

Reforming the United Nations? An iconoclastic view from the inside

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Despite perennial efforts to reform the United Nations no one is ever satisfied. That is because reform targets are wrongly chosen. As I show in my book, *Bread and Stones: Leadership and the Struggle to reform the UN World Food Programme*, a more effective UN system is achievable given strong leadership and sharply defined goals.

In thinking about reform it is essential to bear in mind that the name 'United Nations' encompass either or both of two things.

First, the United Nations proper, headed by a Secretary General answerable to the Security Council and the General Assembly and with headquarters in New York. When I refer to the UN I am talking about this institution.

Second, the UN system, a loose aggregation of de facto independent and quasi independent agencies. Each has defined functional responsibilities and distinct inter-governmental oversight committees. When I use 'UN system', that is what I refer to. The UN system encompasses the UN. There is **no** chief executive of the UN system.

Neither the UN nor the organizations of the system are supra-national. They are all organs of national governments served by secretariats of international civil servants answerable to governments.

Unfortunately, media reports of UN happenings rarely make these distinctions clear. The UN is said to fail but usually the failure lies with governments who cannot agree. Generally speaking governments find these ambiguities useful.

To give a topical example: The UN is under fire because of the sexual predations of UN peacekeepers. But peacekeepers are simply coalitions of troops provided by national governments. They carry the UN label and wear blue helmets to give them political legitimacy. It is absurd to imply that the UN is responsible for their discipline.

Discourse about UN reform usually focuses on the UN's security role, so overshadowing the need for reform elsewhere in the system.

Security reform concentrates on perceived deficiencies in the composition and role of the Security Council and the veto power of the five permanent members. Much of the controversy is about national prestige more than substance. Moreover, Security Council reform requires amendment of the UN Charter. That is very difficult, possibly more so than amending the Australian Constitution. The founders wanted it that way. So long as the nation state remains the foundation of international order and the United States is predominant, the conclusion is inescapable: focusing on Security Council change as the main objective of UN reform is a dead-end.

But that is not really cause for concern. The Council has shown a capability to adapt to changing circumstances through flexible interpretation of the UN Charter. A vastly expanded and more flexible use of peacekeeping forces has grown up. A consensus has emerged that the abusive use of force by governments against their citizens may justify intervention by the international community to stop the abuse. There is agreement that such intervention is justifiable within the Charter as currently written.

At the same time, in the light of experience the Security Council has become more cautious in authorizing use of force. To quote Paddy Ashdown on his experience in Bosnia: 'We are anything but good at this'. The unintended consequences of military interventions can easily make matters worse, as they did in Somalia. Exit by the international community from what can become quasi-colonial roles with no determinate end, as in Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor, is far from easy. Hence the caution being shown in the Darfur crisis.

In considering reform within the broader UN system it is critical to recognize that there is no such thing as an apolitical UN system agency, whether its functions are developmental, technical or humanitarian. During my leadership of WFP I fairly quickly learned that. Politics is pervasive in inter-governmental organizations. A statement of the obvious perhaps, but failure to recognize its truth leads to unrealistic expectations about what the UN system can do.

Consideration of policy in governing bodies easily degenerates into unproductive attempts by developing countries to put donor countries under pressure to increase aid. During the Cold War this became bitter and destructive. Not surprisingly some agency heads colluded in this practice. It subsided during the nineties. Indeed the boot shifted to the other foot. The developed countries became more aggressive in insisting on 'good governance' as a condition for aid. Just what constitutes good governance is itself a moot question in the concrete social and cultural circumstances of each developing country. Understandably, developing countries may see this emphasis as reflecting developed country 'cultural imperialism'.

What should best be done to promote development easily slips into political conflict between agencies. For example, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has been locked in battle for several years over the desire of powerful developing countries to make WIPO a counterweight to another specialized agency, the World Trade Organization (WTO). They see WTO as biased in favour of developed countries in its management of trade aspects of intellectual property disputes.

FAO spent years of discussion before agreeing in 2004 to *Voluntary Guidelines to support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*. Those Guidelines will not have a skerrick of practical effect on the intake of food by the poor, to whose interests they are supposedly directed. They became the focus of debate in a 'technical' body because the developing countries in New York were promoting throughout the system the importance of 'economic, social and cultural' rights. They see them as a counterweight to 'political' rights championed by the developed countries.

Even organizations that provide humanitarian relief are heavily influenced by the political agendas of member states. I know this from personal experience in WFP. I was involved in negotiations with governments in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Thailand, Sudan and Ethiopia/Eritrea to gain access to the starving. As I show in *Bread and Stones*, in none of those interventions were we able to act with the political even-handedness of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or Medecins Sans Frontieres. Though we did do much to alleviate suffering, politics was always a factor in our operations. The political interests of the US were the driving force, then as now, as to who was helped. More often than not that was for the good. The United States cannot always get others to do what it wants but without its positive involvement the member states are usually unable of themselves to take actions of consequence.

In my day WFP was also an important development agency. Like most of the functional organizations that make up the UN system we provided development assistance to member countries. It became quickly evident that politics, rather than need, plays a role in determining the distribution of aid as between different claimants. It was always a tussle to ensure that countries like Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua and Ethiopia, unpopular with the United States, were not discriminated against.

There are essentially two categories of economic and social organizations within the system: those funded by member states through assessed, mandatory contributions and those funded through voluntary contributions.

It is generally accepted that voluntary funded agencies like WFP and UNICEF are the best run organizations in the system. In many agencies the main output is paper: resolutions,

reports, studies. WFP's output has measurable, concrete outcomes. The nobility of the goal of physically feeding the poor attracts dedicated people who retain their commitment. I have said many times that I have never worked with finer people than I did in WFP.

Moreover, staffs of voluntary funded agencies know that the future of their organizations depends on good performance if it is to go on attracting donations. The result overall are more highly motivated staffs than in assessed agencies.

In assessed agencies decisions are taken by majority vote of the whole membership of governing committees. In some cases they may have up to nearly 200 members. As a result the developing countries have relatively more say than the developed countries over how the money is spent. The main weapon available to the latter, who overwhelmingly fund budgets, is to resist expansion of overall expenditure. Over time the effect of this is to ossify the work programme. That in turn eventually leads to a poorly motivated work force, weaker performance and a decline in the organization's value. The worst cases are in the UN secretariat.

My successor at WFP subsequently became Under Secretary General for Administration for the UN. That gave her first hand experience of both categories of organization. In testimony to the US Congress after leaving the UN she strongly advocated at least partial voluntary funding of all currently assessed agencies.

However, the drawback to voluntary funding, as I found in WFP, is that it gives a great deal of power to donors. I saw it as my responsibility to strike a fair balance between the interests of developed and developing countries. At times that was difficult to achieve.

It takes exceptional leadership by the executive heads of system agencies to overcome these hurdles. Some succeed by recognizing that their role is to ensure that outcomes reflect a balance of interest as between the parties and to do so by seeking compromise. Others are tempted to exploit differences for their own personal advantage.

Getting good leadership of agencies is at the heart of system reform. Governments alone cannot do the job. Politically disinterested leadership from agency heads is vital.

As regards the UN, all Secretaries-General since Hammarskjold have been disappointing. The five permanent members of the Security Council essentially decide the appointment. They prefer weak leadership, though in the instance of Boutros Galli, when the US was outsmarted by France, they got a strong-minded maverick. As the saying goes, the P5 want secretaries, not generals. *Bread and Stones* provides a concrete case study of Perez

de Cuellar's deficiencies as a leader. I should add that I have known, as delegate or UN official, all except the first and current S-Gs.

In the specialized agencies, FAO, WHO, etc. - there are 15 in all - which are funded by assessed contributions executive heads are chosen by majority vote. In my experience the result is more dynamic leadership in the agencies than in the UN. However, unscrupulous leaders are able to thwart reform and so long as they remain eligible for re-election are able to ensure their continuing re-election.

Ideally heads of all system organizations should be eligible for a single term of no more than seven years. A compromise is a maximum of two terms limited to four or five years each. Some progress has been made in introducing the latter arrangement. The process for identification of suitable leaders has also been marginally improved in a few agencies.

The United States is always cognizant of the importance of the chief executive position. Over the years it has ensured that Americans held at least two of these posts in the four principal voluntarily funded agencies. I was the last non-American to be Executive Director of WFP. *Bread and Stones* gives a revealing account of the steps the US initially took to block my appointment to a second term. I was seen as 'too independent'.

Beyond leadership reform, overall effectiveness could be enhanced by narrowing down what the system tries to do through the myriad of entities working in the economic and social arena – the UN system has acronyms for 76 distinct entities. The core of much of the system's increasing irrelevance lies in the desire to encompass, no matter how superficially, the whole corpus of issues that can be said to have some effect beyond a single state.

The worst problems lie in the UN Secretariat itself. Over the years the General Assembly has created scores of entities with specific functions that often overlap with others in the UN or with agencies elsewhere in the system. For example there are three quite distinct organizations dealing with women's issues. For years there has been pressure to amalgamate them, an aim supported by the new SG that hopefully will be realized.

In *Bread and Stones* I analyze why there are so many inconsequential agencies and why few are ever shut down. Vested interests among government delegates and in the UN secretariat prevent obvious rationalizations.

Fewer entities would mean fewer inter-governmental oversight bodies. Governments would thereby be in a better position to develop more consistent oversight. The extraordinary proliferation of the UN system, which has led to its dysfunctionality, owes much to government

failure to exercise responsible, consistent oversight in governing bodies. Governments are always blaming the organisations for poor co-ordination but most of the blame rest with them.

A framework for progressive long-term reform which could bring about a materially leaner, more effective system would encompass:

- Recognising explicitly that the goal of the UN economic and social system should be to build global legal or quasi-legal regimes to better regulate matters of global concern. As a corollary technical assistance provided by system agencies would be directed toward enabling poor countries to give effect to regimes and conventions.
- Progressively closing down agencies that do not contribute to that goal, for example some of the many entities undertaking research. Their work is often carried out better by apolitical organisations outside the UN system.

A start on slimming the number of UN entities began over a year ago. However, without an agreed over-arching principle to guide judgements about which institutions to preserve, to close or to amalgamate, such as I have suggested, this effort, like its predecessors, will bog down.

There is however a need for two new specialised agencies.

First, in the area of **humanitarian relief**, there are far too many operators. The result is poor coordination. WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR's relief functions would provide the nucleus. A single global operational UN agency would facilitate a more effective UN system response. Hopefully it would also be better able to coordinate activities of the scores of NGOs who quickly become involved in natural and man-made disasters than is currently the case.

Secondly, it will be an enormous challenge to devise an equitable, enforceable regime embracing all the main polluters for the management of **climate change**. The UN system is not well equipped to provide the necessary leadership. In the UN there are four principal inter-governmental committees and a host of agencies concerned with the environment. The European Union's desire to see created a consolidated environmental specialised agency deserves support.

Finally a word about Australia's role. I suggest that we would be unwise to seek membership of the Security Council. Membership is flattering to the egos of foreign ministers and ambassadors but for Australia the potential risks are high.

There is always the possibility of giving gratuitous offence to friendly nations on matters peripheral to us but vital to them. The arrogance of power too easily rubs onto the

acolyte of the great and powerful. Listening to our Foreign Minister I sometimes think that has already happened.

More importantly, on any issue of concern to the US we would be under great pressure to lend our support. To do so would only reinforce the impression that Australia is no longer an ally but an American satellite.

If you have closely followed US foreign policy over many years, as I have, it is clear that the taint of imperial hubris that has gripped the Bush administration will not disappear with its successors. American exceptionalism is deeply embedded in America's sense of itself. It is in many respects the source of its greatness. However, there are adverse consequences also, including cultural insensitivity, a conviction of righteousness, and an over-reliance on military solutions. Sometime this century, perhaps in a few decades, American military and economic dominance will pass its apogee. As that process evolves the US could become involved in major Asian or global conflict.

As a geographically isolated island continent with a small population an Australia free of alliances would pose no threat to any significant power. Indeed with good relations with all the major Pacific powers we could in reality become the moderating influence we sometimes flatter ourselves on being. Surely we are now mature enough to recognize that reliance on 'great and powerful' friends is no longer a guarantor of our ultimate national security. It is time to move away from the centrality of the so-called US alliance.

We need to get closer to the far-sighted vision of the Evatt era. I do not suggest that the United Nations can yet be a bulwark for any nation's security or that it ever will be. However, a rejuvenated UN system that focuses on building international legal regimes that reflect a good balance between the interest of rich and poor, powerful and weak nations is very much in the interest of Australia. It could become a principal goal of our foreign policy.

I have no doubt that a Rudd government could play a valuable role in advancing the agenda I advocate. Despite Australia's diminished standing in the UN the quality of Australian representation and our practical approach to the resolution of issues is respected throughout the system. Reform of the UN system is necessarily a continuing process. It will never reach finality. Australia should become an influential player.

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