

Foreword

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The UN is a mirror to the world it serves; when that world is divided and dysfunctional so is the UN. Thus today when it seems so needed, it also seems not to be able to rise to the occasion. It is held back by disagreement between the very same member-states that demand more of it. Those member-states make demands and then express their frustration with the inability of the organization to get results.

In the commercial world, reform is relatively straightforward. The principals – boards or the shareholders they represent – demand change when balance sheets deteriorate. The more amorphous world of the UN does not lend itself to the same metrics. Resources are limited but demands are almost infinite. Applying priorities to the expectations of 193 countries appears out of the question. The interests which they have vested in different parts of the UN make it difficult to apply the rigours of cost-effectiveness. Among member-states agreement is elusive because the interests of the major contributors (pay as little as possible) are pitted against those of the net beneficiaries (secure as much as possible). The contest plays out in global UN conferences which rarely conclude without disputes over money.

UN reform is ultimately about politics. Those vested interests are part of what this book describes as the extensive patronage system within the UN. It also identifies two other obstacles to fundamental change, which have been hard-wired into the architecture from the beginning. One is the veto power of the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council which enables members of that exclusive group not just to limit, but to actually prevent response to a crisis of conflict and human suffering. The UN's record of inaction in Darfur and Syria are just two examples. The potential for intergovernmental gridlock has grown worse with the recent retreat from multilateralism by the P5 member, the United States, which used to do more than any other to nurture and support the world organization.

Another obstacle is the absence of an integrating framework for the development organizations. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) had been conceived as a strategic coordinator, but in the Charter the

specialized agencies – some originally created in the nineteenth century – were only ‘brought into relation’ with the UN system, and have successfully maintained and defended their independence of governance and will. The many UN funds and programmes which were added to the development family have also preserved a high degree of autonomy. Although individual members of the family have made impressive contributions to the causes of development and humanitarian needs, the household is disjointed and resistant to the advantages of delivering as one. Sibling rivalry is heightened by the competitive race for the resources of donors.

Stephen Browne, himself a veteran who toiled in the UN trenches, has written an important account of the struggles within the UN to change and reinvent itself. In its peace and security function, the UN had to devise the practice of peacekeeping, which has subsequently mutated as conflicts turned inwards, then taken on global dimensions with the emergence of terrorist networks. It is now engaged in the complex demands of peace-building, creating resilience before and after conflict and destabilization. In its work on human rights, the UN succeeded early on in codifying international law through a succession of treaties. The world is far from just, but it has a forum in which rights abuse can be aired. The creation of the Human Rights Council and the High Commissioner boosted the profile of the UN as a rights organization of deliberation as well as advocacy. More has to change, but to do so the UN must try to counter the diminished interest by some of the P5 members in pursuing reform. And, as an intergovernmental organization, it struggles with double standards – where politics rather than the realities of its human rights record can determine how a country is dealt with.

Nowhere more than in the theatre of humanitarian action has the UN been so stretched by the rapidly growing scale of needs. The UN retains a privileged status as first resort, creating a succession of mechanisms to coordinate the responses of many actors even as resources fall short. In the development sphere, reform has constantly sought a greater measure of cohesion almost throughout the UN’s existence.

This call for closer integration is a commendable theme of this book and is relevant for the entire family. The sprawling agglomeration of the UN’s multiple entities has a common system of salary scales, but little else is uniform. Yet every part of the UN acknowledges the ideals of the Charter. If, as the book proposes, the organization is to rededicate itself to those functions for which it has no peers and for which it is best primed, we might see a more compact but more effective UN calling seamlessly on the talents within its many parts.

Getting there is the challenge. Stephen Browne usefully describes a first UN of a deeply regulated, government-controlled centre – the UN

Secretariat and its operations – overseen by a network of micromanaging member-state committees; a second UN of the agencies, funds and programmes with somewhat more autonomy; and a third UN that represents the visions and hopes of civil society. Because of their great independence, these second two UNs have always shown a greater ability to adapt and grow than the first. And perhaps reform will remain an incremental process that exploits that relative independence.

However, I have argued elsewhere that the UN really needs a new San Francisco moment.¹ If 1945 was a time of malleability and vision after a catastrophic war, we can only hope that major new planetary challenges – climate change, global terrorism or other disruptive forces that threaten stability – will help push the UN we need towards the world we want. As the world lurches precariously towards new instability one must hope that any such San Francisco moment comes before, not after, global conflict.

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¹ Mark Malloch-Brown, *The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Pursuit of a New International Politics*, New York: Penguin, 2011; ‘Can the UN be Reformed?’ The John W. Holmes Lecture, *Global Governance* 14 (2008), 1–12.