CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: REFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS

The UN is in demand for a wide spectrum of services ranging from standard setting to humanitarian and refugee operations to the struggle against poverty, the implementation of technical co-operation projects in developing countries, disaster relief, the fight against HIV/AIDS, and climate change. The expansion of peacekeeping operations is particular striking. By mid-2009, the number of peacekeepers had risen to over 100,000 involved in 15 missions and peacekeeping now account for over half of the Organization’s activities. At a second glance, however, the situation is less clear.

New organizations have emerged and compete with the UN for resources and mandate. In policy making, the Group of Eight now includes over 20 countries, including the large developing nations. In humanitarian assistance, the Red Cross and Red Crescent have increased their activities and new organizations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) have established innovative, low-cost mechanisms for delivering health care assistance. The Bretton Woods organizations and the OECD have taken the lead on aid efficiency, and even in peacekeeping NATO has developed competence and activities which had previously been the prerogative of the UN. Moreover, a new universe of non-governmental organizations has emerged. Today, the UN is often only one actor among many, although an important one. Moreover, the global ‘goodwill’ enjoyed by the UN has been tested during recent years. The outbreak of the Iraq war challenged the legitimacy and effectiveness of the UN system as a whole, and the UN’s reputation for efficiency and integrity suffered as a result of shortcomings in some of its major operations ranging from the UN Oil-for-Food Programme to peacekeeping missions.

The UN has attempted to adapt; it has a history of reform efforts which covered all aspects of organizational life, including its mandate, governance, resources, structure and process. In the narrow sense, those efforts addressed specific organizational failings or new opportunities. In the wider sense, the reforms aimed at fundamental change by responding to global political, economic and social shifts. These include the manifestation of the North/South divide in the 1970s, the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, globalization in the 1990s, and the emergence of civil society as a main actor in global affairs as well as a host of new crises such as climate change, the global economic and financial meltdown, food and energy security, the spread of pandemics, global terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and the outbreak of civil wars around the globe. The manifold reform efforts have, however, often resulted in disappointment and marginal adjustments only.

What are the limits of UN reform? Do structural barriers exist that are difficult to overcome? Could the UN be ultimately unreformable? The history of the UN reform provides some insight into these questions. This is particularly true of the recent period when new reform initiatives have looked beyond the UN proper to cover the coherence of the UN system as a whole and address the challenges faced by a multitude of agencies working together.
Can real reform be achieved? Or is the history of UN reform ‘testimony to the dysfunctional and perhaps ultimately un改革e character of the organizations’.¹ The reform efforts since the 2005 World Summit, covering the period 2006 to 2009, will be assessed to better understand the issues involved. Insight can also be gained from the earlier reviews in this series dating back to the foundation of the Organization.² The reform efforts during the recent period include something new. In addition to initiatives limited to the UN only, new reform efforts aimed at addressing the coherence of the UN system of independent agencies. A review of those efforts promises to provide new insight into the limits of UN reform.

A. THE UN SYSTEM

The UN was established in 1945, after World War II, to replace the League of Nations, maintain peace and security by preventing war between countries, foster economic and social development, promote respect for human rights and provide a platform for dialogue.³ It is at the centre of the UN system, which now includes a complex network of 14 international organizations,⁴ working in areas such as health, education, food, labour, energy, aviation, international trade, intellectual property and postal administration. In addition, the Bretton Woods organizations⁵ are linked to the UN and deal with issues of finance and economy. The system brings together organizations that were newly created in the post-war period, such as the FAO and UNESCO; those whose foundation predates this period, such as the ITU, which was founded in 1865 and the ILO, founded in 1919; and more recently created specialized agencies, such as UNWTO, founded in 2003. The UN system organizations are independent, each with its own governing body of member states and its own secretariat of international civil servants.

The UN itself has undergone a dramatic expansion and developed into a complex and fragmented institution with a global presence. From its initial membership of 51 states, the Organization has become truly global now, with a membership of 192

³ For a detailed description of the UN system, see Appendix I: UN System Organizations and Participation in Inter-Agency Co-ordination.
⁵ The International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and World Bank, with the affiliated organizations International Development Association (IDA) and International Finance Corporation (IFC).