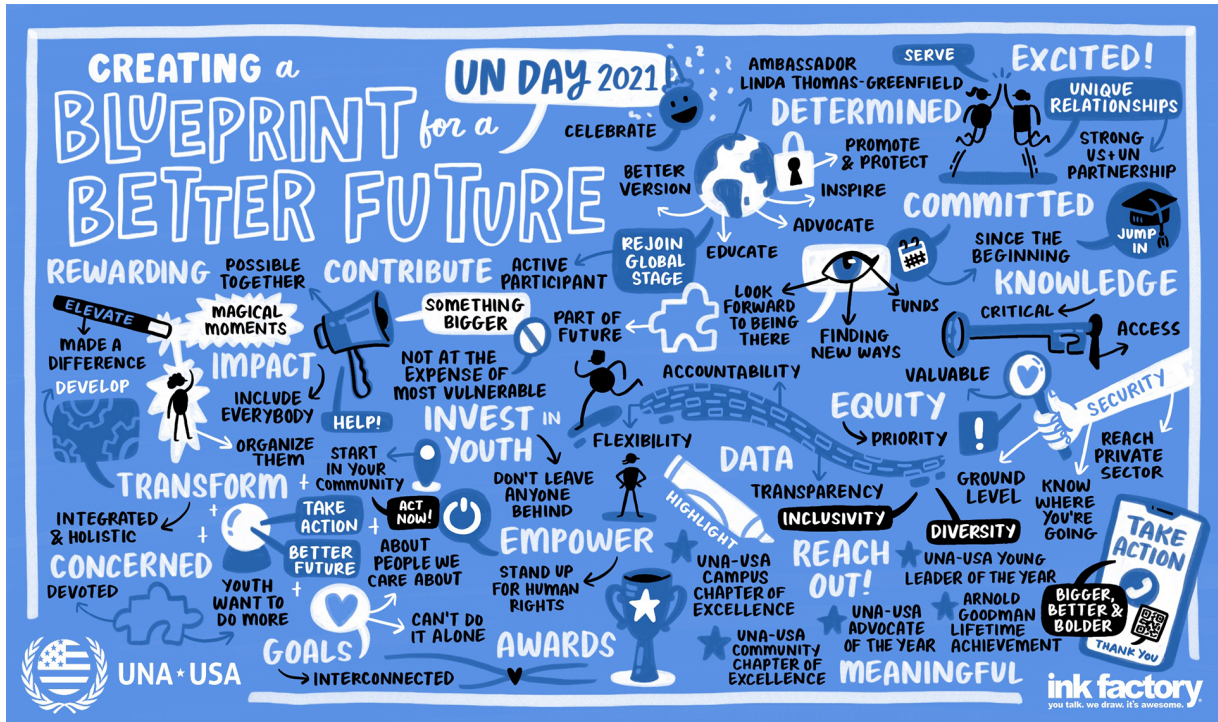


UN Day 2021: Creating A Blueprint For A Better Future with a focus on the role of the United States



On October 24, 1945, the United Nations (UN) Charter came into effect and the 51 states who had signed the charter became the founding members of the organization, representing countries from all regions of the world, including the United States of America (US) (Dag Hammarskjöld Library, n.d.). Now, 76 years later, on October 25th, 2021 this historic moment was commemorated by an event entitled, *UN Day 2021: Creating A Blueprint For A Better Future*. As the title of the event suggests, while much had been achieved over the last 76 years, progress still remains for the future of the UN, and especially considering the important role of the US.

The event was hosted by the United Nations Association of United States of America (UNA-USA), whose mission is “educating, inspiring, and mobilizing Americans to support the principles and vital work of the United Nations and its agencies” (United Nations Association of United States of America, n.d.). The organization aims to accomplish the goals set forth in the UN Charter, and also to promote the aims of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to work towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Given my interest in the UN in general, and in the role of the US in this system, I was motivated to attend and report on this event to learn about how this association sees the future of the UN and where they feel the focus of their work should be placed in the coming years.

The event started with opening remarks from Ms. Rachel Bowen Pittman, Executive Director of UNA-USA, who reviewed the founding of the UN 76 years ago. She emphasized how no country can tackle global problems such as climate change or the Covid-19 pandemic, alone. The UN represents the major body which aims to achieve collective action and collaboration, through multilateralism. Pittman focused on the importance the US plays in this context, and how UNA-USA, with its over 20,000 members, aims to expand this role. She emphasized that the new US administration is focused on taking more responsibility in this regard, as demonstrated by the fact that US President Biden sent a letter to UNA-USA members in honor of the day, in which he stressed the importance of the association's efforts in supporting the work of the UN.

Following this introduction, the key address was delivered by H.E. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, who was appointed by the Biden administration and sworn in early this year on February 24 (United States Mission to the United Nations, n.d). Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield highlighted the progress the UN has undergone since its founding, stating that “there have been fewer large-scale conflicts than at any point in history” and that the UN prevented nuclear war and continuously enshrined human rights and taken humanitarian action.

In her view, this 76th anniversary of the UN represents a celebration of these collective achievements, and at the same time serves as a reminder to continue to improve the organization and its actions.

Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield also underlined the importance of cooperation through multilateralism, which aligns with Goal 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN Agenda 2030, in its aim to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”, and more specifically with targets 17.16 to “enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries” and target 17.17 to “encourage and promote effective public, public/private and civil partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships data, monitoring and accountability” (United Nations, n.d.).

I found it encouraging to see that the US ambassador to the UN considers multilateralism a key element for a better future.



The next presentation was by Ms. Michele Sumilas, Assistant to the Administrator of the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL) at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The bureau places a strong priority on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, as well as promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Ms. Sumilas described how the work of USAID overlaps with the efforts of the UN in almost all areas, such as humanitarian aid, in countries such as Afghanistan, Haiti, and Sudan.

She repeated the intention of US President Biden to reassert the US position in the UN and to rejoin the world stage. Such actions include rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement and attending the Glasgow conference in November to reinforce the US commitments, as well as being re-elected to the Human Rights Council.

A major concern she addressed is that too many US organizations, including USAID, are going out on their own instead of trying to create connections to combine efforts.

Ms. Sumilas saw immense benefits the UN agencies offer through their deep expertise and knowledge as well as their decades of experience. One very relevant example that stands out in this context is the experience of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in distributing vaccines, which is especially reflected in the UN's ability to reach populations who have the least access. This is more than essential in the current ambition to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine worldwide.

Another key aspect Ms. Sumilas described in detail was how UN agencies hold unique relationships with governments and countries, since they are seen as fair partners which are not biased towards one country or another. This also gives the UN greater access to national leaders. In contrast, the US is seen as following their own agenda, which can restrict political access. Especially interesting in this regard was her perspective on how the UN sets global norms and standards. In this context, she said, people are interested in working with the UN, in comparison to the fact that the US is perceived as being biased by their own interests.

Another major problem Ms. Sumilas sees is how to tackle the issue of working with the private sector in a sustainable way, and coincidentally how multinational companies do not know how to work with the UN.

A further problem is that the complexity of the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning's work has to be reduced, since layers of bureaucracy are not necessary for accountability.

Additionally, Ms. Sumilas believes that more effort should be placed on how to measure outcomes, what data is needed to assess projects, and that more desegregated data needs to be collected.

She stressed that all these issues require creating a clear blueprint with concrete final outcomes before starting a project, comprising a process which is essential for success.

She advocated for individuals to be active members and to inspire others from all different backgrounds to join the mission.

At this point in the event, Rachel Pittman passed on her role as moderator to Mr. Troy Wolfe, Senior Director of Partnerships and Special Initiatives at UNA-USA, who shifted the discussion from the previous national perspective to a more personalized level of two individuals' experience.

In the first of these presentations, Ms. Besem Obenson, representative in Guatemala of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), described her personal journey with the UN. She grew up in Ohio with West-African parents and spent her childhood in multiple countries. After college, she joined the Peace Corps, which inspired her to join the UN, with the aspiration to “contribute on a larger scale” by being “part of something bigger” and “to be able to give back to contribute to changes”. Looking back, she feels like she now has achieved these ambitions by being a representative of UNHCR in Guatemala and coordinating on a macro level to help others. In her role, she gets the most joy out of talking to people, which she also shared in her “magical moment”.

This “magical moment” entailed that she had spoken to a female asylum seeker selling a Guatemalan delicacy on the street, barely making ends meet. Years later, Ms. Obenson encountered the same woman, this time as a part-time owner of a restaurant which she was able to open in collaboration with other asylum seekers. This woman's story of success from street vendor to bricks-and-mortar business owner showed the strength of working together with others since she was only able to open the business with the help and cooperation of other asylum seekers. This woman's experience served as a perfect transition for Ms. Obenson to point out that while individual growth is part of achieving the American Dream, it does not have to be pursued at the expense of others and it is more beneficial for everyone to work collaboratively. Therefore, with regard to the blueprint theme of the event, Ms. Obenson sees the necessity of focusing on a collective community and taking as many different perspectives into considerations as possible when outlining future goals.

Next, Mr. Dennis Latimer, representative in Honduras of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), provided a statement about his experience in Honduras. Also as a volunteer of the Peace Corps like Mrs. Obenson, his living in Honduras influenced his personal development as well as contributed to his motivation to work in various NGOs afterwards. After the Peace Corps, he then joined the FAO, a UN agency, with the aspiration to become part of something bigger and to help thousands of agriculture producers get out of poverty. When looking at the statistics about who is below the poverty line, and noting that a major proportion are small farm stock producers, Mr. Latimer realized how “the very people who feed this world are the ones that can't get out of poverty and are the ones most vulnerable and at most risk of climate change”. Even more shocking to him was the fact that enough food is available to feed every individual in the world, but at the same time 900 million people starve every single day. This showed him how food systems need to be transformed in order for them to be more just, equitable, environmentally friendly, and sustainable in the future. He highlighted how exciting and rewarding his journey with the UN has been and how the organization is always welcoming new members.

The event continued with the moderator asking questions to both of the previous speakers, Besem Obenson and Dennis Latimer.

The first question focused on the most important thing United States Vice President Kamala Harris can lead the US to do, in order for people in Central America to thrive in their home countries. Ms. Obenson replied that people who flee want to stay in their home countries, but

do not have access to aspects such as education and food security. Therefore, there is a need for a sense of security that can be achieved by working on the specific needs of every country and some overarching problems such as climate change. She pointed out that Guatemala, for example, needs to strengthen access to the asylum system.

The discussion turned to the question of best practices to eliminate poverty, addressing SDG 1 to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” (United Nations, n.d.). Mr. Latimer recommended a multi-sector approach, as there is not one remedy available or one best practice that solves poverty. He suggested better access to markets and adjusting prices. As an example, he pointed to the fact that farmers receive only one-third of the price and will never be able to come out of poverty under such circumstances. The global food economy has changed so much that “today we can get almost any sort of food, all year around, at any price”, which gives rise to the question of how everyone can be included.

To conclude the discussion, the moderator asked the two speakers to share their most important message about the importance of the UN for their UNA-USA members. Mr. Latimer advocated for anyone interested to not be afraid and “jump in”, as “the world is full of opportunities and wonderful ways to be able to participate and to contribute and to make a difference and to have an impact”. In a similar matter, Ms. Obenson encouraged individuals to look at the needs in their communities. She stressed how the diversity of the US has a lot to offer and how important grassroots work is to communities. Both speakers showed how rewarding working for the UN can be and how their individual journeys helped them in supporting people around the world.

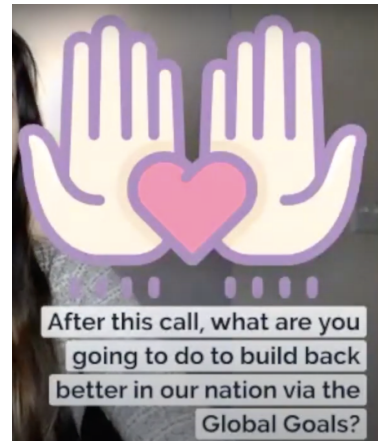
The event continued with Ms. Cynthia Yue, UNA-USA's 10th Youth Observer to the United Nations, outlining the Listening Tour she had been on over the last year. She stressed how young people want to change the world and their ambition to have “a place at the table”. She then created a chat wave by asking the audience to respond to a question at the same time in the chat.

The chat wave questions included:

- What do you consider the most important global issue?
- Answers included: COVID-19, education, climate change, peace keeping, global health and other interconnected issues. These reflect the SDG 3, 4, and 13.
- Who inspires you to want to work for a better world?
- While some attendees mentioned friends and mentors, the most prominent answers were children and grandchildren. This emphasized how the future generation motivates us to make a difference today.
- How can we actually ensure a more peaceful, just, and healthy world?
- Answers ranged from getting an education and voting, to becoming a role model and working together in activism.

Ms. Yue pointed out the need to take action in order to build back a better nation and to commit to diversity as well as inclusivity.

The chat wave effectively visualized the idea of everyone needing to do their part and show commitment for the blueprint of the future.



As the last speaker, Ms. Paula Boland, the UNA-USA National Council Chairperson and Executive Director of UNA-NCA, stressed the importance of the UNA in supporting the efforts of the UN, as did previous speakers.

In the final part of the event, Ms. Boland announced the winners of awards which recognize those who have contributed to a better future over the last year.

- Campus Chapter of Excellence Award was presented to the UNA Harvard Chapter in recognition of the fact that they brought their community together during the pandemic and focused on advocacy and service as well as on equity and justice.
- Community Chapter of Excellence Award was given to the UNA Bronx chapter as they followed the motto of “think globally, act locally” in advocating for human rights and leading with intention.
- Young Leader of the Year Award was given to Ms. Isabel Treidl, for her efforts in creating a scholarship for young advocates of the SDGs which promotes the power of the moment, we are in. In her acceptance speech, Ms. Treidl cited a very inspiring quote by Ghandi: “Learn, as if you’re going to live forever and live as if you were going to die tomorrow”, which summarizes very well the importance of education and taking action.
- Advocate of the Year Award was awarded to Ms. Cindy Roberts, who helped girls and women escape Afghanistan to receive fair opportunities to live a better life. In her reflection, she advocated for individuals to take action by writing down ideas, signing petitions, or participating in protests.
- the Arnold Goodman Lifetime Achievement Award was given to Ms. Jeanne Betsock Stillman for her continuous support of UNA-USA and her tremendous advocacy efforts.

Ms. Boland concluded the event by emphasizing that a strong relationship between the UN and US has never been more important. This is summarized very well by a quote from the UN day proclamation of President Biden:

“We are at an inflection point in history. The choices we make in the next few years - whether or not we come together to face our greatest global challenges - will determine our future for decades to come. [...] Let us remember that our determination and faith in a better future laid the groundwork for the creation of the

United Nations 76 years ago. Now, in a new century, we must work with allies and partners to strengthen the United Nations to effectively and efficiently tackle the challenges that defy political borders and geographical boundaries today” (White House, 2021).”

My reflections

I think it is remarkable that the UN has been a successful organization for 76 years, already almost three times longer than its original form, the League of Nations. Especially since the last presidential administration, the role of the US in the UN has shifted, along with the influence of the US on the global stage. Therefore, I was interested to see how the UNA-USA envisions the new role of the US in the UN, and what they aspire to achieve in the future. It was encouraging to hear that key figures such as the US Ambassador to the UN is determined to strengthen multilateralism, as I see this approach as a major element in strengthening the impact the UN can have with the support of the US. At the same time, I was disappointed to not hear any of the speakers mention mental health as an area that should be addressed more in the future. I did however, find it very inspiring to hear personal stories of individuals who have experience working within the UN system and how they feel their work has a meaningful impact.

I was also fascinated by how two young speakers spoke about the huge impact their volunteer work in the Peace Corps had on their personal development and consequently in their ambition to continue to be involved in the UN system. While I personally cannot join the Peace Corps, as it is only open to US citizens and I am from Germany , I find the UN volunteer program to be an amazing opportunity to gain first-hand experience of international missions. Attending this event not only increased my motivation to advocate for mental health in a global context, but also to apply to become a UN volunteer.



EVENT OVERVIEW:

TITLE: UN Day 2021: Creating A Blueprint For A Better Future

Date/Time: Monday, 25 October 2021, 3:30 - 4:00 PM (EST)

Location: Zoom

Moderators: Rachel Pittman and Troy Wolfe

Panelists: Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Michele Sumilas, Assistant to the Administrator of the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and

Learning at United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Besem Obenson, Representative in Guatemala at United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Dennis Latimer, Representative in Honduras at Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Cynthia Yue, UNA-USA's 10th Youth Observer to the United Nations, Paula Boland, UNA-USA National Council Chairperson and Executive Director of UNA-NCA

Reported by Hanna Lissinna, a member of the Student Division of the International Association of Applied Psychology pursuing a masters' degree in the Department of Clinical Psychology, Columbia University Teachers College, and a student in Professor Judy Kuriansky's class on "Psychology at the UN."

Cite this article as:

Lissinna, H. (2021). UN Day 2021: Creating A Blueprint For A Better Future with a focus on the role of the US. . *International Association of Applied Psychology: IAAP at the UN*. https://iaapsy.org/site/assets/files/1228/un_day_october_2021.pdf

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