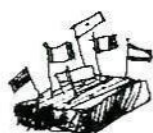


THE UNITED NATIONS AT FIFTY: ADJUSTING THE MULTILATERALISM SYSTEM

(PRIMERA DE DOS PARTES)



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Abstract. *This paper is a brief examination of the adjustment which the UN system has been undergoing in an attempt to remain a relevant actor on the multilateral stage. The discussion of the process of adjusting the UN multilateral system to a changing global environment is done within the context of the major UN reform proposals and positions that have coined the political debate among the primary actors involved in the reform process.*

The fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations was heralded with great fanfare and celebrated by more than 140 heads of State and other leaders in New York on 24 October 1995. This major milestone provided state leaders, practitioners and academics with the opportunity to reflect, specifically, on the organization's past half century and on the evolution of multilateralism, more generally. It also provided a forum for re-defining the challenges facing humanity and for speculating about what changes will be necessary if the UN system is to become a more relevant, efficient and effective instrument of global governance in the coming millennium.

What has become clear during this exercise, however, is that the UN is in danger of going the way of its predecessor, the League of Nations, unless

major adjustments are made to its normative base, its institutional statutes, its organizational structures and decision-making processes, and to the instruments and mechanisms developed within the world body for the purpose of facilitating cooperation and managing common global problems. In other words, the future of this organization may very well depend on its adaptive and transformative facility.

The general problematic for the world organization and its members today revolves around the need to address the issue of how the UN system can best handle the new security challenges posed during the present period of flux, transition and uncertainty in a manner that would facilitate peaceful change to the greatest extent possible. More specifically, an understanding of the history of insti-

tutional change within the UN should alert us to the limitations placed on the role of multilateral institutions at the end of the twentieth century as well as to the expanded opportunities that these institutions may have for re-configuring certain aspects of their operations and structures and for re-defining their fundamental purpose and meaning as we head into the twenty-first century.

It exposes the difficulty of trying to manage change in a super-bureaucracy in which the preferences and interests of 184 member states collide. While the end of the Cold War may have ushered in a "new chapter in the history of the UN" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992-93: 89) questions persist about the ability of the organization to respond to the increasing demands and challenges given its limited resources, its internal financial and administra-

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tive problems, and its structural deficiencies (Knight, 1994). These questions are not without some foundation, since the history of the UN's reform efforts has been somewhat bleak.

As a result of this picture, two crucial questions are being asked with regularity today about the UN: 1) Can this organization, given its limited resources and problems of internal administration, respond in an effective and efficient manner to the myriad of demands being placed upon it? 2) Can it adapt its structures and processes sufficiently to meet the challenge of relevance in a changing international arena?

I. Adapting the UN system: two institutional change processes

What is clear from examining the historical and empirical record of the UN system is that preoccupation with adapting this organization is not new. Indeed, the issues of adjusting the UN system to changing realities and improving its overall performance are ones that have consumed UN officials and member-states from the time the organization was brought into existence. Careful study of the literature on the UN reveals at least two change processes operating within the UN: a *reflexive* adaptive process and a *purposive* one, usually labelled 'reform' (*ibid.*: 76-100).

1. The UN's reflexive adaptation process

In the first instance, the UN's response to pressures for change has consisted primarily of adding new structures to already existing ones and modifying institutional processes to cope better with increased demands from an exponentially expanding membership and a growing agenda. There has been little attempt made within the UN secretariat, or among UN member-states, to question the role and place of the organization in

world politics or to rethink and recast the underlying problem-to-be-solved. Organizational theorists, Connor and Lake, aptly describe this kind of reflexive organizational change this way: "With no guidance or direction from management, the form of those adjustments will develop according to custom, convenience, (path of least resistance, for example), power differences among groups affected, or whim" (Connor and Lake, 1988: 4).

Certainly, much of the UN's change process fits that description rather well.

As a direct consequence of this reflexive approach to change, the UN system has evolved more by default than by rational design (The Nordic UN Project, 1991: 28). Its organizational structure thus looks quite messy and confusing to the average observer, although this perhaps also reflects its exogenous environment. And, while this adaptation process may have staved off the threat of the UN becoming completely irrelevant over the past fifty years, one cannot deny that the end-result has been unbridled growth in the structures, policies and decision-making apparatus of this superbureaucratic byzantium (to use a label by Pitt and Weiss, 1986: 23-38). Certainly, the administrative practices and accountability structures at the UN have not kept pace with the unbridled bureaucratic growth and this has made the organization close to unmanageable.

2. The UN reform process

It is the organic-like growth in the organization's tasks, programmes, personnel and budget—much to the chagrin of the major donor member-states—that a purposive approach to change (usually called "reform") was more or less institutionalized within the UN (for a good analysis of the downsizing and retrenchment in the UN see Kanninen, 1990). This kind of reaction should not come as a complete surprise to close observers

of organizational development, for there is a well documented debate in the decision-making and organizational theory literature between advocates of reflexive incrementalism and those that support rational planning as a means of bringing about organizational change (for some examples see: Legge, 1984; Stein and Tanter, 1980 and Lindblom, 1959).

Drawing on the organizational theory literature, we can label UN change attempts as 'reform' efforts if they involve conscious, deliberate and collaborative efforts to "improve" the operations of the system through a selection of strategies at key intervention points in the change-management process. The entire reform process is usually conceived as a managerially guided activity having at least five main stages: 1) problem recognition and diagnosis; 2) initiation; 3) implementation; 4) routinization, and, 5) evaluation or feedback (Knight, 1995).

Most of the so-called reform measures in the UN have dealt with improving the following: recruitment practices; salary, allowance and leave system; financial operations; peace-keeping operations; secretariat activities; charter and global role, and; administrative, financial and personnel structure. In most cases, attempts at administrative, operational, personnel, financial and constitutional changes can be directly linked to the expansion of UN membership and the accompanying unbridled bureaucratic growth that occurred within the organization as a result of the above-mentioned "reflexive adaptation" process.

The major macro-level UN reform efforts, to date, have dealt with improving the capacity of the UN development assistance system (the Jackson reforms), reorganizing the economic and social sectors (the Dadzie reforms), downsizing the UN system's administrative and financial functioning (the Group of 18 reforms),

and adjusting the organization's international peace and security role (the Boutros-Ghali reforms, see United Nations, 1970 and 1986).

1. *The Jackson Reforms.* The proliferation of sub-units, commissions, committees, programmers and funds which resulted from the UN's reflexive adaptation process created what has been referred to as a 'non-system' that lacked a 'central brain' (UNDP document DP/5, 1969). This sprawling bureaucracy, devoid of coordination, produced telling and negative effects on the UN's delivery system (Gadgil, 1982 and Mohan, 1986: 165-186). Despite the creation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1965, problems of poor inter-agency co-ordination continued because the 'administrative jungle' that characterized the fragmented and polycentric development assistance structure of independent and semi-independent agencies, units and funds had essentially remained intact. To redress this problem, the UNDP Governing Council commissioned Sir Robert Jackson and a group of "experts" to undertake a study of the UN system's capacity to handle the resources that were being made available through UNDP to the organization.

Jackson concluded that UN member governments really did not control the development assistance machine and that "the machine is incapable of intelligently controlling itself." In his view, there was no sign or sense of managerial direction as far as development planning and delivery were concerned and as a consequence this machine had become "slower and more unwieldy, like some prehistoric monster" (UNDP document DP/5, 1969). The recommendations of the *Capacity Study* focused on developing a coherent plan for the rationalization of UN development activity. This plan called for enhancing the role of UNDP and ECOSOC, improving in-

ter-agency co-ordination of funds and other resources as well as aid delivery and technical assistance to the developing world, overhauling programme budgeting and staff training, and establishing a unified UN development service. The failure of the Jackson reforms is fairly evident and can be attributed directly to the piecemeal nature of the implementation plan. The relative importance of UNDP resources *vis-à-vis* those of the UN specialized agencies declined rather than increased, and inter-agency rivalry and lack of co-ordination continued unabated.¹ Furthermore, the more long term and far-reaching objectives of the Jackson reforms—the transformation of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) into a 'one world' parliament, the merger of some of the intergovernmental bodies and Secretariat units, and the harmonization of developmental policies throughout the system—have not been implemented. Those changes that did occur were mostly limited to UNDP and this was perceived as a blow specifically to the interests of the developing countries of the South.

2. *The Dadzie Reforms.* Responding to the perceived failures of UNDP and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (Ramsay, 1984: 35 and Saksena, s/f: 35), and the obvious lack of progress in achieving the proclaimed objectives of the Development Decades and the New International Economic Order (NIEO) programme of action, the Group of 77 (G-77) used its voting majority in the UN General Assembly to force the establishment in 1974 of a high level group of "experts", the Group of 25 headed by Dadzie, that would recommend structural changes to the UN's economic and social apparatus. The western industrialized states used this opportunity to get the organization to address, as it had done on previous occasions, the problems of institutional fragmentation, poor

coordination and planning, and deficiencies in the programming, budgeting and evaluating systems throughout the UN system.

Recommendations from this group included the creation of a post of Director-General (DG) to co-ordinate socio-economic activities in the UN, establishing a new consultative procedure to achieve consensus on controversial socio-economic issues, replacing UNCTAD with an international trade organization, revitalizing ECOSOC, redefining the role of specialized agencies, and consolidating preinvestment funds (Nicol and Renninger, 1982: 74-92). Most of the representatives from the G-77 countries were unhappy with the recommendations.² They wanted to strengthen the role of UNCTAD, not eliminate it. They also hoped to see the General Assembly empowered to issue direction to the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The G-77 opposed attempts to consolidate development funds, believing this would lead to a decrease in such funds. On the other side of the coin, the US and some of the major donor countries opposed any attempt to limit the

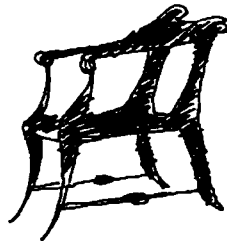
1. There were other proposals for inter-agency co-ordination which were not even tried. Examples include, the proposal to develop a system-wide computerized information system for development activities, the initiation of a combined UN Development Service and the harmonization of development policy through the ACC Development Resources Panel under the UNDP, Williams, 1987: 47-49.
2. The representatives of the Soviet Union and the other countries with centrally planned economies did not particularly like the report either. Information based on interviews with Third World representatives at the UN in New York (1991).

autonomy of the IBRD, the GATT or the IMF. The US in particular did not like the proposal to create the post of director general (United Nations, 1975).

In December 1977 the Assembly finally approved the implementation of a watered down version of the Dadzie recommendations in order for it to gain the acceptance of the various dissenting groups.³ Although the Office of Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation was created, for instance, it was given insufficient resources and authority to fulfill its mandate, of coordinating the overall development programme of the entire system, effectively. But there were marginal "successes" that accrued from this reform effort. For instance, coordination of development operational activities at the country level would be enhanced by the appointment of resident coordinators (local UNDP resident representatives); an Office for Programme Planning and Coordination was established with the specific mandate to monitor system-wide coordination problems in the area of development and to act as a 'linking pin' body by providing transorganizational programme analyses; the subsidiary bodies of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) were streamlined so that this unit could be placed in a much better position to oversee inter-agency coordination in the developmental field; and a Consultative Committee on Substantive

Questions (CCSQ) was created to encourage medium-term joint planning among UN system sub-organizations. In addition, the developmental institutional apparatus was expected to be strengthened by the fact that both the ACC and ECOS OC were given a Secretariat, the Office of Secretariat Services for Economic and Social Matters (OSSESM) and by the formulation of a new Department for Technical Co-operation and Development (DTCD) to coordinate all staff dealing with developmental issues.⁴

Despite these efforts, the overall reaction to the changes was disappointing. The commitment of the de-



veloped countries to the Dadzie and Jackson reforms was lukewarm at best. The OECD leaders in particular agreed with the developing world on the need for restructuring the world economy, but they wanted to control the plan for accomplishing this. For them the best strategy was one of coordinating their economic policies through the Group of Seven (G-7), which has since become a bi-annual feature of international relations.⁵ For all intents and purposes, as Saksena notes, "the so-called North-South dialogue has reached, it seems, a dead end." And, as far as international economic decision-making goes, the UN was "actually reduced to a non-

factor" (Saksena, s/f: 39, 43). Within the UN itself, the implementation of some of the reforms were sabotaged by resistant forces among the staff of the specialized agencies and from among some member-state representatives as well. A decade after the implementation of the restructuring reforms the UN system was no better coordinated, and the development programme was no more coherent or multidisciplinary in its approach than before (Williams, 1987: 51-53).

3. *The Group of 18 Reforms: An Attempt at Forced Institutional Change.* By the late 1970s it was quite evident that the strain on the UN's administrative and financial structures was, in part, a by-product of North-South conflict and a consequence of the failures of previous successive reform efforts. The South, by virtue of its voting majority in the Assembly, was able to force the UN to institute new programs and entities to serve the interest of the developing world; in most cases without much thought to the consequences of such expansion on the UN's ability to survive, to be efficient and to be effective. The North, on the other hand, used its financial clout to deny resources that would be necessary for these new programs and organs to operate adequately. The end-result was a bloated, over-extended and inefficient organization.

The relevance of the organization was also put into question as the UN failed to meet the demands of its member states and of international society. Instead of trying to establish what was required of the organization and then set about re-designing the UN's administrative, institutional and constitutional structure to meet the demand, the debate over reform tended to revolve around a North-South struggle over the organization's resources and expenditures.

Evan Luard had predicted in 1979 that such "conflicts about the level and type of expenditure" within the

3. In the end General Assembly resolution 32/197 was passed unanimously, but it reflected much compromise.
4. Especially in the Second Committee which has a mandate for economic and social issues.
5. The seven major industrialized countries that formed the G-7 was: Canada, France, West Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the US.

UN would become "frequent and fierce in the future..." and that this issue "could become perhaps the central issue of international government" (Luard, 1979: 124). It took less than five years for this prediction to become a reality. In fact, each year since 1976 a "financial emergency" item has been placed on the Assembly's agenda. By the mid-1980s representatives of the US and some other major donors blamed this crisis on internal UN mismanagement. Some of them described the organization as an expensive, ungovernable, ever-expanding bureaucracy with severe management and personnel problems brought on by the Third World "tyrannous majority". It was at this point that a number of questionable tactics were used, particularly by the US, to force pre-determined reforms on the organization.

In 1985, just as the UN was preparing for its fortieth anniversary celebrations, several pieces of US Legislation (for example, the Kassebaum-Solomon Amendment and the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act) were passed - aimed at reducing the US deficit but effectively diminishing the level of US financial contribution to the UN's regular budget (from 25% to 20%) and linking full payment of the US's UN dues to the implementation of such institutional changes as a revamped financial and accountability system in the UN, a 15 percent reduction in UN staff, reorganization of budgetary methods to allow larger contributors a 'bigger say' in the allocation of the organization's funds (i.e. the introduction of weighted voting in the general assembly and some of its subsidiary organs), and a reduction in the number of Soviets working within the UN system on short-term contractual basis.

US financial withholding was obviously in clear violation of article 17 of the UN Charter and Third World delegates naturally viewed this move

as an attempt at blackmail to force predetermined reform measures which the US wanted onto the organization (Donini, 1988: 302). But it was at this point that UN officials also realized that unimpeded organizational growth would no longer be a self-evident fact in the life-cycle of the UN. Managers would have to learn to cope with dwindling resources, as many states were trying to do by the mid-1980s. A deliberate zero-budgeting policy was advocated by the US and other western developed states to demonstrate this new thinking. The organization's major donors obviously intended to produce a leaner UN that would be more efficient and effective. What followed, however, was a severe financial crisis that threatened the viability and survival of the UN system during the mid-1980s⁶ - a time when the very essence of multilateralism was being questioned by groups like the Heritage Foundation in the US (Burton, 1984; Krauthammer, 1987: 18-23).

A number of short term measures were taken by the UN secretary general to deal with this financial problem, e.g. deferment of expenditures, reductions in the number of meetings, curtailment of some programmes, and a freeze on hiring staff. But the official administrative response to this forced crisis was initiated by the Japanese delegation at the UN which called on the Assembly to set up an eminent persons' group to address the UN's financial and administrative problems. On December 18, 1985 one of the most extensive administrative and managerial reform effort in the UN's history was initiated.⁷

The High-Level Intergovernmental Experts group was created to review the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the UN (UN General Assembly resolution 40/237). Initially, many Third World states had resisted the idea of setting up such a group, but eventually they

acquiesced and allowed it go through. This reform effort lasted five years and had a profound effect on the entire UN system (Mathiason, 1987: 165). The primary goals of this effort were to reorganize the Secretariat, cut staff levels, reduce the number of meetings and reports, cut back on official travel, and streamline the central budgetary and administrative operations (See the Group of 18 report. Also, United Nations Document A/40/PV.7, 1985). Tapio Kanninen calls this a classic case of "retrenchment" and "downsizing". Between February and August 1986, this *Group of 18* met sixty-seven times in closed session. Its final report was, according to one commentator, more a disparate list of recommendations than an agreement on what was to be reformed (United Nations, Document A/41/149, 1986). Indeed, the 71 recommendations were simply repetitions of past proposals.

In a further cost-cutting move, secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, following on from his predecessor in implementing the Group of 18 recommendations, announced on February 1992 that external recruitment for posts in the professional category would be suspended until further notice and that maximum restraint should be exercised in making appointments to posts in the general

6. A similar crisis occurred in 1972 when the US' share of the UN regular budget was reduced from 31.52% to 25%. The difference between this situation and the one in the mid-1980s was the forced nature of the latter. Note that by the end of 1985, the UN was faced with a \$390 million deficit in its regular budget.

7. Mr. Abe, Japanese foreign minister and the catalyst for this effort, urged the 40th session of the Assembly to establish "a group of eminent persons" to examine ways in which the UN could function more efficiently.

service and related categories. The secretary general also made a number of sweeping and downsizing changes to the Secretariat, particularly in the top echelons. Effective February 29, 1992, a number of offices and departments⁸ were discontinued as separate entities, and their functions and programmes continued under new administrative arrangements (UN, Secretariat, 1992; Personnel Manual, Index No.4087). A number of top-level secretariat positions were also axed by the secretary general at the same time (UN Department of Public Information, 1992; UN, 1992: 7; UN, DPI, 1992). In total, Boutros-Ghali's reorganization effort resulted in a net reduction of fourteen high-level Secretariat posts (Also note UN Secretariat, 1992). The UN's 1992-93 regular budget of just over \$1 billion a year made provision for a total of forty-eight posts at the top-level within the Secretariat, down from sixty-two in the previous budget. The established posts were for one director general (DG), twenty-seven under-secretaries general (USGs), twenty assistant secretaries general (ASGs). In addition, provision was also made for temporary posts for 1 USG and 3 ASGs.

Despite these seemingly sweeping organizational changes, the Group of 18 failed to agree on several issues that lay at the heart of the organization's administrative and financial

problems—in particular the planning, programming and budgeting process and the restructuring of the intergovernmental machinery. In the final analysis, this reform effort can be considered at best of only a limited success. Indeed, the implementation of this planned change effort could not have come at a worse time for the organization. It made the serious financial crisis facing the UN even worse and its retrenchment and downsizing emphasis placed a severe strain on the ability of the UN to meet the new demands in the field of international peace and security placed on it with the end of the Cold War. The organization found itself on the brink of insolvency, trying to do more with less at a time when international systemic changes demanded greater involvement of the UN system in global governance.

4. *Boutros-Ghali's Reforms: An Agenda for Peace.* It is ironic that just when the UN seemed to be undergoing a period of renaissance (with the culmination of the Cold War), it was in the midst of the massive downsizing exercise initiated by the Group of 18. As the new UN secretary general, Boutros-Ghali noted in 1992, the UN was operating under his direction in an entirely different context than existed during the Cold War era. The end of the Cold War produced a situation that required a rethinking of the role of the UN in world affairs as well as a summoning of new responses by that organization to meet the demands of a changing period. This changed situation was recognized by the UN Security Council at the first ever heads of state and government meeting of that body, convened on 31 January 1992. At that meeting Council representatives expressed optimism that, with the end of the Cold War and the relaxation of ideological and political tensions within the UN, the organization's member states could finally work together more freely in order to

fulfill the original goals of the UN Charter.

In response to a challenge from the Council to prepare by 1 July 1992 "an analysis and recommendations on ways of strengthening and making more efficient within the framework and provisions of the Charter the capacity of the United Nations for preventive diplomacy, for peacemaking and for peacekeeping", the secretary general produced his now widely-read *An Agenda for Peace*. In it, he outlined a number of initiatives designed to improve the UN's performance in the three tasks listed above. However, his boldest recommendation was for the creation of peace enforcement units which would act under Article 43 of the Charter in response to "outright aggression, imminent or actual". These units were conceived as being separate from UN peacekeeping forces and would be made up of heavily armed volunteer soldiers who would be trained and kept in reserve within their national military contingents. Ghali further recommended that the Council consider the utilization of these special units only in "clearly defined circumstances and with their terms of reference specified in advance."

While this idea was considered imaginative, and could have possible filled one of the conceptual voids in the UN's Charter mandate to maintain international peace and security, only France reacted positively and with any enthusiasm to the secretary general's proposal. Canada, the Nordic countries and the Netherlands seems to have warmed to the notion of peace-enforcement units after the debacle in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda. They have illustrated this with their proposals for developing a rapid reaction force and capability for the UN system. However, these proposals are still a long way off from becoming reality. ♦

8. The offices/departments referred to were: Office of the Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation; Office for Political and General Assembly Affairs and Secretariat Services; Office for Research and Collection of Information; Office for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea; Department of Political and Security Council Affairs; Department for Special Political Questions, Regional Cooperation, Decolonization and Trusteeship; Department for Disarmament Affairs, and others.