

How Not to Reform the United Nations

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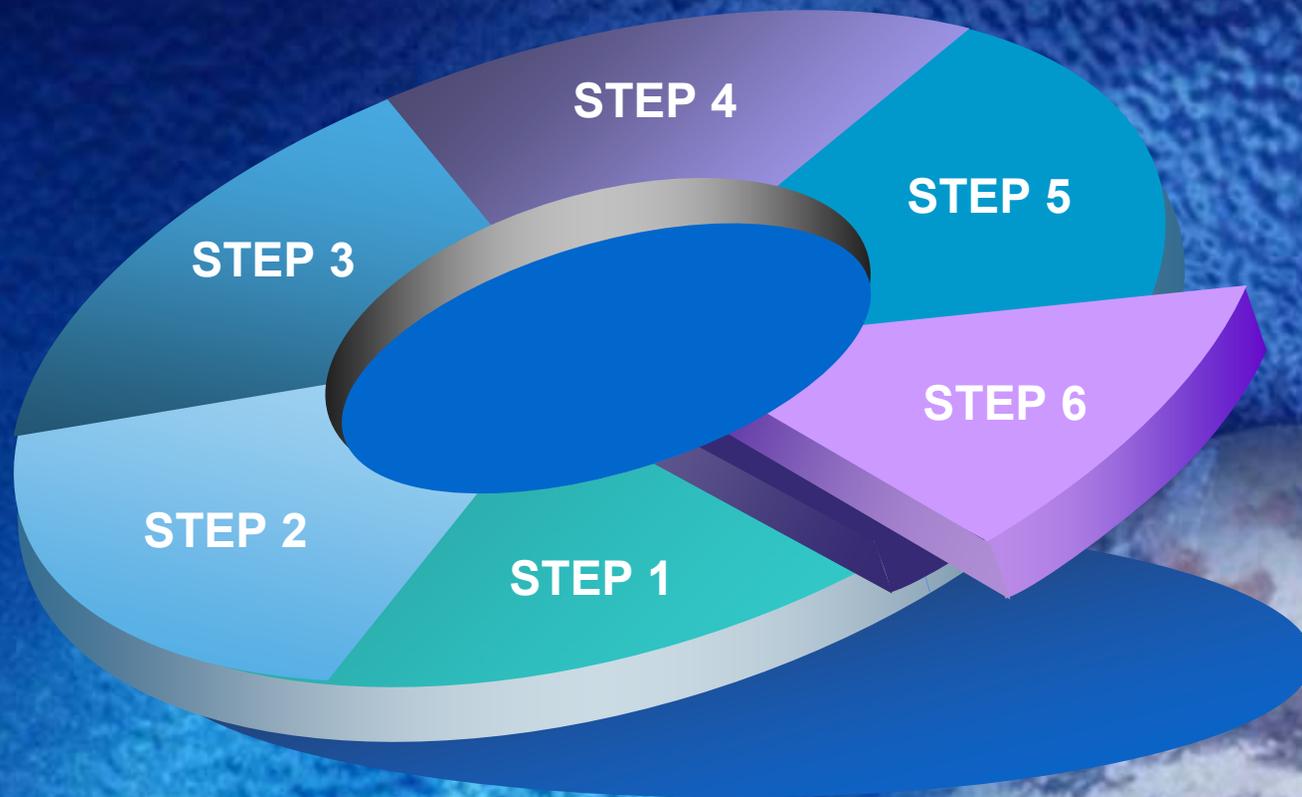
Past six decades

- Dozens of reform efforts, most following recurring patterns and producing largely predictable results
- Need to revisit and relearn some of the most painful lessons
- In mid-2005, things are not going well but there is light at the end of the tunnel

Recent developments

- In 2003, Secretary General Kofi Annan called for a “radical” overhaul of the UN beginning with the Security Council
- Members States building a consensus around a few modest and sensible renovations, which fall far short of the historic transformation proposed by the SG
- Compared to past efforts the product should appear reasonably respectable

Typical six steps in the cycle of UN Reform



Step 1

- SG and a group of earnest national leaders bemoan the state of the UN
- Demand sweeping renovations to reflect profound changes in the global situation
- Calls for fresh approaches and bold initiatives
- Make gross overstatements for dramatic effects

Step 2

- A blue ribbon commission assembled to add substantive depth
- For e.g., Kofi Annan commissioned the High-Level Panel (HLP) on Threats, Challenges and Change
- This HLP acquitted itself better than most of its predecessors, but the 101 recommendations were a mix lot in terms of practicality and desirability
- It fared better the two such exercises encouraged by Boutros Boutros-Ghali

Step 3

- Once the eminent persons have articulated their vision, the SG translates their ideas into digestible policy steps for consideration
- How far and on what issues the SG can advocate is a political judgement
- His roles fades over the course of transition from the secretariat to Member States
- This year the shift was remarkably quick and decisive
- Once again the SG proposes and the GA disposes

Step 4

- Member States become fully engaged as decision points approach and the implications for their national interests become clear
- For most, their conservative instincts and fear of change come to the surface
- Big and small states alike worry about their relative positions affected by unpredictable renovations
- They may continue to mouth rhetoric about sweeping changes and historic opportunities but look for modest measures capable of attracting consensus

Step 5

- Some culminating event is convened
- This might coincide with with one of the UN's major anniversaries
- September 2005 was a multipurpose convocation of heads of states and government – marking the UN's 60th anniversary, assessing progress of the Millennium Declaration and approving the latest reform plans – a megaevent

Step 6

- National leaders and the secretariat always find reasons to portray even the incremental reforms in glowing colours – in part for public relations and in part because their expectations tend to be pitched much lower than their rhetoric
- Claims traditionally coupled with declarations about unfinished work and renewed dedication
- The glaring gaps between the standards voiced in steps 1 and 5 provide an impetus for the next round of UN Reform

Current Reform Drive

- Initially pursued with vigour and imagination
- Poorly conceived and the most a historical and apolitical effort to date
- *“Historical context is either missing or incorrect”* in the HLP Report – Michael Glennon in “Idealism at the UN”, Policy Review, no.129 (Feb.-Mar.2005, p.3-13
- Nothing unusual about a UN-sponsored study being weak on politics and history – the dynamics of multilateralism discourage candid analysis
- The HLP laid out a comprehensive and compelling vision of how security challenges are evolving

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- Repeated disconnects in the thinking of both HLP and the SG between analysis and institutional recommendations
 - SG considered that the problems in the UN were institutional, not political and that radical structural reforms were needed, including the Security Council

Reform of the Security Council

- Major enlargement and the addition of more members proposed
- HLP calls for expansion but cannot agree on a single formula – which and how many countries, whether permanent status should be extended, what the balance among regions and groups should be, whether the veto should be retained, modified or eliminated, how decisions should be made and whether its working methods should be further refined
- The emphasis on the remodelling has not resulted in bringing Member States together in support of a common platform
- History of the UN shows that political convergence precedes institutional change not the other way around

Lessons learned from earlier Reform Initiatives

- *“Reform is not an event; it is a process.”* Kofi Annan
- Sharpening the tools of management, implementation, and agenda setting should be a full-time, year-round, and well integrated task
- Although broad packages of steps are proposed, they are never adopted – Member States like to pick and choose
- In the mid-1990s, the GA convened 5 parallel working groups on different aspects of reform in addition to the management plans put forward by Kofi Annan in 1997
- De-linking these distinct efforts meant that more controversial items like the SC reform did not retard progress in other areas

Central Lesson

- Modest expectations are in order
- UN survived because it is highly adaptable and capable of making mid-course corrections, of championing new agendas, and of learning to employ new tools as the needs, values and demands of the Member States shift
- It adopts formal reforms with great reluctance and glacier-like speed
- The need to seek consensus among 191 Member States meant that public expectations about the rate and depth of likely change should not be raised

Management of Expectations

- In the current wave of Reform, it was suggested that the UN was confronting such a deep institutional crisis which can only be addressed by radical structural reform
- Radical restructuring was not in the cards
- UN should not trumpet problems – particularly imagined ones – for which it has no answers

Positive Elements of the Current Reform Process

- Member States' commitment to the UN was tested and was found to be fundamentally sound, if as shallow and self-serving as ever
- Helped forged broad agreement, if not consensus, on the need for far-reaching change in how the UN is managed, so that it is more efficient, transparent and accountable
- Reminded Member States that the working methods of the SC and how the secretariat carries out its mandate is as important as how many countries are represented in the SC

- Good ideas such as the Peacebuilding Commission and a smaller Human Rights Council produced
- Reconfirmed the continuing validity of the lessons from earlier reform rounds

