

## **Speech by Natalie Samarasinghe, UNA-UK Acting Executive Director**

UNA-UK Annual General Meeting, Farmers Club, London SW1A 2EL

20 June 2013



*It is a great pleasure to address this Annual General Meeting today in my capacity as Acting Executive Director of UNA-UK.*

*It is now a little over 100 days since the Board appointed me to this role, and I am grateful for the confidence that Trustees have placed in me, and for the support that I have had from the wider membership.*

*Today, I would like to provide you with a report on UNA-UK's work in this financial year, ending 30 June 2013.*

*I believe that we have made real progress on policy, campaigning and outreach by playing to our strength as an organisation that promotes joined-up thinking and joined-up action on global issues.*

*This year, we have placed emphasis on generating original and timely policy recommendations, submitting evidence on a number of issues, from UK defence and education policy to implementing the responsibility to protect (R2P) and strengthening UN peacekeeping. We have produced briefings on unmanned combat vehicles, called for considered action on Syria, and taken an early and progressive stance on lethal autonomous weapons systems.*

*Through our publications and our website, we have sought to offer a different perspective to the mainstream media. We drew attention to 'invisible issues' like the plight of widows, provided analysis on global developments such as the BRICS, and covered topics like technology, which rarely get an internationalist treatment. Our specialist publication on the Arab Spring, which featured some 50 expert contributions, is an indication of the types of publications that we would like to produce in the future.*

*Generating policy ideas is just one side of the coin. This year, we have worked hard to ensure that we campaign more effectively for their adoption, through a mixture of public and behind-the-scenes lobbying, which has included a heavily improved programme of work in Parliament.*

*From my perspective, we ran two stand-out campaigns this year, on the Arms Trade Treaty and the UK's review by the UN Human Rights Council. On the first, we were able to make a small but significant contribution to what was a truly global civil society campaign. On the second, UNA-UK has been in the driving seat, lobbying not only on the issues to be raised during the review, but also calling for stronger parliamentary and public engagement with the process. As a result, several promising developments are now underway.*

*The other area of work that merits particular mention is our R2P programme. Launched just last August, it is already filling a crucial gap in bringing together a wide range of constituencies to talk about what is probably the most difficult area in which to bridge the gap between theory and practice.*

*What really sets UNA-UK apart though, is our grassroots base. It gives us legitimacy at the national level and a voice at the local level, so vital if we are to build a critical mass of support for the UN in this country. And this year, there has been good progress in joining up our policy and outreach activities.*

*I was delighted by the Policy Conference in April. The Procedure Committee, led by Andrew Boakes and supported by Ian Donoghue, did a truly fantastic job. I believe it was a huge step in*

the right direction in terms of promoting genuine debate and producing ideas to guide our work, including on some of the hardest areas for us to approach, such as interventions in crises, as well as population growth, where there are distinct views within the membership. The conference also gave us a firm indication of the strength of feeling on areas such as gender empowerment and international development. You will see the issues raised echoed in our policy work. Indeed, we have already taken action in several areas, such as Syria, the arms trade and UK torture and rendition allegations.

I am also delighted that our new Policy Inbox is beginning to function as a clear channel for ongoing dialogue with the membership, and that our Policy Advisory Group has been able to meet and discuss issues raised. It is good to see our three main policy input mechanisms working in tandem.

Perhaps most exciting of all, we have seen hundreds of members and supporters take part in our 'monthly actions'. Together, we have called for the protection of Burmese minorities, support for human rights defenders and peacekeepers, and action on tax dodging, to name just a few examples. These actions have been taken forward at the local level by a number of branches – from Harpenden's lobbying on the arms trade to Belfast's engagement with the G8 Summit.

In a few moments, we will discuss topics raised by members. At every AGM I have been to over the past years, members have placed great emphasis on the need to extend our reach and raise our profile. Although we continue to face a decline in membership numbers, there continues to be encouraging progress in terms of reaching new audiences.

Launched just one year ago, our supporters initiative has seen nearly 9,000 people engage with UNA-UK. Generation United Nations, our programme for 13-18-year-olds, has continued to gather pace and we have seen renewed engagement by UNA Youth, with a fantastic Youth Council election campaign this year and three new university branches. In many ways, UNA-UK is now more vibrant than ever.

There has also been some progress on the media front, with around 20 interviews, letters or comment pieces placed this year, more than half by our Chairman, Sir Jeremy Greenstock. And we should not forget that we started this financial year with our UN Forum event in July 2012, which featured an inspiring speech by our celebrity patron Sir Patrick Stewart.

None of the above could have been achieved without the hard work and dedication of my UNA-UK colleagues, and the brilliant support we receive from our interns and volunteers. Thank you.

And I would like to thank all of you here today for your hard work and support throughout the year.

UNA-UK is not an ordinary charity. Our mission is not always easy to communicate. Too many organisations prize short-term fixes or headline-grabbing campaigns over real impact. Too few consider fully the links between issues nor the consequences of what they call for.

I firmly believe in our unique value as a policy-influencer and grassroots movement; and as a critical friend of the UN. What we offer is Idealism on outcomes, a firm stance on values, realism on what is achievable and creativity in our approach.

What we need, however, to be more effective is sufficient resources, both for our core and programme work. This is an area in which we have not managed to make as much progress as we had hoped for this year. We have managed to control spending and significantly reduce our planned deficit. But we are now at a stage where further savings would each into our programme work. Fundraising is our top priority for next year.

We will also concentrate on extending our reach and increasing our impact. This will mean a clear focus on delivering our core objectives, as well as broadening our outreach programmes, raising our profile, deepening our engagement with existing networks and putting in place better

measures to evaluate our work.

Over the past three months, my priorities as Acting Executive Director have been to manage a smooth staffing transition and to focus on our year-end planning and reviewing processes so that we are ready to hit the ground running on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July.

While our resource constraints mean we need to set realistic objectives, this does not mean that our levels of ambition have dropped. Our operational plan for 2013-14 comprises a comprehensive and challenging programme of policy and campaigning activities, which will include preparing for the 2015 UK elections.

On the outreach front, our aim is simple: to give anyone who wants to understand global challenges and contribute to solutions the opportunity to get involved with us.

Planning is underway for another large-scale UN Forum event in 2014, which we hope to support with a year-long publicity campaign. We are also due to begin early discussions on the UN's 70th anniversary in 2015.

I hope that all of you here today, and everyone in our wider networks, will all be involved in these activities. Together, we can build on our achievements and strengthen our impact as a people's movement for the UN.