

## **THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY,** **PLUS ...**

The General Assembly and its main committees (and many of its vast number of subsidiary bodies) are a disorderly jumble of 190-plus Member States with widely differing capacities and preoccupations. Delegates are diplomats, not management people, and management itself is not really a General Assembly priority.

Each year the legislative bodies face formal agendas overcrowded with hundreds of items, including more and more pressing decisions on worldwide operational programmes. From this muddle, the Assembly produces extremely vague and cryptic (because based on consensus among the 190-some participating Member States) resolutions and decisions for Secretariat programmes. The Secretariat then uses this confused guidance as an excuse to set vague or no goals, and to evade serious progress and performance reporting on results.

The pressures and confusion are only enhanced by the fact that the General Assembly must consider and deal with the work of a massive agglomeration of subsidiary committees, commissions, expert bodies, and other organs dealing with the whole range of global programme issues which the UN seeks to address. This process produces an incredible flood of documents and issues for the General Assembly to deal with.

The work of one single body, the Economic and Social Council, illustrates the enormity of the "paper flood" which confronts the Assembly, as shown by a detailed analytical report in 1984. These reporting quality problems continue, with reports that are fragmented, poorly related to each other, and have only recently (and not always) added such obvious format items as tables of contents and summaries. In addition, even in the age of "desktop publishing," UN reports contain very few "visual aids" -- charts and graphs, statistics, or orderly factual comparisons, trends and results -- which would provide transparency and permit Member States and other readers to understand what is going on. And that seems to be precisely the intention.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Reporting to the Economic and Social Council", UN

document A/39/281, **1984**,  
John P. Renninger, "ECOSOC: Options for reform", Policy and Efficacy Studies  
No. 4, United Nations Institute for Training and Research, New York,  
**September 1981**, and  
Joint Inspection Unit, "Management in the United Nations: Work in progress",  
UN document A/50/507, **1995**.

The General Assembly still works at a leisurely, almost 19th-century legislative pace that is ill-suited to pressing world problems. It considers overall management issues only once every two years (alternating between odd-numbered "budget" years (which really battle only over who gets how much money for what programmes) and even-numbered "personnel" years (which really battle over who gets what staff jobs, and under what procedures). Management reform only became a separate and consistent agenda feature during the 1990s. However, it appears under the very cumbersome title of "Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations," and is comfortably submerged within the sprawling discussions of personnel (now "human resource") matters every second year.

The Secretariat's sketchy biennial reports on "human resource management reform" and (ever more minimally on) "accountability" topics are followed by General Assembly requests for renewed progress reports two years hence. This leisurely pace postpones any real accountability actions on and on into the indefinite future. Meanwhile, impunity and poor performance continue, or are overcome only by the stubborn efforts and integrity of conscientious individual UN managers, rather than by any disciplined and systematic UN management culture.

The oft-stated assertion that the UN actually represents "We the peoples" of the world also requires closer examination. The 189 Member State missions to the UN are comprised of diplomats, none of whom (including Secretariat officials from Mr. Annan on down) are elected in any popular voting or even a transparent selection process making them directly accountable to "the people." In fact, countries belonging to the UN themselves range from "relatively-less-corrupt" to "very corrupt" on global corruption scales, and display similar wide ranges of achievement, problems, and respectability on other global indexes assessing their records on democracy, human rights, globalization, torture, social development, and good governance.

Many of the UN member "nations" are really "mini-" or even "micro-states" with tiny populations (as few as 10,000 people). The majority of UN Member States pay a petty obligatory contribution of only some \$13,000 per year, which calls into

question the intensity of their concern as "stakeholders" with how, and how well, UN funds are spent. In addition, on many issues the Member States who want to obstruct, undermine, or neutralize any global declarations and actions at all on "good governance", human rights, or management reform or improvement issues, may well be a significant majority.

In fact, the UN is quite simply "a trade-association of nation states". This was illustrated at the 2000 UN "Millenium Assembly" when Secretary-General Annan justified the exclusion of the Dalai Lama from a meeting of global religious leaders due to Chinese objections because " ... this house is really a house for the member states, and their sensitivities matter."

Alvin Toffler, Powershift: Knowledge, wealth and violence at the edge of the 21st century, Bantam, New York 1991, pp. 456-457,

"UN spiritual talks to bar Dalai Lama", AFP, International Herald Tribune, August 25, 2000, p. 10,

"UN head exhorts religious leaders", International Herald Tribune, August 30, 2000.

At the same time, Czech president Vaclav Havel made a plea that the UN should finally come to "represent the people." In fact, many UN member states have long resisted recognition of and meaningful collaboration with NGOs and other civil society groups. While no nation is untainted, the UN Commission on Human Rights is a prime example of a centrally-important UN policy area increasingly influenced, if not yet captured, by countries whose own human rights records and motivations are in serious doubt (see the subsection on Human Rights under the section on UN Performance Problems .)

Steven Erlanger, "Hear the 'voice of the people', Havel implores world bodies", International Herald Tribune, August 23, 2000.

The above facts underscore the UN's serious legislative and oversight limitations. The General Assembly's (Fifth) Committee on administration and budget has no subcommittees or staff experts of its own to analyse and oversee management reform and Secretariat programmes. Instead, its 189 Member States endlessly debate and dilute every management issue in public sessions or in critical backroom "informal" sessions, because all member states want to "participate" fully in the deliberations that lead to "concensus" resolutions (or to stalemate and inaction).

Childers and Urquhart made a detailed analysis of UN legislative problems in 1994. They observed that:

"The UN deals in one way or another with virtually every aspect of the human condition and the natural environment. Its decision-making processes have inevitably

become a maze of reports and resolutions. Like any fifty-old machinery it needs overhauling, and its operators need to improve and update their techniques. ...

In the short term, member-states should establish ... an intergovernmental expert group that should begin by commissioning a review of the business flows through the machinery by an international team of top-quality professional legislative managers. ...

The second requirement for effective reform ... is to open up the working calendar. ... trying to fit the world's economic, social and environmental agenda for the 21st century into the forty-five-year-old calendar of an organization that then had only 28 percent [of] its present membership is absurd.

Extending sessions across the year will certainly cost more money. The extra cost should, however, be examined against the ultimate cost of continuing the calendar compressions. Poor or mediocre intergovernmental decisions in the UN system end up costing considerable sums in the delegation and secretariat time that has to be spent later in re-examining what was too hastily adopted (not least on UN reform itself.)"

Erskine Childers, with Brian Urquhart, "Renewing the United Nations system", Development Dialogue 1994:1, Dag Hammarskjold Foundation and Ford Foundation, Upsala, Sweden, 1994, Chapter VIII, "The decision-making machinery," pp.119-141 [121, 139].

Ronald Spiers made similar expert observations on the worsening legislative problems, and key obstructive factors:

" The quality of the General Assembly's work has deteriorated in recent years. Its agenda is extremely resistant to being streamlined or rationalized, and many agenda items are trivial, overlapping, or of very narrow interest to the member states. ... In addition, the right of any member state to place any item on the agenda, no matter how parochial or trivial, continues to be sacrosanct. As a consequence, the assembly's agenda has grown to over 150 items ...during the fall session. ...

The General Assembly's ... most important function is the consideration and approval of the organization's biennial budget. However, this function is essentially entrusted to the lower-level representatives in the Fifth Committee, whose meetings the ambassadors seldom attend. [The committee favors] ... micromanagement [and] ... little attention is paid to the big issues which should underlie discussions about the utilization of resources. ...

Were the General Assembly to institute reforms [to provide] ... fewer but more-important agenda items, fewer constraints on its operating schedule, and a more manageable committee structure, and were the Fifth Committee to become less bureaucratic and engage the attention and participation of senior UN officials, this would [considerably] ... enhance its relevance and effectiveness."

Ronald I. Spiers, "Reforming the United Nations," in Roger A. Coate, ed., U.S. policy and the future of the United Nations, Twentieth Century Fund, New York, 1994, pp.19-40 [29-31.]

[Note: Mr. Spiers served an Under-Secretary General of the United Nations in New York in the early 1990s.]

Several General Assembly Presidents have also spoken pessimistically about the complexity and slowness of the Assembly's work. The Finnish President of the 2000 General Assembly stated frankly that the jumbled agenda made meaningful achievement on serious matters almost impossible.

"The 55th session of the U.N. General Assembly ended on Monday with its outgoing Finnish president criticizing the body's hit-or-miss agenda which left too little

time for important issues.

Specifically, Harri Holkeri, a former Finnish banker, said ... the assembly's agenda spread itself too thin with 200 issues, many of them overlapping with the 'big issues' hidden.

The Assembly has 189 members and controls the budget and general programming of the United Nations. While its decisions on political issues express the will of the international community, they are not mandatory ...

... Holkeri also criticized the number of conferences held throughout the world that he said 'cost big money.' If the assembly trimmed its agenda, such issues could be [discussed] during the body's main session. ...

'There is a tendency to do too much at the same time,' Holkeri said, adding, however, that 'This is a bureaucratic institution. Nothing happens overnight.'

Holkeri also grappled with reform of the U.N. Security Council which has gone nowhere for eight years. ...

... he said he would promise that when Finland 'in about 2000 years,' gets the presidency of the assembly again 'I am not going to be available for that position.'

Evelyn Leopold, "UN General Assembly president laments free-for-all agenda," [dailynews.yahoo](http://dailynews.yahoo), **September 10, 2001**.

The JIU included a subsection on "Accountability for accountability" in its 1995 report on progress in UN management reform efforts. It observed that:

**"...The ultimate leadership, responsibility, authority and accountability for the ... [UN's] management, good or poor, rest with [both] top management ... [and] the General Assembly. ... governing bodies set the tone for their entire organization. They must show through their actions and determined follow-up that they give high priority to firm accountability, ... effective oversight, a performance culture, wise resource use, ... and maximum implementation ... of organizational missions ..."**

The Fifth Committee, ... as a "board of directors" with 185 Member States considering all types of management issues, can hardly operate effectively. ...

**Many governing bodies in the United Nations system** now have or are establishing specialized subcommittees ... to **devote more continuous attention to administrative, management and oversight matters.**

... if professionalism and competence [and full transparency and reporting] can be assured, three new subcommittees could be [established]:

Peace-keeping management subcommittee [for the greatest single burden of Fifth Committee work]; ...

Strategic planning and management subcommittee; ...

Oversight subcommittee. ...

**... Finally, many national governments have legislative staffs and analysts to help them [with oversight.] JIU proposed this idea of modest staff resources to assist the CPC in 1984, but the Secretary-General was opposed** ... establishing a few posts for [each of the above committees] could have a great positive impact on the future oversight and decision-making effectiveness of the Fifth Committee."

Joint Inspection Unit, "Management in the United Nations: Work in progress", Chapter VI.A., "Accountability for accountability," UN document A/50/507, **1995**, paras. 150-154, 166-175 [150-152, 170-174.]. [emphasis added.]

Finally, the UN Secretariat blames much UN bad management on Member States that attempt to "micro-manage" day-to-day UN operations in their own interests and on behalf of staff (or job

candidates) from their countries. Such interference does indeed exist and is very damaging, but it is almost entirely on the personnel "input" side.

On the output side, however, IO Watch finds that where Member States should closely monitor Secretariat performance and results, there is almost no oversight effort. The input meddling, however, has led to the clever Secretariat counter-strategy of "free the managers" as already discussed, and a lawless and unaccountable UN operating "behind the curtain." Sadly, this "free the managers" counter-attack is the only actual major reform that the Secretariat seems to have actually implemented in response to the management accountability reforms that the General Assembly insisted on in 1993.

Many other United Nations system governing bodies have made some significant progress in recent years in streamlining and rationalizing their governing body work methods and functioning, often as a regular agenda item. In addition, various specific efforts were undertaken in the 1990s to improve governing body oversight, reporting, external review, and transparency by establishing or improving specialized committees for management and implementation matters.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the UN system", UN document A/50/503, **1995**, Part I, Chapter VIII, "Oversight governing bodies", pp. 48-54, and Part II, Table 12, pp. 24-27.

The UN's Fifth Committee is far behind in such reforms. It presently performs its oversight responsibilities poorly, and with many major barriers. The diplomat/delegates lack expertise and are uncomfortable with management audit and investigation matters and responsibilities. They prefer to rely on an established but archaic system of "expert" advisory bodies (see the next subsection) that is preoccupied primarily with financial, budgetary, and system-wide input issues, rather than with "output" results and performance.

The Fifth Committee is also woefully dependent on the evasive, often non-transparent, and frequently tardy "reform" or "performance" reports that the Secretariat places before it every biennium, and it can only give back more vague and evasive "reform guidance" to the Secretariat in return.

Worst of all, the Fifth Committee will not establish any subcommittees on oversight, or management, or any other matters because, as one senior official put it, "everyone wants to participate". Of course, 190-plus cooks can spoil any recipe,

especially since one or more of them can almost always be relied on to object strenuously to any specific remedial management improvement or oversight proposal which might jeopardize their pet programmes.

In addition, the Fifth Committee really does not know what to do with specific OIOS reports or OIOS annual reports. Mr. Paschke observed several times that those reports were piled up in front of the Committee, still awaiting action after a considerable time lag. Further, when they are discussed, it is only in considerable (but sporadic and poorly-focused) public (and then informal) meetings.

The discussions thus stretch sporadically over several months of each annual session, in the vague catch-all agenda item "Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations", in which they often are buried among many other, more pressing, operational and policy matters. As a result, the Fifth Committee often just "takes note" of them or does nothing, and it did not even pass annual resolutions on OIOS work for several years. As the head of OIOS expressed it in his final annual report:

"As I write these lines, three previous [OIOS] annual reports, as well as several individual reports of OIOS, transmitted and introduced a long time ago, have still received no formal response from the Fifth Committee, although they have been thoroughly discussed and commented upon in that forum.

I can only express my hope that this impasse will eventually be overcome and that the value added to the work of the United Nations by independent internal oversight will be recognized by all stakeholders."

Comments in the "Preface" to the last OIOS annual report prepared by Under-Secretary-General Karl Paschke, in "Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services" A/54/393 of **23 September 1999**.

Discouragingly, the Fifth Committee launched a required 5-year evaluation of OIOS performance in 1998. But, after an attempt to state some specific improvements needed in OIOS work led to disputes, the Assembly finally passed only a very dry resolution. It asserted that it had "evaluated" OIOS, that the Office was functioning satisfactorily, and essentially that it should carry on as before but strive in general to improve. The Assembly stated that it would "evaluate" the OIOS again, presumably in the same toothless fashion, in the year 2004. In light of recent oversight and management scandals, IO Watch wonders if they will finally find some more substantive comments to make this time.

"Review of the implementation of General Assembly resolution 48/218B", General Assembly resolution 54/244 of **31 January 2000**.

The 1995 JIU report on management reform progress observed that the General Assembly and its Fifth Committee must join the Secretariat top leadership in setting the tone for the entire organization. If they do not insist on systematically and seriously assessing programme and policy implementation, then the Secretariat will not spend serious efforts on this function either. The JIU concluded its examination of "accountability for accountability" by stating that:

"The United Nations has often been criticized for establishing many grand objectives and goals in all areas over the years, without paying much attention to whether the Organization's subsequent programmes actually contribute to progress toward those goals. **The Fifth Committee, with reforms ... must be a critical leader and 'linch pin' in the new system of accountability and responsibility, driving the United Nations continuously toward the management reforms and 'transparency and effectiveness' which the General Assembly has repeatedly called for.**"

Joint Inspection Unit, "Management in the United Nations: Work in progress", Chapter VI.A., "Accountability for accountability," UN document A/50/507, 1995, para. 175.

A decade later, the General Assembly has failed to meet these challenges. The situation only seems to be getting worse, even as the complexity of global problems and needs for effective global action increase. In 2002, as part of his "second wave" of reforms, Mr. Annan acknowledged the problems of "Allocating resources to priorities." He admitted that:

"The present United Nations programming and budgeting system is complex and labour-intensive. It involves three separate committees, voluminous documentation and hundreds of meetings. Changes proposed ... include a medium-term plan covering only two years (rather than four) ...

The budget document itself would be less detailed and more strategic, and would give the Secretary-General some flexibility to move resources according to needs. Also ... intergovernmental review should henceforth be conducted exclusively in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly [rather than shared with the CPC] ... [and] measures will be taken to streamline peacekeeping budgets, and to improve the management of the large number of trust funds through which Member States provide voluntary contributions to supplement the regular budget."

"Strengthening of the United Nations: An agenda for further change: Report of the Secretary-General," UN document A/57/387 of 9 September 2002, "Summary, section V," p. 3.

IO Watch will add more material on the Assembly's role and weak performance as time goes on. This archive also addresses the consequences of this present faulty oversight and guidance situation under the Recent Developments section of this website, in the subsections on an unaccountable UN, recent scandals, and possible answers. Most important of all are the subsections under "Answers" on annual status and results reporting to the General Assembly, and on a General Assembly audit subcommittee.