

EVAP Ep 55- Natalie Samarasinghe

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SPEAKERS

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Natalie Samarasinghe



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Deputy Executive Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention, and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today I'm speaking with Natalie Samarasinghe, Executive Director of the Public Engagement Platform for Climate Action. Natalie was previously the CEO of the United Nations Association UK, Chief of Strategy for the United Nations UN75 initiative, and co-founder of the 1 for 7 Billion Network. Natalie is also one of the Global Centre's esteemed International Advisory Board members. Thank you for joining us today, Natalie.



Natalie Samarasinghe 01:12

Yeah, thank you so much.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:13

Natalie, you've spent your career working in the human rights space across civil society, philanthropy, and the UN system. Can you give us a bit more detail about your background and what drew you to this area of work?



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 04:48

You know, on the multilateral system, I'm really curious what led you and your co-founder to start the 1 for 7 Billion, which is now 8 Billion Campaign, and what issues does the campaign aim to address in the Secretary-General process?



Natalie Samarasinghe 05:05

So some of those issues I was talking about, you know, where does the international system act as a safety net, a multiplier, a support system, or, you know, have a kind of sharper role to play? I think a lot of the issues to do with that are systemic. The UN, the whole post-1945 system, is, you know, it comes with baked-in structural flaws. It's kind of deliberately designed to preserve an unequal power dynamic. There's heavy constraints on the ability of institutions like the UN to really act without consent, and changing those institutions is really slow, it's cumbersome. We often end up solving for the problems of yesterday or a decade ago, much too late, in a really limited form. So, having spent so much time trying to work on these reform processes, really, I think the best theory of change, and where I've really seen change happen, is leadership. And that's why we really wanted to focus on the selection of the Secretary-General, not because, you know, the SG has this ability to kind of change course and push back and act independently of geopolitical constraints, but because, you know, a good leader is able to both navigate the spaces that do exist, to bring creativity and innovation to the role, and to really get reforms going in a much more kind of incremental way so that we can actually act in a timely fashion. And the selection process, I mean, it wasn't a process at all. The UN Charter says absolutely nothing about it. It sort of says the role is appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council. That's it, that's all. Everything else that has happened in the past has been, you know, based on practice, on the wishes of states, on precedent, it's--there's nothing else there. And we thought it was fundamentally unfair that, you know, the 7 billion people of the world were affected by this decision, in more or less tangible ways, have literally no say. The 193 Member States that make up the UN have virtually no say, save for the five permanent members of the Security Council, who would take the decision behind closed doors, subject to all sorts of pressures, trade-offs, deals. We had, you know, ridiculous examples in the past where the other members of the Security Council, the non-permanent ten members didn't actually know who was in the race. So how are they making an informed recommendation? Or it was clearly presented as a done deal for the General Assembly to rubber stamp. In, I think, one or two instances, even the candidate was sort of taken by surprise. I mean, put forward in some kind of compromise situation between big powers. And we thought, you know, in any other job, including when other parts of the multilateral system, that's just not acceptable. So we wanted to put in place the basics. Let's know who the candidates are. Let's hear what their vision statement is. Let's have dialogues, give them the opportunity to interact with the whole membership and to perform in public. And you know, you can sort of question how much the public element of that is performative or not, but ultimately, this is a public profile role. You have to be able to thread the needle between balancing the geopolitical, you know, sensitivities and still being able to represent the values of the UN. So we just wanted to put this, put in place like the basics of any recruitment process, and hopefully build from there.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 08:49

That's so fascinating. I don't think I really appreciated how unstructured the process previously was, because I've seen the current process, and so far there's been, I guess, what were considered at the time the four candidates, now a fifth one has been added, engage in public dialogues, and I saw the process for the election of Guterres 10 years ago, but I don't think I appreciated how behind closed doors it was previously.



Natalie Samarasinghe 09:19

Yeah, we used to say it was, you know, more opaque than the selection of the Pope, because the Security Council wouldn't necessarily even send smoke signals. They have this sort of very arcane process of, you know, color-coded ballots. It feels like something my daughter would do, kind of in kindergarten, you know, you get the red card to play if you're, you know, a veto-carrying member, or or white. So it was really, really opaque, and I think, I guess, I have a lot of thoughts about things that we could have done better and differently, and the flaws that are within the process. I think there's a right challenge to say the whole public element is performative, it's still a power selection, but I think there's no denying that the dialogues, especially the very strong performance that Guterres is seen to have put in 10 years ago. You know, he went from being someone who was a contender but not a front-runner to really being a front-runner. At the same time, the weaker performances that were put in by some of the front-running candidates really impacted them, and even the permanent representatives to both the US and Russia acknowledged that it had some impact. You can't ignore the momentum of it. So, I think that's important, but it's also important that you know this is only the second time we're doing this like this. So there is a lot of room, I think, for states, for the President of the General Assembly, and even for us in civil society to innovate and shape and create those precedents. So things like, people say it has to be a candidate from Latin America and the Caribbean, that is a strong expectation, and they're great candidates from the region, it's not actually a baked in rule, it's a practice.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 10:58

Kind of building off of that last point on a lot of people saying it should be a candidate from the Caribbean, you know, over the last few selection cycles, there has also been increasing pressure for the first woman Secretary-General. You know, what would that represent substantively beyond symbolism of having the first woman?

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Natalie Samarasinghe 11:18

I mean, I think there is just, you know, a basic level of equity here. We've had eight decades of men. We've not, I think, until the last time there were, you know, only a handful of women were even seriously considered. I think forcing the transparency and open nominations led to, you know, more and more women on the ballot last time and this time, and that's great. So, I think there is a basic equity question here. The UN represents human rights, it represents equality. It is in the charter, that is actually something that is explicit in the charter. So, I do think that that is a point. But I think, you know, we're looking at, really, a leader who needs to have the foresight to reimagine the UN at a time when its future is at stake. You need to have the kind of--the courage to be able to kind of close agencies, I think, and pull out of areas of work where the UN is not the only actor capable of doing the job. You need to be a kind of skilled mediator, convener, you know, be able to move beyond all the different forums, formal and informal, that now make up the more complex and fragmented multilateral system. So I think this is about a kind of competent, empathetic, experienced leader who can kind of shrink the UN without compromising the dignity I think of those it serves. So I think there's a question, regardless of gender, that that's, you know, one of the skill sets that's needed. But I do think there is an impact that is beyond the symbolic. I mean, this is a time when basic norms, rights are being questioned, and when there's also a lot of focus on double standards, you know, most, you know, most sharply in the context of, you know, atrocities and conflict and aggression, etc. But also there, again, there's a basic issue of the UN being able to walk the talk on the issues that it is supposed to defend, and about showing that there is an alternative, I think, to this sort of polarized way we see the Secretary-General's role. It's always, is it a general, is it a secretary? And that pushes you towards certain types of leaderships and peoples moments, and I think this is about having someone who can operate in many different ways, and you know, quite frankly, if you are a woman and you've reached that level of experience, which, you know, the candidates so far have, despite all the structural, the personal discrimination that women in public life face, I'm sorry, you probably had to fight a lot harder to get there. I think this is about inspiring people, reconnecting people with the mission of the UN, making it relevant, and you know, not having another kind of faceless bureaucrat, quite frankly, or someone who looks different, I think, could help. So, I don't want to fall into the trap of, oh, women are more consensual, women are this and that, I think, you know, certainly looking at the candidates now, they have had senior roles in defense, in, you know, in peacekeeping, and managing youth brokers. These are not your traditional soft, you know, female-coded traits, they exhibit both. But I think it's about having that diversity.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 14:36

I appreciate how you kind of talked about, like, the is it a secretary, is it a general, you know, and it can't, I agree that it can't be just a faceless bureaucrat and someone very technical, kind of without the larger kind of leadership qualities and perspectives that I feel like the moment demands. So I'm curious, you know, recent--the public dialogues with the four candidates that were known, I guess two weeks ago, highlighted proposals for more proactive engagement with the Security Council during crisis, such as greater use of Article 99 and increased in-person participation in council meetings. You know, in your view, how can and should the Secretary-General more effectively leverage their authority, particularly in the current moment, in the current kind of state of geopolitical differences, the current state of violations of IHL, and just the way the world is at the moment to drive earlier and more proactive engagement?

So, that is, you know, that is really the key question, that's the million dollar question. I do need to say, kind of in the interest of transparency, that my fund is actively supporting and working, you know, with candidates. We primarily work on climate policy, energy policy issues at the national level, but we really recognize the opportunities that you have if you have a functioning multilateral system and UN that can support national governments. But also the risks of not having that and having a kind of compromised or captured or failing system. So we are doing that. I think it was really interesting to see, again, that archetype of Secretary or General or Dag Hammarskjöld who's, you know, seen as the type of Secretary-General we need for this moment. I think that really played out in the dialogues. So, I think it's interesting for one reason: one, there's this, you know, a huge focus on the UN's role in peace and security, and that effectively kind of sets up, you know, do we have an SG who can mediate and resolve conflict, etc. And again, just to say on the female issue, you know, however you conceive of this role, there are qualified women and they're qualified women who are standing now, who have that experience, who can do that. But I think what it doesn't take into account, that framing, is the space that the Secretary-General has within the UN, and the space that the UN has in the current geopolitical environment to really make a difference. So, of course, we need a Secretary-General who will show up, be creative, you know, really go through the hard work of engaging with all the big powers, engaging with all the other countries as well. This is not just about managing the Security Council, and I think that was also quite obvious from the dialogues. You have the majority of Member States who are, of course, interested in peace and security, but they're also interested in the impacts that these crises have in the kind of secondary and tertiary way on energy, food, debt, you know, all the other issues that they're facing. There were so many questions on development, that's not really had, I think, the attention it deserves, and arguably the UN has more space in this role. So, I think this is, you know, the moment for a person who can say, of course I'll try, of course I'll try and get some space, you know, the UN needs to be able to offer the Secretary-General's good offices to the international community and states. But what does that really mean today? Today we see an environment where a number of leaders of very large and very small countries clearly want to play a role in mediation, they want to be the conflict, you know, negotiators, solvers, etc. What can the UN Secretary-General do to support those actors? So it's not just, you know, strengthening the UN's mediation benching capacity for itself, it's what is the toolbox it offers others? And then I think there's a real role in the diplomacy around those secondary and tertiary effects. So, if you look at fertilizer shortages or bottlenecks in other kind of, you know, much needed commodities, countries hoarding them, etc., there's a different type of conflict diplomacy that is about managing those impacts and getting ahead of them. And then I think there is, you know, just, you mentioned Article 99, again, you know, there's nothing in the chart about the UN being--the UNSG being a general or an active mediator, that is very much a practice that's developed through the incumbents of the role. For me, Article 99 is kind of a last resort, just like raising the alarm publicly is a bit of a last resort. There is a lot that the Secretary-General needs to do to be able to both offer their services, work with a wider range of actors, look at the different spaces where conflicts now move, you know, in the trade dimension, that's a huge kind of, you know, real battleground, in the AI area... There are just different fronts where geopolitical conflict and actual conflicts are playing out, where the UN doesn't really have the space, let alone the Secretary-General, so what can this new person do to increase that space, but also just take a much more humble approach to their own role and the role of the UN?



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 20:13

Yeah, and I think that kind of brings me to one of the questions I have, which is, you know, to the extent that the selection process and the SG, given that it's, you know, something where they can run for a second term, and the geopolitical vying that happens throughout the selection, it does become a bit, like, you know, electoral politics that we see within states. So, how much agency does a Secretary-General really have versus being constrained by, you know, the demands of 193 Member States, or, you know, sometimes the demands of, you know, 15 Council members?



Natalie Samarasinghe 20:58

Yeah, or five, or three, or two, or one in particular. I think, look, I think weirdly, this is in as much as it's an awful moment, there is also a real opportunity for the Secretary-General in a way that I don't think there has been, because of the financial crisis, which, you know, itself is part of a much longer crisis of legitimacy, politics, structure, etc., but it does offer space in saying, you know, how does the, you know, the UN needs to shrink, but how? And at the moment, what we're seeing, unfortunately, is this kind of salami slicing across the board of, you know, cuts-first approach, where it's just about reducing the footprint, reducing the costs. Where I think you could do it in a really interesting way, which would be, what are the functions the UN can transition, divest, pass on to local actors who are arguably better placed, you know, national governments, regional governments, local partners, who are, you know, arguably better placed, but also actually have more legitimacy and greater accountability and through-line to the people than the UN? So I'm thinking, you know, the areas that we often say are the kind of poster areas for the UN, and why it's needed: humanitarian assistance, development. I often say the UN says it vaccinates two-thirds of the world's children, that's great, but should it do that? That's where the most of the resources go. So you can see someone coming in with an opportunity to cut not just across the board with a cuts-view, but actually saying strategically, where does the UN add the most value? What is a kind of principle of subsidiarity? What can only the UN do? And then you're left with a much harder but interesting set of tasks around norms, human rights, atrocities, conflict mediation, which are really hard to replicate. And you also free up, quite frankly, like two-thirds of staff work on kind of development, humanitarian issues, three-quarters of the budget. You get out of this kind of fundraising cycle because we're saving lives if you actually can manage a kind of transition where you're responsibly divesting yourselves on the task, so you aren't risking lives. You know, it is very difficult to do, but then ultimately you're in a much more sustainable position, where it is a smaller UN, it is a leaner UN, but it's also a UN that is really focused on the tasks that are needed. Doesn't mean it's easy, those are the hardest tasks, but I think there is an opportunity amidst the crisis to reframe that role of the UN. And it's not just, you know, the mediation norms, there's things like foresight, analytical capacity, technical assistance, as a host of other things where I think a creative SG could make headway. And then you get to carve out a different sort of relationship where you're not just chasing the money. I do think the whole question of having two terms is tricky. I mean, people often say, do SGs really get better in their second term? I mean, some have, you know, some did, some didn't. But I think what--it's not about kind of whether or not they do better in the second term, I think it's about fundamentally changing that incentive structure, where you have a candidate who knows they're going to have to be, you know, reappointed, even if it's a bit of a tick box. So you either need to make that a proper process or you need to just have a single term. Because I think the worst aspect of this is the trading that goes around the senior kind of under-secretary-general posts. They have been used to park

political has-beens, people who are inconvenient, or just, you know, get a little retirement bonus before they bow out of national politics, who are grossly incompetent. We've had monopolies on, you know, peace and humanitarian and other posts for a long time. There have even been cases where fairly recently, you know, the SG has tried to reform and merge departments, and then everyone says, "Yes, of course, we want you to cut and merge and streamline, but we still need to keep our two USGs, and we can't compromise." So, you look at where the current cuts have been falling in terms of the level of staff. So I do think, you know, we do need to relook at that. So anything that will strengthen the hand of the SG. I think also having a more balanced role for the General Assembly in the appointment, which I'm hoping we will see this time. I think there's been a real recognition that both principal organs are charged with this appointment. So what can we be doing in the General Assembly that's within the mandate and powers of the General Assembly and the President of the General Assembly to really make sure they feel like they have, you know, some sort of a say and are not just accepting a diktat from the Security Council. So, you know, I think if I had to pick single term seems to be one way to resolve this. You could also look at a stronger role for the GA in signaling, you know, candidates that, you know, it likes, its kind of own version of stroke holes. You could also look at a better way to test at the interim. It may be a combination of all three. But we have to find ways to kind of relook at the UN SGs role as that kind of--their key relationships just being the permanent members. And I think that's ultimately when we were setting out to do the 1 for 7, now the 1 for 8 Billion Campaign, it was, yes, it was about the voice of the people, but it really was about the voice of all Member States as well.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 26:31

Interesting. And, you know, I'm also wondering, in a scenario where the GA had more influence, do you think it would help produce a candidate or a Secretary-General who's maybe more willing to stand up to the permanent 5 members? And the reason I'm asking is, you know, coming from an atrocities perspective, you know, we currently have a Council where at least three permanent members are implicated in atrocities at the current moment, two of which have, you know, blatantly violated the UN Charter. And I'm not sure if we've seen Guterres really, aside from statements, kind of stand up and say, like, "You've agreed to this charter and the principles of the UN, principles of multilateralism, and you're violating them, but should be kind of setting the example for others." So yeah, would a more empowered GA kind of prevent that in the future, or are we still going to have this kind of dynamic where the P5 really have so much sway over what the SG can do?

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Natalie Samarasinghe 27:48

I think, I mean, I don't know if the empowered GA leads necessarily to a better Secretary-General, however we define that. And I don't think it would necessarily be a good thing to get involved in it, to kind of foment some kind of Security Council versus General Assembly type dynamic. I think that leads to a lot of performative speeches, stalemates, issues pinging back and forth--I don't think that actually helps people. What I do think has been interesting, and you kind of picked it up a little bit in these initial dialogues with candidates, is you can't be seen to just be beholden to one group, including the P5. So anyone who seemed to be playing too much to that gallery, you can see that, I thought the statement by the Permanent Representative of China, which now holds the Security Council Presidency, was really interesting when they said, "Yes, we want someone who, you know, can stand up for all three pillars of the UN, and especially development." The implication being we haven't heard enough about that. So, I think again, someone who can thread the needle between development and peace and that complementarity. I think ultimately having a stronger GA role would be useful for a couple of things. One, in just like the basic kind of framework principles that every Member State has signed up to, you need to have that. If we get too into our own interpretations of this and that, I think that is one of the core roles of the Secretary-General is to be like, "This is what the Charter says, this is what we signed up for." So that's one. I think the second is, you know, the double standards issue is really pervasive, and I don't think, again, the GA is always the right remedy for that, because you have double standards that play out in that space as well, but the Secretary-General's role in being consistent in calling out, which is where you get back to that dynamic of them not being beholden to the P5. You just have to be absolutely consistent and not bite your tongue. And that's the way you kind of, I think, you get into a lot of trouble as a Secretary-General if you're very vocal on certain issues in a timely way, but not about others, or you, you've kind of prevaricated a bit on, is something a genocide or not, or whatever. I think that is, like when the Secretary-General chooses to speak and how. I think ultimately, though, a stronger role for the GA just creates space for the issues. This is all about creating political space. This whole process, for me, it's about--it's a way to have a bigger picture conversation about the UN that isn't about where can we cut, how can we cut, where are we going to get 20 per cent, 30 per cent whatever. This is about what kind of a UN do we want and need in this world? And the second thing is, can you use the process to build up momentum, lay the groundwork, plant some seeds for things that the Secretary-General can actually do? With a good cohort and backing of Member States. Otherwise, they get into power, they want to do something. What are they going to do? High-level panel, some conference, five years' time we might have solved something... that has moved on. So, is there a way to shortcut that through this process? So, this is all about opening space, increasing legitimacy, reducing the perception of double standards.

@GCR2P

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 31:04

Amazing, and you know, I think that also leads to my next question, which is, you know, regardless of who comes out of this selection process, since the UN is in this reform moment, do you think there are things that the next SG could realistically change within their first year? And avoid this kind of cycle of, you know, exactly as you just said, like a panel and then a five year plan, and that we see so frequently?



I hope so. I mean, I think if they're smart, they'll use this process and the many closed door interactions they'll be having with, you know, individual and groups of states to kind of figure out where is there space to move. I think what's been really interesting to see in some of the discussions around the UN budget is how much potentially space the Secretariat and the Secretary-General did actually have to come with formulas. So states were kind of waiting to say, like, what are you suggesting we're cutting? How are we going to... they were saying cut, but the how was left very much in many ways to the Secretariat. And, of course, they have their own vested interests, etc. and their own pet projects and pet agencies and priorities. But, I think, you know, being able to kind of use these conversations to figure out where that space is. I think there is a demand for a vision, and it's a vision that isn't just, you know, candidates going around promising, "Oh, we'll cut the UN, and we'll do this and do that." It has to link to, but why are you cutting here? And maybe even having the courage to say that, yes, over time, once we're over this reform moment, I mean, some would say reform crisis, like, you know, we may actually want to be investing in certain capacities that might be useful as well. So I think this is about, here's a plan to meet these, you know, financial pressures, but in a way that is managed, that isn't chaotic, that is really looking to, where does the UN need to be in the future and where does it not need to be? For me, you know, building on my earlier points about where can the UN make the most difference on the peace and security side? For me, it's, you look at this current crisis and the fallout from Iran, it's all those not common effects, where there is a short-term diplomatic role to make sure that states and people can get the goods that they need and are not going to be in dire straits or have hunger crises because all their crops failed this year because they couldn't get fertilizers. It's about maybe being able to carve out a little bit more space for the UN on some of the finance, debt, and trade issues. But it's really looking at what is that longer term shock management role, because we're going to see more shocks. And Guterres, you know, really to give him credit, he tried with the emergency platform to do things for various reasons that didn't fly politically. We need something like that, so I think looking at those key areas of energy transition, adaptation, affordability, you know, it's those questions that are the pressing issues for states nationally. They need to be able to look to the international institutions to help create those conditions. And one of those conditions, yes, might be a whole basket of traditional peace and security issues, but I think it has to be connected in a much more real way. And then, I think the ability also to just be more small "p" political, having the experience of, you know, this is how you need to play things nationally. These are the kinds of constraints that governments who switch on to the UN dip in and out of these issues. You know, the missions are always engaged, leaders are, to you know, greater or lesser degree, usually a lesser degree. Being able to do that, and being able, I think, for me, crucially figuring out where the UN has more of an active role and where it is complementing, nudging, working with other forums, other groups. I think this, the real challenge will be not just kind of hopping from these different groupings, and there'll be more and more and more on issues, but actually saying, how can you take an agenda and guide, support it in navigating through these spaces? Here's a decision, here's a norm, here's legitimacy, here's getting buy-in. How do you use the G20s, the BRICS', you know, the regional organization much more creatively? One of my favorite kind of UN Secretary-General star moments is Kofi Annan, who, you know, maybe one of his finest acts of diplomacy was getting pharmaceutical companies around the table to agree, you know, lower cost and in some cases free access to antiretrovirals, which had a huge impact on the AIDS crisis. There are different types of diplomacy. So I just wish that we would get out of that kind of mold of writing into, you know, sit around a table, you know, knock heads together. Yes, there is that, but there are lots of other things too. I think all actors who are interested in the kind of protection, prevention, atrocities, rights space, is really what are the smart, politically feasible ideas that we can be feeding into this process? The selection process, but also what happens afterwards. Because

right now, it's an area where the UN, you know, there are, have been some successes. We tend to dwell much more on the failures in those areas, which are to some extent illustrative. But you know, really kind of, if you were in the Secretary-General's transition team, what can you be putting on the table that will just, you know, be a stepping stone, nudge the UN in that direction? I think that's something that we lack. I think you either have, you know, great ideas of what the Secretary-General should do, the UN should do, etc., without that political dynamic, or we have too much of the incrementalism. And I think really thinking about, what is the arc over, you know, the five years of an SG's term? You know, where can they make a difference? What should they be focusing on? What even does, you know, a success or progress for the UN look like? And how do we get the voices of those who really are affected, but also the ones who need to be the agents? How do we find out and calibrate the role of the UN in that? I think that's a big question, and I think it applies to other places as well, but I feel like this is the kind of sharpest area, and the area where there's the most need to go beyond what is either a very reductive, low ambition toolbox, where we're just in sort of damage limitation mode, or can we envisage a way back, and what does that kind of ladder look like?



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 38:19

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