

THE UN, ALONE AND UNACCOUNTABLE

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"If, in the future, the UN hopes to avoid failures like that in Somalia, it will need to change on a more fundamental level.

Above all, if the UN is to be effective, it must be accountable. 'The UN is probably the least accountable bureaucracy in the world -- a main reason not only for the cataclysm in Somalia but for the persistence of famine through Africa', said Alex de Waal, a British anthropologist who has studied the UN's response to famines. 'Officials who are responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths must face the prospect of prosecution, not promotion.'

There is also the need for a freedom of information act, so UN officials cannot hide from the public everything from their salaries to their mistakes to how much they're spending on public relations. And finally, there must be an independent watchdog organization with full power to investigate U.N. agencies.

The General Assembly has the authority to establish a commission of inquiry to examine what went wrong in Somalia, but it has never examined its own performance."

Ray Bonner, "Why we went": How the United Nations turned its back on Somalia and subverted the best chance for peace", Mother Jones, (USA), **March-April 1993**, pp. 54-60. [emphasis added.]

[Note: the full article is available at MotherJones.com under the author's name.]

As the above quote indicated in 1993, and as still seems true, IO Watch believes that the present-day UN warrants the harsh judgement rendered by this subsection title. It stands alone in the world because of its rejection of the rule of law, and its failure to firmly apply the accountability, transparency, and oversight processes that increasingly govern the rest of mankind.

The first major section of this archive on Where is the Rule of Law? provides an answer --- it is not present within the UN. The other major sections on UN Performance Problems presents many assessments of its past and continuing defects in all operational areas, and the sections on UN Management Accountability Struggles and on Inadequate UN Oversight indicate that the reform efforts made thus far are much more show than substance.

The UN is not yet bound by the good governance processes that increasingly apply to the rest of mankind. Its traditions of diplomatic immunity have been bolstered by a defective management culture that is now six decades old, and the recent attempts to "free" UN managers without firm, and offsetting, accountability. These factors have greatly handicapped the Organization's programmes and therefore progress toward the global goals it was created to help attain.

UN management operations and "reforms" are hidden behind much reassuring rhetoric and vague documents. But enough facts have already emerged, and many more exist, to indicate that the UN presently has grave failures of due diligence and good governance. These flaws must be rectified if the UN is ever to operate effectively, and its many outstanding and motivated staff must be given the opportunity to perform dynamically without "deadwood" burdens on their backs.

This and the following two subsections provide the situation and the road ahead for UN pursuit of management accountability. This first subsection summarizes some major aspects of the UN's UNaccountable culture, the second introduces an open-ended list of recent major problems which have resulted, and the third offers a "best practice" list of real reforms that have already been applied elsewhere or are "doable", which could finally make the UN more transparent, open, and accountable.

Global governance and 21st century international issues present too much complexity for the old UN model -- "the only truly universal organization" -- to handle or even lead by itself. Instead, common, concerted, and effective action is needed from the powerful private sector, ever-more-vigorous and assertive NGOs, and the forces of civil society, along with the traditional nation-states and international organizations.

The modern-day world, especially because of the media and the Internet, has become very much one of networks and networking processes, not of hierarchies in a pyramid with the UN claiming the top position. Instead, the UN must work with (not above) others to address and resolve global problems.

An interesting reflection on the key determinants of organizational effectiveness in the brave, new networked world comes from management guru Warren Bennis. In an interview in 2000, he said that:

"Networks, by definition, connect everyone to everyone. Hierarchies, by definition, don't: they create formal channels of communication, which you're expected to follow. Hierarchies are concrete-lined irrigation ditches, where water flows along prescribed lines. Networks are flat, rich mysterious [entities] of every-which-way communication. ...

When a network becomes the main means by which information is conveyed and work gets done in an [organization], ... hierarchal crutches are knocked away. Rank is unclear. We work in teams, which are often [inter-organizational] -- so hierarchical power can't guarantee that work gets done. Networks encourage people to operate informally, with few rules. They depend on trust.

Few [organizational] people I meet are mystified by power. Trust, on the other hand, baffles them -- yet it is more important.

[In a new book ... he and his coauthors write] 'Gathering information, and above all, developing trust, have become the key source of sustainable competitive advantage.'

Thomas A. Stewart, "Whom can you trust? It's not so easy to tell: ... how [do] organizations build trust in a networked world," Fortune, **June 12, 2000**, pp. 173-174.

The author of the article went on to explore the question of how we create, build, and support a climate of trust in a networked world. He identified five elements:

"competence -- I can trust you if I know you're good at what you do.
community -- Networks naturally spawn informal ... "communities of practice" ... [which] create and validate competence. The boss may not know which butcher is best, but the other butchers do.

commitment -- it's vital that there be a shared commitment to the same mission. Unfortunately, the randomized bromides and buzzwords that pass for vision in most [organizations] breed cynicism, not trust. ... No more hiding the [organizational] model behind high-sounding nonsense. ... [Also] The company that asks for innovation and rewards obedience should not be surprised if its creative people seem diffident.

communication -- can be [trust's] best friend or its worst enemy. Hierarchies lie and get away with it pretty well. Naked emperors go unchallenged. ... A revolutionary

way to built trust ... Tell the truth.

[Finally] ... if trust is a source of competitive advantage, it should pay. Trust needs to be seen to be good business."

Thomas A. Stewart, "Whom can you trust? It's not so easy to tell: ... how [do] organizations build trust in a networked world," Fortune, **June 12, 2000**, pp. 174-175.

In IO Watch's opinion, the UN is indeed trapped in old-fashioned bureaucratic hierarchical ways of doing things (the "free the managers" efforts notwithstanding), and its arrogance and lack of accountability make it poorly prepared for gaining the trust that 21st century global networking requires. It is not yet a member of the various "coalitions of the competent," nor does it even really provide its much-trumpeted sense of "legitimacy." Even if it did, this "seal of approval" function should not cost the world the \$6 to \$10 billion that the UN spends annually.

UN performance in terms of the five elements of trust and competitive advantage outlined above fall short:

-- competence is indeed key the key to performance and trust, but UN personnel processes have and still do hire too many people (often as managers) despite their lack of professional competence and willingness to work;

-- the UN is known as a difficult partner, slow to decide, arguing and bickering over direction and details, and always wanting to be the dominant force;

-- clear commitment is lacking, in favor of reams of "high-sounding nonsense" on every conceivable issue [a major specialty of UN discourse];

-- communication, as discussed throughout this archive, shows clearly that UN reporting seeks (or manages to) gloss over, cover up, and numb the mind, not to explain, illuminate, and speak frankly, or in concentrate on actions taken and results achieved;

-- and, as the citations in thia archive's subsection on Staff Rights? vividly shows, an atmosphere of trust and openness has always been in short supply at the UN, now enhanced by the bad managers who flaunt their impunity.

IO Watch wishes in the following subsections to identify nine key aspects of this "UNaccountable UN". It would note that on many of these topics a separate book could and probably should be written, but this archive presents only a brief and initial

selection of incisive analyses which it believes convey the key points.

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(Note: informally assembled by IO Watch, to be roughly ranked from "most useful" on down, and subject to change as new sources are added)

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