

## UN FORUM 2010

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#### Remarks by Dame Margaret J. Anstee DCMG

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As you have just heard, I spent 41 years working for the United Nations, which is the best description of an optimist that I know! I served in all regions of the world and in many different capacities, mostly on operational programmes at the field level in economic and social development, humanitarian and disaster relief, narcotic drugs control, crime prevention and criminal justice, and peacekeeping. Since my official retirement I have worked to support the organisation whenever I can, particularly in the fields of peacekeeping and peace building.

During all this time I have seen many ups and downs in the image of the U.N. but it seems to be at particularly low ebb just now, when the increasing global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are making ever greater demands on the organisation. This panel has been asked to make recommendations on "Practical ways to make the U.N. more effective" and it so happens that, during my career, I have been involved in a number of major reform exercises, which seem to be a constant feature in the U.N., going right back to its creation.

The first was the seminal "Study of the Capacity of the United Nations Development System" led by Sir Robert Jackson, one of the most able and distinguished officials ever to serve the U.N., whom I served as Deputy. Published in 1969, the Study proposed an integrated plan of reform that would greatly have strengthened the capacity of the U.N. system to deliver effective development cooperation. It has been called "the Bible" because, like the Bible, everyone agreed with its precepts but they were never properly implemented.

Since then there have been innumerable other attempts at reform, which often concentrate on the intractable problem of changing the composition of the Security Council at the expense of other lesser, practical reforms that would do much to improve the daily working of the organisation. They have usually been the fruit of the work of successive "High-level Panels". [Have you noticed how panels always have to be "high level" nowadays, just as meetings have invariably become "summits"? Could one possibly conceive of "low level" or even "medium level" panels?]. One of the most recent such panels, which did deal with more mundane matters, produced the report entitled "Delivering as One", to which Mrs. Helen Clark, the present Administrator of U.N.D.P., referred this morning as a bold step forward. In fact, this report repeats almost exactly the same recommendations as the Capacity Study did 40 years ago. I was surprised to find, in later conversation with Mrs. Clark, that she had never heard of either Sir Robert Jackson or the Capacity Study. We seem doomed to keep on reinventing the wheel.

When it comes to reform of the U.N. system it is not a question of **WHAT** needs to be done – that is blindingly obvious – but rather of **HOW** to get it done in the face of opposition by vested interests both on the part of member states and within the bureaucracy itself.

When I worked on the Capacity Study I was young and starry eyed and thought that the solution lay in a logical, across the board reform proposal. Then reality set in and I realised that this could not work because the U.N. is not a logical organisation. Instead I have come to the conclusion that the only way forward is through a series of key changes that would have a multiplier effect. Here are a few:

### **1. LEADERSHIP**

Without leadership that commands respect there can be no real change and that means that reform must begin at the top. First and foremost there must be an end to the present system of horse trading through which the U.N. Secretary-General, the Directors-General of Specialised Agencies and the heads of other important programmes and funds are elected or appointed. All too often that can lead to mediocrity and to the selection of the "least common denominator" rather than the best person for the job, which should be the true criterion.

Obviously the choice will in the end be political but it should be made from a short list of candidates with recognised qualifications and experience. There has been growing support in some quarters for a proposal to set up an international selection commission, formed of representative and reputable personalities, which would produce such a list, bearing in mind geographical and other considerations but doing away with the present system of "Buggins's turn" whereby the office rotates between regions. The creation of such a commission does itself present political difficulties but is probably the only way of ensuring that the new incumbent is chosen from among eminently qualified candidates. It would also encourage really eminent people to come forward. The major underlying problem is whether member states, especially the major powers, really want a strong U.N. Secretary-General.

### **2. A SINGLE TERM**

The Secretary-General and the Directors-General of Specialised Agencies should serve only a single term, which could be longer than the present five years – say six or seven. This would mean that they would go down in history not for the number of times that they had been re-elected but rather for what they had achieved during their time at the helm. More importantly, this would absolve them from the political pressures of having to make compromises or accede to inappropriate requests from member states simply to ensure support for their re-election. Such a system would enable the Secretary-General to exercise more authority and independence but again that is perhaps not what the very governments who clamour for reform really wish.

### **3. A CONSOLIDATED BUDGET FOR THE UN SYSTEM**

A consolidated budget for the whole U.N. system would strip out layers of ineffective and costly coordination at one fell swoop. During my long years at the U.N. I have seen more crimes committed in the name of coordination than almost anything else. Whenever governments see alleged inefficiencies they immediately call for more coordination, which usually ends up in a new set of coordinators being created to coordinate the existing coordinators, so that in the end very few people are left to do the actual work at the cliff face! Such a consolidated budget was originally considered when the United Nations was first

created but I recognise that it might be politically difficult to achieve today when the different bodies in the system have developed an entrenched sense of their own autonomy. Some compromise system of more centralised finance might, however, be devised that could help.

#### **4. THE COMPOSITION AND ELECTION OF GOVERNING BODIES**

Many of the governing bodies in the system are more concerned with political rather than substantive issues. Some progress has been made with the change of the voting criteria for election to the Human Rights Council, as compared to the Human Rights Commission which it replaced, but recently we have seen that, while this excluded the election of Iran to the Council, the dismaying outcome, as a result of the insidious practice of bloc voting, is that Iran has instead been elected to the Commission on the Status of Women, presumably as some form of consolation. It is hard to think of a greater anomaly!

There should be some kind of agreed criteria to ensure the compatibility of the elected countries to the purposes of the governing body in question. Again, this may be very difficult to bring about in the present circumstances, for the usual political reasons, but at the very least it is reasonable to demand that countries serving on technical, as opposed to purely political, bodies [e.g. health, agriculture, development etc.] should appoint as their representatives individuals who are professionally proficient in that field, rather than diplomats or politicians. This would help to diminish the present tendency for these bodies to become dominated by political concerns at the expense of substantive issues.

#### **5. THE INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE**

The concept of an international civil service, responding only to the Secretary-General, has become eroded, partly as result of member states' interference in personnel appointments and promotions in favor of their nationals, but also because of the lack of proper policies and discipline within the Secretariat. It is essential that measures be taken to ensure that staff live up to the commitments made in the oath that they swear on joining the service, particularly as regards not taking orders from anyone other than the Secretary-General and accepting to go wherever he directs. It is also important to get rid of deadwood. Some progress has been made in the latter regard through less reliance on permanent contracts.

But it is also important that rotation between the field and headquarters should be made an obligatory condition for promotion to senior ranks. When I was at U.N.D.P. I persuaded two successive Administrators to adopt and announce such a policy but in both cases exceptions were almost immediately allowed which made a nonsense of the whole thing. Officials should not be allowed to spend their lives in comfortable headquarters positions without experience at the sharp end. If their personal circumstances do not allow this, or they are not prepared to make the sacrifices that their field colleagues accept, then their suitability for international employment and dedication to the U.N. ideals is clearly called into question. Rotation would also ensure greater mutual understanding between field and headquarters staff. In particular, as I once recommended to the then Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros Ghali, no one [including those politically nominated by member states] should be appointed to senior operational positions, such as heading peacekeeping and humanitarian relief at

headquarters unless they have direct personal and practical experience of working on such operations on the ground.

## **6. THE MEDIA**

The image of the U.N. is not helped by constant negative reporting and [often misplaced] criticism in the media, with very little attention given to positive developments and U.N. successes. Of course the media is independent and there is not much that can be done about this directly – most journalists still operate by the old adage “If it bleeds it leads”. But steps can and should be taken to improve the provision of information to the media. It was a grave mistake and a false economy to close down the U.N. information centres in the developed countries. The U.N. needs little flag waving in developing countries, where its work in so many different fields is very close to see. It is in the developed countries, which provide most of the money and where scepticism prevails, that a greater effort needs to be undertaken.

## **7. THE ROLE OF WOMEN**

Last but by no means least I want to underscore the importance of improving the role of women within the organisation. I can hear you saying “Well, she would say that, wouldn't she?” but I do so not merely because I happen to be a woman but also because my long experience has shown that this is an essential element if we are to obtain real progress. I confess that I am proud of the fact that at no point in my career was I given responsibilities limited to women's issues but always assumed functions that hitherto had been considered exclusively a male preserve; indeed I did not directly handle them at all until later in my career, when the Division for the Advancement of Women came within the multiple responsibilities that I assumed as Director-General of the U.N. Office at Vienna from 1987 – 92.

Please don't misunderstand me. At all times I was very conscious of women's issues and did my best to promote them but I was appalled that the first appointments of women to senior levels, apart from my own, were for posts exclusively linked to women's issues, as if this were the be all and end all of women's involvement in the organisation. Fortunately we have moved on from there: there are women heading all kinds of substantive programmes and organisations and the position of women in the U.N. generally is vastly improved from what I knew in the early stages of my career. But the overall situation is still not satisfactory and a great deal more needs to be done.

The acquiescence of many major countries to the access of Iran to the Commission on the Status of Women and the fact that the proposal for a new and greatly strengthened Women's Agency, combining all the existing bodies, has become a pawn up in a political squabble over wider reforms, demonstrate all too clearly how political considerations predominate over substantive issues and, in particular, that for too many governments, politicians and senior bureaucrats [mostly male of course!] women's issues are something to which lip service must be paid but which do not merit real action.

The execrable implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security is another case in point. I have a special interest in this, since the idea for it originated at a meeting by chaired in Namibia in May, 2000, mainly, I have to admit, at a cocktail reception! This is a landmark resolution,

covering all aspects of women's involvement in conflict, peace negotiations and peacekeeping, whether as victims of war or promoters of peace. Everyone quotes it admiringly but the deeds are not consistent with the words. One of the recommendations that falls within the purview of the U.N. itself is that the Secretary-General should appoint more women as his Special Representatives to head peacekeeping operations [SRSGs]. It is quite simply shocking that, in the eighteen years since I was appointed to head UNAVEM II in Angola as the first woman SRSG, the total number so far appointed has still not reached double figures. The perennial cry goes up that there are not enough qualified women to merit consideration but this is quite simply nonsense. To my knowledge many lists of qualified women have been proposed without result. It is true that governments themselves seem reluctant to present female names in their lists of proposed candidates which would give them additional political credence. The UK has been very supportive of Resolution 1325 but I am not aware of how many female candidates it has suggested. Since the Minister is present I would like to suggest that he makes this a priority area.

It could even be argued that the UK itself might have been in breach of Resolution 1325, the first operative paragraphs of which urges member states to involve women at the highest level in all negotiations relating to conflict resolution. It is surely remarkable that, in the negotiations to avoid political conflict following on the deadlock that ensued after the recent general election, not a single woman figured in either of the negotiating teams!

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As I said earlier, the problem is not **WHAT** but **HOW**, as the long succession of panels and reform measures without any lasting transformation has clearly shown. As one practical measure I would suggest that there should be a moratorium, sine die, on all High Level Panels on U.N. reform. Or perhaps there should be just one, with the remit to review all past recommendations for reform, select the best and then concentrate on determining what needs to be done in order to ensure that they are actually implemented!