



Report on Wilton Park Conference 850¹

WHAT FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

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Summary

- reform, or change, in the United Nations (UN) will be incremental. Sectoral reform, for example, would be a useful approach;
- the UN should concentrate on areas where it works most effectively and has most impact, for example on climate change;
- the inflexibility of the UN's biennial budget needs to be tackled; the erosion in regular budgetary funding in favour of voluntary contributions needs to be halted and appropriate control mechanisms found for the use of supplementary funding;
- the mobility of UN personnel, between New York, other headquarters or duty stations and the field needs to be addressed; recruitment, contractual arrangements, retention, training and appraisal of UN personnel require attention;
- accountability and oversight within the UN system need to be improved, with individual rather than institutional accountability; delegation of authority needs to be made more explicit; there should be a focus on outcomes and not outputs;
- UN 'delivery as one' in-country assistance requires the recipient country to be in the 'driving seat', with one inclusive national development framework and evaluation mechanism; agencies should recognise where comparative advantage lies;
- member states should loosen constraints on the UN Secretariat if it is to engage more openly with the public and media;
- mistrust, both among member states and between member states and the Secretariat, needs to be addressed by increased informal dialogue.

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Introduction

1. Seven months into UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's first term, there is a widespread perception that the UN is more relevant than ever. The UN is engaged in more critical activities than ever in its history. It is therefore essential for its component parts to work together in order to make the organisation more effective. The conference focused on three priority areas identified by the new UN Secretary-General: improving trust and consensus among member states and between member states and the UN Secretariat; management reform; and 'system-wide coherence' to improve the UN agencies' ability to 'deliver as one' on the ground.

2. To make progress in these areas, there is a need for imaginative, determined and focused reform efforts. The time is not ripe for another 'big bang' reform drive but for concrete initiatives that make the UN more effective in providing peace and security, promoting sustainable development, and reaching the Millennium Development Goals, as well as furthering human rights. Reform efforts need to be based on realistic assessments. Many share the assessment of the previous Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, that "reform is a process, not an event". There is a need for issue-based cooperation across groups and blocs to forge consensus foster compromise and build trust.

Building trust and consensus

3. A 'lack of trust' is at the centre of the UN's current woes. This lack of trust applies to both relations among UN member states and relations between UN member states and the Secretariat. This is not a historically unprecedented phenomenon. Secretary-General Hammerskjöld talked about the 'poisoned atmosphere' at the UN, and his successor Secretary-General U Thant about a 'crisis of confidence'.

4. To a significant degree, differences in opinion and interest, and ensuing struggles for power and influence, form the basis of the 'lack of trust'. Differences of interests and struggles for influence have been part and parcel of the UN since its

early days in San Francisco. Today, the UN's membership is divided on both substantive and institutional issues. On the one hand, there are significant political differences on the meaning of sovereignty, the universal application of human rights and the conditionality of development assistance. On the other hand, there is disagreement on the proper distribution of roles and responsibilities between the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Secretariat. All efforts to 'rebuild trust' need to address these political differences.

5. In recent years, these political differences have been exacerbated by entrenched 'bloc politics' at the UN. In order to reach political compromises, the UN membership needs to think and act outside of the 'trenches' of the respective blocs. Informal working groups cutting across different blocs can make an important contribution. Some informal groups already exist and have contributed to political compromises in crucial areas. There is a need to see more of these initiatives tackling real concerns and crucial issues. Such efforts should be accompanied by intensifying the direct contact between capitals, since this can lead to improving the often very charged and politicised atmosphere in New York and Geneva.

6. One example for a successful effort cutting across entrenched group and bloc politics is the Four Nations Initiative (4NI) in which Chile, South Africa, Sweden and Thailand got together to start a dialogue on improving the governance and management of the UN Secretariat. The 4NI succeeded in demystifying UN reform by going beyond the usual UN reform mantra that to some has a poisonous taste. The 4NI managed to phrase reform challenges and opportunities in language which sounded less threatening. However, more needs to be done to restore trust between member states and the UN Secretariat. Many developing countries in particular distrust the Secretariat, which is perceived as doing the bidding of the major paymasters and bending backwards to service the interests of the most powerful countries. This has led to opposition to reform proposals that would grant the Secretariat greater flexibility in exchange for more effective accountability.

7. The future should see more efforts that try to break from the mould of bloc politics. Informal settings can produce results and contribute to building trust. Leadership is a key ingredient for success. Here small countries in particular can make a big difference as mediators.

8. Perceptions of the UN matter not just among member states but also among the public at large. In order to build trust the public projection of what the UN does needs to be more effective. There should be more talk about content not form. Engaging the public has to be done by multiple actors (the Secretariat, member states, other 'friends of the UN'). Suggestions included the call for the Secretariat to be more open and pluralistic with the media. Messages should be clear and simple. Managing expectations is a key challenge for the UN. Engagement with the public should not be a one-way street. Feedback and suggestions from the broader public should also inform the work of the UN.

Improving UN management and accountability

9. Improving the management and accountability of the UN Secretariat is a key concern. Many point to restoring the sense of purpose and integrity of the international civil service as a major challenge. The UN should make a concerted effort to attract, recruit, develop and retain the best people. In this regard, the upcoming generational shift within the UN presents an opportunity if it is accompanied by an active talent management approach. This includes a change in recruiting practices and a stronger regional and local UN presence in terms of recruiting. In order to get the best people with varied backgrounds, the UN needs to engage in active recruitment locally across the globe.

10. At the same time, the UN needs to invest more in career development. This includes stopping the practice of issuing consultant contracts without benefits to perform the same work as regular staff. In an increasingly field-based organisation mobility between headquarters and the field needs to be enhanced. Many refer to the resistance by the New York-based staff union against enhanced mobility as a major obstacle. Improved career development also includes adhering to the

principles of a strict meritocracy at all levels: the top posts should go to the 'top talents, not the top countries' or the best lobbyists.

11. Accountability lies at the heart of all efforts to improve UN management. The rationale for accountability is clear-cut. Since the UN deals with public money, has publicly derived authority and is engaged in the provision of public goods, by definition the UN's actions have to be transparent and accountable.

12. Improving accountability presupposes changing two elements of the traditional accountability equation. First, the UN needs to move from focus on process and output (for example, counting how many reports have been produced) to a focus on outcomes (the difference the UN's actions made) when measuring performance. The introduction of results-based budgeting is a step in the right direction. Since many of the UN's activities are complex undertakings, involving a broad range of actors, accounting for the UN's performance is often a very difficult challenge. Second, accountability needs to move away from a culture of assigning blame to a culture of learning and improving. For UN staff, there needs to be a level of risk that can be taken safely when making decisions. Otherwise, paralysis of the UN apparatus will result, with UN staff scared to take action. There should also be an enterprise risk management framework for assigning responsibility with clear and explicit delegation of authority.

13. Two further areas stand out in terms of improving management and accountability: the budget and procurement. The regular budget for the UN Secretariat has seen zero real growth for the past years. Many remark that the biannual budget leaves too little flexibility for the shifting of resources. Some criticise the trend to move from regular assessed contributions to voluntary contributions which also restricts the UN's freedom of operation. The radically increasing peacekeeping budget is now four times the size of the regular budget. This presents significant challenges for budget management and procurement. The growth of peacekeeping has overstretched the Secretariat. This has affected procurement, which has seen a huge expansion over the past 10 years, with too little preparation and training. Major reforms are under way on the procurement side and need sustained support from member states. Handling the post-Tsunami funds was a

model of a concerted effort across the UN system to improve coordination and transparency. However, the lack of a streamlined system-wide evaluation and oversight system has led to a situation in which no uniform evaluation of the UN system's handling of the post-tsunami funds is available.

14. The UN can learn from the experience of management reform in other international bodies, for example the European Union. The European Commission faced similar challenges in 1999 when the Commission had to resign following alleged mismanagement from the European Union. The Commission is also faced with a multitude of complex issues in a multicultural environment. It too has experienced an enormous expansion of its work in the past decades. The main goals of the Commission's reform efforts were to achieve a more efficient matching of resources to tasks and to rebuild public trust. It took leadership for reform from the top plus skilful internal stakeholder management for the reforms to take root. One major difference is that the European Commission has a larger degree of autonomy. Its reforms for the most part were internally designed and implemented, concluding with a report to the European Parliament and the member states.

15. Governance reform efforts should also include the General Assembly. The office of the President of the General Assembly should be strengthened to be more effective. The Security Council should be more transparent in its working methods. Permanent members of the Security Council rebutted calls for the Security Council's financial resources to be placed under control by the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly.

16. The office of the Secretary General is also a key concern in debates on improving UN management and governance. Many acknowledge the 'impossibly confining brief' of the Secretary-General who has to take into account the interests of a diverse membership. At the same time, it is important for the Secretary-General to carve out the political space needed to be effective while at the same time being answerable to UN member states. The Secretary-General needs to place a lot of emphasis on good administration. Some urge the Secretary-General to be seen as 'impartial' and not "anticipate the views of certain countries regardless of how

powerful they are". They add that the Secretary-General should not "be afraid to not get re-elected".

System-Wide Coherence and 'Delivering as One'

17. Ninety per cent of the UN's action is now happening at the country level. There is general agreement that improving the UN's performance on the ground is a key priority. It is important not to get carried away with the process as an end in itself but as a means to an end. All reform efforts need to be mindful of the ultimate goal: better delivery and progress on the Millennium Development Goals. While a focus on the Millennium Development Goals as a yardstick for measuring success is crucial, we should not deemphasize the importance of economic growth as a goal. Private sector development, energy and youth employment should be critical issues on the development agenda, which should not be restricted to aid. The 'One UN' initiative that is now being implemented in eight pilot countries provides a framework for efforts to improve coherence.

18. The 'One UN' effort should be about common sense. Country level cooperation between different parts of the UN system is decisive. The more it becomes normal practice to work together in a single country team, the better for the UN system as a whole. Country ownership is the precondition for effectiveness. The recipient country needs to be in the 'driving seat', with one inclusive national development framework and evaluation mechanism; agencies should recognise where comparative advantage lies. Country objectives need to go first and take priority over the goals of different agencies.

19. Some remark the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has the infrastructure to provide for coordination at the country level. But if UNDP is leading in 'delivery as one', it should not also be involved in sectoral activities, but restrict itself to exerting neutral and consensus-building UN leadership on the ground.

20. Participants remarked that improved coherence is not just needed on the part of the UN system but also on the part of donors. National donor coherence is needed from three angles. First, the trend towards voluntary contributions instead of assessed core contributions needs to be reversed in order to avoid increasing fragmentation and competition for resources. UN agencies that have to rely on volatile voluntary contributions, for 75% of their activities can hardly be expected to be successful at long-term planning and coordination. Second, within donor governments there are often competing positions and priorities among different ministries and government agencies vis-à-vis the UN. This needs to change for UN coherence to be effective and realistic. Third, improved coherence cannot just be about the UN's activities on the ground. 'Delivering as one' ultimately needs to include all actors engaged in development, also bilateral donors.

Prospects

21. A proper diagnosis of the UN's woes is a key prerequisite for agreeing on the right prescription and therapy. The UN is considered to be of uncertain but not declining health, although some doomsayers might assert the opposite.

22. Often-heard negative views about the parlous state of the UN's health are exaggerated. Member states might be ambivalent about the organisation, but, in terms of UN funding, the crises of the 1960s and the late 1990s were much more severe. Some argue that the UN cannot reform itself but the Secretariat is a master of adaptation and organisation against the odds. It often "makes things work despite the system".

23. The UN is certainly uneven in its delivery but partly this is a result of unrealistic expectations. In a sense the biggest enthusiasts for what the UN could do also create most damage. Still, the UN is doing more than at any other point in its history. The incoming US Ambassador to the UN described it as "most effective security organisation in history". In addition, the UN is a leader on critical issues such as climate change.

24. It is not usual for the UN to adopt radical, comprehensive reform packages. Therefore UN member states, the Secretariat and the public at large should promote incremental yet creative reforms, and seek to foster political compromises that break the deadlock of entrenched group positions.

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