

AGM 2014 - Speech by Natalie Samarasinghe, Executive Director

I am delighted to be able to address this Annual General Meeting as Executive Director of UNA-UK, having been confirmed in post just after our last AGM. UNA-UK is an organisation with great history, and with great potential, and it is a privilege to be able to contribute, as you all have, to its success.

Today, I will report to you on our work since we last met in June 2013, and look ahead to the coming year and a half. Over the past nine months, we have submitted evidence to parliamentary, government and political-party inquiries on intervention, deterrence, arms control, education and human rights. We have fed our comments, with some success, into the outcome document of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Security Council's resolution on humanitarian access in Syria, and the Human Rights Council's resolution on Sri Lanka. And we produced a major publication on the UN Millennium Development Goals and what should follow them in 2015. All of these examples were followed up with monthly email actions to increase the impact of our campaigning work.

While we remain active on global issues and work with a number of coalitions on global advocacy, we increasingly seek to ensure that our activities have strong resonance in the UK. Founded to serve as a bridge between the UN and the UK, we have an important role in ensuring that British foreign policy furthers UN goals, and that this country is meeting its own international obligations.

This year, we have protested against arms export licences to states the government itself has branded countries of concern. We have commissioned a report on how various UK government departments work together to respond to mass atrocities, and we have urged the UK to think creatively about a number of UN reform issues, from transparency and accountability, to gridlock in the Security Council.

From my perspective, we ran two stand-out campaigns this year: our success in keeping the UN in the national curriculum, and our work around the Ministry of Justice consultation on the UK's review by the Human Rights Council. The former is testament to the impact that we can have, despite being a small organisation, when we are targeted and make good use of our relationships. The latter exemplified how well we – individual members and supporters, and local UNAs – can work together. UNA-UK's contributions made up the vast majority of responses received and significantly increased the total number of responses, a clear signal to the MoJ that these issues matter to the public.

Deepening engagement has been the focus of outreach this year, from our first event last July, a UN masterclass for schools, to our successful Youth Conference in Edinburgh, and I am very pleased that the Procedure Committee has organised another such occasion this afternoon. We are currently working on four outreach packs for members and supporters, on nuclear issues, R2P, the arms trade treaty and climate change. We have also launched outreach grants and tools for local UNAs linked to our major UN Forum event in June.

In organisational terms, we have made good progress towards completing the tasks required to ensure we can take full advantage of the benefits of being a single charitable entity. We continue to control costs tightly; and we have ramped up our fundraising work.

Long-term core funding remains the biggest challenge we face as an organisation, as three of our multi-year grants will have expired by the end of June 2015. Our position for this year is good, as we have managed to secure a significant amount of government funding for planned projects. In fact, we have already at this point in the

year doubled the overall funding target in our budget. However, government funding is increasingly difficult to obtain and does not, in any case, contribute to the core funding that we need.

Our financial constraints make it even more important for us to focus our work on those areas where we can have the most impact. This is a good time to be reflecting on our mission. Next year, the UK, with or without Scotland, is set to hold an election and review its defence and security strategy. The international community must adopt new development goals and a climate agreement. And we, like the UN, will celebrate our 70th birthday and begin work on a new strategic plan.

I believe that the next 12 to 18 months will put us in good shape to do so. Our UN Forum in June is a huge opportunity to increase our profile and reach. Unlike previous events, Forum 2014 will focus on the UK's foreign policy and role in the world, and will mark the start of our work in the lead-up to the General Election. We hope to have another set of outreach grants and tools available to support local UNAs in organising activities such as hustings.

After the election, we will turn to the UN itself. As our Chairman has said on many occasions, international institutions fade with time. Is the UN still fit for purpose 70 years after it was created? We will mark the anniversary with activities that commemorate and critique the organisation. We also hope by that time to have started a global conversation on the appointment of the next UN Secretary-General.

Together, these initiatives will help to position UNA-UK as an organisation that has something important to say on issues that are relevant to this country. To have real impact, we need to connect with more people. Having peaked at 85,000 in 1949, our membership has been in decline ever since. Although we've managed to slow the rate during the past decade, the figures continue to go down. On the other hand, we now have well over 10,000 supporters across the country, and more people than ever are receiving our materials, taking part in our campaigns and visiting our website.

This situation is not unique to UNA-UK. Traditional structures and processes of representative democracy are being challenged by direct participation, fast-moving issue-based campaigns and informal networks. We must adapt to this new context, which offers great opportunities for a smart, nimble and strategic organisation.

For me, it is simple. Everyone in this country has a stake in an effective United Nations, so everyone should be able to connect with us in whatever way suits them. It is the connection that matters. From that point, we can start developing the relationship – it may be through campaign actions, through donations, through attending an event and, we hope, through membership, but we do have to recognise that this route will only be attractive to some people.

Engagement is about more than money. It is about commitment. While we must and will continue to seek new supporters and new ways to engage with them, it is our long-standing members, particularly those involved with their local UNAs, who remain our most valued partners. And we will be calling on you in the coming weeks and months, to help us get people to our UN Forum event, to push for an effective and ethical UK foreign policy, and to call for a revitalised and reformed UN at 70.

As I said at the beginning, UNA-UK is an organisation with great history and great potential. I am immensely proud to be the first woman in the hot seat, and I look forward to working with you all on taking forward our collective vision of a strong UN and a strong UNA-UK.