

International solidarity as an emerging norm in the United Nations

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International Solidarity: Yesterday's ideal or emerging key norm?

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We can increase respect for human dignity in every land. (...) ... the cause of larger freedom can only be advanced by broad, deep and sustained global cooperation among States. Such cooperation is possible if every country's policies take into account not only the needs of its own citizens but also the needs of others. This kind of cooperation not only advances everyone's interests but also recognizes our common humanity. ... As the world's only universal body with a mandate to address security, development and human rights issues, the United Nations bears a special burden. (...)
*We are united both by moral imperatives and by objective interests. We can build a world in larger freedom — but to do it we must find common ground and sustain collective action.*²

Like other key terms, such as *inter alia* democracy or civil society, solidarity seems to suggest something we all can in some way or another relate to. But a closer look at the notion and the variety of definitions or associations suggest, that it is more complicated. While we talk about something we vaguely assume has a common meaning and understanding, solidarity has quite different connotations for many of us. At the end, engaging with “international solidarity” in more depth suggests that there are differing interpretations at play. At the end, the term is far from clear and rather fluid, if not fuzzy. It also leaves unanswered who practices solidarity with whom and for which purpose. Let's not be misled: the alliance of right-wing anti-immigration parties is as much an act of solidarity among like-minded as the struggle for a decent treatment of refugees by human rights activists. Hence, strictly speaking, solidarity – similar to civil society – simply characterizes a specific form of interaction, without considering the aims, contents and meaning of such actions. We therefore should be careful when somewhat naïvely assuming that solidarity by definition means something ‘good’.

As David Featherstone in his engagement with solidarity as hidden histories and

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² United Nations General Assembly, *In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all*. Report of the Secretary-General. 21 March 2005 (A/59/2005), pp. 3, 6 and 53.

geographies of internationalism observes, there exist “many different uses of solidarity by elite and middling as well as subaltern and working-class movements”.³ For him, internationalist movements from below are in the center of interest, which he considers as accounts “of solidarity as a transformative political relation”.⁴ While international or global solidarity has a long history⁵, it is indeed often discussed and reflected upon in the context of social movements and non-governmental forms of collaboration, with the abolitionist movement, workers’ solidarity, the struggle for women’s rights and similar forms of alliances among the more prominent examples. But solidarity also has a dimension of inter-state and multilateral relations, less often reflected upon. Despite numerous confrontations over the power of definition, geopolitical divides and claims of relativism versus universalism, all massive stumbling blocs contributing to erode a common notion of solidarity and its implementation in political acts, the multilateral relations include an element of solidarity – and its contestation.

International Solidarity as a Godmother to the United Nations

In terms of institutionalized global governance, both the League of Nations as well as the United Nations as its successor can be considered as organizations, whose mandate includes the notion of solidarity as an integral part. Neither the Genocide Convention nor the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which were adopted as the first two normative frameworks by the Member States of the newly established body, would be in existence without a concept of solidarity. It already formed an integral part of the Charter of the United Nations, though not explicitly appearing as a term. The notion of solidarity was despite many perceptions otherwise also no Eurocentric design, nor was it selectively practiced purely in pursuance of Western interests. Solidarity as a guiding principle was in combination with the codified human rights successfully applied in the promotion and implementation of struggles for emancipation by the people of the so-called global South, most notably so in the anticolonial struggles and the decolonization of Africa.⁶ The United Nations stance against institutionalized racism in the settler societies of Namibia and South Africa remains a prominent example of solidarity with those, who were denied fundamental rights and freedoms.⁷

Not surprisingly, therefore, Dag Hammarskjöld as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, serving in this office from 1953 until his untimely death in 1961, understood his own role as the highest international civil servant among others as one guided by solidarity.⁸ He was of the firm belief that the world body was anchored in a

³ David Featherstone, *Solidarity. Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism*. London: Zed Books 2012, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁵ See for a more profound engagement than this paper can offer Reinhart Kössler/Henning Melber, *Globale Solidarität? Eine Streitschrift*. Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel 2002.

⁶ See Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010.

⁷ See *The United Nations and Apartheid, 1948-1994*. New York: United Nations Department of Public Information 1994.

⁸ See i.a. Henning Melber, “Dag Hammarskjöld – Ethics, Solidarity and Global Leadership”, in Henning Melber/Maxi Schoeman (eds), *The United Nations and Regional Challenges in Africa – 50 Years After Dag Hammarskjöld*. Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2011 (Development Dialogue; no. 57), pp. 39-50

moral and ethical obligation to act in solidarity with the values of the Charter and those, who were denied the defined rights in the normative frameworks adopted. On 26 January 1960, towards the end of his journey through more than twenty African countries since 22 December 1959, he declared at the second session of the Economic Commission of Africa in Tangier: "Partnership and solidarity are the foundations of the United Nations."⁹

When addressing a few months earlier in May 1959 the students at the University of Lund in Southern Sweden, Hammarskjöld stated:

"The health and strength of a community depend on every citizen's feeling of solidarity with the other citizens, and on his willingness, in the name of this solidarity, to shoulder his part of the burdens and responsibilities of the community. The same is of course true of humanity as a whole. [...] Those democratic ideals which demand equal opportunities for all should be applied also to peoples and races. (...) no nation or group of nations can base its future on a claim of supremacy."¹⁰

Already in 1956, Hammarskjöld during a visit to India articulated a similar conviction:

"It is no news to anybody, but we sense it in different degrees, that our world of today is more than ever before *one* world. The weakness of one is the weakness of all, and the strength of one – not the military strength, but the real strength, the economic and social strength, the happiness of people – is indirectly the strength of all. Through various developments which are familiar to all, world solidarity has, so to say, been forced upon us. This is no longer a choice of enlightened spirits; it is something which those whose temperament leads them in the direction of isolationism have also to accept."¹¹

The United Nations and International Solidarity Today

Unfortunately, with the Cold War further escalating into superpower rivalry and a large number of states joining the world body in the process of decolonization, the originally

and various chapters in Carsten Stahn/Henning Melber (eds), *Peace Diplomacy, Global Justice and International Agency. Rethinking Human Security and Ethics in the Spirit of Dag Hammarskjöld*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014 (paperback 2016).

⁹ Dag Hammarskjöld, "Statement at the Second Session of the Economic Commion for Africa, Tangier, Morocco, January 26, 1960". In: Andrew W. Cordier/Wilder Foote (eds), *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Volume IV, Dag Hammarskjöld 1958-1960*. New York: Columbia University Press 1974, p. 517.

¹⁰ Dag Hammarskjöld, "Asia, Africa, and the West. Address Before the Academic Association of the University of Lund. Lund, Sweden, May 4, 1959". UN Press Release SG/813, May 4, 1959. In: Andrew W. Cordier/Wilder Foote (eds), *Public papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Volume IV: Dag Hammarskjöld 1958-1960*. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1974, pp. 383 and 384.

¹¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, "The United Nations – Its Ideology and Activities. Address before the Indian Council of World Affairs 3 February 1956". In: Andrew W. Cordier/Wilder Foote (eds), *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Volume II: Dag Hammarskjöld 1953-1956*. New York and London 1972, p. 661.

established platforms for normative frameworks, which presumably embraced shared values, were subject to conflicting interpretations and increasingly undermined and eroded. Particularistic perspectives and agendas guided by self-interest of those protecting and seeking to further consolidate their own power as global or local actors – often based on injustices and at the expenses of human rights for all - replaced universal humanism.

Once the Cold War era and the East-West block confrontation faded away, the relative success of the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights of June 1993 in Vienna symbolized for a short while a new beginning for shared human rights among most member states of the world community. This was an important window of opportunity, though not open for long, when “it became possible to surmise that most people, after all, agree about the dictates of ‘dignity’ and other basic values, even though they spent the twentieth century slaughtering one another over which ideals to prize”.¹²

But soon new divisions emerged, often along a North-South divide or guided by religious belief systems, other forms of faith or ideology, which provided a basis for alliances among like-minded. The notion of cultural relativism gained new ground, often replacing political ideology, if only as a convenient argument to dismiss human rights norms vested in the Universal Declaration and subsequent normative frameworks adopted. The selectivity of abiding to or refusing compliance with such norms might – somewhat cynically observed – be the most universal instrument, when for example human rights activists or other civil society organisations speaking truth to power all over the world experience similar obstacles (though different forms of harsh treatment and restrictions) by those governing or ruling their countries.

Notwithstanding the unresolved contradictions indicated, the Member States of the United Nations do in their declared policies recognize the relevance and need for solidarity. Already the Millennium Declaration identified solidarity as one of the fundamental values of international relations in the 21st century. As a consequence, the United Nations General Assembly adopted on 22 December 2005 resolution 60/209. It identified solidarity as a fundamental and universal value and proclaimed 20 December as annual International Human Solidarity Day. It is supposed to be among others “a day to celebrate our unity in diversity; a day to remind governments to respect their commitments to international agreements; a day to raise public awareness of the importance of solidarity” and to “encourage debate on the ways to promote solidarity”.¹³

Also in 2005, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights as the predecessor to the United Nations Human Rights Council took the initiative that the Economic and Social Council endorsed the appointment of “an independent expert on human rights and international solidarity” to “prepare a draft declaration on the right of peoples to

¹² Samuel Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History*. New York: Verso 2014, p. 30.

¹³ <http://www.un.org/en/events/humansolidarityday/background.shtml>.

international solidarity”.¹⁴ In a report to the Human Rights Council the former independent expert Rudi Muhammad Rizki from Indonesia reinforced the understanding that international solidarity is understood as a principle and even right in international law.¹⁵ It reaffirmed the notion already stressed in Kofi Annan’s pioneering report *In Larger Freedom*, “that international solidarity must be recognized as a prerequisite for any collaboration in the international community”.¹⁶ And he concludes: “There is an abundance of hard and soft laws, policies and values that can form the basis of a conceptual and normative framework on human rights and international solidarity, principles and guidelines on human rights and international solidarity, and, eventually, a draft declaration on the right of peoples and individuals to international solidarity.”¹⁷

A subsequent report by the current independent expert Virginia Dandan from the Philippines submitted a preliminary draft for such a declaration, based on consultations with the world regions.¹⁸ Her mandate was subsequently extended on 26 June 2014 to continue regional consultations with a focus on the proposed draft declaration and to submit a revised draft.¹⁹ Her report submitted on 27 April 2016 summarized the subsequent regional consultations. It indicated that there was still a long way ahead to reach some kind of consensus, since “a number of recurring issues ... have not been resolved”, including “the definition of the right itself”.²⁰

As these extended negotiations with little visible progress seem to suggest, solidarity among the Member States of the United Nations in pursuance of human rights for all remains a vision not yet close to reality. A recent example illustrates this stalemate. On 30 June 2016 the 47 members of the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a landmark resolution advocating the protection of the rights for members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities. The resolution on “Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI)”²¹ is a milestone in elevating LGBT rights to the level of human rights. For the first time an independent monitor will be appointed with the mandate to identify root causes of discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. In an effort to protect gay and transgender people, the expert will similar to other special rapporteurs also be tasked to talk with governments to protect LGBT

¹⁴ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human rights and international solidarity*. Human Rights Resolution 2005/55, p. 4.

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the independent expert on human rights and international solidarity, Rudi Muhammad Rizki*. 5 July 2010 (A/HRC/15/32), p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity, Virginia Dandan*. 1 April 2014 (A/HRC/26/34) and as separate Addendum *Preliminary text of a draft declaration on the right of peoples and individuals to international solidarity*. 1 April 2014 (A/HRC/26/34/add. 1).

¹⁹ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council*. 16 July (A/HRC/RES/26/6).

²⁰ United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity*. 27 April 2016 (A/HRC/32/43).

²¹ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/32/L.2/Rev.1.

rights. The specialist to be appointed has the power to document hate crime and human rights violations, but no mandate to recommend sanctions. While understandably so celebrated as a major breakthrough in some quarters, African countries remained opposed or reluctant to take a stand, with ten Member States of the Council voting against the resolution and the other four abstaining. Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation all except Albania (voting in favor) opposed the resolution.

The pioneering initiative was notably taken by a core group of seven South American states (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Uruguay). 41 additional countries co-sponsored the text. A record 628 NGOs from 151 countries supported the effort. Notably, some 70 percent of these NGOs were from the global South. The resolution was drafted before the massacre of 49 people in an Orlando nightclub took place on 12 June 2016, where members of the LGBT communities socialized in an environment free of discrimination. Despite this shocking latest eruption of hatred and brutality, the resolution was adopted by a narrow margin only: 23 members voted in favor, 18 against. Six countries abstained.²²

The final text was considerably softened and watered down after a controversial and at times heated debate.²³ One of the main arguments against the resolution, castigated as “divisive”, was that it violated cultural norms and imposed Western values. Ironically, homophobia, rather than free choice of sexual preferences, has been historically a construct of 19th century Western imperialism and missionary zeal in Africa. This was imposed and legally codified in the colonized societies. Put differently: while those opposing the freedom of sexual preferences and identities argue that these are Western values and a form of ideological imperialism, true decolonization would actually – just as in the case of South Africa’s constitution, which as the first includes the right to free choice of sexual preferences – require them to abandon homophobic legislation. After all, countries bringing about this resolution – such as Bolivia, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela and Vietnam – can hardly be classified as neo-colonial agencies of the West.

This is a case that illustrates that solidarity can take different forms and orientations and when guided by different convictions, solidarity can at times be in collision. If, for that matter, a resolution would name and shame waterboarding, other forms of torture or extrajudicial interventions by state authorities, the voting behavior of member states would most likely produce different patterns and alliances, with states holding opposite views on other matters (like homophobia) all of a sudden sharing a much more amicable understanding, even if for different reasons. Acts of solidarity, as not only this case shows, are at the same time both, inclusive (including those sharing and practicing

²² Voting in favor were: Albania, Belgium, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Georgia, Germany, Latvia, Macedonia, Mexico, Mongolia, Netherlands, Panama, Paraguay, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Slovenia, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Venezuela, Vietnam. Voting against were: Algeria, Bangladesh, Burundi, China, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Morocco, Nigeria, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Togo, United Arab Emirates. Abstentions were from: Botswana, Ghana, India, Namibia, Philippines, and South Africa.

²³ For details of the lengthy and at times very controversial discussion see the records at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20220&LangID=E>.

solidarity as regards a specific issue) and also exclusive (by excluding those with other views and convictions on this matter).

But this does not imply that because of such changing constellations - and the fact that at best in rare cases everyone would agree on an issue and act accordingly - solidarity finally remains a purely arbitrary matter. In the case of our example, a last-minute amendment stressed that “the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind”. But the resolution also states: “It is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” As the International Commission of Jurists stressed: “Although a number of hostile amendments seeking to introduce notions of cultural relativism were adopted into the text by vote, the core of the resolution affirming the universal nature of international human rights law stood firm.”²⁴

This might help to find a compass in navigating through the Scylla and Charybdis of universal rights versus cultural relativism. We do have the normative frameworks, which define universal values, to which Member States of the United Nations should abide for the simple reason that they are rooted in the Charter of the very same organization they decided to join. This Charter and other fundamental normative frameworks (not least including the guiding principle of national sovereignty) are at times handy to argue in favor of own interests, even though they are ignored, if not outright dismissed, when they are not suiting the own agenda. But as the saying has it: you cannot eat the cake and keep it.

In a speech on Human Rights Day 2010 Ban Ki-Moon already declared in no uncertain terms: “As men and women of conscience, we reject discrimination in general, and in particular discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. When there is a tension between cultural attitudes and universal human rights, rights must carry the day.”²⁵ Solidarity, one might argue, therefore finds its justification in the pursuance of justice anchored in the fundamental principles of the various Human Rights Conventions and subsequent guiding principles adopted by the world body. Put differently, solidarity can be translated in the popular slogan during the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, which categorically declared, that “An injury to one is an injury to all”.

Conclusion: Back to the Roots

In June 2015 the Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance presented a report advocating the promotion and implementation of “just security”. The authors want “to enable humanity not only to survive but to thrive with dignity, offering the basis for a new global ethic and a new direction for global governance”.²⁶ The co-chairs

²⁴ <http://www.icj.org/hrc32sogi/>.

²⁵ <http://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sgsm13311.doc.htm>.

²⁶ Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance, *Confronting the Crisis of Global Governance*. The Hague: The Hague Institute for Global Justice and Washington: The Stimson Centre 2015, p. xx.

define the aim as “to help build and sustain a coalition for progressive global change, in pursuit of a vision of justice and security for all”.²⁷ Soon thereafter, towards the end of September 2015, Member States of the United Nations adopted the “Agenda for Sustainable Development” with 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The document underscores the determination “to implement this Agenda through a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people.”²⁸ The wording of such appeals might be new, but not the message.

Such moral compass was in existence already 60 years earlier. Not least it guided the United Nations second Secretary-General as a prominent advocate of solidarity. His values and visions shaped an agenda, whose goals on too many occasions have since then been sacrificed on the altar of self-interests. Engaging with Martin Buber’s philosophy he in an address at Cambridge University in 1958 appealed to tear down the “walls of distrust” through acts of international solidarity:

“The widening of our political horizons to embrace in a new sense the whole of the world, should have meant an approach to the ideal sung in Schiller’s ‘Ode to Joy,’ but it has, paradoxically, led to new conflicts and to new difficulties to establish even simple human contact and communication.” [...] The conflict to different approaches to the liberty of man and mind or between different views of human dignity and the right of the individual is continuous. The dividing line goes within ourselves, within our own peoples, and also within other nations. It does not coincide with any political or geographical boundaries. The ultimate fight is one between the human and the subhuman. We are on dangerous ground if we believe that any individual, any nation, or any ideology has a monopoly on rightness, liberty, and human dignity.”²⁹

Such conviction and engagement also required a firm belief, guided by courage. In Hammarskjöld’s words, when addressing in 1956 a gathering in celebration of the 180th anniversary of the Virginia Declaration of Rights: “It is when we all play safe that we create a world of the utmost insecurity. It is when we all play safe that fatality will lead us to our doom. It is ‘in the dark shade of courage’ alone, that the spell can be broken.”³⁰

²⁷ Madeleine K. Albright/Ibrahim A. Gambari, Foreword. In: *ibid.*, p. vii.

²⁸ *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations 2015 (UN Doc. A/RES/70/1), p.4.

²⁹ Dag Hammarskjöld, “The Walls of Distrust”. Address at Cambridge University, June 5, 1958. In: Andrew W. Cordier/Wilder Foote (eds), *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Volume IV, Dag Hammarskjöld 1958-1960*. New York: Columbia University Press 1974, pp. 90f and 91f.

³⁰ Dag Hammarskjöld, “Address at Celebration of the 180th Anniversary of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, Williamsburg, Virginia, May 15, 1956”. UN Press Release SG/479, May 14, 1956. In: Andrew W. Cordier/Wilder Foote (eds), *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Volume III, Dag Hammarskjöld 1956-1957*. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1973, p. 142. The quote is from Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, Canto XC.

Representatives of the Member States in the United Nations, claiming to speak on behalf of “We the Peoples” (though they often do not), as the Preamble of the Charter begins, should find such courage and return to a true meaning of solidarity, being the solidarity of people with people in their fight for human dignity and a worthy life free from fear, “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained.”³¹

Keeping in mind these principles formulated more than 70 years ago, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. But what is urgently needed is to return to the values, which inspired such a manifesto, guided by solidarity. This is admittedly easy said, while difficult to achieve. It will remain an uphill battle. But global solidarity is an urgent need for the community of states to address the fundamental challenges created by our anthropocentric lifestyle guided by egoisms and greed. Many people live at the expense of even more and in a self-destructive way risk extinction of all living creatures on our earth. We urgently need empathy for those paying too high a price and the awareness that acts of solidarity are the ultimate need to secure a future not only for humanity and humanism, but for all life on our planet.

³¹ From the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations, signed on 26 June 1945 in San Francisco at the conclusion of the United Nations Conference on International Organization.