



The Negative Effects of UN Reform

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There is no question that certain structures of the UN need reform, but there is a question how this should be done. Under strong financial and political pressure, Secretary General Kofi Annan has chosen to cut the resources of the organization in order to make its work more "efficient". The UN budget is down to US\$253 billion for the period from 1998-1999, and preliminary estimates for the years 2000-2001 only amount to US\$247 billion. 1000 posts were cut and now the staff size is below 9000. Many positions are not being filled, and especially for young professionals who only get short term contracts for three months, this creates a feeling of insecurity among UN staff. Administrative expenditures went down from 38% to 25% of the budget.

The general difficulties resulting from these cutbacks affect the daily work of the organization. Communication technologies cannot be updated when needed. Old versions of Word Perfect are still in use, for example. Some computers are not even in working order. Parts are missing and software is not adequately configured. There is not enough paper available. Some professionals have started bringing in their own paper to ensure that they can print out material whenever they need to. In the library one must bring along one's own paper in order to print out more than ten pages. The fax machines may be used only when communication is urgent. Internet access is limited to a specific amount of time. Offices at the UN are often poorly furnished. Translation services are not offered as often they should be. Necessary documents are sent late or not at all, thus hampering important communication with other organizations. These examples highlight the increasingly difficult conditions that UN professionals have to cope with at their work place. They concern the general administration and impede the UN's necessary work. Clearly they do not streamline the organization or help to make it more efficient as they are supposed to.

But the cutbacks have caused even more serious problems in various UN programs in the field. The insufficient funding is not only making life harder for some UN professionals but it may risk the life of people in need of help. Indeed,

all bodies of the UN are affected by the severe financial problems of the organization.

Two examples from the humanitarian field show what kind of problems we have to deal with and demonstrate the shortcoming of the organization due to insufficient resources:

1. UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for the Democratic People's Republic (DPR) of Korea.

The World Food Program (WFP) needed US\$345,801,900 to provide emergency assistance for vulnerable groups in 1998, but the income for this food aid activity only amounted to US\$111,244,342. Nutritional rehabilitation of severely malnourished children should have been undertaken in Korea by The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). It required US\$502,001 but there was no money available for this project as of 12 August 1998. The World Health Organization (WHO) was entrusted with needs assessment, project management monitoring, and evaluation of implementation (which are activities critics of the organization often request to improve transparency about where and how the money is spent), but it only received US\$1,194,349 even though more than six times that amount was needed to fulfill this complex task. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was one of the agencies which had to ensure food security in Korea. One of their activities to achieve this was an emergency repair of agricultural roads, but they were not able to raise the necessary money for this activity.

2. 1998 UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Angola.

The financial situation of the organizations working in Angola can be described as difficult as in the DPR of Korea. Often they have to work with much less money available than what they would actually need. Despite its actual appeal requirements of US\$3,500,000, UNICEF only received US\$695,719 to provide minimal health conditions for resettlement and reintegration in Angola. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also received inadequate funding for repatriation and reintegration of Angolan refugees (requirements: US\$23,000,000; income - through contributions and pledges - : US\$9,698,661). For the coordination of demobilization and reintegration activities the UNDP and UCAH received no financial support as of 11 August 1998. (Source for the figures used above is the Financial Tracking Database prepared and maintained by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA].)

Not only in the humanitarian field are more resources needed (not fewer as many critics and reformers of the UN suggest) but they are needed in other

sectors as well. Peacekeeping activities are questioned because the UN is now unable to pay countries like Fiji and Bangladesh for providing soldiers, and in the future these countries may not be willing or able to contribute soldiers anymore.

The financial crisis has gripped all parts of the UN. Cutting back on resources does not seem the right way to ensure that the UN will fulfill its tasks successfully. On the contrary it should be the goal of serious reformers to provide enough resources for the important work done by this unique organization.