

## Is the United Nations Relevant?

Written by Monika Milinauskyte

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MONIKA MILINAUSKYTE, FEB 11 2011

***The United Nations exists not as a static memorial to the aspirations of an earlier age but as a work in progress – imperfect as all human endeavours must be but capable of adaptation and improvement***

(Annan, 2002: 2)

***If the United Nations did not exist, we would have to invent it. So why not to use our analytical toolkits to repair it?***

(Weiss, 2008: 16)

While those sixty five years of history have indicated significant weaknesses and failures in fulfilling its purposes, the UN with all its specialized agencies and development funds has extended its scope of action and remains the only international organization with universal membership. The virtue of the UN is that it provides a forum for different viewpoints to come together and ways to come to an agreement that produces results. Thus, the UN's role as a stage is particularly important. However, while placing focus upon the UN's role as an actor, many observers have indicated that it is somewhat limited, especially in the political sphere, where the UN often lacks a capacity to catalyse an action.

This paper argues that it is somewhat inadequate to focus on the UN's political realm only and dismiss the other substantive areas of its work such as sustainable development. The analysis is demonstrated by focusing upon the outstanding work of the UN's umbrella agencies, particularly the World Food Programme (WFP) which strengthened the UN's role as an actor in the field of development. The essay highlights that the work of the WFP has particularly extended the UN's scope of action and reveals its ability to provide immediate response to address complex problem such as hunger than any other international body or regional organization can. Thus, to dismiss the UN as an irrelevant body is preposterous because it is not only able to adapt and address the dynamics of the twenty first century but also has records of attempts to initiate its organizational changes if we adhere to the Secretary-General's proposed reform agenda. However, the UN needs to have a capacity in order to catalyse an action and effectively implement its agenda, especially in the political domain. The essay argues that although the UN faces serious structural problems that often impedes its role as an effective actor, the fundamental issue is that of the political will which limits the UN's capacity to take action and causes the organizational disintegration. In fact, how to generate the will remains one of the most complicated tasks of this century. Nonetheless, one hypothesis perhaps could be suggested in terms of strengthening the network of the UN's outstanding thinking before introducing any further reform or resolution enforcement agenda. Although, nobody should think that these attempts to design a new UN would be easy. But if the alternative is the ineffective and declining UN in the interconnected world where complex political, economical and social problems overlap; that is not going to be easy either.

It can be argued that despite the flaws in the political domain and the weaknesses of the Security Council, the UN's role in sustaining the economic and social development and addressing global issues such as hunger has been exceptionally strong. In particular, the role of the World Food Programme needs to be acknowledged in this context. The agency's work has been outstanding in the last decade due to the well developed logistical strategies to provide life saving food and ensure human security when humanitarian crises or violent conflicts emerge. The WFP indicated

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the growing number of hungry people which reached more than one billion in 2009. However, despite these challenges the WFP was able to provide life-saving food and nutrition assistance for 101.8 million people last year, affected by conflict, storms, droughts, displacement, financial crises and other shocks that left them without food (WFP, 2010: 1-5). In this respect, the UN's effectiveness should not be assessed only by its performance in ensuring international law. Its efforts in promoting human security and sustaining the development require adequate recognition too.

The WFP being the world's largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide, has extended the UN's scope of action and proved its ability to be an effective actor as well. The relevance of such humanitarian agency can be noticed while placing focus upon the WFP's strategic and effective response to the Haiti crisis where 53,000 children received micro-nutrition commodities in the first week (WFP, 2010: 6-13). In fact, it can be argued that the UN and its umbrella agency are needed as never before in order to address global issues such as hunger. It must be also noted that such global challenge can only be tackled collectively; especially the WFP's Purchase for Progress project (P4P) has been instrumental in encouraging collective work in order to promote economic growth and provide more food to affected populations. For instance, more than fifty partners, including government, UN agencies, local organizations and NGOs are working with the WFP to implement the P4P project (WFP, 2010: 31-33). The virtue of the P4P is that it aims to not only use the WFP's ability to buy food commodities but it also stipulates agricultural production among small holder farmers by encouraging them to sell their food commodities to the agency and ultimately link them to agricultural market (WFP, 2010: 33). Thus, it can be noted that international efforts are needed in building the capacity of the UN and its agencies and the WFP example reveals that when there is a will by the member states to address global concerns, the UN becomes a vital catalyst of action.

However, the majority of the UN's attempts to strengthen its mission and organizational effectiveness have been halted by its own members due to the lack of political will to adhere to the body's action agenda. For example, the Kyoto Protocol and the proposed ideas how to tackle and limit the impact of climate change were left to be unimplemented due to China's the USA's and India's lack of will to share the burden of this global issue (Jolly, Emmerij, Weiss, 2009: 155-158). In fact, the ineffective deployments of recent peacekeeping missions in Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) and Sudan (UNMIS) are also caused due to the lack of the will by the UN members to provide well trained troops and ensure robustness of the operations (DPKO, 2010). Thus, the problem of the will inevitably limits the UN's role as an effective actor.

Although, if we recall the unending series of reforms that have been tried more or less since the UN creation, it can be argued that UN is able to catalyse action and has the potential for improvement and adaptability. In particular, the action agenda for reform was initiated under the Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2002: 17-23) in his report *Strengthening the UN: An Agenda for Further Change* which proposed to reform the UN's mandates, funds, and promote the partnership with regional and nongovernmental organizations. While adhering to Annan's vision of change it can be asserted that the other three reform documents such as *Millennium Declaration* (2000), Secretary-General's report *High-Level Panel On Threats, Challenges and Change* (2004), followed by the 2005 report *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights For All* emerged as further developments indicating UN's ability to catalyse an action and initiate its organizational reforms. However, the UN reform activism did not prove to become a reality and the major explanation can again be linked with the fact that there was no will by the international community to adhere to these proposals and reach a consensus on how to implement the UN's structural reforms (Weiss, Forsythe, Coate, Pease, 2007: 108-113).

In fact, there should be less criticism about the role of the UN and more focus on the attempts to generate the political will because only the activeness of the UN members and their adherence to its action agenda will determine UN's future effectiveness and its capacity to catalyse an action. Robert Orr, Assistant Secretary-General, (cited in Traub, 2006: 266) highlights this hypothesis by claiming that 'as an actor, there is so little we can do, and often the people accusing us are the same ones who prevent us from being able to act'.

Thus, the major question which should be raised is not the one about the relevance of the UN, it is obviously needed; instead the major debates should evolve around the measures how to generate the political will of the member states. Perhaps one suggestion could be made in terms of strengthening the UN's intelligence. According to Thomas G.

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Weiss (2009: 219-220), 'just as the UN is a world centre for tying countries together so it must also be a place to network outstanding thinking'. If the UN seeks the alliance with academia, government policy units, think tanks, research centres this might encourage the member states to use their 'analytical toolkits' as well in building this network of the UN's outstanding thinking (ibid.). Perhaps this could be a starting point for the will to be generated as it can be argued that the willingness to act depends on the level of support and involvement in the UN's political as well as development work by the member states.

The past records have indicated that there is a possibility of the UN member states to reach a consensus even on the most controversial issues such as redefining the notion of sovereignty or even identifying the necessity of its organizational reforms, so why not to strengthen the UN's thinking this time by using our 'analytical toolkits'? Although, how to generate the political will is a remaining fundamental question of this century which requires a separate debate in order to identify the most needed measures. However, as long as the UN regardless of its somewhat limited capacity to act effectively continues moving forward and extends its role in the development domain, one might hope that the member states will show their political will to strengthen the UN's role as an actor, and ultimately repair its organizational ills.

This essay has sought to argue that the relevance of the UN should not be doubted. In fact, this international body is needed as never before since the world became interconnected where current global problems such as hunger and climate change emerged, thus the UN's collective efforts are essential in order to tackle these modern challenges. Although, in terms of the UN's political domain, global action to maintain international peace and security might not always be the best solution as it can lead towards inability to reach a consensus due to a vast number of countries taking different positions and showing little attempts for compromise. In particular, a composition and a somewhat weak role of the Security Council have resulted in the decline of the UN's authority and it became to be perceived as an unnecessary international body. However, the UN's role is not based upon the political domain only, on the contrary, it has been an effective actor in sustaining the development. The outstanding attempts and capacity of the WFP to combat hunger ensure human security by distributing life saving food as well as promoting the growth of economy by introducing the Purchase for Progress project, indicate that the UN has an exceptionally wide scope of action than any other international body has or attempted to have.

The UN has also attempted to improve its structure while placing focus upon Annan's numerous reform agendas, however, the lack of the will by the member states to implement the reforms impeded the UN's progress, especially in the political domain. The next step which should be taken is the one of the generation of the political will as it became a fundamental issue fuelling further UN disintegration. Reform agenda directed towards strengthening the UN's outstanding thinking could be a solution which might encourage the member states to be involved in building such network by using their 'analytical toolkits' which ultimately could lead towards better adherence to the UN's structural reform agenda. Clearly, it is relatively complicated to determine the measures that can generate the will and it is not going to be easy to design a new UN once these measures are discovered either. However, if the member states notice that the only alternative without the UN is to address the growing number of complicated interconnected and wide scope challenges by themselves. They will be left with no choice but to accept the fact that it might be better to collectively repair the UN rather than be left alone to face the dramatic challenges of the today's world.

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