

# Mental Health, the Human Face of an Effective Multilateralism

*La salud mental, el rostro humano de un multilateralismo eficaz*

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## **Abstract**

Global problems can only be solved through international cooperation and a more effective multilateralism. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a mental health crisis of global proportions. In this article, the authors describe the mental health actions taken by Mexico within the Security Council as part of its work plan for the 2021-2022 period.

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## **Resumen**

Los problemas globales sólo se pueden resolver a través de la cooperación internacional y de un multilateralismo más eficaz. La pandemia de covid-19 puso de manifiesto una crisis global en la esfera de la salud mental. En este artículo, los autores describen las acciones de México en el Consejo de Seguridad a favor de la salud mental como parte de su plan de trabajo para el bienio 2021-2022.

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## **Keywords**

Multilateralism, mental health, infancy, COVID-19, Security Council, Mexico, foreign policy

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## **Palabras clave**

Multilateralismo, salud mental, infancia, covid-19, Consejo de Seguridad, México, política exterior

# Mental Health, the Human Face of an Effective Multilateralism\*

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## Introduction

In the 77 years of its existence, the United Nations has been called out on numerous occasions for its ineffectiveness at solving the problems that afflict humanity, from armed conflicts to matters related to poverty, hunger, climate change, terrorism and pandemics, among others. Recent events like the war in Syria or, even more in evidence, the invasion of Ukraine, are clear examples of the limitations of the United Nations and, especially, the Security Council, to effectively address conflicts. The possibility of one of the five permanent members of the Council exercising its veto powers and blocking potential solutions is a very real one, and happens more often than we would like to see.

Similarly, the actions taken by the General Assembly and other U.N. agencies to, for example, ensure the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines were not entirely successful, even though the resolution sponsored

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by Mexico precisely for this purpose was adopted with the support of 179 countries.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, it is just as important to acknowledge the valuable contributions the United Nations has made to international law, the promotion and protection of human rights, gender equality, decolonization and actions to avert or settle conflicts, such as the deployment of more than a million troops on 70 peacekeeping operations, in addition to mapping out new routes and negotiating commitments to sustainable development, and fostering the conditions required to eradicate famine and prevent disease.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, what all this illustrates is that common problems, *i.e.*, global problems, can only be solved through international cooperation and a more effective multilateralism focused on the wellbeing of people, without exclusion or exception.

The secretary-general himself, António Guterres, has acknowledged that the United Nations has not always risen to the modern-day challenges that affect humanity. It was precisely for this reason, in response to the mandate of the Member States set forth in the Declaration on the commemoration of the Organization's seventy-fifth anniversary, that Guterres drew up *Our Common Agenda*. The proposals laid out in his report deserve a separate, more detailed analysis of their own, but what concerns us here is that they are based on recognition that what has not worked needs to be rectified, and innovative or complementary approaches to more effectively address the needs of people in situations of vulnerability proposed.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed a mental health crisis of global proportions.<sup>3</sup> In the spirit of humanist theses that advocate hu-

<sup>1</sup> U.N. General Assembly, "International Cooperation to Ensure Global Access to Medicines, Vaccines and Medical Equipment to face COVID-19," A/RES/74/274, April 20, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> U.N. General Assembly, "Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations," A/RES/75/1, September 28, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> António Guterres "Secretary-General's video message to launch the Human Development Report: "Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a World in Transformation," September 8, 2022, at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2022-09-08/secretary-generals-video-message-launch-the-human-development-report-%E2%80%9Cuncertain-times-unsettled-lives-shaping-our-future-world-transformation%E2%80%9D> (date consulted: March 23, 2023).

man dignity and the prevention of conflicts to avoid suffering, and in light of Mexico's recent experience on the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Human Rights Council (HRC), we decided to promote the issue of mental health as an indispensable aspect of an effective multilateralism with a human face.

## Multilateralism and health

Cooperation on health has come to be considered one of the main pillars of multilateralism. Understanding the world from the perspective of health is useful because, among other things, it explains the imperfections of global governance in terms of the capacity of countries to offer their populations equitable access to medical services and effectively handle national health threats (epidemics) and global ones (pandemics).

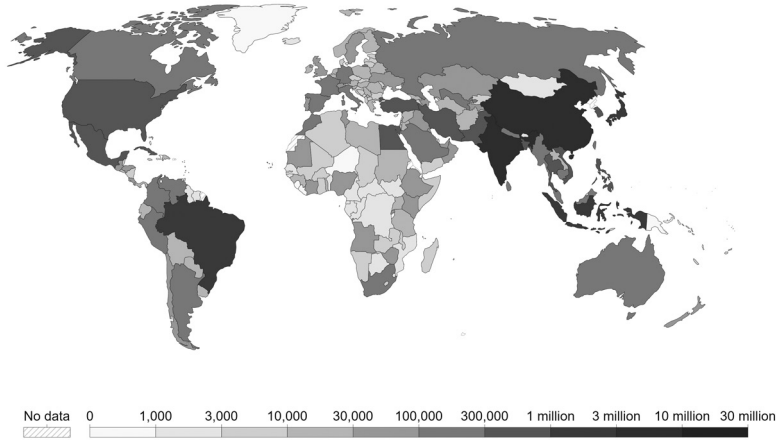
A clear example of the limitations of diplomacy in achieving public health objectives was access to COVID-19 vaccines, with the disparity between vaccination rates in more developed countries and less developed ones reaching unacceptable levels. Map illustrates daily doses of COVID-19 vaccines administered on a given date (September 21, 2021), on which vaccines were allegedly distributed on a mass scale. The contrast is outrageous and the number of deaths that could have been prevented even more so.

While there are many factors to explain the global shortage of vaccines (costs, stockpiling, intellectual property rights, bottlenecks in the global supply chain, excessive profitmaking, among others),<sup>4</sup> there can be no denying COVID-19 vaccines were unfairly distributed. Multilateralism let the world down, even though the United Nations implemented laudable mechanisms like the global platform for access to vaccines, better-known as COVAX, and initiatives promoted by the aforementioned resolution on international cooperation to ensure global access to medicines, vaccines

<sup>4</sup> Juan Ramón de la Fuente, "La escasez de vacunas", *El Universal*, 22 March 2023, at <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/opinion/juan-ramon-de-la-fuente/la-escasez-de-vacunas/> (date consulted: March 22, 2023).

and medical equipment to combat the pandemic that was sponsored by Mexico and adopted by the General Assembly.<sup>5</sup>

Map. Daily COVID-19 vaccine doses administered, September 21, 2021



Source: "Daily COVID-19 vaccine doses administered, Sep 21, 2021: 7-day rolling average. All doses, including boosters, are counted individually" Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations," in Our World in Data, at [https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?tab=map&zoomToSelection=true&time=2021-09-21&facet=none&uniformYAxis=0&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&hideControls=false&Metric=Vaccine+doses&Interval=7-day+rolling+average&Relative+to+Population=false&Color+by+test+positivity=false&country=-OWID\\_WRL](https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?tab=map&zoomToSelection=true&time=2021-09-21&facet=none&uniformYAxis=0&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&hideControls=false&Metric=Vaccine+doses&Interval=7-day+rolling+average&Relative+to+Population=false&Color+by+test+positivity=false&country=-OWID_WRL) (date consulted: March 23, 2023).

## Mental health and multilateralism

Until very recently, the issue of mental health was generally only aired at ECOSOC in relation to debates on other health issues. Mexico decided to take it to the Security Council as part of its 2021-2022 work plan.

Forums dealing specifically with this issue in New York were limited to those promoted by the Group of Friends for Mental Health and Wellbeing

<sup>5</sup> Pablo Arrocha Olabuenaga, "A Light in the Darkness: Mexico and the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 74/274," in *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, no. 119, January-April 2021, pp. 61-79.

established in 2018 and in which Mexico participates. These groups are formed by likeminded countries to discuss mental health strategies, but they have no formal mandate and depend on their members to function. For some of the permanent members of the Security Council, discussing mental health in the context of international peace and security was extremely contentious, even though the issue was beginning to take on increasing importance due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In September 2021, at the peak of the pandemic, the secretary-general made an unprecedented call to prioritize mental health and psychosocial support.<sup>6</sup> But while 95 U.N. Member States (Mexico included) endorsed a joint declaration along these lines,<sup>7</sup> some members of the Security Council were still opposed to including this issue on the Council's negotiating schedule, arguing that a specific reference to mental health was not necessary, that referring to health in general would suffice.

In keeping with its pro-dialogue diplomatic tradition, Mexico undertook systematic efforts to rewrite this narrative and explain why mental health should be a priority in the context of armed conflicts and situations that require humanitarian aid. Mental health needed to be addressed as a key factor in the paradigm of sustainable peace.

A milestone in the process was resolution 2601 (2021).<sup>8</sup> This was the first time a Security Council resolution included a paragraph explicitly acknowledging the harmful effects of forced displacements due to armed conflicts on the mental health of children.

Getting the Council to make an express reference to the non-conventional impacts of conflicts and threats to international peace and security in an official document was no easy task. The same can be said of mental health and psychosocial support for civilian populations and humanitarian

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, "Make Mental Health a Priority Across the Board, U.N. Chief Urges," in United Nations News, September 8, 2021, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099402> (date consulted: March 22, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> "95 U.N. Member States commit to action on mental health," in United for Global Mental Health, at <https://unitedgmh.org/knowledge-hub/95-un-member-states-commit-to-action-on-mental-health/> (date consulted: March 22, 2023); A. Guterres, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> U.N. Security Council, Resolution 2601 (2021), S/RES/2601 (2021), October 29, 2021, para. 15.

workers exposed to situations of conflict and post-conflict. But diplomacy opens doors and at the end of the day, that is its purpose. The strategy we used to achieve this was a three-pronged one.

1. Give greater exposure to the issue of mental health and psychosocial well-being at all U.N. debates and forums in which we participated. In other words, the issue was brought up whenever relevant and included in the agendas of bilateral meetings with diplomats, civil society and U.N. officials.
2. Propose references to the importance of mental health at all relevant negotiations and attempt to incorporate *de facto* language in the conclusions of negotiations on platforms like the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, where actions to protect children in such circumstances are frequently mentioned.
3. Promote and participate in events on this specific topic. One deserving of mention was an Arria-formula meeting of the Council on “Ensuring Access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Situations of Conflict, Post-conflict, and Humanitarian Settings,” where ways of guaranteeing access to mental health services and psychosocial support in such situations were discussed. The moving testimonies of some of the speakers and the reactions of the various delegations participating created a conducive atmosphere, highlighting the expediency of the issue and the importance of providing mental health services as a component of humanitarian aid. The Arria-formula meeting also proved to be the ideal forum at which to set aside gestures of good faith and, pursuant to established practice, hear all members of the Council speak on the issue and suggest concrete ways in which to facilitate the provision of mental health services in complex situations. In addition to the 15 members of the Council, 13 other Member States and the European Union participated. A summary of the main messages and recommendations issued in writing by several of the civil society organizations convened by Mexico<sup>9</sup> was later drawn up and circulated by the

<sup>9</sup> U.N. General Assembly/U.N. Security Council, “Identical Letters Dated 1 June 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council,” A/76/854-S/2022/456, June 6, 2022.

presidency. This document, essentially a “Call to Action” with specific recommendations, reaffirmed our commitment to the issue and was the basis of the draft resolution on the topic of mental health and sustainable development we submitted to the General Assembly.

On October 10, 2022, within the framework of World Mental Health Day, we circulated our call to action, comprised of 11 recommendations and specific commitments derived from the conclusions of the aforementioned meeting. Our reasoning was that we could continue making the most of the attention that had already been drawn to mental health to push the issue up the agenda at the various U.N. forums. By this time, we had garnered more support and collected sufficient supporting evidence. In June 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) had published its flagship report on the state of mental health in the world,<sup>10</sup> which served to further back our arguments.

By March 2023, the call to action proposed by Mexico had received 88 endorsements: 52 from Member States and 36 from civil society organizations (including the WHO and the International Committee of the Red Cross). The director-general of the WHO himself, Tedros Adhanom, called on Member States to support Mexico’s initiative via a video on his social media.<sup>11</sup> The direct, personal backing of the head of the leading U.N. authority on global health lent more weight to the recommendations. Other valuable support included that of United for Global Mental Health, a British NGO that echoed our recommendations aimed at helping countries deliver the call to action.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> WHO, *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All*, Geneva, WHO, 2022, at <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338> (date consulted: March 22, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (@DrTedros), “I urge all Member States to join #Mexico and other partners in signing the Call to Action on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support,” December 7, 2022, 9:28, on Twitter, at <https://twitter.com/drtedros/status/1600512593210269698> (date consulted: March 22, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Kline. “How U.N. Missions Can Help Deliver the Call to Action on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS),” in United for Global Mental Health, November 3, 2022, at <https://unitedgmh.org/knowledge-hub/call-to-action-mental-health-psychosocial-support/> (date consulted: March 22, 2023).



The General Assembly may soon adopt another resolution under topic 128 on the agenda (Global health and foreign policy). Broadly speaking, the proposed text deals with the issue of mental health in the context of peace and sustainable development, as one of the main pillars for making progress on the 2030 Agenda, specifically, SDG 3. It also acknowledges the connection between mental health and non-communicable diseases, and alludes to thematic issues related to health services, particularly access to these by people in situations of vulnerability.

If the new Mexican proposal is adopted, it will be the first resolution of the General Assembly focused on mental health and the perfect complement to what has been Mexico's greatest achievement in this area to date—the unanimous adoption of resolution 2668 (2022) by the Security Council,<sup>13</sup> just before the end of its two-year term. The latter was the first resolution of the Council to focus on the mental health of personnel deployed on U.N. peacekeeping operations. We managed to gather evidence to suggest substantive action needed to be taken to attend to the mental health of these personnel, who are strategic to peace and who work under enormous mental and emotional pressure.<sup>14</sup> In short, the goal was to establish a strategic, pragmatic link between the Council's mandate and mental health.

Negotiation of the resolution was unimaginably complex. We already knew some of the permanent members were reluctant to discuss matters deemed non-conventional, but one of the main contributors to peacekeeping operations also expressed grave reservations, arguing that there were already bodies in place to deal with the issue, like the General Assembly's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34). We countered that this specialized committee does not have as broad a scope as the Council and that, since the goal was to raise greater awareness of the issue, a body with limited impact on public opinion would not help us achieve our goal. Also, we reminded members that the Council's mandate is to establish

<sup>13</sup> U.N. Security Council, Resolution 2668 (2022), S/RES/2668 (2022), 21 December 21, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Namie Di Razza, *Mental Health in Peace Operations: Addressing Distress, Trauma, and PTSD among Field Personnel*, New York, International Peace Institute, December 2020.

effective peacekeeping operations and that failure to address the basic needs of personnel would be tantamount to renegeing on this responsibility.

After lengthy negotiations, we submitted our proposal. We anticipated three abstentions—Russia, China and India—, but were able to bring one of them into the fold with a final effort, which caused the other two to follow suit, resulting in the unanimous adoption of the resolution.

The equanimity and steadfastness shown by Mexico over the two years it served as an elected member of the Council put it on good footing with all the other members, which, along with the team's negotiating capacity, made it possible to bring their efforts to fruition.

The regrettable events in Ukraine are one reason mental health has made its way into the discussion and analysis of conflicts, while conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and certain African countries have also underscored the importance of providing more psychosocial support, particularly for people in situations of vulnerability, namely women and children.

## **The future of mental health in the Security Council**

Resolution 2668 (2022) was a watershed in getting mental health formally included as a component of the Security Council's mandate. Among other aspects, it requests that the U.N. secretary-general report on substantive progress on strategies adopted by the U.N. Secretariat. The topic lends itself to an in-depth analysis of the impact of other, equally polemical threats to international security, like climate change and the shortage of natural resources like water, on mental health.

It is the task of the Security Council as one of the main forums for multilateralism, and unquestionably the most visible in the public eye, to keep the spotlight on mental health if the dignity of people and their comprehensive wellbeing is to be fully acknowledged. It is also necessary if we are to continue progressing toward more humanist, more effective forms of multilateralism.