Geneva and the future of multilateralism

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Author Cedric Amon

The event was organised by the University of Geneva in partnership with the Swiss Federation, the Republic and State of Geneva, the City of Geneva, the United Nations Office at Geneva, and the Fondation pour Genève. The event celebrated 100 years of multilateralism in Geneva in remembrance of the creation of the League of Nations in 1919, which marked the beginning of modern multilateralism and the rise of International Geneva.

Mr Yves Flückiger (Director of the University of Geneva) spoke about the three principles which have contributed to Geneva's central role on the international level: universality, unanimity, and consensus. He also underlined the importance of scientific institutions for the cohesion of the international system.

Flückiger further called for a more inclusive form of multilateralism to face today's challenges. Moreover, he said that despite the current focus on new technologies, the human aspect in multilateralism and international co-operation should not be underestimated.

Mr Ignazio Cassis (Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland) noted that the first general assembly of the League of Nations on 15 November 1919 put Geneva and Switzerland on the map of the international scene. This assembly also meant that Switzerland had to take on the responsibilities of a host state. He retraced Switzerland's historical evolution and the official recognition of Switzerland's neutrality at the end of the First World War (WWI). Cassis further explained that although the League of Nations had failed as an institution, it laid the

Anticipator had already been created in line with the strategy.

Ms Tatiana Valovaya (Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva) underlined the importance of the League of Nations for today's multilateral system and said that the League of Nations had created the foundation for the work of the UN, ranging from justice and minority production, to the improvement of work and the respect of international public law.

As Geneva is the birthplace of the League of Nations, Valovaya mentioned the importance of the Palais des Nations' archives in Geneva.

Valoyava further noted that in a fragmented and polarised world, multilateralism is needed more than ever in order to address today's challenges and to find global solutions to them. According to her, the multilateral system is not in crisis but transitioning. Therefore, it is important to shape this new system to make it more inclusive.

Mr Sacha Zala (Director of the Research Centre Dodis and Co-Editor of the publication 'Switzerland and the Construction of Multilateralism' (unreleased diplomatic documents)) explained that Switzerland has been very active in world politics over the past 100 years. Zala mentioned that the right to self-determination which was recognised at the dawn of WWI, created challenges for the unity of Switzerland and threatened to break apart the country. However, Switzerland has established itself as a vibrant centre for world politics, thanks to the many international institutions in Geneva and Bern. Multilateralism has since then become a cornerstone for Switzerland, the same way that Switzerland's neutrality was essential to it becoming the host country of the League of Nations. Zala also mentioned the importance of hosting the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in maintaining Geneva's status as a diplomatic capital.

Ms Heba Aly (Director of The New Humanitarian) moderated the debate. She mentioned that the most common symptom of the crisis of multilateralism is the incapacity of addressing the crises around the world, given that institutions seem blocked and the respect of International Humanitarian Law is fading.

Ms Laurence Boisson de Chazournes (Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Geneva) observed that there is a disenchantment regarding international co-operation which stems from inside the countries. She explained that this sentiment stems from the problem of sharing the benefits of global co-operation, which means that certain populations feel abandoned and left out. She urged for a fundamental rethinking of the collaboration, and is hopeful that certain forms of private-public partnerships on specific areas will help strengthen multilateralism.

next challenge will be to digitise diplomatic practices to create a more inclusive system, and reduce travelling costs for face-to-face meetings with different actors.

Mr Francis Gurry (Director-General of The World Intellectual Property Organization) pointed out that the architecture of global institutions to address the current challenges is outdated. He identified this as being the greatest challenge of the UN system along with the attacks on the idea of multilateralism. Gurry emphasised that this is a political problem, given that he does not see a political will to reform international institutions. However, according to Gurry, there has been a transfer of power and capabilities, from the public to the private and non-governmental sectors, which must be reflected in the architecture of the international system.

Furthermore, he went on to recognise the mostly positive track record of UN institutions and indicated that abandoning multilateralism is not a choice, given that today's problems are global and need global solutions. Moreover, short-term projections are a difficulty for the success of diplomacy. He explained that diplomacy means building relationships over time, to build trust. In an interconnected world this is more difficult, given the ease at which information travels and how used we have become to finding immediate solutions.

According to Gurry, technical co-operation, such as is practised at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) is a good way to ensure the sustainability of co-operation in an increasingly complex world.

Mr Jean-Yves Art (Senior Director, Strategic Partnerships at Microsoft) pointed out that we are witnessing an increase in human relations in all aspects of our lives, which relies on private infrastructure. Art indicated that because of this, private actors operating these infrastructures also have a responsibility to find solutions to problems generated by this increase in human connections.

Another important problem which he recognised was that 50% of the world's population is not connected. Given the importance of new technologies, not being connected will prove to be a major handicap and important obstacle to development.

According to Art, multilateralism is often associated narrowly with the UN system. However, he believes that multilateralism goes well beyond UN institutions, as was proven by the numerous calls involving all relevant stakeholders (for example: the Paris Call for Peace, and the Christchurch Call). These dynamics from outside the UN system are now also finding their way into its institutions. He also mentioned the approach of the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation which is spreading its

setting clear goals about the aim and extent of involving these new actors.

According to Suedi, the model of the Human Rights Council is a very important, and one of the most successful ones at the UN given that it managed to integrate the voices of civil society. However, she still sees room for improvement to include a more representative role for non-governmental organisations. For example, they could be allowed to introduce draft resolutions rather than simply expressing their point of views regarding the state of human rights in the various contexts.