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Does the United Nations reform benefit the poor? A critical evaluation of the recent reform proposals



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DOES THE UNITED NATIONS REFORM BENEFIT THE POOR? A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE RECENT REFORM PROPOSALS

Javier Arellano*

Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much in you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his life and destiny?

Mohandas Gandhi

ABSTRACT

Over the last ten years there has been a huge quantity of proposals to reform the UN system. This paper reviews the current proposals and evaluates the extent to which they are likely to benefit the poor. To this end, the study identifies a set of criteria that subsequently are used to carry out the evaluation. The main conclusion reached is that UN reform deals primarily with management improvement that, although important, is insufficient to overcome the UN's major shortcomings in the socio-economic realm. Responsibility for this situation lies largely with the most powerful member states. The Secretariat could strategically use some of its strong points to gain political momentum for further political reforms that really benefit the poor.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Reform” seems to be a mantra recited whenever the United Nations comes under scrutiny. Over the UN’s lifetime there has been an enormous quantity of reform proposals. The calls for reform started within years of its foundation (Luck 2003, p. 1; Rosenthal 2005, p. 10). This tendency has dramatically increased in the last ten years (UN 1997, 2000, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). However, as usual, “reform” means different things to different people depending on the political interest that each one holds. As taking a specific point of view is inescapable, this paper examines the current UN reform process from the perspective of the poor.

The preamble of the foundation Charter focuses the institutional mission of the UN on two main goals¹: a) *to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war* and b) *to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom*. The first goal is usually considered to be the “security” dimension of the UN system, while the second one is thought of as the “developmental” or “socio-economic” dimension. The introduction of the latter in the Charter acknowledges that *social progress* is no longer an exclusive national concern that could be achieved in isolation from the international community. On the contrary, although each country retains its own responsibility for this, increasing global interdependence necessitates effective cooperation among countries to improve their populations’ wellbeing. The UN undertook responsibility for promoting this cooperation. However, there is wide agreement on its unfavourable record in this field (Kennedy 2006, p. 113; South Centre 1995, p. 27).

Methodologically, despite the growing consensus on the interconnection between security and developmental goals, it is justifiable to distinguish between the two goals and thus evaluate security and developmental reform proposals separately, in terms of their likelihood of improving the UN’s performance. Dealing with the interest of the poor, this paper evaluates the extent to which the UN reform proposals put forward during the last ten years strengthen the UN’s capability of fulfilling its “developmental” role. In order to undertake this task whilst avoiding excessive naivety, it is both fair and right to recognise at least two challenges that should influence the methodology of this study. First, it is not a question of simple goodwill to take another’s perspective and make it one’s own.

¹ The preamble also reaffirms some values that inform its mission: human rights, dignity of the human person and obligation to respect international treaties.

Second, “the poor” is a label that hides a highly complex and plural set of persons who have different and legitimate interests.

The argument put forward is that most of the reform proposals are focused on management issues. Although these reforms are important to improve effectiveness and efficiency, they are insufficient to overcome the UN’s major shortcomings in the socio-economic realm (Toye 2004, p. 280). It is not possible to strengthen the role of the UN in development without promoting some political reform of the system. Realistically, given the international context, these reforms are unlikely to be carried out in the short-term. However, some of the strong points of the UN system (knowledge and legitimacy) can be used to generate a new scenario in which further political reforms could be fostered.

This paper begins by summarising the main reform proposals advanced in the last ten years. Secondly, it discusses and selects the most pertinent criteria for evaluation of the UN reform proposals regarding socio-economic goals. Thirdly, it evaluates the proposals taking into account different points of view. Finally, it puts forward some conclusions.

II. BRIEF ACCOUNT OF REFORM PROPOSALS IN THE LAST DECADE

Kofi Annan’s period in office as Secretary-General of the United Nations (1997-2006) has been characterised by recurring proposals to reform the UN system. Although calls for reform have been presented throughout the UN’s lifetime (Luck 2005), the initiatives of the past decade present two specific features. First, at least formally, the reform process has been driven by the Secretariat. The other actors have reacted to its propositions. Thus, it could be considered an attempt to reform the system from within (UN 1997, p. 3). Second, there have been a strikingly high number of proposals. Annan’s mandate started with the presentation of an extensive reform program (UN 1997) and has ended with the publication of *Delivering as One* (UN 2006b), the recommendations of the Secretary-General’s high-level panel on UN system-wide coherence in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment. Between these two milestones, there have been at least another six major official UN reports addressing issues related to reform (UN 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006a). These two specific features make it convenient to start the evaluation of UN reform by dealing primarily with official proposals in order to clarify their main contents. Outsider proposals will be used later to challenge and evaluate the official ones.

In July 1997, a few months after assuming the office of Secretary-General, Kofi Annan presented his first report on UN reform to the General Assembly. The report intended to “*identify the ways in which the United Nations can more effectively and efficiently meet the challenges that lie ahead as we enter a new century, and a new millennium*” (UN 1997, p. 2). The report consists of two parts. The first one puts forward a new management structure that aims to provide stronger leadership to the Secretariat. The second part explains the set of measures and makes their practical implications clear. Regarding our specific interest in the developmental dimension, the report includes the following main proposals: a) the consolidation of three departments in the economic and social field into a new Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN 1997, n° 69, 139-142); b) the improvement of Social Council functioning by means of holding its various working groups at different, pre-established period during the year; c) strengthening the role of the Resident Coordinators at country level to ensure greater coherence among different programmes and funds (UN 1997, n° 152-153); d) generation of the United Nations Development Group that is comprised of UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA. This group is convened by the Administrator of UNDP and it aims to provide a common framework for their action in the development field (UN 1997, n° 153-155).; e) call for a constructive partnership between the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions (UN 1997, n° 163-164); f) measures to assure more predictable financing for UN development work (UN 1997, n° 165-169). To summarise, the report addresses mainly management problems and seeks to improve effectiveness and efficiency, through proposed changes in organisational structure and greater coherence in the operation of different funds, agencies and programmes. References to measures of major political significance, such as coordination with Bretton Wood institutions or the search for new ways of binding state members to development efforts, are scarce, symbolic and more rhetorical than practical. Taking into account the political context in which the report was presented, it seems that what was really at stake on this occasion was the financial stability of the organization (UN 1997, n° 31-33). Thus, although effectiveness and efficacy appear as the pretext for reform, reduction in the administrative budget would be the most urgent and imperative task. This would be coherent with the intention of the US Government when it pushed the appointment of Kofi Annan as Secretary-General (The Economist, 1996 December 7).

In September of 2000, the Millennium Summit adopted the *United Nations Millennium Declaration* (UN 2000). In the field of development, the Millennium Declaration fixes a set of goals to reduce poverty. The novelty of this initiative lies

in the wide scope of the goals and their link to quantitative and time-bound concrete targets. The Declaration includes a few references to the process of internal reform of the UN. Although these references are a mere repetition of previous proposals, the Declaration plays an important role in reinforcing the centrality of the UN in global poverty reduction and, consequently, in stressing the need for a stronger UN. Thus, from that point on, the Millennium Declaration has become a useful lever to foster the reform process and, in some way, give more room to positive proposals than to budget cutting. It also helped to set up the Global Compact initiative that engaged hundreds of companies in supporting the UN's activities (UN 2002, n° 12).

In September of 2002, the Secretary-General reviewed the process of reform and proposed new measures *“to make the United Nations a more effective instrument for pursuing the priorities adopted in the Millennium Declaration”* (UN 2002, n° 1). Regarding the developmental and socioeconomic dimension, the new report provided little originality. Under the label of *working better together*, the report repeats the call for better coordination between the UN agencies and funds at country level. Specifically, it underlines the importance of the Resident Coordinator and the task of integrating planning and budgeting (UN 2002, n° 119-120). As usual, the document includes proposals for modification of the UN's organisational structure. The main novelty is the introduction, for the first time, of a reference to collaboration between the UN system and civil society.

Additionally, in 2004, the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change presented its final report. The fourth chapter of the report addresses the question of UN reform (*A more effective United Nations for the twenty-first century*). The report analyses the role of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and acknowledges its limitations. The Panel affirms that *“decision-making on international economic matters, particularly in the areas of finance and trade, has long left the United Nations and no amount of institutional reform will bring it back”* (UN 2004, n° 274). The main role of ECOSOC is restricted to one of coordination. However, the fragmentation of funds, programmes and agencies makes this task extremely difficult. Despite these limitations, the Panel proposes three goals to strengthen the capability of ECOSOC (UN 2004, n° 275-278): a) provide normative and analytical leadership through the creation of a Committee on the Social and Economic Aspects of Security Threats; b) provide an arena in which States measure their commitments to achieve key development objectives in an open and transparent manner; c) transform itself into a develop-

ment cooperation forum and use the annual meeting between the ECOSOC and the Bretton Woods institutions to foster discussion of common criteria.

In 2005, the Secretary-General published a new report to follow up the Millennium Summit outcomes: *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*. In its fifth section, the report, deals with internal organizational reform. It discusses the asymmetry between the Security Council and ECOSOC and affirms that “*the Economic and Social Council has been too often relegated to the margins of global economic and social governance*” (UN 2005, n^o 165). The report’s answer to this bold statement consists of three combined measures (UN 2005, n^o 175-177): a) organization of annual ministerial-level assessments of progress towards agreed development goals; b) making ECOSOC a high-level development cooperation forum that is held biennially; c) reinforcement of the role of ECOSOC in the coordination of responses to economic and social crisis, such as epidemics and major natural disasters. The rest of the recommendations are a repetition of previous reports: a) need for an improved coherence and coordination between funds, programmes and specialized agencies; and b) strengthening of the Resident Coordinator system at country level (UN 2005, n^o 193-201).

Finally, during 2006, there were another two major reports that include a number of measures for reform. The first, *Investing in the United Nations: for a stronger Organization worldwide* (UN 2006a), is exclusively focused on management issues and deals with personal recruitment, a new organisational structure, budget and finances, etc. The second report, *Delivering as One* (UN 2006b), presents the conclusions and recommendation of the Secretary-General’s high-level panel on UN system-wide coherence. In relation to development, its main proposals can be summarised in four points: a) for the UN to “deliver as one” at the country level, with one programme, one budget, and one stronger Resident Coordinator under the leadership of UNDP (UN 2006b, n^o 14-24; b) to establish a UN Sustainable Development Board responsible for the supervision of the One UN Country Programme (UN 2006b, n^o 60-61); c) to reinforce the role of ECOSOC, a Global Leaders Forum (L-27) should be established (UN 2006b, n^o 57-59); d) to clarify and strengthen the relationship between the UN Development Group and Bretton Woods institutions to ensure policy consistency and coordination (UN 2006b, n^o 70-71).

To summarise, the last ten years have witnessed a remarkable record in terms of UN reform proposals. Measures related to the developmental dimension of the

UN can be grouped, according to their content, into three major categories. First, management measures which try to enhance effectiveness and efficiency by means of a more coherent and coordinated operational structure. This kind of proposal is the most frequent and it constitutes the backbone of the current reform process. Second, governance measures that seek to overcome ECOSOC'S lack of power and scope within the UN system. In this area, the least that can be said is that proposals do not address the problems identified. Furthermore, these proposals are weak in terms of their creativity and range, and also in terms of their lack of consistency. Finally, there are some budget measures that seek to gain the confidence of the main contributor countries. The Secretariat is constantly worried about the way in which budgetary constraints and unpredictability have a negative impact on the quality of the UN's work. However, although it is officially unmentionable, the UN's heavy financial dependence on a handful of countries may also be considered a weakness (South Centre 1995, p. 35-36; United Nations Association of the USA 2006) as this blocks any attempt to undertake political reform of the UN. As well as the classification into the three advanced categories, it is noteworthy that an important proportion of the measures are repeatedly proposed report after report. On the one hand, this highlights the consistency of the rationale that underlines the proposals. However, on the other hand, it reflects the lack of success regarding the implementation of the measures which burdens the UN reform process.

III. CRITERIA TO DETERMINE THE “BENEFIT” OF THE POOR

It is not a trouble-free task to elucidate the extent to which the UN reform proposals benefit the poor. This task has to tackle two kinds of interrelated obstacles. The first is the practical difficulty of representing the plurality of interests of “the poor” in a simple way. The second obstacle is related to the complexity of translating measures that primarily try to shape the UN's institutional structure into practical outcomes that affect the poor. As a result, there is not a single criterion that can be easily used to evaluate the UN reform from the perspective of the poor. In consequence, we need to identify a more sophisticated group of criteria that, as a whole and acting as proxies, help to evaluate the proposals.

The criteria can be grouped into two different sets which can be labelled as “functional” and “political”. “Functional” criteria must help to evaluate the degree to which the reforms enhance the UN's capability to deliver services to the poor. “Political” criteria can be used to examine whether the reform improves the participation of the poor in the UN's policy-making processes, thus increasing

their political leverage. The analysis of these two separate dimensions facilitates a critical understanding of the nature of the ongoing reform process.

To carry out this analysis, it is also necessary to take into account the marked shift in the development paradigm that has occurred in the last thirty years. When the UN was founded, development was inextricably linked to the state. The state was simultaneously the object (developed and underdeveloped states) and the main agent in the process of development. Today, development tends to be more centred on people (Sen 1999, pp. 35-53). The concept of “human development” highlights this shift from the state to people. Even if the state retains its centrality as agent, the aim of development is people’s welfare and the enlargement of their capabilities and choices (UNDP 2000, p. 17). As a result, it cannot be assumed that “the benefit of the poor” is synonymous with “the claim of the poor countries”. Although the existence of a significant correlation between them may be presumed, it does not mean that they are strictly interchangeable. Thus, this distinction must inform the process of identifying accurate criteria.

Dealing with the “functional” aspect of the UN’s work on development, it is worth realising the complexity of the so called UN system or “family”. In the socio-economic field, the UN counts 27 organs reporting to the ECOSOC (Jolly 2006). Although the high number and differing statuses of these bodies tend to generate confusion among laypersons and a sense of “too many”, it is also true that only seven of them have a significant presence at country level (Jolly 2006): UNDP, WFP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR and UNCHS. Even then, the complexity of the functional structure makes it challenging to assess the quality and impact of its performance. To do so, this paper focuses its attention on three criteria that help determine the UN’s effectiveness and efficiency in delivering services to the poor: a) clear and focused scope; b) coordination and coherence among different actors; c) correlation between resources and task.

People’s aspiration for development is not limited to passively receiving a collection of services. People increasingly wish to take part in the decision-making processes that shape their lives (Sen 1999, pp. 190-191). Apart from the need to be recognised as a subject, this fact is consistent with the known, although complex, correlation between political participation of the poor and pro-poor policy outcomes (Whitehead and Gray Molina 2003, pp. 32-51). Moreover, in a context of growing global interconnectedness, political participation in the arena of international institutions became a key instrument to gain power (Held 1995, 270-272). Thus, the UN will benefit the poor if it provides them with the leverage to

have a voice and participate both at national and international levels. To evaluate this “political” dimension of the UN’s developmental role this paper takes into account two criteria: a) the existence of mechanisms that guarantee accurate representation of the poor in the UN’s decision-making processes; b) the UN’s capability to influence national policies that benefit the poor. These two set of criteria aim to be a tool to examine the current UN’s reform proposals in a systematic although not exhaustive way.

IV. EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSALS

This paper limits its scope to analysing whether the current reform proposals are likely to promote or prevent real implementation of the UN’s developmental goal in favour of the poor. However, to understand the true meaning of the proposals, it is indispensable to make reference to the broader context in which reform takes place. An important part of the context is the origin of the urge for reform. Although the Secretariat has formally led the process, it is an open secret that the US government, frequently in collaboration with other developed countries, has constantly put the system under pressure to reform (Khor 2006; Williams 2006). The rationale behind the pressure is to cut back on overlapping agencies, reduce the cost to tax payers and improve efficiency (Kennedy 2006, pp. 247-248; Seager 2006). However, the G-77², which represents the interest of the developing countries in the UN system, claims that reform is an excuse to “*drastically reduce the already marginalized role of the UN in development, particularly in economic and social policy*” (South Centre 2006, p. 21). Consequently, the background of the reform is a political battlefield where powerful and developing countries fight an unequal combat and in which the latter, in a defensive mood, struggle to firmly maintain their positions as trenches to prevent the advance of the enemy. It is important to keep this political context in mind to understand current discussions on reform because frequently arguments are disguised as merely technical or academic.

As noted above, most of the official proposals are related to management and, consequently, are part of the quest to enhance the UN’s capability to deliver high-quality services to the poor. To evaluate the likely result of the proposals this section will examine the questions posed by the three defined criteria. One added difficulty for the completion of this task is the lack of factual evidence. The UN

² Although the membership of the G-77 has increased to 131 countries, the original name was retained because of its historic significance.

system has not systematically monitored the results, in term of tangible and measurable outcomes, yielded by the progressive implementation of the reform proposals. UNICEF (2004) and UNDP (2004) have published reports on their contribution to the reform process and the impact that it has on both organizations. However, these reports completely overlook the impact on their performance. In fact, the reports seem to be pieces of self-advertisement used to attain a better bargaining position in the reform process. Accordingly, the evaluation is based on the logical analysis of scarce, although basic, facts and different authoritative judgments on the process.

First, would the current proposals help to clarify and focus the scope of the UN regarding the services that must be delivered? The answer cannot be clear-cut. The Millennium Declaration was deliberately promoted to generate the momentum for a more far-reaching and focused development scope. Internally, it ought to unify the effort of the different parts of the system. Moreover, the aim of strengthening interaction among the main funds (UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA) by means of generating the United Nations Development Group and the intention of revitalising the ECOSOC to provide normative and analytical leadership can be counted among the positive measures in that direction. However, critics affirm that the Millennium Development Goals have shrunk and diluted the international development agenda and have blocked the macroeconomic perspective advocated by developing countries (South Centre 2005, pp. 141-143). In addition, the tendency to reduce the number of staff at the headquarters could lead to a less “reflexive” and unified organization where the fieldwork imposes its diverse and sometime narrow priorities.

Second, would the reform improve coordination and coherence among different actors? Undoubtedly, efforts to improve coordination and coherence among agencies, both at headquarters and at the country level, are the strongest point and a constant over the last ten years of proposals. *Delivering as one* (UN 2006) summarised the proposals (at the country level) in four main points: one leader, one set of procedures, one programme and one budget. Jolly and Emmerij (2006, p.6), with internal knowledge of the system, claim that a strict implementation of the measures would impose uniformity and, therefore, would reduce flexibility and adaptability. In addition, the theoretical advantage for the recipient countries of having one single interlocutor is minimised by the fact that reform does not contemplate any kind of coordination at country level with bilateral donors and Bretton Wood institutions. In brief, proposals for coordination are generally welcome, but are far from being a panacea.

Third, would the reform improve the correlation between resources (human and financial) and task? This seems to be one of the weakest points in the reform process. Reform is under suspicion of being driven by budgetary constraints imposed by major contributors as a way of reducing not only its operational capability, but its political role (Khor 2006, Williams 2006; South Centre 1995, p. 35-36). Unfortunately, facts matched suspicions and from 1996 to 2000 the regular budget of the UN was reduced from 2600 to 2500 USD Millions. Only after the Millennium Summit, the budget grew slightly (2891 USD Millions in 2002-2003 and 3608 USD Millions in 2004-2005). Financial resources for the specialised agencies and funds followed the same pattern (UN 2006a, p.3). Moreover, three factors heavily condition budget expenditure and management: a) most of the financial resources of the main funds (UNDP, UNICEF, etc.) come from voluntary contributions that are freely allocated by the donors. In addition they cannot be planned in advance; b) the US contribution accounts for more than 22% of the UN Regular Budget but has an appalling record of late payment (UNA-USA 2006); c) the five major contributors provide 62% of the total budget. As a result, the UN system is highly vulnerable and dependent on the political interests of the rich countries. In this context, the reform proposal has been twofold: a) to cut down the administrative cost by reducing staff at the headquarters; b) to launch the Global Compact to involve companies in supporting the UN budget. Both measures have been strongly opposed because they tend to erode the position of the poor countries (Judge 2000; Zammit 2003; South Centre 2005 p. 161). As a result, despite the political correctness of the discourse of *doing more with less*, it is not clear how reform benefits the poor in this field.

The “political” dimension that could improve the power of the poor within the UN system is almost completely absent in the official reform proposals. Nevertheless, different analysts highlight that this omission, which leaves the unequal distribution of power in the socio-economic realm untouched, has an unambiguous political meaning (South Centre 2005, p. 154). Furthermore, some of the “functional” reforms would tend to weaken the democratic components of the UN system and to favour those which are accountable to the rich countries (WB and IMF). To assess the validity of these statements the next paragraphs respectively review the two criteria related to the political aspect of the reform process.

First, does reform help to increase the presence of the poor in the UN’s decision making processes? According to the UN institutional structure, the ECOSOC provides a forum for the discussion of socioeconomic issues. The reports recognize

its miserable and neglected condition but they propose little to overcome the situation (UN 2004b, n^o 224; UN 2005, n^o 165). The G-77, some think-tanks and part of civil society have put forward some alternatives to strengthen ECOSOC's capacity to accomplish its role (Adaba et al. 2003; Archibugi and Marchetti 2005; Rosenthal 2005). These proposals include some measures to help the ECOSOC gain functionality such as reduction of the number of members and a more realistic planning of meetings and agenda (Kennedy 2006, p. 270). More radical ideas include changing the Charter to allow the generation of a powerful Economic Security Council (Bello 2002, pp 91-92; Falk 2002 pp. 204-206), parallel to the Security Council, or propose to split the present ECOSOC into two different bodies that would deal separately with social and economic issues (Kennedy 2006, p. 269). None of these is likely to happen because they would need the amendment of the Charter and, thus, the support of the most powerful countries. If these proposals were implemented, they would provide more room for political discussion and more opportunities for poor countries to make their voice heard. However, they would not totally substantiate the question of the representation of the poor, who cannot entirely be identified with their states. Also the question of the presence of civil society and its debatable legitimacy to represent the poor is, at most, a very imperfect response. To advance in the right direction a more democratic global governance system is needed in which global powers would be accountable to the population and not only the states. It is recognized that in a representative democracy the power of the weakest diminishes as decisions are taken far from their directly elected. Therefore, to properly represent the interest of the poor a kind of "cosmopolitan" democracy has to be encouraged (Held 1995, pp. 270-283; Bigler 2005). However, in the current international context, if the previously advanced measures were unlikely to be implemented, the later is completely idealistic, at least in the short run.

Second, does reform enhance the UN's capability to influence national policies that benefit the poor? Sovereignty is one of the basic pillars of the UN. The states are especially jealous of any interference in what they consider internal matters. Thus, the UN system has been generally thought of as a tool to solve international problems. Over the past few years, there have been some conceptual advances regarding the right of the international community to intervene in national issues in cases of clear violation of human rights (Weiss 2005b, p. 69-73). However, as the new doctrine is seen as a US Trojan horse used to legitimize US international military interventions, most of the developing countries have strongly opposed it (South Centre 2005, pp. 143-145). Thus, there is no room for this kind of interven-

tion in the socioeconomic field and the reform does not move in this direction. However, paradoxically, the WB, the IMF and increasingly the WTO, have developed the capability to impose measures that influence deeply national policies. This is a problem for two reasons. Primarily, the kinds of policies fostered by these institutions have historically harmed the interests of the poor (Bello 2002, pp. 33-51; Tandon 2006). Secondly, although WB and IMF are formally part of the UN family, they are out of the control of the ECOSOC and are only accountable to their main shareholders. Reform proposals point out this problem, but unfortunately they fall short of addressing it. Accordingly, in spite of the calls for a more fruitful interaction, a tendency to “maintain the distance” between Bretton Wood institutions and the UN system is to be expected.

V. CONCLUSION

The UN reform proposals advanced by the Secretariat over the last decade do not represent a great improvement for the poor. Most of the reforms deal with management enhancements that, although important, are insufficient. The tendency to think about the UN as a body which delivers services, in combination with its lack of political capability to drive global socioeconomic challenges, tends to transform the dream of “the parliament of man” (Kennedy 2006) into a big NGO. The tragedy is that the UN is too big to be an effective NGO and too weak to become the political forum where the poor, who are the majority of the world population, could be properly represented. It makes no sense to blame the Secretariat or the different funds and agencies for this situation. The member states, mainly the most powerful ones, are largely responsible for the inability of the UN to carry out the mission entrusted to it by the founding Charter (Weiss 2005a, p. 341).

Despite this pessimistic diagnosis, there is a way ahead. The Secretariat, in alliance with some governments and part of civil society, could create political momentum for further political reforms (Boutros-Ghali 2006; Utting 2006, pp. 19-23). The UN system has some assets that could be strategically used. First, over the past few decades, the UN has demonstrated competence in generating knowledge and translating this knowledge to the people (Jolly 2005; Weiss 2005b, p. 78). This potential must be reinforced and wisely brought into play in order to gain political leverage. Second, in spite of its ambiguous performance, the UN maintains a high legitimacy and credibility among the poor (Toyne 2004, p. 280). The UN has the opportunity to use this confidence of the people to build the capacity to better meet their expectations.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council (United Nations)
G-77	The Group of 77
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
UN	United Nations
UNA-USA	United Nations Association of the United States of America
UNCHS	United Nations Commission Human Settlement
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
US	United States
USD	United State Dollar
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme