

PAST HISTORY

This entire archive, and especially multiple subsections of the UN Performance Problems section , discuss the many weaknesses and cultural factors holding back effective performance and true reforms in UN operations.

The following eight quotes lay out a pattern of shortcomings over the years. Perhaps the only change over this period is that the early quotes tried to obtain recognition that major changes were needed, while the later and most recent ones show just how hard it is for the UN to overcome its past management culture baggage and actually move forward as a modern, professionally-managed, and accountable organization.

"The crude truth about many of the UN agencies is that they don't know what they are trying to achieve; and that cronyism, sloth and incompetence would ensure they could not achieve it even if they did. The obstacles to reform are huge, the courage to tackle them nowhere visible. Still, here are some suggestions.

The system reflects the whims and false starts of 44 years ... some parts should be radically slimmed or closed entirely.

Other parts are paralysed by having too many separate aims, too many programmes Each should be given a manageable set of objectives and focused on these.

Accountability must be improved. That would at least mean regular and public reports on where and how the money goes, and on how far pre-stated targets of achievement are being met.

Co-ordination between the various agencies is much talked about. It should happen.

The quality and morale of professional staff must be raised ... start rewarding merit, not political or personal connections.

Not least, the length of time anyone can run an agency should be strictly limited."

"The United Nations agencies: A case for emergency treatment", The Economist, **December 2, 1989**, pp. 27-28, 30 [30]. [emphasis added]

[Note: the article offered a set of sensible suggestions for improvement as of 1989. At present, most if not almost all still seem to have been ignored.]

" International law -- so reverently invoked, so rarely defined Does it exist? Some spheres of international behavior (e.g., maritime matters, the rights of diplomats) are governed by law-like regimes: there are enduring and widely-adhered-to conventions, and institutions for arbitrating disputes.

The phrase 'international law' often is virtually an oxymoron. Law without a sword to enforce it is mere words, mere admonition or aspiration.

Law must be backed by coercion legitimized by a political process. The 'international community' has no such process. A true community exists only when there is consensus about certain matters -- the meaning of freedom, the nature of rights and duties, sources of legitimacy. Rhapsodizing about the U.N. as the 'international community' incarnate obscures this fact

If 'international law' is defined as what the 'international community' actually does, the problem deepens. Regarding force, history is clear; nations do what they think necessary and feasible.

Eager seizure of the label 'legal' encourages the fallacy that international law is explicit and exhaustive it puts policy at the mercy of a vague and volatile consensus of an 'international community' most members of which are unsuited to serve as ethicists or judges."

George F. Will, "The perils of 'legality': If international law is really law, who enacts, construes, adjudicates and enforces it?", Newsweek, **September 10, 1990**, p. 25. [emphasis added]

"Over-stretched and under-funded, bureaucratically and unimaginatively organized, the UN is perceived to straddle the globe like a dinosaur. ...

I couple of years ago, I spent some months in New York [to examine the work of] the Security Council and General Assembly at close quarters. I was prepared to believe that the UN was an interesting ... institution with a possible new lease of life.

I returned with a somewhat different set of beliefs. Today's UN, I now believe, is an essentially and intrinsically conservative institution ... no longer capable of reform along lines that would enable it to change in a progressive direction.

... Always an opaque organization, it is not easy to understand its workings, and almost impossible to follow the threads of its myriad activities. Sometimes it seems more like a church for the faithful, with its attendant mysteries, than a political institution run by rational individuals.

Only four groups of people [diplomats, journalists, academics, and members of the secretariat] are familiar with its arcane ceremonies, and all of them usually conspire to sing its praises.

.... [They] all have such a vested interest in the UN that they rarely question the organization's existence.

.... I believe we should regard it with ... suspicion ... and shed no tears if it were to disappear."

Richard Gott, "Nations divided by a lost vision", Guardian Weekly, London, **12 September 1993**, pp. 1-3.

"It is seldom possible to use the word 'new' about proposals for reorganization or better coordination in the UN system. They are almost always repetitions from an earlier round. ...

Few UN reforms have been complete enough to work. The negotiation process has often left only slivers of what were originally integrated recommendations.

Negotiated compromise may be the stuff of diplomacy ... But if compromises on structure turn out to be unwise or unworkable, correcting them may be extremely difficult and may take years. ...

Equally disastrous are the temptations of mechanistic change, [carelessly] moving boxes on an organizational diagram ... Reorganization proposals need a comprehensive scrutiny in the same way that a heart specialist must look at the entire blood-circulation system. ...

If governments make indifferent choices of executive heads, no amount of reform

will compensate for the lack of leadership. ...

Good organizational decisions can be, and have been, wrecked by overlooking the staff requirements to make them effective ... [this has] invariably been neglected by governments and most executive heads in UN system reforms, with the result that five years later delegates usually wonder why the reforms are not producing significant improvement."

Erskine Childers with Brian Urquhart, "Renewing the United Nations System", Development Dialogue, 1994:1, Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden, **1994**, pp. 34-37.

"Sins of member states:

Secretariat staff resent ...member state interference in ... their daily work ... [their micromanagement of] the hiring and promotion of Secretariat personnel. [and of] Secretariat budgeting, too often ...seeking to control the minor details of spending allocations.

Secretariat staff members are also frustrated by lack of clear direction from intergovernmental bodies. Too often member states fail to agree on how best to confront global problems Moreover, mandates are frequently assigned to the Secretariat with little thought as to the resources needed for their implementation.

Sins of the Secretariat:

.... Member states contend that ineffective -- some would say nonexistent -- managerial practices throughout the Secretariat have led to inefficient use of the [UN resources] ...; a staff unaccountable for its actions and prone to delegate upwards; insufficient program coordination ...; and wasteful duplication of efforts. There has been a lack of transparency in Secretariat decision making [on] policy issues, personnel, and budget expenditures. ... much of the information that is provided is not timely or readable. ... Overall, inefficiency and lack of accountability within the Secretariat, whether preceived or real, have invited member state micromanagement. "

"Making UN reform work: Improving member state-Secretariat relations", Report of the twenty-eighth United Nations issues conference, The Stanley Foundation, **February 21-23, 1997**, pp. 2, 14-16.

"The United Nations and its sister institutions will face a period of harsh reform. Most of the global organizations set up at the end of the second world war are held in low esteem

This is odd. The end of the cold war has accentuated the need for global institutions.

Unfortunately, global institutions have not risen to the task.

The UN, quite simply, looks out of date. By trying to do everything, it rarely does anything very well. In particular, most of its money goes into social and economic development. These activities appeal to the poorer 'southern' states that have such a grip on the {General Assembly}. But government aid now accounts for only a tiny proportion of the money flowing to developing countries. And much of the UN's development work has been superceded by leaner, non-governmental organisations, such as charities."

John Micklethwait, "The multilateral muddle", in "The world in 1999", The Economist, **January 1999**, p. 73.

"1) Reform does not come easily to the UN system. The Secretary-General has

- little leverage, the system is diffuse, and the Member States are rarely united ...
- 2) On the other hand, the process of reform is a constant ... At times, process seems more important than results, while at other times process is the desired result.
 - 3) Those unaware of the history of reform may indeed be condemned to repeat it ...
 - 4) The key to UN reform, in that sense, may lie less in trying to be innovative than in understanding why past initiatives have failed and how the strategies and tactics for achieving them could be improved. ...
 - 5) More study is needed of how independent scholars and commissions have helped to shape the UN reform process. ...
 - 6) When it comes to moving an agenda for reform in the United Nations, it is not always clear where power dwells ...
 - 7) Change happens even if reform doesn't. ... Sometimes formal reform follows (it never leads.)
 - 8) The course of reform tends to be decidedly unpredictable. ...
 - 9) ... the temptation to mistake modest and short-term adjustments for epochal change has proven irresistible ..."

Edward C. Luck, Reforming the United Nations: Lessons from a history in progress, Occasional Papers, 2003 No. 1, Academic Council on the United Nations System, Yale, **2003**, pp. 47-49.

"Why GAO did this study

The U.N. Secretary General launched two reform agendas, in 1997 and 2002, to address the U.N.'s core management challenges -- poor leadership of the Secretariat, duplication among its many offices and programs, and the lack of accountability for staff performance. ... In 2000, GAO reported that the reforms were not yet complete.

What GAO found

... First, the Secretariat has taken positive steps to strengthen its human capital management, but reforms in this area are ongoing and additional challenges remain. Second, the U.N. has begun to adopt results-oriented budgeting, but its monitoring and evaluation system does not measure program impact. ...

UN reform faces several challenges. For example, the Secretariat does not conduct comprehensive assessments of the status and impact of U.N. reforms. In addition, the reform agendas lack clearly stated priorities, interim goals, and target dates for overall completion. Other challenges include resistance to change from program managers and possible resource constraints.

What GAO recommends

... the [US] Secretary of State and [US Mission to the UN] should work with other member states to encourage the Secretary-General to (1) report regularly on the status and impact of reforms; (2) identify short- and long-term goals and establish target end dates for remaining reforms; and (3) conduct assessments of the resulting resource implications."

U.S. General Accounting Office, United Nations: Reforms progressing, but comprehensive assessments needed to measure impact, GAO 04-339, **February 2004**, "Highlights" page. [emphasis added.]

[Note: the complete report is available at www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-339 .]