

UN REFORM AND HUMAN SECURITY – THE NEED FOR BROAD PERSPECTIVES

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Reform has been an almost continuous activity of the UN since its beginning. As one recent study puts it, “the quest for reform, for improving the functioning of the UN has been an integral part of the life of the world body since its earliest days.”

Curiously, this has gone along with a number of myths: that reform is never taken seriously by the UN secretariat; that the UN remains a “bloated, over-staffed bureaucracy”; that agreed reforms are rarely implemented. I hope that the Commission will set some of these grossly misleading impressions to rest. Where certain reforms were not implemented it is often because member states could not agree on the reforms required. But even when member states did agree, reform was often desperately underfunded – “trying to starve the UN into reform”, as Dame Margaret Anstee once put it.

Equally important is to emphasize that much reform has been initiated by the secretariat itself, without any immediate pressure or resolutions in the GA or other governing bodies. My experience in UNICEF and UNDP is that often the reforms initiated by the various UN secretariats themselves have been the most relevant and most significant and often have led to important improvements in UN efficiency and effectiveness.

There are other common mis-apprehensions that deserve to be corrected. In the area of economic and social action, work by the UN history project on UN contributions to development thinking and practice has already shown:

- That the UN has had more success in areas of economic and social development and action than it seems to have had in the areas of peacekeeping and political negotiation
- That the UN has often had more success in areas of economic and social development and action than have the Bretton Woods institutions
- The recent focus on the Millennium Development Goals raises very specific questions about past performance. How much impact has goal setting by the UN had in the past? Over the years, the UN has set some 50 development goals. The record of success has been more positive than often realized. It is true that only a few goals - like the eradication of small pox, the reduction of infant mortality, and the near elimination of polio and guinea worm have been fully achieved in almost every country – but many other goals have been achieved largely or considerably in a sizeable number of countries. There is in fact only a small minority of specific global goals where hardly any progress has been made – the reduction of maternal mortality is one notable example and, more serious and revealing, goals for support by the developed countries of aid in general and support for the least developed countries in particular.

How is all this relevant to a commission on reform in relation to the UN's role in security and peace-keeping? I believe that the Commission could make a fresh and pioneering contribution if it considers priorities for reform of UN institutions and operations within a new and broader perspective of human security, far beyond the traditional concepts of state security, peacekeeping and humanitarian action. Such an approach would have several advantages:

- It would enable the commission to bring in and build on some of the more positive experience of UN achievements.
- It would relate the Commission's report and recommendations on reform to new thinking on human security – an approach which is likely to be ever more important in the future. This is because human security provides a coherent frame in which other high priority security issues can be considered: terrorism and its underlying causes; urban crime and trafficking; conflicts over water resources; environmental protection and sustainability.
- A broader focus would also bring in a wider range of experience of UN reform, with lessons both negative and positive on what makes for success. It would bring in the experience of the UN funds and programmes – UNDP, UNICEF and WFP, in particular – which are often closely involved in both security matters and humanitarian action.

I. Some examples from past experience may illustrate the points:

UN actions in the area of development and humanitarian relief have sometimes set the stage for subsequent more direct peace-building negotiations and efforts. In Central America in the early 1980s, WHO launched “Health as a Bridge to Peace”. UNICEF introduced “Days of Tranquillity” in which, by agreement, there was a cessation of all fighting between rebel forces and government forces for a succession of Sundays for several years. This was done to enable the immunisation of children in both government and rebel-held areas. UNDP was involved in parallel initiatives. All this helped lay the foundations for more formal negotiations on conflict resolution and peace several years later.

Such actions demonstrate the ability of different parts of the UN to establish confidence in and the legitimacy of the UN and its funds and agencies at local level, more than may be realised. Moreover, the cost of these actions is relatively small, sometimes even minute, in comparison with the costs of military efforts of peace-keeping.

There is a further point often underemphasised: different parts of the UN operate under rules of practice and with different traditions which have enabled them to intervene in ways which involve much less of the formal diplomacy than when Security Council approved actions are required. In Sudan, for example, UNICEF for several years led “Operation Lifeline Sudan”, as part of which UNICEF was able to engage in cross-border humanitarian operations on a no objection basis, as opposed to needing to seek formal approval in advance. UNICEF's position was that response to children's urgent needs, regardless of politics, was part of its long tradition based on a humanitarian morality superseding those of governments engaged in warfare. Such flexibilities among the

different agencies of the UN can still be important for wider UN action and need to be treasured and protected.

Reform of UN security also needs to embrace mechanisms for the better financing of these and other operations by the funds and agencies of the UN. Over the past two decades or so, funding for the development activities of the UN has been severely squeezed, absolutely and relatively to funding for and through the World Bank. Yet the record shows that often the UN has been “ahead of the curve” in policy and strategy compared with the World Bank and the IMF. The UN has often also been more cost effective. International support for humanitarian and security actions is an area where the UN has long been operating before the World Bank provided any support. In recent years, coordination between UN and the Bretton Woods institutions has improved markedly. This now needs to be followed by a better balance in the allocation of funds.

The need to focus develop a new international agenda for human security is my main recommendation. But it might be helpful to indicate some more specific lessons of reform, drawn from my own experience within the UN, on three important areas likely to be involved in carrying such an agenda forward.

- There will need to be ground work within the UN, to help pave the way for agreement by political bodies on the major changes or new initiatives required. For such groundwork to be quick and efficient, I would stress four points:
 - It will be important to focus on the big picture – new objectives, the broad approach and the new priorities needed - not the minor details of administrative change. To achieve this, some leading thinkers within and outside the UN will need to be involved, to indicate the priority actions required and their implications for the different bodies of the UN. Some outsiders are essential to help develop a truly innovative perspective. Some creative insiders are also essential to help develop the links with practical action by and with the UN. It will be important to keep open a broad perspective on the UN – including its funds and specialized agencies - not only those involved in more traditional views of security.
 - Many elements of reform and management change may be better left for the secretariat or UN agencies themselves to devise and initiate, not seeking Board approval in advance though naturally reporting afterwards to the Board on outcomes. These especially cover matters of cost-saving re-organization.
 - The secretariats themselves may also be better judges than Boards and governments about when outside advice and consultancies are needed. Outside consultancies have often been excessive, provided in rapid succession, supported or encouraged by different donors and overwhelming secretariats with new challenges and new rounds of interviews, visitations and recommendations, long before they have digested the previous ones.

- In contrast, quiet support for reforms and analyses initiated by existing management can often be the most useful and most effective.
- What are the lessons from previous summit-level conferences – from the World Summit for Children in 1990 onwards – as to how follow up can be constructive and make a practical difference at country level.
 - As mentioned above, a careful review of the record shows that results have often been better than many people appear to think. Some of this evidence has been summarised in the Human Development report 2003 and in the UN History Project volume, *Ahead of the Curve*, published in 2001
 - Critically important for positive results are at least four conditions: 1) to ensure that in each area one or two UN agencies have main responsibilities, clearly defined, for follow up in the key areas of action, with the leadership and resources required and strong support from their Boards for the necessary action, 2) that the focus is put on country level action with all parties being clear about this 3) that donor countries provide sustained support on a sufficient scale 4) that monitoring is public and transparent. There are clear and positive examples of this from the 1980s and 1990s with respect to child survival and development, water and sanitation – in contrast to areas of action linked to structural adjustment, where failure was frequent and often disastrous. It is noteworthy that most of the positive UN examples were achieved with strong agency leadership and without much or any “conditionality”.
 - Independent analysis often shows that failures to make adequate progress are linked to weaknesses and lack of support and follow through in the broader international arena. Notably this includes serious declines in commodity prices, rising debt with debt relief that is too little and too late, failures of the developed countries to reduce agricultural subsidies, tariffs and other trade barriers, as well as providing aid on an inadequate scale, to an unpredictable timetable and often only after complicated and extended processes of negotiation. Many of these factors repeat a litany of complaints issued over past decades, but this does not take away from the basic truth of problems and difficulties they present, especially to poorer countries.
- How much attention should be given to reform of ECOSOC and associated Board and decision making structures as opposed to reform of overall policy and programmes.
 - Reform of the Security Council and of ECOSOC has for many years been one of the hardy perennials – with little to show for the efforts. There is no short of proposals, many proposing ways for ECOSOC to have a small and effective decision making bureau or other body, modelled after the

economic security council. If there is a mood to undertake some major reforms of this sort, the effort would be worth pursuing.

- But more productive is likely to be a focus on new or key areas of UN policy and action. This could make an important difference if driven by a serious political commitment among at least a core of developed and developing countries, focused on accelerating action towards the Millennium Development Goals and strengthening human security.
- A critical issue is to ensure adequate support for action by the UN as well as by the Bretton Woods Institutions – including a better balance in the allocation of resources between these institutions. Though no one should argue that quantum of international resources for multi-lateral action has been adequate, it is true that the bulk of resources in the economic and social arena now flow via the Bretton Woods institutions and that UN funds and agencies have for the most part been starved of financial support, often with serious consequences for overall multi-lateral action and efficiency as well as for development in poorer countries. Priority attention to human security will require some serious redressing of these imbalances.
- Many of these proposals will gain strong support from many countries, developed and developing – though probably not initially from all. This may be an area where it will much better to focus on building a successful coalition among a core of the truly willing countries, developed and developing, rather than to dilute a new vision and supportive action to what is at present universally acceptable.

A vision of the new actions required for human security, led and supported by the United Nations, should not be held hostage to the present reluctance of some countries to act.