

UN Lives on the Dark Side II, UN, hindrances, 2004

U.S. General Accounting Office, United Nations: Reforms progressing, but comprehensive assessments needed to measure impact, Report GAO-04-339, February 2004. 59 pages. (especially pages 33-36, and 19-25, see below.)

This report, in its entirety, can be found at: www.gao.gov/new.items/d04339.pdf.

“U.N. 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.”

From the GAO report highlights page

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (formerly General Accounting Office) is the largest, and certainly considered one of the best, national government audit and oversight offices in the world. Because the U.S. has been and remains the biggest donor to the UN and the UN system, the US Congress, to which the GAO reports, has expressed continuing interest and concern about the proper use of US funds provided to the UN for more than forty years.

In the 2004-2007 period alone, the GAO prepared more than half-a-dozen reports to the Congress on UN accountability, internal control, and oversight matters: they can be found in full at [Bibliographic Lists](#), under “Reports,” of the IO Watch Archive.)

The above 2004 report was important as an independent, expert, full-scope review of Mr. Annan’s 1997 and 2002 reform initiatives. It found that the Secretariat had taken actions to provide more unified leadership and inter-office coordination, but that other reforms, such as developing plans and new units, were actually only “first steps” toward achieving the overall UN management reform goals.

Two sections of the GAO report are particularly revealing about the difficulties encountered. First, pages 33-36 of the report, and especially page 35, “Various factors may impede full implementation of U.N. reforms,” (and page 36 “Conclusions”) cited:

the Secretariat’s (and especially the Deputy Secretary-General’s) failure to systematically assess the status and impact of the reforms and hold managers accountable for implementation;

Mr. Annan’s basic failure to differentiate between short- and long-term goals and to establish time frames or milestones for their completion;

his failure to request additional resources to establish the Secretariat reforms; and the lack of regular, comprehensive reports on overall reform status.

Most disturbingly, the GAO (via the OIOS) discovered found that “about half” of U.N. managers had NOT complied with U.N. regulations to monitor and evaluate programme performance, and that they lacked the processes, resources, and training for properly monitoring and evaluating their work. As the GAO wisely concluded, on page 35:

“Managers’ support is critical for the institutionalization of reforms in the long term.”

Second, in pages 19-25, and especially pages 22-23, “Performance-Oriented Budgeting is Being Adopted, but Monitoring and Evaluation System does not Measure Program Impact and Results”, the GAO (again via the OIOS) found that program managers and department and office heads were not complying with U.N. regulations. Managers did not have plans for such work, were not held directly accountable for meeting program objectives, and were not using any monitoring and evaluation findings to improve program performance. Secretariat officials acknowledged airily that a “more mature” system was needed., and that OIOS would rectify all these problems by developing a “strategy,” and expected to “have” a complete system by 2006.

Ban Ki-moon’s top management officials stated that 2007 would be “a year of implementation” of management reforms, but many factors raise doubts about this. In June 2006, the General Assembly had forcefully called for clear accountability mechanisms, proposals for clear parameters for its applications and instruments for its rigorous enforcement -- without exception -- at all levels (see [General Assembly accountability efforts](#).) This certainly does not sound like “implement now”, but like “back to the drawing board,” which is where the seemingly-perpetual Secretariat accountability effort began, way back in 1993 (and in a preliminary status which the Secretariat would like to preserve forever.) In addition, Mr. Annan stated in 2006 that UN information systems were fragmented, outdated, and underfunded, which certainly does not help (see [UN, outdated, 2006](#))..

A new and dynamic top manager did work hard to overcome the UN’s newest major scandal – procurement – in 2006, but evidence shows that the overall Secretariat efforts before 2006 to hold procurement officials accountable for their grave mismanagement were poor (see [UN, impunity, 2007](#)), and a massive procurement task force investigation since 2006 inevitably distracted OIOS attention from such things as monitoring and evaluation system applications.

Furthermore, Mr. Annan’s new 2006 reform proposals were so sweeping and muddled that action on them will be difficult to follow (see [UN, reform?, 2006](#) above). And, last but certainly not least, Mr. Ban’s new Deputy Secretary-General and his new Under Secretary-General for management, both responsible for providing firm leadership action for the “radical” reform processes, had very weak management backgrounds despite Secretariat promises of new, rigorous selection procedures for filling top UN posts. (see, in the UN Hall of Shame feature, the items on [Alicia Bárcena](#) and [Asha-Rose Migiro](#).) They have so far displayed very little dynamism and leadership to advance UN management accountability, and Ms. Bárcena left office in May 2008 after less than a year-and-a-half of service.

All these factors suggest strongly that, as the 2004 GAO report emphasized, UN managers’ behavior (read recalcitrance, both at the very top and at the operational level) continues to be a – and perhaps the -- major hindrance to institutionalizing accountability reforms and processes for effective UN Secretariat operations in the future. When will the UN leadership ever begin to hold its managers fully accountable for their performance, and especially for the major, ongoing instances of poor performance?