Rescuing the United Nations

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Its spirit of compassion is alive and well, but the UN has evolved into an overly complex bureaucracy on the brink of financial collapse. To survive, experts say, it must change.

In an ideal world, there would be no need for the United Nations. But considering the level of poverty, pestilence, pollution, and pugnacious human behavior perpetrated on planet Earth each day, it would seem that the United Nations should expect eternal applause for its enduring commitment to casting light into the world’s darkest corners. Lately, however, the behemoth international organization—which wheeled out the limos and luminaries for its 50th anniversary celebration last fall—has been under serious scrutiny. Experts agree the UN remains essential: A collective voice of conscience in an ever-changing world that has yet to shake its contradictory habit of both advancing and obliterating humanity. Yet in the same breath they describe it as bloated, bureaucratic, disorganized, and, most crucial to its existence, broke.

"The United Nations urgently needs reform," says Goodwin Cooke, a Syracuse University professor of international relations and former U.S. State Department diplomat. "Its institutions are out of date, its procedures are clumsy, its management is poor at best. Its role was defined in 1945; over the next 50 years it is going to be very different."

Indeed. When the United Nations was established in 1945, its top priority was to head off World War III. The organization’s charter called for saving "succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and embraced human rights, justice, and social progress for the good of all humankind. "We have to remember the UN was created by statesmen and -women who had just survived a savage war, and they didn’t design an institution to fail," says Thomas E. Boudreau G’80, G’85, a graduate of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and advisor to the staff of former UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. "They designed the UN with all the expectation and hope that it would succeed in solving many of these issues."

Today, of course, the Cold War has vanished, the Soviet Union has crumbled, Germany is one again, and countries that didn’t even exist are now armed and dangerous. Meanwhile, once unheard-of issues—global warming, terrorism, AIDS, international drug cartels, cyberspace—have become commonplace. And through it all the United Nations has maintained its vigil, struggling to deal with the myriad issues ushered into its corridors.

"People expect too much of the UN," says Maire Dugan, a 1979 doctoral graduate of the Maxwell School and associate chair of the conflict resolution master’s program at the McGregor School of Antioch University in Ohio. "Most people call it a failure whenever an international incident occurs that the UN has not prevented from being damaging. And that’s an unfair mandate. The UN’s success is hard to see because much of it is in preventing conflict and creating a forum through which nations can do productive work together in a whole range of social, political, and economic policy areas."

So, what exactly is the UN? At its core, the United Nations consists of six principal organs: the General Assembly, Secretariat, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, International Court of Justice, and Trusteeship Council. From this basic structure springs the colossal assortment of UN programs and organs, independent and specialized agencies, commissions and committees. Needless to say, a UN flowchart has come to resemble a handful of octopuses grappling in a free-for-all. Consider, for instance: The UN’s Economic and Social Council counts 1,500 nongovernmental organizations among its consultants. And the UN’s seemingly all-encompassing
framework holsters groups such as the Administrative Committee on Coordination's Consultative Committee on Substantive Questions and deals with issues ranging from deep seabed mining and meteorological services to the repatriation of Rwandans and the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty. Little wonder, then, that UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali preaches cooperation among the conglomerate of arms and, in proposing his 1996-97 program budget of $2.69 billion, called for cost-cutting measures, greater efficiency, and a restructuring of the Secretariat.

"The United Nations has no say as to who works for the United Nations," says Silvana Rubino-Hallman, an assistant professor of political science and international relations at the Maxwell School and faculty associate of the Global Affairs Institute. "There's a whole overlapping of programs, divisions doing the same thing with different monies that come from the same source and do not coordinate with each other. We need this organization to adapt to the times we live in."

One initiative the UN has undertaken to improve operations is establishing the Office of Internal Oversight Services, created to "audit, inspect, investigate, and evaluate waste and inefficiency in the United Nations," says David Curzon, chief of the office's Central Evaluation Unit. In the past three years, the unit has evaluated work on refugees, the environment program, and different phases of peace-keeping operations. While each evaluation is unique, recurring problems surface. "We found in the peace-keeping operations, for example, that the UN was not learning systematically from its experience," says Curzon, a 1972 doctoral graduate of the Maxwell School. "In general, there is a lack of institutional memory in the UN."

Like other public service institutions, the UN also encounters problems in the shift from production to marketing, especially in the economic and social sectors. There is, Curzon says, "an imbalance in the effort spent to produce a report or study and ensuring that it gets to potential users. Reports and analyses by UN offices are often of high technical quality," he adds, "but probably don't reach most of the government officials who could make use of them."

Ultimately, the UN is a reflection of its member states, acting on their will and whimsy. Originally it had 51 members. Today that number is more than triple. "Most people believe that the United Nations goes about things in its own way, but it can't," says Terence A. Todman, a retired career ambassador who received a master's degree from the Maxwell School in 1952. "It can only reflect the attitude of the majority of its own members." Todman, who served more than four decades in various capacities with the United Nations and U.S. State Department, points out that the UN membership has a kind of Orwellian Animal Farm shadow hovering over it. "All members are equal, but not all are equal members," he says. This, however, allows even the membership's smallest players to float ideas and weigh in on the issues. And it's also the place where the United States gauges its support. "Every (American) embassy becomes involved because the United States wants to know the position of every country, why they're taking it, and then seeks the support of the host country," says Todman, whose ambassadorships have included appointments in Argentina, Denmark, Spain, Costa Rica, Guinea, and Chad.

As the organization's most influential member, the United States plays a major part in the future of the United Nations. "The ability of the UN to act depends to a heavy degree on the attitude of the American government," Todman says. "If you can predict how the United States will act, then you can predict how the United Nations will be."

Fiscal Frailty

The most glaring reform issue confronting the United Nations is its financing—or lack thereof. As a dues-collecting body, the UN relies on the support of its member states, who ante up an annual fee and also make voluntary contributions to the vast network of groups under the UN umbrella. The cost of keeping—or attempting to keep—the peace is by far the UN's most expensive venture. In fact, UN members are reportedly more than $3.3 billion behind on their dues, includ-
ing nearly $1.9 billion for peace-keeping. As the top debtor, the United States alone owes at least $1 billion.

"It's a philosophical issue of whether the people who have power in Congress and the people of this country are willing to have the U.S. involved in foreign affairs," says Rubino-Hallman. "Some think there's still a choice—of being isolationist or being a policeman in the world—and I don't think there's a choice anymore. You have to be out there because of economic interdependence and trade. Alone, you don't survive anymore."

O. Rudolph Aggrey, a longtime U.S. State Department official and retired U.S. ambassador to Romania, Senegal, and Gambia, has witnessed the benefits of multilateral work. While serving as U.S. ambassador to Senegal and Gambia from 1973-77, he assisted in the development of relief efforts to the drought-plagued area. In a situation like this, Aggrey says, multilateral endeavors, coordinated among a group of nations, can be crucial to resolving an overwhelming problem. Such an arrangement allows the involved nations to focus on the dilemma so that it is a priority clearly set for all the participants in the best of worlds," says Aggrey, who received a master's degree in journalism from SU in 1948.

But even the most purposeful agenda of humanitarian aid won't get off the launching pad without financing. And, by most accounts, the financial turmoil now engulfing the UN is severe enough to raise the specter of whether the global alliance will exist at the turn of the century. Many observers believe the next five years will determine the organization's fate. As the founder and editor of the World Future Society's Future Survey, a monthly abstract that examines published materials on forecasts, trends, and ideas regarding the future, Michael Marien is familiar with the UN's predicament. "Financing is a key matter, because if there is to be an effective and viable UN in the future, then you have to think of new terms of finance," says Marien, who received a Ph.D. from the Maxwell School in 1970. "There has to be some new means of raising money, preferably from multiple sources. Right now, simply getting money from member states, many of whom are deadbeats, is inadequate."

Harlan Cleveland, a former Maxwell School dean now a professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota, has monitored global affairs and the United Nations for decades. Since the late 1960s he has worked with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and served as United States ambassador to NATO and assistant secretary of state in the Kennedy administration. He also is the author of several books, including The Global Commons: Policy for the Planet.

Cleveland believes the UN must turn to more innovative methods of international financing, particularly for work that requires continuous support, such as the UN's World Weather Watch, a unique system that gathers, analyzes, and distributes daily weather information from around the globe. "It would be a very good thing if we could develop an international flow of funds that did not require 185 governments to scratch their heads each year and ponder whether they want to invest in peace for another year," Cleveland says.

To fund the UN, Cleveland calls for raising revenues from sources that are commonly shared and not owned by any particular entity. Among Cleveland's proposals is an international tax on the areas he refers to as the "Global Commons"—the atmosphere, outer space, the oceans, and Antarctica. Such a tax—imposed, for instance, on travelers who fly over Antarctica—would help cover the cost of protecting those areas and reduce the role of political shenanigans in the funding arena. "It wouldn't be hard to develop an international revenue stream out of charging people for using air space, outer space, and the oceans," he says.

Cleveland also advocates small charges, or overrides, on transmitting of computer bits of information, for example, as well as on international monetary transactions. "More than $1 trillion is exchanged across borders every day, so you wouldn't have a very big override on those transactions to raise all the money the UN needs," he says.

Financing the United Nations doesn't escape irony either, Cleveland notes. "We have no difficulty appropriating huge amounts of money for arms in case the UN doesn't work, but we have great difficulty in deciding to make sure the UN does work," he says.

**War and Peace**

When the UN goes to work among parties that have strayed from the path of peace, echoes of its efforts reverberate between inept and sublime. Everyone naturally wants crises curtailed immediately. But as any global observer knows, conflicts can stretch across centuries, and simple solutions are about as common as an air conditioner in the Arctic Circle. "When people have been shooting at each other, they get an independent momentum that often precludes any sort of settlement," says Boudreau, now a visiting assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "So it takes some very important and gifted diplomacy to bring about a settlement."

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As a forum, the United Nations ensures the views of differing voices will be heard, hopefully with the opposing perspectives striking an understanding. Easier said than done, of course, but the UN is equipped as a mediator, too. Antioch University’s Dugan feels, however, that mediators outside the UN are often better suited for delivering a deal, mainly because of the structural baggage the United Nations hauls around as a membership organization. “I would hold out mediation as an appropriate function for nongovernmental actors to play among nations because nongovernmental actors don’t have the structured interest necessarily that the UN does,” she says.

Nonetheless, these days the United Nations finds itself in a precarious straddle between the particulars of peacemaking, peace-keeping, and peace-building. There is, after all, a noted difference between the particulars of peacemaking, peace-keeping, and peace-building. There is, after all, a noted difference between establishing peace and maintaining it. Dugan likens the UN’s role as a peace-keeper to that of a referee in a boxing match: He’s not trying to settle the bout, just hold back the pugilists “at moments of extreme pique to prevent them from hurting each other.”

The UN’s mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina serves as the perfect example of how intervention without solid support can backfire. “When we sent peacekeepers to Bosnia in 1992, we violated the idea of peace-keeping because we sent them into a very primary situation” before any peace agreement, SU’s Rubino-Hallman says. “We made a mistake, and we’ve been trying to make up for that mistake for the last three years. One of the biggest lessons we’ve learned from Bosnia-Herzegovina is that we need to rethink the idea of peace-keeping and whether the use of peace-keeping forces is viable in this kind of war.”

The UN’s peace-keeping operations have grown in number from two in the United Nations’ first decade of existence to 25 between 1985 and 1995. During the Cold War many of the confrontations were linked to the American-Soviet standoff, and there was a pervading fear that a conflict’s escalation would lead to a showdown between the superpowers. “The possibility of a third world war if both superpowers got involved was a huge deterrent,” Rubino-Hallman says.

Today, the threat of nuclear Armageddon at the hands of the superpowers has waned, but in the wake of the Persian Gulf and Somalia operations, the scope of confrontation has widened from patrolling demilitarized zones and overseeing cease-fires to guarding humanitarian convoys and surviving skirmishes with warlords. “The UN is supposed to be the absolute instrument of collective security, a neutral force that will go anywhere in the world and provide order,” Rubino-Hallman says. “It worked when the world was divided and when we had sides; it doesn’t work in a collective security type of environment because people are forced to take sides. No matter how neutral you try to make the operation, there’s someone who’s going to see it as taking sides. One of the things we learned from Somalia is that we were better off when the U.S. did not have troops on the ground because U.S. Marines in blue helmets are still U.S. Marines.”

Such troubles have led the United States to be a reluctant participant in multilateral military maneuvers and thus a tempting target for troublemakers. In fact, American soldiers no longer serve under UN command, unless it’s American. SU’s Cooke calls this “American exceptionalism, and it’s certainly going to weaken the United Nations’ mandates.” The Maxwell professor points out that “the inadequacy of the United Nations force in Bosnia has led a lot of people to believe that the United Nations cannot be effective. The mandate for the force in Bosnia was from the Security Council, in which the United States plays an important role.”
Boudreau views the UN's ineffectiveness in Bosnia as resulting from a lack of American leadership. "I think it was the most striking failure of U.S. leadership at the UN, perhaps since its inception," he says, adding that he believes superpowers should provide logistics, command control, and aerial support, but should avoid putting troops on the front line. "I think Bosnia is particularly the type of situation that called for collective security measures, not humanitarian assistance."

While the United States now seemingly takes a don't-call-us, we'll-call-you approach to global security, its inclination to avoid such engagements accentuates the issue of whether the United Nations should have a permanent security force, a reform many see in the making. "The whole idea of peace-keeping has to be rethought: Who supplies the peace-keepers, who pays for them, under what circumstances should they be deployed? Those things are undefined," Cooke says. "Many countries would oppose the concept of the United Nations being able to dispatch a bunch of tough mercenary soldiers to clean up things the Security Council doesn't like. It may be controversial, but I think a permanent UN force makes a lot of sense, even though it would be expensive and the rules for its deployment would have to be written with great care."

Atop the Power Structure

When the UN's first rules were worked out, the Security Council collected the assignment of maintaining peace and security. Throughout its 50-year history, the council's five permanent members have stood steadfast as a reminder of who was on the winning team in World War II. Today, even with 10 nonpermanent rotating seats, the Security Council casts a shadow as a Cold War relic that hasn't adapted to the changing global order. There's European representation—Britain and France—for sure, not to mention the well-worn seats of the United States, what's now the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China. But what about making room for a Latin American country? An African one? How about India—or Japan?

"Security Council reform should embody a geopolitical principle of legitimacy and diversity," Boudreau says. "That means it should be representative of at least the five mainland continents of the world—North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. I think this exclusion from Security Council affairs really detracts from its legitimacy."

Cooke, too, views the current Security Council structure as a target for reform, but doesn't envision Britain or France voting themselves as second-class powers. Such a shift would also require amending the charter, Cooke explains, and that's not likely with the all-powerful veto—the single, show-stopping armament with which all five permanent members are equipped. A single veto halts everything. And while the veto could be sidelined in the future in favor of some type of majority vote among the permanent members, Boudreau staunchly defends its unique power. "The veto in some ways delegitimizes violence," he says, citing conventional arms sales as an example. China may not approve all of the United States' sales, while the United States may have reservations about China's customers. Veto power provides that wedge of security for the skeptics. Stalemate maintained, status quo. "The point is that, as the world becomes more interdependent, the role of the veto in delegitimizing certain activities could become more important," Boudreau says.

Other Reforms

From the Security Council, all you have to do to discover more fodder for reform is step next door to the Trusteeship Council, the Economic and Social Council, then on to the Secretariat and the office of the secretary-general. Mention reform among these organs and a litany of logic prevails:

- The Trusteeship Council, established to guide fledgling trust territories from colonialism to sovereign statehood, has become obsolete. Popular and busy a few decades ago, its tasks subsided to the point that, in 1994, it basically closed up shop. The now dormant council could return in a new role, according to Cleveland, perhaps as supervisor for the Global Commons.

- The Economic and Social Council overlaps in too many programs, such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Many observers advocate a split into two separate councils.

- The Secretariat, home to 25,000 international civil servants, should weed out dead weight. But, as might be suspected, buyouts can sometimes be expensive.

Despite significant political changes, racial inequality remains a reality in South Africa, as shown in this example of a family outside their "home" in a resettlement village in KwaZulu homeland, Natal, South Africa.
It has also been suggested that the secretary-general divvy up his duties. Why, people ask, should he be required to simultaneously shift from ceremonial greeter to peace-maker to CEO to traveling humanitarian?

"It's an almost impossible job, if not impossible, because not only is he responsible for administering a global organization, but he's also accountable to almost 200-plus bosses," Boudreau says. "If he could delegate many of his ceremonial, peace-keeping, military, and administrative tasks, he would still have an enormous challenge facing him as often the most effective or sometimes the only international mediator that's acceptable to both or all sides in a potential or real conflict. I think that is his primary challenge."

Undoubtedly, necessary reforms will require perseverance. After all, these days little happens overnight. UN official Curzon, for instance, estimates it will take several years before the UN has all the institutional procedures in place to really learn from experience in peacekeeping. "It can be frustrating to repeat the same general idea over and over again, and to negotiate the turf battles and other aspects of the bureaucratic politics of reform. But these problems occur in all organizations," Curzon says. "The satisfaction of working on them in the United Nations is that the issues being dealt with are great ones: the global problems of war and peace, protecting the earth's environment, and developing a world economic system."

**The Progress and Plight Paradox**

Even if the United Nations wrestles its way through major reforms, it's still immersed in an increasingly fragmented world careening toward information overload. Technology may have turned Mother Earth into a global village, but it's loosely wired to a landscape where civil strife has become more common, violence hasn't faded from view, the population is soaring, the environment is slouching, and the complexities of humankind are creating a collective headache for the citizenry, one and all.

John J. Donohue IV, who holds master's ('69) and doctoral ('75) degrees from the Maxwell School, has worked for about 20 years with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), an autonomous agency under the UN umbrella. Now the director of Evaluation and Research for UNICEF, Donohue bears witness to the present-day paradox between progress and plight, where countries can be industrialized in one region and dirt-poor in another, strive toward self-sustained development yet suffer from their own incivilities. Often, he says, it can be a matter of priorities, where even a poor, war-torn country like Sri Lanka can focus on social issues and show surprising success in areas like infant mortality rates. "There are some countries," he says, "that have invested heavily in health and education, dealt with nutrition issues, have respect for the role of women in our society, and, in spite of relatively low per capita incomes, have fared better than others might have expected."

Not to be overlooked, though, are the places where war crimes are committed against women and children, where UNICEF and other workers are the victims of violence, and where humanitarian efforts must piggyback on top of the increasingly complex nature of strife. According to UNICEF's report *The State of the World's Children 1996*, warfare has claimed the lives of two million children in the past decade, and upwards of 28 million more have been left disabled, homeless, orphaned, or traumatized. Staggering figures like these leave little doubt about the self-perpetuating horrors of war and their impact on children. Beyond the statistics are entire generations knowing nothing but war. In Angola, war has ravaged on for more than three decades. In many places, at a time when children should be studying and playing games, they are handed AK-47's and turned into killers. "You see children dying, children being soldiers, assassins before age 16," Donohue says.

To combat such scenarios and protect the young and women, UNICEF has launched an "Anti-War Agenda," which attacks the war-crimes business and calls for action on several fronts. "In many ways, this is a proposal—not ideological, but pragmatic," Donohue says, "because we can see who's paying the price."
Part of UNICEF’s mission is to eradicate several of the underlying causes of war, including poverty and substandard living conditions. Donohue strongly believes in UNICEF’s decentralized structure and “country program approach” as a way to reach out to people and empower them. To succeed in helping others, Donohue recommends a sense of humility—something he learned as a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid-sixties—recognizing people’s capabilities and respecting them. “You see how little it takes to help people carry on in their own self-sustained way,” he says.

Even with the advent of technology, grass-roots work can be unpredictable. During a 1994 election, Rubino-Hallman ventured to the Dominican Republic as a political analyst and electoral observer for the Organization of American States. Her work required her to visit an electoral district atop a mountain. There were no roads, so she traveled to the electoral office on a donkey. Once there, she found a simple one-room structure—no windows or doors, but in the middle of the room there was a brand spanking new computer, part of a system designed to collect election results by modem from across the country. The only trouble was, there were no phone lines, so there was no way to use the modem. “That,” Rubino-Hallman points out, “is one of the problems you come across when you are trying to be a missionary.”

From a world futurist’s view, perhaps that anecdote could be seen as technology zipping off down the information highway without paying attention to what’s in the rear-view mirror. According to Future Survey editor Marien, a vast amount of knowledge out there needs to be sifted through, connected, and drawn together in some cohesive, beneficial manner. “We’re spending more time communicating in more ways than ever before, and the result is—at least during this transition period—there’s a lot of chaos going on,” Marien says. “There’s no good management of information that is being produced, and there seems to be little concern about getting on top of the important information.”

Idealistically, he says he’d like to see universities worldwide establish world futures programs—a role for academic leadership—to sort through the chaos and create a cogent knowledge industry. Such a program would allow us to “seriously put these pieces together and look at the entire planet, and humanity’s role in the planet,” Marien says. “We are obviously becoming a global society in many respects: You have a global economy, there’s a global culture, but there’s a lag in our thinking.”

Part of that lag, he says, is a reflection of the American culture, complete with all of its distractions. “There are two poles of tension: self-absorption and ignoring civic concerns versus paying some attention to the variety of the problems we face—world affairs, as well as U.S. affairs,” Marien says.

As president of the United Nations Association of Central New York, Maxwell School alumnus Stephen Waldron G72, G76 belongs to a like-minded group that looks at life from a global perspective. Association members meet for living-room discussions, forums, and other activities. They share ideas and try to be as knowledgeable as possible about the issues of the day. There’s an interest in other cultures, cultural exchanges, travel, a curiosity about the rest of the world, and an understanding that, increasingly, fewer and fewer activities stop at geopolitical boundaries.

“There’s a commonality of humankind and we see the UN as the premier organization designed to recognize and promote that aspect,” says Waldron. “We see we’re all affected one way or the other by things happening throughout the world. And again, we look to the United Nations as a forum in which those issues can be recognized and discussed; solutions proposed, accepted, and developed.”

Creating, sustaining, and sharing a sense of compassion in all of humankind is no small order. It is, however, a part of the UN’s original intent, the spirit of which persists today. Some experts believe the organization could change radically, even vanish. But all of the experts agree either the United Nations itself, or some future facsimile of it, will be necessary to address the uniquely global issues spinning around us without regard to borders. “Developing countries have great needs, but so do developed societies and so do people from developed societies,” retired diplomat Aggrey says. “Individuals, I think, benefit from experiences in other cultures.”

And if there’s any organization that, day in, day out, crosses paths with both the triumphs and fallibilities of the planet’s populace, and has the structure to guide it with a grasp on the world’s wisdom, it seems to be the United Nations.

“I don’t think we can imagine a world without the United Nations,” Rubino-Hallman says. “It would be a step back for civilization.”