Development, Disease and Environmental Degradation: A Commentary*

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Critical assessments of our international organizations are not new—in fact, they are regularly scheduled and essential. But, 60 years on, the United Nations (UN) seems to have arrived at a critical juncture. Universal pessimism and concern is deafening. What does this mean for the prospects of genuine UN reform? What does it mean for the UN in its work focused on environment, development, and disease issues?

Past anniversaries, including those in 1955, 1985 and 2000, were helpful in setting priorities and launching major initiatives. Leaders gathered and collaborated to assure themselves that the UN continued to be effective and relevant. At the conclusion of each of these historical Summits, a consensus emerged and, despite challenges and evolving expectations, the balance between optimism and pessimism regarding the organization's future consistently tilted to optimism.

Last September in New York, as the world's leaders gathered to mark the UN's sixtieth anniversary, there was a difference. Lines regarding UN reform were drawn in the sand. Clear proposals for concrete change were tabled by governments (such as Security Council reform and the creation of a Human Rights Council). An ambitious blueprint for reform was set out by the Secretary General. Notwithstanding the usual rounds of diplomatic interventions and modest, consensus language, pessimism and resignation seem to have won the day. There was a growing recognition that an organization with a "board of directors" of more than 190 countries was fundamentally flawed and capable of little more than negotiated gridlock and lowest common denominator decision making. The inability of countries to mobilize around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was evidence of a dysfunctional system. The undeniable consensus was that the UN is at a crossroads, and its iconic status was dealt yet another blow. How does an organization recover and rebound when such basic fundamentals as public trust, legitimacy to act and purposeful leadership have been devalued?

With the outcome of the recent summit fresh on our minds, what does it mean, and where does it lead us? Do we prepare for the incremental demise of the UN that some have suggested is inevitable? Alternatively, do we view this recent wave of pessimism as the biggest window of opportunity for genuine reform that the

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UN has seen in decades? Can it be a window for rebuilding trust, legitimacy, and leadership?

If there is to be real reform in the fields of environment, health and development, the three panellists provided a starting point by reflecting on myths and misunderstandings about the very nature of the UN and the way it works. They touched on the asset of universality and neutrality but recognized that it does not mean equality of voice and influence. Panellists spoke of the disagreements about objectives and agendas and persistent efforts to reach a consensus, which lead to accepting decisions that represent the lowest rather than the highest common denominator. National sovereignty is a very stubborn obstacle for real future progress. The myth of a "system" was unmasked through examples of fragmentation and lack of coherence. The UN excels in the use of its convening power to raise awareness of issues and build momentum for action, but usually there is no enforcement mechanism, which results in a consequent reliance on nation states for action and compliance. Finally, the UN is intergovernmental and thus largely insulated from the potential productive contributions of non-state actors.

Three sets of consideration could help in shaping a reform agenda: (1) learning from the lessons of the past (both past successes and past frustrations); (2) understanding the nature of the issues that lie ahead in the 21st century and acknowledging the shortcomings of existing institutions and processes to tackle those challenges; and (3) making adjustments for the current state of geopolitics including the changing dynamics between north and south, and between rich and poor.

LESSONS OF THE PAST

Looking back, it was in the 1970s that the global community agreed that multilateral institutions were necessary to support and guide the protection of the global environment and to promote sustainable development. The UN Environment Programme was born and environmental programming in other international and national bureaucracies was strengthened. The influence and prestige of the World Health Organization on matters of public health (especially disease eradication initiatives) reached a peak in the late 1970s, when polio was eradicated and the seminal *Health for All by the Year 2000* campaign was launched. The inter-relationships between poverty, environmental degradation and human health were coming to the fore.

In the past 30 years, we have learned a great deal from the way environmental issues have been tackled internationally. A strong base of international law has been developed, including key initiatives like the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) and the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer.

But in retrospect, ozone depletion seems like an easy problem relative to the complexities of the issues we face today. It was not "easy" in the sense that it did not require scientific ingenuity to diagnose the problem, to sort through the human health and environment impacts and to develop the prescription, but it was "easy" in

the sense that it was a narrow issue with a rather specific cause that could be traced to a particular industrial sector and regulated out of the market in developed and developing countries alike. The systems and decisions taken in the environmental field in the last thirty years excelled at dealing with issues on a sector-by-sector basis (for example, marine pollution and species protection) or on an issue-by-issue basis (for example, ozone depleting substances and hazardous waste).

Learning from the Montreal Protocol

- Scientific assessment was linked to policy response.
- Precautionary principle in action—governments took action in the face scientific uncertainty (*i.e.*, no actual damage to human health had been proven).
- Specific timetables for each country's phase-out were mandated. This "technology forcing" accelerated phase out and created markets for safer alternatives.
- Universal participation—but through common and differentiated responsibilities.
- Integration of science, economics and technology.
- Institutional platform (UNEP) allowed countries to come together and find consensus. UNEP's credibility rested with its organization of the scientific assessments and then its persistence in working with countries on a legally binding response and today as a clearinghouse for implementation.

Contrast those issues with global climate change—a diffuse problem whose cause has taken decades to achieve scientific consensus on, and that has impacts that are too numerous to enumerate. Climate change is compounding the current challenges faced by developing countries such as lack of food and water security, HIV/AIDS, poor human health, and environmental degradation. The damage and losses resulting from climate changes undermine the effectiveness of development assistance. They place increasing demands on humanitarian assistance and emergency response measures. The poor and marginalized bear a disproportionate share of the impacts on the fragile ecosystems that are often essential to their livelihoods. In turn, this affects poverty levels, hunger, and human health. If left unaddressed, climate change poses a major obstacle to achieving the MDGs.

Twenty-First Century Issues and Challenges

Clearly, then, while learning from the past is critical to shaping our future world, on their own these lessons are insufficient for dealing with today's and tomorrow's challenges. For the past ten years sustainable development has been described as the politics of hope. Today, concepts of "human security" and the "responsibility to protect" have been added to our vocabulary in recognition of emerging challenges.

We need to develop a deeper understanding of the nature and complexities of the issues that are confronting us in the twenty-first century—many of which

were highlighted in "A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility", the report of the UN's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.[1]

Today, despite best efforts, the state of the global environment continues to decline. Environmental problems transcend borders and necessitate international cooperation. Many environmental challenges themselves are increasingly complex, including climate change and genetically modified organisms. Combine this with the fact that the cumulative and uneven effects of industrialization and resource consumption are not particularly well understood.

Transboundary pollution and global issues like climate change are threatening environmental and human health, and the links between environmental degradation and poverty are indisputable. For instance, the recently completed Arctic Climate Impact Assessment found that air temperatures in Alaska and western Canada have increased as much as three to four degrees Celsius in the past fifty years. Other observations from this assessment include melting glaciers, reductions in the extent and thickness of sea ice, thawing permafrost, and rising sea levels. Arctic climate change presents serious challenges to the health and food security of some indigenous peoples and is threatening the survival of entire cultures.

As for biodiversity, it continues to provide a bountiful source of medicines and food products, and it maintains genetic variety that reduces vulnerability to pests and diseases, yet according to the United Nations, we are degrading and in some cases destroying the ability of the environment to continue providing these life-sustaining services for us.

And if all this were not enough, unsafe water and poor sanitation cause an estimated 80 per cent of all diseases in the developing world. The annual death toll exceeds five million—ten times the number killed in wars, on average, each year. More than half of the victims are children. No single measure would do more to reduce disease and save lives in the developing world than bringing safe water and adequate sanitation to all.

Do the existing institutional structures have the ability to deal with these issues? From a governance perspective, we know that the number and range of international institutions and instruments for dealing with these issues have grown steadily over the past quarter century. International institutions now exist to perform the functions of information broker, convener, facilitator, standard bearer, scientist, banker and investor.

International institutions and states have not organized themselves to address the problems of development in a coherent, integrated way, and instead continue to treat poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation as stand-alone threats.

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1 *Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, UN GAOR, 59th Sess., Supp. No. 565, UN Doc. A/59 (2004), online: United Nations ‹http://www.un.org/secureworld/ report.pdf›.

Environmental concerns are rarely factored into security, development or humanitarian strategies or the larger agendas of trade liberalization and global security. Nor is there coherence in environmental protection efforts at the global level.

We also know that this system of institutions has poorly developed mechanisms for compliance and enforcement, that the institutional structures for managing international agreements are fragmented, and that capacity-building at the local and national level is uneven and slow.

We know that integration of the science and policy agendas still pull in different directions and are not integrated. We also know that many of the right tools (science, technology, genomics-based tools) exist but are not diffused and widely implemented in developing countries. While no one has an interest in stifling scientific curiosity, collectively we must do better at putting science and technology to work for the improvement of the human condition.

Based on the above summary, there is clearly little cause for comfort, less reason for self congratulation, and no justification for complacency.

FACTORING IN GEOPOLITICS

The third consideration as we think through UN reform relates to geopolitics. Without doubt the benefits of globalization are unevenly distributed. With globalization comes an increase in the numbers of failed and failing states and new asymmetric security threats. There is the challenge of how to respond to the unprecedented military, economic and diplomatic power of the United States while recognizing the emergence of major new economic actors (such as India and China) and the potential of new consumer societies. The pace of technological advancement varies significantly from North to South and the disparities are growing, not narrowing.

As the world adapts to this most recent era of globalization, significant barriers to progress within the developed world must be addressed if we have any hope of tackling the issues noted above. This includes tackling the following:

(a) the lack of financial resources and appropriate investment models;
(b) a non-receptive policy environment;
(c) a lack of human resources to develop policies, institutions and infrastructure (including scientific, legal and financial resources);
(d) few incentives for entrepreneurial activities;
(e) insufficient investment in research and development; and
(f) limited public education and dialogue that would lead to effective and accepted public policy.

Given all of these considerations, the panel offered the following initial thoughts for those designing a blueprint for reform.

Strengthening the UN

First, the UN should focus on its core competencies of its convening power and its legitimacy. Attention is required on organizational fundamentals such as managing

public funds with probity, eliminating corruption, acting in areas of comparative advantage, acting with clarity of vision, taking public (not special) interest to heart, and being a model for other international institutions.

Second, non-state actors and sub-national and local governments need to see and hear that national governments are serious about acting on global issues and that there will be consistent, long-term policy direction, regulation and management of major global issues such as climate change. The UN is essential in negotiating international environmental treaties among parties with the constitutional power to do so. Strong long-term political signals will shift capital flows.

Third, given that the planet is becoming more interconnected and not less so, there is a greater need than ever for integrated, coherent regimes. This means linking the UN regimes and organizations to other sectorial international regimes, including organizations that deal with trade and investment, health, development, biodiversity, and desertification. The UN needs to show it can deliver a flexible, creative, and incentive-based regime. Specifically, with respect to climate protection, a key test will be the UN's ability to attract emerging economies and non-players like the United States back into the global climate change regime.

Thinking Out of the Box

New governance models are emerging and should be examined for their potential to enact change.

Networks hold particular promise. In the past decade considerable attention has been directed to the examination of networks as a response to fast-paced change, complex issues, and global interdependence. Anne-Marie Slaughter, in *A New World Order*, describes a world of networks, each with specific objectives and activities, membership, and history.[2] Some are government networks while others are global policy networks. Some expand regulatory reach while others build trust and establish relationships. Most exchange information about their own activities, develop data-bases of best practices and offer technical assistance and professional socialization to members from less developed countries. Clearly these networks can develop new ideas and broaden engagement, but they cannot replace the constitutional authority of governments. We should be thinking about how we can encourage networks and simultaneously preserve and enhance the credibility of formal intergovernmental regimes.

Flexible and functional multilateralism warrants greater exploration. Such fora as the L-20 and the G-20 have the potential to engage the new global titans (such as India and China) in matters of global public health and climate change without the suffocating apparatus of the UN. These fora need not be formal negotiations or treaty negotiations. Increasingly, countries need to search out and create safe havens for designing implementation strategies and for building

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[2] Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

consensus. The trap to avoid is the creation of new "clubs" where only a limited number of countries participate and there is no access for civil society or industry. Perhaps it would be wise to recognize that there is no single model that perfectly meets the needs and aspirations of all countries.

There is tremendous scope for greater corporate engagement in global issues and for greater public-private partnerships. As their global reach extends, their stake in human well-being on an international scale changes. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is a great success in the public health field that has proven to be a model for other sectors.

Conclusion

The possibilities of reform seem real. So too are the constraints. We need to overcome the feeling of fatigue that is permeating this dialogue and push for innovation, while being careful not to abandon the potential of authentic global cooperation as reflected in the UN.