international community can be framed to a certain extent and influenced by the individual state. Size is not necessarily a defining factor. Determination, energy, and the ability to learn from and engage with others make a difference. A cooperative, energetic, competent, and innovative spirit may prevail.

Fourth, Nonetheless, during the past decade, two new unique UN initiatives paved the way for the betterment of humankind in 2015: the adoption of the global Sustainable Development Goals agenda and the Climate Agreement in which small member states were differently influential. In both cases, China, the European Union, and the USA agreed with the initiatives and served as an impetus that blazed it through to adoption in the General Assembly. Small UN member states needed help to carry it through to completion from significant member states of more remarkable power of persuasion. They need the muscles to do so since these initiatives involve heavy financial input from all UN member states, which they may be unable to muster alone. Their importance lies in constituting the necessary measure of supporters impartially without taking sides. We are not all equipped with equal power of persuasion, yet everybody can contribute something and make up for it in a wise dialogue recognizing the strengths of all. Constructive results may emerge for everybody's benefit.

Conclusion

Small UN member states are essential as prime movers in the UN, though they are not the only ones and can only sometimes stand alone. Major players must provide backups to add weight to projects with high financial costs for the entire membership, for instance, to attract multiple votes.

Small member states are known for their niche expertise in UN matters, high-staff competence, diligence, and ability to cooperate and get things done. They also are recognized as skilled participants in international collaboration with swift reactions. Generally speaking, as are UN member states, small member states are good, constructive, quick, and highly committed to the UN cause. Small member states are mainly active within international law, which, to a large extent, provides their lifeline. They prioritize issues strategically and attempt to get to the bottom of the subject matter, hence developing niche expertise and perseverance, though not as the only ones; significant member states, too. Often not bound by bureaucratic rules, they may have no tied hands for issues that matter to them, and therefore, diplomats of small UN member states may be freer to act than those of larger member states.

Yet, no dance on roses without thorns. The work of small states is complicated by difficulties in getting the information they need from the UN to be functional. With short staff to chase up information, they are, to some extent, left in limbo unless they can get help from others with the

enormous volume of reports, press releases, and other material emanating from the UN (the experience gained at the United Nations Research Institute saw it as rivers of documents passing our desks, which had to be looked at to keep being informed). It is highly time-consuming and, by many, considered hard to get through, which may affect their attention to matters. Brief documents in easy-to-read language would make life easier for all UN missions, perhaps especially those of small states. Likewise, if assisted with progress reports and other types of reporting to the UN required by UN resolutions and multilateral treaties. The UN lending them a hand would make a difference.

Small UN member states have the energy and tenacity to offer to the cause combined with expertise and steady political and diplomatic penetration and, in that way, set their mark on the UN. In this light, the UN cannot be without small or significant players since they complement each other. In this sense, there is a constructive social perspective of the interrelation between the two groups, for it takes a diversity of UN member states to make up a world community where the various needs of the world population are perceptively considered and handled. If they collaborate across boundaries and get to the bottom of issues, such as with the Sustainable Development Goals and the Climate Agreement, glimpses of a promising future lighten the horizon.

As argued elsewhere, ECOSOC is underutilized as a forum for exchanging measures to improve the world population's lives Christensen, (2023). It could be revitalized to address major worldwide problems, such as the reduction of air pollution, a part of SDG 3 to ensure good health for all, and possibly water pollution too, within limits established by the WHO and other entities of the UN, in a context where the Sustainable Development Goals may need strengthening to take sufficient care of the problem – and the emission of CO₂, a significant source of air pollution so far is going the wrong way. As is well known, air pollution is a giant killer of human lives in China, the EU, the USA, and around the globe. Reducing it would be a life-saving blessing to humanity. A WHO estimate holds it responsible for 7 million premature deaths every year globally, suggesting that the model of significant/small member-state collaboration used for adopting the SDGs and the Climate Agreement could be considered a remedy for reducing air pollution.

This process could begin by ECOSOC looking into it as a severe issue at risk of being insufficiently addressed by the international community and speed up the commitment of member states to find common ground for resolving the problem through attention and debates, especially if consistently well-covered by the media. Air pollution is a global, significant, fatal, not merely urban phenomenon. Some controversy seems to exist, whether it is number one or number two, after tobacco, which costs people their lives on a big scale, and the sad story is that countries with the highest rate of air pollution also have the least means to prevent it.

As the World Meteorological Organization pointed out on several occasions, air pollution must be tackled with climate change as they interact, mutually worsening one another. Moreover, according to the World Health Organization, the expected lifetime would increase by 2.3 years globally if air pollution were diminished permanently by lowering the magnitude of harmful particles from the air stemming from vehicles, industrial emissions, wildfires, and linked to lung diseases, heart diseases, cancer, and strokes (GSDR, 2023) - and to rising temperatures worldwide. Many member states have devised successful practices and policies to restrict air pollution and would have important lessons to share with others on what works and how much – and what doesn't. On that basis, ECOSOC could devise strategies to restrict air pollution, with clear benchmarks inspired by WHO recommendations for limits of harmful particles in the air to ensure good public health, such as the recommendation limiting the concentration of PM_{2,5} from surpassing five micrograms per cubic meter (WHO, 2023) - the PM_{2,5} being small airborne

particles primarily stemming from burning of fossil fuel that can move into lungs and blood vessels in the human body.

The magnitude of member states that do not live up to the WHO recommendation is quite comprehensive; for example, up to 98 percent of the population in Europe (where data is available) have been found to live in places that do not live up to the WHO recommended level. An ECOSOC strategy for air pollution could make a huge difference and reduce the unnecessarily high mortality rate, saving thousands of human lives worldwide. An essential part of this is to indicate funding prospects for low- and middle-income member states for the specialized agencies in consultation with them before presenting it to the General Assembly for adoption. An example is the Bretton Woods Institutions, which were suggested to open up for funding of the SDGs by the representative of a Founding Father at the 78th session of the General Assembly in September 2023 (President Biden, 2023). It is part of ECOSOC's mandate to coordinate the specialized agencies' activities through consultation with and recommendations to such agencies and through recommendations to the General Assembly and the members of the United Nations (UN Charter, article 63). In other words, through and with them.

ECOSOC is the proper forum for member states to share benign experiences, facilitate development, and tell one another how problems can be handled and solved positively. Membership collaboration can be formed and nursed in this forum for the benefit of those giving and receiving advice. Member states should speak up, inspiring one another with bright ideas and practices for sustainable solutions for everyday challenges for others to reproduce. Seeds of cooperation are sown. The more collaboration, the better the problems can be solved, and the more and better the world will be connected in mutual understanding.

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