100 years of international civil service | no.5

On Leadership:

The Art of Creating Public Value in the United Nations

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Public Expectations

Multilateral public organisations are vested with a public purpose. That purpose usually takes the form of having a mandate which is endowed and authorised by participating member states. The leadership of the organisation must be measured by its success in accomplishing its stated purpose.

In the environment which characterises the United Nations system, there are multiple judges of the performance of each organisation. These include member states, civil society and the international civil servants who manage the organisation. We will look at each of these in turn. But let us start where the Charter starts…with 'We the People'. What does the general public expect from the United Nations?

At one extreme, the UN is expected to implement the decisions taken by Member States. In this instance, leadership is about effective implementation. Beyond this, the UN might play a role in convening actors and in creating the political space that enables them to understand each other and settle their differences. More ambitious, they might be asked to mediate between the parties and to play an active support role in forging a consensus.

Up to this point the role of the UN could be characterised as being essentially passive. In the next scenario, in the field of security, we move from the idea of facilitating mediation to playing a role as peace maker. The role envisages decision-making and active engagement. The unique mandate entrusted to the Security Council and the authority vested in Article 99 empowers the UN and gives the Security Council an extraordinary leadership role.

In the field of development, the breadth and depth of expectations over a vast array of issues is quite startling. We expect, for example, the organisation to be deeply committed to the poorest countries as well as the poorest populations. We expect the UN to be a voice for the voiceless and to fight for the rights and interests of the next generations. And of increasing importance we expect the UN to be a voice anchored in science and reliable data. Such a broad spectrum of expectations carries with it great opportunities as well as severe risks. We will revert to this below.

At this point, it might be useful to highlight two points. The first is that if we were informally to poll the general public, they would range broadly in a spectrum that would extend from being a service provider to member states to principled and independent advocacy. The push and pull between a body of sovereign states and 'we the peoples' is one of the defining characteristics of what the UN is.

The second point relates to the importance of capturing the essence of what leadership means in the highly complex environment in which the UN operates. All too often the topic is handled in a highly reductionist form. Typically for example, Secretary-Generals are characterised as being more secretary or more general.[1] This is a false dichotomy. It sets up against each other two qualities which are not mutually exclusive. What we need is a broad definition of overriding purpose. Hence we shall use Mark Moore's wonderful summary: 'that public servants are explorers commissioned by society to search for public value.'[2]

Let us return to our attempt to categorise a range of functions which the general public associate to what they expect out of the UN. If this broadly is what the general public might come up with today, what by contrast is the vision of leadership to be found in the Charter?

The Charter's Value Proposition

The value proposition embodied in the Charter of the UN was markedly different from the principles underlying the League of Nations. The League of Nations was established to ensure that the mistakes that led to the first World War would not be repeated. The first World War was seen to have been the result of misinformation and miscommunication – a war that could have been avoided. The League was created to provide a forum where states could discuss and settle matters on the basis of shared information. The role of the Secretariat was to provide support and to implement the decisions of the League's member states. There was very little political space for the secretariat to exercise leadership.

The experience of the second World War demanded a more ambitious vision. The Charter envisages the United Nations as something more than a mechanism to prevent misunderstandings between states. In reality, the Charter envisages three spheres of leadership. The first is the leadership to be exercised by the Great Powers as defined by the make up of the Security Council. The UN of the Great Powers was the UN of Roosevelt's Armed Peacemakers. The idea that great powers have unique leadership responsibilities has a long heritage.

A second sphere of leadership lay in the partnership between the UN and a great number of civil society actors. The UN system was teaming with technical experts providing a scientific and technical base to large segments of the work of the UN and its multiple agencies and funds.

A third sphere of leadership lies in the radically new arrangements articulated in the Charter relating to the role of the Secretary-General and the international civil

service. Let us explore a little bit more deeply the emergence of this third sphere of leadership. Specifically, articles 97–100 of the Charter provide political space in which the Secretary-General can take significant initiatives.

Articles 97 and 98 might appear to be mundane but they provide space without which the Secretary-General and the international civil service would not be able to operate. The independence of the secretariat is provided for by establishing that the Secretary-General is the chief administrative officer of the organisation. Article 98 provides for an annual report by the Secretary-General to the UNGA. The idea of the Secretary-General having the duty to report to the General Assembly is an important principle. Over time, most significant perhaps was the provision that the Secretary-General should perform any such functions as were entrusted to the Secretary-General by any of the UN's organs. At moments of crisis member states over and again used this provision to give the space to the Secretary-General to take initiatives as appropriate. It is above all Article 99 which breaks radical new ground in authorising the Secretary-General to bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in the Secretary-General's opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.

Article 100 also merits careful consideration. It states that in the performance of their duties the Secretary-General and the staff should not receive any instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the organisation. They should refrain from any action that might reflect on their position as international officials responsible only to the organisation. For this article to have meaning, it presupposes the existence of a concept of internationalism – of the international interest and of the interests of an organisation that is distinct from its Member States.[3]

Against this background, what was Dag Hammarskjöld's view of the foundations of the Secretary-General's authority and the status of the international civil service? At the core of the argument was whether it was possible for individuals to be neutral in the sense that states could be neutral. It was at Oxford in May 1961 that Hammarskjöld found himself articulating a comprehensive defense of the principles underlying the Charter in response to the severe attack from Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev.[4] For Khrushchev, a new model of leadership based on entirely different principles was required. In the future the UN should be co-led by three directors representing their constituencies – directors for the western group, for the socialist bloc and for the non-aligned group. Since in his view individuals were not capable of

being neutral, leadership would come from the interests of these three great blocs being represented and consensus negotiated and agreed.

Hammarskjöld rejected this position, arguing that reverting to the idea of an inter-governmental secretariat would represent the Munich of international cooperation. In its place, he articulated a number of key principles, the principles that to this day provide the bedrock of what we mean when we talk about UN leadership. In particular, Hammarskjöld argued that the Secretary-General must be neutral in the sense of not being partial to specific interests. And he was in no doubt that the Charter clearly envisages that the Secretary-General has a well defined right of initiative.

Dag Hammarskjöld expressed the view in his 1961 Oxford speech that no one in 1945 realised the extent to which the Secretary-General would be required to take positions on highly controversial matters. Faced with the competing centres of authority that Hammarskjöld faced in the Congo, he saw three options. The Secretary-General could refer the matter back to be determined by the Security Council. Or the Secretary-General could refuse to take action because this forced him to abandon neutrality. Or the Secretary-General could exercise his judgment to resolve the issues on a truly international basis without obtaining the formal decision of the political organs. The first course of action was doomed to failure because there was no agreement, the second course of action simply accepted failure. Only the third course of action was responsible.

So could the Secretary-General exercise his judgment to resolve the issues on a truly international basis without obtaining the formal decision of the political organs? Hammarskjöld's response was that yes, he could, with appropriate consultation. The answer is very revealing. In short, an interpretation of Hammarskjöld's position is that leadership is the art of creating the political space that enables you to create public value.

More recently, over recent decades, commentary has focused on how broad and open the possibilities are for exercising leadership. Innis Claude, for example, summarised the situation by concluding that the Secretary-General has the constitutional licence to be as big as he can.[5] James Traub went even further when he argued that "the UN is thought to be an exceedingly rule based body but the Secretary-General's political latitude is almost wholly a matter of entrepreneurship rather than rule.[6]

At the other end of the spectrum, over the last decade, there is a countervailing sense that there has been a rapid

diminution of the political space that Secretary-Generals and senior officials have to create public value in today's increasingly divisive world. It was against this background that a New York Times editorial, at the time of Antonio Guterres' election, pleaded for more space to be given to the new Secretary-General.

Explorers commissioned by Society to Search for Public Value

The question of whether a Secretary-General is more secretary or more general is not the pertinent question. The question is the extent to which the Secretary-General can create political space. We turn to Mark Moore who offers an analytical framework in which to consider this further.

The challenge for leaders of international institutions is the one identified by Mark Moore (1995) for public sector managers in general: they are explorers commissioned by society to search for public value. Leadership requires the strategic ability to align the proposed mission and its values with what is possible under the existing authorising environment, as well as the capacity to deliver results. The area in which all three variables intersect represents the political space that has been generated. In some cases there is partial intersection between two variables, but strong alignment requires all three variables to come together.

This framework can be represented in two figures. Figure A represents a scenario of high convergence. What is possible to do (authorising environment), what is valuable (mission/values) and what is doable (capacity) come together and converge creating substantial alignment.[7]

By contrast Figure B represents a scenario where authorising environment, mission and capacity push in different directions, leaving very little common space. Leadership requires the ability to align these three spheres and to generate the outcome depicted in Figure A. Creating public value is the outcome of generating political space.

What are some of the dominant characteristics that impact on the creation of political space in the United Nations? The first relates to the nature of the authorising environment. There are multiple and often competing authorising environments in the UN. The authorising environment is not just multiple, it is also deeply fractured and porous. The authorising environment is also of course highly political. As a consequence the organisation is often pushed in a particular direction where the mission might be highly contested and moreover where capacity is unable to deliver. Secondly the mission might be pushed into spheres which are deeply contested and regarding which the authorising environment is deeply divided. Core values might themselves be contested. It is easy for the organisation's mission to become completely detached from priorities of the authorising environment, as well as assessments of the capacity to deliver. This is why it is a very common characteristic in the UN for rhetoric and reality to appear very far apart. Thirdly, capacity to deliver is too often not aligned with changing missions and evolving authorising environments. The lack of alignment between mission on the one hand and funded capacity on the other is at the origin of some of the most direct criticisms of UN performance.
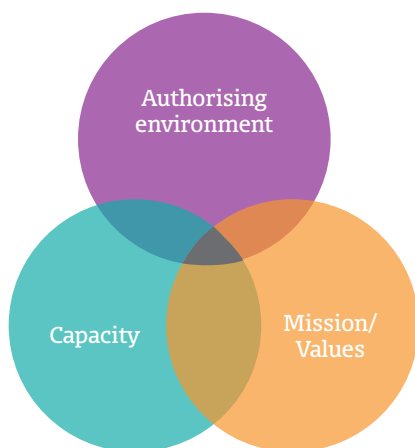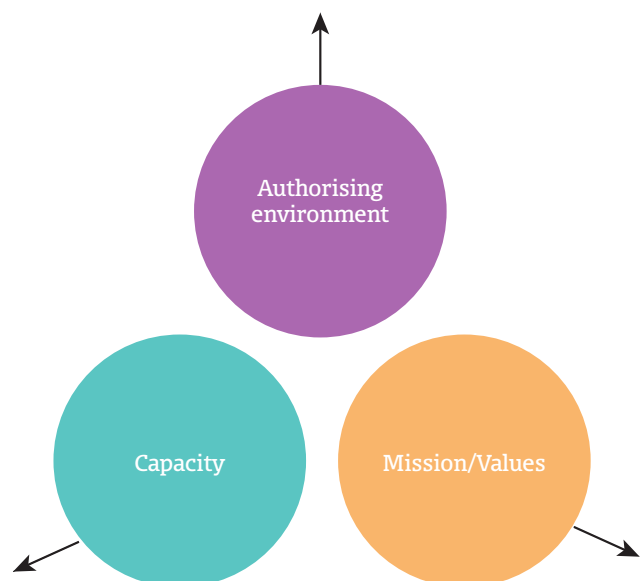
Figure A

Figure B

The uncertainty and unpredictability inherent in the interface between these three variables may in part explain the aversion to risk which characterises the UN culture. By the same token it also provides the space for pursuing significant opportunities.

In Porter's work, the art of alignment is the basis for strategy.[8] Without alignment, strategy gets reduced to operational effectiveness. In the history of UN reform, there has been a focus on operational effectiveness at the expense of strategy. In this regard the promise of Agenda 2030 stands out as an exception. Broadly, however, the difficulties of pulling together the three variables make the pursuit of strategy difficult to embrace.

Risk taking and strategic endeavor: these present huge challenges to the exercise of leadership at the UN. One of Hammarskjöld's enduring legacies is the remarkable imagination with which he carved out political space to make a difference. The development of the concept of the Secretary-General's 'good offices' and Hammarskjöld's Peking formula provide good examples.[9] It was in a similar vein that Hammarskjöld and Pearson invented the concept of peacekeeping – a concept that is not to be found in the Charter. It is instructive that it was at a time of minimum cooperation between the great powers that the political space was engineered to develop the concept of peacekeeping. It was made possible by creating a force that was the opposite of what had been envisaged in the Charter. The concept embedded in the Security Council was the collaboration of the Great Powers to enforce peace and security. The condition for the creation of United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was that the Great Powers would be excluded from its composition. UNEF was established with the tolerance of the Great Powers, not their participation. In this particular instance the political space was given physical expression with the establishment of the thin blue line demarcating the belligerents.

It should be noted that when political space is the product of being tolerated rather than being fully owned, the sustainability of the action being taken may be suspect. This manifests itself in particular through lack of adequate funding.

Instruments for Creating Political Space

Within the framework of the UN, there are a number of instruments which can enhance the space necessary to launch initiatives and ultimately create public value. Let us consider three examples: the use of the UN's convening power, the power of setting goals, and the use of data.

One of the best known instruments is the convening power of the UN as reflected in global conferences and high level panels. The global conferences had a particularly high profile in the 90's, starting with the Children Summit meeting in 1990, followed among others by Environment (1992), Human Rights (1993), Social Development (1994) and Gender (1995). These conferences adopted resolutions that gave a strong normative base from which to build powerful networks, develop advocacy platforms and generate a myriad of proposals to analyse and pursue. The initiatives spawned by the activity around these conferences gave the UN and the Secretary-General in particular, an extraordinary foundation and a source of legitimacy. They have provided an invaluable platform for expanding the space available to civil society and a wide range of non-state actors.

As the succession of global conferences during the 90's began to lose some steam, they to some extent passed the baton on to the convening of high level panels, which proliferated in the late 90's and well into the 2000's. Examples of such panels included the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty[10], the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change[11] and the Coherence Panel on Delivering as One.[12] The first produced the basis for the adoption of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The second produced recommendations covering Security Council and Human Rights Council reform, as well as a new architecture of Peace Building. And the third represented the most significant reform proposals relating to the UN development system for over two decades which in turn provided an important basis for the Guterres reform package in 2018.[13]

All of these 'external' panels expanded the space available for serious discussion about reform. They brought expertise to the issues and increased credibility. They enhanced political visibility. Like the conferences that dominated the 90's the panels over the last two decades have expanded in critical ways the areas and topics that were considered open for discussion.

Another instrument which for some three decades has been associated with the UN is the establishment of Goals. The adoption of the Millenium Development Goals in 2000 and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 represent an important normative framework for the work of the UN development system and the entire development community. The establishment of a global mission should make it easier to ensure convergence with the authorising environment and capacity.

The leadership of Jim Grant at UNICEF with his launch of a worldwide child survival revolution provides an outstanding example of leadership around driving consensus behind a clear and limited set of goals.[14]

Grant was determined to execute a quantum leap in the impact of UNICEF on the survival of children. After searching for the big idea, he was inspired by Jan Eliot Rohde who asserted at a meeting in Birmingham that 50% of all children's deaths was unnecessary. Grant focused on the twin forces of vaccination/immunisation and oral rehydration therapy. By the time he had convened the world summit on the Child almost 10 years later in 1990, the target of 80% immunisation had been met. Grant's approach exhibited real strategic leadership. He aligned the full capacity of UNICEF behind a very focused goal. It is noteworthy that Michael Porter's definition of strategic intent is to focus on what you are going to stop doing.

A third example of an instrument which can enhance political space is the generation and use of data. The UN Development Programme's annual Human Development Reports[15] and use of the human development index to rank country performance against a few core indicators has generated a good deal of policy dialogue. The gathering of detailed evidence to support human rights investigations can serve as a powerful instrument. The use of gender sensitive data has played a critical role in making the case for promoting gender policies. The work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the adoption of clear targets by different countries and the agreement to measure performance against these targets all point to data as a key instrument of change. It is difficult to over estimate the impact of the IPCC reports on pushing the need for urgent action on climate policy.[16]

Investing in Political Space

Nurturing and expanding the political space at the disposal of the Secretary-General needs to be integral to any significant UN reform initiative. Political space can be generated in a number of different ways. For example, the new, transparent process put in place for the election of Secretary-Generals was seen by many as increasing the credibility and legitimacy of the chosen candidate. While helpful, the impact of this on the independence of the Secretary-General should not be exaggerated. A much more radical initiative would be to move towards a one term system. On the one hand this might increase the independence of the Secretary-General; on the other hand it might increase the danger of a greater sense of distance between the Secretary-General and in particular the permanent members.

It is perhaps in the sphere of senior level appointments that the need for respecting the Secretary-General's political space is most flagrant. A system in which great powers and major donors did not feel a sense of ownership in senior level appointments would lead to irrele-

vance. It is not a plausible outcome. However there must be enough space at a minimum for the Secretary-General to ensure basic standards and requirements are met. There is a lot of space between accepting great power expectations to have their nationals represented at the top table and insisting that the Secretary-General cannot be in the position of having to accept a specific candidacy. There are many ways of threading this needle. It is certainly doable. Yet there is a sense today, as mentioned above, that the space has significantly contracted.

A critical component of Guterres's reform package relating to the United Nations Development System is the new organisational arrangements pertaining to the Resident Coordinators.[17] What is the impact of this shift on the space that the system at the country level has to work with? By putting the Resident Coordinators at the heart of the UN directly connected to the Secretary-General's office, is it empowering the system as a whole? Or by potentially delinking the Resident Coordinators from the bulk of programme finance and operational activities, will this over time lead to questioning of the relevance of the function. The answer may partially depend on how significantly the Joint SDG Fund will be able to provide the Resident Coordinator system with credible funding opportunities. In short, success in financing the Joint SDG Fund is of great strategic significance if the repositioning of the Resident Coordinators is to generate more political space for the UN system. If the Resident Coordinator system is starved of system-wide funding in order to prevent competition between the Resident Coordinators and UN entities, then the Resident Coordinator system will be in jeopardy.

It is very difficult to nurture political space in the system absent a strategic brain. To a limited extent, some of the coordination functions in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UN Development Operations Coordination Office played that role. But broadly speaking, the history of the UN developing a system-wide strategic function is a history of failure. The resources are parceled out to some 40 entities long before there is time to leverage them and greatly increase their impact. The system is designed to punch below its weight, (total income stands at US$ 53 billion) unless there is no expectation that the sum of all the entities should be greater than the addition of its parts.

The old adage is that you get what you measure. New imaginative approaches are needed to provide a framework that would provide incentives for leading the transformation that Agenda 2030 envisages. In the context of the challenges discussed in this paper, we refer in particular to instruments that create and invest in political space as described above.

A Unique Moment

A final reflection on the role of leadership in today's UN refers to the fact that we are witnesses to a unique moment. The need for strategic capacity and political space has never been so evident as it is today. This is because of the convergence of a number of critical elements.

The arrival of Anthropocene man means that for the first time human beings have a direct impact on their own destiny.[18]

The speed of technological and scientific innovation is daunting.[19]

Today, never has the gap been so big between the resources we have at our disposal, what we can do with them, and what we are actually doing.[20] It has been calculated that over the next 30 years or so, some US$ 30 trillion in the United States will be transferred from the baby boomer generation to their heirs.[21]

Development challenges are emerging that require a collective response if there is to be any chance of finding solutions. As Martin Wolf has recently eloquently stated in the columns of the Financial Times, the range of public goods we now need has vastly increased with the complexity of our economies and societies. For the same reason, ever more of these public goods are global goods.[22] Effective decision-making requires a level of collective action to succeed. Multilateralism has a major role to play in this regard.

And the scientific evidence points to the very limited time we have to undertake the transformative changes which are required. Whether we look at the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere or the impact on generations to come of investment decisions made over the next few decades, there is a measurable and limited time in which sustainable choices can be made.

The challenge that is common to all of these dimensions relates to the choices we make. How do we exercise the control we have, how do we translate our mission into reality and how do we chose to use and create value out of the resources that are so bountiful.

Fortunately, Agenda 2030 provides us with a powerful, universal mission statement. Whether its rhetoric will be matched by its translation into reality remains to be seen.

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, Simon Chesterman, *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[2] Mark Moore, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government,* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1995.

[3] Bruce Jenks, *The UN and Global Public Goods: Historical Contributions and Future Challenges,* International Development Policy, The Graduate Institute Geneva, 2012.

[4] Dag Hammarskjöld, The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact, Lecture at Oxford University, Oxford, 30 May 1961.

[5] For excellent discussion see Chesterman op. cit.

[6] See James Traub, 'The Secretary-General's political space', in Chesterman op. cit., p 185.

[7] For historical presentation see Bruce Jenks and Bruce Jones, UN Development at a Crossroads, Center on International Cooperation, New York, 2013.

[8] See Michael Porter, What is Strategy?, Harvard Business Review, Nov-Dec 1996.

[9] For excellent discussions see Chesterman op. cit. and Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjold*, New York, Knopf, 1972.

[10] Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001.

[11] A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility – Report of the High-level Panel on Threats Challenges and Change, A/59/565, 2004.

[12] Report of the High level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence, 2006.

[13] Report of the Secretary-General on Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity and peace on a healthy planet, Dec 2017.

[14] Peter Adamson, 'The mad American', in Richard Jolly (ed), *Jim Grant: UNICEF,* Florence, 2001

[15] UNDP's annual Human Development Reports 1980-.

[16] Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

[17] See Report of the Secretary-General on Repositioning of the United Nations development system op. cit.

[18] Martin Rees, *On the future: Prospects for Humanity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018, p31.

[19] Yuval Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, New York, Spiegel and Grau, 2018, p266.

[20] Rees op. cit. p6.

[21] The "Greater" Wealth Transfer: Capitalizing on the Intergenerational Shift in Wealth, Accenture, 2015.

[22] Martin Wolf, Financial Times, 17 July 2019, p9.

About this publication

This publication is part of a series issued by the
Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation commemorating
100 years of international civil service,
which originated in 1919 with the birth of the League of Nations.

The series features inspirational and reflective think pieces on the concept of
the international civil service by former and present United Nations' officials,
as well as representatives from civil society and academia.

It relates to the Foundation's work on leadership, which strives to kindle a
constructive dialogue on how to foster and secure visionary
and principled leadership in the UN.

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