

## A Fool's Errand? The Next Secretary-General and United Nations Reform

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### **Abstract**

How can the incoming Secretary-General António Guterres promote and lead change? A better strategy than immediately seeking to initiate transformational change is to implement modest changes that accumulate over multiple rounds and to influence and empower the leadership of so-called 'smart coalitions' of state and non-state actors seeking to enact ambitious changes to intergovernmental structures and global norms. Specifically, we propose a change leadership strategy for the next Secretary-General based on five guiding principles and include illustrative reforms that suggest how he might put each principle into practice.

### **Policy Implications**

- Give the organization direction by defining an operational mission.
- Resist the urge to play thought leader and focus instead on gathering and analyzing the carefully researched and thoughtful ideas of others.
- Avoid the temptation to pursue a comprehensive grand bargain by, instead, introducing a reform agenda incrementally and implementing it over multiple rounds.
- Embrace informal change by seizing windows of opportunity to establish new practices.
- Let others lead by piggybacking on existing 'smart coalitions,' or where these coalitions do not exist, exercising the Secretary-General's network, convening, and agenda setting power to facilitate their formation.

## Introduction

The United Nations needs strong leadership if it is to meet 21st Century threats and challenges. For many UN Member States, change is urgently needed to update intergovernmental structures, modernize the Secretariat, and reduce turf wars and functional overlap among the loosely-organized network of specialized agencies, funds and programmes.

When a new Secretary-General is selected, many Member States, including the United States and other Western countries, demand that the new leader seize the honeymoon to transform the organization. The problem is that the UN as an institution is designed to curb strong leadership, and the record of these attempted transformational reforms should stand as a cautionary tale for the next Secretary-General, António Guterres. The office's limited authority and resources, coupled with exigencies of major powers, will constrain the kinds of reforms that the next Secretary-General can enact—and rushing an ambitious agenda can trigger a backlash and lingering resentment that cripples subsequent reform initiatives.

So, how can Secretary-General Guterres promote and lead change? Historically, strong, patient, and diplomatically creative Secretaries-General have brought about change by accepting the office's limitations and adapting their strategy accordingly. For

instance, Dag Hammarskjöld (1953-1961) instilled a culture of civil service independence and expanded the organization's operational reach, and Kofi Annan (1997-2006) updated management practices and threw the weight of his office behind a series of new global institutions to inject human security into the organization's operational DNA.

Drawing on these and other examples, the next Secretary-General must make reform what António Guterres himself has called a 'permanent attitude.' Rather than rushing transformational change, institutional realities dictate letting modest reforms accumulate and empowering the leadership of so-called 'smart coalitions' of state and non-state actors seeking to enact more ambitious ones. Change should unfold on parallel tracks with the Secretary-General taking the lead on internal reform, while getting better positioned actors to take the lead in revamping intergovernmental bodies or establishing new international institutions.

## The Challenge of Leading at the UN

The challenge for the Secretary-General is that that institution is not conducive to the strategies celebrated by leadership experts. One approach is for leaders to mobilize followers around transformational change by articulating a vision that taps deep, unmet needs and motivates potential followers to align individual and envisioned collective interests. Transformational change becomes

self-reinforcing as leaders empower and inspire constituents to support change, who in turn become a growing cadre of followers that empower the leader.

At the UN, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992-1996) adopted a transformational approach, particularly when introducing and promoting his widely-read *An Agenda for Peace* (1992). He believed that the spirit of cooperation (especially in the Security Council) at the end of the Cold War made it possible for much of the membership to rally behind a well-reasoned and articulated plan for transformational change. The Secretary-General challenged member governments (particularly the lone superpower) to look beyond their immediate national interests and make far-reaching commitments aligned with his vision.

Alternatively, transformation can be implemented using a 'transactional' leadership style by bargaining with potential followers to get them to support or at least acquiesce to an ambitious reform agenda. The Secretary-General has moral authority as the embodiment of the Charter, oversees the UN system and its sizeable budgets, and has access to intergovernmental forums and influential policy and social networks (think Climate Action Network). In principle, these material and symbolic resources can be leveraged during negotiations to press governments to finance new programs or to induce coordination among UN programmes, funds, and agencies. A Secretary-General

may also formulate or help broker a sweeping grand bargain—an indivisible package of reforms that provides something for everyone—to be the basis for intergovernmental negotiations. The reform agenda laid out in Kofi Annan's *In Larger Freedom* (2005) exemplified such a grand bargain.

However, the office of Secretary-General is not conducive to leading transformational change regardless of the officeholder's style. Transformational change leadership is feasible when a weak institution imposes few constraints on the head or, conversely, when an institution is robust and delegates substantial authority and resources to her. At the UN, neither condition applies. The Secretary-General faces chronic member micro-management and bureaucratic inertia and has limited command-and-control over autonomous UN agencies. Much of the budget is voluntary and earmarked, and financial and human capital is usually overstretched so there is little to dole out as part of some reform bargain.

Officeholders who ignore these realities do so at their own peril. For example, Boutros-Ghali's ambitious *Agenda for Peace* sputtered as many governments contested key norms of the liberal order and the UN's role in it, and a frustrated Boutros-Ghali conceded in a 1995 addendum that many reforms would not be implemented, imploring members to moderate their expectations. His agenda also missed opportunities by offering little guidance to staff

on how to operationalize some of its most promising concepts and his propensity to push the boundaries of his office. Of course, pushing boundaries is always a risk, and even two of the most widely-admired Secretaries-General, Kofi Annan and Dag Hammarskjöld, alienated powerful Permanent Members of the Security Council after doing so one too many times.

Packages of reforms proposed as grand bargains often result in the lowest common denominator, as Member States focus on eliminating undesirable proposals even at the expense of losing desirable ones. Some issues are also so-called “third rails” that both resist compromise and dominate the larger intergovernmental reform process, impeding progress on other matters. For instance, Kofi Annan’s insistence that Security Council membership reform be part of In Larger Freedom mired the package in intergovernmental wrangling. The issue was ultimately separated out to prevent it from scuttling the entire reform process.

Other elements of packaged reforms may be adopted but not implemented. As negotiating deadlines approach, state delegations feel compelled to make unwanted compromises to avoid being blamed for a high-profile diplomatic failure. Subsequently, these states impede implementation of these compromises by dragging their feet or inadequately financing them—impediments that plagued the management reforms and the new

Peacebuilding Commission introduced in In Larger Freedom.

Given all of these limitations, many past Secretaries-General have exercised self-restraint. At the least, they take the temperature of important governments prior to introducing proposed changes. Others go further by avoiding testing the boundaries of the office by interpreting intergovernmental mandates narrowly and gravitating to reform ideas that already have widespread support. Of course, a Secretary-General perceived as too unwilling to challenge governments or the bureaucracy may be accused of putting self-preservation above the UN’s effectiveness and wellbeing. For instance, Kurt Waldheim (1972-1981) was frequently criticized for being too cautious, setting uninspiring goals, and not asserting his authority on behalf of the organization and its ideals.

The lesson for the next Secretary-General is to find a change leadership strategy that is tailored to the executive and resource constraints of the office and the institution. At a minimum, change leadership is not possible if the officeholder permanently alienates the Security Council’s Permanent Five, major donors, the developing country voting bloc in the General Assembly, and the independent governing boards of UN agencies.

The risk of alienation, however, does not preclude change leadership. Taking up his post in the midst of the East-West rivalry, Hammarskjöld, in Simon Chesterman’s words,

turned the UN into “a vital force for peace and international law” particularly by fostering a culture of independence among UN staff, expanding his office’s peacemaking authority, and implementing the first modern peacekeeping mission. More than three decades later, Annan was recognized for enhancing management, institutionalizing civilian protection in peace operations, helping design the peacebuilding architecture, and working with likeminded governmental and non-governmental groups to help establish the UN Global Compact, Responsibility to Protect, and the Millennium Development Goals.

Despite a rocky start, Ban Ki-moon also exercised leadership. During his last two years alone, he is credited with championing the Sustainable Development Goals and fostering new reform ideas by convening high-level reviews on peace operations, the UN Peacebuilding Architecture and issues concerning women, peace and security. On climate cooperation in particular, many UN diplomats and environmental groups credit Ban with playing a leadership role in reaching the Paris climate agreement after the disappointment of the much hyped 2009 Copenhagen Conference of the Parties. He deftly used the UN’s convening power to facilitate several important sectoral, multistakeholder initiatives such as UN-Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD). These sectoral commitments, in turn, created momentum heading into Paris and made it

easier for governments to make their own voluntary commitments because they felt they had a reasonable chance of delivering on them.

### **Change Leadership: A Strategy for the Next Secretary-General**

Drawing on these and other examples, we recommend the next Secretary-General adopt five guiding principles.

1. Give the UN Direction: Set the Operational Mission

An operational mission is an overarching purpose for the departments and agencies of the UN system. It guides the reform agenda and reflects the Charter and its values while communicating primary contributions to Charter goals. For example, Hammarskjöld called for an independent and impartial UN civil service whose operations would prevent regional conflicts from escalating to super power war during the Cold War. Decades later, Annan wanted the institution’s resources and capabilities reconfigured to support “We the Peoples” by advancing human security. In contrast, Ban has not organized his reforms around a single operational mission, preferring to divide them among strategic priorities of climate change, women’s empowerment, conflict prevention, and internal accountability. The benefit of this approach is allowing more flexibility in agenda setting and empowering

senior managers to set out an operational mission for each strategic priority.

The drawback, however, is that those missions may not be complimentary or provide a coherent and easily communicated explanation of the UN's overarching purpose. On balance, the benefits of an operational mission are worth the costs. A clear operational mission serves an important baseline that the Secretary-General and other stakeholders can use to evaluate existing programs and structures, as well as potential reforms. Without a unifying purpose, a reform agenda becomes, as Robert Cox once put it, "a mere accumulation of odds and ends projects, some appealing to one, some to another, group of constituents."

There are also organizational benefits. Even an aspirational mission creates an important symbolic separation between UN staff and the Member States that make up the UN's intergovernmental bodies. In doing so, the mission fosters a shared sense of purpose that boosts morale across a siloed system of turf-conscious Secretariat departments, far-flung country offices, and autonomous agencies and programmes.

There are also political benefits. Formulating the operational mission provides an opportunity to conduct a listening tour with stakeholders, gather change ideas, and understand their priorities and their "red lines." In turn, the next Secretary-General will better understand the political landscape to identify a

coalition of governments and non-state actors from the Global North and South with complementary foreign policies—and anticipate likely opposition before more concrete changes are introduced.

Of course, choosing a compelling operational mission is challenging, particularly at the UN where power cannot be ignored and interests often clash. Yet there are plenty of possibilities already out there that António Guterres should consider. For example, the next Secretary-General could dust off Annan's call to advance human security or adopt the one recent global commission's suggestions that reforms be organized around providing "just security."

## 2. Leave Thought Leadership to Others

A second guiding principle is to forego thought leadership when it comes to developing reform proposals. A Secretary-General has few comparative advantages when it comes to formulating policy ideas; and there are plenty of ideas already baked into recent agreements on 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the climate agreement signed in Paris. António Guterres can also draw on a pool of recommendations from high-level internal reviews of how it conducts peace operations, facilitates peacebuilding, finances humanitarian emergencies, and implements UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. Finally,

prominent public intellectuals and former world leaders have offered a trove of new analysis, including The Elders, the Independent Commission on Multilateralism, and the Albright-Gambari Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance (where one of this article's co-authors served as project director).

There are additional reasons to let others formulate and take early ownership of proposals. The fate of An Agenda for Peace is illustrative. From the outset, Boutros-Ghali embraced thought leadership given his extensive diplomatic experience and prolific-publishing in international relations. The resulting agenda proposed comprehensive change that was circulated widely, and many of its concepts still shape thinking in some UN circles. However, Boutros-Ghali's proud ownership of these ideas impeded the formation of a strong advocacy coalition and buy-in from the Member States. In fact, his profound commitment to them led to confrontations that strained relations with key governments, who accused the Secretary-General of over-reach.

Rather than generating ideas, the next Secretary-General should gather and synthesize the ideas of others. To this end, his office should be structured to reliably channel ideas from internal and external sources and be capable of analyzing the strategic, functional, and political merits of these ideas.

At a minimum, the next Secretary-General needs a designated political director with experience navigating diplomatic waters, managing multistakeholder processes, and supporting intergovernmental negotiations.

The Secretary-General would also benefit from a revamped policy planning shop that serves as what Annan called a "nerve center" to develop strategic communications, analyze and synthesize the best thinking on UN reform, and inform his medium-term (~ 5 years) agenda. This office could also coordinate the UNSG's role in smart coalitions and in the UN Policy Committee, as well as other ad hoc senior management groups.

### 3. View Formal Reform as an Incremental Process

Third, a Secretary-General should exercise self-restraint and enact his reform agenda incrementally. In other words, António Guterres should resist the temptation to use the honeymoon period to introduce a comprehensive reform agenda or some grand bargain. The former is tempting because newcomers often seek to foster an image as relentless reformers. The risk of moving too fast is exhausting scarce resources and political capital and impeding future reforms by producing a lingering ill-will toward the Secretary-General. A grand bargain

introduced primarily by a Secretary-General is likely to lead to lowest common denominator reforms and last minute compromises that will not be implemented.

Instead, reform is a long-term process taking place over multiple rounds to gradually fill gaps, add new capabilities, and align activities with strategic priorities. Politically, incremental change—such as, for instance, new cooperation modalities between the UN Departments of Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations, as a prelude to a possible merger of these two departments—gives status quo-oriented actors time to adapt and denies them a prominent focal point to rally against.

The next Secretary-General's first reforms should target previously authorized changes with widespread support and modest new ones that support more ambitious future reform. A good example is Kofi Annan's initial reforms that sought to strengthen faltering relations with major donors and set the foundation for the future "quiet revolution."

Annan started implementing his *Renewing the United Nations* (1997) just after taking office. Informed by his experience watching UN reforms derailed by major donor governments or the developing states majority voting bloc, his plan centered on strengthening management and internal coherence agenda and was an agenda. Annan also separated reform proposals into ones that would be

implemented immediately and fell largely under his authority and ones that would be introduced later, because they required intergovernmental approval or UN system-wide action. These immediate reforms supported later ones, including the promotion of corporate social responsibility through the UN Global Compact, by empowering his office and strengthening key relationships (even the US Congress begrudgingly approved).

Secretary-General Guterres should also start with changes that can be largely implemented on his own authority and require few additional resources. Besides establishing a nerve center on the 38th floor, he should appoint senior advisers with expertise and networks in policy areas intertwined with the operational mission. He should also seek authorization to appoint two deputies, one responsible for peace and security and the other for economic, social and environmental affairs. These deputies would support strategic reforms, such as better integrating peacekeeping, prevention, and peacemaking capabilities or advancing specific (however unpopular) measures to mitigate the effects of global climate change.

The next Secretary-General may also seek out modest changes to tweak budgeting, management, and oversight, while delaying changes that threaten the favored programs of important blocs of members. The UN needs greater operational coherence, which is best



achieved with effective field leadership and the consolidation of promising recent reform initiatives. António Guterres should convene an independent task force to distill best practices for talent scouting, screening, training, mentoring, and empowering field leaders, particularly Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators and Deputy Special Representatives who manage the UN's multi-agency country teams and its peacekeeping and political missions on a day-to-day basis. He may also enhance peacekeeping planning and capacity by institutionalizing intelligence-gathering capabilities in the field and enlarging the cadre of military specialists that can advise civilian mission leadership.

#### 4. Embrace Informal Change

The Secretary-General should use every window of opportunity to set precedents and establish new practices. In particular, he can leverage crises to trigger change. On one hand, international crises can derail formal change by monopolizing the Secretary-General's time, depleting resources and political capital, and compelling him to endorse imperfect compromises. However, a crisis occasionally permits him to set a desirable precedent. During crises, the membership is more likely to tolerate experimentation for reasons of political expediency, particularly if doing nothing is unacceptable, established

solutions seem inadequate, and intergovernmental bodies are divided.

Hammar-skjöld was particularly adept at exploiting crises, like the holding of U.S. airmen by China (1954), or the Suez crisis (1956), using them to implement novel ways to intervene and to assert the independence of the UN's civil service (Urquhart, 1994). Annan seized on the Security Council's paralysis during the 1999 Kosovo conflict to put humanitarian intervention on the membership's agenda and cajole a few likeminded governments to finance an independent commission that would ultimately propose the Responsibility to Protect.

To this end, the next Secretary-General should lead, for example, the response to the crisis that has engulfed UN peace operations as allegations of sexual abuse by peacekeepers continue to accumulate. The growing sense of crisis inside and outside the UN has created a political opening for the Secretary-General to take action. As a first step, António Guterres should seize this policy window and commit to zero impunity by continuing Ban's decision—endorsed by the Security Council—to repatriate an entire unit of a contingent if there is credible evidence of sexual abuse. To give this change added credibility, he may also experiment with securing ex ante a standby arrangement from another troop contributor (perhaps India or Canada) to replace any unit perpetrating sexual abuse with impunity.

## 5. Foster Collective Leadership: Facilitate the Work of Smart Coalitions

The final guiding principle is for the Secretary-General to sometimes forego a chief leadership role on certain major reforms, while encouraging other political actors to step up, especially when it comes to reforming intergovernmental bodies or establishing new international institutions.

These ambitious changes will require a sustained advocacy campaign with different actors performing different leadership tasks. The Secretary-General can contribute to collective leadership by exercising her network, convening, and agenda setting powers to support the multistakeholder formation and work of these so-called “smart coalitions.” Smart coalitions advocate for particular institutional changes in global governance and are a loosely organized mix of likeminded governments, prominent experts and former statesmen, international civil servants, and other non-state actors. The term was introduced by the Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance, which argued that such coalitions could draw on the “smart power” capabilities and political support of diverse global actors to lobby for desirable change, provide valuable ideas and information, and mobilize a wide range of constituencies. Over the past two decades, these coalitions have successfully campaigned for, among others, a new anti-

personnel landmine treaty, an International Criminal Court, guiding principles for corporate social responsibility, and new partnerships in the delivery of various kinds of international assistance.

On some issues, António Guterres can simply piggyback on existing coalitions whose work complements his view of the UN’s operational mission. On others, he can encourage their formation by (informally and quietly) convening a select few state and non-state actors to serve as a steering committee that takes and keeps ownership of the change process.

Regardless, engagement should be selective, with a focus on structuring the change process and injecting momentum at key moments. The Secretary-General can cajole the smart coalition’s leadership to create an inclusive and transparent change process, avoid common political tripwires, and keep the coalition from evaporating before changes are actually implemented. During the implementation phase, the Secretary-General can also provide some mix of advocacy, mainstreaming within the UN bureaucracy, and pressing UN agencies to assist members with domestic-level implementation (as underway for the Sustainable Development Goals implementation).

Fostering collective coalition leadership may also provide the best chance for more comprehensive UN reform. For example, a steering committee overseeing several task

forces composed of Permanent Representatives from all major regions and each co-chaired by a government from the Global North and South could, together, propose a grand bargain that would reform principal UN organs, including the UN Security Council and General Assembly. This grand bargain would ideally be adopted at a summit, such as the one proposed by Albright-Gambari Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance, to coincide with the United Nations' 75th anniversary in September 2020. Modeled on the 1987 Brundtland Commission's success in bringing about the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, a 2020 summit could serve as a defined rallying point for smart coalitions and generate political momentum for multiple, urgent global reform initiatives.

For his part, the new Secretary-General could selectively contribute his bully pulpit, administrative support, and behind-the-scenes guidance and diplomatic lobbying. Beyond the office's ceremonial roles, Secretary-General António Guterres and his staff can carve out the (minimum needed) two-and-one-half year preparatory space for the next major UN Summit in 2020, and then backstop the Director-General who is formally mandated to support all aspects of the consultations, preparatory committee meetings, and the Summit itself.

As formal intergovernmental negotiations commence, the Secretary-General can press select likeminded governments to become 'champion countries' that support and lead the

steering committee and proposed task forces on a particular subset of the reform agenda. António Guterres may also identify, nurture, and encourage task force leads to liaise with and support the active participation of different non-state actors. Lastly, the Secretary-General can advise the steering committee and task forces on common political traps, such as allowing Security Council membership reform to dominate and derail the negotiations.

### **Conclusion**

António Guterres will face immense demands to ensure that the UN is ready to cope with 21st century challenges and threats. A new kind of leadership at the top of the world body is urgently needed, capable of harnessing the capabilities, ideas, and partnerships of myriad state and non-state actors. Indicative of this kind of leadership qualities is a willingness to forego being chief leader. Instead, he will need to be a skilled mobilizer and influencer and to employ those skills effectively to support governments and multistakeholder coalitions that are perhaps better suited to achieve more transformational changes. As such, Secretary-General Guterres will need to balance humility and ambition as he is unlikely to be able to take credit for leading the most dramatic changes—even as he plays a crucial role in facilitating them.

At the same time, the next Secretary-General must be—and be seen as—a change leader in his own right. This involves more than just reorganizing the Secretariat or pursuing

greater efficiencies—though these are important. A change leader must give the organization direction and implement changes that are more than the sum of their parts. He must let reforms accumulate over multiple rounds and wait patiently to capitalize on windows of opportunity. Ultimately, a far sighted reform process with a clear mission will give the staff direction and the organization a sense of purpose that can be effectively communicated to Member States and other major stakeholders. In turn, many of these diverse actors will have renewed cause to rally

around the new Secretary-General as he works to make the UN more fit for today's pressing global challenges.

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