

Cycle of Conferences

UN Reform

From Pragmatic to Visionary

A cursory glance through the material available on the Internet regarding the subject of U.N. reform, reveals the deep divisions between supporters and detractors of the world body. Of these tensions, the Secretary-General would have been well aware, as he worked to shape the reforms designed to bring this institution into the 21st Century.

There is much distrust of the motives of the U.N., and much condemnation of its activities. But there is equally as much support for its existence and for a broadening of its scope and authority. The mistrust seems to stem from a belief that the U.N. wishes to interfere in the legitimate business of national governments, and is intent on imposing some homogenous form of world government. Hence opposition to the very notion of a U.N. body lies in a perceived struggle for power, national identity and independence. At the extreme of the differing view, are those who have very unrealistic expectations that the UN can, and should, solve all of humanities problems. It would seem that along with all the reforms proposed by the Secretary-General which will be debated at the September conference, there needs to be a concerted effort also to re-educate the populace at large and their leaders, about the origins and purpose of the U.N., so that unrealistic fears of its motives, and equally unrealistic expectations of its potential to serve all our needs, can be addressed. Most people, and even many U.N. delegates, have a limited knowledge, or a distorted sense, of the basic elements that shaped the organisation's structure in San Francisco, and such ignorance complicates genuine and realistic attempts to reform the U.N. today.

The U.N. was born, not so much out of a spirit of friendship and goodwill, as out of a desire to settle long standing grievances and border demarcation disputes after a long and bitter conflict. Every national delegation present carried its own historical baggage, and it took much hard-nosed negotiation to bring this disparate group into any form of consensus. The blueprint for the U.N. was based in the reality of the times, and was never naive about the power of some nations to influence its operation. This pragmatic approach is best exemplified in the membership of the Security Council with its five permanent members with the power of veto. This is perhaps the most contentious issue for those with more idealistic views of how a global body should work cooperatively and for the common good. And, perhaps at some time in the future this will be realised, but in 1945, such concession to the major powers was essential and inevitable for there to be any cooperation and participation at all. Without that participation, however flawed and selfishly based, the U.N. would have been unable to survive and grow. It is much the same today.

Perhaps the greatest misconception about the U.N. lies in the area of its ability to act. It has no authority to enforce its decisions outside the authority of the will of its members to carry them out, hence, the General Assembly can offer only recommendations to the world community. Obligatory acceptance by all nations of U.N. decisions cuts across national sovereignty in a way that would not be countenanced by any country. And, while decisions by the Security Council do require compliance by all member nations, the Council has no independent means to enforce its will (as was evident with its many resolutions concerning weapons in Iraq). Nations sign Conventions that they probably, at the time, do intend to implement, but can put them aside when it does not suit their purpose, while, the Security Council is unable, in itself, to prevent the outbreak of hostilities in any part of the world. It is in these highly visible areas that the U.N. is seen to have lost the confidence of both

national governments and ordinary citizens. While many are aware of, and may indeed support, all the good work that is done by the U.N., this will be overlooked when there is a perceived threat to national and individual freedom and security, and a global response is not readily forthcoming.

Of course, the real responsibility lies with the national governments of U.N. members, but it is easy to deflect the blame and responsibility to the U.N. if people are ill-informed of how the organisation operates, and of its limitations. These very limitations are imposed because people value, and feel that they must protect, their individual freedoms, cultures and nationalities against a misperceived vision of One World, One Humanity. While the U.N. was always to be a forum of national governments, its real effectiveness and authority must come from the support of the citizens represented by national delegates. It is at this grass roots level that we can focus much of our attention, so that the hearts and minds of men and women are inspired by the possibility of a truly global organisation working for the common good, without fear or favour.

If it is indeed true that support for the U.N. is "broad and shallow", then it is clear that an educational campaign is vital if the U.N. is to fulfil its role as a body which holds a vision for our future, based on the authority of spiritual principles. The role of the U.N. is to lead by example and to set the moral standards for good governance and right human relations. But it can never be all things to all people. The Secretary-General has rightly said that, "Reform must be rooted in a new consensus among governments of what the U.N. can do best, what it should do with others, and what it should leave to others to do". In this context, the reforms proposed by Kofi Annan, are designed to move the ethos of the U.N. from a post-world war/cold war mentality into an organisation that stands for right human relations, which, in turn, will be expressed through each nation pursuing its own cultural identity and taking responsibility to integrate that identity into a reality of One Humanity.

To again quote the Secretary-General, "From pragmatic beginnings could emerge a visionary change of direction in our world"

Headquarters Group
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