

'Reforming Development Cooperation at the United Nations: An analysis of policy position and actions of key states on reform options' by Silke Weinlich (German Development Institute, Bonn, 2011) – A Review by Leelananda de Silva

UN reform has been a subject of much discussion over the years. Most of that discussion has been on the reform of the Security Council. There are 192 member states of the United Nations, and for the majority of them the most significant part of the UN is not the Security Council and political and peacekeeping systems, but the more mundane UN Development System (UNDS), which has grown in a fragmented fashion in the last six decades. The UNDS has both normative and operational activities. In its operational activities, it disburses annually about US\$5 billion from core resources received from member countries, and about \$15 billion funded by donors and recipient countries from non-core, earmarked, resources. The core funds of UNDS amount only to about 5% of total Official Development Assistance (ODA). The UNDS emerged largely owing to the demands of developing countries to have a multilateral counterweight to the World Bank, which was viewed as being controlled by developed countries. The UNDS also was expected to be a more objective and more equitable source of development funding than those of bilateral donors. The increase in non-core earmarked funding, however, has had a deleterious effect on the UNDS as it has led to the '*bilateralisation*' of UNDS, as those countries, both donor and recipient, which channel their resources through the UNDS attach their own conditionalities. There is also a growing convergence between development and humanitarian operations, and the distinction between these two activities is less relevant now than it used to be.

Silke Weinlich, in her most impressive study on UN development cooperation, has examined in some detail the efforts that have been made to reform the UNDS. She has looked at the many problems that bedevil the UNDS – including the weak governance systems of the nearly forty UN bodies engaged in these tasks; the serious concerns that have arisen because of greater reliance on non-core funding; the fragmented nature of UN operational activities; the lack of effectiveness and impact of UN operations; and the stalemate between developed and developing countries in efforts to reform the UNDS. She brings to light some of the distortions and weaknesses of the UNDS. The Nordic countries now provide nearly 40% of the core funding of UNDS, thereby gaining significant influence over UNDS functions. Although Weinlich does not provide detailed information, there is also the clear impression that the UNDS today is relevant to a much smaller number of member states (probably 40-50) than used to be the case. The UNDS provides hardly any core funding to Asia and Latin America, largely confining itself to Africa. What such a small resource base from UNDS is doing in China and India beggars belief.

One of the most valuable contributions that Weinlich has made in her topical study is in explaining the various positions taken up by the developed and developing countries. When she talks about developing country

positions, however, it is those that are reflected in New York and Geneva through the UN Permanent Missions. If she does a more extensive study in the future, it is important that she examines the positions relating to UNDS issues by the home governments of developing countries. That will be more appropriate as the views of Permanent Missions often lack any in-depth insight into the UNDS at the field and operational levels, and are clouded by a political mistiness created by North-South tensions which have ceased everywhere else other than in some of the UN forums in New York and Geneva. Permanent Missions of the developing countries look upon the UNDS as a resource transfer mechanism. Their whole effort is focused either on maximising resource transfers or on getting involved in organisational and staffing issues. The system of governance of UNDS is sterile, unhealthy and ineffective.

Silke examines the current fashion for UNDS reform – strengthening coordination at the field level and having a UN resident coordinator who will be equipped with resources to ‘Deliver as One’. Although some member states are not in sympathy with this approach, there are others, particularly the Nordic states, who seem to be pushing it. Of course, the UN is fragmented, but this does not matter too much at the field level, as four or five UN bodies dominate resource transfers in the forty or fifty countries where UN resources are most concentrated. There is not much point, for example, to coordinate UNICEF with UNDP, as UNICEF has a strong brand image in most countries and has effective working relations with the government entities that matter – the ministries of education and health. There might be opportunities for purposive coordination in selected areas like in education and health, and not so much coordination within the UN system, but with other donors and relevant government agencies. The mantra of coordination, coming down from ECOSOC in New York to the UN at field level is largely an irrelevant distraction from more relevant approaches to getting their act together in the one or two aid agencies that matter, with other donors and government entities. Coordination needs to be selective rather than being institutionalised at some cost. Where it all ends up is with the UN country team transforming itself into a talking shop.

Weinlich has examined several key issues and has raised many other important ones which need further research and discussion. This study has been aimed primarily at the German Development Cooperation fraternity, but it has a much wider significance. Relevant government and research institutions in developed and developing countries stand to gain by a detailed examination of Weinlich’s study. It should be the starting point of a more intensive discussion of UNDS reform, including the questioning of the fundamental premises on which the current UNDS is predicated. Should UNDP, having lost its former central funding role, now focus on greater coordination of the UNDS, or move towards filling a more striking gap within the UNDS? While UNDS addresses a vast range of issues, there is no one institution which addresses the critical task of political governance in developing countries, including failed and failing states. Political governance

includes matters relating to effective governance systems, law and order, the rule of law, human rights, parliament, police, and accountability and transparency processes. This is a large and expanding field where only a body like UNDP can play an objective role. UN bodies have largely ignored the political dimensions of development until recently. Now it is time to tackle these issues more intensively and extensively.

(Leelananda de Silva was a senior official in the government of Sri Lanka, and from 1978-1982 he was Executive-Secretary of the Third World Forum in Geneva. He has worked as an international consultant to UN bodies, in New York, Geneva, Rome, Vienna, Bangkok, and in over thirty countries in Asia and Africa. He was also consultant to the Inter-parliamentary Union in Geneva. He has written extensively on development issues.)