

# TransformUN

**Discussion Paper**

**22 November 2004, LSE**

## **Activating a Pathway to Effective UN reform**

As the Secretary-General's High Level Panel (HLP) nears completion, Vision has convened a meeting to consider its probable conclusions, and their implications for advancing global governance reform agenda. One of our aims is to stimulate an urgently needed process of strategic thinking by progressive social actors in Europe to influence and challenge likely reactions from European governments and the EU to HLP outcomes. The meeting is the first of the Transform UN series that will continue in the next months.

Our idea is that, a new platform, initiated by European think-tanks, but global in scope, could now help to bring meaningful changes in global governance closer to reality. By developing key ideas, models and arguments; harnessing to this project individuals, organisations and interests who can, in the arenas of policy, politics and public opinion, act as agents of change; and by together supporting and publicising key aims, this platform could focus the substantial (though still dispersed and hence politically inert) support for urgent renewal that has emerged across many sectors, and turn it into effective political pressure.

This paper is intended to provoke and focus our discussion. First, it recalls the nature and parameters of the true reform challenge. Second, it raises four key areas requiring reflection and decision in defining the reform platform and the strategy to be pursued by a forward initiative.

## UN at sixty: Why now ?

Recent decades have seen new discontinuities arising of a nature and scale that *international* frameworks can no longer govern, or even adequately conceptualise. Regulation of global financial markets and the communications, increasingly transnational abuse and protection of human rights, asymmetrical security threats and developments in genetic research exemplify the new challenges now outstripping the boundaries of our existing institutions and the collective rational capabilities - intellectual structures and political categories we have employed until now - what some authors call an 'ingenuity gap'.

As a consequence, the processes of globalization – the transposition of social systems and phenomena to worldwide scale – are evading the competence of governments and political frameworks to *define problems, prioritise tasks, and craft solutions*. The 'war on terror' – with little progress on solutions, whether 'deep' or tactical – is only the highest profile of a widening range of cases where even the most powerful *nation states* and *international institutions* lack capacity to meet the new demands. And accompanying and reinforcing this dramatic crisis efficacy is a deepening distrust of collective institutions, further weakening their legitimacy.<sup>[1]</sup>

One might expect the need for a step-change in global decision-making and policy machinery should then be a first priority for political actors. But despite a new wave of discussion around reform, provoked especially by the outcomes of Iraq campaign, and also by projected failures to achieve MDGs, our continuing collective impotence to commit to principled change at the global level – which is unlikely to be altered by the High Level Panel, whatever it concludes - must be the most telling failure of all.

Since 1989, events have occurred of magnitude and impact on collective perceptions almost as great as those following the World Wars. Unlike 1918 or 1945, however, this time the gate-keeper states are steadfastly blocking the road to change. Internal UN reform processes, meanwhile, even where they unearth good ideas<sup>[2]</sup>, are rendered 'non-starters' by diplomatic stalemate. Despite accumulating dissatisfaction with their performance and procedures, reform of International Financial Institutions similarly stays firmly off the agenda of national politics and politicians.

Hardly surprising, in this setting, the UN's status and underpinning multilateral vision have been increasingly openly and aggressively questioned. Poor performance is fuelling new rejection, mainly led by the US, of commitments to collective progress and tolerance that were defining features of the post-war vision. Notwithstanding its brand new foreign policy identity, for their part, EU member states are still energetic in their pursuit of unilateral interests outside restraining forums and, at this moment, are cooperating only to confound authentic UN reform.

What should we do now? In responding strategically, as potential actors ourselves in global processes of opinion formation, how should we map the hazards and opportunities, in bringing real reform nearer to reality? What should we do taking in account the result of the US elections and the new US administration layout? What synergies can be leveraged? How do we expose the actors resisting change, and minimise or counter their influence? The next section's four questions aim to clarify options for building new responses to the *reform challenge*.

### Key issues: defining the reform platform

Our position paper identifies four key questions. The seminar and website discussion to follow will aim to find some possible answers.

<sup>[1]</sup> See Vision's position paper on [http://www.visionforum.it/forum\\_en/globalizzazione\\_e\\_democrazia\\_en/la\\_riforma\\_del\\_le\\_nazioni\\_unite\\_en/UN\\_ING.zip](http://www.visionforum.it/forum_en/globalizzazione_e_democrazia_en/la_riforma_del_le_nazioni_unite_en/UN_ING.zip)

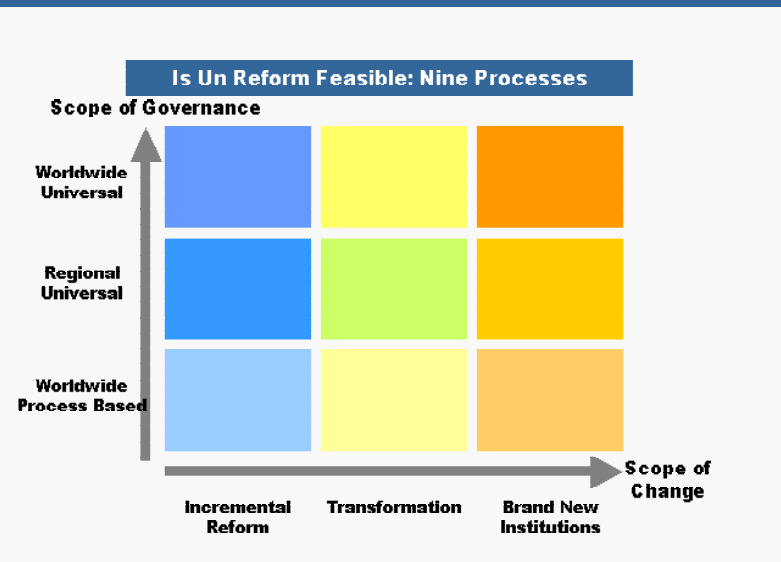
<sup>[2]</sup> Danilo Turk paper.



## 1) The *null* option: Reboot – restart or write-off - Can and should the UN be saved?

Any reform project must face the *null* option. Europe's Constitutional convention showed the effect of fixing an institutional redesign process *ab initio* with multiple assumptions. Questioning the “feasibility” of the reform exercise, and assessing the alternative of a fresh-start approach is essential to avoid being confronted later on by the realisation of having fixed oneself with insurmountable constraints.

The same applies to the UN. After years of tactical positioning and endless talking, a genuine reform effort now must consider whether: a) the UN is still adequately reformable; b) if it retains assets justifying its continued existence in some form; and c) the potential of “zero based” alternative routes. The chart below summarises the contours of the discussion of alternatives to UN reform.



These possibilities should all be considered, in response to the question: would breaking down problem-solving tasks into policy or regional units make them *manageable*?

In fact an accelerating flourishing of transnational organizations is already happening in an organic, sometimes chaotic, process, responding to a genuine and growing demand for supranational governance.

The real question then is how far should we go in granting institutional, legal or policy-making recognition to these organizations? Should we be concerned about making this process more orderly? Should we distribute the energy of reformers on different routes to global governance? What would it be the most effective place to start?

On the other hand, the costs of giving up further attempts to reform the UN must be considered:

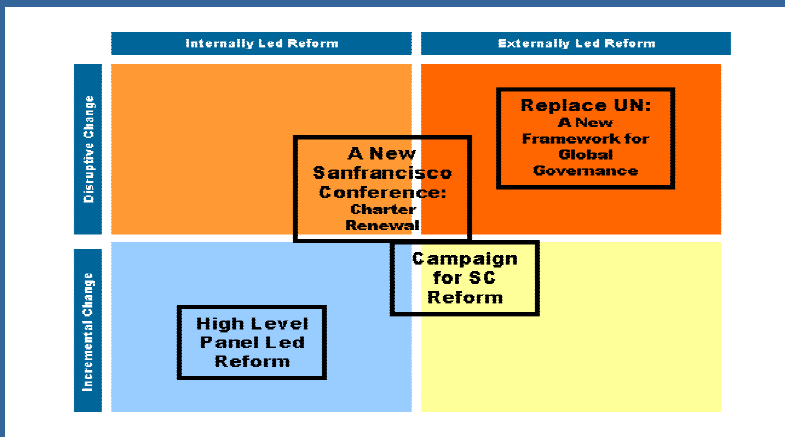
- The credibility and power of the UN ‘brand’ / identity and institutional legacy – its *motivational* and unique moral power
- The accumulated skills, institutional wisdom and practical knowledge at various levels of the organization that cannot easily be replicated
- How valuable do we think these assets really are?
- In which organizational areas do they lie?
- Is the risk of losing / damaging them too great to contemplate starting anew?

Answers to these questions could make an important contribution both to making strategies for reform more realistic, and to creatively imagining other levers for change outside the UN system.

II) The scope of the institutional reform: Is the supposed choice between ambition and realism a false one - is comprehensive redesign really more difficult than piecemeal modification?

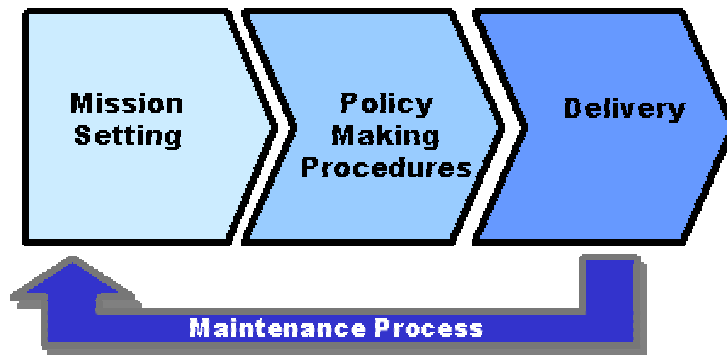
Realists and conventional wisdom suggest that adjustments to an already working system are more feasible than comprehensive redesign. Idealists and the tradition of constitutions, on the other hand, seem to believe that only reconsiderations of the entire institutional charts are worthwhile the effort.

Both large scale reform (the European Convention) and more focused adjustments (which have so far prevailed at the United Nations level) can run into problems. If the risk of the first is “complexity” and the extent of the area requiring negotiation, the products of the latter hazard “irrelevance”, being situated inside a wider institutional architecture that continues as before.



As the UN is a system made of a galaxy of agencies and organizations, the perimeter of reform must be identified. With regard to its four components - mission definition; decision-making procedures (council, general assembly, associated mechanisms for accountability to public opinion and “civil society”), delivery mechanisms; and, lastly, processes to maintain the system and to allow periodic renewal – where should we start?

## The UN system Positioning Reform



Does one locus hold the key to unlocking deep reform throughout? Or should our target be a “portfolio” of strategies pursued simultaneously at different levels? Should an iterative “trial an error” approach be preferred to “rational planning”? On the question of “maintenance”, how could a new UN be made adaptable to the future’s emerging society - “information based”, “networked”, “mobile”, “flexile”, “global”?

Certainty of mission and institutional stability, on the one hand, appear to play against an institution’s capacity to self-regulate to maintain its efficiency and legitimacy, on the other. Europe’s solution to this dilemma has been a process of constant re-negotiation of its political aims and the legal bases of collective action. Would this be viable without the economic drivers, shared political vision and geographical unity that has propelled Europe so far?

Built-in constitutional review could be periodically triggered by sunset clauses on key provisions; more deterministically, by a formula determining membership of key UN organs.<sup>[1]</sup> If the benefits of structural dynamism are thought to outweigh the costs, either way, reformists must identify a realistically acceptable route and make the case for it.

<sup>[1]</sup> Reference to formula paper on Net.



**iii) Selling reform to the incumbents: How can the logical contradiction of a process initiated and managed by nation states, but fundamentally reconsidering their role, be overcome?**

The High Level Panel and the EU Constitutional Convention made no real effort to challenge the nation state monopoly on institutional reform at international level: their implication is that global governance remains an extension of national politics. Although its initial announcement paid lip-service to the question of democracy, Europe's new Constitutional Treaty in fact maintains the bureaucratic oligopoly of power. The real realpolitik is that nation states are themselves a "constituency", both competing for power against players on other institutional levels, and acting ruthlessly to defend, and advance, their relative positions on the intra-statal plane. The real realpolitik is that nation states are themselves a "constituency", both competing for power against players on other institutional levels, and acting ruthlessly to defend, and advance, their relative positions on the intra-statal plane. This becomes a yet stronger truth when spoken of diplomatic delegations to international organizations, policy-making and reform-drafting processes. National diplomats are an interest in cause, a professional group vying with other bureaucracies over mission, visibility, and control.

Both these claims are put in point by European states' current positions on Security Council reform: Franco-British motives in supporting German hopes for elevation to a semi-permanent (SP) 7 matched in their rationale by Italy's new-found support for a European P5 seat. What can persuade such actors to accept reforms that would reconfigures, and diminish, their unilateral powers in ways they now find unthinkable? More specifically, what can engage the new US administration in a project aimed at making global governance more effective?

The arguments are powerful. States need global governance organs transcending national interests and inter-governmental control to conserve the position they currently enjoy, and to draw attention away from their own limitations in the face of globalisation. Like the Enlightenment social contract, managing individual inadequacy and decline, and acknowledging mutual dependence, is preferable to facing catastrophe later. Iraq is now showing, if proof was needed, that even for the most powerful states, imposing or maintaining world order without burden-sharing, is at minimum financially and technically unsustainable.

While this line might hold in relation to states as fictional entities with an institutional prerogative towards long-term sustainability and survival, reality must however deal with "individuals". The politicians, diplomats and bureaucrats whose trajectories of interest are much shorter in span. Our initial question must be refined in this light our initial question must be refined. The following framework for originating priorities and engagement strategies accordingly.

Nation State Categories	Stakeholder Segmentation: Looking for Allies...			Policy Making
	Opinion Makers / Think Tanks	Diplomats / Technocrats	Governmental / Political Parties	
The Rest of the World	Blue	Yellow	Orange	
"Most Significant Losers"	Blue	Light Green	Yellow	
"Up-and-Coming"	Light Blue	Yellow	Light Orange	
P5	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	



Which individuals are most open to appeals for a real process of reform? Who do they represent? Today's (or tomorrow's) real world powers; the tranche of middle-ranking nations, or the multitude of small and/or least developed countries? Could diplomats be brought around to attempting an "inside job"? Or must we focus our attention on policy-entrepreneurs and "gurus" from NGOs or academia, technocrats, business elites, or those who still depend on an electorate for power? Who can sell policy innovation? Most importantly, perhaps, who can lead politically from the front – and who can be expected to fall in line given the right steer?

At root, this question asks if it is realistic to expect an impetus for real reform to originate within the existing system, or whether a new reform agenda *must* be exogenous, led by a new alliance, constructing its goals, and support for them, first of all in "civil society", before approaching the entrenched interests from a position of strength.

**iv) Does democracy matter? Can institutions live, or be reformed, without a political space and public opinion which motivates them and to which they are accountable? Can current indifference to mainstream and institutional politics be overcome?**

While the "democratic deficit" of international organizations is now a cliché, progress towards eliminating it has been negligible. In response or in parallel, the latest EU Parliament elections, and Bush's re-election, can also be read as confirming public scepticism and disillusionment with multilateralist perspectives.

This presents another critical question in generating a successful reform process: does it have to be democratic? In other words, could public opinion, and participation, be effectively incorporated in a reform process? Lacking success in Europe, is this even remotely conceivable on a global level?

Naming this issue requires politicians and reformers at all levels to do some strategic thinking. Reforms designed exclusively through internal, specialist decision-making processes, and imposed from above are not sustainable: reforms, like laws, need people's awareness, knowledge and consent. Pragmatically, though, how can public opinion access and engage with a remote reform process? How much, and what kind of public input needs to be conferred on norms to validate a claim to status as a democratically-sanctioned *renewal*?

We must also consider whether aiming at undifferentiated popular "public opinion" – as the EU Constitutional Convention hollowly vowed to do - would create false expectations, reinforcing the limits of its legitimacy, rather than adding to its sum. But if, instead, we target the tiny portion of world public opinion taking a close interest in the cause of "global governance" (including NGOs, multinational corporations, IGO bureaucrats) the outcome could be straightforwardly elitist.

How can elite, technical expertise in developing alternative frameworks be most easily and effectively coupled with popular dissatisfaction? How do we catalyse the emergence actionable priorities, attracting popular support, to which national leaderships can then be held to account? Are there models or precedents for solving this paradox? Jubilee 2000 and the International Criminal Court campaign translated complex global policy issues into concrete policy claims over short timespans, and offer at least two alternative approaches to institution building / issue transformation. What lessons can they teach?

This framework outlined in this section needs to be considered in making realistic assessments about how much, and where, "popular appeal" can be found or generated for any reform campaign.



## Conclusion

The redesign of global governance instruments looks like the only possible, structural solution to some of the most serious questions we have been facing since the collapse of the old world order.

However, the paradox is that the more crucial such an objective becomes, the more difficult it appears.

The High Level Group conclusions and the diplomatic attempts of changing existing equilibria will most likely show the limits of processes which are too “internal” to the institutions, not ambitious enough in terms of the scope of the transformation or too complex in terms of the interests to be aligned.

The experience of institutional reform at European level shows both useful methods (for instance, a dedicated “convention” with a specific objective to be achieved in a limited timeframe) and lessons to be considered (for instance, the drawbacks of an institution-centric communications and political campaign, and the failure to engage “public opinion” on its own terms and in a segmented way instead of talking to a small set of tame proxies).

The paper focuses the discussion of the first of the meetings of TransformUN in four main question areas. The objective is to generate new ideas and articulate them into a number of proposals aimed to help move the agenda toward more effective global governance capabilities.

