

THE NEXT UN SECRETARY-GENERAL: VIEWS FROM UN WATCHERS

Stephen Browne, Fiona Curtin, Thomas G. Weiss

The results of the latest FUNDS survey of global experts, conducted during the winter of 2015/16, contains clear messages about the next UN secretary-general: s/he should be a world leader with integrity and political courage who will prioritize UN reform; and the election process should be open and transparent.

There is more room for genuine leadership and independent initiatives by the UN's executive head than many believe. Thus, the election of the ninth UN secretary-general (SG) between now and December 2016 is crucial to the future of the organization. The next leader will either help steer the UN back to a more central position in world affairs or preside over its continuing marginalization. Choosing the right person with the right qualities is essential.

In the UN Charter, there is a single sentence devoted to the election of the world's most senior diplomat: "appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council." In practice, SGs have always been chosen by a cabal of the five permanent members of the Security Council (United States, Russia, China, France, and United Kingdom) on a no-objection (no veto) basis, while adhering to an informal regional rotation. Female candidates have rarely been put forward, and there has never been a female SG. This process eschews detailed examination of the merits of individual candidates and is manifestly undemocratic for a position of such importance. A better process is clearly needed and some welcome changes are being put in place for the next election, responding in part to the clamor for change from movements such as the 1for7billion campaign and growing media attention.¹ In September 2015, the General Assembly (GA) asked the presidents of the Security Council and the GA to issue a joint letter to all member states inviting the nomination of candidates for SG, and requesting supporting documents including full curricula vitae.² The letter was issued in December 2015 and a series of "informal dialogues" with the nominated candidates are being conducted by the GA from April 2016.

This latest FUNDS survey is intended to feed into the deliberations on the next SG. The FUNDS project will also be organizing its own hearings for SG candidates in London in June 2016, in collaboration with the UN Association of the UK and *The Guardian* newspaper.

THE SURVEY

A total of 768 people from 114 countries completed the survey, all of them individuals known to FUNDS and interested or engaged in UN issues. Respondents came from academia (25 percent), the private sector (22 percent), NGOs (18 percent), current UN staff (17 percent), governments (13 percent), and other international public organizations (5 percent). People who have worked in or for the UN at any time made up 39 percent of those surveyed. One third (35 percent) of respondents were female. The results were recorded for the whole population, and then filtered by UN (past and present) respondents, by gender, and by location in the North (OECD) or Global South (non-OECD) origins. Respondents were invited to provide additional comments throughout the survey. A representative selection of these comments is included in each section below.

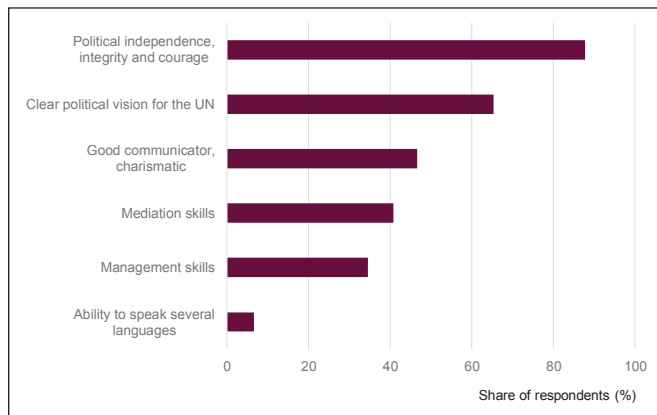
GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF UN EFFECTIVENESS

When asked to give their general rating of the work of the UN, the respondents' judgments were more positive than negative. The majority (56 percent) completing the survey declared it to be either "very effective" or "effective" against 18 percent who considered the UN to be either "very ineffective" or "ineffective." Almost a quarter of respondents took the middle ground, finding the UN "neither effective nor ineffective." As in previous surveys, the respondents with a UN background were more critical of UN effectiveness than others, and women also had a less favorable perception than men. The results suggest that many people who know the UN—and especially those with direct experience—believe that the world organization is in drastic need of improvement.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSONAL QUALITIES

The most important personal quality required is political independence, integrity, and courage say 88 percent of those surveyed, and an even more decisive 91 percent of female respondents. This call for a strong leader is the most unambiguous finding of the survey. It begs the question: is the appointment of such a leader possible under the current selection process, which favors less prominent figures whom permanent members of the Security Council believe—or hope—can be controlled?

What are the most important personal qualities of a UN Secretary-General?



Source: UN FUNDS survey 2016; Dalberg Research Analysis.

Possessing a clear political vision for the UN is considered vital by 66 percent of respondents, while 48 percent are looking for a charismatic SG who is a good communicator. These two traits are particularly highly valued by individuals who have worked for or at the UN; 72 percent of this group highlighted the need for a clear political vision (compared to 59 percent of people without UN employment experience), and half of them are looking for a charismatic, media-friendly leader (compared to 40 percent of those who have never worked at the UN).

A smaller share of respondents regard management skills (selected by 32 percent) and the ability to speak several languages (selected by just 8 percent) to be highly important. Mediation skills are valued by 41 percent of people overall, and by a higher share of Global South respondents (48 percent) than those from the North (31 percent). Another clear difference between these two groups is that more people from the North stressed the need for the SG to be charismatic and a good communicator (59 percent) compared with those from the Global South (32 percent).

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS BY RESPONDENTS

“I want someone who represents the voice of the voiceless.”

“Ability to ‘speak truth to power’ and mobilize broad support for recommendations.”

“A sense of humanity and a clear commitment to human rights.”

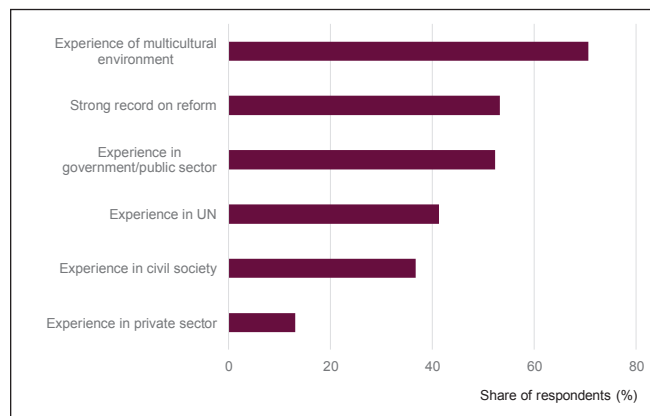
“Ability to select extremely able deputy SGs to run the organization.”

“Creativity, drive for results, and political sensitivity. The person should not be afraid of rethinking the UN system’s role, and how to position it to continue being the most relevant international body for peace and security.”

THE MOST RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

Experience in a multicultural environment was deemed most relevant by the highest share (71 percent) of those surveyed, and even higher among those from the Global South. A majority (52 percent) considered a strong record on reform to be important. A similar proportion (51 percent) considered government experience so, in fact, this ranks higher than the need for prior experience within the UN itself. Not surprisingly, UN experience is viewed favorably by more people who rate the UN itself more highly, and by those who themselves have had a UN affiliation. Experience in civil society was ranked lower by those from the Global South than the North.

What are the most relevant past experiences for a future UN Secretary-General?



Source: UN FUNDS survey 2016; Dalberg Research Analysis.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS BY RESPONDENTS

“The candidate should have demonstrated that he/she can effectively lead a large multicultural organization.”

“Experience leading social movements and communicating/campaigning with the public on issues relevant to the UN.”

“An accomplished diplomat with management skills.”

“Grassroots experience. Experience working with vulnerable groups and in the field.”

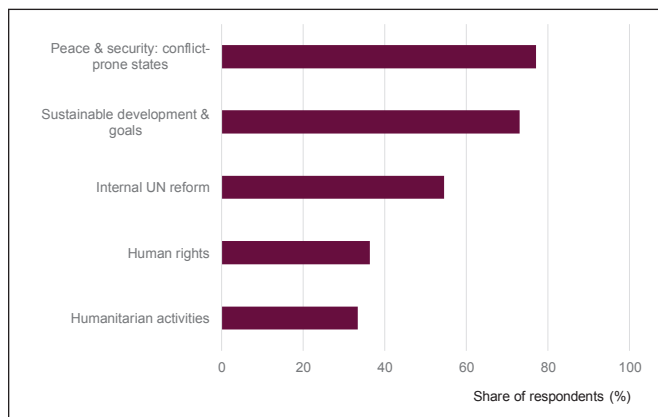
“Experience in the public sector is critical as governments are the main interlocutors, but experience and understanding of the private sector or civil society would be helpful in building meaningful coalitions.”

THE MOST URGENT AREAS OF CONCERN

The top three areas of concern were peace and security (78 percent), sustainable development and the SDGs (72 percent), and internal UN reform (53 percent). Trailing well behind were human rights and humanitarian activities. The results reflect the major UN news stories of the past months: enthusiasm surrounding the new UN global goals and the Paris climate agreement, and deep concern at the UN’s inability to resolve such long-running armed conflicts as Syria and Darfur.

More than half the respondents attached priority to internal UN reform, which had a particularly strong showing among those who perceive the UN to be less effective (62 percent); those with a UN affiliation (61 percent); and those from countries in the North (60 percent), which are the UN’s largest funders.

What should be the most urgent areas of concern for the next UN Secretary-General?



Source: UN FUNDS survey 2016; Dalberg Research Analysis.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS BY RESPONDENTS

“Re-establishing the UN as an effective intergovernmental body that has impact on peace, security and development, in line with the UN Charter.”

“Actually holding governments accountable to the agreements they sign up to; not allowing bullying in behind-closed-door negotiations.”

“Ensuring clarity around the SDGs—which I fear lack the focus of the MDGs—will be significant.”

“Inclusion of public interest, civil society and social movements in UN deliberations.”

“Women’s rights to full equality in the running of the UN and in all spheres of human life.”

“An overall integrated vision for the UN and for a world in profound turmoil and devastation – a vision that can bring people and nations together and overcome the self-destructive competitiveness between national agendas.”

THE LENGTH OF A TERM

Preferences were split evenly between the current arrangement of up to two five-year terms, versus a single and non-renewable term of six or seven years. Those affiliated with the UN were more supportive of a single term. It has been argued—for example by the 1for7billion campaign and The Elders—that a single term would allow the SG to act more decisively in moments of crisis without fear of offending powerful member states. It would allow an uninterrupted period for delivering major UN commitments and programs – for example, the SDGs – without the distraction of campaigning for re-election. Since most secretaries-general have been elected for two terms, a single one of six or seven years would result in a more frequent turn-over, and therefore more “honeymoon” periods at the beginning of each mandate that are the most propitious for UN reform.

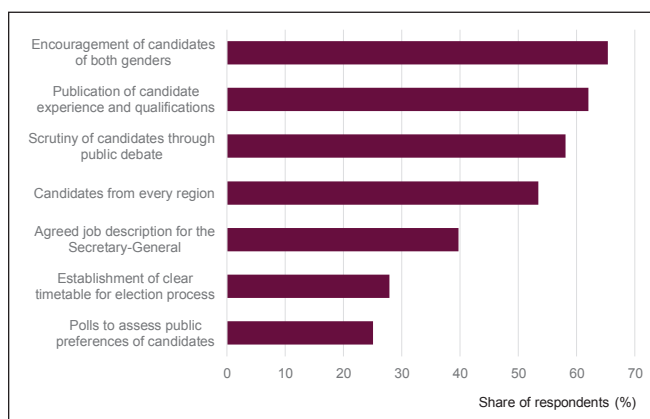
THE PROCESS OF SELECTION

Gender equality and transparency were the most favored features of an improved process. Two-thirds of respondents wanted to see candidates of both genders, while the publication of candidate experience and qualifications, scrutiny of candidates through public debate, and more regional rotation were all favored by the majority.

After eight consecutive male SGs, there are growing calls for a female leader and the need for candidates from both genders was stressed more by female survey respondents and by those from the North. Of the first seven candidates to be nominated by their governments for the next SG, three are women, which is the same number of female nominees from all previous elections combined.³ UN affiliated respondents were more inclined than the non-UN affiliated to support more transparency through publishing candidate information and holding public debates.

Respondents were invited to name a preferred candidate and one-fifth did so. The most frequently named person was Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany, and most of the top ten suggested by our participants were women. While an unlikely prospect, Chancellor Merkel represents the high calibre that many people would like to assume the world organization’s highest position.

What is most important to include in the process of election?



Source: UN FUNDS survey 2016; Dalberg Research Analysis.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS BY RESPONDENTS

“Include civil society and NGOs in the consultation process.”

“Avoid international lobbying by big powers.”

“Rotational system is fine, so that each region leads the UN.”

“The special selection committee should be established by the GA, a shortlist of three candidates drawn up and put to the vote by the GA.”

“This process should be taken out of the hands of the Security Council, which has an extremely poor record in nominating SGs.”

“A transparent, competitive process. Not behind closed doors!”

CONCLUSIONS

This survey shows that people are actively favoring the appointment of an SG with the political courage and strategic vision to lead the UN to the forefront of global governance. The choice will determine whether the UN continues to be relevant or becomes a relic. It is the people with the most at stake in UN operations—those in fragile, conflict-prone states and those whose human rights and basic needs are not fulfilled—that will most benefit from the right kind of leader.

These findings are a reminder, particularly to the Security Council’s five permanent members, that the next secretary-general should be

a leader for the entire world, not just for the electoral college of five. The results of the FUNDS survey indicate the following:

1. The public wants a strong, courageous, independent leader—a person of high integrity ready to stand up to powerful states and act decisively in times of crisis, and with a clear political vision for the UN.
2. The SG should be a prominent and charismatic public figure, who is able to effectively and forcefully represent and communicate with the global public.
3. More easily delegated skills, such as management and the ability to speak multiple languages should not necessarily be central to the selection process.

4. The SG must be a proven reformer with the experience and background to make the UN fit-for-purpose; and the successful candidate should be prepared to rock the boat, with the determination to take difficult and unpopular internal decisions.

5. Changes already made to introduce transparency in the selection process are welcome. This trend should be strengthened and consolidated to ensure a clearer and more open system for electing not only the Secretary-General but also the heads of all UN organizations.

An increasingly informed and engaged global public are calling for more democracy and transparency in the manner in which the world's top diplomat is elected. The 2016 selection must not revert to the old ways—the people are watching.

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NOTES

1. "1 for 7 Billion – Find the Best UN Leader," www.1for7billion.org.
2. United Nations GA Resolution 69/321, New York, 11 September 2015.
3. United Nations General Assembly, <http://www.un.org/pga/70/sg>.

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