



WHAT WE'RE LEARNING:

Critical Assessments of the Role of Global Governance

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OVERVIEW

Between 1985 and 1996 the Ford Foundation supported and, in some cases, managed a series of United Nations reform projects ranging from academic studies to scholars-in-residence programs and blue-ribbon commissions. To varying degrees, each of these projects sought to assess how people and governments think about the UN and global governance generally, and was intended to spur specific reforms. These projects, as a whole, were catalysts for some of the key institutional changes that took place in the world body in the late 1990s and which continue.

How We Got Started

A Partnership in Pursuit of International Cooperation

For more than 50 years, promoting international cooperation has been a pillar of the Ford Foundation mission. Through our Peace and Social Justice program, we support international collaboration through initiatives that focus on good governance, the strengthening of civil society, and the promotion of human rights. An effective and efficient UN is a critical partner in pursuing this important international agenda. But because the UN had struggled to undertake internally generated reform, the Ford initiative was welcomed as a needed catalyst for fresh thinking.

Located one block from UN headquarters, the Ford Foundation provided an ideal venue for candid conversation about strengthening and reorganizing the UN. Ford had already made an investment in this process by inviting noted UN expert Brian Urquhart to become scholar-in-residence from 1986 to 1996. He was followed in that role by Sadako Ogata, another respected international diplomat and scholar, as well as UN high commissioner for refugees.

The initiative generated contributions from eminent thinkers and diplomats engaged in the international arena. Key publications in the series included:

- “A Successor Vision: The United Nations of Tomorrow,” Elliot L. Richardson, chairman, New York: United Nations Association of the USA, 1988
- “Toward a More Effective United Nations, Reorganization of the United Nations Secretariat: A Suggested Outline of Needed Reforms, Strengthening International Response to Humanitarian Emergencies,” Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers, New York: the Ford Foundation, 1992
- “Financing an Effective United Nations, Report of an Independent Advisory Group on UN Financing,” Shijuro Ogata and Paul Volcker, co-chairmen, New York: the Ford Foundation, 1993

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- “Renewing the United Nations System,” Erskine Childers and Brian Urquhart, New York: the Ford Foundation, 1994
- “Our Global Neighborhood,” Commission on Global Governance, Ingvar Carlsson and Shridath Ramphal, co-chairmen, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995
- “The United Nations in Its Second Half Century: The Report of the Independent Working Group on the Future of the United Nations,” Moeen Qureshi and Richard von Weizsacker, co-chairmen, New York: Yale University/the Ford Foundation, 1995
- “A World in Need of Leadership: Tomorrow’s United Nations,” Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers, New York: the Ford Foundation, 1996
- “The United Nations: The Next Fifty Years,” Sadako Ogata, International Relations Institute, Korean University, 1996

What We Have Learned

Critical Insights Led to Many Major Reforms

These projects were viewed as highly valuable by government officials and international bodies eager to strengthen and reform the United Nations. The evaluation process itself, which included a substantial time commitment from key members of the UN community, demonstrated the high degree of interest these studies have generated and an appreciation for Ford’s support of them.

Extensive press attention attended the release of each study. But perhaps the most tangible sign of the project’s success was that several of the reports foreshadowed most of the major UN reforms adopted from the mid-1980s through 2000. The best of the studies combined compelling vision with practical policy proposals.

The reforms included:

- Efforts to bring more coordination and coherence to the operation and functioning of the UN
- Establishing a unit to provide the secretary-general and top officers with an interdisciplinary policy planning and global-watch capacity
- Creation of the post of deputy secretary-general
- Modifying the way the secretary-general and other top officers are selected
- Creating more transparency
- Developing the International Criminal Court
- Raising the priority of humanitarian issues on the UN agenda
- Developing consensus-based budgeting procedures in the General Assembly to satisfy U.S. law

A Strategy to Overcome Obstacles, Win Over Policy Makers

Despite these notable successes, some flaws were identified in the way that each project was defined or carried out.

Four important design flaws were noteworthy:

- Failure to plan for, identify or analyze the bureaucratic, structural and political obstacles that had to be overcome to achieve desired policy outcomes
- Poor strategies for reaching influential Washington, D.C., policy makers
- A lack of politically conservative opinion leaders engaged in program recommendations
- Detachment of the analysis from some of the more influential political processes and perspectives of the time period

This last flaw proved most significant. Many of the studies did not seem to adequately take account of the end of the Cold War, which had an enormous impact on the UN. They also weren't designed to counter the complex—and often negative—feelings toward the UN held by many in the U.S. Congress and the American public.

Some of the project's structures for reporting findings were less effective for the process than others. Large blue-ribbon commissions, for instance, typically expensive and time-consuming, tended to produce small ideas compared to the amount of time and money invested.

Looking Ahead

Many Promising Avenues for Additional Work

The evaluation posed some useful areas for further study:

- How this type of analysis and study can reach audiences beyond the relatively small, internationalist and politically isolated UN community
- How the choice of secretary-general affects the overall abilities and execution of UN responsibilities

Because the studies focused primarily on structural blueprints, rather than political dynamics, the historical, cultural and political factors that shape opportunities for real UN reform were not fully discussed, and reform of key parts of the UN system, including the Security Council, remains unfinished.

How This Evaluation was Conducted

The Ford Foundation commissioned an academic study center to evaluate the UN projects. For six months in 2001, a wide-ranging review of these projects was conducted by the center using foundation archives and by compiling press and journal articles related to the reports. All the studies were re-read to assess impact. Forty-one interviews with leaders and staff of these projects were conducted, along with former Ford Foundation officers and key figures in the effort to reform the UN.