

THE PLACE OF THE UNIVERSAL POSTAL UNION (UPU) AS A SPECIALIZED AGENCY OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Abstract: The Universal Postal Union (UPU) is an intergovernmental organization and a specialized agency of the United Nations that acts to stimulate economic and social development and facilitate communication among all the inhabitants of the world. The UPU represents the leading international forum for the cooperation of state authorities, regulatory bodies, and postal operators in the regulation of international postal services. Among other things, its task is to ensure the existence of an integrated global network and to strengthen the role of the postal sector as an instrument of reform and development. Postal services around the world should constantly improve to keep up with the digital age by building a seamless physically and virtually connected network with a local and international presence fully adapted to the changing and growing needs of governments, businesses, and customers. The UPU has developed a strategy to transform the postal industry to better serve the economies of countries and the growing needs of their customers by creating a global partnership for reform and development, thus shaping a better perspective for the postal sector in the contemporary world.

Keywords: UPU, postal traffic, international communication, cooperation and network, reform.

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“A visionless action is just a passage of time,
A vision without action is mere daydreaming,
Vision and action can change the world”.

Nelson Mandela

INTRODUCTION

The UPU represents a specialized agency of the United Nations based in Bern (Switzerland). The Union was founded in 1874 with the mission of establishing and improving cooperation on a multilateral basis and ensuring the successful functioning of postal traffic, as well as contributing to achieving higher goals of international cooperation in the cultural, social, and economic fields (Jovičić, 2011). The UPU has 192 member states, 29 industrialized and 163 developing countries, united for the uniform and quality performance of international postal services. The Universal Postal Union, as a non-political organization, does not deal with the internal aspects of the organization and functioning of the postal traffic of the member states. However, the member states accept the obligation to apply Union regulations to international postal traffic. The basic principles of these regulations are: unity of postal territory, freedom of postal transit, and uniform principles of charging for international letter services. The UPU became a specialized agency of the United Nations in 1948 and, as such, contributes to the development of UN policies and missions to promote social and economic development. With more than 690,000 permanent post offices and 5.3 million staff, the postal network is the largest network in the world, unrivalled in its ability to reach each and every citizen on a daily basis. This infrastructure network makes approximately 340 billion USD in revenue per year, and the sustainability of the whole industry is insured by the interconnection of national postal infrastructure networks, where each nation has sovereign rights over the technical and operational management of its own network while being at the same time a part of the single worldwide postal territory of the Union, thus ensuring the smooth flow of letters, parcels, and financial instruments between all the countries of the world.

THE MISSION OF THE UPU

The UPU remains an intergovernmental organization and a specialized agency of the United Nations, which will continue to adhere to the traditional values proclaimed by the Constitution, including ensuring the

provision of efficient and accessible postal services to all citizens of the world. It is defined in the United Nations Human Rights Declaration that all inhabitants of the world have the right to communicate. Pursuant to this right, all 192 member countries of the UPU are obliged to ensure that all citizens enjoy the right to a Universal Postal Service (the USO), involving the permanent provision of quality basic postal services at all points in their territory at affordable prices. According to the preamble of the UPU Constitution, the mission of the organization is to stimulate the lasting development of efficient and accessible universal postal services of high quality in order to facilitate communication between the inhabitants of the world. The mission would be accomplished by: Guaranteeing the free circulation of postal items over a single postal territory composed of interconnected networks; Adopting common standards and use of technology; Ensuring interaction and cooperation among stakeholders; Promoting effective technical cooperation and satisfying customers' needs. Postal Vision 2030 is based on the aim of adjusting to the UN Sustainable Development Goals by promoting socio-economic development, which relies on the synergic actions of governments, regulators, operators, and other stakeholders in the postal sector. In order to utilize the postal network to enhance socio-economic development, governments should increase investments in the postal sector and adopt focused policies. Regulatory bodies should harmonize the sectors' regulatory framework, and operators should improve their performance by implementing diversified strategies and introducing operational and technical improvements. Other stakeholders from the private sector and public institutions should cooperate with the UPU through different programs, projects, and partnerships. As outlined in the vision of the Universal Postal Union, the postal sector enables inclusive development and is an essential component of the global economy. Given the rapidly changing world, the vision of the UPU is more relevant today than it has ever been. The proactive action of the UPU contributes to the development of the global economy through its long-lasting leadership in monitoring the development of the postal sector. The global postal sector realizes the value of adapting to innovation and, in turn, the world recognizes the significant potential of the postal sector in strengthening the future of the global economy. This vision is only achievable when combined with a commitment to the mission of the Universal Postal Union. The mission adopts a global approach to supporting the priorities and needs of each country and region, and covers fundamental areas where the UPU can contribute to having a positive and significant impact on users around the world. In order to support Postal Vision 2030,

the UPU as a UN agency must coordinate three main strategic pillars in the forthcoming period: as the main forum; as the provider of innovative and affordable technical solutions; and as the knowledge centre of the postal sector (UPU, 2018).

SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

The countries adopting this Constitution shall comprise, under the title of the Universal Postal Union, a single postal territory for the reciprocal exchange of postal items. Freedom of transit shall be guaranteed throughout the entire territory of the Union, subject to the conditions specified in the Acts of the Union. The Union's goal is to ensure the organization and improvement of postal services, as well as to promote the development of international collaboration in this area. The Union shall take part, as far as possible, in postal technical assistance sought by its member countries. The formation of a single postal territory with each country agreeing to the incorporation of its sovereign territory and existing postal service network laid the foundation for the provision of Universal postal service to all segments of society. The provisions explicitly establish the commitment undertaken by member governments to ensure that all segments of the population are able to exercise their right to universal postal service, confirming their obligation to guarantee the basic right, namely the right to communication through access to postal service. With this aim, the member countries are obliged to set forth, within their national legislation, the scope of the postal services offered, respecting the requirement for quality and affordable prices, taking account of the needs of their population and their national conditions.

Acts and bodies

The Constitution represents the basic Act of the Union. It contains the organic rules of the Union and it is not subject to reservations by the member states. The General Regulations embody these provisions, which ensure the implementation of the Constitution and the working of the Union. They are binding for all member countries and shall not be subject to reservations. The Universal Postal Convention and its Regulations embody the rules applicable throughout the international postal service and the provisions concerning the letter-post and postal parcel services. These Acts are binding for all member countries. The member countries should ensure that their

designated operators fulfill the obligations arising from the Convention and its Regulations. The Agreements of the Union and their Regulations regulate the services other than those of the letter post and postal parcels between those member countries which are parties to them. They are binding for those member countries only. Signatory member countries should ensure that their designated operators fulfill the obligations arising from the Agreements and their Regulations. The Congress is the supreme authority which decides on new policies and rules on the international exchange of postal items and adopts world postal strategy for the forthcoming cycle. Plenipotentiaries from the UPU's 192 member countries gather every four years to shape the future of the postal sector. The Council of Administration consists of 41 member countries elected during the Congress with the task of ensuring the continuity of the UPU's work between the Congresses, supervising its activities, and conducting regulatory, administrative, legislative, and legal work. The Postal Operation Council is the technical and operational body of the UPU and consists of 40 member countries elected during the Congress, which deals with economic, operational, and commercial aspects of the postal business. The International Bureau provides logistical and technical support to the bodies of the Union.

The UPU as an organization of the UN system and an organization for the postal sector

The Union faces risks and opportunities common to other UN agencies, such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), which are similar sector-based organizations of technical nature tied to specific sectors. In order to develop a new vision of the future, it has to respect the voice of governments while fulfilling the needs of its stakeholders through developing and implementing a different range of solutions. The UPU maintains ties with major development organizations in order to promote postal development, and by keeping good relations with the World Bank and other financial institutions, it can ensure investment in the postal sector. The UPU also has an important role in the national postal development. It can cooperate with governments to promote postal reform, and it can provide technical support for the posts that are unable to implement reform without external assistance (UPU, 2017; Berthaud, A., Davico, G., March 2013, Boffa, M., Borba, F., Piotrowski, L., October 2021).

THE POSTAL SECTOR ENVIRONMENT

The Postal sector and a wider business environment

In its traditional form, the postal sector is run by three main actors: governments, regulators, and authorized postal operators. The first two actors define the basic policy and development strategy that represent the framework for the functioning of postal services, while authorized postal operators have a legal obligation to ensure the provision of basic postal services to all citizens in the territory - the universal postal service. In the face of a rapidly growing wave of postal market liberalization, it is extremely difficult to sustain the meaningful level of Universal service obligation and at the same time develop a competitive postal market without efficient regulatory authority. The scope of activities of authorized postal operators originally included services related to the transmission of letters and parcels. However, with the entry of integrators such as DHL, FedEx, and UPS into the most profitable parts of the market, with the increasing liberalization of the postal sector, many authorized postal operators have experienced a decline in their market share. At the same time, the boundaries of the sector were extended to the services they provided only as a marginal part of past postal activities, such as logistics and financial services. Today, the postal sector comprises four basic segments: letter services; package and logistics services; financial services; and other related services. Authorized postal operators face competition in all these segments, but not necessarily from the same player. For example, integrators pose a challenge for authorized operators in the segments related to letter, parcel, and logistics services, while banks and insurance companies represent alternative solutions to postal operators in the field of financial services. However, banks and insurance companies are the main alternatives for postal operators. "Postal networks should be an integral part of discussions in which governments, policymakers, and international organizations design strategies for fostering financial inclusion" (UPU, 2017). However, in most countries, post offices are a guarantee of trust that allows them to be recognized as natural providers of the full range of services needed in the age of e-commerce, from ordering to delivery and payment. Postal operators are facing restructuring processes and further deregulation that will prepare them for the coming days when they enter the open market. Increasing competition will condition the postal sector to improve the quality of postal services and meet customer requirements. The postal network in rural areas and inaccessible regions has a very important role in integrating businesses into the national

and global economy by uniting social and business relations. This is aimed at further development of the infrastructure network, which will provide users in rural areas with new electronic communication services. The members of the UPU should expect the strategic goals of the Union and set priorities in order to facilitate trade for micro, small and medium enterprises. They should aim to build the necessary capacities through an integrative approach to ensure the sustainability of e-commerce services and encourage development along the entire three-dimensional postal network. It is extremely important to define a multilateral legal and operational framework that enables coordination of postal network activities and cross-border trade management, as well as the process of integrating the dimension of payments and financial intermediation between small and medium enterprises and tax authorities in the exporting countries. Public postal operators of the member states should all work to find a single integrative solution with a recognizable international brand to facilitate e-commerce trade and enhance growth in the postal sector and worldwide (Jovičić, 2015). According to the estimates published by the World Bank in 2021, global growth was 3.5% in 2020. The forecast for 2021 is +5, 6%, and for 2022 is +4, 3%. The risks to future growth are greater than ever. Although governments have injected stimulative packages into the economy, the uncertain outlook has resulted in a shortage of investment and the erosion of both human and digital capital (World Bank, June 2022).

Development challenges for the member countries of the UPU

The postal sector has developed differently in various regions of the world in accordance with the level of economic development of a particular country. In this regard, there is a difference in infrastructure development between industrialized and developing countries, which indicates a strong need for operators in developing countries to define different postal strategies and place a greater focus on capacity building. This will ensure that the world's post offices are closer to each other, which is a precondition for an efficient global postal network. Postal networks are well positioned to serve 2.1 billion inhabitants of the planet who do not have adequate access to banks and other financial institutions and to facilitate payments to individuals by the state, e.g., payment of social assistance. The postal sector has a number of different markets, with different drivers of economic development in developed and less developed economies. The lack of market organization and regulation has slowed the exchange of postal items, especially in underdeveloped countries and regions of the world. The

solution lies in the better development of the market and a deeper understanding of the exchange of shipments in domestic and international traffic and supply chains and their impact on the well-being of citizens. The most successful intergovernmental organizations have differentiated their product portfolios and their sources of revenue. The UPU has many ways to help foster development in the member states, such as: a) giving opinions on interoperability, e-commerce, payment methods, business development, product harmonization, and diversification; b) development and implementation of international standards, methodologies, and procedures, as well as safe technological solutions at low prices; c) providing hubs for a high-quality intelligence market and acting as a forum for greater coordination between governments, regulators, operators, and other stakeholders; d) supporting the creation and implementation of the development policy of the postal sector, capacity building, and facilitation of negotiations on multilateral regulations; and d) providing its knowledge of generating revenue. The UPU should also consider some significant risks, mainly: a) the ability to develop products and services that stakeholders consider relevant; and b) the ability to secure funds to ensure long-term financial sustainability.

Situation analysis

In our divided world, where some countries are struggling with economic and political unrest while others are successfully conducting international trade, posts represent bridges of trust to connect and adapt to this ever-changing world. Global trends affect the postal sector and provide opportunities for the sector to implement positive change. The analysis of the situation in the postal sector reveals the following trends:

1. In the political field, we are facing the emergence of new international and regional groups. Changes in interactions between governments and citizens have led to the proliferation of initiatives such as e-government. The role of governments in supporting mandatory universal service (USO) is changing, as are measures and policies to combat frequent security threats. Liberalization and privatization have significant political implications;
2. In the process of liberalization and privatization, new players emerged, which is now a reality for many member states of the Universal Postal Union. Changes in postal business models as well as innovations through the application of new technologies have influenced the new

way of functioning of modern mail. Business models are further affected by increased cross-border trade, the cost of energy instability, changes in financial models, access to finance, and global capital flows. Of great importance is the financial inclusion of the rural part of the population by the post office. The dominance of large and influential private-sector entities and their growing virtual integration significantly affect the development of the postal sector and the way the postal services are provided;

3. The digital age and changes in consumer patterns have contributed to the evolution of new consumers with unique needs and expectations. Mitigating cross-border interactions, migration, and demographic change have changed our understanding of user needs. Defining time values for users who are constantly connected via new devices is a new challenge. Postal addressing in a physical and digital context is now both a challenge and an opportunity;
4. Technology is the key to understanding current and future transformations. The growth of e-commerce has led to a market increase in the volume of parcels and the need to redefine our goals and plans for the future. It is imperative to be aware of and adapt to the acceleration of technological change;
5. There is a necessity to define new postal regulations and establish new international standards;
6. Recognition of the role of the postal sector in combating climate change and responding to global crises has also increased.
7. The key global trends identified as factors influencing the postal sector have brought to light the urgent need for the UPU and the postal sector to develop solutions that focus on innovation within the Union. Also, by offering a variety of sustainable products and services for global users of tomorrow, it should promote the integration of interoperable solutions through its complex and extensive broadband network.

SWOT analysis

SWOT analysis represents the construction of the analysis based on the identification of current trends, past experiences, and future opportunities, i.e., SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). In order to maintain the relevance of the UPU and the postal sector in the global economy in the years to come, it is crucial to act faster in adapting to trends

in all three dimensions: physical, financial, and digital. In order to respond quickly to current and future trends, the UPU needs to highlight its weaknesses, identified in the SWOT analysis, as a priority. These weaknesses have remained relatively unchanged in the last two cycles, showing that they have not been adequately treated. If the UPU does not adjust, it will be difficult to use its current opportunities and will be unprepared to face its identified threats. Therefore, waiting for change to take place gradually is no longer an option, and the UPU urgently needs to meet the challenges, adapt quickly to the market and address its weaknesses through: integrated structural reform to enable more efficient decision-making and to enable bodies of the Union to quickly adapt to new trends and needs of users; and greater participation in and adoption of modern sustainable products and services by Member States and their authorized operators. Encouraging strengths and addressing weaknesses will enable the Union to seize opportunities and defend itself against threats through the integrated, innovative, and inclusive implementation of the Universal Postal Strategy at the global, regional, and national levels.

NEED FOR REFORM AND DEVELOPMENT

Postal reform is a long-term, complex process that requires the strong will and shared vision of all the stakeholders in the postal sector that would be responsible for the implementation of the reform process. The postal reform process is conducted through legal reform, organizational reform, commercial reform, operational reform, and technological reform. Legal reform is conducted through establishing a new legal framework embracing the market as a whole with all its components involving services, customers, designated operators, private operators, and regulatory authorities. Organizational reform is conducted by the restructuring of the designated operator, meaning its organizational structure, legal status, ownership structure, obligations, etc. Commercial reform is conducted through the commercialization of business operations of a designated operator, including concepts of quality of service, customer service orientation, IT systems, development of new services, etc. Operational reform is conducted through the establishment of projects for the modernization of operating processes by improving quality, raising productivity, and cutting costs. Technological reform is conducted through the intensive use of technology in production infrastructure to help increase efficiency and build market share. For the reform to succeed, governments should exercise their commitment by including postal issues in the national development plans

and policies; by allocating funding for the activities during the reform processes; by planning and designing work for postal reform programs; by providing technical cooperation; and by issuing executive orders, decrees, and other acts providing a basic framework for legal reform. The main objectives that governments should set to be achieved are:

1. Ensuring universal access to postal service, meaning the widespread coverage of postal services and extending service into areas where it is currently unavailable;
2. Finding the right balance between universal coverage and competition,
3. Promoting the development of new services, providing new solutions to better serve society's needs;
4. Strengthening the role of the postal sector as an instrument of social and economic development;
5. Ensuring the self-sustaining universal postal service by preserving the system's self-financing capacity;
6. Strengthening the role of the postal sector as an interactive channel of communication between government and society;
7. Restructuring the designated postal operator to improve its performance and prepare the postal sector for international integration;
8. Strengthening the government's role in establishing a regulatory framework and governing the postal sector and
9. Promoting job creation by taking specific measures to help create new jobs and prevent job insecurity.

"Sectoral and institutional reforms are necessary in order for us to be able to keep pace with the market. We must be able to stay up to speed with the demands of the market", stated former UPU Director General, Bishar A. Hussein (UPU, 2019; Spring 2020).

ABIDJAN POSTAL STRATEGY

Strategic pillars for the 2021–2025 period

The Abidjan Postal Strategy is a strategic plan of the UPU which sets the direction of the postal sector at the international level in the upcoming planning period from 2021 to 2025 (UPU, 2021a, doc.13). In this regard, three strategic pillars have been defined in response to the existing environment as well as possible activities to be carried out by the Union bodies and

stakeholders (governments, regulators, and authorized postal operators). Postal stakeholders have identified three strategic pillars that respond to their objectives. The first pillar focuses on strengthening the UPU's role as a forum for the postal sector. This will be achieved through the following types of solutions: the UPU should become the unique global forum where all key postal sector stakeholders can meet to share best practices, define strategies, and obtain support to achieve socio-economic development and fulfill the vision for the sector; the UPU should also confirm its crucial role in adopting and implementing treaties and international agreements. It should be recognized as a place where governments can find multilateral solutions to global and regional challenges and the UPU should offer mechanisms through which postal sector stakeholders can settle transactions and accounts in the harmonized procedures that are most beneficial and efficient to all parties involved. The UPU's role as a provider of affordable technical solutions for postal stakeholders will be achieved through three main types of solutions: consulting and capacity building by the UPU, which should offer the postal sector stakeholders training, technical cooperation, and expertise in order to support them in responding to the challenges and opportunities of the fast-changing environment; the UPU should enhance the development of IT solutions to more closely match the needs of stakeholders in the present electronic era to bridge the digital divide; and the UPU should reinforce its setting of standards and certification activities, thus promoting global interoperability for the benefit of all postal sector stakeholders in all countries and territories. The UPU should develop as a knowledge centre of the postal sector, which will be obtained through the following types of solutions: the UPU should further develop its capacities in order to support the postal sector stakeholders to better understand and better adjust to changes that have taken place in the postal sector; the UPU should leverage the potential of the big postal data that it holds, and offer solutions for the postal sector stakeholders in the form of focused insights and analysis; and the UPU should strengthen its role as a custodian of international data about the sector, storing it in a secure and neutral manner. These three pillars ought to enable the UPU to boost its importance and financial strength while supporting postal sector stakeholders in achieving Postal Vision 2030. These strategic goals, through the accompanying programs, are a guide and a starting point for further development of regions and restricted unions. The strategy defines the obligations of the governments of the member states, authorized postal operators, core unions and permanent bodies of the Union as key players in the postal sector, in charge of achieving the mentioned goals, which will be specially elaborated

at the global and national level. In addition, the role, relevance, and achievements of the postal sector in contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 will be monitored and assessed through the Sustainable Development Goals indicators proposed at the global, regional, and national levels for this sector.

Key success factors

In order to ensure a successful outcome in the three strategic pillars, the Union will have to:

1. Focus on its financial, human and material resources in the creation of new products and services for a wider stakeholder base;
2. Improve its financial strength by increasing its revenues and diversifying its funding structure, using fee-paying models for each of its solutions, which would thus be directly financed by users.
3. Continue efforts towards building a diversified and highly competent workforce capable of responding to the needs of all users of the Union's solutions;
4. Increase the level of regionalization of the Union's activities, with a greater presence in the field and a higher share of production and distribution activities undertaken outside of the headquarters in Berne.

"The road ahead will not be easy, however, as our predecessors did, we must appropriately respond to the changes of the time and move forward as an organization that is truly needed by customers and society", stated Masahiko Metoki, Director General Elect, in his inauguration speech (UPU, Autumn 2021; UPU, 2021b).

CONCLUSIONS

Globalization and the liberalization of postal markets are leading to dramatic changes within the postal sector. Significant increases in traded goods and services have led to much closer interaction between economies. The liberalization of markets has also resulted in the opening of earlier barriers to trade in goods and services, as well as competition with a far greater range of quality and products becoming available to customers. This has also increased the area of postal activity open to competition. The development of new technologies and the evolution of customers' needs have created new challenges for governments, which are expected to define

new rules of competition. Postal services offered by public and private operators have undergone a period of rapid and fundamental evolution. Advances in electronic communications, information processing, and transportation systems have caused basic changes in the supply and demand chains for postal services. These market developments have been followed by legal and institutional changes accompanying the creation of a worldwide postal market. Innovation, in the form of the use of information technologies, has become inevitable for today's postal market. Technology today is changing the way in which individuals communicate and collaborate. With this in mind, the postal sector is in an excellent strategic position, as sectoral global connectivity and internet access open up new markets that can provide governments with opportunities in terms of involving rural areas and creating opportunities for economic and trade development. The concept of interconnection remains one of the main challenges facing the postal sector today. For UPU member states, the interconnection of postal networks, in a broader sense, of all stakeholders in the postal sector, is important for the integration of the global postal transmission chain. This goal is achieved through the modernization and full integration of the product portfolio and support for billing systems, accelerating the development of e-commerce solutions, supporting the development of various products and services, and supporting the facilitation of trade through the postal network. The UPU's contributions to the development of the postal sector should be focused on encouraging market and sectoral information, improving efficiency in policy, regulatory and strategic areas, and mobilizing environmental and sustainable development. One of the key conclusions from the Strategic Conference was that sustainable development must remain an issue of essential importance for the UPU and the entire postal sector. Sustainable development should be understood in the broadest sense, through social issues, environmental protection, the sustainability of the postal business model and sector development through all three network dimensions: physical, electronic and financial. The three-dimensional network should remain a cornerstone of the Union's strategic approach. The global development of the postal sector by all Union members will continue to be a guiding concept of all upcoming Union initiatives. Throughout its long history, the UPU has pursued its objectives and constantly expanded its field of activities. In leading the postal sector, the UPU continues to play a crucial role in facilitating communications by using new technologies that move beyond the traditional business of the post, thus shaping the future of the postal sector. I would like to close my presentation with a quote from the author Julius

Juhlin, President of the VIII Congress of the Universal Postal Union, held in Stockholm in 1924, which stands as an inscription at the entrance to the Central Post Office in Washington: "The bearer of consciousness and knowledge of the human mind, a means of exchanging material and cultural goods, an advocate of peace and goodwill among peoples and nations, a voice of sympathy and love, a mediator between separated friends, comforter of grieving and lonely souls, the connection between separated family members, a reflection of the joy of the society in which we live".

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