

SELECTING THE NINTH SECRETARY-GENERAL, A PRACTICAL STEP TOWARD DEVELOPMENT REFORM?

Natalie Samarasinghe

An effective secretary-general, selected through a robust process that provides him or her with a broad-based mandate, could have a transformative impact on the organization's appetite and ability to implement much-needed change.

Why do efforts to reform the UN fail? Except, perhaps, on the hardest issues, such as implementing an effective response to mass atrocities, the answer is rarely a lack of workable proposals. This is arguably most evident when it comes to reform of the UN's development system.

"There is no point in mincing words: the UN is a structural monstrosity."¹ The development system is in large part responsible for Jussi M. Hanhimäki's description, encompassing some 30 bodies, each with distinct governance, funding, and staffing arrangements and with different, though not necessarily distinct, mandates.² Collectively, the system has delivered conceptual and policy gains, as well as tangible improvements on the ground, but there are invariably issues of coordination and sheer complexity.³

In a previous FUNDS briefing Margaret Anstee provided an overview of reform proposals, starting with the first major set, the 1969 *Capacity Study*.⁴ That report continues to inform debates although very few of its proposals have been implemented, and then only partially. As Anstee wryly summarizes, "The *Capacity Study* has sometimes been dubbed the 'Bible' of UN reform because its precepts are lauded by everyone but put into effect by no one."⁵

How can development reform become a priority? Proponents should consider the opportunities presented by the appointment of a new secretary-general in 2016, and initiatives to improve the selection process.

At first blush, improving a UN recruitment process may seem like a marginal reform with limited impact. However, "the UN system's only real resources are its goals, principles and standards, and its leaders," as Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers pointed out, "if governments make indifferent choices of executive heads, no amount of reform will compensate for the lack of leadership."⁶ Smart leadership, in turn, can stimulate reform.

INDIVIDUALS MATTER

Secretaries-general (see Table 1) have limited scope for action, but many have made a difference nonetheless.⁷ To be effective, they must maintain the support of member states, particularly the big powers. But if they achieve this balancing act, they can manoeuvre within the parameters of politics and of the UN Charter to great effect.

Table 1: UN secretaries-general, 1946-2016

Secretary-General	Nationality	Dates of Service
Trygve Halvdan Lie	Norway	Feb 1946 – Nov 1952
Dag Hammarskjöld	Sweden	April 1953 – Sept 1961
U Thant	Burma	Nov 1961 – Dec 1971
Kurt Waldheim	Austria	Jan 1972 – Dec 1981
Javier Pérez de Cuéllar	Peru	Jan 1982 – Dec 1991
Boutros Boutros-Ghali	Egypt	Jan 1992 – Dec 1996
Kofi Annan	Ghana	Jan 1997 – Dec 2006
Ban Ki-moon	South Korea	Jan 2007 – Dec 2016

Peacekeeping, for example, is not mentioned in the Charter. Foreshadowed by the first secretary-general, Trygve Lie, it was developed by his successor, Dag Hammarskjöld, who also expanded the post's "good offices" function. U Thant played a significant role in de-escalating the Cuban Missile Crisis. Boutros Boutros-Ghali is credited with norm entrepreneurship on controlling small arms. Kofi Annan brokered a groundbreaking deal with pharmaceutical companies to widen access to HIV/AIDS treatment. Ban Ki-moon, the current post-holder, has used the secretary-general's moral authority to champion LGBT rights.

At the policy and practical level, the secretary-general can add value: encouraging action on situations that lack big-power interest; making smart, incremental reforms; appointing quality personnel to key UN positions; and serving as a voice for the marginalized. They also have the power, under Article 99 of the Charter, to bring *any* matter to the attention of the Security Council that they deem threatens international peace and security.

WHO IS THE BEST PERSON FOR THE JOB?

Through formal and informal channels, secretaries-general have the potential to transform the world organization. Their ability to do so would be enormously strengthened by a selection process that is focused on merit; gives them a broader base of support; and minimizes, to the extent possible, the political compromises needed for appointment. To date, the process has satisfied none of these conditions.

The UN Charter affords the appointment just one sentence in Article 97: “The Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.” The involvement of both bodies reflects the realities of the secretary-general’s operating context. But informal practices have skewed this balance, relegating the General Assembly’s role and increasing further the influence of the Security Council’s five permanent members (P5).

Initially, proposals were made for the council to put forward candidates for the assembly to vote on by secret ballot. However, in January 1946, the General Assembly defined a process aimed at promoting stability in the immediate post-war environment, adopting resolution 11(1), which stated that it “would be desirable” for just one candidate to be recommended to it by the Security Council and for debate on the appointment to be avoided in the assembly. It also suggested a renewable five-year term, although it made clear this could be adjusted in the future.

Current practice is an extreme interpretation of this 69-year-old non-binding resolution. The Security Council makes its decision behind closed doors, subject to secret bargaining, including on other senior UN appointments. In the past, some member states did not know who was on the ticket until after the selection had effectively been made.⁸ Even states on the Security Council can be left in the dark. According to Edward Mortimer, in 2006, the United Kingdom and France were largely marginalized: “Last time round, China insisted that it was Asia’s turn, the US quietly agreed with China on Mr Ban ... and Russia didn’t mind as long as it wasn’t an eastern European. The choice was left, in effect, to just three people – George W Bush, Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao.”⁹

Conventions restrict the talent pool. By tradition, candidates come from small or medium-sized countries. Since 1997, when the General Assembly endorsed the principle of geographic rotation, regional groups have sought to claim the post. At that juncture, there was a strong feeling among the African group that it should have its “full term” after Boutros-Ghali was not re-appointed. Just three of 31 formal candidates in past elections have been women. The sum effect is a seriously deficient process, out of step with modern recruitment

practices and contrary to the UN’s principles of good governance. Above all, it is geared towards producing not the highest-calibre candidates but those who are unlikely to trouble the P5. While incumbents sometimes have proved them wrong, secretaries-general could achieve much more if the process encouraged them to be bold and visionary. It could and should be merit-based, transparent, inclusive, less politicized, and realistic.

MERIT

What should such a process look like? First and foremost, it should focus on merit, with formal selection criteria. Such criteria were initially developed by the 1945 UN Preparatory Commission but never adopted. Some argue that criteria cannot be elaborated for what the first secretary-general called “the world’s most impossible job.”¹⁰ But with a fast-paced media environment and a growing range of UN partners, it is difficult to argue that the secretary-general should not be an effective communicator and convenor. As head of an organization with 193 member states, some 80,000 UN system staff and 120,000 military and civilian staff in peace operations as well as programs that span the globe, it is difficult to argue that the secretary-general should not have a proven ability to manage a complex international organization.

Integrity, a capacity for intellectual and political leadership and commitment to the principles of the UN Charter – these qualities seem self-evident. Similar criteria appear in selection processes for the heads of other organizations within the UN system.¹¹ It is surprising that while the secretary-general’s role has grown significantly in scope, the selection process has remained largely unchanged.

An emphasis on merit also means improving the nomination process and widening the talent pool. States should involve parliaments and civil society in identifying candidates. While the issue of regional rotation is of serious concern to many member states, this convention only gathered steam in the 1990s. The geographical emphasis on “who’s turn it is” in fact contradicts the 1980 General Assembly resolution 35/210, which states that no post should be considered the exclusive preserve of any state or grouping of states. Diversity matters greatly in an organization such as the UN, but it should not trump quality.

The same applies to gender equality even as support grows among member states for a strong field of female candidates.¹² A number of states have expressed a preference for a female secretary-general and there are two major dedicated civil society campaigns for this cause.¹³ This author too would like to see a woman on the 38th floor, but only if she is the best possible candidate.

The selection process should be guided by formulations used by other intergovernmental bodies, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO): “Where Members are faced in the final selection with equally meritorious candidates, they shall take into consideration as one of the factors the desirability of reflecting the diversity of the WTO’s membership in successive appointments to the post of Director-General.”¹⁴

TRANSPARENCY AND INCLUSIVENESS

The process should be transparent and inclusive, with a public shortlist of candidates and a requirement for them to set out their priorities for the organization. At the World Health Organization (WHO),¹⁵ candidates are required to submit a 2,000-word vision statement, which is available online alongside their respective CVs.

Such a shortlist—a practice also used by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization—would enable states, civil society, and the media to scrutinize candidates' records. This is particularly important in the absence of a formal vetting process, but also in terms of holding states and candidates to account: states on their eventual selection and candidates on their “running platform.”

An inclusive process, with opportunities for candidates to interact with their future constituencies, is also essential. Again, good practice exists within the UN system on formal and informal ways to achieve this. Candidates for ILO director-general, for instance, engage with states, employers and workers, delivering presentations and taking questions.¹⁶ In the WTO, candidates have closed-door meetings with member states but give press conferences afterwards; and the recordings are posted online.

An adaptation for selection of the UN secretary-general could be arranged under the so-called Arria formula meetings (open to civil society) in the Security Council, interactive dialogues in the General Assembly, and other informal exchanges with civil society and the press. At the time of the last appointment, when social media was in its infancy, there was already pressure on candidates to engage and many did so enthusiastically, creating websites, giving interviews and public presentations.

A LESS-POLITICIZED PROCESS?

No secretary-general can be free from politics,¹⁷ but steps can be taken to lessen the impact during the selection process. The practice by which states extract promises (particularly on other senior appointments) in exchange for support is enormously damaging. It politicizes the secretary-general before he or she is in post and can lead to poor appointments to key positions.

This horse-trading goes against Charter Article 100 that states that secretaries-general should not “seek or receive instructions from any government” and that states should “not seek to influence them.” Difficult as it is to end something that should not be happening in the first place, it would nonetheless send an important signal if states and candidates were required to condemn publicly this backroom practice. The ILO and WHO make this explicit in the guidance documents for their executive appointments.

A single term of office would further strengthen the possibilities for autonomy. It would provide candidates with political space to develop and implement a more independent, long-term, and visionary agenda. Freed from the constraints of seeking re-election, the secretary-general would be in a stronger position to resist states' efforts to compel the world organization to take on poorly-resourced tasks and to insist on action in areas where states are reluctant to lead.

All the elements outlined above would be supported by a clear timetable, setting out deadlines for nominations, exchanges with candidates, and state deliberations. All are more common practice in other parts of the UN system.

A REALISTIC PROCESS?

None of the measures set out in this paper require amending the UN Charter—traditionally the biggest obstacle to reform. They could be implemented through formal or informal decisions in the Security Council and General Assembly. Some could even be realized by candidates, who could decide to stand for a single term, publish a vision statement, and engage with civil society. Indeed, most of these proposals have been previously endorsed by the General Assembly, and there are encouraging signs that they may be implemented.

Efforts to improve the process started much earlier than in the past. Some 18 months before Mr. Ban's term ends, states — notably the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group and Non-Aligned Movement — began putting forward concrete proposals.¹⁸ Launched in 2014, the civil society reform campaign, 1 for 7 Billion, has built a supporter base of over 170 million people.

The Security Council has held discussions on the selection process,¹⁹ and Spain, a non-permanent member, has announced its intention to organize a debate addressing this issue during its presidency in October 2015.²⁰ Perhaps most importantly, two permanent members—the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, France—are supportive of an improved process. London has taken on a leadership role within the P5, publicly supporting a structured process that enables all states and civil society to interact with candidates.²¹

This momentum has resulted in an unprecedented General Assembly resolution 69/321, adopted by consensus on 11 September 2015. It asked the presidents of the General Assembly and of the Security Council to send a joint letter to states containing a description of the entire process; called for candidates' names and CVs to be circulated; and decided to “conduct informal dialogues or meetings” with candidates.

This process has also attracted pushback, notably from China, Russia and the United States. Their position is short-sighted. The proposed reforms do not diminish the Security Council's role in the decision and would go some way to restore confidence in the system they wish to preserve.

While their cooperation would produce the most satisfactory outcome, there is much that could be done without it. States can nominate highly-qualified candidates regardless of gender and nationality. The General Assembly could implement elements of resolution 69/321, such as issuing a timetable. It could also take further action by asking to be given a real choice, with more than one candidate put forward by the Security Council. It has taken decisive action in the past, for example, proposing U Thant to fill Hammarskjöld's unexpired term when the council was unable to agree on a candidate.

PAY-OFF FOR THE UN DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM?

A process that genuinely engages all member states and civil society would give future secretaries-general a broader base of support. This is likely to boost their ability to push forward the UN's development reform agenda. Indeed, an improved process would provide opportunities to raise this issue, test candidates on it, and secure commitments.

International peace is invariably at the top of any secretary-general's agenda, but this idea is reinforced by the selection process, which puts the decision in the hands of the Security Council, guided by five rich military powers instead of the wider UN membership that is more development-oriented. The involvement of civil society and the media is also likely to put more emphasis on development, particularly in the first "implementation" year of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approved in September 2015.

A better process could give the next post-holder a stronger mandate to deliver on these commitments, and free her or his hand in making high-quality appointments, particularly a deputy secretary-general who could focus on the development system. It could also actively

encourage skills, such as resourcefulness, effective management, and leadership.

Thant, known for quiet diplomacy, began the *Capacity Study* and appointed Robert Jackson, a highly capable person with a reputation for results, to lead it. Although his development reform record is modest in structural terms, Annan managed to make progress on the *Capacity Study's* recommendations through the *Delivering as One* effort²² despite having a much wider reform agenda, by raising the level of ambition for change within and outside the system.²³ Ban has expended considerable effort in galvanizing support for the SDGs. However, serious debate on the structural and operational changes needed to deliver them has been absent. It is only fitting that his successor takes up the mantle.

Improving the selection process for the secretary-general would serve as a powerful symbol for broader UN reform, signalling that the system is capable of change and representing a move away from the big-power hold on international organizations that is increasingly at odds with the world's changing landscape and with what global civil society – "we the peoples" in the opening words of the UN Charter – is prepared to accept.

Natalie Samarasinghe is Executive Director of the United Nations Association-United Kingdom (UNA-UK) and a co-founder of the 1 for 7 Billion Campaign (www.1for7billion.org), which calls for a fair, open, and inclusive process to select the next UN secretary-general.

NOTES

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