



United Nations Association in Canada
Association canadienne pour les nations unies

Op Ed
UN Day 2008 October 24

The Global Financial Crisis and One Global Meeting Place

UN Day (October 24th) marks the 63rd anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. The anniversary, coming at the zenith of the current global economic crisis has proven, again, how small the planet is and how interdependent are states.

In daily announcements of global and regional meetings urgently being arranged by leaders of the major international powers, the world is witnessing the primordial value of multilateralism in global crisis. A central function of the United Nations is to provide global norms. It is this norm-setting function that has many of our leaders looking to the UN's IFIs (the International Financial Institutions – developed in a meeting at Bretton Woods in 1945– and often referred to as the Bretton Woods institutions). In all the turmoil of the current crisis one of the key foci is the need to craft new regulatory safeguards.

While not immune to the effects of the market upheavals, Canada has so far fared relatively well in comparison to many other developed countries, and especially in comparison to developing countries. That very fact, however suggests that there is no better time to provide global leadership to the global community. This country is well placed to offer advice and expertise in a timely examination of the structure, use and global regulatory power of the IFIs. Our government should be working closely with others of foresight, including European Union leaders, as they press for an overhaul of the global financial system in the face of the current unprecedented market upheavals.

Included in those arrangements must be an application of the UN's mandate for fairness. All banks and financial institutions must be protected from being unfairly advantaged, or disadvantaged (including our own Canadian banks).

This is not a time for timidity. We must be bold in seeking solutions. A serious risk in crisis, especially when we are tempted to look inward, is to turn away from concern with our neighbours and our world. With financial crisis, a natural correlate is often protectionism. This is it is precisely the time when we must move pursuit of the common good and fairness to the top of the agenda, conscious that protectionism will perpetuate uncertainty and mistrust and risks penalizing those least able to rebound; those most vulnerable.

.../2

The very positives of globalization that bring us into a shared world in times of plenty, unravel most quickly for those marginalized already. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the UN cautioned in a speech at Harvard University “while recently we have heard much in (the US) about how problems on Wall Street are affecting innocent people on Main Street, we need to think more about those people around the world with no streets. Wall Street, Main Street, no street – the solutions devised must be for all.”

We urge the Prime Minister, together with Canadian financial leaders, academe and civil society, to lead in the global commons in bringing solutions to the those commons, to improving international bodies to anticipate, respond and share knowledge. There is an urgent need to work with other heads of government to keep humanitarian and development issues at the forefront of global stability, prosperity and peace and to do this through the institutions of the UN, which have continued to be the essential commons for the world community. We should also not forget that it is the other UN Agencies – those that deliver development and humanitarian assistance, such as UNICEF, UNHCR, and the World Food Programme - that will be front and centre in alleviating the effects of the financial crisis on the poorest of the poor.

It is a truism at all times that we would need to create a UN if it did not exist. Importantly, with the distraction of self-interested states threatening to pull the world body out of shape, we most recognize the truth of this statement during crisis. It will always be a challenge to meet the difficulties inherent in achieving cooperation between 192 countries characterized by vastly different social, cultural, religious and economic realities, but it is a challenge that must be met.

In essence, the UN provides a framework through which countries can jointly address pressing international concerns. This framework has proved quite effective at enabling a much deeper understanding of key international problems and determining more concerted, practical and creative approaches to dealing with them. This is the forum, imperfect though it may be, in which Canadians continue to expect our governments to lead.

Canada has an enviable, proven track record of providing solutions for improving international bodies to anticipate, respond and share knowledge; and to work with others to keep humanitarian and development issues at the forefront of global stability, prosperity and peace. It is a track record on which we must build.

Kathryn White
Executive Director
United Nations Association in Canada

(613) 232-5751