

## REVIEWS

# The Neverending Story: Reforming the United Nations

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**Reforming the United Nations: The Challenge of Working Together**, Joachim Müller, ed., Leiden, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2010; ISBN 978-90-04-17843-4; €129.00 / US\$ 183.00; 390 pages

It is a truism to state reform of the UN is nearly as old as the organization itself. Joachim Müller, a UN insider, has been a long-time follower and indeed meticulous chronicler of the manifold efforts to adapt and change the UN institutional structure, its working methods, staffing, financing, and less frequently, its objectives and goals. *Reforming the United Nations: The Challenge of Working Together* is the sixth volume in a series dedicated to shedding light on UN reform processes published by Martinus Nijhoff Publishers/Brill since the mid-1990s (also conveniently brought together with additional work of the author on UN developments at <http://www.un-reform.net>). It provides an update of the annals of UN reform until 2009 and shows that reforming the world organization continues to be a tedious affair, a neverending story indeed.

The roughly four-hundred-page volume is structured in three parts. The first part is ninety-five pages and provides a mostly chronologically organized account of thematically grouped reform initiatives. First, it gives a short introduction as well a brief historical overview of reform efforts from 1950 to 2006. The main focus, however, is on the period from 2006 to 2009. In a few words, the author introduces reforms initiated by the incoming Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon. He provides an update of processes that were already underway, whether they are a consequence of the World Summit 2005 or have been ongoing for an even longer period of time. As the book title suggests, special attention is paid to cooperation and coordination within the UN System, especially in the area of development and environment. Typically, these complex and technical processes do not receive as much attention as the reform of the composition of the Security Council. We should not forget the UN System in 2008 spent \$18.6 billion on its operational activities and is under increasing pressure to prove its effectiveness, efficiency, and comparative advantages. The section concludes with a short wrap-up in which the author assesses the success of various reform initiatives covered and shares his thoughts on lessons learned and the state of UN reforms.

The second part, about the same length, contains appendices that provide a valuable background for understanding the coordination challenges within the UN System. It gives an overview of the various entities that make up the highly complex UN System and their participation in coordination mechanisms. More interestingly, it compiles information on the

evolution and functioning of the UN's interagency co-ordination machinery, both in the area of development as well as in the area of environment. In the third and most comprehensive part, 189 pages, seven pertinent UN documents are reprinted, five of them dealing with questions of system-wide coherence, one with reform of the Security Council, and one with reform of the UN's human resources management.

Like previous volumes, the book can be considered an extremely useful reference tool for researchers and practitioners who want to deal in-depth with UN reform processes. This is not so much because it provides easy access to important primary sources that are all available on the Internet—if you know where to look—it is rather the combination of primary documents, helpful compilation of information on the UN System, and informed analysis that make the book valuable. It not only allows the reader to keep track of the notoriously slow-moving reform processes from one session of the General Assembly to the next, but also gives insights into the dynamics and stumbling blocks. It also provides the historical context to many of the recent reform initiatives and, thereby, reminds us many of the UN's problems have been known for a long time, there is hardly a reform proposals that has not been voiced before, and what today often seems as an anachronistic North–South divide builds on a long history and the decision of industrialized countries to sideline the UN in questions of economic governance. Nonetheless, the long-term perspective also demonstrates there is movement, although time and again the implementation of reform decisions has fallen short of providing the intended remedies.

The most instructive sections of the book deal with interagency coordination. While the position of member states in intergovernmental negotiations nowadays are often made accessible by NGOs like the Center on UN Reform or on web sites like [reformtheun.org](http://reformtheun.org), the inner workings of the system itself remain rather opaque. The author describes how the Chief Executive Board for Coordination (CEB), a coordination body comprised of all heads of UN organizations, over the last five years developed into a common UN voice that made itself heard in international diplomacy on climate change, food security, and the global financial and economic crisis. Müller does not conceal the difficulties in developing such a common voice in a highly decentralized system, where there are incentives for each agency to be visible as an individual organization and where member states do not necessarily behave coherently across the different governing bodies. Müller also links the emergence of the CEB as an actor with the latest round of reform of the UN's development cooperation system. This process initially got boosted by the World Summit and the subsequent high-level panel on system-wide coherence in areas of development, humanitarian assistance, and environment. As developing countries could not be convinced that a rationalized UN system with fewer agencies would also be in their interest, the process primarily focused on the strengthening of coherence and coordination of UN operational activities. Unfortunately, the period covered stops in 2009 and just misses the climax of the system-wide coherence reform initiative so far, namely the General Assembly's decision in June 2010 to merge four entities working on women and gender-related issues into a new organization, UN Women, as well as to improve the governance, financing, and country-level work of the UN development system by a number of minor reforms. The author also describes the Delivering-as-One (DaO)-initiative from an intergovernmental as well as a UN-system perspective. Since 2007, the DaO-initiative

has been implemented in eight pilot countries, where the UN system acts with one program, one budgetary framework, and under the authority of one leader. Given the difficulties on member states in agreeing on the merger of UN agencies, DaO provides a promising way of building coherence from the bottom up.

How does the author judge the future of UN reform? Unsurprisingly, his very well-informed, plausible, and balanced, yet sometimes not very transparent, assessment does not turn out to be particularly optimistic with regard to more fundamental reform. With regard to the Security Council, where we witnessed the move from informal consensus-based consultations on the process of how to reform the Security Council to actual reform negotiations, he considers intermediary agreements, i.e. the introduction of a new group of nonpermanent members without veto power, to be the most likely option. In the area of UN development cooperation, Müller stresses the need for a more fundamental merger and consolidation of UN organizations in order to remedy the UN system's inefficiencies and overlaps, which cannot be cured by means of coordination alone. Yet, he judges the chances of success of such a restructuring exercise to be rather small. Instead, a more incremental approach focusing on selected UN entities in narrow subject areas seems more promising. All in all, this seems to be a realistic, albeit depressing judgement. As long as member states do not re-discover the UN as core of a rule-based global governance system, he may very well be proven correct.