

How did the UN get so big, asks Rachel Weisz – video animation

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70 years and half a trillion dollars later: what has the UN achieved?

The United Nations has saved millions of lives and boosted health and education across the world. But it is bloated, undemocratic – and very expensive.

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Chris McGreal *in New York*

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It was Dag Hammarskjöld, the tragic second UN secretary general, who had it best. The United Nations, he said, “was created not to lead mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell”.

The kind of hell Hammarskjöld had in mind was not hard to imagine in the wake of world war and Hitler’s extermination camps, and with the atom bomb’s shadow spreading across the globe.

How much of a part the UN played in holding nuclear armageddon at bay divides historians. But there is little doubt that in the lifetime that has passed since it was set up in 1945 it helped save millions from other kinds of hell. From the deepest of poverty. From watching their children die of treatable diseases. From starvation and exposure as they fled wars made in the cauldron of ideological rivalries between Washington and Moscow but fought on battlefields in Africa and Asia.

The UN’s children’s organisation, Unicef, provided an education and a path to a better life for millions, including the present UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon. The UN’s development programmes were instrumental in helping countries newly freed from colonial rule to govern themselves.

And yet. In its 70 years, the United Nations may have been hailed as the great hope for the future of mankind – but it has also been dismissed as a shameful den of dictatorships. It has infuriated with its numbing bureaucracy, its institutional cover-ups of corruption and the undemocratic politics of its security council. It goes to war in the name of peace but has been a bystander through genocide. It has spent more than half a trillion dollars in 70 years.

“Like everybody says, if you didn’t have the UN you’d have to invent it,” said David Shearer, who served the organisation in senior posts in Rwanda, Belgrade, Afghanistan, Iraq and Jerusalem. He is now New Zealand’s shadow foreign minister. “But it’s imperfect, of course it is, and everybody knows that it is,” he said.

As the UN marks the 70th anniversary of its founding this autumn, those imperfections - and how the UN addresses them - have come to the fore as the organisation struggles to define its role in the 21st century.

Tensions between western governments, which see the UN as bloated and inefficient, and developing countries, which regard it as undemocratic and dominated by the rich, have rippled across the organisation as ballooning costs drive the push for reform.

Even accounting for inflation, annual UN expenditure is 40 times higher than it was in the early 1950s. The organisation now encompasses 17 specialised agencies, 14 funds and a secretariat with 17 departments employing 41,000 people.

Its regular budget, which is agreed every two years and goes to pay for the cost of administering the UN - including mouthwatering daily allowances which result in many of its bureaucrats being far better paid than American civil servants - has more than doubled over the past two decades to \$5.4bn.



United Nations peacekeepers north of the provincial capital of Goma, Congo, 2008. Photograph: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP/Getty Images

But that is just a small portion of the total spend. Peacekeeping costs another \$9bn a year, with 120,000 peacekeepers deployed mostly in Africa. Some missions have lasted more than a decade. And then there are the voluntary contributions from individual governments that go to fund a large part of disaster relief, development work and agencies such as Unicef. They have risen sixfold over the past 25 years to \$28.8bn. And yet even at that level, some agencies are warning that they are operating on the brink of bankruptcy.

Even with costs surging fourfold in the last 20 years, total UN spending this year is still only about half of New York City's \$75bn budget.

“There is no single institution that I found more exhilarating at its best, yet more debilitatingly frustrating at its worst, than the United Nations,” said Gareth Evans, a former foreign minister of Australia and strong critic of the way the UN is run. He said his efforts to advance reform of the UN “were about as quixotic and unproductive as anything I have ever tried to do”.

That's a sentiment widely shared among diplomats and UN officials.

Valerie Amos, Britain's former international development minister, described the UN as a valuable ally in delivering UK aid but lamented its inefficiency.

"There were concerns about the UN being overly bureaucratic and slow in the way it dealt with development issues. I think that's one of the criticisms of the UN that remains until now, that since it was formed it has become bigger and bigger. Many organisations have overlapping mandates. It's become an organisation that's quite unwieldy in lots of respects," Lady Amos said.



Helmets belonging to soldiers of the Nigerian army before deployment to Mali in 2013. Photograph: Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters/Corbis

Helen Clark, head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the most powerful woman at the UN, dealt with the organisation from the outside as prime minister of New Zealand. She said that as the leader of a small country she valued being able to use the UN's size and resources to deliver New Zealand's aid programme, such as emergency assistance to Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami.

But once she started work at the UNDP six years ago she was less impressed. "When I arrived, the organisation was a little over a year into its first ever strategic plan. What that tells you is that modern management and modern strategic planning was late coming to the UN," she said. Clark laughed as she said the plan she was presented with was so broad in its goals that it made no sense.

Shearer, who headed Save the Children in Somalia, Rwanda and Sri Lanka before joining the UN, said the organisation's strength lay in what he called its "gravitas". Governments may turn away NGOs but the UN cannot be ignored. Neither can the UN's huge logistical capabilities, such as the World Food Programme's airlifts, be matched by any private organisation.

But he said the UN was weighed down by "incompetence" and red tape. "It's a very heavily bureaucratic organisation. It hasn't changed in a lot of years. It's built systems on top of systems on top of systems," he said. "Getting the right people, that was the Rosetta Stone of the UN for me. Once I cracked that, it meant I could use the organisation how it was supposed to be used irrespective of the structure, because the structure will always protect the incompetent, in a sense."



The United Nations Security Council votes on a resolution at the headquarters in New York. Photograph: Craig Ruttle/AP

A decade ago, the UN launched its most enduring report into reform. A panel - co-chaired by the prime ministers of Mozambique, Norway and Pakistan, and including the then British chancellor, Gordon Brown - wrote a devastating document. It ticked off criticisms which said the UN was badly failing those it was supposed to help. Its work on development was described as “often fragmented and weak”; its governance was called “inefficient and ineffective”.

The report said the UN’s taste for setting goals at the expense of delivering results failed the poorest and most vulnerable. It also criticised a system of funding for many UN programmes in which officials had to beg for money from governments year after year, making it difficult to plan.

“Cooperation between organisations has been hindered by competition for funding, mission creep and by outdated business practices,” it said. “In some sectors, such as water and energy, more than 20 UN agencies are active and compete for limited resources without a clear collaborative framework. More than 30 UN agencies and programmes have a stake in environmental management.”

The organisation has grown so big that at times it is working against itself. Critics point to large numbers of support staff doing ill-defined jobs. Staff costs account for two-thirds or more of some UN agencies’ outgoings. “Performance management is a joke,” said one official. “Almost everyone gets ‘above average’ in their assessment.”

The UN is so fragmented that each agency has its own IT system.

The reform report noted that about one-third of the UN operations in 60 countries had a budget of less than \$2m per agency, which meant that they could do little more than afford the cost of running the office.

The report proposed extensive changes to promote greater collaboration and efficiency under a programme called Delivering as One. This included myriad UN agencies in a single country coming under the authority of one official, and working more closely with the governments of those countries, which often had no idea what the UN was doing.



Soldiers of the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti, 2013.
Photograph: Luis Echeverria/Xinhua Press/Corbis

Ban, who recalls learning from books provided by Unicef as a child after his family was forced to flee during the first UN-led war in his native Korea in the 1950s, told the Guardian that rapid change was happening and that Delivering as One was at the heart of it.

“The United Nations of today is hugely different from the United Nations 70 years ago, and therefore it is very important the United Nations changes and adapts itself to changing circumstances,” he said. “It’s been changing, very drastically now. I have seen this kind of duplication between and among United Nations agencies, for example water issues. Delivering as One, working as one, in the United Nations, that’s the main motor of my administration and I have been engaging with all different agencies and funds and programmes so that we can Deliver as One.”

But that is not what others see. A pilot programme was rolled out in eight countries and was regarded as successful. But the broader reforms never came.

The executive director of the reform report was Adnan Amin, a Kenyan development economist who was head of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which represents all UN programmes as well as associated organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. He said the changes proposed in the report were “fundamentally good ideas” but had not had the impact its authors had hoped for.

“It’s led to reams of reports written in the UN, many of them impenetrable to the rest of the world because of the jargon used. I think there has been incremental progress but I don’t think we can say there’s been a fundamental change in the way the UN does business,” he said.

Amin said the UN had set itself yet more goals but failed to heed the report’s warning about lack of results.

“What we have now is another multiplication of targets and goals which are an extraordinarily comprehensive assessment of what’s needed to be done but there’s no operational clarity around them. Who’s going to do it? Who’s going to monitor it? Who’s accountable for it? The goals themselves are pretty impressive but it doesn’t say anything to the UN about what they should be doing,” he said.

“We still have a lot of fragmentation. There are about 1,200 country offices of the UN around the world. There are 100 countries with more than 10 UN country offices in each country. You have country offices with a budget of eight or nine million [dollars] and a staff of five people. Half the money goes for the operational expenses of the office, leaving what is actually a minuscule amount of money for programming or key activities. In the context of what’s happening today, a few million is not going to make any difference.”



The walking sticks commonly carried by Somali elders and the protective gear worn by the United Nations staff outside a conference hall in Mogadishu, Somalia, 2012. Photograph: Dai Kurokawa/epa/Corbis

The drag on reform comes from different directions. Some UN agencies resist it.

Clark chairs the UN Development Group, an umbrella of major agencies, where she is responsible for implementing Delivering as One. “When I started learning about the arcane intricacies of Delivering as One, there were criticisms that it was very bureaucratic and process oriented. I have to say I believe there was some truth in those criticisms,” she said.

She introduced a system, known as standard operating procedures, which she said was aimed at “not having the whole working together effort drowned in process”. “It hasn’t been easy because there are many different agencies involved and they have all developed over the years their own procedures and ways of working. It has required long and patient negotiation to get to the point of having standard operating procedures. It couldn’t just be decreed because no one has the power to decree it,” she said.

But the bigger obstacle to reform perhaps comes from the UN members states themselves.

After she left the British government, Amos became the UN undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs.

“I don’t think people give enough weight to the fact that the United Nations is a body made up of its member states of 193 nations. You have member states coming at the reform agenda with very, very different perspectives,” she said. “One of the things I saw close up was that if, for example, you had a UN entity based in a particular country and you are seeking to reform and streamline and so on, very often that country will argue strenuously against taking away any resources.

“Even if you’re saying you want to cut a few staff because it makes sense to have them somewhere else, there will be really serious lobbying against that.”



Soldiers of the UN Disengagement Observer Force on an observation tower overlooking Syria. Photograph: Ronen Zvulun/Reuters/Corbis

Amin was confronted with this when the panel drawing up the reform report attempted to get agreement on some of the changes it recommended.

“You can hardly touch any mandate, as minuscule as it might be, that doesn’t have one or two strong advocates from member states behind it,” he said. “Through a very bruising one-year consultation process it became very evident that there was not that much that could be done that could fly politically and we ended up getting rid of two small gender outfits and creating a much bigger gender agency.”

One diplomat points to the saga of the UN print shop in New York, a growing anachronism in the digital age. After it was flooded during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, officials seized the opportunity to shut it down and shed 60 jobs. Even though those affected were promised work elsewhere in the UN, there was strong resistance from a grouping of developing countries opposed to the cutting of any posts.

Reformers are pushing for the 80 separate locations where UN payrolls are processed to be whittled down considerably, but have again run into resistance. They question the need to have large numbers of routine administrative jobs in high-cost cities such as New York and Geneva. They ask why foreign nationals on expensive expat packages, which pay for benefits such as private education for their children, are recruited to do them.

There is a tendency by the countries which pay most of the bills to portray the poorer ones, grouped in the G77 of 134 nations, as a drag on modernisation and the principal obstacle to reform.

But G77 countries say that behind claims of greater efficiency and modern management methods, wealthier nations are tightening their grip on the UN.

India is a leading member of the G77. Its ambassador to the UN, Asoke Kumar Mukerji, said the rich countries took the high-level jobs in the name of efficiency.

“If you look at the secretariat of the United Nations it is dominated by industrialised economies because they are the ones who contribute the bulk of the budget and they get the bulk of the positions in the secretariat, managerial positions,” he said. “The point that the G77 is an obstacle isn’t fair because the G77 is marginalised in the overall secretariat of the United Nations.”

Clark has been praised for her reforms of the UNDP. She is touted as a potential successor to Ban and the UN's first female secretary general, although the politics of the appointment, which moves between regions, is a big obstacle. The New Zealander is lauded by some western diplomats for forcing through reforms, which they say are making the UNDP more efficient.

The G77 sees it differently. It has criticised what it says are the diminishing number of managerial jobs inside the UNDP for people from the developing countries the programme is supposed to be serving. Mukerji said it was an issue increasingly raised at UNDP board meetings.



A general view of the assembly room during a session of the Human Rights Council at the European headquarters of the UN in Geneva, Switzerland. Photograph: Salvatore Di Nolfi/Epa/Corbis

“If you do not have developing country people inside the structure of the UNDP at managerial level up to the senior management, then you do have an agency which doesn’t understand the ethos of the countries where it operates,” he said.

The divvying up of jobs is a source of perpetual tension within the UN. “There’s an enormous amount of lobbying by member states for particular jobs,” said Amos. “I was rather taken aback at the amount of lobbying that goes on and that does not just go on for senior jobs, it goes on for jobs across the system.

“How you reflect in a 193-member state organisation the diversity of the member states and retain a merit-based system is a huge challenge for the UN. We have to move away from this idea that it’s about having people who can somehow run an agenda for that particular country.”

One senior UN official said politics continued to play a major part in the allocations of jobs.

“Appointments should be on merit but the truth is that if a particular country, one you need to keep on side for political or financial reasons, wants you to put one of its own in to a particular job, then sometimes you do it if it’s not going to mess things up too much. Sometimes that person is very competent. If they’re not you just end up working around them,” he said.

“It does mean that there are people who don’t seem to be particularly good or work very hard at what they do. But there are other people who are very good and they carry the rest.”

Although the major powers complain about developing nations insisting on what one official called “jobs for the boys”, they behave little differently. “The permanent members of the security council all expect to have a senior person from their country around the UN table,” said Amos.

The US gets Unicef and the World Food Programme. China runs the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Russia is in charge of crime.



An Iraqi collect boxes of food donated by the World Food Programme. Photograph: Haidar Mohammed Ali/AFP/Getty Images

Amos's former job as head of humanitarian affairs is regarded as a British fiefdom. Her predecessor was British; so was her successor. That appointment laid bare the entitlement felt by the UK.

The prime minister, David Cameron, put forward just one name to the UN for the post - his former health minister Andrew Lansley. Ban demanded he submit at least three and eventually a former minister at the Department for International Development, Stephen O'Brien, was appointed. Although Cameron did not get his first choice, the post remained in British hands.

The sharpest confrontations over money and cuts come in what is known as the UN's fifth committee, which oversees budget and administration. Because it is open to all member states and makes decisions by a simple majority, the committee is where the G77 exerts its greatest influence.

"There are massive fights," said one official who described the US, EU, Japan and Australia on the side of cutting budgets, inefficiency and jobs while the G77 was painted as wanting more spending and more jobs for their nations.

The UN's largest contributors have a caustic view of the committee, regarding it as run by countries who make a minimal contribution to the cost of the UN but decide both the secretariat and peacekeeping budgets.



UN armoured personnel carriers, manned by Zambian soldiers serving with the international peacekeeping force, patrolling the streets of Abyei, South Sudan, in 2011. Photograph: Stuart Price/EPA

Officials and diplomats of all kinds bemoan a lack of assertive leadership. They have one eye on the secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, but he is a product of the permanent members of UN security council.

“It would be great to see what difference a strong secretary general would make,” said one top official. “We all say it knowing that it is unlikely that we will ever get one because the stronger member states have such an interest in not having a strong secretary general. They want a secretary general they are able to influence, lobby.”

Which raises what many consider the real obstacle to remaking the UN for the 21st century - that its most powerful body is still locked in 1945.

The five permanent members, the victors over Germany and Japan, hold the whip hand through vetoes. For all the noise from the US, Britain and France in particular about modernising the UN, they show no willingness to give up the power they wield sometimes in ways governed entirely by political interest. Since 1982, the US has used its security council veto to block resolutions critical of Israel 35 times. The total number of resolutions blocked by other permanent members over the same period is 27. More recently, Russia and China have used their vetoes to block UN intervention in Syria.

India, the world’s second most populous nation, is pushing for expansion of the security council to include six more permanent members with the right of veto, as well as several more non-permanent members. Mukerji, the Indian ambassador to the UN, said his country had been pressing for several years for agreement on a document that will be the basis of negotiations.

“It’s incredible that in the United Nations, which produces negotiating texts on every other area it deals with, in the area of security council reform it has just not been able to put a text on the table,” he said.

Appetite for broader reform seems just as tepid.

“Where is the conversation happening which says that, in 2015 and beyond, what is the United Nations there for?” Amos asked. “What should be the core activities of the UN that should receive a significant proportion of the regular funding of the UN?”

. This article was amended on 9 September 2015. An earlier version said that the US had exercised its security council veto to protect Israel from criticism more times than the total number of vetoes cast by the other permanent members combined. That has been corrected to say that since 1982, the US has used its veto to block resolutions critical of Israel 35 times, while the total number of resolutions blocked by other permanent members over the same period is 27. The article was further amended on 18 September 2015 to correct an editing error that left it saying that Dag Hammarskjöld was the third UN secretary general.

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