

Ethics at the Heart of a Renewed UN80 System

Toward an Institutional Mandate for a UN Ethics Institute in Geneva

Dr. Dietrich Werner, Berlin/Geneva

Executive Summary

As the United Nations has approached its 80th anniversary in 2025, it faces a convergence of crises—geopolitical fragmentation, protracted conflicts, accelerating technological disruption, and deepening ecological instability. These challenges are not only political or technical in nature; they are fundamentally **ethical**. Yet the UN system currently lacks a dedicated institutional mandate to address ethical questions in an integrated, systematic, and preventive manner. In 2025, when Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN General Secretary, would have turned 100, it is more than appropriate to nurture the vision of a comprehensive UN Ethics Institute, as he always envisioned a UN with ethics at its centre¹ in order to strengthen a consolidated system of multilateralism and global responsibility in a renewed programmatic UN framework in times of major assaults and weakening of the current system.

This paper proposes the establishment of a **UN Ethics Institute**, anchored in Geneva, with a clear mandate to advance ethical reflection and guidance across four interlinked domains: **political ethics (including responsible governance and social inclusion)**, **peace ethics (including diplomacy, de-escalation, and shared security)**, **AI and digital ethics (or advanced technologies ethics)**, and **sustainability (or ecological) ethics**. The Institute would serve as a multistakeholder platform bringing together Member States, UN entities, civil society, academic experts, faith-based organizations (FBOs), and humanitarian actors.

The Institute would not duplicate existing human rights or legal mechanisms. Rather, it would strengthen the normative coherence, legitimacy, and preventive capacity of the UN by offering ethical analysis, foresight, dialogue, and policy-relevant guidance. Stable seed funding of at least four years—supported by governments, foundations, and FBOs—would allow a meaningful testing phase. The UN80 reform process offers a timely opportunity to reallocate limited resources toward this long-underfunded but strategically vital area of conceptual and ethical work.

Introduction

As the world has celebrated the 80th anniversary of the United Nations, reflection on institutional reform after this historic anniversary must go beyond questions of efficiency and structure. At stake is the **moral foundation of multilateralism itself**. The UN was created not only as a mechanism for cooperation, but as a values-based project grounded in human dignity, peace,

¹ Henning Melber (ed.): The Ethics of Dag Hammarskjöld, Hammerskjöld Foundation 2010, in: https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/the_ethics_of_hammar skjold.pdf; Manuel Fröhlich: Political Ethics and The United Nations: Dag Hammarskjöld as Secretary-General (Cass Series on Peacekeeping, 25, Band 25), Routledge December 2007

justice, and shared responsibility. Today, however, global governance is increasingly strained by ethical dilemmas that existing institutions are not adequately equipped to address.

Armed conflicts persist despite international norms; geopolitical rivalry undermines collective action; artificial intelligence reshapes power and responsibility faster than regulation can keep pace; and climate change exposes deep injustices across generations and regions. While ethical considerations are present across the UN system they remain fragmented, implicit, or reactive. and The UN Charter itself can be regarded as a foundational document for core ethical values like peace, justice, human rights, and international cooperation, binding member states to uphold these principles. There is no dedicated institutional space however where ethical values embedded in the UN Charter or other foundational documents are seriously applied and interrelated with current political challenges and ethical dilemmata which affect individual or all governments of member states in the UN. A future UN system needs an institutional space in which global ethical issues important for the survival of humanity and the integrity of life on this planet are addressed **systematically, preventively, and across policy domains**.

This essay argues that a renewed UN80 system requires a **specific institutional mandate for ethics**—one that integrates political ethics, peace ethics, AI ethics, and sustainability ethics, and that engages states, civil society, faith-based organizations, and ethical knowledge communities. It further argues that **Geneva**, as a global hub of norms, humanitarian action, and multistakeholder engagement, is the most suitable location for such an initiative.

1. The Ethical Deficit in Global Governance

Despite its normative aspirations, the UN often operates in an environment dominated by short-term interests, power asymmetries, and institutional silos. Ethical questions—about legitimacy, responsibility, inclusion, and long-term consequences—are frequently secondary to immediate political calculations. There have been efforts in the history of the discourses on global governance and ethics however by which successfully attempts were brought forward to formulate a substantial convolute or compendium of global ethical values which can serve as a common basis for political decisions and directions taken in the UN and its membership. Reference can be made to the “*Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*”, which was formulated by the Parliament of World Religions 1993, inspired by Hans Küng,² the “*Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities*”, which was formulated and proposed by the Interaction Council 1 September 1997 at the occasion of preparing for the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³ At a later stage one should also mention the Chinese government initiative to propose “*The Chinese Global Civilization Initiative from June 2024*”,⁴ which explicitly underlines the significance of ethical values in all cultural and religious traditions (though debates continue

² Declaration Toward a Global Ethic. Parliament of World Religions 1993, in: https://www.weltethos.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Decl_english.pdf;

³ <https://www.interactioncouncil.org/publications/universal-declaration-human-responsibilities>

⁴ See also in: <https://english.news.cn/20230926/b74f790c4e554924b57b45fa6a868bce/c.html>; ibid. Panel 8: The Four Principles of the Common Civilization Initiative, 2024; see also: China’s Three Global Initiatives: China’s Solutions to Addressing Global Challenges—Speech by Chinese Ambassador to PNG Yang Xiaoguang at the “China’s Global Initiative and China-PNG Cooperation” Symposium, March 13, 2025, in: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zwbdt/202503/t20250318_11577782.html#:~:text=The%20Global%20Civilization%20Initiative%20is,and%20progress%20of%20human%20civilization.

regarding its relationship to universal human rights standards),⁵ Also the opus magnum of Christoph Stuckelberger on *Globalance* ("Globalance towards a New World Order. Ethics Matters and Motivates") needs to be mentioned in this context.⁶

In the realm of peace and security, decisions about intervention, sanctions, or inaction raise profound ethical dilemmas that go beyond legal compliance. In technology governance, especially regarding AI, ethical reflection struggles to keep pace with innovation. In sustainability, technical targets and indicators often overshadow deeper questions of justice, responsibility, and intergenerational equity. In the whole area of an integrated sustainability approach to a concept of growth within planetary limits which is not spelled out at the expense of nature, humankind, the animals and indigenous people there are immense ethical challenges and dilemmata which are barely discussed. But where is a place for serious ethical reflections and their concrete application to current ethical dilemmas in the UN system in order to provide ground for more consensus in overarching common ethical orientations which reach beyond national power interests of member states? Is there a council of spiritual wisdom, ethical value bearers, religious and humanist leaders for value and ethical transformation at the appropriate UN level?

This ethical deficit does not imply a lack of values within the UN, but rather the absence of a **dedicated institutional locus** capable of integrating ethical reflection across sectors and translating it into actionable guidance.

2. Why a Dedicated Institutional Mandate Is Needed

Ethical challenges in global governance are transversal by nature. Questions of justice, responsibility, inclusion, and legitimacy arise simultaneously in peace processes, climate negotiations, digital governance, and development policy. Addressing them in isolation leads to incoherence and weakens public trust. The existing smaller UN Ethics Office⁷ deals mainly with compliance issues with regard to existing ethical regulations for staff, employment and procedures within the UN organizational system and is not properly equipped to deal with the wider tasks of ethical reflections for member organizations, like national governments, which are needed in the different areas of political work and goals setting within the UN system as a whole.

A dedicated ethics mandate would need to focus on a wider and broader agenda like:

- Strengthen **preventive governance** by anticipating ethical risks before crises escalate.
- Enhance **legitimacy** by making value-based reasoning more transparent.
- Support **policy coherence** across UN pillars.
- Provide structured engagement with **civil society, academic experts, and FBOs**, whose ethical insights are often underutilized.

⁵ [https://en.gmw.cn/2024-06/14/content_37434873.htm#:~:text=Contrary%20to%20the%20linear%20perspective,and%20mutual%20learning%20among%20civilizations.](https://en.gmw.cn/2024-06/14/content_37434873.htm#:~:text=Contrary%20to%20the%20linear%20perspective,and%20mutual%20learning%20among%20civilizations.;);

⁶ Christoph Stueckelberger: *Globalance towards a New World Order Ethics Matters and Motivates*. Handbook with 250 Graphs 2nd Enlarged Edition 2020, Globethics, Genva, in: <https://globethics.net/publications/globalance-towards-new-world-order>

⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/ethics/#:~:text=WHAT%20IS%20THE%20UN%20ETHICS,Charter%20of%20the%20United%20Nations.>

- Reinforce the UN's role as a **normative leader** for ethically responsible, inclusive, just and sustainable governance in a fragmented multipolar world.

3. Core Mandate and Functional Scope

3.1 Mission

The proposed UN Ethics Institute would serve to generate, integrate, and elevate ethical reflection in support of legitimate, inclusive, and responsible global governance. Its role would be advisory, analytical, and convening—not operational.

3.2 Key Thematic Areas

3.2.1 Political Ethics: Responsible Governance, Legitimacy, and Social Inclusion

Political ethics must address the ethical quality of governance itself. Central to this is the **ethics of responsible governance**, which views political authority as stewardship exercised on behalf of affected populations and future generations. This includes transparency, accountability, proportionality, and long-term responsibility for global public goods.

Equally essential is the **ethics of social inclusion**. Many global decisions affect populations that lack meaningful representation—particularly in the Global South, among indigenous peoples, women, youth, and marginalized communities. Inclusion is not merely procedural; it is an ethical imperative grounded in equality, dignity, and agency. Ethical analysis can help assess legitimacy gaps and support more inclusive governance designs.

Political ethics also addresses power asymmetries, the role of non-state actors, and the moral limits of influence in global decision-making.

3.2.2 Peace Ethics: Diplomacy, De-escalation, and Shared Multidimensional Human Security

Peace ethics must move beyond a narrow focus on armed conflict. A core component is the **ethics of peace diplomacy and de-escalation**, emphasizing moral responsibility to prevent violence, pursue dialogue, and resist escalation even under political pressure.

Peace ethics must also integrate **concepts of non-military security**, recognizing that climate change, pandemics, inequality, and food insecurity are among today's most serious threats to peace. Ethical scrutiny is needed to rebalance priorities between military and civilian security instruments.

Finally, peace ethics must advance **shared multidimensional human security**, based on interdependence rather than zero-sum logic. Ethical reflection can support cooperative security frameworks, arms restraint, and trust-building measures grounded in fairness and mutual vulnerability.

3.2.3 AI Ethics: Autonomy, Responsibility, and Equitable Digital Governance

AI ethics within a renewed UN80 system must extend beyond technical concerns of algorithmic efficiency and cybersecurity. It requires critical reflection on the societal, political, and economic implications of artificial intelligence, data governance, and autonomous systems. At its heart, AI

ethics asks not only what AI can do, but what it should do, for whom, and under what moral, legal, and social constraints.

A central pillar of this domain is the ethics of autonomous decision-making. As AI systems increasingly perform tasks previously reserved for humans—ranging from judicial recommendations and medical diagnostics to predictive policing and autonomous weaponry—ethical reflection is required on accountability, transparency, and oversight. Autonomous systems raise complex questions about responsibility: who bears moral and legal liability when algorithms make errors or perpetuate harm? A UN Ethics Institute could develop global standards for algorithmic accountability, explainability requirements, and risk mitigation frameworks to guide states, corporations, and civil society in deploying AI responsibly.

Closely linked is the ethics of data governance and privacy. AI depends on vast datasets, often derived from sensitive personal, social, and environmental information. Ethical data stewardship requires balancing innovation with fundamental rights to privacy, consent, and informational self-determination. This includes addressing biases embedded in historical datasets, mitigating discriminatory outcomes, and ensuring equitable access to data resources. Institutional mechanisms could support normative evaluation of data collection practices, ethical auditing of AI models, and participatory frameworks that involve affected communities in decision-making processes.

Another critical dimension is the ethics of societal impact and digital inclusion. AI systems have the potential to exacerbate inequalities, reshape labour markets, and influence public opinion and democratic processes. Ethical reflection must interrogate the distributive consequences of AI deployment, asking whether the benefits and risks are fairly shared across populations, nations, and generations. A dedicated ethics mandate could promote policies that support inclusive access to AI technologies, equitable economic transitions in AI-driven industries, and mitigation of algorithmic harms in marginalized communities.

Finally, AI ethics encompasses global governance and normative alignment. The transnational nature of digital technologies challenges conventional frameworks of state sovereignty, law, and regulation. Ethical AI governance requires coordination among states, international organizations, and private actors to establish shared principles, standards, and accountability mechanisms. By integrating autonomy, responsibility, data ethics, and distributive justice, a UN Ethics Institute would help ensure that AI development aligns with human dignity, social equity, and global stability.

3.2.4 Sustainability Ethics: Intergenerational Justice, Ecological Stewardship, and Equitable Transitions

Sustainability ethics in a renewed UN80 system must transcend conventional environmental policy concerns to include ethical analysis of long-term human and ecological well-being. It demands reflection on moral responsibility across generations, fairness in resource distribution, and the integration of environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability.

A first core dimension is the ethics of intergenerational equity. Decisions made today have profound consequences for future generations, particularly regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. Ethical reflection must address the moral obligations of current societies to protect the rights and well-being of those yet to be born. A UN Ethics Institute could develop normative frameworks for evaluating long-term policy impacts, balancing immediate

development needs with the ethical imperative to avoid compromising future human and ecological flourishing.

Closely related is the ethics of ecological stewardship. Sustainability ethics emphasizes the intrinsic value of non-human life, ecosystems, and planetary boundaries. Ethical analysis must guide resource management, conservation strategies, and technological interventions to ensure ecological integrity is maintained. Institutions could provide guidance on ethical trade-offs, ecological impact assessment, and frameworks for assigning responsibility when environmental degradation occurs across borders.

Equity and justice constitute another essential dimension. Environmental burdens and benefits are unevenly distributed, both within and between countries. Vulnerable populations often face disproportionate exposure to environmental risks while contributing least to their causes. Ethical sustainability mandates policies that mitigate these disparities, integrate marginalized voices into decision-making, and ensure fair allocation of resources, technological support, and adaptation measures.

Finally, sustainability ethics must address systemic transformation and normative guidance for transitions. Achieving a sustainable future requires rethinking economic models, energy systems, urban planning, and consumption patterns in ways that are ethically justifiable and socially acceptable. A UN Ethics Institute could help develop metrics for ethically informed sustainability, evaluate policies against principles of ecological justice, and foster international cooperation to manage global commons responsibly. By embedding intergenerational equity, ecological stewardship, and distributive justice into sustainability ethics, the UN can guide transitions that are not only environmentally effective but morally coherent and socially inclusive.

4. Institutional Design and Governance

4.1 Governing Council

The Institute should be guided by a **multistakeholder Governing Council** including:

- Representatives of UN Member States,
- Civil society and NGO leaders,
- Academic and ethical experts,
- Relevant private sector actors,
- **Key representatives of global religious communities and other bearers or custodians of ethical value traditions.**

Religious and ethical traditions play a central role in shaping moral norms, social trust, and peacebuilding worldwide. Their pluralistic inclusion would enhance legitimacy and cultural resonance, while avoiding dominance by any single tradition. Pluralistic engagement with faith-based organizations will require careful governance design. Participation criteria should ensure that inclusion does not compromise the Institute's foundational commitment to universal human rights standards, including non-discrimination. Governance protocols could draw on precedents from bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council, which navigates value pluralism among member states while maintaining core normative commitments.

4.2 Secretariat and Thematic Units

A professional secretariat (the relation to which sector in the UN system still needs to be clarified) would host thematic units aligned with the four ethics domains, supported by cross-cutting coordination to avoid silos.

4.3 Reporting and Accountability

The Institute would report annually to the UN General Assembly and the Secretary-General, and provide ethical input to relevant UN bodies upon request.

4.4 Funding and Autonomy

Funding should come from **governments, private foundations, and faith-based organizations** committed to ethical orientation in global affairs.

To ensure credibility and learning, **at least four years of guaranteed seed funding** should be secured for an initial testing phase. Transparency and safeguards against donor influence are essential. Potential anchor funders could include Switzerland—given Geneva's role as host city and Switzerland's tradition of supporting multilateral norm-development—as well as Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland) with established track records in funding global ethics and governance initiatives. Private foundations such as the Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, or the Rockefeller Brothers Fund have historically supported institutional innovation in global governance. An initial annual operating budget in the range of USD 3–5 million would allow for a lean but credible secretariat, thematic programming, and convening capacity during the testing phase.

5. Geneva as the Strategic Location

5.1 Geneva as a Normative Hub

Geneva still hosts a dense concentration of UN agencies, human rights bodies, and humanitarian organizations, making it a natural centre for ethical reflection and norm development.

5.2 Existing Ethical Institutions

Special attention should be given to the question which ethical institutions could be considered to bring in experiences in ethics, education, and multistakeholder engagement for ethical standards in key areas of policy, technology, peace and sustainability and form a starting point for an institutional development of the envisaged nature.

5.3 Engagement with Faith-Based and Humanitarian Organizations

Close cooperation should be established with organizations such as the **World Council of Churches (WCC)**, the **ACT Alliance**, **Council of Muslim Elders**, Cordoba Peace Institute and **Islamic Relief Worldwide** and other humanitarian associations. These actors bring ethical insight grounded in practice and lived experience, ensuring that ethical reflection remains connected to real-world impact.

6. Addressing Potential Objections

A proposal of this scale will face challenges and objections. Some can be preemptively addressed:

6.1 “We Already Have Human Rights Bodies”

Human rights are essential but not exhaustive. An ethics institute would complement human rights mechanisms by addressing value tensions (e.g., between freedom and security) that human rights law alone cannot resolve and cover the whole range of ethical values which currently are at stake in national and international policies.

6.2 “It Will Be Politicized”

Ethics is inherently about values and conflicts. Structured, transparent deliberative processes and balanced governance can mitigate undue politicization and build trust.

6.3 “Overlap with Existing Agencies”

Coordination protocols and clear scopes would prevent duplication. The Institute’s unique role is **systematic ethical integration**, not operational delivery. Existing UN bodies address specific dimensions of ethics but lack an integrative mandate. OHCHR focuses on human rights law and violations; it does not systematically engage broader ethical dilemmas such as trade-offs between competing values. UNESCO’s AI ethics work, including the 2021 Recommendation, establishes normative standards but operates within a sectoral mandate without direct linkage to peace, political, or sustainability ethics. The existing UN Ethics Office addresses staff conduct and internal compliance—not the ethical dimensions of member state policies. For example, when the Security Council debates sanctions regimes, there is currently no institutional mechanism to request independent ethical impact assessment regarding humanitarian consequences or distributive justice. The Ethics Institute would provide precisely this integrative, anticipatory, and advisory function.

6.4. “No government standing up for it”

There is too much tiredness of some governments being asked for new funding for a new organization within the UN at present. At the same time it is also obvious: The more the crisis of multilateralism is progressing the more also the vital need for a bold initiative for an integrating UN Institute for Ethics will become clear. There needs to be a small coalition of few willing governments and strategic partners to be formed to explore the feasibility of this idea further and to move to first steps towards implementation.

6.5 “Resource Constraints”

While new institutions in deed require resources, the costs of ethical incoherence—policy failures, public distrust, and normative vacuums—are far greater. The **UN80 reform process** should explicitly examine internal resource allocation. Ethical and conceptual work has been **systematically underfunded** despite its strategic importance. Modest reallocation toward ethics could yield significant returns by improving coherence, trust, and preventive capacity across the UN system.

7. Pathways to Implementation

A phased roadmap could begin with:

1. **High-Level Commission on Global Ethics** (established by the Secretary-General) to draft a blueprint.
2. **Member State Resolution** at UNGA 81 in 22 September 2026 launching the Ethics Institute.
3. **Interim Secretariat** in Geneva to begin foundational work in late 2026 .
4. **First World Forum on Global Ethics** in 2027 for broad stakeholder input.
5. **Operational Launch** aligned with the follow up of UN80 commemoration

Conclusion

A renewed UN80 system cannot rely on technical expertise and political negotiation alone. It requires a **renewed ethical infrastructure** capable of integrating values into global decision-making. Ethical leadership is not an optional add-on for the United Nations; it is essential to its legitimacy, effectiveness, and moral mission. The challenges of the 21st century—geopolitical realignment, technological disruption, climate catastrophe—are not only technical or political but deeply ethical. Establishing a **UN Ethics Institute in Geneva** would provide a durable institutional home for global ethical reflection, deliberation, and guidance. It would help bridging the divides between states and societies, integrate values across policy domains, and affirm a renewed moral foundation for a reimagined United Nations as it enters its ninth decade.