



The Universal Postal Union (UPU): A pioneer and template for multilateralism

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The UPU was one of the first international organizations to promote cooperation and integration among countries. It pioneered a unique form of multilateralism – starting with postal experts from around the world, not diplomats these postal experts knew their subject matter well and wanted innovative, interconnected, interdependent solutions for the Post. They turned seemingly insurmountable problems in postal delivery into future successes which endure to this day.

Established in 1874 in Berne, the UPU became a model for new organizations even after the destruction and havoc of World War I. In this regard, Leonard Woolf wrote in 1916: “The UPU, after a life of over forty years, remains the most complete and important example of international administration [...], having by its birth effected a *revolution* in the constitution of the society of nations.” (*International Government*).

The word “revolution” is very appropriate as, prior to the establishment of the UPU, the world postal system was in chaos. A letter starting in Bavaria and going to the USA could take any one of six different routes. Depending on the route, the amount to be paid in postage could vary almost twentyfold. It was not only a question of different currencies, but also of postal rates which each country calculated according to different systems of weights and measures.

In response, delegates from 22 countries convened in 1874 and drew up the Treaty of Berne. This created uniform postal rates of 25 centimes for letters (under 50 grammes) mailed anywhere in the world within 30 signatory nations (now, in 2024 there are 192 signatory nations), creating a *single postal territory*. This revolution provides a unique and successful template for problem-solving in this exponentially changing world.

In advancing and promoting the UPU as a template of multilateralism for other international organizations, three aspects should be considered:

- 1 The initiative did not come from government; it came from *high-level postal officials*. At the personal request of the US Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, postmasters general from 15 countries met in Paris in 1863, with the aim of trying to resolve the international postal chaos. These senior postal officials were able to agree on 31 resolutions on matters of principle for postal services, which were circulated ahead of the meeting in Berne in 1874.
- 2 The delegates were all *postal experts*, not professional diplomats, who all faced similar problems in their home countries. Additionally, during the weeks of meetings, working to solve common problems, lasting personal bonds were created, which were then followed up with abundant correspondence. All of this created a positive atmosphere, allowing greater chances of settlement on complex issues.
- 3 The Berne delegates created an *International Bureau (IB)*: a secretariat to accomplish the day-to-day operational work needed to implement the innovative solutions devised by these postal experts. The IB applied and adapted rules at its central Berne location, in the capital of a neutral and multilingual country. It gave worldwide postal operators a hub to engage and co-create the most streamlined, efficient, customer-centric, cost-optimized postal network in world history.

The UPU, with its unique take on multilateralism has proved its longevity and efficacy in worldwide postal solutions. This unique multilateralism has held strong from 19th century needs for intercontinental mail delivery to the 21st century, with deeply interconnected digital innovations, e-commerce, sustainability challenges and more. The UPU provides a successful template for others needing multilateralism solutions to effectively take on large and seemingly insurmountable current world problems.