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**The United Nations and its interests:  
Dollars or Humanitarianism?**

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## **Introduction**

The United Nations (UN) is an international organization founded in the aftermath of World War II with the main goal of bringing peace to conflicts across the globe. Even though the organization is seen as a type of world government, it surely is not, nor is it a type of world police. The UN is primarily a humanitarian organization with the goal of promoting international cooperation between nations in an effort to avoid conflicts.

In summary, the UN holds our hopes, goals and predictions for the future, even if those goals seem to be unattainable. So far, the greatest goal of the UN since its foundation is being met, and that is to avoid a third World War. However, it is not common for any daily news reporting system to bring news about the UN's achievements. Most often, news about the UN involves politicians joining or leaving an agreement, not about what the UN itself does. Due to the fact that the UN lacks everyday visibility by people who are not directly involved with it, seeing its results gets a little more challenging, which brings up the unavoidable point of how ordinary people might question the true goal of the United Nations. Common questions asked by these people could be the goal of the UN - After all, are the UN member states such as the United States, mostly interested in pursuing humanitarian goals rather than financially or politically benefiting from the international influence of the organization? This is a tough question because in order to sustain itself in a strongly capitalist world scenario, the United Nations must establish a middle ground between listening to wealthy nations who contribute to its budget, and in fact advocating for the betterment of the world through its humanitarian goals. Therefore the only way it can exist is by coexisting with wealthy nations while striving for its humanitarian goals.

### **The United Nations and its interests: Dollars?**

In his article named “Visualize the World's Funding for the United Nations”, Raul mentions how President Trump criticized very often how much money the United States (US) dedicated to UN funding. Indeed, the US contributed approximately \$674.2 million dollars in 2019, making up 22% of the UN’s funding (Raul). The American contribution surpassed by 10% the second greatest contributor, China, who contributed approximately \$367.9 million dollars in 2019 as well (Raul). It seems rather convenient for the UN to have an income of over 1 billion dollars from simply the top two greatest economies in the world. Raul asserts that “developed countries with the largest economies tend to spend more on UN operations than the countries directly benefiting from UN programs” (Raul para. 3). Which illuminates an idea of the US possibly wanting more power within the organization - Almost contributing to a quarter of the organization's fund is no small deal.

Further in his article, Raul states that “some countries clearly benefit from the UN’s existence more than others. The UN was originally created after World War II to promote world peace and de-escalate tensions, especially between the U.S. and Russia. [...] Developed countries in the West as well as the East have a shared interest in stability and economic development” (Raul). By illuminating the idea that the Western world, mainly the US, would be strongly interested in the continuity of peace as well as on international political stability, this information can be added to the fact that the US is the greatest contributor to the United Nations, giving the impression that the nation, is in fact buying world stability by painting a picture of the good nation.

Seeing the amount of money the US invests annually in the UN and how much it aligns itself with its interests as well, the question of the United Nations true goal comes into the

conversation. Politically, the United States would be benefiting from this exchange immensely, considering the above mentioned was in fact reality, so how can one attest that the UN can stay true to their goal that is in fact, helping the world?

Since the UN is a huge international organization often far from reality for many people, there is only one way to determine this organization's true goals, and that is through news of what it has done and is currently doing. As a founding member of the UN, the United States houses the headquarters of the United Nations in New York City as well as provides major funds for the past seventy-six years. The UN funding system works through a membership system. All 193 member nations' condition of membership is a sum of money, this sum is determined by a complex formula that takes into account a nation's gross national income as well as population. However, any nation is more than welcome to donate more money on top of its "dues," and the US is the strongest economy doing such. For instance, in 2018 about two thirds of the American payment to the UN was voluntary while only one third was assessed. "By comparison, [\$10 billion dollars] is about what the government allocates annually to the U.S. Coast Guard" (cfr.org). In light of this information, it is easy to wonder why such a prominent and wealthy nation would invest such a great amount of money in an international organization, which has sovereignty over no nation.

According to the Council of Foreign relations, in order to establish a comparison between two departments that represent different goals, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in the UN receives approximately \$2.1 billion dollars straight from US funding. Meanwhile the World Health Organization (WHO) receives only \$400 million (as of 2019 data) (cfr.org). It is easy to see how the UN is directing the funding of a big donor nation towards exactly what is historically convenient to that nation, instead of directing more money towards WHO and more

strongly following its mission of humanitarianism. Further, in 2018, the Trump administration halted many American contributions to the agency, forcing the UN to cut 250 jobs. However, even after the cuts, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations still received over \$2 billion dollars regardless of other agencies needing minimal parts of the American contribution to operate. In a letter sent by more than thirty US senators to the President informed him that “that the cuts could prevent 140,000 people from receiving food aid and more than 70,000 people from accessing clean water” (cfr.org), and even after the letter, the department’s budget remained over \$2 billion.

In order to further understand the issue where the United States could potentially be financially benefiting from the United Nations who are politically benefiting from being in the US’s good graces, the focus will be switched from the United States and its funding to the international organization, to China. The focus will be on the second greatest nation contributor and how it has so far, not suffered any sanctions or whatsoever for starting a global pandemic that still is affecting the globe. In an open letter to two UN agencies, the WHO and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the Environmental Policy and Law International journal discusses how the poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is greatly affecting the whole globe and most especially third world countries. It is said that the pandemic “is inflicting unprecedented social and economic costs on countries and communities, with the poor and vulnerable hardest hit” (open letter of the Environmental Policy and Law International Journal Para. 2), reiterating how little the WHO or the UNEP can do when it holds as little as \$200 million dollars as its funding. Further, the open letter calls for UN’s action towards China, saying that Chinese “wet markets” have received indiscriminate bans and restrictions. However, “indiscriminate bans and restrictions risk being inequitable and ineffective” (open letter)

especially when going against the second greatest economy of the world. Illuminating the fact that, by coincidence or not, the second greatest contributor to the UN's annual budget, is not receiving any sanctions or whatsoever for originating a global pandemic. Even though this might not be the only reason, it seems oddly convenient and coincidental.

In addition, the open letter carries the signature of over 160 organizations as well as 140 individuals, highlighting the fact that the ideas brought up by this open letter are not the opinions of a single person but of a decent sized group who advocates for wildlife issues, globally. The letter also quotes WHO officials saying that “the WHO has defined health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being’” (Subsection 2.1 Para 1) and then it proceeds to explain how the pandemic is unleashing unprecedented economic and social chaos. But even after receiving this open letter, and after seeing all of the social, mental and economic effects of this world pandemic, the WHO has not addressed any sort of punishment to China, the second biggest contributor of the UN's budget. Even though the WHO could attempt to utilize a strategy of naming and shaming, it has done nothing. “Worldwide, nearly half a billion more people could be pushed into poverty, with the crisis disproportionately affecting women, leading to wide-ranging social impacts including human rights abuses. Over half the global population could be living in poverty after the pandemic” (Subsection 2.1 Para 1) - but even when there is a global pandemic going around, and there is a financial hardship across the globe the budget of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) is still immensely higher than the budget of the organization focused on the world's top priority this year, the WHO. Even though the WHO's budget has increased to \$5.84 billion to fight the pandemic for the year of 20-21 (World Health Organization), the DPKO's budget is still higher, at \$6.58 billion (Department of Peacekeeping Operations).

Further, the open letter suggested even a new approach for the UN towards the effects of this pandemic. It claims there is the need for a “One Health” coordinated approach both across the UN including many committees such as the WHO, the UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and even the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Perhaps then, the UN would have sufficient funds and arguments to confront its second greatest source of income.

### **The United Nations and its interests: Humanitarianism?**

Conversely, one cannot say that the United Nation is an insignificant institution whose sole focus is to enrich its employees, because it simply does not. Take for example the UNEP, according to Maljean-Dubois (2009), “this agency was originally devised as a catalyzer to encourage actions from other institutions dedicated to sustainable development [...] The role of the organization [...] is clearly to coordinate and provide general guidance for environmental programmes within the United Nations system, without, however, taking the central role in debates and decision-making processes in the environmental field, as is the case of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Commerce Organization (WCO)” (Mazzarino, Turatti, Petter ) meaning that even though the UNEP is a fairly small agency, its initial goal was to be an objective, a director for environmental agencies across the globe.

Further, the UNEP works through offices in six different regions across the globe, those being Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin American and the Caribbean, North America, and Western Asia. The fact that the UNEP has offices all across the globe seems to go against the idea that the agency as a whole exists merely for a financial benefit. In addition, the program has also several different priority areas, those being “1) Climate Change, 2) Disasters and Conflicts,

3) Ecosystem Management, 4) Environmental Governance, 5) Chemicals and Waste, 6) Resource Efficiency, and 7) Environment under Review” (Mazzarino, Turatti, Petter). These priority areas illuminate the idea that all of this structure does not seem to be created only due to some possible financial benefit.

The structure of the United Nations, most specifically the UNEP Governing Council is what perhaps most strongly supports the idea that the United Nations in fact does stick to its initial goals of being the humanitarian leader for the world. The Governing Council has 58 elected members, those are elected by the General Assembly and they come from all different areas across the globe. African states have sixteen seats, Asian states have thirteen seats, Eastern European states have six seats, Latin American states have ten seats and thirteen seats for Western European seats and other states. As it can be seen, the number of representatives does not necessarily correlate to the amount of wealth a nation has or contributes to the UN with, signifying that the number of representatives is independent from the amount of wealth of a determined region. Another factor that strongly suggests the UN does not in fact benefit economically nor politically from wealthy nations is how it breaks down its resources within its organization. Even though some departments receive more funding than others, if more closely examined, programmes such as the UNEP do “not benefit from a regular and mandatory fund based on UN's contribution scales, and it depends on the United Nations Economic and Social Council and on voluntary contributions to the programme” (Mazzarino, Turatti, Petter) further, “the Programme [has] no right to [establish] treaties or regulations. [...] its statute provides that the programme cannot exert authority on the States, or even on the international organizations, i.e., it cannot play the role of intervenor. This status removes a potential binding effect of its decisions, and those who receive its guidance shall decide whether or not to comply. This

prerogative shows that UNEP's role is that of an articulator.” (Mazzarino, Turatti, Petter) This excerpt illuminates the idea that the UN in all of its extensions still has no sovereignty nor authority to force a nation to comply to anything, therefore it does not make sense to fund an agency that is not able to physically enforce any of its decrees, sanctions, or laws. Thus, it would not be a safe move for a major nation to invest so much money into an organization that is not able to physically do anything enforcement wise, in comparison to efficacy wise.

In a TED Talk, David Jensen further explains how even though the United Nation has its foot on a little of every subject - as an international humanitarian organization must have - it appears that it has spread itself out too thin. Having an organization that is focused on improving the situation of every aspect of the whole world indeed sounds like it can easily spread itself too thin, especially relying on donations. Jensen further explores in his TED talk the fact that even though the United Nations helped countless nations to restore its environment, quality of life and overall lifestyle, the UN only published loose reports but not a “how to guide” per se, Jensen notes that somehow it never recorded its steps towards success or failure in a literary manner. Records are everything our society is constructed upon nowadays, if it was not for people properly recording their steps in the past, future generations would never be able to go beyond the basics. Jensen based himself off of this idea of building proper records to fully execute his idea of putting together records of how to aid a nation in need. Further, in his talk, Jensen illuminates different aspects of the recovery of a nation through the environment and how that can affect every other aspect of one’s life. For instance, the most prominent and relevant example Jensen gives is when he posed the questions of what people thought was the greatest source of conflict in Afghanistan currently, and even though most people answered the Taliban and ethnic differences, the greatest source of conflict currently is land and water. A huge source of conflict

in an underdeveloped nation are services that should be provided by the government to its citizens but for certain reasons they are not, such as having access to clean water - a human right.

Further, how can a nation like Afghanistan possibly be focusing on political benefits by being part of an international organization, when it is currently struggling to provide the most basic necessities to its citizens? The answer is that Afghanistan could not care less about how much funding the UN receives annually by the United States of China or any other nation, or even how much political or financial benefit it can have over other nations because its people are struggling with much more basic issues.

Upon Jensen's return from Afghanistan to the United Nations headquarters, he started to ask around and do research to see if he would be able to find a manual that could aid him in his mission to Afghanistan, in recovering a nation through its natural resources. When he could find none of the sort, he decided to take an initiative by himself and reach out to other UN branches that could be interested in helping. The aftermath of his simple request were 12 UN agencies, 25 external organizations from the private sector, 12 donors and foundations, 250 experts came forward offering their knowledge and resources through the study of 50 different countries. Though the end goal was only one policy and one field guidelines book, Jensen's initiative generated 6 books and 150 lessons, all of which are up on the internet for anyone who would like to read more about it. Jensen's initiative brings to life the UN's pure intentions, it shines a light at an agency that is not strongly funded at all, but still does all of the above, simply for the betterment of future nations in similar situations, simply to move the world towards a humanitarian end goal proposed by the UN. Jensen has shown the world the core of the UN: the ability to build peace through unexpected means.

Further, in agreement with Jensen's argument and actions, the website history goes into further details about the history of the UN, bringing relevant facts and explaining why the UN has the goals and is structured the way it currently is. As its opening argument, the source explains how major UN initiatives "include preventing conflict by exploring options to ensure peace, providing food and medical assistance in emergencies, and offering humanitarian support to millions of people around the world". (History Para. 1)) In addition, the source also brings up the fact that even though the UN is often criticized for its "policies, bureaucracy and spending" its accomplishments are countless, especially peacekeeping missions.

Additionally, the United Nations Charter says the organization has four main goals, those being to maintain international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations, achieve international cooperation in solving international problems, and be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends. And by following these goals, the UN had many successes in the past such as by providing food to 90 million people in over 75 countries, assisting more than 34 million refugees, authorizing 71 international peacekeeping missions, working with 140 nations to minimize climate change, amongst other successes. These accomplishments were not necessarily reached through the most well-funded agencies, but through the agencies that truly believed in the greater good and the goals of the UN, like Jensen believed.

In addition, it is easy to think that it is impossible to have such a big organization with no failures, and that is correct. The UN has also countless failures, and it is all clearly labeled and listed on their website such as the 1994 Rwanda Mission, the Cholera in Haiti, the Oil for Food program, the Crisis in South Sudan, etc. But once more, the organization is not trying to prove it is the best at what it does, but that it tries its best to help everyone.

## Conclusion

After all, it is easy to see daily how politicians withdraw from an agreement or a treaty, and how the UN is this big idealistic organization that does nothing truly relevant for the average American citizen. By seeing this sort of information, it is easy to wonder if this massive organization as well as nations are just in it for the money and political leverage they get from it. However, the analysis of whether an organization does anything in the name of the benefit from it can be a little tricky, such as it is the example with the UN. The UN is an international organization that works on nations volunteering to be part of it and then having to minimally contribute to it. Even though the UN has its goals, when looking through the lenses of reality, absolutely no nation would keep paying to be part of an organization that does not listen to any of their wishes. For instance, the United States by being its greatest contributor has not been as harshly punished for not reducing its carbon emissions into the atmosphere, and similarly, China, the UN's second greatest donor has not been sanctioned at all after the spread of coronavirus into the world - And they will certainly not be. This is simply because sanctions are imposed by the UN Security Council and both China and the US are permanent members who would veto any sanctions coming their way. However, on the greater scheme of things, even though the UN has a list of failures in its website, it only proves that it is not afraid to show that it is a relatively new organization and it still has a lot to learn. In order to sustain itself in a strongly capitalist world scenario, the United Nations must establish a middle ground between listening to wealthy nations who contribute to its budget, and in fact advocating for the betterment of the world through its goals. Overall, the UN's balance of benefiting nations that financially contribute and still pursue its humanitarian goals, shows the world that it is not about waiting for the storm to pass, it is about learning how to dance in the rain.

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