



The UN is failing – states must back off and give its leader the power to act

Helen Clark

The former New Zealand premier and top UN official says the organisation cannot hope to end today's crises while it is hamstrung by micro-management

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Wednesday 13 September 2017 10.00 BST

In a world facing many grave challenges across many spheres, people look to the United Nations to play a key role in resolving them.

Yet there is broad appreciation that the UN is failing in vital areas, not least on peace and security. It is at its best in the development and humanitarian domain, where it works with and for people and gets results. But its seeming inability to act to end the protracted crises that have driven untold human misery – including the forced displacement of an

unprecedented 65.6 million people - is an indictment of the organisation. It badly needs structures and ways of working that will address this century's crises, not those of 1945.

Some of its constraints are structural, like the veto power on the security council given to five nations when the charter was written in 1945. That prevents effective action on peace and security - even when an overwhelming majority of the security council and member states wants it. That veto should be removed, and replaced by a qualified voting system that allows, at the least, for decisions to be taken on a near-unanimous basis.



Photograph: Eduardo Munoz Alvarez/Getty Images

That should be coupled with a move to fairer representation on the security council. It is, in effect, the executive board for the UN on peace and security matters on which Europe is clearly over-represented and other regions are correspondingly under-represented. This is a long-term source of grievance, and it undermines the UN's legitimacy.

On top of that, the requirement for a range of key agreements to be reached unanimously is holding our world back. If the climate negotiations in Bali in 2007, for example, had been able to forge ahead leaving a minority of dissenters behind,

there would be much greater confidence today that we could avoid reaching the tipping point at which irreversible and catastrophic change in the climate ecosystem occurs.

Then there are the many constraints placed on a secretary general's ability to lead. The secretariat is subjected to micro-management by member states through various committees of the general assembly. There is little appreciation of the need for a clear line to be drawn between management and governance.

I advocate the empowerment of the secretary general to take bold initiatives and run the organisation as an effective leader and chief executive must. International organisations need leaders empowered to act. Yes, there must be systems of accountability, but when they hamper action on everything from courageous diplomacy for peace to streamlining management, as they do now, they become counterproductive. Worse, they can leave a secretary general looking weak, indecisive and hamstrung because of fear of offending member states.

So, member states must ease up, and give the secretary general and his/her managers the space to act decisively. Coupled with that, there should be only one term served by a secretary general, to avoid the over-caution that is inherent in aiming to secure a second mandate from the day the first one begins.

If steps like these aren't taken, the UN will continue to diminish in relevance. The world needs an effective UN. The current limitations on its capacity to lead and act need to be addressed urgently.

● *This article forms part of the Global Challenges Foundation's report global governance for global citizens*

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