

LACK OF A STRATEGY

The UN has had many strategies over the years, but never a coherent one. The introductory article to this "UNaccountable" subsection cited five elements necessary to build trust in a networked world, one of them being:

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.

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.

Maurice Bertrand recommended changes almost two decades ago (still undressed) to persevere with efforts toward realistic UN programme decision-making processes, in order to help improve UN efficiency and effectiveness and redefine the role of the UN in the modern world. He reached very fundamental conclusions:

"The main obstacle to overcome is a conceptual one -- the illusion that there is enough consensus in the international community to allow the U.N. a central role in the international system. [There is still] an exaggerated belief in the ability of the Organization to maintain peace and security and to 'achieve international cooperation in solving international problems' ...

Forty years of experience have shown how misconceived a role this was ...

Maurice Bertrand, Planning, programming, budgeting and evaluation in the United Nations, United Nations Management & Decision-Making Project UNA-USA, United Nations Association of the United States of America, New York, **1987**, pp. 45-46.

"Everyone acknowledges ... that the system has failed to facilitate a better agreement among member states on [program content and financing] ... Wordiness ... is still flourishing in resolutions as in [the] documents prepared ... The efficiency of the Secretariat does not seem much improved.

Achievements seem meager

... and a feeling of failure tends to prevail.

The resistance ... can be explained as the usual attitude of bureaucracies toward change. ... it is also more convenient to ... give an idealized image of the [U.N.'s] generalized role ... rather than try to define [specifically how the U.N. might cope with] the real political, economic, and social problems of the world. ... It is always more pleasant to state grandiose objectives to be implemented at some indefinite date than to state modest and precise goals and try to reach them by an assigned date."

Maurice Bertrand, Planning, programming, budgeting and evaluation in the

United Nations, United Nations Management & Decision-Making Project UNA-USA, United Nations Association of the United States of America, New York, 1987, pp. 23-27.

Similarly, a third overall assessment went to the key issue of a UN "trying to do everything":

"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.

And yet a fourth article underscored that it is often almost impossible to get the General Assembly to agree on anything, not least on what to do about the turbulent changes of the past 15 years:

"It is also worth noting that a major factor generally untouched by those working at UN reform is the need for a new political consensus to underpin the Organization. Without such a consensus all the changes now being considered -- while entirely necessary -- have little chance of improving the effectiveness of the UN. A new consensus might not be possible in the present turbulent period of post Cold War adjustments, but the need for it has to be kept fully in view, not least to underline how the lack of one contributes to the intractability of many issues facing the Organization."

An observation made by the *International Documents Review* in articles on General Assembly deliberations and disputes in 1995, in the International Documents Review (New York), **11 December 1995**, p. 3.

Fifth, a 1992 assessment noted the power of the UN habits of conducting "business as usual", still visible today even as the world spins ever faster:

"The end of the cold war brought a boom in opportunities for [the UN, but it] must now reform the swollen bureaucracy.

"Australian Ambassador Peter Wilenski, [a management expert urging UN reform] says the U.N. 'is run as a club rather than as an organization.'

Notes Edward Luck, president of the UN Association of the USA, 'The organization doesn't know how to set priorities -- and good management starts there.'

Much of the problem is an elaborate system of patronage based on accommodating the pride of member states.

Another problem is what Luck calls 'logrolling at its worst' in the General Assembly [as groups of states band together to protect their pet projects.]

The U.N. Economic and Social Council is too unwieldy to deal with its vast agenda ... 'Its resolutions,' says Wilenski, 'are largely unread and ignored.'

Yves Fortier, [Canada's former UN ambassador] says the organization suffers from 'overlapping mandates' among its different agencies We've witnessed some appalling turf wars.'

Last month the General Assembly took a first step to control duplication and infighting among humanitarian-aid programs by calling for a high-level coordinator."

Bonnie Angelo, "United Nations: Challenges for the new boss," Time, **February 3, 1992**, pp. 40-41 [41]. [emphasis added.]

Sixth, a 2000 article noted the degree of mistrust that exists among Member States about intelligence-gathering to assess and promptly respond to major risks and looming disasters:

"Proposals for a new unit for gathering information and improving planning for United Nations peacekeepers, which officials see as crucial to faster and more effective responses to crises, could be blocked by developing countries ...

The proposed policy planning staff ... was one of many recommendations from [the Brahimi report]. ... Mr Brahimi [a frequent trouble-shooter for the organization has] said his own experience as an envoy ... on assignments from Haiti to the Middle East and Afghanistan, had given him firsthand knowledge of the shortcomings of United Nations information collection and analysis. His proposal was widely welcomed at first as a way to give peacekeepers, who can take months to reach a crisis, a sharper operation. ... The Security Council underlined the need for better analysis and planning.

But recently ... a host of objections arose ...

Many poor nations say that more money should be spent on development, not peacekeeping. Western diplomats say that this inverts the order of things: without a stable environment, development is wasted. In any case, they say, the ... [new policy staff costs] would be small ..."

Barbara Crossette, "UN plan for a new crisis unit opposed by wary poor nations", New York Times, **November 26, 2000**.

[Note: the report referred to is the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations [the "Brahimi report"], UN document A/55/305 -- S/2000/809 of **August 21 2000**, which is available at <http://www.un.org/documents/> under the A document number]

These observations, stretching from 1987 to 2000, might seem dated and no longer applicable, but not in the United Nations. Their continuing applicability is shown by Secretary-General Annan's grim assessment in September 2003 of the need for "radical reforms" to enable the UN to cope with modern challenges, which is the last entry under the preceding topic on the UN as An awesome bottleneck .

Recent grand UN conferences only raised more skepticism about the traditional UN efforts to set grand new global goals and strategies, as shown by the two following quotes:

"In retrospect, it is difficult to understand why United Nations Secretary-General

Kofi Annan and his senior advisers ... were so determined to organize a summit conference of world leaders ... on the occasion of the first General Assembly of the new millennium. In many ways, the 1990s was a decade of peacekeeping failures and conferences for the world organization. The failures are all too obvious; and most of the conferences, if they are remembered at all, exist only in the institutional memories of the organizations that participated in them. ...

This [Millennium Summit] is of course a public relations ploy, not a serious idea. The problems of the world organization cannot be solved by summits, millennial or otherwise. ...

Yes, almost every major head of state dutifully trooped to New York to address the summit -- for an allotted time of five minutes each! That alone should have been enough to demonstrate what an inconsequential event the entire summit really was. ... Tellingly, almost no one at the United Nations today talks about the summit, although the event took almost two years to plan and occupied the attention of some of the institution's best minds. It is almost as if it never happened. And, in a sense, it never did."

David Rieff, "The Millennium Assembly", Global Governance, 7 (2001), pp. 127-130 [127, 130]. [emphasis added.]

"In the end, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development was just too complex. The ambitious project ended with a sprawling document that had something for everyone but few specific promises.

One thing seems certain. There may never be a conference like this again. Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark, currently president of the European Union, said he did not think such 'megasummits' were the way to ensure implementation of critical environment and development tasks. 'The 1990s was the decade of mega summits,' he said. 'I think we should make the next 10 years the years of action.'

Another shortcoming of the summit, according to its critics, was its failure to go beyond a general sentiment to reduce trade distorting energy and farm subsidies in the rich countries.

But having made and broken so many promises at the Earth summit meeting in Rio [in 1992], some say it was just as well that the Johannesburg summit meeting did not erect another series of pledges to be broken.

"Why make promises you can't keep?" asked Donald Johnston, secretary-general of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development"

Barry James, "Johannesburg summit: A triumph or a disaster?", International Herald Tribune, September 6, 2002. [emphasis added.]

Yet despite such doubts, the UN seems undeterred, and has forged ahead with the old approach, in the massive, and seemingly quite encompassing, strategy endorsed at the Millennium Summit. Despite a high-profile follow up meeting of leaders from some 60 nations in Monterrey, Mexico in 2002, the UN "deplored the stagnating pace of progress" in late 2003, stating that aid was "still far short" of that needed to meet the Millennium Development Goals. In the next progress report in May 2004 Secretary-General Annan called for "increased momentum" if the targets are to be met and, further:

"On peace and security, Mr. Annan stated that 'I am not even sure whether the consensus and the vision that the Millennium Declaration expressed are still intact ... We seem no longer to agree on what the main threats are, or on how to deal with them'. He added that he felt the UN system was not working as it should, and asked world leaders

to come to the world body's annual debate armed with good ideas on how to make it work better.. "

"World must forge post-Iraq unity, rich states must help poor -- new Annan report", UN News Service, **September 8, 2003**, and

"UN alarmed at slow rate of Third World Development", AFP, **October 30, 2003**.

[Note: Vast amounts of information on the Millenium Project, noted on the cover page as "Commissioned by the UN Secretary-General", can be found at www.unmillenniumproject.org/html/about/

In a September 2004 assessment, *The Economist* expressed some very pertinent further reservations about the Millenium Development Goals effort.

"This week the United Nations published its annual assessment of progress toward its Millennium Development Goals -- targets established in 2000 for advancing welfare in the developing countries. The record, as you might expect, is mixed. ... It remains questionable, in fact, whether the MDG exercise, with its unimpeachably good intentions and its proliferating bureaucratic overhead, has done any good at all on balance. ...

... The weakness of the whole MDG concept is that it wills the ends without willing the means -- something which the UN, perforce, has come to specialize in. A plan to spend a specific allocation of aid on specific interventions ... could be judged for cost-effectiveness and ranked alongside alternative ways of expending resources ... A statement of good intentions is unfortunately just that.

The UN seems especially proud of the progress [toward the goal] ... in which it has a vested interest ... greater global co-operation on development. ... Conferences, working groups, declarations, strategies, and programmes ... swearing allegiance to the MDG idea, are multiplying fantastically. In this sense, at least, the concept is a runaway success. However, what this is actually doing for the putative poor country beneficiaries is harder to say."

"Ends without means: The United Nations has set benchmarks for progress in poor countries. Are these any use?", The Economist, **September 11th, 2004**, p. 78.

The Millennium project thus sounds more and more like the old, failed "Development Decades" that the UN attempted to promote several times in the past, but this time on a much grander scale. It also (as one of the older quotes above indicates) focuses again on the desire for maintaining worldwide top priority on economic and social development, although UN funding in this area continues to decline as NGOs and the World Bank and especially the private sector become more active, and overall development aid success and reform options continue to be hotly debated.

As the above suggests, the UN grand plan focuses so much on development -- which is indeed a central area -- that other major priority areas get crowded out. One can attribute this to a UN accustomed to rituals and old routines, or just disorganized in its policy thinking and leadership. However, from the point of

view of the Secretariat, it can also be seen as a deliberate attempt to keep multiple crises -- humanitarian, disaster, peacekeeping, human rights, famine -- before the global public so that the funds keep flowing in for this or that cause. Not coincidentally, this process also supplies multi-billion dollar "life blood" money for the perpetual extension of UN Secretariat programmes and posts.

In any event, the UN does not have anything approaching the comprehensive and up-to-date analysis and perspective that "the world organization" should offer, nor in responding promptly and intelligently to emerging crises. Important warnings have appeared which note the grave challenges involved in assessing emerging global risks and crises, including, for instance:

"The illegal trade in drugs, arms, intellectual property, people, and money is booming. Like the war on terrorism, the fight to control these illicit markets pits governments against agile, stateless, and resourceful networks empowered by globalization. Governments will continue to lose these wars until they adopt new strategies to deal with a larger, unprecedented struggle that now shapes the world as much as confrontations with nation-states once did. ...

Why governments can't win [these wars] ...

They are not bound by geography. ...

They defy traditional notions of sovereignty. ...

They pit governments against market forces. ...

They pit bureaucracies against networks. ...

Rethinking the problem

Develop more flexible notions of sovereignty. ...

Strengthen existing multilateral institutions [particularly INTERPOL]. ...

Devise new mechanisms and institutions. ...

Move from repression to regulation. ..."

Moisés Naím, "The five wars of globalization," Foreign Policy, **January/February 2003**, pp. 29-37.

[Note: the article also identifies other areas traded illegally for huge profits, including human organs, endangered species, stolen art, and toxic waste. As with most other *Foreign Policy* articles, it also contains an excellent guide for further reading on these topics.]

But just as there are many new crises, so too are there new ways to foresee and deal with them strategically. An excellent 2003 article states that:

"All companies ... are vulnerable to predictable surprises. ... we have found that organizations' inability to prepare for them can be traced to three kinds of barriers: Lapses in recognition occur when leaders remain oblivious to an emerging threat or problem ...

Failures of prioritization arise when potential threats are recognized by leaders but not deemed sufficiently serious to warrant immediate attention. ...

... failures of mobilization occur when leaders recognize and give adequate priority ... but fail to respond effectively. ...

we found that ... [some] causes are psychological -- cognitive defects that leave individuals blind to approaching threats. Others are organizational -- barriers within

companies that impede communication and accountability. Still others are political -- flaws in decision making that result from granting too much influence from special interests. Alone or in combination, these three kinds of vulnerabilities can sabotage any company at any time. ...

'Prediction is very difficult', physicist Niels Bohr once said, 'especially about the future.' Difficult, yes. Impossible, no. Even though many organizations are caught unprepared for disasters they should have seen coming, many have successfully recognized approaching crisis and taken evasive action.

There are practical steps that managers can take. ..."

Michael D. Watkins and Max H. Bazerman, "Predictable surprises: The disasters you should have seen coming", Harvard Business Review, **March 2003**, pp. 72-80 [74-76, 79.]

The above authors, and others, have quite reasonable ideas to offer the UN on how it could do a much, much better job of strategic planning and risk analysis in a comprehensive and foresighted way. They are presented under Answers: A Starting Point under the topic of A true global strategy . Some decisive movement toward these approaches is very much needed if the UN is ever to contribute to global decision-making on 21st century critical issues.