

U.N. Day: Strengthening and Reforming
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24 October is U.N. Day, marking the day when there were enough ratifications including those of the five permanent members of the proposed Security Council for the U.N. Charter to come into force. It is a day not only of celebration, but also a day for looking at how the U.N. system can be strengthened, and when necessary, reformed.

There have been a number of periods when proposals for new or different United Nations structures were proposed and discussed. The first was in the 1944-1945 period when the Charter was being drafted. Some who had lived through the decline and then death of the League of Nations wanted a stronger world institution, able to move more quickly and effectively in times of crisis or at the start of armed conflict.

In practice, the League of Nations was reincarnated in 1945 in the U.N. Charter but the names of some of the bodies were changed and new Specialized Agencies such as UNESCO were added. There was some dissatisfaction during the San Francisco negotiations, and an article was added indicating that 10 years after the coming into force of the Charter a proposal to hold a U.N. Charter Review Conference would be placed on the Agenda - thus for 1955.

The possibility of a U.N. Charter Review Conference led in the 1953-1954 period to a host of proposals for changes in the U.N. structures, for a greater role for international law, for a standing U.N. "peace force". Nearly all these proposals would require modifications in the U.N. Charter.

When 1955 arrived, the United States and the Soviet Union, who did not want a Charter Review Conference which might have questioned their policies, were able to sweep the Charter Review agenda item under the rug from where it has never emerged. In place of a Charter Review Conference, a U.N. Committee on "Strengthening the U.N. Charter" was set up which made a number of useful suggestions, none of which were put into practice as such. The Committee on Strengthening the Charter was the first of a series of expert committees, "High-Level Panels" set up within the U.N. to review its functioning and its ability to respond to new challenges. There have also been a number of committees set up outside of the U.N. to look at world challenges and U.N. responses, such as the Commission on Global Governance.

While in practice there have been modifications in the ways the U.N. works, few of these changes have recognized an expert group's recommendations as the source of the changes. Some of the proposals made would have strengthened some factions of the U.N. system over the then current status quo - most usually to strength the role of developing countries (the South) over the industrialized States (the North). While the vocabulary of "win-win" modifications is often used, in practice few States want to take a chance, and the status quo continues.

Now, with a new Secretary General who knows well how the U.N. works from his decade as High Commissioner for Refugees, U.N. reform is again "in the air". There are an increasing number of proposals presented by governments and by non-governmental organizations associated with the U.N. The emphasis today is on what can be done without a revision of the Charter. Most of the proposals turn on what the Secretary General can do on his own authority. The Secretary General cannot go against the will of States - especially the most powerful States - , but he does have a certain power of initiative.

There are two aspects of the current U.N. system that were not foreseen in 1945 and which are important today. One is the extensive role of U.N. Peacekeeping Forces: the Blue Helmets. The other is the growing impact of non-governmental organizations. There is growing interest in the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the United Nations system in the making and the implementation of policies

at the international level. NGOs are more involved than ever before in global policy making and project implementation in such areas as conflict resolution, human rights, humanitarian relief, and environmental protection.(1)

NGOs at the UN have a variety of roles — they bring citizens' concerns to governments, advocate particular policies, present alternative avenues for political participation, provide analysis, serve as an early warning mechanism of potential violence and help implement peace agreements.

The role of consultative-status NGOs was written into the UN Charter at its founding in San Francisco in June, 1945. As one of the failings of the League of Nations had been the lack of public support and understanding of the functioning of the League, some of the UN Charter drafters felt that a role should be given to NGOs. At the start, both governments and UN Secretariat saw NGOs as an information avenue — telling NGO members what the governments and the UN was doing and building support for their actions. However, once NGOs had a foot in the door, the NGOs worked to have a two-way avenue — also telling governments and the Secretariat what NGO members thought and what policies should be carried out at the UN. Governments were none too happy with this two-way avenue idea and tried to limit the UN bodies with which NGOs could 'consult'. There was no direct relationship with the General Assembly or the Security Council. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in Article 71 of the Charter was the body to which "consultative-status NGOs" were related.

What in practice gives NGOs their influence is not what an individual NGO can do alone but what they can do collectively. 'Networking' and especially trans-national networking is the key method of progress. NGOs make networks which facilitate the trans-national movement of norms, resources, political responsibility, and information. NGO networks tend to be informal, non-binding, temporary, and highly personalized. NGOs are diverse, heterogeneous and independent. They are diverse in mission, level of resources, methods of operating and effectiveness. However, at the UN they are bound together in a common desire to protect the planet and advance the welfare of humanity.

The role of NGO representatives is to influence policies through participation in the entire policy-making process. What distinguishes the NGO representative's role at the UN from lobbying at the national level is that the representative may appeal to and discuss with the diplomats of many different governments. While some diplomats may be unwilling to consider ideas from anyone other than the mandate they receive from their Foreign Ministry, others are more open to ideas coming from NGO representatives. Out of the 193 Member States, the NGO representative will always find some diplomats who are 'on the same wave length' or who are looking for additional information on which to take a decision, especially on issues on which a government position is not yet set. Therefore, an NGO representative must be trusted by government diplomats and the UN Secretariat. As with all diplomacy in multilateral forums such as the UN, much depends upon the skill and knowledge of the NGO representative and on the close working relations which they are able to develop with some government representatives and some members of the UN Secretariat. Many Secretariat members share the values of the NGO representatives but can not try to influence government delegates directly. The Secretariat members can, however, give to the NGO representatives some information, indicate countries that may be open to acting on an issue and help with the style of presentation of a document.

It is probably in the environmental field — sustainable development — that there has been the most impact. Each environmental convention or treaty such as those on biological diversity or drought was negotiated separately, but with many of the same NGO representatives present. It is more difficult to measure the NGO role in disarmament and security questions. It is certain that NGO mobilization for an end to nuclear testing and for a ban on land mines and cluster weapons played a role in the conventions which were steps forward for humanity. However, on other arms issues, NGO input is more difficult to analyse.

‘Trans-national advocacy networks’ which work across frontiers are of increasing importance as seen in the efforts against land mines, for the International Criminal Court and for increased protection from violence toward women and children. The groups working on these issues are found in many different countries but have learned to work trans-nationally both through face-to-face meetings and through the internet web. The groups in any particular campaign share certain values and ideas in common but may differ on other issues. Thus, they come together on an *ad hoc* basis around a project or a small number of related issues. Yet their effectiveness is based on their being able to function over a relatively long period of time in rather complex networks even when direct success is limited.

These campaigns are based on networks which combine different actors at various levels of government: local, regional, national, and UN (or European Parliament, OSCE etc.). The campaigns are waged by alliances among different types of organizations — membership groups, academic institutions, religious bodies, and *ad hoc* local groupings. Some groups may be well known, though most are not.

There is a need to work at the local, the national, and the UN levels at the same time. Advocacy movements need to be able to contact key decision-makers in national parliaments, government administrations and intergovernmental secretariats. Such mobilization is difficult, and for each ‘success story’ there are many failed efforts. The rise of UN consultative-status NGOs has been continual since the early 1970s. NGOs and government diplomats at the UN are working ever more closely together to deal with the world challenges which face us all.

Note

(1) This interest is reflected in a number of path-making studies such as P. Willets(Ed.) *The Consciences of the World: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organizations in the UN System* (London: Hurst, 1996), T. Princen and M. Finger (Eds) *Environmental NGOs in World Politics: Linking the Global and the Local* (London: Routledge, 1994), M.Rech and K. Sikkink *Activists Without Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), Bas Arts, Math Noortmann and Rob Reinalda (Eds) *Non-State Actors in International Relations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001) and William De Mars *NGOs and Transnational Networks* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

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