

The UN's post-2015 development agenda and leadership

by Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss



The flag-lined approach to the entrance to the United Nations office in Geneva, Switzerland, November 2015. (GODONG/ROBERT HARDING/NEWSCOM)

There is a dramatic fork in the road for the United Nations and the United States in 2016. But unlike the late Yogi Berra, the next U.S. administration cannot merely “take it” but rather is required to act. While most American media and pundits are focused on international peace and security and the travails of the Security Council, much of the rest of the planet is instead often riveted on the challenges of poverty eradication and sustainable development. A new global push begins in 2016, when everyone will also be eyeing the “election” of the United Nations’ next secretary-general.

Why new development objectives?

At the outset of the 21st century, 150 or so heads of state

endorsed a set of eight measurable Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with 18 concrete targets. While pundits dismiss the impact of goal setting, it is one of the few ways to aim at improvements and shame governments by holding their feet to the fire for poor results or even lackadaisical efforts.

While many judged the pursuit utopian, the record since 2000 is better than the generally slower progress in the 1990s

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UNDP Administrator Helen Clark and Mbaranga Gasarabwe visit a small-scale mango farm operated by women. Mali, May 2010. (UNDP/UN PHOTO)

among most of the poorest countries (see chart on the right). Indeed, the 2015 final MDGs report showed that the proportion of people in dire poverty worldwide will have been more than halved, even ahead of the target year; all developing regions will have achieved gender parity in primary education; the clean water access goal will have been reached along with impressive results in fighting malaria and tuberculosis. In other areas, global measurements indicate some substantial shortfalls. Primary school enrolment is still not universal; chronic child malnutrition remains far too high; child and maternal mortality rates have fallen, but inadequately; and sanitation standards are short of their targets. While skeptics often indicate that the MDGs themselves deserve less credit for the plunge in poverty than growth in China and India, nonetheless more than 700 million people emerged from poverty. Meanwhile, the prospect of bad pub-

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licity for failing to meet international targets undoubtedly motivated at least some countries to adopt measures that they might otherwise have not.

A few countries will have achieved all goals, but the majority will have fallen short on several. Some, especially those prone to armed conflict, have not advanced in economic terms for more than a generation. For them, targets will have meant little. And even those countries that are better off in 2015 than in 2000 may find it harder from their improved positions to attain the new goals.

A small group of UN staff compiled the MDGs in a single, succinct package that was measurable and time-bound. Although several UN organizations were slow to sign up, they all eventually did. The goals were the closest that the world organization has ever come to a realistic and realizable development agenda.

Starting in 2012, states and secretariats have toiled to frame a new set of “sustainable development goals,” again intended to focus UN operations, but this time until 2030. In 2013, a high-level panel chaired by three serving heads of government proposed a new set of 12 goals and 50 measurable indi-

cators, already a quantum leap in range and ambition from the earlier millennium versions. The panel also laid down two important parameters. First, any new set of goals should build on the MDGs but have more breadth, including concerns about economic growth and jobs, promotion of peace and security and inclusive governance. Second, they should be universal, including all 193 UN member states in a global partnership that does not distinguish developing from developed countries (or the “global South” from the “North,” in UN parlance).

The panel’s report was the starting point for exhaustive consultations within an Open Working Group (OWG) of member states, which began deliberations in 2013. Open consultations have the merit of seeking wide consensus—a process that was not followed for the formulation of the MDGs, which were produced by a handful of senior UN officials.

The path to consensus among representatives of member states is to ensure that all their respective interests are included, along with those of multiple lobbying groups and advocates, including every UN development organization. A year-and-a-half later, the OWG

UNDP’S MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS, 1990 – 2015

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL	MADE PROGRESS	MET GOALS
1. The proportion of extremely poor people decreased by more than half since 1990.		✓
2. Five out of ten children in developing countries are now in school.	✓	
3. There are generally as many girls as boys enrolled in primary school today.		✓
4. The global under-five mortality rate declined by more than half.	✓	
5. The maternal mortality rate decreased by 45%.	✓	
6. The HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB epidemics have been halted and still fewer people are infected each year.		✓
7. Five out of ten people have access to clean drinking water today.		✓
8. Develop a global partnership for development	no clear deadline	

SOURCE AND TEXT: UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

arrived at a list of no fewer than 17 development goals (see Table 1) and 169 explanatory paragraphs (with at least as many targets). The largest gathering ever of presidents and prime ministers at the UN summit of September 2015 adopted “Transforming Our World by 2030: A New Agenda for Global Action.” Optimists called it “aspirational,” whereas skeptics like Bjørn Lomborg noted that “having 169 priorities is the same as having none.” William Easterly suggested a different “SDG” acronym: “senseless, dreamy, garbled.” All too often the problem with UN deliberations is that process is more important than product; getting to an agreed text is a sufficient criterion for success, however lacklustre the result.

The Economist aptly characterized an earlier version as “something for everyone has produced too much for anyone.” Indeed, the number of targets is so numerous that no country will be able to adopt them all. Among the first seven goals, there is a restatement and a further elaboration of most of the unrealized MDGs. And because “sustainability” implies environmental management, the majority of the 17 goals are wholly or partially concerned with managing resources, energy or climate change.

An exception is Goal 16 that, in acknowledgement of what is considered the main engine of development progress, deals with aspects of national governance that include building strong and inclusive institutions, promulgating the rule of law, respecting rights, and reducing corruption and “all forms of violence.” Another exception is the final Goal 17 that concerns the “means of implementation,” which contains some general statements acknowledging that the goals will necessitate substantial new resources for their realization. A central problem, which is especially pertinent for Goal 16, is that the last two umbrella goals are vague but shelter a large number of issues dear to the West and contested by many other countries.

The SDGs do not lack ambition, but if they are to have any practical importance, critical choices will have to be retrofitted onto this indigestible menu

Goal 1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
Goal 2	End hunger; achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
Goal 3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
Goal 4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
Goal 5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
Goal 6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
Goal 7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
Goal 8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
Goal 9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
Goal 10	Reduce inequality within and among countries.
Goal 11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
Goal 12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
Goal 13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
Goal 14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
Goal 15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
Goal 16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
Goal 17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

of development aspirations. In some ways, the can has been kicked down the proverbial road as the actual contents of the agenda have been postponed until March 2016 when the Inter-Agency and Expert Group—a sub-group of 28 of the 193 national statistics offices that compose the UN’s Statistical Commission—is to quantify targets where possible. Their indicators will, in effect, define the meaning of the SDGs and how they are monitored. Choices are necessary because not all countries can meet the (measurable) targets. And perhaps more importantly, their sheer number means that the earlier MDG advantage of being able to name and shame governments will largely have been removed.

Will all goals and targets be measured for every country? Or will a different set of goals be tailored to each? Or a mixture? How will their detailed application be measured? While the SDGs refer to least developed, landlocked and small island states, there is no mention of those prone to conflict, which will face the greatest development challenges. Readily available metrics existed for virtually every country for every MDG; how will new SDG concepts, such as security or governance, be determined?

Even once the shaping and honing has been done, better capacities for statistical compilation will be required. How will they be provided? And if the data can be trusted, who will monitor,



Speakers at the opening ceremony celebrate the adoption of the new Sustainable Development Goals during the Sixth Annual Social Good Summit on September 27, 2015, in New York. An initiative of the United Nations Foundation, Mashable, United Nations Development Program and the 92nd Street Y, the Social Good Summit explores how technology and new media can be leveraged to address global issues. (STUART RAMSON/AP IMAGES FOR UN FOUNDATION)

and how? How can observers, as Nate Silver's best seller asked, distinguish "the signal from the noise"?

Governments simply must be held to account if this exercise is to be even modestly meaningful. Yet governments—as the main obstacles to development—are the sole drivers of the review process. To ensure objectivity, civil society organizations, international nongovernmental organizations and the UN itself should track the SDGs. Indeed, the world body could well emulate its own practice in the human rights domain and institute "universal periodic reviews" of each country's development performance.

Apart from Goal 17 on means of implementation, the OWG did not go in depth on the resource implications of the SDGs; but it is clear that huge investments will be required to support the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda. Rather clumsily, the UN contrived to hold a conference on the financing of the agenda two months before the agenda was agreed. The Third International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) was held in Addis Ababa in mid-July 2015.

Alliteratively, but not accurately, the outcome document of the July meeting was called the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA). In the age-old relationship between cart and horse, it might have been more logical to agree what needed to be done prior to determining the resources and actions required for implementation.

On a bright note, the Addis meeting did not—like virtually every UN development meeting before it—get bogged down in a sterile North-South debate about aid, prompting the UK development minister to declare that it was "a historic international deal that takes us beyond aid." The conference ended on time and was without fireworks or passion, which could also signify that the stakes were low. In fact, the outcome document outlines the requirement to blend domestic public and private finance before the section on "international development cooperation." The juxtaposition is important because of aid's diminishing role in relationship to other potential international resources. The discussion about Official Development Assistance (ODA) stopped short of making progress conditional on more aid and "welcomed

the increase in all forms of international finance" since the first FfD conference in 2002. The role of South-South cooperation was also recognized.

But for an "action" program, the language is infused more with exhortations than decisions. It reads in part like an alternative post-2015 agenda. A rare mention of the word "decide" occurs in the establishment of a "technology facilitation mechanism" based on an inter-agency task team of eight UN entities. In typically convoluted UN jargon, this mechanism is "for facilitating interaction, matchmaking and the establishment of networks between relevant stakeholders and multi-stakeholder partnerships."

The AAAA is also more explicit in its treatment of illicit financial flows and corruption, which bleed the African continent of more resources than can be offset by incoming aid. The document also calls for strengthening the work of the UN committee of experts on international cooperation in tax matters, a sensitive issue for several major donor countries.

There is also some language dealing with international migration and human

trafficking. Signatories also “commit to ensuring the effective implementation of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime,” although actions will speak louder than these words.

A challenge for the SDGs agenda is the inherent tension between its universal nature—what is called “a shared global responsibility”—and the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility,” or the idea from environmental law that wealthier, industrialized countries have a greater responsibility because they have for some time contributed much more to environmental deterioration. At stake is how to square that circle, or how to include the concept

of national differentiation or differential responsibilities. The AAAA moved toward a balance between external aid and domestic resource mobilization.

The AAAA was also a step in the right direction, moving the international conversation away from financing for purely national goals such as education and clean water and toward global public goods such as halting climate change and pandemics. The document recognizes many new sources of development finance, including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, GAVI, the global Vaccine Alliance, and the Green Climate Fund. These sources are mainly funded by the traditional Western donors and are de-

signed to finance the provision of global public goods. The section on trade also recognizes its contribution “to the promotion of sustainable development.”

If suitably adjusted to include realistic targets, if a proper monitoring system is put in place and if adequate resources are available—obviously, some very big “if’s”—this complex agenda is supposed to capture what UN publicity trumpets as “the world we want.” This agenda nevertheless constitutes a gigantic challenge to the UN development system on which successful implementation will at least partially depend. But what constitutes this system, and will it be up to the job? In short, what is the UN we want and require? ■

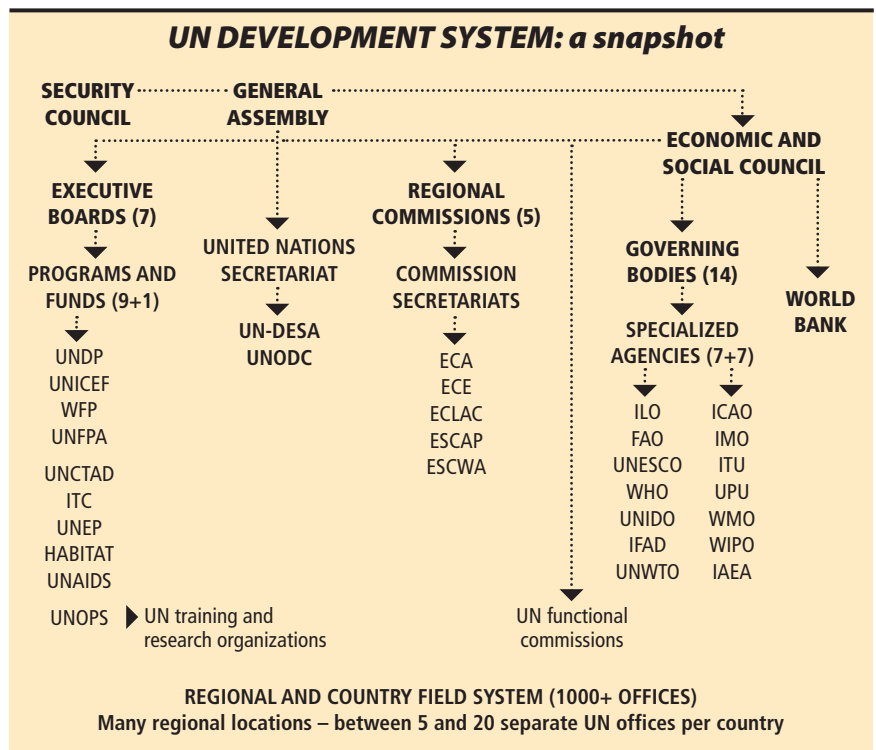
How fit for post-2015 purpose is the UN?

Development is usually described as one of the main pillars of the UN, the others being international peace and security, human rights, and humanitarian action. As distinct from the other pillars, the various organizations that make up the UN development system share long-term objectives. Almost every part of that system is also a member of the High-level Committee on Programmes and the UN Development Group, which oversee operational activities at the field level. Therefore, there is a “system” behind the UN’s development pillar and aspirations.

This system undertakes the “operational activities” that account for about 60% of total annual UN spending (some \$17 billion in 2013), employing 80,000 people, a majority of the organization’s full-time staff. It includes more than 30 organizations (variously called funds, programs, offices and agencies). There are also an equivalent number of supportive functional commissions and research and training organizations, which are not included in the total. For example, the UN University alone has 16 specialized centers that do not appear in the UN’s main alphabet soup.

Although it comprises organizations covering the gamut of development domains, the UN system cannot provide institutional solutions to all the challenges encompassed by the SDGs. For example, the World Trade

Organization will play a major role for commerce but is outside the UN. In infrastructure and finance, the World Bank Group and regional development banks as well as the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank will be



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS

partners, but they are part of the UN system in name only or not at all. In health, a major role can be anticipated for the Global Fund and the GAVI Vaccine Alliance.

In addition to the role of such non-UN bodies, the landscape is changing for the UN in other ways. Competition comes from other global forums like the G20 and the World Economic Forum. Emerging powers like Brazil, China and India provide alternative forms of assistance to developing countries. More appropriate and specialized sources are available for the bread-and-butter technical assistance long provided by the UN system. Development inputs go far beyond aid, which is being supplanted

with alternative sources of funds and expertise—ranging from foundations like Gates to nongovernmental organizations of rival size, to foreign direct investment that is five times larger than ODA, and to remittances that are at least three times the size. And, of course, trade is booming, with many of the poorest countries in Africa enjoying substantial royalties from oil and mineral production.

Co-optation is the way to describe the increasing extent to which government and multilateral agency contributions to the UN development system are tied to donor conditions and earmarked for specific countries, priorities and groups rather than determined by the

Development System (UNDS) worldwide (and over 1,400 for the UN as a whole, including peace operations). The numbers, moreover, are growing not shrinking. Criticism is getting louder as impatience grows with proliferation, decentralization, rivalry, turf battles and redundancy.

Capacity is another variable. What exactly can the system do? How robust is the expertise within it? What are its comparative advantages, and how can they be maximized? Merely replicating the activities from the past is not viable, and limping along does not suffice, although it seems to be the default option.

Complacency characterizes the attitude of too many members of the international civil service who do not seem to recognize that there is a crisis, and that a transformative change must be made to prevent the UNDS from becoming a marginalized anachronism.

Another “C” is for “consolidation” or “centralization.” The UN’s structure would have puzzled even Rube Goldberg, the celebrated U.S. cartoonist whose elaborate contraptions a journalist described as a “symbol of man’s capacity for exerting maximum effort to achieve minimal results.” The structure and procedures, along with donor incentives, explain why individual UN organizations focus on their own substantive areas and eschew a coordinated UN path; they prefer to go it alone. Backed by separate budgets, governing boards, and organizational cultures as well as independent executive heads, an almost universal chorus sings the atonal tune praising decentralization and autonomy. The UN’s principal organ charged with oversight, the Economic and Social Council, provides one of the main concert halls for this cacophony.

To be fair, there has been adaptation by the UN over time. Indeed, founders might well not recognize today what they created in 1945, when such problems as the environment and women’s rights were not on the agenda—problems that have subsequently spawned a variety of institutional adaptations and changes. At the same time, our perspective reflects how empty the current glass



by foreign direct investment, private capital, worker remittances, export receipts, taxes and mining royalties.

Besides being hemmed in by an increasingly competitive environment, the UN has its own inherent weaknesses, giving urgency to considerations about its purpose in the post-2015 era. Five kinds of weaknesses characterize the current UN system: competition, coherence, co-optation, capacity and complacency.

Competition has squeezed the system out of the aid mainstream. The UN is now the source of less than 14% of total ODA. The UN’s operations are essentially financed by ODA, which is less and less important in comparison

UN itself. Earmarking by donors threatens to undermine the capacity of the UN to address effectively a universal development agenda represented by the SDGs. Indeed, the single largest source of funding for the operational UN is the European Commission and its agencies, for which UN organizations act as implementing agencies.

Coherence, or actually lack thereof, is a long-standing lament. Few would deny that the system is atomized. Apart from the number of different entities, there is their physical dispersion. The headquarters of the main organizations are in 14 different countries (and 15 cities). There are also more than 1,000 representative offices of the UN

is after seven decades. Robert Jackson was one of the operational giants of multilateralism for the Allies in World War II and the UN afterwards. He began his 1969 *Capacity Study*'s evaluation of the UN development system by writing: "The machine as a whole has become unmanageable in the strictest sense of the word. As a result, it is becoming slower and more unwieldy like some prehistoric monster." That sentence infuriated heads of UN organizations then, but the lumbering dinosaur is now older and certainly not better adapted to the climate of the 21st century.

There have been serious debates but only half-hearted efforts at reform, including the 2006 "Delivering as One" report (DaO). But astonishingly, the most serious scrutiny about the fundamental role of the system took place in 1969; and we could do far worse than revisit the Jackson report's recommendations. While the importance of the world's body in helping to confront a growing litany of global challenges has never been greater, the UN is disjointed and demoralized. Former UN Under Secretary-General Margaret Joan Anstee lamented that after 45 years, the *Capacity Study* remained "the 'Bible' of UN reform because its precepts are lauded by everyone but put into effect by no one."

The UN needs to be fitter for purpose if it is to be a useful institution in the post-2015 era. But unlike most public organizations, there are no incentives to pursue cost-effectiveness because member states are either the UN's interested patrons or its patronized partners. Such cozy relationships are impediments, but they are also opportunities for reformers: impediments because any proposal that purports to reduce the UN's footprint will meet opposition (from donor countries that are hosts of UN organizations, or developing countries with a large UN presence); but opportunities as well because one or a few influential member states can work to champion change. Fortunately, there are initiatives to pursue.

The most recent overall reform blueprint consists of the 2006 DaO report of the High-level Panel on UN System-



A nurse gives a health record to the mother of a malnourished child waiting to be seen at a clinic of the NGO Kuwait Patient Helping Fund in Abu Shouk camp for Internally Displaced Persons, North Darfur, Sudan. (ALBERT GONZÁLEZ FARRAN/UNAMID)

wide Coherence. The recommendations from this panel, convened by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, are still pertinent but are only very slowly being implemented. Having more than 1,000 country representatives is wasteful, and while maintaining a universal presence, the UN's country operations should be scaled-back in a growing number of emerging and middle-income countries. The world body should concentrate more on those specific situations in which its operational role will remain indispensable, particularly in conflict-prone countries. In fragile environments, the UN should combine its operations with its other main roles of peacebuilding, including humanitarian relief, and the promotion of human rights and social justice.

The DaO report recommended that the UN system deliver as a unit instead of as a menagerie at the country level, but it never questioned why more than 20 different UN organizations still require separate offices in program countries, and overlooked the fact that transaction costs increased rather than decreased. While not achieving the hopes for one leader, one program, one fund and one office in more than a handful of cases, UN development organizations are collaborating more closely in some instances. An encour-

aging sign was the merger of four entities to form UN Women, the result of painstaking negotiation over four years—the first time in UN history that major institutional entities were closed down and consolidated. The panel also recommended a rapprochement of the UN with the World Bank, which appears to be taking place informally, through growing contacts between the Korean-born heads of the two institutions, hopefully leading to joint programs in some troubled states.

Most recommendations from 2006, however, remain moribund. The proposal to vest the UN Environment Programme with "real authority as the environmental policy pillar of the UN" was widely mooted at the Rio+20 conference in 2012, but it has barely advanced. The Commission for Sustainable Development was re-vamped but falls short of the authoritative Sustainable Development Board envisaged to oversee and drive the DaO initiative. Two of the recommendations that would have done more than any others to bring greater coherence to the system have not materialized: the appointment of a respected development thinker to oversee the entire system, and the establishment of single consolidated funds for the UN development system in each country.



The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti's (MINUSTAH) Civil Affairs and the Brazilian UN Peacekeepers held a Civilian/Military Community event at a school in the volatile neighborhood of Cité Soleil. (LOGAN ABASSI/MINUSTAH/UN PHOTO)

There have been fledgling efforts to promote coherence under Ban Ki-moon, the current UN Secretary-General. Some business practices are being harmonized. More system-wide evaluations are envisaged. A cautious plan has been proposed to align seven research and training entities. That such seemingly obvious steps are still merely under consideration and viewed as stretches is a reflection of the magnitude of the task.

Some new initiatives could have a beneficial impact. In an attempt to bring the different parts of the system together and more partners into the UN's work, the secretary-general has launched several programs: Every Woman, Every Child; Sustainable Energy for All; the Global Education First Initiative; Zero Hunger Challenge; the Scaling-Up Nutrition Movement; and the Call to Action on Sanitation. These initiatives demonstrate the continued proclivity for accretion—adding but never retiring redundant relics. However, if they encourage existing UN organizations to take charge and extend partnerships, perhaps they will have helped

to move the UN toward the kind of transformation required.

The requisite overhaul is not only urgent but also unprecedented. Radical reform has been elusive and change incremental. As former UN Deputy Secretary-General Mark Malloch-Brown puts it: “a long period of tinkering with the UN machinery may actually allow the growing gap between performance and

need to increase....[T]he call for reform is likely to grow steadily” and “the question remains when, not if.” The authors' own research and interpretation of the last seven decades of development efforts show more and more moving parts but with less and less synergy, as well as higher transaction costs related to coordination for both host governments and for UN staff, but with too few results. ■

Future reform

The UN's operations, particularly in developing and transition countries, are its most visible feature, and most conversations about reform concern the operational delivery capabilities of the UN development system through its technical cooperation activities. But such assistance has diverged too far from the other primary function of the UN system—its contribution to the ways that states, organizations and individuals think about problems and formulate meaningful policies. The UN's development goals are the products of this ideational role, although in the case of the SDGs, the UN Secretariat's intellectual contribution has been minimal. This absence of original UN thinking belies the findings of a decade of research from the United Nations Intellectual History Project, which demonstrated the world organization's exceptional role in the generation of ideas, norms, principles, data and standards. In many ways, these efforts have been a singular contribution, one that can thrive even amid the system's institutional silos.

Human development

However, translating ideas into practice is where the UN falters. There are two parts to the problem. The first consists of attempting to define a unifying development paradigm by bringing together the many solid ideas that have emerged from the system. In the 1990s, for instance, the UN Development Programme (UNDP)

came up with “human development,” which was a value-driven riposte to the Washington Consensus that emphasized liberal economic reform without considering the human costs. Defined over the course of many global, regional and country reports, human development is a paradigm that places individual well-being, not only economic growth, as the central target of human progress. Inherent in the concept are the rights, capacities and opportunities of the individual and the creation of an enabling environment. Unfortunately, human development never caught on across the entire UN development system—not because of any inconsistency with UN values, but rather because the atomized system could never find and occupy common ground.

So, human development was “copyrighted” as a UNDP idea. The rest of the system was still defining development in narrower dimensions by organizational sectors and mandates: economic, social and environmental. These are the three facets of “sustainable development” that anchor the SDGs. However it is unlikely that sustainable development will “broaden the frame of reference and community in which development issues are understood, decisions are taken, and implementation is executed and evaluated,” as outlined by Ban Ki-moon. In fact, it is likely to permit an array of isolated efforts to be displayed side-by-side, with different UN organizations championing favored angles. A coherent paradigm

would require the kind of collaboration across agencies and perspectives that cannot easily come from the UN development system as currently configured.

The second part of the problem arises in putting the UN's ideas into practice—"operationalizing" development, however defined, by every part of the system. UN organizations are a source of original research and ideas, on which global norms and standards are based. They embody the universal values for which the UN is rightly cherished. In areas such as human rights, gender equality, health, employment and environmental standards, the UN is the critical source of value-based global norms that aspire to universal application. But the expansion in the numbers and scope of these standards is not matched by the efforts of the UN development system to help ensure compliance.

The MDGs' agenda at least focused the system on the goals that it had helped to establish. But too much of the UN's technical cooperation—the backbone of its operations—is spent on free-standing project initiatives, many only tenuously connected to the system's own norms. The World Health Organization cannot itself deliver better health to the world, including halting the spread of Ebola, but it can actively promote its own healthcare norms and raise funds for its own niche activities. The International Labor Organization mobilizes resources to help build labor-intensive rural roads and also sets up cooperatives, but its principal vocation is ensuring greater compliance with the conditions and safety standards it established for the world's workforce. The Office for Drugs and Crime has sought for many years to stamp out narcotics cultivation, without success; much more important are its efforts to promote and monitor compliance with the UN Convention against Corruption (of which it is the custodian) but here too headway is hard to verify. The UN Industrial Development Organization has played a role in helping industrial enterprises to phase out the use of ozone-destroying substances,

but it is also involved in many other industry-related activities that have no normative footings but are attractive to donors. The UN development system could be more effective if it were to expend more resources on issues in which it has been instrumental in setting standards, and less in areas where there are growing numbers of alternative sources of assistance.

Getting the UN system and its staff to think and act more normatively will necessitate changes in organizational culture. In 2013, the secretary-general revived a proposal originally put forward by his predecessor that he called "Human Rights Up Front." The purpose of the new initiative has been described as an attempt to ensure that the UN system "takes early and effective action, as mandated by the Charter and UN resolutions, to prevent or respond to large-scale violations of human rights or international humanitarian law. It seeks to achieve this by realizing a cultural change within the UN system, so that human rights and the protection of civilians are seen as a system-wide core responsibility." Officials are encouraged to embrace moral courage and prevent serious and large-scale human rights violations. It remains to be seen whether cultural change results, and whether

staff can count on the support of the UN's leadership in taking a moral stand on rights issues.

At the global level, the importance of having a system is nowhere more in evidence than in the UN's attempts to face up to major, longer-term development challenges. If the UN is to have an impact in improving the planet's environmental management, climate change, food security, migration and many other issues, it requires marshaling "coalitions of the willing" of different organizations within its own development pillar (technical, normative and operational).

2016 marks the beginning of a renewed development agenda and coincides with the last year of current Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's tenure. One of his legacies seemingly will have been to preside over the continuing decline of the UN's development system. Inertia will not be a viable organizational strategy for the next secretary-general.

The discouraged reader may very well be tempted to ask, is the system actually capable of fundamental change? We have been asking that question in a series of public opinion surveys over the last four years among people worldwide who support and are usually familiar with the UN's work.



United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon rides a bike made of bamboo during a meeting with the Ghana Bamboo Bike Initiative at the UN Climate Conference in Warsaw, Poland, November 20, 2013. (ALIK KEPLICZ/AP PHOTO)

Samples in the U.S. would undoubtedly be more indifferent and probably more hostile toward the very notion of international cooperation and the role for the UN system. However, it is worth noting that a large majority of informed respondents worldwide in the latest expert survey of December 2014 were “optimists” (77%) who maintained that the system could change, while only a quarter remained pessimistic. The proportion of pessimists was smaller among emerging powers (15%) and larger among developed countries (31%). Over the years, voices from some 10,000

citizens (two thirds from the global South) have also identified possible directions for UN reform, with more optimists than pessimists.

Rankings of individual organizations have shown very wide ranges of perception of both relevance and effectiveness. An informed global expert public has called for the merger of many overlapping UN organizations. For the system as a whole, the most urgent and feasible changes are to modernize business practices, which are too complex, expand partnerships with other development organizations and clarify the relationship with the Wash-

ington-based financial institutions. The views in the global South about the urgency of UN reform are often more strident than those of the North, although the support for a UN system with less state control and more norm-making and operational autonomy are feeble everywhere.

Whether the UN’s development glass is half-full or half-empty, clearly there is very substantial room for improvement to get the United Nations that we want for the world that we want, or even for the world that we have. Does an opportunity arise with the forthcoming election of the next secretary-general? ■

Next SG must be a reformer

For only the second time—the first was in 1996—the electoral campaigns for the American president and the United Nations secretary-general are running in parallel. Both promise to be long and protracted. Each has a growing slate of presumptive candidates pounding flesh and employing lobbyists.

But the next year will witness very different selection processes. U.S. presidential aspirants will be watched, tested, and paraded in front of respectful and hostile audiences in a vetting that is far more prolonged than the electoral campaign for most heads of state. Americans undoubtedly will be fatigued by and fed-up with the seemingly never-ending process, but the citizens of the planet are at the opposite end of the spectrum: they have virtually no say in selecting the UN’s top official.

Indeed, the UN Charter says precious little about how the secretary-general is to be selected. If past is prelude, however, the successful candidate for the planet’s top job will, as spelled out in Charter Article 97, be rubber-stamped by the General Assembly after being selected by an extraordinarily compact electoral college of five: the veto-wielding members of the Security Council—the U.S., the

United Kingdom, China, France and Russia. The main “tests” will be geographic origin, which this time favors Eastern Europe, and perhaps gender. “Why not a female secretary-general for the first time?” rhetorically asks Equality Now, a network of women’s rights groups.

After seven decades of elections for individuals based as much on accident as on merit, the decibel level is growing for a shakeup in the traditional UN process of leadership selection. The 1 for 7 Billion campaign emerged in 2015 and uses social media and other means to call for a more transparent process, including a shortlist for all member states to evaluate. Importantly, it has called for geography to be secondary and for the more inclusive process to identify a secretary-

general who is “highly skilled, competent, persuasive and visionary.” If seven billion constituents along with 188 other member states cannot vote, could their views at least be better represented? Could some modest accountability not be introduced into the usual great power manipulation? How about a basic job description?

Only Pollyanna would hope for a comprehensive vetting in 2016, but calls for change may have more traction than in the past. In early September 2015, the General Assembly passed resolution 69/321 that asked the presidents of the assembly and of the Security Council to send a joint letter to states describing the entire process and to “conduct informal dialogues or meetings” with declared candidates. It also called for candidates’ names and CVs to be circulated.

An absolutely essential element of any candidate’s platform should be a candidate’s “vision” for the future shape of a reformed UN system and how to make the most of its 80,000 international civil servants (and some 125,000 military and civilian peacekeepers). While geopolitical change is beyond the writ of the secretary-general, shaking up the system and its staff members is not.

Resigning in utter frustration, the first incumbent, Trygve Lie of

Box 2: UN secretaries-general 1945–2016

SECRETARY-GENERAL	NATIONALITY	DATES OF SERVICE
Trygve Halvdan Lie	Norway	2/1946–9/1952
Dag Hammarskjöld	Sweden	4/1953–9/1961
U Thant	Burma	9/1961–12/1971
Kurt Waldheim	Austria	1/1972–12/1981
Javier Pérez de Cuéllar	Peru	1/1982–12/1991
Boutros Boutros-Ghali	Egypt	1/1992–12/1996
Kofi Annan	Ghana	1/1997–12/2006
Ban Ki-moon	S. Korea	1/2007–12/2016

Norway, described his seven years at the helm as “the most impossible job in the world.” In addition to being battered by politics, he and his successors have unsuccessfully tried to make sense of a fragmented and decentralized system engaged in virtually every sphere of human activity: peace and security operations; humanitarian assistance; promotion of human rights and justice; establishment of norms and conventions; and the provision of technical assistance for peace-building and development.

The job is all the more complex because within the system, the “boss” is only *primus inter pares*. The UN’s specialized agencies are independently funded and managed, answering only to their own governors and donors. Even the special funds and programs of the UN proper are largely autonomous.

The last two decades have witnessed a few promising innovations: the International Criminal Court; the Global Compact; the Peacebuilding Commission; and the Human Rights Council. However, these innovations have added new moving parts. UN member states and secretariats normally respond to emerging problems by creating new mechanisms, often putting existing UN organizations in unworkable configurations but virtually never getting rid of old institutions. More and more organizations are at the table but without a common menu.

As indicated earlier, the painful process of formulating new SDGs has been a predictable, if lamentable, reflection of the cumbersome system at work. The UN’s progressive marginalization is one reason not to be complacent about their implementation.

A second reason is the evidence from past attempts at reform that a strong leader committed to change, and with the vision and communication skills to match, can make a difference. Key reform initiatives could and should be on the radar screen of the next secretary-general. The question is not what and whether, but when and how.



President Barack Obama (center) and world leaders pose for a photograph before a UN Peacekeeping Summit, September 28, 2015, at UN headquarters. (ANDREW HARNIK/AP PHOTO)

Thus, it is critical to identify and elect a secretary-general who understands the flaws in the structure and staffing of the component parts of the dysfunctional UN family and has the knowledge, determination and charisma to confront and hopefully correct at least some of them.

Indeed, the chances for significant institutional change are normally enhanced during the “honeymoon,” the first months of a secretary-general’s term. Both Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan instituted their most sweeping staffing and management changes in 1992, 1997 and 2002. Let’s insist on similar initiatives from 2016’s successful candidate.

The 1 for 7 Billion campaign has also recommended a single term of six or seven years for the next secretary-general (instead of a renewable one of five years), a proposal that has been raised repeatedly over the years but without success. Doing so would require overcoming tradition and regional claims for parity but not a Charter revision. And it could eliminate the caution that customarily accompanies concerns for re-election and jolt the eventual nominee with a greater sense of urgency to strengthen—and actually transform—the world organization.

Policy implications in DC

While the UN should, it undoubtedly will not figure in the presidential debates or American voting decisions for the November 8, 2016, presidential election. Nonetheless, a crucial input will come from the presidential transition team about the UN’s next leader, and what he or she should do with the atomized UN system.

In spite of the obvious shortcomings resulting from the SDGs kitchen-sink, these goals nonetheless provide a framework of an ambitious development agenda for 2016–30. This framework contains the vocabulary for the next administration to exert leadership in pushing for sensible priorities and sequencing for concessional finance and investment by the U.S. and by the Washington-based international financial institutions.

The same kind of supportive multilateral rhetoric and initiatives that characterized the early Obama and Bush administrations could well have an impact in Washington. Let’s hope that the muddled process of formulating the SDGs will not be implemented by an ineffectual new UN secretary-general. The selection of that person in late 2016 will provide a crucial opportunity for the next U.S. administration to weigh in and help save the UN system from itself. ■

discussion questions

1. Should there be more incentives provided by the UN to countries that are able to meet certain Sustainable Development Goals?
2. If nominated to be the next Secretary-General, what reforms would you push? In addition, what initiatives would you undertake in order to make the SDGs more successful?
3. Of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which is the one that seems the most likely to be achieved? What about the least? Why?

4. Do you think that there is too much power vested in the Security Council veto? How would you change this system without encroaching on any of the permanent member's interests?
5. Is there a global issue left unaddressed by the SDGs? Do you share the authors' opinion that the SDGs are trying to take on too much at once?
6. Which of the "five weaknesses" of the UN mentioned by the authors has the most detrimental effect on the organization? Which one is the easiest to solve and how should we go about it?

Don't forget: Ballots start on page 99!

suggested readings

Browne, Stephen, **The United Nations Development Programme and System**. New York, Routledge, 2011. 192 pp. Browne offers a brief overview of the system of organizations that delivers technical assistance in developing countries.

Browne, Stephen and Weiss, Thomas G., eds., **Post-2015 UN Development: Making Change Happen?** New York: Routledge, 2014. 276 pp. This set of essays examines the problems and prospects of the development challenges facing the UN system.

Chesterman, Simon, ed., **Secretary of General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 280 pp. Gordonker, Leon. **The UN Secretary-General and Secretariat**. London: Routledge, 2010. 126 pp. These books provide insights into the leadership and administration of the world organization.

Jolly, Richard, Emmerij, Louis and Weiss, Thomas G., **UN Ideas That Changed the World**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 339 pp. This final volume in the United Nations Intellectual

History Project Series examines the UN's exceptional role in the generation of ideas, norms, principles, data and standards.

Murphy, Craig N., **The UN Development Programme: A Better Way?** New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006. 392 pp. This authoritative history of UNDP argues for the enduring relevance of the network's founding principles.

United Nations, **Delivering as One**. New York, United Nations, 2006. Available free online at: <http://www.un.org/en/ga/deliveringasone/pdf/mainreport.pdf>. This report offers an evaluation of the Development Program and System, and proposes solutions to UN structural fragmentation.

Weinlich, Silk, **Reforming Development Cooperation at the United Nations: An Analysis of Policy Positions and Actions of Key States on Reform Options**. Bonn: German Development Institute, 2011. 152 pp. Weinlich puts forward key issues from the point of view of key actors about the reform of the development system.

Weiss, Thomas G., **What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. This book contains a concise list of the UN's ailments and suggests possible prescriptions.

To access web links to these readings, as well as links to additional, shorter readings and suggested web sites,

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