

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

The John W. Holmes Lecture:  
Reinvigorating the International  
Civil Service



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“PEOPLE MATTER” IS A CENTRAL CONCLUSION FROM THE UNITED NATIONS Intellectual History Project and the penultimate sentence of the first of seventeen published volumes.<sup>1</sup> Yet critical contributions by individuals who work at the world organization are usually overlooked or downplayed by analysts who stress the politics of 192 member states and the supposedly ironclad constraints placed by them on international secretariats. However, I have devoted considerable professional energy to international administration, both as an analyst and as a civil servant.<sup>2</sup> My proposition is straightforward: the United Nations should rediscover the idealistic roots of the international civil service, make room for creative idea-mongers, and mark out career development paths for a twenty-first century secretariat with greater turnover and younger and more mobile staff. This essay explores the origins of the concept, problems, the logic of reform, and specific improvements. Examples come from the UN’s three main areas of activity—peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development.<sup>3</sup>

**Overwhelming Bureaucracy and  
Underwhelming Leadership: The “Second UN”**

If the conceptual UN is unitary, the real organization consists of three linked pieces. The “Second UN” consists of heads of secretariats and staff members who are paid from assessed and voluntary budgets. Inis Claude long ago distinguished it from the arena for state decisionmaking, the “First UN” of member states. The “Third UN” of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), experts, commissions, and academics is a more recent addition to analytical perspectives that first appeared in these pages.<sup>4</sup>

The possibility of independently recruited professionals with allegiance to the welfare of the planet, not to their home countries, remains a lofty but contested objective. During World War II, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace sponsored conferences to learn from the “great experiment” of the League of Nations.<sup>5</sup> One essential item of its legacy, the international civil

service, was purposefully included as UN Charter Article 101, calling for “securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity.”<sup>6</sup>

The Second UN’s most visible champion was Dag Hammarskjöld, whose speech at Oxford in May 1961, shortly before his calamitous death, spelled out the importance of an autonomous and first-rate staff. He asserted that any erosion or abandonment of “the international civil service . . . might, if accepted by the Member nations, well prove to be the Munich of international cooperation.”<sup>7</sup> His clarion call did not ignore the reality that the international civil service exists to carry out decisions by member states. But Hammarskjöld fervently believed that UN officials could and should pledge allegiance to a larger collective good symbolized by the organization’s light-blue-covered *laissez-passer* rather than the narrowly perceived national interests of the countries that issue national passports in different colors.

Setting aside senior UN positions for officials approved by their home countries belies that integrity. Governments seek to ensure that their interests are defended inside secretariats, and many have even relied on officials for intelligence. From the outset, for example, the Security Council’s five permanent members have reserved the right to “nominate” (essentially select) nationals to fill the key posts in the secretary-general’s cabinet. The influx in the 1950s and 1960s of former colonies as new member states led them to clamor for “their” quota or fair share of the patronage opportunities, following the bad example set by major powers and other member states. The result was downplaying competence and exaggerating national origins as the main criterion for recruitment and promotion. Over the years, efforts to improve gender balance have resulted in other types of claims, as has the age profile of secretariats. Virtually all positions above the director level, and often many below as well, are the object of campaigns by governments, including the already rewarded permanent members of the Security Council.

How many people are in today’s Second UN? Professional and support staff number approximately 55,000 in the UN proper and in agencies created by the General Assembly, and 20,000 in the specialized agencies. This number includes neither temporary staff in peace operations (about 120,000 in 2008) nor the staff of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank group (another 15,000). These figures represent substantial growth from the approximately 500 employees in the UN’s first year at Lake Success and the peak total of 700 staff employed by the League of Nations.<sup>8</sup>

I emphasize neglected personnel issues because individuals matter, for good and for ill. The Second UN does more than simply carry out marching orders from governments. I thus disagree with three analysts who dismiss “the curious notion that the United Nations is an autonomous actor in world affairs that can and does take action independent of the will and wishes of the member governments.”<sup>9</sup> This obviously is a truism for resolutions, but there is considerably more room for creativity and initiative in numerous activities

than is commonly believed. UN officials present ideas to tackle problems, debate them formally and informally with governments, take initiatives, advocate for change, turn general decisions into specific programs, and implement them. They monitor progress and report to national officials and politicians gathering at intergovernmental conferences and in countries in which the UN is operating.

None of this should surprise. It would be a strange and impotent national civil service that took no initiatives or showed no leadership, simply awaiting detailed instructions from the government in power. UN officials are no different except that formal decisionmakers are government representatives in boards meeting quarterly, annually, or even once every two years. With the exception of the Security Council, decisionmaking and responsibility for implementation in most parts of the UN system, especially the development funds and specialized agencies, depend in large part on staff members as well as executive heads.

### **Problems in the International Civil Service**

The composition, recruitment, promotion, and retention—and ultimately the disappointing performance—of international civil servants are a substantial part of what ails the world organization. Though writers like Brian Urquhart properly have long called for a dramatic change in the selection process for the secretary-general and other senior positions,<sup>10</sup> the problems go much deeper. Moreover, the quality and impact of the staff are variables that can be altered far more easily, swiftly, and cheaply than such problems as state sovereignty, counterproductive North-South theater, and extreme decentralization that plague the organization. Examples from the main areas of UN activities highlight what is wrong and needs to be fixed.

#### *International Peace and Security:*

##### *The Oil-for-Food Scandal and Gender Imbalance*

The maintenance of international peace and security was the main justification for the UN's establishment. Many persons have served the world organization with distinction and heroism since 1945, including Sergio Vieira de Mello and twenty-one other colleagues who lost their lives in Baghdad in August 2003, and the seventeen UN staff who were killed in Algiers in December 2007. Like the 1961 death of Dag Hammarskjöld in a plane crash in the Congo, these high visibility sacrifices should not overshadow the less dramatic deaths of some 300 other civilian staff members<sup>11</sup> and almost 2,600 soldiers in UN service.<sup>12</sup> The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to UN peacekeepers in 1987 and to Kofi Annan and the secretariat in 2001 reflects this reality.

Valor should not, however, blind us to such serious problems as those encountered in administering the Oil-for-Food Programme (OFFP) and in at-

tempting to improve gender balance. The OFFP scandal was undoubtedly blown and specifically linked to American domestic politics. Member states were responsible for quietly approving the bulk of the monies that found their way into Saddam Hussein's coffers and conveniently overlooked leakage to such key US allies as Jordan and Turkey. Nonetheless, the sloppy general management of this politically visible and crucial assignment tarnished the organization's reputation.

The OFFP was established in 1995 to allow Iraq to sell oil and purchase humanitarian relief items—primarily food and medicine—for ordinary Iraqis who were suffering the devastating effects of sanctions imposed by the Security Council after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The OFFP was regularly criticized as corrupt and inefficient for failing to address the basic needs of Iraqis while lining the pockets of officials. In 2004 the secretary-general finally appointed an Independent Inquiry Committee headed by the former chairman of the US Federal Reserve, Paul Volcker. The 2005 report pointed to the "ethically improper" conduct of the program's executive director and allegations about misconduct on the part of Kofi Annan's son Kojo. Subsequent dismissals of staff and criminal proceedings have resulted.

The main disconcerting details, however, related to an inattentive management system that was outmoded, inept, and quite out of its depth in administering a program of that size and complexity. While evolving from a forum for global policy discussions to leading substantial military and civilian operations worldwide (with costs four times larger than the core budget), advances in communications technology and modern management techniques had seemingly bypassed the secretariat. Neither the people who had been hired to do the work nor the oversight systems in place were up to the job.

After years of hesitation by the General Assembly, Annan named the first deputy secretary-general in 1997. Rather than an all-purpose stand-in for the secretary-general, this deputy should have a distinctly different job description. He or she should be an authorized chief operating officer for the organization. In this way, the management buck would stop short of the secretary-general, who should remain the UN's chief politician, diplomat, and mediator. The Volcker team proposed that the deputy, like the secretary-general, be nominated by the Security Council. Such a formality would require amending the UN Charter, but the objective could and should be accommodated by having the Security Council vet and informally approve a nominee.

The preface to the Volcker report could have been written by a Beltway neocon or perhaps US President Barack Obama: "The inescapable conclusion from the Committee's work is that the United Nations Organization needs thoroughgoing reform—and it needs it urgently."<sup>13</sup> Volcker continued: "Willing cooperation and a sense of legitimacy cannot be sustained without a strong sense that the Organization has both competence and integrity. It is precisely those qualities that have been called into question."<sup>14</sup> Such problems are not

unusual but endemic; and “urgent” in UN parlance has a different meaning from any dictionary, since no significant change has followed.

One might have expected the UN to lead in integrating women into work compared with other institutions. The pace has been glacial. In her February 1946 “Open Letter to the Women of the World,” Eleanor Roosevelt as first chair of the Commission on Human Rights made a direct appeal to bring women into peace efforts. Some three decades later, at the first UN-sponsored world conference on women in 1975 in Mexico City, governments signed the Declaration of Mexico, which proclaimed: “Women must participate equally with men in the decisionmaking processes which help to promote peace at all levels.”<sup>15</sup> That same year, General Assembly Resolution 3519 (XXX) called upon women to participate in strengthening international peace and security.

However, the exclusion of women from the trenches and the bureaucracy continues at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As of April 2009, participation by women in UN peace operations was a paltry 2.7 percent.<sup>16</sup> Statistics about women elsewhere in the world organization also are disappointing. The representation of women in the professional and higher categories in the UN system is just over one-third. Only at the entry—P-1 and P-2—professional levels has gender balance been achieved. In the higher categories—D-1 and above—women only account for about a quarter of UN staff.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in an arena with much flexibility—the appointment of special representatives of the secretary-general (SRSGs)—the results are remarkably poor.<sup>18</sup> As then US ambassador Swanee Hunt bluntly summarized on the world organization’s sixtieth anniversary, “Two female SRSGs and one female Deputy SRSG in 26 peacekeeping missions is indefensible; a list of dozens of qualified women has sat on the Secretary General’s desk for years.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Human Rights: Individual Courage and Institutional Cowardice*

It seems justified to hold the international civil service to the highest standards of consistency because the UN has played an essential role in establishing human rights norms. The standard bearer should lead in implementing the standards set for others.

Following widespread allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct—including trading money and food for sex and engaging in sex with minors—on the part of UN troops in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in early 2005, the UN instituted systemwide reforms. When similar allegations surfaced later that same year in Burundi, Haiti, and Liberia, the UN was forced to acknowledge widespread abuse after downplaying problems. There is no UN discipline for troops because the command and control of UN troops are almost entirely in the hands of national commanders; and so reports of sexual misconduct by peacekeepers regularly continue to surface in spite of the “zero tolerance” policy adopted by Secretary-General Annan in 2006 and a UN-wide strategy to eradicate sexual abuse and exploitation agreed upon by

UN and NGO personnel following the High-level Conference on Eliminating Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

Moreover, two cases of unacceptable administrative reactions indicate a related lack of vigilance and appropriate support for staff from the UN's highest levels when visible senior personnel are caught in a vortex of sovereignty and human rights. Perhaps the most searing example was when the force commander of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda, Roméo Dallaire, made repeated requests for assistance and authorization to try, even symbolically, to halt the fast-paced genocide. His *Shake Hands with the Devil* recounts how his pleas to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) for more combat troops and logistical support were denied before the April 1994 genocide.<sup>20</sup> Arguing that a force of 5,000 could have prevented the genocide—probably an overly optimistic assessment<sup>21</sup>—Dallaire's experience illustrates how the lack of leadership among those in key positions thwarted decisive personnel action.

The calls by the UN special representative to Sudan, Jan Pronk, for help to halt the slow-motion genocide in Darfur met with similar silence from New York in 2004–2006. Governments and the Security Council were dragging their feet then as now, but should we not have expected outrage from UN headquarters when Khartoum expelled Pronk as *persona non grata* in late 2006? He had unflinchingly reported on the violence against civilians throughout his tenure and thus was accused of displaying “enmity to the Sudanese government and the armed forces” on his personal blog. Yet Annan recalled Pronk ahead of an expulsion deadline.<sup>22</sup> Failing to support him suggests an overly sensitive ear to the wishes of a sovereign state rather than to a special representative trying to hold the government in Khartoum responsible for its reprehensible violations of human rights subsequently highlighted by the International Criminal Court's March 2009 arrest warrant for President Omar Hassan al-Bashir.

All bureaucracies have their ups and downs, and the previous examples do not imply that there have not been numerous instances of outstanding behavior by UN officials. But the weight of the shackles of political correctness is a peculiar feature of the UN human rights machinery. What governments—be they major or minor powers—consider acceptable too often determines official policy. Such subservience reflects the outmoded concept of sovereignty without responsibility and builds a substantial structural flaw into the international civil service.

### *Sustainable Development: Politics Trumps Competence*

The UN's reputation and performance in economic and social development are continually degraded when political machinations take precedence over competence. For instance, Ban Ki-moon selected Sha Zukeng, a career Chinese diplomat who started as a translator and had virtually no exposure to development thinking and practice, as under-secretary-general to head the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

This was not an atypical appointment by the current secretary-general—his deputy's main asset is that she is a Tanzanian Muslim woman, and the main assets of the under-secretaries-general for political and humanitarian affairs were their closeness to George W. Bush and Tony Blair, respectively. Two of the most painful historical cases within the field of sustainable development concern the egregious incompetence of the director-general of the UN Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) from 1974 to 1987, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, and the director-general of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) from 1976 to 1993, Edouard Saouma. Some institutions are headed always by a national of the same country—for instance, the World Bank by a US citizen, and the IMF by a European—whereas others have positions that are rotated among regions, including the UN secretary-general. In M'Bow's and Saouma's cases, their elections were both because it was “Africa's and the Middle East's turn” at the helm of these organizations.

The result can be read in UNESCO's and FAO's decreased prominence in promoting development. During the period that M'Bow led UNESCO, rampant mismanagement resulted in continual budget deficits. His anti-Western bent—especially hostility toward a free press as called for in the New International Information Order—led the United States to withdraw in 1984, followed by the United Kingdom and Singapore in 1985. The withdrawals resulted in a major loss of funding for the organization, and many member countries breathed a sigh of relief when M'Bow announced that he would retire as director-general in 1987. Similarly, Saouma was lambasted by many, including the much-publicized criticism by Graham Hancock in *Lords of Poverty*. His corrupt and autocratic management practices, as well as his rigid control of public information during his seventeen-year tenure as FAO director-general, became an embarrassment.<sup>23</sup>

Again, while not gainsaying sterling contributions to development by such intellectual stalwarts as Raúl Prebisch and Helvi Siipila, and operational ones as Jim Grant and Sadako Ogata, the selection criterion for senior appointments increasingly has become nationality, sometimes mixed with gender, rather than a demonstrated experience to do the job. Nationalistic politics and patronage thus get in the way of selecting personnel and ultimately of optimum performance and impact. Students of international relations and organization can hardly expect appointments to be “above politics.” However, when purely political considerations so clearly trump competence and autonomy regarding the appointment of senior and more junior personnel, both member states and “We the peoples” suffer.

### **The Logic of Reinvigorating the Second UN**

The world organization's main expenditures (usually around 90 percent) are for its employees. These individuals are the UN's main strength and can be

redirected and reinvigorated. The most essential and doable challenge for Ban Ki-moon and his successor is changing the way that the Second UN and its chief executive do business, to go beyond the formulaic plea in the *World Summit's Outcome Document* "to enhance the effective management of the United Nations."<sup>24</sup> Whereas Susan Strange and Robert Cox would argue that views from inside can only be orthodox and sustain the status quo,<sup>25</sup> I have a different view. The international civil service, properly constituted, can make a difference—not only in field operations but also in research and policy formulation.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, autonomous officials can and should provide essential inputs into UN discussions, activities, advocacy, and monitoring.

Significant change and not abolition is required. James O. C. Jonah, an international civil servant for over three decades, including a stint as head of personnel, tells us:

It is a common practice of politicians to blame the civil service for their failures and inadequacies. More often than not, their citizens join them in complaining about the evils and sloppiness of bloated bureaucracies. The UN Secretariat is not immune to such criticisms, and over the years all and sundry have decried its waste and ineffectiveness. Despite these complaints about perceived defects, it would be inconceivable for member states to contemplate the dismantling of the Secretariat or parts of it. Surely, they would not abolish their own civil services despite their dissatisfaction?<sup>27</sup>

Knowing when to ignore standard bureaucratic operating procedures and to make waves is an essential part of effective leadership that can break down the UN system's bureaucratic barriers. For instance, former US Congressman and later UN Development Programme (UNDP) administrator Bradford Morse and Canadian businessman Maurice Strong broke the rules of the feudal system when they headed the temporary Office of Emergency Operations in Africa in the mid-1970s. Their own experience, reputations, and independence permitted them to override standard operating procedures just as Sir Robert Jackson had done on numerous occasions. He applied the military skills and hierarchy that he used for defending Malta and with the Middle East Supply Centre during World War II to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in postwar Europe, parts of Africa, and the Far East—what may have been the biggest UN relief operation ever—and then in the Bangladesh emergency in 1971.<sup>28</sup>

The High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change as well as the secretary-general proposed and the World Summit agreed to consider a one-time buyout to cut deadwood from the permanent staff.<sup>29</sup> No useful follow-up has resulted. Moreover, this long-standing proposal probably would not improve matters—enterprising and competent staff could take a payment and seek alternative employment while the real deadwood would remain. The more pertinent challenge is how to gather *new* wood for the secretariat and en-



sure that the best and brightest are hired and promoted and then move to other international jobs.

Recruitment should return to the idealistic origins in the League of Nations and early UN secretariats. Competence should be the highest consideration rather than geographical origins—the primary justification for cronyism and patronage. Quotas, if they continue to exist, should reflect regions, not countries. In a globalizing world, origins as well as current nationality are relevant. Moreover, the onus should be put on governments to nominate only their most professionally qualified and experienced candidates—not just someone with contacts who fancies life in New York or Paris. And in contrast to the take-it-or-leave-it approach of the posts “reserved” for particular nationalities, several candidates should be nominated with the final selection by UN administrators.

It is possible to balance quality, independence, and representation. Special recruitment efforts can be focused on underrepresented nationalities, including the expanded use of standardized and competitive examinations for new entrants, without compromising overall quality. As with efforts to achieve better gender balance, priority can be given to nationals of underrepresented regions by casting the net widely enough to draw fully qualified candidates from those backgrounds but without resorting to cronyism. It is a fallacy that quality must suffer while moving toward more diversity. The real requirement is to limit outside influence and the pressures for patronage—which come from donors, friends, and family members of candidates from developed and Third World countries alike.

The beginning of a term for a secretary-general is often a good moment for shaking up the Second UN. Kofi Annan instituted significant managerial and technical improvements shortly after assuming the mantle in 1997 and again at the beginning of his second term in 2002—just as Boutros Boutros-Ghali had in 1992. Ban Ki-moon made no such visible effort to jump-start his administration. The next secretary-general should make reinvigorating the international civil service a signature of her or his administration.

The clash between South and North at the end of Annan’s term made it impossible to consider sensible proposals to place more authority over budgetary and personnel matters in the secretary-general’s hands. A relatively small number of countries in the global South are reluctant to move power away from the General Assembly, where by virtue of their numbers they call the shots. If more discretionary authority over personnel and power of the purse were placed in the UN administration, so the argument goes, it would be more subject to Western (and especially US) influence. The UK’s minister with a portfolio for UN affairs, Mark Malloch Brown, noted with some puzzlement, “Taking a demotion to come over from UNDP to be Kofi Annan’s chief of staff was a much bigger step down than I anticipated. . . . I found when it came to management and budgetary matters, he was less influential than I had been.”<sup>30</sup>

Increased discretionary authority over budget and personnel decisions for the secretary-general would be in the interests of developing countries whose populations and governments benefit most from UN operations. If the United Nations is to meet new and old challenges and be accountable, additional authority and responsibility at the top is required.

### **Specific Improvements for the Second UN**

The residue from the Volcker Commission and sexual scandals are still very much with us, and there has been no implementation of *Investing in the Future United Nations*, the 2006 comprehensive report about personnel from the by-then lame-duck secretary-general, Kofi Annan. Sensible suggestions, like those in numerous other reports, remain in filing cabinets. It would be useful to explore experiments that worked and might be applied more generally to improve the Second UN.

#### *International Peace and Security:*

##### *Disciplining Peacekeepers and Resolution 1325*

The problems discussed earlier—disciplining soldiers and better representation of women in peace operations—illustrate how slow change can be even after decisions are made. In response to allegations that emerged in 2004 of sexual misconduct among peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the secretary-general invited Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid al-Hussein, then permanent representative of Jordan to the United Nations and currently its ambassador to Washington, to act as his Advisor on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN Peacekeeping Personnel. His hard-hitting 2005 report made a number of recommendations, including standard rules about sexual exploitation and abuse to apply to all peacekeeping personnel and the establishment of a professional investigative process to examine alleged abuses.<sup>31</sup>

The General Assembly adopted a “comprehensive strategy.” DPKO established conduct and discipline units to prevent, track, and punish gender-based crimes. The DPKO Conduct and Discipline Unit in 2006 joined with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF, and UNDP to host a high-level conference. As a result, the “Statement of Commitment on Eliminating Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN and non-UN Personnel” contains ten commitments to “facilitate rapid implementation of existing UN and non-UN standards relating to sexual exploitation and abuse.”<sup>32</sup>

The dominant national command and control structures within UN operations impose limits for international accountability. Usually, the worst that happens is for the soldiers in question to be sent home. Given the symbolic and actual importance of peace operations—in 2009, approximately 100,000 soldiers and 20,000 police and civilians, costing some \$8 billion—tougher measures would be essential steps toward professionalism. UN accountability and

punishment for individuals, rather than the “boys will be boys” attitude, certainly would enhance the UN’s reputation and performance.

The world organization continues to struggle with underrepresentation of women at senior levels of the organization. In 2000, building on the momentum of the Millennium Declaration, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, and the 1997 creation of the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, the Security Council approved Resolution 1325. This marked a symbolic turning point in the UN’s commitment to gender mainstreaming and addressing the impact of war on women as well as to appointing more women at all levels. A 2006 assessment of the resolution’s implementation noted, however, that women remained underrepresented in senior positions at the UN, with still only one female special representative and one envoy.<sup>33</sup>

Ironically, certain member countries have done better and made conscious and public gestures to appoint women to decisionmaking positions in government. Liberia, led by Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf—the first democratically elected female head of state in Africa and a former international civil servant—has appointed women ministers of defense, finance, sports and youth, justice, and commerce, as well as chief of police and president of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The United Nations should follow her lead.

#### *Human Rights: “Outside-Insiders,” Rotation, and Contracts*

Using more outsiders, insisting on field rotation, and issuing fewer permanent contracts are desirable and plausible measures to improve the quality of personnel working on human rights and other issues as well. A considerable constraint on UN leadership is the status of full-time employees of the international civil service because member states are bound to be offended by human rights advocacy. With their jobs and family security on the line, officials often avoid not only robust public confrontation but also even one of a more gentle variety. Self-censorship is rife. Making no waves is usually a key to a successful career.

One possible solution is based on work on internally displaced persons, an official with a UN title and privileges but based outside without a salary.<sup>34</sup> Francis Deng’s mandate (1992–2004) as the representative of the secretary-general was intertwined with the Project on Internal Displacement (PID) directed by him and Roberta Cohen at the Brookings Institution—and a similar arrangement has continued with Walter Kälin since 2004. The conceptualization of internal displacement was a notable contribution to contemporary thinking about international relations, in particular by reframing state sovereignty as responsibility. In addition, *Guidelines on Internal Displacement*, an important piece of soft law, was agreed; and UN institutions and NGOs established special programs for this ignored category of war victim.

Deng had a foot in two camps—taking advantage of being within the in-

tergovernmental system of the United Nations *and* outside it. He made good use of having both official *and* private platforms. Richard Haass summed up the advantages of such an arrangement: “Many of us spend a lot of time figuring out how to get ideas into policy-makers’ hands, but Francis had a ready-made solution.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, the PID’s base at a public policy think tank working in tandem with universities provided a respectable distance from governments and from predictable multilateral diplomatic pressure, processes, and procedures. Moreover, a wide range of private and public donors expect the project’s activities to extend the outer limits of what passes for conventional wisdom in mainstream diplomatic circles.

Although being on the “outside” has disadvantages—no guaranteed budget or access being among them—the role of outside-insider or inside-outsider offers advantages that should be replicated for other controversial issues when independent research is required, institutional protective barriers are high, normative gaps exist, and political hostility is widespread. More part-time senior officials pushing from independent bases outside the United Nations would strengthen policy formulation processes within the UN system, where a rule-breaking culture is in short supply.

Many students encounter the world organization through a tour at or pictures of headquarters in New York or Geneva or of specialized agencies like UNESCO in Paris or FAO in Rome. But the bulk of the UN’s operations are in developing countries. A problem for staff morale and competence over the years has been that promotions are mainly the result of work and networks in pleasant headquarters settings, whereas the real challenges lie with delivery of services in the field. And the world organization is increasingly called upon to react to major crises by sending staff quickly to emergencies.

However, rewarding better fieldwork and applying a flexible personnel policy to meet the unforeseen, but expectable, demands of new crises poses real but not insurmountable challenges. In 1982, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees implemented the first formal rotation policy in order to promote burden-sharing among staff members and to ensure that all share in the postings to hardship duty stations where families are not permitted. All international professional staff are subject to rotation, a practice that the Joint Inspection Unit has cited as a model.<sup>36</sup> UNICEF and UNDP also now have mandatory mobility and staff rotation policies; and similar ones should be a requirement across the UN system.

The mandatory rotation policy creates a sense of equity among staff members and ensures that they are exposed to field problems and acquire the management skills necessary in future emergencies. The secretary-general’s 2006 *Investing in the United Nations* identified promotion and mobility among staff as key strategies. He also proposed that the majority of international professional posts be designated as rotational and that staff mobility between headquarters and the field be implemented as a matter of priority, describing this

wrenching effort as “a radical overhaul of the United Nations Secretariat—its rules, its structure, and its systems and culture.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed.

The League of Nations instituted permanent contracts, a practice continued by the United Nations, in order to protect staff from government pressure and arbitrary dismissal. Permanent contracts have the same justification as university tenure, and both have critics who argue that removing the possibility of being fired can also lead to coasting. There remains a widespread perception that such contractual arrangements do not stimulate but rather retard productivity because they impede hiring or retaining risk takers.

During Kofi Annan’s decade at the helm, permanent contracts were increasingly phased out. Three types of contracts replaced them: short-term, up to a maximum of six months to meet specific short-term requirements; fixed-term, renewable up to a maximum of five years; and continuing, to be granted to staff who have completed a fixed-term contract and met the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity.<sup>38</sup>

Though organizational memory may be enhanced by veteran officials, the number of persons with “continuing” contracts (basically the equivalent of “permanent”) should be kept to a minimum. Currently about 13 percent,<sup>39</sup> they should be even fewer and reserved for a very limited number of administrators and avoided for substantive jobs, especially within controversial areas. Within the human rights field, in particular, an argument could be made that virtually no one should have a long-term contract. If a staff member, especially a senior one, were doing a job correctly, many member states should be irritated and be asking for his or her head. Indeed, human rights officials with fixed assignments would provide an incentive to use public shaming to maximum effect and make a reputation in order to secure future employment in a government or an NGO.

There are more than enough qualified persons worldwide to fill UN posts for fixed periods. The possible loss of bureaucratic memory created by turnover would be outweighed by the benefits of attracting more idealistic and motivated personnel. Moreover, if mistakes are made in selection, as always is the case in any organization, the damage would be limited to five years. Of especial relevance is the guaranteed influx of younger and hungry staff anxious to make their mark and as a first step in a career in international affairs, rather than seeking the guaranteed benefits of a life-long UN position.

### *Sustainable Development: Ideas and the Next Generation*

The bulk of the UN system’s staff and resources are devoted to activities to foster sustainable development. Whether one believes glasses to be half full or half empty, the world body’s efforts have contributed to genuine advances in human welfare since 1945, and there are ways to ensure that the liquid level rises. Two possible solutions suggest themselves for what ails the Second UN that are drawn from this arena: better ideas and younger staff.

Ideas matter, for good and for ill; and so it is instructive to recall John Maynard Keynes's aphorism about so-called practical men and women who have no time to read but often are acting on the basis of theories from dead "scribblers" like the readers of this journal. He wrote that "the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood."<sup>40</sup>

Powerful minds are essential to the UN's performance. Intellectual contributions by such sharp minds as Hans Singer and W. Arthur Lewis (and eight other Nobel laureates in economics) are part of the world organization's history, to which can be added the more recent *Human Development Report*. Since 1990 this UNDP-subsidized report has put forth an annual unorthodox view of people-centered development. Participation, empowerment, equity, and justice are placed on an equal footing with the market and growth.

Mahbub ul Haq, the Pakistani UN economist whose vision animated the *Human Development Report*, died in 1998, but his approach continues.<sup>41</sup> A powerful tool consisting of three composite indicators for ranking countries for their performance on the Human Development Index, remains: longevity, educational attainment, and access to a decent standard of living. In 2008, Iceland was number one, the United States was in fifteenth place, and Central African Republic and Sierra Leone brought up the rear.

As might be imagined, calling a spade a shovel in numerical terms does not always make fans among governments that rank less well than they thought they should. As an outsider becoming a UN insider who insisted upon autonomy, ul Haq and others associated with the effort have taken political flak as well as resisted pressure from governments irritated with embarrassing publicity. Some resent that poorer neighbors get higher ratings because they make sensible decisions about priorities—for example, devoting limited resources to education and health instead of weapons. Some UNDP staff members, including its administrator William Draper, were keen on the approach, but the technical details were the work of minds of the quintessential outsider aided by scholars. Indeed, many governments disputed the appropriateness of Draper's approach using their financial contributions to commission research that produced embarrassing comparative data. Some rudely grumbled about "biting the hand that feeds." In spite of repeated pressures to halt it or tone it down, UNDP has continued to subsidize and guarantee the independence of the team's work.

At all levels of the world organization, persons capable of such intellectual leadership should be on hand. And this is far more likely to come from the minds of fixed-term officials, specialized consultants, and academics on leave rather than permanent civil servants whose careers are dependent on reactions from superiors and governments, and who may not stay abreast of the literature. It should be possible to arrange for regular exchanges with university and think-tank personnel around the world, which would benefit secretariats while

outsiders are in residence, and also benefit the research agendas of analysts once they return. In short, it is necessary to strengthen the institutional capacity to generate and disseminate original ideas, to fortify mechanisms that ensure creative thinking.

In the myriad of proposals for UN reform over the years, none has stressed the vital intellectual dimensions and reasons to invest in analytical capabilities. Honest evaluations are prerequisites for planning better, developing measurements of performance, and holding personnel accountable. The critical ingredient is up-to-date and well-grounded analysis. And producing, refining, and disseminating digestible research better prepares the United Nations for challenges, known and unknown.

Specific measures to strengthen this aspect of the Second UN are not pie-in-the-sky aspirations. “Track II” reforms do not require constitutional changes or even additional resources but vision and courage by the secretary-general and other heads of agencies. Two come to mind. First, all parts of the UN system should acknowledge that contributions to ideas, thinking, analysis, and monitoring in their areas of expertise should be a major emphasis of their work. An environment that encourages and rewards creative thinking along with first-rate staff is essential; and no compromise can be justified in ensuring the highest standards of competence and professional qualifications. Second, the mobilization of more financial support for research, analysis, and policy exploration should be a top priority. Not only are longer-term availability and flexibility necessary, but donors also should attach no strings in order to guarantee autonomy.

It is essential to attract young qualified staff. A 2000 report by the Joint Inspection Unit, for instance, identified the need to address “work-life” or “work-family” issues.<sup>42</sup> UNDP in the 1960s launched the Junior Professional Officer (JPO) program, which provides some 13 percent of UNDP’s international staff.<sup>43</sup> JPOs are selected and sponsored (i.e., fully funded) by their governments to work for a fixed period of time—usually two to three years. The program has become the key entry point for an international career and has been adopted by numerous other UN agencies, including UNICEF, UNHCR, and the World Food Programme. Other agencies have adopted similar programs under different titles—e.g., the International Monetary Fund’s Economist Program and the Asia Development Bank’s Young Professional Program.

There are no silver bullets—indeed, some observers criticize JPO programs as jump-starts for the careers of nationals from wealthy countries. Shortcomings could be overcome, and in some cases have been, by funding individuals from developing countries. Essential, however, is finding the means to lower the average age at the professional entry level (currently thirty-seven) and the average age of the secretariat as a whole (currently forty-six) over the next five years when at least 15 percent of the staff reach retirement age.

Adlai Stevenson once joked that work at the United Nations involves

“protocol, Geritol and alcohol.”<sup>44</sup> Little can be done to reduce diplomatic procedures and the consumption of fermented beverages, but sclerosis in the Secretariat guarantees mediocrity. And the world organization should find ways to infuse continually new blood.

### **Conclusion: The Way Forward**

The international civil service is not the UN’s most virulent illness—the myopia of Westphalian member states wins that award—but the crucial health of the Second UN could and should be improved. Luckily, the world organization’s residual legitimacy and the ideal of international cooperation keep a surprisingly large number of competent people committed to its work. The likes of Kofi Annan and Margaret Joan Anstee indicate that autonomy and integrity are not unrealistic expectations of international civil servants who are recruited as junior officials without government approval and have distinguished careers. The fact that both Ralph Bunche and Brian Urquhart joined the secretariat originally on loan from national government service also suggests that government clearance need not entail subservience to national perspectives.<sup>45</sup> The potential is far from realized.

In a series of follow-up reports for *Investing in the United Nations*, Kofi Annan lamented the “silos” that characterize staff appointments and promotions and spelled out his back-to-the-future “vision of an independent international civil service with the highest standards of performance and accountability. The Secretariat of the future will be an integrated, field-oriented, operational organization.”<sup>46</sup> The so-called Four Nations (Chile, South Africa, Sweden, and Thailand) Initiative (4NI) sought to come up with consensus proposals for improved governance and management of the secretariat. Though it originally did not have human resources on the agenda, that subject necessarily “came to the fore” during conversations with other member states. Predictably, the 4NI expressed concern with “geographical representation,” but the main thrust of its 2007 recommendations pointed to “merit-based” recruitment and the use of “expert hearings” for the most senior positions that “should not be monopolized by nationals of any state or group of states.”<sup>47</sup>

The stereotype of a bloated and lumbering administration overlooks many talented and dedicated individuals; but the composition, recruitment, promotion, and retention policies certainly constitute a fundamental but fixable part of what ails the world body. Successes usually reflect personalities and serendipity rather than conscious recruitment of the best persons for the right reasons and institutional structures designed to foster collaboration and maximize output. Staff costs account for the lion’s share of the UN’s budget. People are not only the principal cost item but also represent a potential resource whose composition, productivity, and culture could change, and change quickly. It is time to reinvigorate the international civil service.



## Notes

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1. Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 214. The capstone volume is Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Other details are available at [www.unhistory.org](http://www.unhistory.org). Jolly gave the Holmes Lecture in 1996.

2. This ACUNS swan song revisits my first book and doctoral dissertation (done under the supervision of my dear friend and mentor Leon Gordenker, who gave the first Holmes Lecture in 1990) along with my most recent book (on which this article draws). See *International Bureaucracy: An Analysis of the Operation of Functional and Global International Secretariats* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1975); and *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2009).

3. These pillars provide the framework for the UN textbook by Thomas G. Weiss, David P. Forsythe, Roger A. Coate, and Kelly-Kate Pease, *The United Nations and Changing World Politics*, 6th ed. (Boulder: Westview, 2010).

4. Inis L. Claude Jr., *Swords Into Plowshares: The Problems and Prospects of International Organization* (New York: Random House, 1956), and "Peace and Security: Prospective Roles for the Two United Nations," *Global Governance* 2, no. 3 (1996): 289–298. See also Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, and Richard Jolly, "The 'Third' United Nations," *Global Governance* 15, no. 1 (2009): 123–142.

5. Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *The International Secretariat: A Great Experiment in International Administration* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945).

6. See, for example, Leon Gordenker, *The UN Secretary-General and Secretariat*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010).

7. Dag Hammarskjöld, "The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact," lecture delivered to Congregation at Oxford University, 30 May 1961, reprinted by Clarendon Press, Oxford, quotes at 329 and 349. Available at [www.un.org/depts/dhl/dag/docs/internationalcivilservant.pdf](http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/dag/docs/internationalcivilservant.pdf).

8. Thant Myint-U and Amy Scott, *The UN Secretariat: A Brief History (1945–2006)* (New York: International Peace Academy, 2007), pp. 126–128.

9. Donald J. Puchala, Katie Verlin Laatikainen, and Roger A. Coate, *United Nations Politics: International Organization in a Divided World* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), p. x. Puchala gave the Holmes Lecture in 1995 and Coate in 2008.

10. See, for example, Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers, *A World in Need of Leadership: Tomorrow's United Nations* (Uppsala, Sweden: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1990).

11. An astounding 291 UN civilian staff members have died as a result of malicious acts in the period since reporting began in 1992 through July 2008. *Safety and Security of Humanitarian Personnel and Protection of UN Personnel*, Report of the Secretary-General, UN Doc. A/63/305, 18 August 2008.

12. Fatalities of 2,591 resulted from 1948 through 31 May 2009 as compiled by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, available at [www.un.org/Depts/dpko/fatalities/StatsByYear%201.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/fatalities/StatsByYear%201.pdf).

13. Paul A. Volcker, Richard J. Goldstone, and Mark Pieth, *The Management of the Oil-for-Food Programme*, vol. 1, 7 September 2005, pp. 4–5, available at <http://www.iic-offp.org>.

14. Paul A. Volcker, "Introduction," in a summary version of the principal findings done by two staff members, Jeffrey A. Meyer and Mark G. Califano, *Good Intentions Corrupted: The Oil-for-Food Scandal and the Threat to the UN* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), pp. xii, x.

15. Quoted by Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 72.

16. There were 2,474 women out of a total 92,655 peacekeepers worldwide. See DPKO, "Gender Statistics by Mission," 30 April 2009, available at [www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/gender/2009gender/apr09.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/gender/2009gender/apr09.pdf).

17. OSAGI, "The Status of Women in the United Nations System and Secretariat," 6 October 2008, available at [www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/factsheet%206%20oct%2008.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/factsheet%206%20oct%2008.pdf).

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19. Swanee Hunt's Remarks to the Security Council on UN Resolution 1325 and the Status of Women's Inclusion in Peace Processes Worldwide at the Initiative for Inclusive Security, 25 October 2005, available at [www.huntalternatives.org/download/253\\_10\\_25\\_05\\_hunt\\_haf\\_statement\\_to\\_un\\_security\\_council\\_on\\_resolution\\_1325.pdf](http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/253_10_25_05_hunt_haf_statement_to_un_security_council_on_resolution_1325.pdf).

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21. Alan J. Kuperman, *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001).

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24. *2005 World Summit Outcome*, UN Doc. A/60/1, 24 October 2005, par. 163.

25. See, for example, Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Robert C. Cox, *The New Realism: Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). Cox gave the Holmes Lecture in 1992.

26. See Ramesh Thakur and Thomas G. Weiss, "United Nations 'Policy': An Argument with Three Illustrations," *International Studies Perspectives* 10, no. 2 (2009): 18–35. Thakur gave the Holmes Lecture in 2005.

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28. James Gibson, *Jacko, Where Are You Now?* (Richmond, UK: Parsons Publishing, 2006), pp. 247–280.

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36. *Staff Mobility in the United Nations*, prepared by Even Fontaine Ortiz and Guangting Tang, Joint Inspection Unit, UN Doc. JIU/REP/2006/7, Geneva, 2006.

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38. *Human Resources Management Reform: Report of the Secretary General—Addendum: Contractual Arrangements*, UN Doc. A/59/263/Add.1, 9 September 2004.

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41. See Craig Murphy, *The United Nations Development Programme: A Better Way?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Murphy gave the Holmes Lecture in 2004. See also Khadija Haq and Richard Ponzio, eds., *Pioneering the Human Development Revolution: An Intellectual Biography of Mahbub ul Haq* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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43. See [www.jposc.org](http://www.jposc.org).

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