

The Long Pedigree of United Nations Development System Reforms: Continuity and Change

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“I am sorry; I could not reform the UN in three weeks!”

*“Mr. Secretary General, what are you complaining about? God made the world
in one week!”*

“Yes, but he had a key advantage, he was working alone!”

(Exchange between UN SG Kofi Annan and Russian Ambassador Lavrov) 1

1. - Introduction

This article explores the historical path of the United Nations Development System reforms (UNDS). In particular, the linear progression that exists from the Jackson Report of 1969 to the “Delivering as One” proposal of 2006, until the last challenges envisaged by the current UN Secretary General António Guterres. It identifies the permanence of an ongoing attempt to deal with the fundamental issues of efficiency and rationalization within the system. These efforts were highlighted in a recurrent way in 1969, in 1975, partially in 1995, and more vigorously in 2006, within the “Delivering as One” (DaO) reform program, initiated by the previous UN SG Kofi Annan.

Given that the DaO is the last child of a long generation of attempts, it is still considered among the United Nations practitioners and academics to be the most suitable reform. A reform that could be capable in this sense to achieve coherence and reduce duplications within the UNDS. To reduce

1 This exchange has been revealed personally by Mr. Kofi Annan during the BBC “HARDtalk” interview celebrating his 80th birthday at the Graduate Institute in Geneva on 12th April 2018.

- This anecdote with the current Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, (previously on duty as Russian ambassador to the UN HQ in New York 1994-2004) was not edited later in the BBC publicly broadcasted version.

the duplications, in particular at the level of the target country, and thus avoid wasting increasingly limited resources.

The article follows a chronological approach, highlighting the “*étappes*” that differentiate the issue of UNDS reforms within the global galaxy of United Nations agencies and programmes.

In this respect, on the whole, this article draws lessons on the ideal way of reforming the UNDS. This becomes evident from this historical trajectory, which does indeed include past failures. It is a particularly interesting exercise if, for example, one wishes to include the current UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in such an evolutionary context.

A specific section of this article examines the inherent tensions between the first and second tier of the United Nations in this reform process. They also played, from the outset, and continue to play, an important role in deterring the materialization of these proposals for reform. Finally, the conclusions based on the current proposals include a reflection on a possible scenario for moving forward in addressing a “still” possible reform

2. - The trajectory of UN reforms from Jackson to Guterres - initial steps.

It is often argued, paradoxically, that the first reform of the UN system has already been contemplated since 1945 when the United Nations started as the post-war successor of the League of Nations (Müller: 2016, Salter: 1957)

The need for a first reform of the “*modus operandi*” of this primary international organization was regularly demanded by the United Nations diplomatic community. This professional milieu has played a first direct functional role and has meanwhile acquired on-the-ground development experience (Kaufmann:1971). At the outset, such a reform was needed even before the United Nations became a major player in global development, starting in the 1950s and 1960s.

As early as 1948, Lord Boyd Orr of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) realized the need for co-ordination

among the specialized agencies of the United Nations (at the time even a small number). This first issue of UN coordination on the ground is perhaps a direct consequence of the way the UN itself has been designed since the Washington treaty (Salter: 1957).

In this framework, the United Nations system has generated agencies and programmes without a genuine pragmatic concept of “foresight” about the consequences that such a “spillover effect”² could create in the system. This was due to the increasing exceedance of responsibilities in different areas of development (Müller:2006). Consequently, the autonomous character of each of the agencies of the United Nations system and the programme inevitably leads to a lack of coherence and coordination.

This situation has already manifested itself, particularly in the sixties, when the accelerated process of decolonisation really demanded a better understanding of implementation on the ground in the developing world. Decolonisation also led to a rapid increase in membership of the United Nations, reaching 118 Member States in 1965.

The urgent need for efficiency can be identified in the personal motivation upon which Robert Jackson³ assumed responsibility for drafting the first comprehensive UN reform report at that time (1969). He stated that: “My only reason for accepting this task was the hope that the study ultimately helps people in the developing countries” (and further) “it is important that the international organisations should function efficiently for the sake of all mankind” (report cit.).

2.1 The Jackson Report, 1969.

This study was necessary to adapt the United Nations development system to the new challenges of the time in order to speed up the development assistance and technical cooperation required by the South. Originally called “A Survey

2 The spillover effect often refers to an effect experienced by an independent event to a seemingly unrelated cause.

3 A former Royal Australian Navy officer who was “loaned” to the Royal Navy in 1938 and later UN administrator since the Lake Success UN headquarter period (1946 to 1951),

of the Capacity of the United Nations System for Development” it lasted a year of work. Jackson in such an enterprise was particularly committed to ensuring the proper functioning of the UN system.

Such a commitment has been made also for developing countries to comply through cooperation with the less privileged regions of the world. On the development side of the UN, this was also a necessary requirement given by the merger of 1966 (Meron:1976). The union between the Expanded Technical Assistance Programme (EFAP) and the United Nations Special Fund, which jointly established what has since become the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).⁴ Just prior to the merger of UNDP, also new UN development entities were created, namely the Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and UNCDF - the UN Capital Development Fund (Müller 2016).

Jackson's report had a peculiar imprint of his personality as the team leader of the drafting group. His pragmatic style, including the use of very direct expressions, was considered by some in the diplomatic circles to be too “aggressive”⁵. But this unconventional style has nevertheless pushed international organizations and governments to pay more attention to it, and to attack the systematic sophism of the UNDS.

For the diplomatic community, the principal contribution of the reform report comes from the conclusions on pages 22 and 23 of the original text, which are still important today. Because there are still such falsehoods as were pointed out in the Jackson report. (Weiss: 2016).

For example, the relations, between UNDP and the International Bank for Restructuring and Development⁶ have been, since the 1960s, a matter of duplication and gaps in development financing.

The factors that Jackson identified as important for the UN to achieve effective results (not only because of the creation of UNDP), included a

4 It was in June 1968 that the UNDP Governing Council decided to give a mandate for a reform report. This work was supported at the same time by an extensive survey on development aid conducted by experts in the “Pearson Commission”.

5 The UN is a “machine” and a “prehistoric monster” in Jackson's words.

6 The IBRD as part of the World Bank group.

seamless information system, post-programming monitoring procedure⁷ and flexible and timely project implementation.⁸ A number of points for improvement were raised, particularly in the areas of programme and project formulation, followed by overall coherence, execution and monitoring (Meron: 1976).

Meanwhile, the lasting issues listed in the Jackson report have been significantly improved and resolved over the last 50 years. Particularly within UNDP, which was the main target of this report, and also the main guardian of UN development assistance, could better handle these criticisms (Kaufmann:1971). Examples of such reforms were the subsequent creation in the 1970s of UNDP regional bureaus and the function of the Resident Representative.⁹

However, apart from the case of UNDP, as a whole, and across the UNDP galaxy, the Jackson report remains a partial failure. It was not implemented with immediate success. With the deficiencies enlisted, the report helped in any case to set up a development program for the reforms which were later revised. At least at that time there was a consensus for such an undertaking; the report was approved by ECOSOC and later adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1970.

2.2 - The Gardner report, 1975.

In the context of the North-South decolonization “cooperation”¹⁰, the work titled “A New UN Structure for Global Economic Co-operation” was the one of the following attempts in a row to address the UN reforms. It was drawn up by a group of experts mandated by the United Nations General Assembly (GA/RES/3343 (xxix)) and named “Group of Experts on the Structure of the United Nations System”. It was also called the “Gardner report”, named after its *rappporteur*, Richard Gardner.

7 E.g. the phasing-out component in a project cycle.

8 These are issues and inherent problems typical to any cumbersome bureaucracy.

9 In UNDP jargon called the RR, or ResRep.

10 The term “cooperation” is historically contentious because the process of decolonization has been a torn issue leading to conflicts and wars in several countries for many years.

In particular, the experts discussed the structural changes confronting social and economic development within the UN system itself. The working group focused in particular on the notion of "Operational Activities", in order to make them fully capable of dealing with developing countries in an exhaustive manner. These include measures to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations to develop international economic policies and proposals to consolidate operational activities and funds into a single UN Development Authority (Müller:1994). This was to be coupled with the integration of inter-governmental bodies and associated secretariats.

Other proposals in the Gardner report included the restructuring of ECOSOC, a new type of the consultative process and the consolidation of development funds into a new United Nations Development Authority. On top of that, there are the creation of a new position of Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation to provide leadership to the UN system (Schlesinger:1997).

Finally, the Gardner Report also defined the role of the Resident Representative (RR) as already highlighted in the previous Jackson Report. In addition, in line with the need for a common information system referred to in the Jackson Report, it included a provision for the sharing of statistical information concerning voluntary or compulsory funding contributions. This was specific to operational activities and expenditures funded by these contributions to UNDS organizations.

The Gardner report was presented and discussed at the Seventh Extraordinary Session of the UN General Assembly (1 - 16 September 1975). However, no specific recommendations were approved, as the report was the subject of considerable controversy within the Assembly. To guarantee a possible outcome from the report in order not to lose the momentum and efforts, the General Assembly established the Ad Hoc Committee on the Restructuring of the Economic and Social Sectors of the UN System.

After two years of negotiations, the working group arrived at a compromise to at least include some of the proposals in the Gardner report which,

however, are considerably diluted (Florini&Pascual: 2007). Indeed, one of the accepted measures that survived scrutiny was obviously to strengthening the role of the UN General Assembly itself, but this did not reach a capacity of control over the World Bank, IMF and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). In addition, a Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation has been created.

2.3 - The 1980s.

In such limiting circumstances, after the attempt of the Gardner Report of 1975, a better role was played in addressing the development of the United Nations through the new ad hoc Brandt Commission - from 1979 to 1992. This commission, known as "One World", played a central role in the North-South conflict, notably described in the 1980 "Brandt Report" (Schlesinger:1997). The work of this UN commission was more "philosophical" in terms of the North-South world order, rather than pragmatic centered on UN reforms.¹¹ At the same time, in the 1980s, the demands for UN reform continued, but were accompanied by a new withholding of funds (Müller:1995).

2.4 - The Carlsson - Ramphal report, 1995.

The report entitled "Our Global Neighbourhood", while not expressing a reform proposal for the UNDS, nonetheless focused on areas that were relevant to it. Particularly in regard to the peacekeeping component, and the idea of an economic security council to deal with global human security issues. In order to draft this report, a Commission on Global Governance,¹² was included within a larger set of working groups to address the preparation for the 50th anniversary of the UN (Schlesinger:1997). Even if this seems to be just an arbitrary date, it is very important to understand the role of each working group's outcome in the framework set by the end of the cold war. In that sense, the United Nations had to take the initiative, or at least take the necessary steps, to reform and take

11 Such approach is called the "Brandt line".

12 The Carlsson-Ramphal Commission.

on new roles in world governance.¹³ Among several proposals of the global governance commission, the most radical were the creation of a standing UN army and the end to the veto power of the five permanent members of the Security Council (Mathiason:1995).

Despite the festive mood, no decision on the proposed reform of the Carlsson-Ramphal Commission was taken during the anniversary of the United Nations. The only proposal that came into existence was the new International Criminal Court. At least the international community reached this landmark when 120 states agreed on this tribunal treaty signed in Rome. - Three years ahead of the Carlsson - Ramphal report, on 17 July 1998.

2.5 - The “Delivering as One” report, 2006.

The constant struggle for coherence in the UN system and greater harmony among UN specialized agencies followed the 2005 World Summit. This was mainly in support of the reform process envisaged by the Carlsson - Ramphal report. However, we should also consider another important task because the United Nations has in the meantime taken on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It became clear that, logically, to achieve the goals and their funding objectives, a reform of UN field practices was urgently required. The UN Secretary-General, at the time Kofi Annan, asked a high-level group to formulate new institutional proposals to that effect. The “Delivering as One” (DaO) initiative has been implemented and is based on four rational principles: one leader, one program, one budget and one office (Freiesleben:2008).

Among several other DaO arguments, traces of what Jackson originally reported in 1969 were also evident in the DaO proposal of 2006. Calling for instance the UN Secretary-General, the World Bank president, and the IMF managing director, to reach formal agreements on their respective roles and relationships at the global and country levels. UN Secretary-General Kofi

13 E.g. making the verdicts of the International Court of Justice binding.

Annan, at the end of his term, also wanted to leave a good instrument of reform in the hands of his successor. But the United Nations General Assembly did not approve this measure by the end of 2006.

This, however, has become a matter of success for the new Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon. Pushing strong in the direction of the reform of its predecessor Annan, the new UN SG wanted to approach the “Delivering as One” in a progressive manner (Freiesleben:2017). This involved a more flexible approach with some pilot countries to first assess operationalization against the criticisms of the UN General Assembly, particularly in the Global South (Müller:2006) .

Guided by the explorative role of the UNDG (Florini&Pascual:2007), a first group of countries represented by Albania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uruguay and Vietnam, started to adopt the DaO with standard operating procedures.

An evaluation of the pilot exercise demonstrated the validity of the programme and other shortcomings of the UN system in terms of overall coherence. For example, the need to rationalize the number of UN organizations (and their presence in the field), as part of the “Single Office” concept (Freiesleben:2008).

The “One Office” component of the DaO has been in fact the most challenging in terms of the consolidation of the UN agency presence on the field, in one single location and with shared services. Actually considering that UN agencies tend to set up their own offices in a capital city, bringing the group together under one roof, although not always physically, has already been a big accomplishment (Weiss:2016).

The author had the chance to value in person the operational side of the “One UN” reform on the field as a head of programme in one of the pilot/testing countries of the second wave (Kyrgyzstan). As a member of the UN Country Team between 2008 and 2010, the local practice observed, involved an improved role of the UN Country Resident Coordinator in the increasing convivial atmosphere created among UN agencies. In that new

setting, the UN Country Team (UNCT) was not acting any more as an information sharing hub, or a forum for coordination attempts, but went down concretely on joint interagency cooperation. Under the leadership of an RC, the result of this exercise was a comprehensive set of projects, no longer developed in silos, but shared and implemented jointly by the specialized agencies of the United Nations on the ground. The logic adopted by the United Nations SG Ban Ki-moon at the time, gradually starting from small settings, seems to have borne fruit. In the meantime, progressive changes have taken place and 50 countries have adopted the DaO approach by July 2015.

2.6 - The future.

Since the new UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, took office in January 2017, there has been considerable discussion of UN reforms, especially in the first year of his mandate (the so-called “honeymoon” in UN jargon). It seems to have been a pragmatic approach to take into account the broad but targeted nature of the proposals; there is a chance that something will actually happen.

The three main pillars of Guterres’ reform relate to all critical areas. Beginning first with the most torn, and perhaps difficult one, the United Nations leadership and personnel reform.

Earlier, Kofi Annan, during his mandate across the millennium, deplored in this respect the presence of “silos” that characterize the appointments and promotions of staff. In this sense, Annan stated his vision of an “independent international civil service, with the highest standards of performance and responsibility”. Guterres personally took the initiative of reforming the international civil service as early as January 1, 2017 (Ponzio&Schroeder:2017). Current management reforms are focused on reorganizations to better fulfill United Nations mandates.

Secondly, the development system is, in effect, the second pillar of the United Nations. With the right lenses, it is possible to see the continuation of

the implementation of various common objectives, envisaged from the DaO programme.

The current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as the MDGs before, now with DaO, need a new repositioning of the UN development system in order to implement the 2030 Agenda.

In this respect, five issues will be central to the ongoing development reform::

- An impartial and empowered RCs leading a new generation of Country Teams;
- A revamped regional approach, created by optimizing existing arrangements and ensuring the UN Regional Commissions serve as think tanks and intergovernmental platforms;
- Strengthened accountability by strengthening system-wide evaluation. With the ECOSOC possibly playing a larger role in system-wide coordination;
- A new Funding Compact, based on both greater results accountability by the UN system and an enhanced predictable base of funding by Member States, aimed at providing incentives for system-wide coordination; and
- A stronger partnership at scale for the 2030 Agenda. Underpinned by a system-wide approach to partnerships.

The important issue of the separation between the Resident Coordinator (RC) system and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is certainly being considered, as required.

Lastly, the third pillar concerns more the reform of the peace and security architecture that includes the very delicate issue of the Security Council and the P5.

3. - Conclusions

The constant evidence that emerges from this study on the different milestones paved along the path of UN development reform is certainly that they always come at a particular moment (momentum). The various stages of the trajectory (e.g., from section 2.1 to 2.5), are not only related to domestic problems within the United Nations, but also to substantial variations in the integrated international context.

Although the need for UN reforms has been there since the beginning of this International Organization, the years in which such a reform proposal has emerged are no coincidence. It makes perfect sense, if we think that the demands for UN reform have been raised either by the UN General Assembly or by the UN Secretary General himself. Historically, in fact, the Jackson report comes with a phase of global governance shaped by the Cold War that required pragmatic tools to confront the decolonization process. The Gardner report instead, relates to a time when the international system has been drastically shaken, by the oil crisis, the end of the gold standard and the idea of a new international economic order.

On the other hand, the reforms proposed before the end of the millenium are a necessity given by the end of the global polarization of two competing ideologies which monopolized the international system. This situation allowed the UN to become a better player after the end of the bi-polar system. The bipolar system has in fact been blocking the effectiveness of the United Nations organization for decades, particularly at the UN Security Council level, since 1945. Iconic in this sense is the 1995 proposal for a United Nations army, something unthinkable during the Cold War.

If we look back today and take into account the current competition between “the west and the rest”, we see that the 1990s were possibly the golden age for the UN (Fawcett&Newcombe:1995). To play a determinant developmental role in those countries that have been labelled “economies in transition”. At the same time, however, these new opportunities required a new series

of reforms within a new world order. “Our Global Neighbourhood” made, therefore the United Nations to be “rediscovered” and with astonishing speed, during the enthusiasm of the early 1990s. At that point, even the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, a position that has been always defiant with the UN, emphasized the importance of the UN organisation in maintaining peace and security.

Today, with the rising of the BRICS, the changing of world paradigms catalysed by the war in Ukraine and the increasing assertive role that China is playing within the UN, a major overall reform it is definitely needed. This possible UN reform could be sponsored innovatively by countries considered to be marginal a few years ago. Within the challenges of a new world architecture that is appearing, where old powers are in decline (particularly in the West) and new powers that belonged to the “Second World” are rising (in what was previously considered in general “the South”). From this perspective, the three-pillar reform proposal put forward by Secretary-General Guterres can be viewed positively. In particular, with the assistance of the European Union and Japan, which are still trying to achieve a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Simply put, this is an international system that is becoming more and more multilateral. In this regard, the United Nations development system, if it is to continue to function in a coherent way, needs to reform and adapt accordingly to current global challenges. As this article suggests, this has traditionally been an indicator of paradigm shifts in the past.

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