INSIDER'S VIEW

Organizational Culture, System Evolution, and the United Nations of the 21st Century

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We live in a time of tumultuous global change, crisis, uncertainty, and potential. As the UN strives to keep pace with economic and financial stringencies, climate change, and food insecurity, with shifting fulcrums of power, the Arab spring and the Occupy movements, what will it take to meet urgent new needs? Beyond strategies, politics, and competencies, organizational culture is critical. The UN has developed a range of formal and informal arrangements to apply its principles. These reflect the history of the organization, as well as the interests and resources of the system's actors. In the organization's culture, formal adherence to impartiality, geographic representation, and professionalism are nuanced by practical institutional measures, management approaches, and values dilemmas that, *inter alia*, may foster myopia, risk-aversion, and competition. Efforts towards coherence and system functioning include interagency collaborations, "Delivering as One," agency consolidation, and the human-rights-based approach. Progress toward a more fully values-aligned culture, higher level system functioning, and greater responsiveness to its broadest constituencies, will signal strides toward meeting twenty-first century needs and more sustainable realization of the UN mission.

> The question is not either the nation or the world.
> It is, rather, how to serve the world by service to our nation,
> and how to serve the nation by service to the world.
> (Hammarskjöld 2005:139)

Introduction

We live in a time of tumultuous global change, crisis, uncertainty, and potential. As the UN strives to keep pace with economic and financial stringencies, climate change, and food insecurity, with shifting fulcrums of power, the Arab spring and the Occupy movements, what will it take to meet urgent new needs? These new needs fundamentally entail a deeper and broader understanding of global interconnectedness across departments, organizations, sectors, species, and other previously defined classifications. Acting on this new understanding involves greater collaboration across old lines of separation and greater coherence in the form of more holistic systems more fully incorporating and accounting for its constituent parts, while seeking the optimal fulfillment of the purpose of the whole. These new needs demand an evolution in the way we interpret and embody the UN's values for peace, justice, equality, human dignity, and environmental sustainability. Responding to new needs involves shifts and innovation in the culture of the system.

Beyond strategies, politics, and competencies, organizational culture is critical. As reported by a global management consulting firm, "more important than any of the individual elements [for innovation in organizations] . . . is the role played by corporate culture—the

organization's self-sustaining patterns of behaving, feeling, thinking and believing—in tying them all together." (Jaruzelski, Loehr, and Holman 2011).

This paper outlines how UN member states, Secretariat staff, and other international community actors have interpreted the organization's principles through its culture, and further explores trends in how the UN functions as a system as an expression of this culture. In identifying developments in the culture that more fully reflect the evolution in the manifestation of the UN's universal values, and the corresponding institutional expression of a more holistic system, this paper argues that the UN can and should be better equipped to meet the needs of the twenty-first century, and serve the greater fulfillment of the universal values themselves.

The first section on organizational culture lays out the significance of international community actors for taking forward the UN's universal values and examines the development of different aspects of this community's culture. The second section explores the evolution of the UN as a system and how this both reflects and determines the organizational culture. It notes the historical fragmentation of the organization and traces the nascent tendencies towards greater consolidation and coherence in both function and approach. These trends include the Delivering as One pilot program, interagency efforts, and the human-rights-based approach to programing. The paper concludes that in developing and more fully applying these trends, the UN will be better equipped to support the increasing requirement for holistic functioning, participation, and interdependence. In this way, the organization can more fully adapt to serve its mission and values in the context of the needs of the twenty-first century.

Organizational Culture

The UN's main thematic areas of focus in peace and security, sustainable development, human rights, and humanitarian affairs define an array of intergovernmental negotiations, mandates, programs, and activities that have grown over time and embody the international community's work and culture.[1] This array has evolved in keeping with the values, interests, circumstances, personalities, resources, and needs of its member state delegates, Secretariat staff, related civil society actors, and ultimate beneficiaries on the ground worldwide.

This international community of actors assumes some significance in light of the far-reaching mission with which it is charged for ensuring the promotion and realization of the world's core universal values—peace, justice, equality, human dignity, and environmental sustainability. These universal values are endorsed by the body's 193 member states and articulated in the UN charter and other documents, which further establish the mission, structure, and functioning of the organization. However, as the foremost mechanism of global governance for achieving universal values, the values, actions, interactions, and power relations among international community actors represent an important framework for the realization of these broader values globally. The UN's culture is seen as expressing a range of characteristics that variously reflect and accommodate intergovernmental and Secretariat interests and aspirations.

Among the formal features of the organization's culture that have grown to facilitate its functioning are the principles of impartiality and of fair geographic representation, with significant efforts undertaken in this latter regard in the General Assembly and in the Secretariat, employing strict quota arrangements. Notably, this does not apply to the Security Council. The UN also promotes the official organizational values of integrity, professionalism, and respect for diversity among its staff. Other important efforts include a growing internal justice mechanism, a system-wide integrity survey undertaken in 2004, a Secretariat Ethics Office established in 2006 (largely relating to financial disclosure and whistleblower measures), various ethics offices and officers in other UN organizations, and ongoing ethics training. Throughout its history, the UN has faced only a few major public ethics crises: The scandals of sexual exploitation by peacekeepers and the Oil for Food Program in Iraq among them.

1. Focus in this paper is essentially on the core UN agencies exclusive of the Bretton Woods institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, though they also officially comprise the UN system.

Other informal features permeate the UN culture, however. Within the Secretariat, the system functions through a military-style bureaucracy and hierarchy that fosters risk-aversion and suppresses initiative (Darrow and Arbour 2009:452). While there is some variation between field and headquarters as well as among individual leaders and personalities, this approach frames much of the interaction, reporting lines, and ethos of the organization. With this institutional approach, the need for approval at higher levels and from various offices serves as a disincentive for creativity and means that responsiveness to dynamic situations is somewhat circumscribed. A more open structure and culture would accommodate greater adaptability, so that those at different levels in the hierarchy can explore new ideas and take initiative in response to changing circumstances, notably on the ground. Operationally in the field, the perceived need to maintain good relations with governments may also contribute to significant caution, and the employment of large proportions of local staff may additionally make for undermining independence (Uvin 2004:153).

At the managerial level, the UN administration is often characterized by a short-term focus, influenced by factors such as the limited tenure and national interests of governments, specified financial timeframes for donors, and the usually biennial programming and budgeting cycle. The results-based management (RBM) approach, while useful as a response to requests from member states for more tangible rather than process-oriented outcomes, also translates into significant inflexibility in programming. RBM, increasingly applied by the UN since 1998, usually corresponds to a two-year time period for achievement of specific objectives through pre-identified results, inputs, activities, and outputs. As such, while lessons learned can be factored into subsequent programming cycles, current cycles do not usually allow for changes in any of the predefined elements and limits flexibility in often unpredictable conditions. More flexible use of the current results based budgeting and biennium budgets and corresponding programming would allow for deeper understanding of structural problems and longer timeframes for sustainably addressing them and would mean some accommodation of changing objectives, results, outputs, and activities. At least one organization, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, has amended its cycle to reflect its concern for deeper and longer-term processes and since 2010 applies a four-year cycle.

With the proliferation of different organizations and governance bodies, the tendency in UN culture has also been toward a "silo" mentality and rivalry among agencies (Weiss 2009:73). Organizations and their respective staff protect their "turf" with regard to the allocation of responsibilities, funds, and personnel. The implications include less than optimal application of increasingly scarce resources, as well as the absence of the holistic understanding and streamlined interactions among different elements that facilitate systemic effectiveness.

Several developments can help counter this last general trend of "silo" thinking. First, there are a growing number of interagency efforts: At headquarters level, the UNDG human rights mainstreaming mechanism coordinates roughly a dozen human rights-related or other relevant interagency mechanisms in the UN System, covering such agendas as rule of law and gender mainstreaming, mostly with a headquarters or policy focus.[2] Others address a range of UN issues. Additionally, at the field level, the pilot program to Deliver as One in eight countries—Albania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uruguay, and Vietnam—is an attempt to have the various UN country presences operate with one leader, one program, one budget, and one office. This follows the 2006 recommendation of the High-Level Panel on UN System-Wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment. These initiatives foster a movement away from the traditional

2. The panel was itself a response to the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (General Assembly resolution A/60/1 2005) for implementation of reforms of operational activities aimed at enhanced UN effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, and coordination. The 2012 evaluation report of Delivering as One provides further insights into the challenges of managing multiple partners and maintaining strategic focus. See "Independent Evaluation of Delivering as One: Summary Report" at http://www.un.org/en/ga/deliveringasone/pdf/summaryreportweb.pdf.

institution-specific, myopic thinking that often characterizes UN approaches and activities, and toward greater systems-oriented functioning. It also brings to bear more comprehensive and multi-disciplinary expertise, increasingly relevant to complex and crosscutting situations.

Other protective impulses have been displayed by the UN as a whole. Until the end of 2010, it was stipulated in human resources policy that specific explanations were justified for the hiring of external candidates for UN posts in the core Secretariat. While this has since been eliminated, the same general policy continues to apply in other UN entities.

Evolution of the UN as a System

What is the relationship between this culture and the development of the UN as a system? In systems thinking, evolution may be viewed as the movement from the small, simple, and mechanical toward that which is more expansive, more inclusive, more complex, more internally cohesive, and more energetically dynamic and responsive.[3] Therefore, the degree to which inclusiveness, coherence, dynamism, and adaptability can be shown to be present in the UN culture, and to be informing the development of the UN system is the degree to which the culture can be asserted to be fostering system evolution, or, conversely, serving as an obstacle to such advancement.

I have pointed out some pervasive features of the UN culture in terms of caution, myopia, and "silo" mentality, and I have seen that trends in interagency efforts and Delivering as One may be showing the way forward for enhanced coherence and inclusiveness that counter "silo" thinking, while extension of the RBM programming timeframe by at least one organization may make for greater adaptability. An examination of the system below provides some insight into whether the same internal cultural forces, both progressive and otherwise, are expressed in the external institutional functioning of the international community.

The UN system comprises an intricate collection of agencies, funds, and programs, whose work and working methods are largely defined by member government delegates, who establish mandates to address specific issues or accomplish specific objectives. These mandates are then primarily implemented by the UN Secretariat.

The historical growth of the UN's many agencies has given rise to a decentralized network of different entities with different governing bodies, different structures, different methods of work, and different priorities. This may be viewed as the institutional corollary of the silo mentality among staff mentioned in the previous section. Such a state of affairs would seem to serve the interests of at least some governments, an observation that can be made by perusing the different positions taken by the same government on the same issue in different forums. It does not, however, necessarily serve the interests of the organization's mission objectives or the integrity of its functioning. On the contrary, the UN's functioning as a cohesive, efficient system has been significantly compromised.

A particular feature of the UN system is the duplication of functions among agencies, as, for example, in the case of the multiple entities responsible for various aspects of development. Conversely, an encouraging effort toward overcoming this is the consolidation of agencies working on gender equality and the empowerment of women: Established in 2010 as UNWOMEN, this new organization brings together the former Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW); the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW); the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Such a development augurs well for the UN's functioning as a system and for a more coherent UN identity among staff. It may also be viewed as especially welcome at a time when the UN must operate more cost-effectively—the 2012–2013 budgets represents a 5 percent reduction from the previous period.

3. See Senge, Peter (1990): *The Fifth Discipline—The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*. New York, Doubleday, and Bánáthy, Bela (2000): *Guided Evolution of Society: A Systems View (Contemporary Systems Thinking)*, New York, Springer.

Similarly, the plethora of UN mandates, the intergovernmental resolutions that authorize UN action and programing estimated as numbering close to ten thousand, and their performance would require a thorough review, an effort likely to release resources consumed by outdated mandates and further reduce possible duplication.

Another notable trend is the growing role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors in the work of the UN. While consultations with NGOs are grounded in Article 71 of the UN charter and NGOs have always been active in the work of the organization, further efforts, notably with 2005 UN reform endeavors, have facilitated a broadening of the opportunities for civil society actors. NGOs are thus involved in information dissemination, awareness raising and advocacy, joint implementation of programs, and provision of technical expertise both at the international and national levels. They may also participate in conferences, and enter into consultative status with specific UN departments. As has been extensively examined elsewhere,[4] issues persist regarding civil society accountability and legitimacy, and the degree of their substantive participation in global political processes. Nonetheless, the inclusion of NGOs in its functioning contributes to increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the UN as a system.

The advent and growing application of the human-rights-based approach (HRBA) in UN development activities has significantly strengthened the participation of civil society. The HRBA rests on the principles of participation, accountability, and nondiscrimination. It employs examination of immediate, underlying, and structural causes of development problems, and how these relate to the respect, fulfillment, and protection of human rights; it identifies the most affected portions of the population and ensures the participation of all stakeholders in identifying core problems and framing solutions, including civil society groups and individuals as well as representatives of government; it undertakes strategic programing designed to address capacity gaps in claiming rights, fulfilling rights, and design-related activity.

As explored more fully elsewhere,[5] the HRBA can represent a model for the UN system's evolution as a more cohesive and better integrated machinery. This is because it has been proven to add value with sustained development results; governments consider it as a legitimate part of development assistance frameworks. Moreover, the interagency institutional arrangements employed for its development and implementations can help transcend the myopic "silo" functionality and move toward more holistic and interdisciplinary working methods. The HRBA has also been shown to engender greater flexibility, openness, responsiveness, and adaptability of practitioners and the organizations they represent.

In promoting organizational change in these ways among its practitioners and processes, the HRBA has the potential to move the UN forward in terms of internal cohesiveness as a system and toward greater service to its ultimate beneficiaries, with more fully owned national human rights protection systems and development achievements. However, the approach can benefit from the development of indicators and a more compelling vision and from more advanced knowledge management techniques to capture lessons learned and best practices, thereby laying the basis for systems thinking in action.[6] Among other things, it would also require further endorsement by the UN governing bodies and more consistent integration with the World Bank, to be more fully entrenched. Nevertheless, it holds the potential for enhanced UN adaptability to larger global shifts and opportunities.

For such progress to be fully rooted, it has also been noted that practitioners must also be conscious of more meaningfully embodying the principles they advocate. Internalization

4. McKeon, Nora (2009) *The United Nations and Civil Society. Legitimating Global Governance—Whose Voice?*

5. Clarke, Alisa. "The Potential of the Human Rights Based Approach for the Evolution of the United Nations as a System" *Human Rights Review*, Volume 12, No. 4, December 2011.

6. Peter Senge notes "Systems thinking also needs the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery to realize its potential. Building shared vision fosters a commitment to the long term. Mental models focus on the openness needed to unearth shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world. Team learning develops the skills of groups of people to look for the larger picture beyond individual perspectives. And personal mastery fosters the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect our world" (Senge 1990:12).

of values also plays a role in ensuring system progression on various levels. As the Danish Institute for Human Rights affirms, "rights based organizations and their staff should move forward by setting an example and should focus on ensuring that the values of dignity, accountability, nondiscrimination, and participation are embedded in project implementation procedures as well as every day behavior and attitudes" (Boesen and Martin 2007:29).

Conclusion

The UN has developed a range of formal and informal arrangements and procedures to apply its principles of peace, justice, equality, human dignity, and environmental stability. These reflect to no small degree the historical development of the organization, as well as the respective interests, circumstances, and resources of the system's actors

In the organization's internal culture, formal adherence to impartiality, fair geographic representation, professionalism, and integrity are nuanced by real-life institutional arrangements, management approaches, and values dilemmas. Among these, bureaucracy, hierarchy, silo-mentality, short-term focus, and risk aversion are seen to promote internal competition and erode initiative, adaptability, sustainability, and effectiveness of UN efforts. Some supportive trends toward greater coherence include increasing interagency collaborations and the Delivering as One initiative.

Some of the same forces of internal culture are expressed in the functioning of the larger UN system as a whole, and may be viewed as both reflecting and reinforcing the internal culture. As with "silo mentality" and hierarchy, critical current factors in this regard are the significant decentralization of organizations with different governance bodies and priorities, as well as traditionally top-down approaches to determining needs and impacts for beneficiary populations. In terms of advancements, the consolidation of agencies working on women's equality and empowerment, the growth of opportunities for civil society, and expanding application of the human-rights-based approach are promising developments for ensuring greater institutional cohesiveness as well as sensitivity and responsiveness to its broadest constituencies.

We can broadly conclude that the internal culture of the UN is largely mirrored by the institutional functioning of the system, with a fundamental proclivity towards hierarchy, fragmentation, short-term timeframes, limited collaboration across different entities, and fixed agendas. At the same time, we can point to some trends that seem to foster system evolution through greater coherence (demonstrated internally by inter-agency initiatives and Delivering as One, and externally by UNWOMEN), greater expansiveness and inclusiveness (both internally and externally with more NGO consultation, and externally through broad stakeholder consultations with the HRBA), and greater adaptability (shown internally with extended RBM timeframes and externally through increasing incorporation of the HRBA in programming).

What does this mean for supporting UN system evolution? Whatever other forces there may be at play, its culture is something over which the UN actors themselves have significant control. Charged as they are with a primary role in taking forward the UN mission, and now further armed with the knowledge that their culture can have such far-reaching and profound implications for the way the system as a whole functions, it is incumbent upon all UN actors and especially its leaders, to consciously develop the ways of feeling, thinking, believing, behaving, and interacting that will cultivate higher fulfillment of its organizational mission. It means that management should introduce greater incentives among staff for taking initiative and embracing the lessons of failure. It means building on the experience of longer RBM timeframes and the HRBA for programming. It means further collaboration across teams, divisions, and agencies, with a view to greater consolidation. It means flattening hierarchy internally and externally, consulting with a wider range of stakeholders, more often, and listening more fully. And it means "walking the talk" in ever more practical ways, with the values of accountability, nondiscrimination, and participation embedded in processes, in every day

behavior and attitudes, as well as in recruitment and performance assessments. It means taking responsibility for UN culture shift and evolution.

Global political developments, evolving methodologies, and nascent consolidations are reshaping the contours and adaptability of the UN system, and calling into question much of the UN's traditional institutional design and its corresponding culture. In the same way that the UN member states, Secretariat, beneficiaries, and partners have historically navigated their interests around the formal structure and organizational functioning, new forces and interests seek to assert their influence and will continue to determine the course and content of their representation as "we the peoples."

For this quintessential world organization of universal values and ideals, progress toward a more fully values-aligned culture, higher level system functioning, and execution based on merit and openness, will be steps forward toward more meaningful and durable realization of the UN mission. Consciously supporting these culture shifts, both internally within organizations, and correspondingly through the larger external system, will be pivotal for the viability, relevance, and sustainability of the UN. In serving the evolving manifestation of the UN's values, through more holistic system functioning and expanded collaboration, the UN is better positioned to respond effectively to the urgent needs of the twenty-first century.

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