

Acknowledgements

The analysis in this book can claim a long pedigree. When I joined the UN development system in the 1970s, driven by a strong sense of idealism, I shared the same ambition as many others in wanting to change the world for the better. In Bangkok, I was a very small cog in an enormous machine stretching across all regions. Whatever familiarity I had with the many UN acronyms early on was quickly out of date as the disparate family of agencies, funds, programmes, commissions, institutes and myriad other entities with UN in their titles expanded. The UN seemed to have a solution to every challenge: create a new body. And when, periodically, the UN was reminded of the fact that all those entities were actually distant relatives of the same family, there was another standard solution: create a new coordination mechanism.

So much for the structure, what about the software? The UN has incubated many path-breaking norms, standards, ideas and practices in contriving solutions to a huge range of problems. It has attracted many brilliant minds: some 20 Nobel laureates in economics and peace have worked in or with the UN (and eight UN organizations have been recognized), and it has employed some extraordinary practitioners working in the front lines of conflict, state collapse and humanitarian emergencies. But this small cog also perceived very early on that the UN could be so much better with a rational structure and with more uniform excellence among its staff. And so began my own restless thinking about change.

After a dozen assignments on different continents, including stints in New York and Geneva, I left the UN and started the Future UN Development System (FUNDS) project with Professor Tom Weiss (FutureUN.org). He has pioneered the reference to the three UNs (First, Second and Third) which I use in the book to clarify where responsibility lies for making change. Soon FUNDS had funds from several generous donor governments, and we were able to undertake and publish research on UN reform as part of a network of interested parties. Among the most original features of the work were the regular global surveys we conducted with Dalberg on perceptions about the UN and its work. These surveys were aimed at many thousands of representatives of the three UNs: its governments (first), its staff (second) and the global public (third).

They helped open our eyes, and those of many others in the UN, to the strengths and weaknesses of the world body. Some of the survey findings are included in the book to support the analysis. My thanks go to Tom – and the four donor governments and Dalberg – for almost a decade of collaboration; also to the authors, too numerous to mention, of the nearly 50 FUNDS Briefings on different aspects of UN reform, whose opinions have influenced the text.

As a lecturer at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, I have benefited from the wisdom of Tom Biersteker, Cecilia Cannon, Francesco Giumelli and several students who, like me some decades ago, were able to bring fresh minds to an examination of the record and prospects of the UN. Alan Doss, a former colleague who headed the UN's largest-ever peacekeeping operation, helped put me right on the contents of Chapter 2, and Sukehiro Hasegawa, another of the UN's former 'generals', shared his thoughts on peace operations.

My thanks also to Professors Lorraine Elliott and Alistair Edgar, who encouraged the writing of the book, and read and commented on the text. They have been sources of inspiration both as editors of this series and as leaders in the Academic Council on the UN System (ACUNS). Needless to say, none of those named are responsible for any remaining errors or construals.

Finally, my thanks to Mark Malloch-Brown, who has contributed the Foreword. As a former boss at the UNDP and then as UN Deputy Secretary-General, he helped forge numerous paths to UN reform. He worked in partnership with Kofi Annan, who died in 2018 and to whose memory this book is dedicated. Annan was the most reform-minded of all the UN's Secretary-Generals because he combined his vision with courage. Changes that he wrought are part of his legacy, and have helped maintain the relevance of the organization today.