

SIPG POLICY BRIEF 39

Reforming the United Nations: Towards Accountability and Inclusive Global Governance

Insights from the United Nations Day
Seminar at North South University
Dhaka: October 23, 2025

December 2025



SIPG



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations Day Seminar 2025, jointly organized by the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG) at North South University (NSU), the H&H (Hussain & Hussain) Foundation, and the United Nations Association (UNA) Luton Branch (UK), brought together scholars, diplomats, policymakers, and practitioners to deliberate on the theme of critical review and evaluation of UN reform.

The seminar, held on 23 October 2025 at NSU's Syndicate Hall, examined the structural challenges facing the United Nations, particularly the continuing controversy surrounding the veto power of the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council. Participants agreed that while the UN remains the most essential platform for global interaction, its legitimacy and effectiveness are being tested by evolving power dynamics, the unchecked use of veto, and inadequate representation of developing nations in decision-making processes in particular.

Speakers called for a renewed effort to strengthen accountability mechanisms particularly modernize procedures within the UN system. They emphasized that countries like Bangladesh, with a long tradition of peacekeeping and humanitarian diplomacy, have both the moral credibility and institutional capacity to contribute to global reform dialogues. The event concluded that the UN must reform not to weaken its authority, but to restore global trust and ensure that it remains inclusive, effective, and representative.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The year 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, an occasion that invites reflection on its historic mission to preserve peace and promote human dignity. The UN's record in setting global agenda, consensus-building, making of rules and agreeing on principles, peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, and human development cooperation has been substantial, yet its political mechanisms, particularly the Security Council, has struggled to respond decisively to new forms of conflict and humanitarian crisis.

At the heart of this debate is the veto power held by the five permanent members. Originally intended to preserve great-power consensus and prevent direct conflict among the major victors of World War II, the veto has increasingly been used to block collective action even in the face of overwhelming international support. Conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Gaza, and Myanmar were repeatedly cited as examples where the veto has immobilized the Council, leading to humanitarian suffering and loss of faith in the institution's impartiality.

The seminar's timing and focus were therefore crucial: it sought to revisit the founding ideals of the UN, evaluate its performance in today's fractured global landscape, and reflect on realistic pathways for reform that balance purpose, functionality, fairness, and power. The central question animating the event was clear: how can the United Nations evolve to reflect 21st-century realities without compromising its foundational purposes and principles?

PROCEEDINGS OVERVIEW

The seminar opened with welcoming remarks from Mr. Syedul Islam, Joint Secretary General of the H&H Foundation, who framed the event as an opportunity to bridge academic reflection with policy action. The keynote speech was delivered by Dr. David Cheesman, Secretary of the United Nations Association (UNA) Luton Branch, UK, who provided a historical overview of the UN's evolution and an analytical critique of the veto's political and moral implications.

Dr. Nazia Khanum OBE, Chair of UNA-Luton, followed with her remarks that linked reform to the UN's civic mission of education, youth engagement, and community participation. Subsequent discussants, including Professor Imran Rahman, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and Dr. Mohammed Nuruzzaman, Professor of Political Science and Sociology at NSU, examined the institutional barriers that have historically obstructed reform efforts.



Dr. Saima Khan, Country Director of UNAIDS Bangladesh, reflected on the UN's humanitarian reach and argued that reform must enhance accountability to citizens. Dr. Susan Vize, Head of Office and UNESCO Representative to Bangladesh, emphasized the cultural and educational dimensions of reform. Mr. Sufiur Rahman, Senior Research Fellow of SIPG made an evaluation of the efficacy of the Specialized Agencies and other Organs of the UN, while the UNSC remained hamstrung owing to geopolitical considerations of the major players. Brigadier General (Retd.) Dr. M. Sakhawat Hussain, Adviser to the Ministry of Shipping, underscored the diplomatic role of neutral and mid-sized countries such as Bangladesh in building global consensus.

The session was moderated by Professor Sk. Tawfique M. Haque, Director of SIPG, and chaired by Professor Abdur Rob Khan, Treasurer and Pro-Vice Chancellor (In-Charge) of NSU, both of whom highlighted Bangladesh's contribution to global governance debates and the importance of incremental, evidence-based reform.

THEMATIC INSIGHTS FROM THE SEMINAR

Role and Contribution of the UN and its Agencies

Speakers emphasized that although the UN's political divisions, particularly within the Security Council often draw criticism for its paralysis, the broader UN system continues to deliver significant and transformative work globally. Interventions at the seminar highlighted that the UN's specialized agencies and operation system such as the UNDP, UNESCO, WHO, ILO, UNICEF, UNAIDS, UN Women, and others have not failed.

The keynote underscored that it is a misconception to declare that "the UN has failed." The UN has succeeded to a great extent in its mandates on development, humanitarian action, norm-setting, and institution-building, even as the Security Council often fails to prevent conflict. Thus, the seminar concluded that the UN's failure is not institutional despite rooms for functional improvements, but largely political, specifically concentrated in the domain of peace and security where the veto disrupts consensus.

UNESCO, represented by Dr Susan Vize, plays a vital role in strengthening education, cultural preservation, scientific cooperation, social inclusion, and communication, all of which foster conditions for sustainable peace. The UN's human development approach under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains one of its most successful frameworks, guiding national priorities and international cooperation. Dr Saima Khan noted, UN agencies continue to "protect lives every single day" through public health programs, surveillance systems, rights-based initiatives, and support for marginalized groups.

Challenges to Multilateralism

Multilateralism today faces a crisis of credibility, driven largely by structural imbalances that date back to the post-World War II settlement. Speakers noted that the UN's framework has not adapted to contemporary geopolitical realities and that power politics, particularly the strategic interests of major powers, has repeatedly undermined collective decision-making. As Professor Imran Rahman emphasized, the problem is not with the idea of multilateral cooperation but with a system where "institutional structures lag behind the expectations of global society."

Panelists such as Dr Nuruzzaman and Ambassador Sufiur Rahman further highlighted growing frustration in the Global South, where many states feel excluded from meaningful participation in global governance. Financial constraints, geopolitical rivalries, and widening North-South divides have weakened trust in the UN, leading some to question whether multilateralism can still deliver equitable solutions. Be that as it may, the UN's norm setting and contribution to developing globally recognized principles generally protected interests of the weaker nations and averted huge number of armed conflicts, Ambassador Rahman argued. The seminar stressed that without renewed commitment to transparency, inclusion, and open dialogue, multilateralism risks losing its moral and political legitimacy.

Reform of the UN and in Particular the UNSC (Expansion Not Necessarily the Answer)

Speakers converged on the view that UN reform is essential but must be realistic. While the expansion of the Security Council is frequently proposed, the seminar emphasized that expansion alone cannot resolve the deep structural issues that undermine the Council's efficacy and relevance. As highlighted in the keynote, simply adding more permanent members risks replicating existing inequalities, especially if new members demand veto rights. The fundamental challenge remains the concentration of power among the P5 and the aspiring Permanent Members and the lack of mechanisms to hold them accountable to the general membership.

The seminar emphasized that given the wide divergence of positions meaningful reform is more likely to emerge from procedural innovations than from attempts to amend the UN Charter, which requires unanimous consent of the P5. It was opined that the Accountable Veto Resolution Initiative (AVRI) and relevant General Assembly resolutions demonstrate that reform can be pursued through enhanced transparency, structured scrutiny of veto use, and greater involvement of elected members. Participants agreed that the UN must evolve through practical, achievable steps rather than symbolic structural changes.

The Veto Power and Collective Responsibility

Participants agreed that the veto system remains the most pressing structural barrier to the UN's ineffectiveness in resolving conflicts and hence damaging its own credibility. Dr. David Cheesman argued that the veto, while historically justified, has turned into a "structural obstacle to justice." He proposed introducing procedural accountability, such as institutionalizing a requirement that any veto will automatically trigger a General Assembly review to maintain transparency and collective scrutiny. Ambassador Sufiur Rahman suggested creative involvement of the UNGA in case of repeated inability of the UNSC to take decisions as well as procedural improvement on automatic referral to the UNGA in case of an agreed level of super-majority in favour of any decision that the UNSC fails to take, owing to recurrent veto. Several speakers endorsed the idea that procedural reforms could save the UN from decision-making paralysis.

Restoring Credibility Through Reform

Dr. Nazia Khanum OBE stressed that the UN's moral authority rests not only on its ability to mediate conflicts but also on its role in improving lives. She observed that peace and development are inseparable and called for reform that reconnects the organization's political mission to its developmental achievements. Her emphasis on youth engagement and civic education underlined the need to rebuild global faith in multilateralism through public awareness and participation.

Human Rights, Public Health, and Accountability

Dr. Saima Khan spoke passionately about the UN's operational role in safeguarding human lives. Drawing from UNAIDS' work, she remained how UN programs deliver tangible benefits improving health systems, supporting marginalized groups, and advancing human rights. For her, reform means ensuring that these results are more visible, accountable, and citizen-centered, so that people continue to see the UN as a protector of everyday dignity, not only a diplomatic arena.

Knowledge, Education, and Culture as Pillars of Reform

Dr. Susan Vize expanded the conversation beyond geopolitics by emphasizing the UN's intellectual and cultural foundations. She illustrated how UNESCO's programs in education, science, and culture strengthen social inclusion and global cooperation. Reform, she argued, must therefore be ethical as well as procedural. It must modernize the UN's engagement with education, heritage, and communication to keep it relevant to future generations.

The Role of Neutral and Mid-Sized States

Brigadier General (Retd.) Dr. M. Sakhawat Hussain reflected on the diplomatic importance of neutral and mid-sized countries in today's polarized

international environment. He argued that Bangladesh, with its strong record in UN peacekeeping and reputation for moderation, has the credibility to act as a bridge-builder among competing powers. His remarks reminded policymakers that reform is not only about structure but also about the quality of political will and moral leadership that member states bring to the table.

Academic and Policy Perspectives

Professor Imran Rahman and Dr. Mohammed Nuruzzaman both underscored that the UN's structural inertia cannot be resolved by radical measures alone. Instead, they called for gradual, consensus-driven reform informed by rigorous research.

SELECTED QUOTES & REFLECTIONS



“Reforming the veto power is not about weakening the United Nations, it is about restoring the world’s faith in it.”

Dr. David Cheesman
Secretary, UNA-Luton (UK)



“The world’s moral authority cannot rest on selective justice. Reform must make the UN truly representative of all humanity.”

Dr. Nazia Khanum OBE
Chair, UNA-Luton (UK)



“The UN must not only prevent wars; it must protect lives every single day.”

Dr. Saima Khan
Country Director, UNAIDS Bangladesh



“Reform must include education, culture, and ethics, not only power politics.”

Dr. Susan Vize
Head of Office and UNESCO Representative to Bangladesh



“Reform is not about dismantling the United Nations; it’s about making it the united peoples.”

Professor Sk. Tawfique M. Haque
Director, SIPG, NSU



“The policy of veto power has often become a tool of paralysis, preventing timely and effective action.”

Professor Imran Rahman

Vice Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB)



“Reform has stalled not only because of the veto power and great-power privilege, but also because the Global South remains divided and hesitant.”

Dr. Mohammed Nuruzzaman

Professor, Department of Political Science and Sociology (PSS), NSU



“Our challenge is to find ways to empower the General Assembly and create alternative mechanisms that allow for incremental reform.”

Ambassador Mohammad Sufiur Rahman (Retd.)

Senior Research Fellow, SIPG, NSU



“Bangladesh must no longer see itself as a peripheral player, but as a credible contributor to global governance.”

Brigadier General (Retd.) Dr. M. Sakhawat Hussain

Adviser, Ministry of Shipping, GoB

POLICY ANALYSIS: BALANCING CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The seminar revealed three enduring tensions within the UN system: effectiveness versus representation, accountability versus sovereignty, and continuity versus change. Participants emphasized that reforms should not seek to dismantle existing mechanisms but rather update procedures to make them more transparent, responsive and participatory. The use of the veto should be subject to public justification and review, while the General Assembly’s role in upholding collective responsibility should be expanded in particular when the UNSC faces total impairment for internal differences.

Speakers also agreed that reform must strengthen the link between peace, stability and development. The UN’s political credibility cannot be separated from its operational effectiveness in achieving its developmental deliverables such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A reformed UN, therefore, should integrate peacekeeping with humanitarian relief, education, health,

scientific and cultural cooperation. It should seek to further momentum on matters that create fragility and vulnerability such as climate change and environmental degradation. Such holistic reform would not only restore trust in the organization but also demonstrate that multilateralism delivers tangible and measurable outcomes for people across all regions.

RISKS OF STAGNATION

Several participants warned that failure to advance reform could have serious implications. If political paralysis persists, the gap between the UN's mandated work and public perception will continue to widen. In such a scenario, member states might increasingly rely on ad-hoc coalitions outside the UN framework, plurilateral mechanisms, undermining the universality of the multilateral system and creating room for making excuses for unilateral actions. Moreover, a continued representation deficit and inequity could deepen frustration among developing countries, threatening the UN's moral authority and operational legitimacy. Reform, therefore, is not optional. It is a strategic necessity for the UN's survival as a credible institution for multilateralism.

IMPLEMENTATION PATHWAYS AND MONITORING

For reform to gain traction, multi-track engagement is essential. Universities, think tanks, and civil society can serve as spaces for policy analyses, while governments can take the lead in championing procedural improvements. SIPG and NSU, for example, can host annual UN Reform Dialogues, bringing together diplomats, academics, analysts, practitioners and youth leaders to translate academic ideas into policy options.

Monitoring may be built around measurable indicators: the number of vetoes at the UNSC and General Assembly discussions before and after vetoes, the participation of developing countries and non-members in the Security Council debates, and the visibility of UN achievements in national and international media.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reform of the UNSC

Reforming the Security Council requires focusing on transparency of deliberations and accountability rather than expanding membership or creating new veto-wielding states. As several speakers noted, the political reality is that structural reforms requiring Charter amendments are unlikely to succeed, given the reluctance of the P5 to dilute their authority. Instead, incremental and achievable reforms such as requiring explanations for vetoes, creating opportunities for review veto decisions, and strengthening Council transparency may be considered.

The seminar highlighted the value of initiatives such as the Veto Scrutiny Panel under AVRI, which could allow UN member states to examine any veto and initiate broader discussion within the General Assembly. By reinforcing the idea that no veto should escape scrutiny, the UN can help promote a culture of responsibility within the Security Council. Participants stressed that the goal of reform must be to ensure that the Security Council protects collective interest rather than great-power privileges and geopolitical interests. Greater interaction between UN agencies and the Council could help integrate peace, health, education and non-traditional security aspects into global security deliberations.

Greater Role of UNGA

Speakers emphasized that the General Assembly, the UN's most representative organ, must be allowed to play a greater role in addressing global crises, particularly when the Security Council is ineffective and paralyzed. The permanent members should be encouraged to adopt voluntary restraint in situations involving mass atrocities or humanitarian emergencies. The UNGA Resolution 76/262, which mandates debate within ten days following the use of any veto, was identified as a significant step that should be strengthened through more substantive follow-up, independent reporting, and wider member-state engagement.

Participants also noted that the General Assembly should increasingly rely on mechanisms such as Resolution 377A ("Uniting for Peace") to uphold collective responsibility through an Emergency Session of the UNGA when the Security Council fails to act. By promoting open, transparent dialogue among the UN entities and extra-UN stakeholders and aligning reform discussions with research-based evidence from universities and think tanks, the UNGA can reinforce global trust and ensure that multilateralism remains grounded in fairness, equity, and broad participation.

The seminar underscored the importance of the General Assembly as a counterbalance to great-power dominance, helping preserve the inclusive spirit of the UN Charter.

Countries such as Bangladesh should build coalitions to use their diplomatic capital to facilitate consensus-building and moderate dialogue. Establishing training programs for young diplomats and academics on multilateral negotiation can strengthen this capacity for constructive mediation.

Foster Research-Policy Partnerships:

Institutions like SIPG and UNA-Luton can collaborate to produce policy briefs, working papers, and model procedures to contribute to awareness building of the problems that presently has been inflicting the UNSC and to contribute to

an informed debate. Such collaborations ensure that reform remains grounded in both scholarship and real-world policy experience of the practitioners.

CONCLUSION: RENEWAL, NOT REPLACEMENT

The United Nations Day Conference 2025 concluded that the world does not need a new organization, it needs a renewed, refocused, and reenergized United Nations. Reform must be practical, inclusive, and ethically driven, rooted in the conviction that global governance must have equity at its core. As one speaker aptly noted, reform is not about dismantling the United Nations, it is about transforming it to right aspiration of the United Peoples.

Bangladesh, through its commitment to peacekeeping, multilateral diplomacy, and sustainable development, is well positioned to collaborate with other stakeholders to advance this agenda to resurrect multilateralism. The UN's future depends on the collective commitment and determination of its members to strengthen equitable representation, and ensure that global cooperation serves all nations through a fairer global governance and reinvigorated multilateralism.



**This policy brief has been prepared by Riyasad Iqbal, SIPG, NSU
Under the supervision of Mohammad Sufiur Rahman, Senior Research
Fellow of SIPG, NSU**

**Design & illustration by
Communication Skills Development Academy (CSD Academy)**

Contact us

South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG)

North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Phone: +8802-55668200 Ext. 2164 | E-mail: sipg@northsouth.edu

Website: www.sipg.northsouth.edu

United Nations Association, Luton Branch, UK

Luton, Bedfordshire, United Kingdom | www.una-luton.uk

H&H (Hussain & Hussain) Foundation

Dhaka, Bangladesh

www.hhfd.org | facebook.com/hhfdoundation.page

M: +88 01988900300, +88 01672172673 | E: info.hhif.bd@gmail.com



SIPG



United Nations Association
Luton Branch
United Kingdom



H&H Foundation
Dhaka, Bangladesh