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**UN Reform Commissions:  
Is Anyone Listening?**

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## Background

It is instructive, if not always reassuring, for those of us in the business of producing ideas and policy proposals to check from time to time whether anyone is listening. Are we making a difference in terms of influencing policymaking at the United Nations and/or in member state capitals? If we learn more from our failures than from our successes, then I am unusually well qualified to speak on this topic. In twenty years with the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA), I was involved in well more than my share of blue ribbon panels and binational reports on how the UN could do its job better or the US could be a more constructive player in multilateral fora. Most of these were quite respectable pieces of work, and at times even innovative. Though widely regarded as influential, our reports hit the mark in terms of policy implementation only occasionally and then not always with the ideas we valued the most highly.

From 1995 to 1997, I backstopped much of the reform effort at the UN, including with the Strengthening Working Group in the General Assembly, with Razali Ismail when he was President of the Assembly and pushed Security Council reform, and with the Secretary-General's team in helping to assemble the 1997 reform package. My group of researchers at the UN produced an enormous compendium of reform proposals from inside and outside the UN, literally thousands of recommendations, for use by the member states and secretariat officials. Yet, again, only a handful of these ideas found their way into the inter-governmental deliberations and even fewer were adopted. So, were most of these authors and commissions simply wasting their breath espousing lost causes to a disinterested and deaf audience of jaded and narrow-minded policymakers?

## Standards of Success

Before jumping to conclusions, or jumping off the policy wonk bandwagon altogether, some perspective would help on what would constitute a reasonable set of standards for success. Would a mid-level bureaucrat in Washington, Moscow, London, or Beijing have much higher expectations for getting his or her pet policy innovations adopted as national policy? Probably not. Quite simply, there are relatively few opportunities for policy change, particularly when this would have to entail institutional reform, and large numbers of individuals and groups attempting to push this or that idea for change. Many of these suggestions, of course, contradict what others are espousing. This is true in national capitals, and even truer in multilateral organizations with hundreds of member states, dozens of institutional actors, and endless agendas. Even if one-tenth of the thoughtful and relevant reform ideas were adopted, the result would be institutional chaos at the UN. It can only absorb so much at one time. The politics of change can be very sensitive, especially in the UN, and it wouldn't take long for too many cooks to spoil the reform broth.

I would suggest three standards for success:

- 1) Did the report affect how policymakers, opinion leaders, and publics think about an issue, weigh policy options, or prioritize interests and values?;
- 2) Did the report set forth fresh concepts and proposals for change and/or reform, even if they were not achieved in the short run?; and
- 3) Did the report spur the process of change, speed the ripening process, help build constituencies for change, or expand the boundaries of what is widely considered to be feasible or reasonable? If, as Secretary-General Kofi Annan has declared,

reform is a process, not an event, then perhaps one should not assess a report's impact until a decade after its release.

Of course, it is gratifying to see one's proposals expeditiously translated into national or UN policy. But that doesn't assure that they will prove to be sustainable or ultimately successful in producing the kinds of results one had anticipated. Given the number of times the UN has been "reformed," for example, it would seem that many of the reforms did not prove out over time. And should our goal be to get our proposals adopted or to achieve real results in terms of ultimate effectiveness? It may be better, in that sense, to have spurred a process of reflection and negotiation that in the end produced somewhat different but more sustainable policy innovations.

### Lessons

Looking back at past commissions and reports, what lessons might be derived about what works and why? The lessons enumerated here are drawn from three exercises in which I participated in recent years: 1) a review conducted for the MacArthur Foundation and the Commission on Global Governance on the impact of its report, *Our Global Neighborhood*; 2) a study of a number of projects, undertaken for the Better World Fund and the UN Foundation and published as "Blue Ribbon Power: Independent Commissions and UN Reform" in the inaugural issue of *International Studies Perspectives* (2000); and 3) a 2001 review for the Ford Foundation of eight reform projects it supported between 1985 and 1996. Based on these research efforts, a dozen lessons come to mind:

- 1) In every successful case, the project had committed leadership and a quality staff. Views differ as to which is more crucial, but it clearly helps to have both.

- 2) In terms of getting high-level and/or sustained attention, nothing counts like follow-up, follow-up, and follow-up. The release of a “final” report should be around the mid-point of the project, not its culmination.
- 3) It is very helpful – though not a prerequisite – to have the project based at an institution that is prepared and equipped to carry the report’s key proposals forward as part of its ongoing agenda. If a particular government is ready to carry the ball over an extended period, then that almost always helps as well.
- 4) Careful planning and preparatory work is needed before a commission is formed or a project is launched. This is when the biggest mistakes are made. This would seem obvious, but it is remarkable how many policy projects are launched on the equivalent of a wish and a prayer. Enthusiasts, in particular, should be encouraged to stop and ask themselves candidly a) whether a market exists for the product they intend to produce and b) whether their commission or study will truly bring added value to the subject.
- 5) The best reports have both vision and practical proposals. Too many groups try to get away with having one or the other.
- 6) It is critical to have a sober understanding of the political and institutional realities that will define the context within which the project and report will be seen.
- 7) It helps, sometimes greatly, to line up potentially supportive constituencies early on. This gives them a sense of ownership and an incentive to help with the marketing and salesmanship.
- 8) Likewise, it pays to reach out to those who will be key to actually implementing your proposals, even if they are not initially enthusiastic. Again, such a dialogue

should be opened at an early stage and maintained throughout the project.

Whatever else you do, take care to avoid surprises – don't drop the report on the desk of policymakers and expect them to be taken with the brilliance of your ideas and the persuasiveness of your prose.

- 9) In most cases, the process of getting one's ideas absorbed by policymakers does not seem to follow either a top-down or bottom-up model. Rather, much of this osmosis seems to flow horizontally, from one side of the process to the other, as commissioners or key staff move laterally into positions of policy responsibility. While much of the focus in organizing panels tends to be directed to distinguished former officials – which may be wise for credibility reasons – it is often the future policymakers who actually carry the ideas forward into policy circles. So remember to think about “futures” as well as “formers.”
- 10) Big ideas are exciting, of course, but it helps to have some smaller or less innovative ones as well. Having some readily achievable proposals may boost the credibility of a report, as well as the morale of its authors.
- 11) It almost always pays to be flexible, to look for openings and niches, twists and turns both in what commissioners may be thinking over time and in the potential environment in which their ideas will be thrust. What will the market bear at any point? Which ideas might be held in reserve for more propitious times ahead? It is striking, in this regard, how often reports are remembered for ideas or proposals that may have seemed rather secondary to the authors at the time.
- 12) It may well be true that money can't buy you love, and it is certainly true that money cannot guarantee a good report. We have seen more than one example

where the expensive promotion of a second-rate report has been doubly embarrassing. However, it is also a fact of life that commissions do not get very far without sufficient funding and staff. Poorly funded projects cannot take advantage of unexpected opportunities, adjust to unforeseen contingencies, or – and this can be fatal – do proper follow-up.

Most of these lessons, it would seem, are little more than common sense. Yet it is remarkable how often they are overlooked in planning or carrying out high-profile panel projects.

### Missing Links

In assessing the independent UN-reform studies over the past 15 or so years, four shortcomings recur so often as to qualify as missing links. As these four points suggest, the shortcomings of these efforts generally lay more with what they did not attempt than with what they did.

One, there was a repeated failure to identify, understand, or plan for overcoming the obstacles that could be expected to interfere with achieving the desired policy outcomes. Perhaps it is just too difficult or out-of-character for advocates to accept that others may not share either their sense of urgency or their enthusiasm for a particular course of action. The very process of selling their project proposals to funding sources (and to potential panelists) may lead both to over-heated expectations and to believing one's own rhetoric. In any case, while I have seen many thoughtful expositions of ways to make the UN a better place, I have yet to come across a single cogent analysis of how to move the political and bureaucratic processes to get all of these glorious ideas implemented.

Two, though a few projects did far better than the rest, in general these efforts were plagued by weak or insufficient follow-up. This was especially true when it came to lobbying legislators and policymakers in major capitals. Effective follow-up tends to be expensive, time-consuming, and staff intensive. Someone needs to be in residence over an extended period of time, whether it is an individual associated with the project, a professional hired for that purpose, or a volunteer who is simply sympathetic to it. Funders, moreover, are more likely to call for effective follow-up than to fund it.

Three, in almost every case, the project leaders failed to establish effective and sustainable communication links with Washington policymakers. True, reaching key figures in the US capital or UN-related issues can be a frustrating exercise, but usually little effort was made in this direction and, tellingly, strategies were not even formulated for involving US policymakers. At times, there seemed to be a distinct preference for bypassing or ignoring what were assumed to be political obstacles in Washington. Not surprisingly, the latter tended to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Four, given these predilections, it should come as no surprise to learn that very few conservative voices were included in the various commissions or staff. By and large, these projects have facilitated the exchange of ideas among confirmed internationalists. Therefore, with a few exceptions, most of these reports spent relatively little time addressing larger questions of strategy, history, priorities, or the relationship between national sovereignty and global governance, since it was assumed that there was – or should be – a consensus on core goals and principles. Too often, however, it has been differences over these fundamental questions that have interfered with the implementation of designs for stronger international institutions.

## Examples

Before commenting on a few specific projects, two caveats are in order. One, it is awkward to provide a candid public assessment of any of these efforts, since they all involved individuals for whom I have great respect and in many cases with whom I have worked in the past. Two, evaluations may well change over time. Sometimes reports that make a big initial splash due to good PR work, the prominence of the personalities associated with them, or apt timing, do not ultimately enjoy a long shelf life. The opposite can also be true. Some proposals may not appear ripe when first released, but then gain relevance and credibility over time, as political and contextual conditions evolve. The gestation period for a significant reform proposal, for example, may be a decade or longer.

These caveats aside, it is worth pondering why certain initiatives that had a great deal going for them appear to have fallen below expectations or at least achieved rather uneven results. Four over the past decade come to mind, in part because they were undertaken with the encouragement, even in several cases the endorsement, of the UN Secretary-General and had not only the funding, but also the active involvement, of one or more major foundations.

One. In 1993, at the behest of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (or at least of his staff on his behalf), the Ford Foundation convened a blue ribbon panel to study the perennial problem of UN funding. The group, ably led by Shiguro Ogata and Paul Volcker, was composed of top-flight former finance ministers from around the world, who reportedly worked together very smoothly and amiably. They produced their report, *Financing an Effective UN*, in less than six months. It was a model of brevity, accessibility, and common sense. While the report was generally well received, however, certain recommendations apparently were not to the liking of top UN officials and others to key member states. The follow-up efforts were relatively modest,

especially in capitals, where the report stirred relatively little interest. Relatively few of the recommendations, however sensible, were ever implemented.

In this case, there appears to have been two basic flaws in planning the study. One, it had been assumed that the common voice of respected financial officials would be sufficiently authoritative to overcome whatever political obstacles had been in the way of a reliable system for financing the UN. Political figures were excluded from the panel to permit a relatively quick and broad consensus. Financing the UN, however, has always been an acutely political issue and national decision-makers wanted to keep it that way. Two, it seems that no market testing was done beforehand. Other than a smattering of officials in the UN and in sympathetic missions, there was relatively little interest in solving this “problem,” so even a distinguished and cogent report got little play.

Two. Two years later, the UN would mark its fiftieth anniversary. Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, among others, urged the preparation of a high-level and independent study of the future of the world body and of ways it might be strengthened. Again the UN turned to the Ford Foundation, which in turn provided Yale University with a major grant to organize and oversee the project. The two well-respected institutions, working in close collaboration, chose Moeen Qureshi and Richard von Weizsäcker to head a geographically balanced commission with strong intellectual and policy credentials. It was decided, however, that to get fresh ideas the group should not include figures with too much UN experience.

In retrospect, this either was a misjudgment or one that was carried out too rigorously and uniformly. The panel’s final report, *The UN in Its Second Half Century*, presented a well crafted, concise, and compelling account of the challenges before the world body. But its recommendations, while often original and innovative, did not show a good feel for how the

organization operates or what would fly politically. With the emphasis on brevity, moreover, several of the more innovative proposals were not explained adequately and no supporting papers or materials were provided. The timing might have been ideal – since the member states and the secretariat were just launching the broadest reform debate in the history of the UN – but the report gained little attention from the membership and was virtually ignored by the Secretary-General who had been so instrumental in its launch.

Three. By far the most costly of all of the projects reviewed was that of the Carnegie Corporation of New York on conflict prevention. In part this was due to the scope of the work undertaken, which included the commissioning and publication of a series of individually authored papers in addition to the report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. Unlike the two reports noted above that may have erred on the side of brevity, the Commission, itself an unusually large group, produced a final report of over two hundred pages in 1997. Led by two widely respected internationalists, David Hamburg and Cy Vance, the Commission sought both to underline the importance of prevention as a way of thinking about policy choices and to put forward specific recommendations for the UN and member states. The group appears to have done much better on the former than the latter tack.

Aided by an ample outreach budget and enthusiastic co-chairmen, the prevention mantra became a regular component of the UN's vocabulary under Secretary-General Kofi Annan, one of the report's biggest boosters. Yet Boutros-Ghali had emphasized prevention in his *Agenda for Peace* report five years before and it was already widely accepted in both scholarship and policymaking that prevention was highly preferable to reaction after conflict had already broken out. Whether the Carnegie report and its supporters have provided sufficient guidance in terms of specific policy steps that would translate the concept of prevention into workable, effective

policymaking remains to be seen. Like the other reports being reviewed, *Preventing Deadly Conflict* failed to reach out convincingly to more conservative figures or to Washington policymakers. Many in the academic and policy research communities, however, benefited from the related funding undertaken by the Carnegie Corporation, giving this project a much wider research legacy than the others.

Four. Prior to the Carnegie project, an award for the most expensive, as well as ambitious, study would have gone to the Commission on Global Governance. Headed by Ingvar Carlsson and Sonny Ramphal, the membership of the large Commission read like a liberal internationalist all-star team. It, too, produced a book-length final report. *Our Global Neighborhood*, in fact, was produced by Oxford University Press as a surprisingly readable four-hundred page book in 1995. Carlsson was elected to his second round as Prime Minister of Sweden over the course of the project, which benefited from the political and material support of that government as well as of several major foundations.

Addressing the whole scope of global governance was an enormous undertaking, and it could be said that the scale of this substantive ambition determined both the success and the failure of the enterprise. Some parts of the report necessarily were far better received and far more influential than others. Though the commissioners and organizers expected their recommendations for UN reform to be the centerpiece of the study, it turned out that most of their proposals in that area were well outside the mainstream of international debate at that point and had little influence at the UN. For more conservative audiences, these proposals, plus what they saw as a denigrating of sovereignty concerns, reduced the credibility of the whole exercise. On the other hand, the report was prescient about the future course of arms control and about the growing role of civil society within and between countries. Perhaps because it flagged rising

issues of how the world should organize to handle transnational challenges, the report has shown considerable durability, even if many of its findings remain controversial with some groups.

As these four cases illustrate, clearly it is not enough to throw either money or blue ribbon commissions at a problem. Some high quality products, like the Ogata/Volcker report, the series produced by Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers at the Ford Foundation, and the *Successor Vision* study headed by Elliot Richardson for UNA-USA, cost only a fraction of the last three projects discussed above. Urquhart and Childers demonstrated, as well, that it does not necessarily require a large blue-ribbon panel to get attention and results. In this field, bigger is surely not always better.

#### Caveats, Worries, and Provocations

While I remain a booster of independent international studies of how the UN and other international institutions can be strengthened, it does seem to me that we need to rethink how to go about this. In each of the four cases addressed above, decisions made in the planning stages – who, what, when, and why – proved critical in terms of determining the project’s eventual impact. The political context in which these efforts are made is changing, which makes such strategic choices even more critical. In this regard, I have five concerns.

- One. While most of the organizers have paid attention to geographical diversity, they have either ignored or rejected the need for political diversity. Surely it is more fun to work with the like-minded and it certainly both eases and broadens the process of consensus-building within the group. But the larger question is how a report will fare outside of the group, and that is where all of these projects ran into trouble. Sooner or later our ideas will be challenged and it might well be

better to have a few devil's advocates within the process of deliberation than to face them only after the ideas and phrases are fixed and potential critics are doubly upset at being excluded from the process. One option would be to include dissents and reservations in the reports, a practice that has largely been lost in recent years with the stress on consensus. More thought needs to be given to how to incorporate a broader range of views without destroying either the chemistry within a group or the possibility for a meaningful and specific result.

-- Two. The trend to mega-studies – those costing over \$1 million US dollars – in the latter half of the 1990s is worrisome for several reasons. Not only is there a question of cost effectiveness, but it suggests that there will be fewer studies and hence less of an intellectually competitive and stimulating environment. If mega-projects with sweeping mandates, authoritative leadership, and consensus rules come to dominate the production of well-publicized ideas on UN reform, security, or global governance, for example, where are the dissident voices going to come from and how are they going to be financed? It is not coincidental, in this regard, that all of the major projects reviewed were sponsored and organized by bodies based in the North. Some of these groups, of course, were much better than others at including voices from the South, but then only those known to and selected by the northern organizers.

-- Three. At times, it can be difficult to tell whether some of the projects were established for the purpose of advocacy or inquiry. In several cases, it appeared as if the organizers assembled a study or commission basically to add a degree of authority to a position or orientation they already held. These groups seemed to

be independent only within the confines of a set of stated or unstated assumptions, and their conclusions were largely predictable from the outset. To some extent, of course, panels will be self-selecting and organizers need to have a sense of where they are going before launching a panel study. But if the results seem largely pre-cooked, then the whole enterprise of independent commissions will lose some credibility and questions will be raised by funders about whether such exercises are a sound way to expend scarce resources.

- Four. While it is quite understandable that these projects have identified the UN as their prime target, it should be questioned when and where this is most appropriate. In most of these matters, it is the member states, not the UN secretariat, that are the key decision-makers and implementers. Even in the realm of UN reform, the member states are the final arbiters of most big-ticket items. Capitals have the keys to both financial and political capital. The UN, moreover, tends to be a place of grand visions and weak follow-through. By bringing their visions and ambitious action plans to the UN as their primary target, these commissions have tended to compound this gap between vision and practice in the world body.
- Five. At the same time, this pattern tends to exacerbate the gap between US politics and global norm-building processes. On both sides of the split between the US and other member states on global issues, the tendency is for the like-minded to talk to each other, reinforcing their perspectives and presumptions. When global commissions purporting to represent the range of relevant views chronically leave out certain perspectives – including those of US conservatives

and legislators – it reinforces the impression that Americans are not a part of the global consensus, and that their views are not welcome in global gatherings.

So, yes, I do believe that these blue-ribbon initiatives have been influential on the whole. They have had, no doubt, more effect on the way we think about global issues and institutions than on specific policy choices. But to assert that they have been influential does not mean that their influence has always been constructive. That judgment may well depend on whether we make some mid-course corrections and begin to address the kinds of questions raised here this evening. In another decade or two, historians hopefully can give us more authoritative answers. In the meantime, these speculations can serve as a starting point to such an inquiry.