

THE UNITED NATIONS AND GOVERNANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: INNOVATION, INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND ANTICIPATORY CAPACITIES

Innovate, collaborate, anticipate: three verbs that should be employed much more at the United Nations in the 21st century. They are very much needed in the Pact for the Future, which is intended to initiate an overhaul of an organisation as essential as it is outdated. Time is moving faster than ever, but the United Nations system has stagnated as far as its institutional culture, early warning and anticipatory capabilities, and speed of action are concerned. Good policy can be even better and even more transformational if procedures are modernised.



Cristina Gallach

Former Under Secretary-General of the United Nations for Information; former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Government of Spain

The dizzying speeds at which events unfold; the complexity of the crises, problems and transformations to be dealt with; and the close interconnections between the various spheres of local and global public life define the current moment, one which bears little or no resemblance to the post-war era when the United Nations came into existence and developed. Apart from paralysing political confrontation, the evident mismatch between present challenges and bureaucratic mechanisms and processes that remain stuck in the past is denting the public's confidence in the organisation and its capacity to act. The more the United Nations is needed, the less it is seen.

Innovate, collaborate, anticipate

If the Summit of the Future in September 2024 is to signal a qualitative leap forward, it requires three essential strides: undertake significant changes in the organisation's institutional culture; innovate in terms of both analysis and procedures; and develop sound anticipatory capacities. These and other major changes must help to overhaul the UN system. The Pact for the Future is essential to deliver on agreed commitments, particularly the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This overhaul will be neither effective nor transformative if it fails to bring about significant modifications at the very core of the way the system operates. It presents a major challenge, and it comes precisely at a time when the agendas to be implemented require unprecedented levels of coordination, innovative collaboration procedures, an inpouring of scientific knowledge and new technological tools. There are clear interconnections with advances in the SDGs: action or lack thereof on one impacts the others, and those impacts can be positive or negative.

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Simplicity is not possible, but greater effectiveness is

If the world and its problems are enormously complex, we have to concede that the system at the UN, whose mission is to help improve things, is itself extremely convoluted. Just take a look at the [overview](#) of the UN system chart, which contains details of the various organs, funds, programmes, their position in the system, their collaborative relationships, and the ties between them, including the Secretariat and its departments. Fitting it all on one page is an

achievement in itself and helps to get a better understanding of it.

Added to this are the intrinsic difficulties of acting by combining the proposals, interests and commitments of member states in the system's principal organs, such as the Security Council; the General Assembly and its subsidiary organs (which are, incidentally, undergoing their own processes of renewal); the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); or the Secretariat. The initiatives to be undertaken, then, should not be aimed at merely simplifying a system that plainly will always be complex, because of the sheer number and variety of actors and procedures to take into consideration. It does, however, call for a good measure of modernisation of the methods and processes which have a direct bearing on increasing the effectiveness and impact of policy, and that they be seen as such by citizens and governments.

First, it is essential to harness technological advances to infuse the whole system (particularly the Secretariat, as the organ responsible for day-to-day business) with innovative methods and procedures that help to anticipate and make the most informed decisions possible, optimising current timescales.

Anticipate better, act in good time

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the system lacks an effective anticipatory and early warning capability and that it needs to strengthen especially dedicated mediation capacities. This is making the organisation a reactive mechanism in the face of crises, people-generated conflicts and natural disasters. To operate effectively it requires a partnership that includes data management; information; and analytical, trending and scenario-mapping capabilities. These instruments should be open to external actors: research institutes, scientific bodies, etc. The impact that the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, created in 1988) has had on climate policy is a prime example of how invaluable inputs to the decision-making process can come from outside.

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The motto might be something like “Know how to anticipate, prepare to act and dare to do it”. How often have we seen crises coming but not known how, not been able or not wanted to trigger the action, for a whole host of reasons? Artificial intelligence, data analytics capabilities, blockchain and other frontier technologies must be harnessed and introduced into the system to act as a lever for the development of a culture of creative solutions. Technology will contribute to better risk management. It is no small revolution, and it requires a giant technological leap to ensure that it is also system wide. This will only be possible if it comes with a credible financial commitment and effective processes for adapting human resources, the most precious capital of any group or business and something which must also apply at the United Nations.

Many governments today are experimenting with initiatives like GovTech to design new and innovative solutions in combination with digital technologies to respond to citizens’ day-to-day problems. The United Nations, then, must get behind some sort of innovation lab, bringing together both internal experts and know-how from the member states and private sector. The latest draft of the Pact for the Future includes a proposal to “build capabilities by harnessing new technologies and data to anticipate risks and seize opportunities”. To this end, the UN 2.0 vision was launched recently. It is now essential to give it a major push.

More parity, more inclusion and more transparency

These advances must be designed to improve transparency and accountability, which are other black holes in the current system. They are measures that will have a clear impact on the changes to ensure that an undeniably stagnant institutional culture becomes more inclusive, more agile and more effective. A crucial step towards this end is to reach system-wide gender parity, balanced geographical representation and to find mechanisms to incorporate the voices of young people, minorities, indigenous peoples and communities that are traditionally marginalised from decision-making processes.

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The United Nations will be more robust if it is equal, inclusive and diverse. It is essential to pick up the pace of the steps taken in this direction. An excellent guide is the call to action from Global Women Leaders-Voices for Change and Inclusion ([GWL-Voices](#)), an organisation created to foster a transformation of the system based on the full participation of women in the management of major global challenges such as inequality, climate crises, conflicts, new technology development or economic justice. It is crucial to ensure that the calls for action towards gender equality contained in the current draft of the pact are maintained. Similarly, the opportunity should be seized to

reinvigorate the Commission on the Status of Women ([CSW](#)), which, together with the [Beijing Declaration](#) of 1995, is essential for achieving gender equality.

Fragmentation is the enemy

But it will be impossible to transform the institutional culture without addressing other deep-rooted obstacles in the system. A former senior staff member in the organisation sums up one of these major challenges like this: "We must be capable of overcoming the fragmentation of the different actors when it comes dealing with crises or in policy deployment. We have to move from operating in silos to obtaining the aggregate value of the system. It's about making a multidisciplinary diagnosis, based on a quick, cross-sectional reading, and then having the courage to take action, overcoming the prevailing risk aversion". This fragmented approach is evident at UN headquarters and on the ground. The distinguishing logo

often counts for more and is defended more vigorously than the common flag people operate under, and which protects them.

Part of this challenge could be met by optimising the work of the Chief Executives Board (CEB), the traditional coordination forum in the UN system. It is chaired by the secretary-general and made up of 31 members, who are the heads of the agencies, programmes, funds, financial institutions, etc. For many, it is the ideal place to work on consistency and spotting the cracks through which overlooked needs slip.

It is true, however, that a full-blown pact is not essential to push for some of the necessary transformations in the system's institutional culture. A good measure of leadership that musters support and affinities can be a catalyst for meaningful change. The secretary-general himself, for example, could improve diagnosis and take more effective action through operational groups made up solely of those who contribute and those concerned. The selection criterion would be: only those affected

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attend. It is a management model based on teams united by competence, in the sense of both knowledge and engagement. It makes it possible to bring together only those actors that are strictly necessary, thus averting the proliferation of participants in already complex and sometimes interminable working sessions. It is also about being nimble. This method would reveal the secretary-general's discernment regarding those he invites, and his selection would demonstrate his approach to the problem, crisis or initiative.

The Summit of the Future was launched with a highly ambitious goal given the difficult crossroads the United Nations is facing. With only a few weeks to go before it starts, and with negotiations among countries in full swing, there is every indication the bombastic/high-sounding tagline of/ what is loftily billed as "a unique opportunity" to restore eroded trust and demonstrate that international cooperation can rise to the challenges of the day will be rescaled. A broad and far-reaching agreement on all the necessary reforms may not be reached. Rather, September will mark the start of a process of gradual transformations. All the same, there is a pressing need for innovative approaches, substantial shifts in the institutional culture and a reinforcement of anticipatory and early warning capabilities to maintain relevance, increase effectiveness and improve people's lives in such a rapidly changing world. And all so the United Nations, which is more necessary than ever, can be useful to the whole of humanity.

