

GRAND LACK OF FOCUS

One of the topics under The UN, Alone and Unaccountable discussed the lack of a coherent UN strategy, and instead the long-standing tradition of the "world organization" trying, if not to do everything, at least to get involved in everything. In the past few years this tendency seems only to have accelerated, so that instead of the advice of many that any organization should concentrate on what it does best as its area of "comparative advantage", the UN persists in getting into everything.

The Millennium Project (disappointing so far, see Lack of a strategy), and the Global Compact hypocrisy (a success?, a public relations game?, a UN sell-out?), and the UN Convention against Corruption (too new to assess yet) have already been discussed in this subsection. But there are many other new fields of engagement as the UN continually expands its policy horizons. A few of the major and most surprising efforts are noted here.

For decades real UN action in many areas was hampered by Cold War tensions and insistence on "national sovereignty" principles. But in 1998 Secretary-General Annan stated that:

"Only universal organizations like the United Nations have the scope and legitimacy to generate principles, norms and rules that are essential if globalization is to benefit everyone."

Kofi A. Annan, "Partnerships for global community: Annual report on the work of the organization 1998", United Nations, New York, **1998**, p. 81.

In 1998 Mr. Annan commissioned a strange book which argued that the UN (actually it relied mostly on the work of the UN system technical specialized agencies) had played a large but unrecognized role in global commerce. Its unusual tenor can be gained from its introductory and concluding statements:

"There is a popular conception that the United Nations system is not particularly central or salient to the functioning of the global economy. This is a misconception because many UN bodies generate norms and rules (or regimes) that are crucial to order and openness in the international commercial system ...

In a very real sense, the UN system has picked up the torch of global collaboration from a host of statesmen and industry officials ... [who were active] over the century prior to the birth of the UN system. ...

In concluding ...

It is important ... that the profound contributions of UN bodies to commercial order and openness are understood and publicly recognized. International businesses need to support the many UN institutions that facilitate their global activities. and ... to defend ... [them] from attacks that undercut their ability to contribute ... [and] to come to the defence of UN institutions from criticisms that fail to recognize their very real contributions."

Mark W. Zacher, The United Nations and global commerce, UN Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, 1999, pp. 10-11, 55.

The 2000-2001 period was already filled with the energetic work on the UN Millennium Project Goals, the Global Compact, and work on developing the UN Convention against Corruption. But in 2002 Secretary-General Annan accelerated the process still further and faster with his "agenda for further change" and with a whole new range of UN "partnership" activities."

"... The need for a strong multilateral institution has never been more acutely felt than it is today, in the era of globalization. ...

Much has already been achieved. ...

The United Nations has been in the forefront of the battle to eradicate poverty and fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic. ... [Reforms are] improving the Organization's ... peacekeeping and peace-building operations, and it has responded well to novel and unexpected challenges in Sierra Leone, Kosovo, and Timor-Leste. The United Nations is showing greater coherence, and its disparate elements are working better together. Fruitful partnerships have been built with a wide range of non-State actors. In short, the Organization is evolving with the times. It is more efficient, more open and more creative."

"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,"

"Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization", UN document A/57/1, **2002**, "Partnerships", paras. 203-229,

"Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization", UN document A/58/1, **2003**, "Partnerships", paras. 219-248, and

"Towards global partnerships", General Assembly resolution 58/129 of **19 February 2004**.

The UN may not have been more effective, and was probably becoming less coherent, but it certainly was being creative and opening partnerships -- or new roles -- almost everywhere. A most surprising new field was proposals for the UN to become a "global taxman", which began in 2001 and speeded up in 2003:

"Declaring no task more urgent than rescuing a billion people in the world from 'abject and dehumanizing poverty,' the United Nations has come up with dozens of ways to finance the economic development of poorer countries.

An extensive report issued on Tuesday on behalf of Secretary General Kofi Annan offered no fewer than 87 remedies, many aimed at attracting more private investment and promoting trade to offset declines in foreign aid.

The 64-page report broke ground in calling for a study of the potential for international cooperation on tax matters, including tax evasion. ...

Nitin Desai, the under secretary general for economic and social affairs, said the

report formed the basis for further discussions leading to an international conference on development financing in March 2002. ...

The report noted that the worlds of finance and development meet through the system of saving and investment. An estimated \$7.5 trillion was saved or invested last year, of which \$1.7 trillion went to developing countries. But the net transfer to wealthy countries amounted to \$450 billion, three-fourths of which was absorbed by the United States."

Christopher S. Wren, "The UN offers 87 remedies to help poor nations develop", New York Times, **February 4, 2001**.

"For those who worry the United Nations doesn't already deal with enough red tape, the UN General Assembly began discussing a proposal to set up an international tax organization.

Enough to chill the hearts of shady criminals and opponents of bureaucracy alike, the proposal was first spelled out by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in a report earlier this year.

He recommended that an existing 25-person committee be expanded and upgraded to an 'intergovernmental body' -- in other words, an international group along the lines of other UN agencies like UNICEF and UNESCO.

The assembly began considering the proposal as part of a two-day 'high-level dialogue' on how to finance international development that will feature officials from the World Bank and other key trade and financial institutions.

'This is not something that would write tax codes or set global taxes' ... [a UN information officer] told AFP. 'But there are a lot of sloppy, messy tax issues out there.'

"UN mulls role of global taxman", AFP, **October 29, 2003**.

[Note: It should be noted that most of the UN Secretariat officials and diplomatic missions involved in [sloppy, messy?] pontificating on this grand global tax initiative have never paid any taxes in their entire lives, because they work outside their home countries.]

Although such discussions are still in their early stages, there are obviously tremendous ramifications for global commerce, national tax policies, taxpayer interests, and UN financing, with enthusiasm on the UN side and many doubts appearing elsewhere. The creation of an International Tax Organization (ITO), among other possibilities, envisions a UN Economic Security Council (ESC) with the same standing on international economic matters that the Security Council has with regard to peace and security. A Secretariat report, and various critiques, on these grand matters are already available.

"Report of the High-Level Panel on Financing for Development", with "Letter" of the Secretary-General, UN document A/55/1000 of **26 June 2001**, esp. pp. 27-28.

Bruce Zagaris, "U.N. report calls for new spirituality: The creation of two organizations to aid international tax enforcement", Tax Notes International, **July 23, 2001**, and

Daniel J. Mitchell, "The UN tax?", Heritage Foundation, **December 22, 2003**.

[Note: the quite detailed 2001 analysis is available at www.freedomandprosperity.org/Papers/zagaris-un/zagaris-UN.html]

The tax discussion also revives memories of the "Tobin tax", first proposed by the Nobel economic laureate James Tobin in 1978. It would impose a very small percentage charge on speculative "spot" transactions in the global foreign exchange market, which amount to some \$1.5 trillion a day. The proposal is promoted by NGOs and parliamentarians who believe it would provide multiple economic and social benefits, but business argues that it could seriously disrupt international commerce. Conservative estimates are that the tax could yield from \$150-\$300 billion a year. The UN estimates that the worst forms of poverty and environmental destruction could be wiped out for around \$225 billion a year.

Robin Round (of the Halifax Initiative, a group of Canadian NGOs) "Stop speculation by supporting a 'Tobin Tax' on international financial transactions", in Wayne Ellwood, The no-nonsense guide to globalization, New Internationalist, Oxford (UK), **2001**, pp. 124-130.

[IO Watch would only note that it appears that the UN is intended to administer these enormous "Tobin tax" sums. In light of the alleged multi-billion dollar scandals in the far, far smaller and UN-administered Iraq oil-for-food programme that have emerged in 2003-2004 (see discussion of that topic in the very next subsection) and overall weak UN financial management and oversight, entrusting it to administer any gigantic Tobin tax revenues sounds disastrous.]

But the UN also has many other "fish to fry." One of them is the extraordinarily complex issue of human cloning.

"The General Assembly on Tuesday ducked for a year a polarizing debate over human cloning that has set the Bush administration against allies like Britain and large parts of the world's scientific community.

All 191 members of the United Nations agree on a treaty that would prohibit the cloning of human beings but are divided over the issue of whether to extend a ban to stem-cell and other research known as therapeutic cloning.

Opponents of total prohibition say that it would block valuable research and medical advances ...

The United States lost a UN struggle to pass a complete ban last month when a substitute measure postponing the debate for two years passed the assembly by one vote.

Science associations and societies flooded UN headquarters with petitions, e-mail and messages of alarm ..."

Warren Hoge, "UN Assembly puts off debate on human cloning", International Herald Tribune, **December 10, 2003**.

Another sweeping topic is control and oversight of the Internet.

"After two years of preparatory talks, this week's first round on the United Nation's World Summit on the Information Society should not have been contentious. Rather than demonstrate a harmony of global interconnectedness, however, the conference revealed serious divisions in the way the governments of rich and poor nations think about the Internet.

The first stumbling block was the attempt to address the "digital divide", the inequality of access ... in developing countries compared with the rich world. ...

The second big bone of contention was how to run the internet's addressing and numbering domains ... currently controlled by a private body ... Some countries believe the co-ordination of the internet's core infrastructure should be placed on a more multilateral footing ...

With no clear solution, the summit's declaration called for the establishment of a UN working group to develop ... [governance policies] in time for the summit's second round in Tunisia in 2005.

A fudge, in short. But it is a positive sign that countries are discussing how to run the internet, since it requires global solutions to its problems."

"Internet governance: Swiss fudge: Rich and poor nations are squabbling over how best to run the Internet", The Economist, **December 13, 2003**.

Still another UN grand initiative involves plans for a much more comprehensive UN approach to global "civil society".

"[In February 2003] ... U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan ... appointed a panel of 12 eminent persons to assess the role of civil society and find ways to strengthen its future relations with the United Nations. ...

In a series of recommendations, the Cardoso panel has [now] called for the creation of a new U.N. under-secretary-general to head an Office of Constituency Engagement and Partnerships that will liaise between civil society and the world body.

Jim Paul of Global Policy Forum ... welcomed the proposal to appoint a senior official to handle relations with NGOs. ...

Still he remained guarded about his support for the proposal ...

The U.N.'s Global Compact ... is to be incorporated into the proposed [OCEP] ...

The [Cardoso] report admits that many in civil society are concerned about ... [that]. [But the report says that multinationals] 'constructive engagement through the Global Compact [allows the UN] to monitor accountability and responsibility.'

The panel recommends the creation of a U.N. fund 'to enhance the capacity of civil society in developing countries.' The U.N. Secretariat has been encouraged to seek contributions from [various sources] ... extra-budgetary funds of about 40 million dollars could be raised ..."

Thalif Deen, Politics: UN plans to boost NGOs come under scrutiny", ipsnews.net, **June 21, 2004**.

Yet amid all these broad-scale new activities, other much more urgent matters consistently and insistentlly intrude on UN policy-making capacities and intentions. Just two will be cited here:

"The head of [the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei] ... said Friday that the illicit trafficking of nuclear-related material and equipment had grown so widespread that it amounted to a Wal-Mart for weapons-seeking countries. ...

... [He] said he was taken aback during a recent trip to Libya by the scale and complexity of the black market, through which Libya obtained material and blueprints for nuclear weapons designs. ...

[He acknowledged that] ... neither the atomic energy agency nor the intelligence branches of the big countries have a grip on the extent of nuclear trafficking.

'The system is under a good deal of stress,' he said. 'We need to take this seriously.'

... many experts ...[believe that] nuclear proliferation is looming as the next big security threat."

Mark Landler, "Trafficking in nuclear arms called widespread", International Herald Tribune, **January 24-25, 2004**.

"The Security Council has unanimously approved a resolution to keep chemical, biological and nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists. ...

The 15-to-0 vote followed months of negotiating and redrafting to win over ... [some reluctant members.] ...

The resolution compels all 191 UN members to draw up legislation and strengthen laws to prevent terrorists and black market agents from being able to [obtain, build or use such weapons.]

The measure asks countries to report on their compliance within six months, and it establishes Security Council monitoring for two years.

No specific enforcement power was included in the resolution, although UN rules allow for sanctions against noncooperating countries."

Warren Hoge, "Security Council passes ban on weapons for terrorists", International Herald Tribune, **May 2, 2004**.

All this "sloppy, messy" mix (to use the UN officer's characterization of tax issues above in the October 2003 article) of grand new initiatives and pressing needs -- Millennium Development Goals, the Global Compact, the new UN Convention against Corruption, global taxes, human cloning, Internet oversight, civil society needs, nuclear weapons proliferation, keeping weapons out of the hands of terrorists, to name only a few -- would be a very tough task for the most efficient and well-organized public decision-making body. For the UN, it is a case of tremendous overload, verging on breakdown.

Four central elements of this trend must be noted. The first is the following two very acerbic but valid assessments of present UN capacities for decisive, high-quality decision-making:

"On the first day of what was billed as the Millenium Summit last September in New York, Kofi Annan ... welcomed the assembled dignities from 147 countries with a banquet and the proposing of a toast to 'You [who] have the authority to speak for, and the ability to transform, the lives of six billion people.'

The flattery was extravagant but it was cheerfully received (strong applause, complacent nods) and for three days and three nights the dignities gave speeches, ratified treaties, glanced at documents, signed declarations of blameless principle in favor of human freedom and the biosphere.

Our twenty-first-century faith in scientific miracle gives rise to the hope of 'transnational institutions' capable of managing the world's affairs with the sangfroid of the late emperor Caesar Augustus.

.... the front page news mocked the presumptions of omnipotence -- civil war in Colombia and Sierra Leone, famine in Ethiopia, a mob with machetes murdering three U.N. officials in West Timor (on the same day that Kofi Annan was raising his glass of congratulatory champagne), civil war in Chechnya and Sri Lanka, floods in India and six men arrested for cannibalism in Tanzania."

Lewis H. Lapham, "Cleopatra's nose", Harpers Magazine, **November 2000**, pp. 9-11.

"During [the 1990s I spent some time] in stately European palaces with diplomats, parliamentarians and multilateral men who used the word 'modalities' a lot, and we'd discuss the post-Cold-War international order.

Far from mastering events, the poor souls found history moving in unfathomable directions. Their careful negotiations often had nothing to do with reality.

[The UN deliberations on reconstruction of Iraq] face a series of tortuous problems: it's neighborhood building in all its granular specificity.

But the talk at the Security Council is 8,000 miles above all that. There are lofty and vapid formulations about moving from the 'logic of occupation' to the 'logic of sovereignty.'

The more you look at the Security Council negotiations, the more they resemble one of those horrible divorces in which the children get ignored because the parents are caught up in the psychodrama of each other's perfidies.

.... we need to focus on serving the Iraqis first, second and last. We don't need to get caught up in a distracting round of lofty debates among the world's Metternichs, who treat the Iraqi people as pawns in their great game power struggles."

David Brooks, "All the lofty policy talk ignores Iraqi's needs", International Herald Tribune, **September 24, 2003**.

Second, that the above comments are not "out of line" is validated by Mr. Annan's own call for radical UN reform in September 2003.

"President George W. Bush's turn to the United Nations for help in Iraq was a welcome, if belated, recognition that global policing can acquire legitimacy only through multilateral endorsement. But the record of the major political bodies of the UN -- the General Assembly and the Security Council -- has little to show that this is the place to find that sort of legitimacy in the 21st century.

The General Assembly is usually mired in speechmaking. The Council is increasingly perceived as an antiquated relic of the cold war. These are not just the sentiments of neo-conservatives in Washington: they were voiced by ... [Secretary-General] Kofi Annan. In an unusually candid reported on September 8, Annan challenged the UN to make radical reforms."

"Restructuring the UN", International Herald Tribune, **September 22, 2003**.

Third, the UN has always had the age-old bad-government habit of wanting to "throw money at problems" rather than recognizing its fundamental fiduciary responsibility for the wise and prudent management of the resources entrusted to it. IO Watch believes that this pattern continues on in the UN not only because of habit and inertia but because -- harsh but true -- it keeps the UN baronial structure in business and even expanding.

"Iraq gets ...[the headlines and the most] aid money. ... But there are other crises that crave attention, many involving far worse suffering. So this week the UN issued a list of 21 forgotten disasters and appealed for \$3 billion to alleviate them.

... The only way to raise money, the UN reckons, is to lump ... [the countries concerned] together ...

The UN complains that donors ,, tend to have ... [their favorites]. True enough.

...

... The UN's own list shows a hint of bias, too: it asks for \$305m for the Palestinians, but only \$187m for Congo, though the death toll from Congo's war is more than 1,000 times greater than that during the *intifada*. ...

Since the UN never gets all the money it wants for disaster relief, some of its officials hint that donations should be compulsory. In a press release this week, for example, it mused that 'many humanitarians would like to see aid evolve from a free-floating act of kindness to an arrangement based on law.' It is not obvious that this is a good idea. ... [Money should go] where donors ... want it to, not where unselected bureaucrats choose."

"A United Nations appeal: Forgotten disasters", The Economist, **November 22nd 2003**. [emphasis added.]

Fourth and finally, a recent article from the UN's public information chief indicates that UN officials too have noticed that the old "trust us to save the world, today" approach is not working, whether it is based on Mr. Annan's personal choices for action or an informal canvassing of UN officials.

"Iraq,' [Secretary-General] Annan noted ruefully, 'has sucked out all the oxygen and distorted the international agenda.' This has been true, of course, for some time -- at least since January 2003 when Annan held a press conference to cover 16 different issues on his global agenda and every question addressed to him was about Iraq.

In response to the gap between what we at the United Nations thought the world should care about and what the media covering our work preferred to focus on, my colleagues and I came up with a list last May of the top 10 stories we felt were not getting enough media attention. ...

My team consulted every UN department and agency ... A list of over 60 issues emerged. ...

But why go on? None of the top-flight international journalists who turned up at my press conference to launch the list actually wrote about our list. ...

We know we are making the smallest of dents in the public consciousness, but we could not forgive ourselves if we didn't try."

Shashi Tharoor, "The critical news stories you never read", International Herald Tribune, **July 14, 2004**. [emphasis added.]

IO Watch believes that the grand lack of focus and muddle of UN initiatives and programmes described above is a very grave problem. It is not a matter of the themes, all of which are worthy and many of which are life-or-death matters. It is also not a matter of UN staff or programmes, which usually try to do their best. But it is a matter of careless, lazy, and self-indulgent decision-making which must become far wiser and more responsible.

A specific proposal for much more responsible, reasoned, responsive, and ongoing UN decision making and priority setting for the global agenda was proposed almost two decades ago. New proposals and new perceptions add critical elements of wise use of societal talents and careful analysis to attempt to determine where the scarce global resources made available to combat global problems can produce the greatest tangible benefits for mankind.

This hard task, which obviously cannot avoid controversies and the inevitable politics, still has vastly more potential than the present "sloppy, messy" UN mix, and seems vastly more transparent and reasoned. It is discussed further, as A true global strategy , under the concluding substantive section of this archive on Answers: A starting point .