

International organizations as a profession and distribution of power: the importance of human resources management for the success of UN Reform

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Good afternoon.

Since it is getting late and I can see that you are getting tired, if not restless, I will be very short in my remarks.

In addressing the issue of UN reform, I will focus on the question of human resources.

The reason for this is very simple.

For years now, it has been the consensus that the UN is failing in putting together a management system of resources, and primarily of human resources, which would be able to optimize the resources at hand.

As it is widely recognized, this inability of the UN to get its acts together is particularly damaging.

It is particularly damaging because unless an organization is strong within, which implies first and foremost, efficient human resources management, it will never be able to be strong

outward. This state of affairs is true for any organization in general, but all the more for the UN.

It is all the more true for the UN considering the specific context in which it operates –and this for three reasons:

a) the combination of the global mandates of the UN and of its historically limited resources calls for maximizing these resources.

b) how to make the case that more resources are needed by the UN when the UN is not optimizing the resources at hand?

c) the shortcomings of its resources management is destined to undermine the ability of the UN to deliver on the global public goods that it is meant to help delivering (global security and global development, among others), and therefore its credibility and legitimacy.

Mr. Ban Ki-Moon seems to be very much aware of this situation, and seems to want to make of the strengthening of the UN Secretariat one of his initial priorities.

In the various public interventions that he has made during his campaign for the post of SG, on the occasion of his appointment, or even last Thursday, when he was sworn in, he indicated that he would make the reform of the UN one of his primary concerns.

And he is certainly right to want to do so, of course provided that focusing on UN reform is followed by real change and improvement –which, historically, has not been the case, we have to recognize.

And I think he would be well advised to try to improve the Human resources of the UN. For in this regard, the pathologies at work are really hampering its ability to function well and to deliver politically and on the ground.

Of course, nobody is going to ask me what should be the issues on which a focus on improving UN human resources should entail.

Yet, if I were asked, I would say that there is a need to address and try to minimize four pathologies (and here I am not even talking about resolving them):

- i) First, the ambiguous job security and career development tracks that the UN offers;
- ii) Two, the process rather than result-oriented work culture;
- iii) Three, the ad hoc and unsystematic implementation of mandates;
- iv) And four, the self-centered exercise of leadership.

You will find my thoughts on these four points much more developed in the working paper that you have in the seminar précis, under the title “International Organization as a profession”. Also, let me say that in outlining these pathologies I am not inventing anything. I am just following a number of reports which have been issued recently on the topic, either

by UN staff or by consulting companies tasked to assess the situation, or by the UN Secretariat itself.

In any case, let me review quickly each of these four pathologies and tell you what they are damaging to the UN and its work.

1) First, what about job security and career development at the UN?

Nowadays, when you look at the UN Secretariat, you see that a first half of the positions are financed on the regular budget, and that a second half is based on extra-budgetary resources.

Considering that extra-budgetary resources generate short-term contracts, this mean that more or less half of the international civil servants working for the UN Secretariat are in and on precarious positions.

The reason behind this has to do with that fact that the UN regular budget does not allow to cover all the tasks at hand. Hence the need to create new temporary positions –thousands of them.

The net result of this state of affairs is that all too often the “provisoire” becomes the permanent. This is not good for the UN people in this position, and this is not good for the institution as a whole.

Lack of properly established tracks for career development is another major problem for the UN.

Unlike any other well functioning national administration, at least in developed countries, in the context of the UN, most of the time it is up to the people employed to find their next position and next level.

Hence the fact that people can stay for years in the same position, or in the same grade, or that they spend a very significant part of their time and energy looking for the next position. Or even that they relate to their current position, not in light of the job that needs to be done, but in light of using it as a spring board for the next position.

In the end, it is both the people working for the UN and the UN itself, who are the losers of this situation.

Of course I am not advocating here, life long security as a guarantee for the UN to better do its job. I am just saying that a better balance has to be struck between too much security and too much insecurity. After all the private sector also teaches us that those companies which are very successfully are not necessarily against employees' longevity. They are about retaining and promoting the workers who perform well, based on clear and relatively objective benchmarks.

- ii) The second UN pathology that stands out concerns the fact that the professional culture of the United Nation has a tendency to be more process than result oriented.

This is not a trend that is necessarily specific to the UN, nor is it present everywhere in the United Nations.

For example, those areas of the UN system with mandates that are more geared towards concrete needs on the ground, tend to give more focus to action than process oriented result. This is to a certain extent true for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) as their field presence call for action with results that can be measured.

Nevertheless, the overall environment of the United Nations is prone to make process more than result oriented, a defining character of its professional culture. Three main factors namely shape the work ethics in this direction.

First, the hierarchical structure of the UN leaves decision-making to be highly concentrated to only a few people. Many are left squeezed in between layers of authority discouraging any real sense of initiative.

Second, the United Nations often adopts conservative courses of action in order to take the safe option; in order to avoid taking on responsibilities that are linked to the risks that trying to make a difference tend to come with.

Third, as a result of the servicing function that the UN has towards its member states and with the cumbersome and slow rhythms of the politics of UN diplomacy, UN activities are often limited to a ritualistic production of documents with little short-term result.

- iii) A third downside of the UN professional culture is its ad hoc and unsystematic way of functioning.

In the UN, there is a significant disconnect between rules and regulations, and their ability to put in place tracking systems. This is rather ironic considering the importance that the United Nations gives to rules and regulations.

As a result, one could argue that the UN ends up embodying the worst of both worlds in this regard: it has a love for regulations, but it is unable to use these regulations to put in place systematic approaches, templates, which help to optimize the resources at end.

Hence the tendency of the UN as a bureaucracy to constantly have a poor memory of what has been done, of what works and of what does not work, and, at times, of constantly reinventing the wheel.

This unsystematic character of the way UN does business is only one illustration of its under-institutionalization. This does not only undermine the capacity of the UN to be, and project as a professional organization. But on the long run, it also undermines its attractiveness for skilled people.

iv) The question of leadership is a fourth pathology that I would like to point out to you. More specifically, it is about the self-centered exercise of leadership.

In 2004 a United Nations Organizational Integrity Survey was organized as a way to assess the moral of the staff in terms of leadership within the UN context. If you are interested, you can find it on the Internet, in fact on the UN website.

The results were quite an indictment of UN leadership. Three main concerns, among others, stood out.

First, there are the discrepancies between what United Nations leaders say, and what they do. Lofty rhetoric shows to be counter-productive as they fail to be followed-up with acts matching their words.

Second, UN leadership often seems to be uninterested in management. It is already problematic that frequently those in positions of leadership are not trained to exercise managerial responsibilities. Adding insult to injuries, these people often concentrate on the more “noble” aspects of the job, spending more time on the political and diplomatic issues at the expense of management.

Third, the UN leaders, who should in fact be the very custodians of the welfare of the organization, do not mind at times projecting their own interest even when it is at odds with that of the organization. What tends to be the weak sense of institutional accountability at the UN only furthers this situation and allows leaders to get away with it.

Of course this leadership behavior is not specific to the United Nations. But within an organization grounded in the ideals and goals of a public service and public good, it becomes all the more demoralizing; especially for those who take this ethical message seriously.

And since 2004, I do not think that much has changed in this area.

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So here we are. As you can see, in these areas alone, Mr. Ban ki-Moon has a lot of work ahead.

And here we are left with two questions that I will touch upon as a way to conclude.

First, how could this situation be changed?

And second, what are chances for this situation to be changed?

As for the first question, that is how this situation could be changed, I see the following possible ways to improvement.

The first thing is that there is a need for sufficient resources. And when I say sufficient resources, I here refer to both financial and human resources. The two come hand in hand.

Under a certain threshold it is simply not possible to do a good job.

On the other hand, secondly, these sufficient resources have to be optimized. As I mentioned before, it is very difficult to make the case that more means are needed when the one's currently available are not properly used.

Also, optimizing resources, once again financial and human resources, requires at least, two types of change in the way in which business is done at the UN.

When it comes to regular staff, a better balance has to, as I said previously, be found between professional security and insecurity. This is critical in putting in place working structures built around incentive. What is also important for enhancing incentive is to insist on the need of working to truly make a difference. Making a real difference in light of what the mandates of the UN are, should be the primary mandate of the UN. Rhetoric should never be enough.

As for senior UN staff, I tend to believe that a better system of accountability is more than required. It is at this condition that the legitimacy of senior UN staff will be preserved if not enhanced and with it, the one of the UN as a whole.

I should add here that asking for more accountability for UN senior staff is only natural considering that in general, the more power one has, the more duties and responsibilities one has. And this is especially true when it comes to organizations dedicated to the public good.

In the end what is the likelihood for these changes to happen?

Well I have to admit that I am not all that optimistic.

Changes may happen in the margins. But I do not foresee deep and structural changes.

I think I will stop here.

Thanks.