



The mother of all questions

The UN is experiencing its most dramatic crisis since it was established in 1945. Meanwhile, nation states seem unable to fill the vacuum.

Whereas the American commitment to fighting 'global terror' through a series of costly localised wars is to be questioned from an efficiency standpoint, this is not enough for the French to reject 'preventive' action in favour of a Cold War concept of international legitimacy. Both positions seem no longer compatible with the new priorities of the post-September 11 era.

At a time when most questions seem to become by definition global ones, nation states demonstrate a structural lack of capacity to solve global problems, while the 'place' which is institutionally allotted to global strategic thinking seems to be more irrelevant than ever.

Frank Vibert has asked on openDemocracy, 'Can such challenges be met by relatively modest reconfiguration of structures already in place? Or is a drastic reconstruction necessary and desirable?' We believe radical reform has become the only realistic option.

This paper is far from being a conclusive, comprehensive proposal. It gathers some ideas together and proposes a draft general framework. It invites the opinions we put forward to be 'falsified' and the general framework to be challenged. It calls for other suggestions to be proposed. In general it has the objective of stimulating a broader debate on an issue which is a question of paramount political importance which cannot, therefore, be left to the expertise of a very few insiders. Our opinion is that "experts" will never develop a vision systematic enough for such a complex question.

Reforming the UN: One Approach

Is reform of the UN the most efficient way to approach the shaping of global governance instruments? Wouldn't reforms be more costly than constructing brand new entities with brand new - arguably smaller and more compact communities of founding member-states?

We believe that the credibility in which the UN is held is still an asset worth capitalising on. The organisation needs to be radically redesigned, but it is still perceived by most public opinion as the only source of international legitimacy.

The UN remains, in fact, one of the most effective public sector bodies in existence, and has moreover developed its effectiveness in nation-building in recent years, as Karin von Hippel points out. In fact the organisation is a good performer evaluated on a cost-benefit, micro level. Still, even UN 'local' missions are often obstructed or prevented at source, by a lack of political consensus.

The problems that arise, indeed, do so only when it comes to designing and delivering effective policies. The UN's one big political achievement was its establishment, 60 years ago, fully equipped with an ambitious mission statement which then and in the years to follow was accepted by all of its 191 members: virtually every nation in the world. The fact that every member of the UN declares that they share common principles (freedom, peace and development for all) which are still rejected by most of them in their individual behaviour, is a paradox that weakens it, as Frank Vibert observes. But at the same time, the UN is a foundation stone and point of leverage for those principles.

So what sort of blueprint for reform can we envisage?

Our starting point is that any viable proposal must at least consider the three major features shaping the United Nations:

- (1) their policy making procedures (Council and General Assembly);
- (2) the re-formulation of their mission statements;
- (3) the internal organisation by which the United Nations function and the rationalisation of the entire 'portfolio' of UN-related or autonomous entities which make up the entire machinery of international policy making.

Our recommendations close with some longer-term options: which in fact, could also parallel a more incremental approach.

Reforming policy-making: current criticisms

Let's start with the most politically relevant UN organ: the Security Council. The two most frequently voiced criticisms about it concern 1) the veto and 2) the ability of the current membership to represent the contemporary distribution of worldwide power.

If we want the UN to be more relevant and efficient, many would start by eliminating the veto. This is rather obvious: everything from tenants' organisations to national football associations bear witness to the rule of thumb that unanimous decision-making processes give some members blackmailing powers over others, leading to weak decisions and eventually failure.

The UN is no exception to this rule. The big five represent at least four plus one different cultures, histories and agendas (if we consider the US and UK to be broadly aligned). If we expect them all to agree, we will never advance. "Great power unanimity" makes the Security Council structurally unable to

take decisions on the most important issues, because such issues tend to be controversial and divisive.

However, there is some merit in unanimous decision making: it has ensured that none of the big winning powers of WW2 (also for decades the only powers who could engender a new worldwide disaster) were sidelined. But today we live in a different era.

Global power in a new balance

After 60 years, do the big five still represent a big enough portion of world power? And has the distribution of power among the five changed so that any of them – specifically the US - may no longer be happy to be counted as one among equals?

The assumptions behind both questions are, on a quantitative point of view, largely wrong. If we look to a broad set of criteria (military strength, but also current and potential economic might, population, and the capacity to represent different cultures), the big five are still very important. Indeed, their combined weight on the most important indicators of power has stayed approximately the same.

According to IMF reports and the World Fact Book of the CIA, in 1945 the big five represented 36% of world population and now they represent 32%. As for GDP, they nowadays represent 34% of world GDP, whereas in 1950 they counted for 32%.

They are even more powerful when it comes to military strength. The convergence between information technologies and weapons production makes more important economies of scale: this amplifies the gaps between leaders and followers and technically much less likely for any of the big five to experience in conventional confrontations disasters comparable to Vietnam or Afghanistan.

There has been some redistribution of power among them, but these changes were not the ones we would expect. France's weight has stayed the same. The UK has in fact lost some ground: and Russia much more. China has compensated. As for the US, their economic and population advantage has become smaller. Of course, their military edge has increased sharply, but this happened for reasons largely external to the US (the collapse of the Soviet Union).

So, if one looks to numbers, the story of the last half-century is more about the rise of China and the collapse of the Soviet Union than the rise of America relative to the other four.

But while the big five are still the most powerful, the percentage of interests which need to be represented before we consider decisions with a worldwide scope acceptable, has significantly risen.

September 11 showed dramatically how the dispersed nature of technological power coupled with the greater vulnerability of economic and social systems renders the agreement of the big five nation-states insufficient for global security. Catastrophic consequences may stem from relatively local crises. The number of parties who may seriously disrupt security worldwide is much higher.

Maintaining international security and peace will only be possible if, through a synchronised effort, this becomes the common objective of many more countries. Even if it sounds paradoxical to say so, at a time when unilateral decisions instead seem to be becoming the norm – the fact is that our need for multilateralism has significantly increased.

False trade-off: between efficiency and democracy

The UN is, therefore, facing a problem both of efficiency (the question of the veto) and of democracy (the composition of the decision-making body).

Normally, we look for a trade-off between these two terms: one could increase “efficiency” by slightly reducing “representation”, or the other way round. But this does not hold true in this instance. The UN – like virtually any single political institution – is inefficient for the very reason that it is unable to “represent” its stakeholders. Meanwhile, stakeholders do not bother to have their say within the UN because they no longer trust its capacity to deliver. So, up to a point, more democracy and more efficiency would help each other.

What can we do? Some proposals go for the abolition of the veto, or modifying the composition of the Council and its permanent membership. Others even suggest the abolition of the Security Council, leaving all decisions to the General Assembly. But when it comes to institutional redesign, what usually makes for success is to start by identifying a couple of separate “powers” able to convey democracy and efficiency with different intensity, and make sure that they are able to counterbalance each other. So it is, we believe in this case.

A new separation of powers

Our proposal is that the Security Council (it may even drop “security” from the name) should become a more executive decision-making body whose members – the “biggest” countries – will all be “permanent”. The General Assembly’s power could be extended to all politically relevant issues.

The former will be the guarantor of “efficiency” (problem-solving can only be performed by smaller groups) and “stability”. The latter will become the guarantor of “democracy” (in respect of the willingness of all stakeholders) and of “innovation” (which normally comes from outsiders and smaller players).

General Assembly decisions would require a simple majority on most issues (electing the boards of UN bodies described later) and two-thirds for the most sensitive (for instance, if a war against members must be authorised or for acceptance/ expulsion decisions). The Council may instead demand a higher quorum for a General Assembly decision (perhaps two-thirds and three-quarters for each of the above decisions).

Initiatives may come from a qualified number of members of the Assembly or Council alike.

Council new membership

The new UN will have to take full advantage of a very simple fact: that the distribution of world assets (population, economy, army) tends to be highly concentrated. In other words, to “represent” 50% of the world population, it is enough to take the six largest countries and add in only one more state, to account for half of the world’s GDP. This statistic means that a well designed, relatively small body – and, therefore, a rather efficient one in terms of problem-solving capacity – could still be strongly “representative”.

Who will the members of this new Council be? The selection criteria should be simple, transparent and quantitative. Our criteria were to include the ten biggest countries, in terms both of population and GDP.

The new list has fifteen nations on it: the current five, three more G8 members (Japan, Germany and Italy), plus India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, Pakistan and Nigeria.

Around 7% of the members of the United Nations (fifteen out of a total of 191) would still represent 65% of the population worldwide (4 billion people of 6.2 billion) and 59% of worldwide GDP. The group would also account for more than 90% of total military expenditure, and for nearly all weapons of mass destruction. Such a group would also have a good regional balance and be consistent with the current balance of power.

Nevertheless, it would not be a rich club. Less developed countries would be a strong minority or even have a slight majority, depending on whether Russia and Mexico were now included among their number.

Another innovation would give some of the nation states to give a seat to the most important macro-regional communities: the most likely initial candidates being Bangladesh joining India or Pakistan to work out some sort of partnership with the Arab League; and the European Union in the immediate short term. This would encourage smaller countries to develop effective macro-regional networks. But it would also be the beginning of a more profound, longer-term, reform of the council.

Some pragmatic adjustments to the general framework

One big question remains: what will convince the current incumbents, the big five, and especially the sole superpower amongst them to accept such a plan, which undoubtedly implies some dilution of their decision-making powers? In general, why should nation states ever concede the significant reduction in their sovereignty that such a strategy requires?

We envisage four major problems over all: 1) some countries may object that they are big enough for the Council (Spain and Australia on the ground of economy, Egypt and Vietnam on population); 2) these countries may be unwilling to have the same weight as Tuvalu or San Marino, in the General Assembly; 3) the big five may not accept being put on a par with the new Council members; 4) most important, the US may object to the loss of the veto.

The first objection may be the easiest to address: over time, members of the Council may gradually be replaced by macro-regions (like the European Union): countries too small to qualify will have the possibility of increasing their weight through partnership. Secondly, votes in the General Assembly would certainly have to be weighted, most likely according to population (or better, classes of population size, so that India and China will not be over-represented and the smallest countries rendered negligible).

Weighted votes may also be applied for a period in the Council, to persuade the current big five to accept the changes: their votes could be weighted at – say – twice those of the other ten.

Lastly, the role of the United States. Their power has only materialised on the military front, and because of the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, their superpower status cannot be denied. We must find some institutional mechanism to accommodate it. One of our options would involve us returning to our opening premise: which we would, in fact, now propose to correct, by conceding the veto to the United States alone.

An “adjustment”, like this, prevents the UN from adjudicating against the US: such decisions would in any case be technically impossible to implement. And the US would be encouraged by it to take major decisions with the consent of the UN: not doing so has already been shown to be politically unsustainable in the long term.

To all these “adjustments” we will need to attach a “sunset clause”. When such a date arrives, they will be reviewed or abolished.

Questions of the feasibility of global governance provoked by such a reform deserve much more space for consideration. But of one thing we can be sure: such a measure cannot be perceived as a zero-sum game. The US will achieve a “legalisation” of their status of sole superpower, but must also concede that they cannot be self-sufficient. France (together with Russia and China) will procure the survival and increased effectiveness of the UN, but will

have to give up some of their power of interdiction. Others will eventually get a say in a process where they are currently without voice, but will have to accept the responsibilities involved in decision making. This is no “prisoner’s dilemma”.

Redefining the UN’s mission

The current UN mission statement mentions three major objectives, and implies a hierarchy among them: peace and security; development and aid; freedom and human rights.

All deserve reconsideration. The first has changed radically, for the reasons mentioned above. The relationship between the two terms – peace and security – seems to have been turned upside down. The second objective, development and aid, will probably remain substantially intact. But UN and specialised agencies should review the macro-economic hypotheses upon which development theory and practice have been constructed, in order to capitalise better on the valuable know-how the UN itself has accumulated in humanitarian aid and development.

Thirdly, freedom and human rights pose a question we can no longer postpone. Is democracy an inextricable part of human rights, and therefore a natural part of the UN mission? If yes, what do we really mean by democracy? Is there a definition simple enough to be universally accepted? Is there any implication for membership rights of the UN? These are some of the most difficult questions which remain to be answered.

We would argue that a reformed UN may be assigned three further objectives, already within the UN domain of interest, but deserving to be institutionalised:

- (1) the preservation of the environment and of energy for current and future generations;
- (2) the definition and enforcement of regulations within borderless, currently poorly-regulated social, economic and scientific arenas (privacy, copyright, and the Internet have recently revealed this need);
- (3) the promotion of research projects whose optimal scale is worldwide (for instance, biotechnology to improve food production for the many, or the development of drugs like AIDS-related vaccines that may not be sustainable from a short-term profit point of view).

More importantly, the new UN should clarify how seriously its stakeholders want it to drive forward such objectives. This is both a question of definition and of the necessary mechanisms.

It is one thing to promote a rhetoric loosely saying that “the UN promotes peace and security”. It would be an entirely different matter if the UN were to clearly state – as we would recommend – that “No war against one or more

UN members can be waged without the explicit authorisation of a qualified majority”.

There is one further recommendation that we would make, as a parallel statement: “The UN may authorise the limitation of national sovereignty, should it decide that a State is posing a risk to the security of others”.

Redesigning the UN's organisation

At this stage we can only gesture at a few of the many remaining areas for analysis, both within the UN galaxy and outside but still related to it. In general, it is clear that there are crucial synergies to be leveraged and considerable overlaps to be reduced, which would have to be identified before we could cost the functions of global governance better.

One rationalisation would be to merge institutions with similar goals, such as the FAO and the WFP. The World Bank and IMF pose a more complicated question. They are, in fact, the product of different political, economic and diplomatic processes: and as a consequence, have different genetic codes. However, a more rational global governance framework would require a vastly improved coordination between the two. The other problem-family is agencies and programmes with different institutional missions which may still significantly impact upon each other: the most interesting example being the relation between the WTO and the same IMF/ World Bank.

The new UN must also clarify the relationships between policies. It should be clearly stated that, “Wherever a shareholder is recognised by the UN as in breach of its obligations towards other stakeholders’ security or its own citizens’ freedom, support for development will immediately stop, being replaced, as and when required, by humanitarian aid provided directly to that country’s citizens without interference from the aforementioned government.”

From such a principle a number of systematic decisions would then follow. Many UN activities will in fact be performed by single national governments (such as the enforcement of UN regulations on single individuals or organisations). But the UN will have to have in place a more systematic mechanism which will ensure single shareholders’ collaboration.

We believe that the launch of a reformed UN, like any brand new organisation, would have to be preceded by a “business plan” clarifying the range of likely activities to be performed, and its resulting financial needs. Necessary resources would be allocated according to economic criteria, and raised according to each country’s financial capacity as a percentage of its GDP (debt-burdened countries may even be exempt). A sort of initial public offering will have to take place, in which only those countries which have unwritten their obligations are admitted as founding members of the new UN.

Longer-term perspectives

Achieving such a grand redesign - and convincing some parties that it is also in their national interest - is likely to take years. But even this achievement will only be partially complete.

One could argue that such a pragmatic reform would still miss the very point of the global Internet era we are poised to enter. It would enhance UN performance both in regard to its efficiency and legitimacy, but would still leave it as a form of governance not very different from the ones we have at national or even at the European level. Its capacity to act and to represent would – even when optimised – be inadequate to the speed and complexity which these technologies are relentlessly producing.

More radical steps would assist even higher degrees of efficiency and also of democracy. But when all is said and done it is institutional flexibility itself, more than anything else, which is bound to be the real name of the game when one looks at global governance in the longer term.

More efficiency?

One of the ghosts haunting this discussion is the question: what about a proper “UN government”?

In worldwide police and intelligence activity against terrorism, for instance, we need not only to take decisions at the supranational level, but also to implement them with rapidity and often with secrecy. Such delivery is inconceivable, even if it were confined to Security Council level. We would instead need a proper executive, accountable to the political (council plus assembly) level.

But we would argue that the new UN should avoid replicating traditional, nation-state (even European) governance structures. Rather than institute a single, huge government with its own President (whom somebody might, horror of horrors, be tempted to christen “President of World Government”) we should perhaps have six different entities, each focused on one of the above-mentioned mission areas, whose nature will be somewhere between “agencies” and real “government”. The Council and Assembly could elect an executive body for each of these mission agencies (security, aid, freedom, environment and energy, international private law, research).

More democracy?

The abolition of the Council and routing of all decisions through the Assembly would certainly be an error. National parliaments show clearly in practice that beyond a certain number of members they become unable to “parliament” (discuss together and challenge ideas) on anything. The peculiarity of world population distribution which makes it possible to gather 70% of it together simply by counting in the fifteen biggest states is a felicity we should exploit.

This concentration may even be strengthened. One very interesting option is to gradually replace the smallest new Council states (those which do not have

a “continental scope” like the USA, Russia, China, India and Brazil) with macro-regional organisations, as they become capable of contributing meaningfully to decision-making.

We could even envisage one day the membership of the Council being the five “continental” states, plus the EU, the Arab League, some form of political or economic union of Africa, Far East Asia, and South America. Even not strictly regional organisations like the Commonwealth could become members.

Such unions should be encouraged. Multiple memberships like that of the UK one in both the EU and the Commonwealth should be allowed. The share of worldwide population would increase even further.

Eventually, we could consider giving additional seats to non-governmental international organisations, such as international political parties which represent a big enough, sufficiently cross-border share of population; single issue organisations, and associations of NGOs. We may even envisage allowing for limited experiments to involve citizens directly on a world or at least a macro-regional footing.

This may strike you as pure science fiction; but one of the most pressing demands of the *no global* movement is just this. And the gulf between public opinion and global decision-making processes has become even more dramatically evident since the months preceding the war in Iraq.

Slowly, we must find a way to help citizens participate in these decision-making processes, again without making the mistake of replicating national mechanisms. International referenda could be an organisational nightmare, but at the same time a very effective tool to market the idea of global governance to citizens of all countries.

Last but not least, all the reforms envisaged here need to be planned and executed with an experimental approach. Institutional flexibility is, in fact, not even a long term vision, but the only way any Institution – not only the UN – will survive the age of uncertainty which we will be navigating in decades to come. And institutional flexibility, among other things, places the idea of a variable geometry of the United Nations on the agenda. The UN should promote – as the European Union has tried to do – the principle that it may assume different configurations vis-a-vis different institutional tasks. For, as we see it, different programmes and projects, all authorised under the UN umbrella, will each involve different subsets of stakeholders.

A moral imperative

By definition, a networked society cannot be governed by a Leviathan. It would be giant stupidity to ignore such a simple reality. Here we propose some initial ideas for a new “social contract”: the contract that human beings

and groups (families, clans, municipalities, and now nation states) have to agree on when they discover that its alternative would be mutual destruction.

We cannot afford an actual catastrophe on a global scale to drive us to this global contract: our only hope is that a crystal clear message – like that dramatically conveyed to everybody by September 11 – of the potential for such a catastrophe will give us the wisdom once provided solely through total war. At the end of the day, developing strategies of global governance brings us back inexorably to issues of morality. Of rationality. Of our will to survive.

Francesco Grillo & Simona Milio – Vision

Vision is an independent think tank committed to developing possible solutions to the complex problems that modern societies are facing. Vision objective is to collect ideas, protect them from short term pressure, make them grow in projects with high social added value, make sure that the projects become realised.

Vision is a not for profit association. The publication and other Vision works are presented mainly through public events. Vision most important way to collect ideas and communicate projects is Internet (www.vision-forum.org). Vision believes that the production of innovative solution to long term problems requires to gather ideas from very diverse backgrounds: this is why Vision is the meeting place of young talented people coming from very different experiences: management, academia, government, media, education. Vision objective is to make individuals with high potential and high social commitment become part of larger networks.

Vision believes that real political innovation is more likely to be produced at global or at least european level. This is why Vision has developed a network with think tanks from other European countries and the USA.