

A Duty to Shout? A debate on what it means to be an international  
civil servant in today's world  
**Wednesday, 2 September 2020 at 12.00pm EST**

### Overview

Young UN and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation are joining up for a three-part 'Young UN Talks' series to spark a debate in the UN system on what it means to be an international civil servant in today's turbulent world and political landscape. This topic has recently been brought into focus in the context of the #BlackLivesMatter, Fridays for Future, and #MeToo protests, strikes and social movements when different UN entities and offices have conveyed mixed messages regarding how UN personnel should balance the responsibility to uphold the Organization's values with the duty to remain impartial in the face of controversial matters. For instance:

- On 03 June 2020, the Ethics Panel of the UN issued guidance on staff regulations concerning political expression that was perceived to ban the participation of UN Secretariat staff members in public demonstrations, expressing that such activities may not be consistent with the independence and impartiality required of international civil servants.
- On 5 June 2020, 47 independent experts of the Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a joint statement on the Protests against Systemic Racism in the United States.<sup>1</sup>
- On 07 June 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association released a public statement to encourage the UN to lift restrictions that would ban personnel from exercising their right to peaceful protest fighting for justice, equality and dignity.<sup>2</sup>
- On 09 June 2020, the Secretary-General clarified that, "[...] staff are not to remain neutral or impartial in the face of racism. To the contrary, there is no ban on personal expressions of solidarity or acts of peaceful civic engagement, provided they are carried out in an entirely private capacity; rather, the guidance was meant to emphasize the need to balance such activities with one's best judgement as international civil servants".
- On 14 June 2020, 20+ senior UN officials of African descent released an opinion piece (OpEd), written in their personal capacities, calling for the UN to, "step up and act decisively to help end systemic racism against people of African descent and other minority groups".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25927&LangID=E>

<sup>2</sup> <https://freeassemblyandassociation.net/2020/06/07/lift-the-un-ban-on-protest-un-staff-have-the-right-to-peaceful-protest/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066242>

This calls attention to the complexity of the roles and responsibilities of international civil service and a core set of issues:

- How can the perceived conflicts between impartiality and other UN values and principles be resolved?
- What are the criteria that the UN applies when determining its position and how could personnel use them to assess their own actions in complex situations?
- What innovative ways would allow UN employees to advocate for the promotion of human rights inside and outside of the UN in line with the UN Charter and its values?

The objective of this seminar series is to discuss and document how these can be achieved and contribute to clarity and change. Concretely, the virtual discussion is expected to increase awareness about the need for the UN (and its personnel) to better define what it means to be impartial international civil servants in different contexts while defending the values enshrined in the UN Charter and international human rights conventions. The discussion aims to highlight new tools and ideas that could guide UN senior leadership in designing and implementing policies (at the institutional level) as well as UN personnel in assessing their application (at an individual level).

## About Young UN Talks

Young UN Talks is an initiative that aims to showcase the positive impacts of the UN's work and to provide a platform for UN personnel to reflect on and share their own experiences. It sparks open and honest debate around issues that need to be addressed for the UN to overcome organizational obstacles, including those posed in the current political environment. In so doing, Young UN Talks give visibility to the everyday work of the Organization and its employees.

This Young UN Talks series is co-organized by Young UN and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. It will be conducted in a moderated dialogue setting with one or more (senior) UN officials providing different perspectives. This three-part series will explore themes related to the evolving role of international civil servants and UN leadership.

## About the co-hosts

In regular dialogue since 2016, Young UN and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation have previously collaborated on both convenings and publications, including the event '*Embracing the human rights agenda as an international civil servant*', the blog series '*How can Young UN be drivers of Change? Perspectives of Young UN civil servants on UN leadership, integrity and accountability*' and the Foundation's 2020 Report, '*The Art of Leadership in the United Nations: Framing What's Blue*'.<sup>4</sup>

Working towards a vision of a UN that fully embodies the principles for which it stands, Young UN recognizes the need for genuine change in order for the UN to effectively meet the challenges of this century. With more than 1,800 members across UN entities in 80+ duty stations, Young UN adds value as a cross-UN space to crowdsource ideas, a platform to pilot and drive innovation, and a bottom-up mechanism for mindset change to realize the UN's values and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/un\\_leadership\\_2020.pdf](https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/un_leadership_2020.pdf)

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation is a non-governmental organization established in 1962 in memory of the second UN Secretary-General, which aims to advance dialogue and policy for sustainable development and peace. The Foundation's work on ethical leadership and the integrity of the international civil service builds on Hammarskjöld's legacy with an aim to ensure the UN's continued relevance and effectiveness in the face of contemporary global challenges.

## Format

The 90-minute event will be organized online and jointly moderated by a representative of the co-hosting organization/network. Young UN members are expected to constitute the largest segment of the target audience, but registration information will be promoted on the UN's intranet to encourage wider participation by UN civil servants. The event's provocative title intends to spark a debate-style discussion intended to catalyze follow up conversations in more intimate and interactive formats. This event will be held under the Chatham House rules and will not be recorded.

This event will be conducted in English only with no interpretation to other languages, including sign language interpretation. Live captioning will be available.

## Session run down

- Short introduction by moderator of the topic and panelists (5 min)
- First segment (“inspirational exchange”): Speakers respond to 2-3 guiding questions presenting arguments (25 min, 5 minutes for each speaker)
- Second segment (“hot-seat”): Speakers respond in 3 minutes maximum to “hot seat” questions from participants, or preselected from registration form inputs, if necessary (45 min)
- Vote on next steps and closing (15 min)

## Speakers

- Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association
- Elia Armstrong, Director of the UN Ethics Office
- Mona Ali Khalil, Founder and Director of the Mark Law International
- Fabrizio Hochschild, Under-Secretary-General and Special Advisor the Secretary-General on the Commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UN
- Henrietta Maria De Beer, Chief of the Human Resources Policies Division of the International Civil Service Commission