# City Research Online

# City, University of London Institutional Repository

Working Paper No. 171 – March 2016

# INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP IN GUIDING CHANGE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Jan Wouters and Jed Odermatt

# INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP IN GUIDING CHANGE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Jan Wouters and Jed Odermatt

## Abstract

It is increasingly accepted that in order for international organizations to address fully the panoply of threats and concerns at the international level the current structure of global governance, particularly the design of major international institutions, requires some level of reform. In different fields and at different levels, this reform has been discussed and debated, but has mostly stalled.   Increasingly, it is the executive heads of an organization that are called upon to show stronger leadership during times of crisis and change. No longer viewed as merely managers or administrative posts, the leadership shown by executive heads of international organizations is now strongly linked with the effectiveness of these organizations. This working paper seeks to understand the role of leaders in driving, and responding to, change in international organizations. What does leadership, a term often used in relation to national politics, mean in the context of an international organization? How do leaders drive change within these bodies, and how do they effectively respond to external and internal challenges and threats? This paper argues that individual leaders, particularly during times of crisis, can play an important role in guiding change and reform. The first part discusses the concept of leadership in the context of international organizations, and discusses some of the ways in which executive heads can pursue change and reform in their organization. The second part turns to the specific example of the UN Secretary General, an executive head who, despite having a relatively minor role on paper, in some cases has been able to implement meaningful change in the organization. The paper argues that executive heads can and should show greater political leadership in reforming organizations and improving their effectiveness.

## Keywords

## Authors

**Prof. Dr. Jan Wouters** is Jean Monnet Chair *ad personam* EU and Global Governance, Full Professor of International Law and International Organizations and Director of the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies and the Institute for International Law, KU Leuven.

**Dr. Jed Odermatt** is a Max Weber Fellow, European University Institute.

## Address for correspondence

jan.wouters@ggs.kuleuven.be
jed.odermatt@EUI.eu

# INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP IN GUIDING CHANGE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Jan Wouters and Jed Odermatt

**Table of contents**

# 1. Introduction

It is increasingly accepted that in order for international organizations to address fully the panoply of threats and concerns at the international level the current structure of global governance, particularly the design of major international institutions, requires some level of reform. In different fields and at different levels, this reform has been discussed and debated, but has mostly stalled. In the European Union (EU), there is little appetite for further changes to the EU Treaties, even if required in the wake of its debt crisis and in the face of new problems. Reform of the United Nations (UN), especially of the UN Security Council, remains at a standstill. Long-awaited changes in the major institutions for global economic governance, including the Bretton Woods institutions, are resisted. We can add to this list the other oft-quoted examples of stagnation, from the World Trade Organizations' (WTO) Doha Round to the fight against climate change and the ill-fated idea of a World Environmental Organization. While there are many reasons for these barriers, they largely stem from the fact that there is no longer a state or group of states able to show leadership and drive an agenda of change. Admittedly, change can be driven by other sources, such as global civil society or non-state actors. In international organizations, one driver of change can come from within the organization itself, that is, from its executive head.

'What is the UN doing to solve the crisis in Syria?' 'What is the EU doing to the address the refugee crisis?' When questions like these arise, to whom, exactly, are they addressed? Are they asking the leaders of the member states of these organizations, who are in the end responsible for decision-making and financing of the organization, to take action? Or are they levelled at those who hold office in these organizations? Increasingly, it is the executive heads of an organization that are called upon to show stronger leadership during times of crisis and change. No longer viewed as merely managers or administrative posts, the leadership shown by executive heads of international organizations is now strongly linked with the effectiveness of these organizations. Executive heads, who are present at leaders' summits and international negotiations, have visibility in the international media and are more than ever in the public eye.

This paper seeks to understand the role of leaders in driving, and responding to, change in international organizations. What does leadership, a term often used in relation to national politics, mean in the context of an international organization? How do leaders drive change within these bodies, and how do they effectively respond to external and internal challenges and threats? While shifts in economic and strategic power and the politics of the constituent Member States all drive change within international organizations, this paper argues that individual leaders, particularly during times of crisis, can play an important role in guiding change and reform. Much of the discussion on executive heads has focused on the particular personalities and leadership styles of the individuals who hold office. Rather than examine the particular traits of individual leaders, in this paper the first part identifies some of the ways in which executive heads can pursue change and reform. The second part turns to the example of the UN Secretary General, an executive head who, despite having a relatively minor role on paper, in some cases has been able to implement meaningful change in the organization. The paper argues that executive heads can and should show greater political leadership in reforming organizations and improving their effectiveness.

## 2. The Concept of Political Leadership

*2.1 Defining "Leadership"*

The concept of leadership can be applied generally to a variety of collective bodies, be they states, organizations, or groups. There has been a lot written on leadership in politics. Young's definition of leadership is "the actions of individuals who endeavor to solve or circumvent the collective action problems that plague efforts of parties seeking to reap joint gains".[1] Underdal defines leadership as an "asymmetrical relationship of influence in which one actor guides or directs the behaviour of others toward a certain goal".[2] Helms notes that "[m]ost scholars and citizens agree, if only vaguely and sometimes intuitively, that leadership is about giving direction, about guiding others, and about providing solutions to common problems. This normally includes different aspects of goal-setting and motivation which may be pursued by very different means."[3] Although most would have an intuitive sense of what leadership entails, it remains a *"*notoriously elusive and contested concept".[4] In particular, the notion of political leadership is not easy to capture in a definition as it is dependent on institutional, cultural and historical contexts and situations.[5] A number of working definitions abound.[6] Although many methodological issues challenge the operationalisation of the concept of leadership, some common traits seem to be discernable. Northouse, for example, defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal."[7] Barker, too, sees leadership as a continuous social process "that is not specifically a function of the person in charge". Unlike managers, who pursue stability and create hierarchical structures, leaders are characterised by adaptation, evolution and change; leadership is *"*a process of transformative change where the ethics of individuals are integrated into the mores of a community as a means of evolutionary social development".[8]

Helms recalls, in this regard, the famous distinction made by Burns between 'transactional' and 'transformative' leadership. Whereas the former "centres on the existent values and preferences within a given organisation or society", the latter "seeks to bring about change and create higher levels of motivation and morality for both leaders and followers, transforming followers into leaders and leaders into moral agents".[9] The emphasis on innovation can also be found in Masciulli, Mochanov and Knight, according to whom the phenomenon of leadership incorporates "leaders involved in some type of innovative

---

[1] O. Young, 'Political Leadership and Regime Formation: On the Development of Institutions in International Society', *International Organization* 43(5) (1991) 281, 285.

[2] A. Underdal , 'Leadership Theory: Rediscovering the Arts of Management" in I.W. Zartman (ed) *International Multilateral Negotiation: Approaches to the Management of Complexity*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, (1994) 178.

[3] L. Helms, 'Introduction: The Importance of Studying Political Leadership Comparatively", in L. Helms (eds.), *Comparative Political Leadership*, Palgrave Macmillan (2012) 2-3.

[4] Helms, above note 3, 2.

[5] See J. Masciulli, M.A. Molchanov and W.A. Knight, 'Political Leadership in Context', in J. Masciulli, M.A. Molchanov and W.A. Knight,(eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Leadership,* Ashgate,(2009) 4; J. Blondel, *Political Leadership. Towards a General Analysis,* London, Sage, (1987) 17-19.

[6] As to the differences between the many definitions, see G. Yukl and D.D. Van Fleet, 'Theory and Research on Leadership in Organizations', in M.D. Dunnette and L. M. Hough (eds), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology,* Palo Alto: Consulting psychologists (1990-1992) 148-149.

[7] P. G. Northouse, *Leadership. Theory and Practice*, Sage (2010) 3.

[8] R.A. Baker, "The Nature of Leadership", 54 *Human Relations* (2010) 491.

[9] Helms, above note 3, referring to J.M Burns, *Leadership,* Harper and Row (1978). For the various theories about transformational and charismatic leadership, see Yukl and D.D. Van Fleet above note 6, 173-179; see also J. S. Burns, 'Defining Leadership: Can We See the Forest for the Trees?', *Journal of Leadership Organizational Studies* (1996-3) 151-152.

adaptation with followers, group objectives and organisational means, and problematic situations and contexts".[10]

### 2.2 Leadership in International Organizations

The concept of political leadership has been studied extensively by political scientists and international relations scholars. There has been less discussion, however, about the role of political leadership in international organizations. In some sense this is understandable, since the executive heads of these organizations are often viewed as playing the role of manager or administrator, capable of effecting change in only a relatively marginal way. Unlike in the state context, where governmental leaders are more capable of implementing their agenda, the executive heads of international organizations do not have the same level of power or influence. Member States, not the executive heads, have power to drive change. Even if one points to a particular secretary general of an organization who brought about change, in the end he or she was still constrained by the will of the organization's Member States.

The role of leaders in international organizations has not been totally ignored in the international relations literature, however. Reinalda and Verbeek identify three major research agendas examining leadership in international organizations. The first stems from Inis Claude, who examined the role of executive head in terms of the "leader-versus-clerk" image. This dichotomy, later viewed as "secretary-versus-general", captures a main theme that runs through much of the literature, that is, the idea that the executive head of an organization must somehow balance the goals of showing political leadership and statesman-like skills, while at the same time being a manager, one that often has little independence of the organization he or she is called upon to serve. The second strand of research, that of Haas, is concerned with how the international organization was capable of developing a certain level of autonomy from the Member States, and the role of an executive head in this process. Haas argues that the leadership of the bureaucracy was part of the process of allowing executive heads to be more active politically, allowing international organizations to intrude further into the domestic realm of the Member States. This role of the executive head as 'opening up' political space and thereby contributing to the growing independence of international organizations is another theme in the literature. Cox looks at the role of the executive head in developing an international organization into a type of international actor. He argues that "[t]he quality of executive leadership may prove to be the most critical single determinant of the growth in scope and authority of international organization."[11] Cox added a layer to the previous studies, that is, a focus on the personal traits of the executive head: "The personal idiosyncratic dimension enters both in the form of the executive head's ability to maintain himself as top man in bureaucratic politics and in the clarity of his perception of the significance for international organization of the prevailing pattern of conflicts and alignments."[12] Michael Schechter added to this debate on executive heads, demonstrating their roles as "agenda setters… major change agents… [and] norm entrepreneurs."[13] According to Schechter, the early study on the heads of international organizations focused on the organizational, idiosyncratic (personal) and systemic (situational) constrains that had to be overcome. The third main research agenda came in the 1990s with the work of Young,[14] who sought to examine the role of individuals in international institutions, not just the role of states. Young sets out three parts to political

---

[10] J. Masciulli, M.A. Molchanov and W.A. Knight, above note 5, 4.

[11] R.W. Cox, 'The Executive Head: An Essay on Leadership in International Organization' *International Organization*, 23(2) (1969) 205.

[12] Cox, above note 11, 229–30.

[13] M. G. Schechter, 'Confronting the Challenges of Political Leadership in International Organizations', in L. Helms (ed.), *Comparative Political Leadership,* Palgrave (2012) 249.

[14] Young, above note 1, 285.

leadership in international institutions, that of structural, entrepreneurial, and intellectual leadership.

These studies tend to focus on two main issues. The first element looks at the role of the executive head as part of the wider move towards the autonomy of international organizations, and the role of the executive head in creating this political space and helping to establish the international organization as an independent international actor. The second element examines the leadership traits of the executive head and how this translates into successfully managing the organization. This research combines insights from political science, social psychology and management. Schechter discusses, for instance, some of the traits of a successful leader in the context of international organizations:

> "the most successful leaders need to be visionary, but not utopian; able and willing to take the opportunities afforded to them by their organizations' constitutive documents, oftentimes by creatively interpreting them; to understand the constraints of the bureaucratic and systemic contexts in which they are operating; to articulate an appropriate organizational ideology for those contexts; and be true to one's morals and ethics."[15]

Masciulli and Knight identify six necessary intellectual and character traits that global leaders will need in order to lead effectively. These are:

"1) contextual intelligence and practical judgement and decisiveness; 2) ethical vision; 3) emotional intelligence and resolute courage; 4) power-wielding political skills; 5) adept communication skills; and 6) competent organizational management skills."[16]

A project entitled Effective Leadership in International Organizations,[17] published by the World Economic Forum and Blavatnik School of Government, also sets out some of the best practices of international organizations that are necessary for supporting good leadership. These best practices cover issues such as the selection and election of leaders, setting and evaluating ethical standards, engaging with stakeholders, and effective evaluation.

We can identify a number of common defining traits of political leadership. The first relates to the personality and individual traits of a leader or leaders. The second relates to the traits of the followers with whom the leader interacts. The third element relates to the societal or organisational context in which this leader-follower interaction occurs. A fourth element is the agenda of collective problems or tasks which confront the leaders and followers in particular situations. Fifthly, there is discussion of the nature of the leaders' interpretive judgment[18], that is, his or her insights to define a certain situation and to use political entrepreneurship

[15] Schechter, above note 13, 249. The moral authority dimension has proven to be particularly important for the function of UN Secretary-General: see K.J. Kille, 'Secretaries-General of International Organizations: Leadership capacity and qualities', in B. Reinalda (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Organization,* Routledge (2013) 224.

[16] J. Masciulli and W.A. Knight, 'Conceptions of Global Leadership for Contextually Intelligent, Innovatively Adaptive Political Leaders' in J. Masciulli, M.A. Molchanov and W.A. Knight,(eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Leadership,* Ashgate,(2009) 90.

[17] Global Agenda Council on Institutional Governance Systems, *Effective Leadership in International Organizations*, April 2015 <http://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/news/international-organisations-need-more-effective-leaders> .

[18] Masciulli, M.A. Molchanov and W.A. Knight, above note 5, who still add (vi) the means – material and intangible – that the leaders use to attain their ends and/or their followers' goals and (vii) the effects or results of leadership. See also G. Peele, 'Leadership and Politics: A Case for a Closer Relationship?", 1 *Leadership* (2005) 196-198.

and creativity. This includes, as Schechter observed, a creative interpretation of the organisation's constitutive documents in order to have them accepted by the followers.[19]

A common theme in this literature is that leadership consists, not only of a leader or leaders, but followers. Heifetz is critical of the "leader-follower dyad", and has observed that

> "a following is simply a group of people who give authority to someone with the expectation that services be delivered […] [F]ollowers define one half of a formal or informal authority relationship: they are the principal party, authorizing or giving their power to an agent in the hope of obtaining certain services. Agents, who become authority figures, are constrained by the expectations of their followers for services. […] Thus, to be precise, followers are actually authorizers, or in more common parlance, constituents, citizens, or stakeholders."[20]

In the context of international organizations, who exactly are the followers? As Jones asks: "Who or what is the constituency of an international leader?. .. If the [UN]Secretary –General tries to lead, who will follow?"[21] A leader of an international organization has to deal with multiple constituencies. Schechter points out how, unlike in the domestic context where the constituencies are rather clear, the executive head has a number of complex constituencies.[22] These include non-governmental organizations and a range of non-state actors, civil society, corporations and social movements. It obviously includes the Member States themselves, but also the individuals attending meetings, the political leaders of their home governments, as well as interest groups inside the state who may be involved in policymaking. Add to this the secretariat itself, which may also be home to its own turf battles and political in-fighting. The executive head is a leader of an organization, and must project leadership towards the staff of the organization, both the upper levels of management in the organization as well as the regular staff, upon whose energy and motivation much of the effectiveness of the organization depends.

### 2.3 Leadership in Times of Crisis

Much of the discussion about leadership in international organizations has focused on the personal traits of leaders, and how leaders manage their organizations in different ways. Political leadership can be set in contrast with managerial leadership; it signals the ability to run an organization both successfully and smoothly. This accepts that the role of an executive head is about more than running a bureaucracy, but instead outlines a common vision for the organization, one that can be aspired to by a number of followers. This requires a mix of idealism and realism, hard-nosed diplomacy and lofty political rhetoric. Importantly, it requires the followers to have a sense of ownership of the process of change, rather than that it be top-down and closely directed. These leadership styles are brought into sharper focus in times of crisis. It is particularly during these periods that the world turns to international organizations, and the leaders of these bodies, to exercise political leadership: "when major trans-border upheavals and security or economic crises occur, international organizations are looked towards for guidance, and it is obvious that in such emergency cases international organizations need leadership in order to play their roles effectively."[23] It is during these times that the leader may need to exercise a certain level of autonomy from the membership of the organization. The leader may have to find space in which he or she

---

[19] Masciulli, M.A. Molchanov and W.A. Knight, above note 5, 5 and 8.

[20] R. Heifetz, 'Leadership', in R. A. Couto (ed.), *Political and Civic Leadership,* Sage (2010) 12, 20.

[21] D. Jones, 'International Leadership and Charisma' in S. Ask, A. Mark-Jungkvist (eds) *The Adventure of Peace: Dag Hammarsjöld and the Future of the UN*, Palgrave Macmillan (2006) 201.

[22] Schechter, above note 13, 285.

[23] B. Reinalda and B. Verbeek, 'Leadership of International Organizations' in R. A. W. Rhodes and P. 't Hart (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (2014) 596.

can undertake certain action and implement measures without the explicit consent of the membership.

During times of crisis and change, the executive head can also play an important role in acting as a neutral player, who represents the goals and ideals of the organization, rather than of a specific state or political bloc. During the often heated exchanges between Member States and other EU leaders during the European sovereign debt crisis, European Council president Herman Van Rompuy was described as a neutral broker, who was able to forge compromise. This could not have been done had he been politically invested in a certain solution or approach. This need for neutrality in an executive head can clash with the need for political leadership, as discussed above. In a system dominated by the interests of states, an executive head often possesses a certain level of impartiality that cannot be seen in other actors. Heavily investing in a particular approach can risk undermining this impartiality. The Secretary General, for example, is widely viewed, not only as an international civil servant, but as a representative of the wider 'international community'.

Another important driver of change is through the management and reform of the bureaucracy. An executive head may be painted as a rather ineffectual political figure, especially if compared to the leaders of national governments. Yet the role of the executive head as the leader of an often vast bureaucracy can also be viewed as a form of power, one that can be deployed by a savvy leader to bring about change. An executive head may, for example, utilize the organization's public relations apparatus to develop a profile in the international media. The executive head might initiate studies to be undertaken in a wide range of fields, including how to reform and better manage the organization. These studies and reports will often be the first small steps towards bringing about wider reforms in the organization. Importantly, as the leader of a large bureaucracy, an executive head can also work towards instilling confidence and belief in the organization's staff. This includes the role of the UN Secretary General as a policy and norm entrepreneur, one that is able to set out a forward looking vision.

Another way in which executive heads may drive change is through acting as a spokesperson for the international community, reflecting certain universal values and global interests. An international organization "claims to be the representative of the community's interests or the defender of the values of the international community."[24] This role can be particularly important during times of crisis, where the executive head, not beholden to national political interests, can represent the goals and ideals of the organization. This is particularly important in the context of the UN Secretary General, who may have a claim to a certain moral authority in international relations. This could also apply with regard to other leaders in the fields of human rights, security, the environment and so on. In the EU context, executive heads such as the President of the European Commission or High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (High Representative), can speak on behalf of European interests. Given this important profile and level of moral authority, the executive head can use his or her role as a bully pulpit from which certain key causes are elaborated upon in the international realm, especially at times when it would be difficult for national leaders to do so.

Since executive heads are selected or elected by the membership of an organization, the process can be a highly political one, and the best or most talented personalities will not always be those that are selected. Member States may seek to elect a leader that will not overshadow the leaders of the Member States, or a leader who will demonstrate what might be considered too much leadership or autonomy. In the context of the EU, for example, there was a certain expectation that the EU Member States might appoint as High Representative – a new post established by the Lisbon Treaty – a person with international experience and

---

[24] M.N. Barnett and M. Finnemore, 'The Politics, Power and Pathologies of International Organizations' *International Organization* 53(4) (1999) 23.

an international profile. As Keukeleire and Delreux observe, instead of appointing a renowned figure like Tony Blair or Carl Bildt, "they opted for rather low profile politicians with limited international experience, which was interpreted as an indication of the EU's limited international ambitions."[25] Since executive heads are often appointed or elected by the membership of an organization, a less dynamic leader may be chosen to counter a more highly effective one. An executive head who has successfully acted as a change agent and norm entrepreneur may find themselves soon at loggerheads with the membership, who may prefer a more compliant leader: "in most instances, the international organization leaders who are most highly regarded as change agents and norm entrepreneurs … almost invariably run counter to the preferences of one or more of their most important constituent groups and, as a consequence, they are usually replaced by less dynamic leaders, who nonetheless work hard to defend and often expand the tasks of the organizations that they lead." [26] While executive heads are capable of implementing change in an organization, their leadership style and personality may not be conducive to driving such an agenda.

## 3. Leadership at the United Nations

### 3.1 UN Secretary General

The position that has received by far the most attention in the literature has been that of the UN Secretary General (UNSG). As one of the key pillars in global governance architecture it is understandable that the UN, and particularly the role of the UN Secretary General, have been subject to studies focusing on the role of leaders in international organizations. As Kille points out, much of this literature has focused on the role in relation to the issue of international peace and security.[27] There are positive and negative elements of this focus on the UNSG. The positive side is that there is quite a good deal of public information about the UN Secretaries General, including biographical information about their personal traits, characteristics, backgrounds and individual leadership styles. As an important, visible and long-standing position in global governance, the role of the UNSG can be compared across time to see how different leaders have utilised their positions and ushered change in their organization and responded to internal and external challenges. The negative side is that the UNSG is a rather *sui generis* position in world politics, and the patterns and insights gleaned from studying this position are not necessarily generalizable to other leadership positions in other international organizations. While the example of the UNSG as a driver of change may not be applicable to all other international organizations, it remains a good example of how an executive head can drive change within an organization through effective leadership.

Kille examined the leadership of various UNSGs[28] and identified three leadership styles: those of manager, strategist, and visionary. Dag Hammerskjöld represents the "visionary", Kurt Waldheim the "manager" and Kofi Annan the "strategist". The "managerial" style of Waldheim is contrasted with that of the visionary; rather than offering strong and independent leadership, the manager is more of a servant to the member states. Kille notes how "managers are constraint respecters, while visionaries are constraint challengers, and strategists are constraint accommodaters."[29] The style of the strategist is a combination of the two. Compared with the visionary, the strategist is more responsive to contextual factors, invests in building relationships, and is generally more sensitive to the needs of other groups. These leadership styles – obviously only ideal types –, along with the external

[25] S. Keukeleire and T. Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd ed. (2014) 58.
[26] Schechter, above note 13.
[27] K.J. Kille, 'Secretaries-General of International Organizations: Leadership capacity and qualities', in B. Reinalda (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Organization,* Routledge (2013) 218-30.
[28] K.J. Kille, *From Manager to Visionary: The Secretary-General of the United Nations,* Palgrave Macmillan (2006).
[29] K.J. Kille, above note 28, 58.

constraints and context in which they find themselves, help to explain the role that each UNSG plays. Chesterman also discusses the political role of the UNSG, as opposed to the strictly administrative or managerial role.[30] Kille argues that a principal-agent approach, one that is applied to the study of international organizations generally, can be applied also to that of the UNSG. The Secretary General is seen as an agent, who has been given powers to carry out specific tasks, but who may also have independent roles and interests. In these studies, the leadership of the UNSG has been identified as a critical component of the success of the UN Secretariat's functioning: "Key to the success of the Secretariat is leadership… the competence, capability, and general character of any Secretary General have an impact on the effectiveness of the Secretariat."[31] As with studies on executive heads generally, academic literature on the UNSGs has focused on the extent to which they combine a dual function, i.e. how they combine both the administrative/ managerial role with that of political leadership ("Secretary" versus "General"). The next section discusses briefly the role of one UNSG in particular, Kofi Annan, and his role as a driver of change in the UN.

### 3.2 Kofi Annan (1997-2006)

Kofi Annan is an example of an executive head that was capable of effecting change within an organization through a mix of management and political leadership. When Annan took up the position of Secretary General in 1997, he did so at a time when there was optimism about his ability to implement a reform agenda. Having considerable experience as a UN staff member, and with an excellent knowledge of the workings of the UN system, Annan was seen to be capable of implementing reform, particularly in terms of organizational management. Annan also took up the position at a time when the role of the UN in world politics was indeterminate; after having dealt with the repercussions of the end of the Cold War, it was time for the UN to find its purpose in this post-Cold War era. Upon taking the helm, Annan set out an ambitious reform agenda. The reforms he set out were not simply part of a cost-cutting exercise, although the budgetary issues facing the UN at the time were certainly of major concern. Annan sought to use management reform and budgetary changes in a way that would also bring about change in the management structure, and ultimately bring about a new culture within the UN. At the time, the U.S. Permanent Representative Bill Richardson described the changes as "the kind of structural reform that will help the United Nations do more, better, and for less."[32] While Annan set out an agenda for reform early on, the initial changes were not as broad and sweeping, but rather those that could be implemented relatively quickly.

As discussed above, executive heads must deal with multiple constituencies. At the UN, one of the key challenges in driving reform was to satisfy and persuade these constituencies, upon whose support Annan relied in order implement these measures. One important constituency in this regard was the United States, particularly the US Congress, which was adamant that reform had to take place in order for it to address the funding gap caused by its failure to pay UN dues. Annan was aware that, well into the post-Cold War era, the United States' support would be critical in pushing forward with many of the slated reforms. Indeed, many of the reforms proposed had been called for by the US. For example, the so-called Helms-Biden 'Package' for UN Funding included reforms and budgetary changes that ultimately would find their way into Annan's proposals. Some of the proposals were made to address specifically the requests made by the US, such as the creation of the post of Deputy

---

[30] S. Chesterman (ed.), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press (2007).

[31] J. Jonah, 'Secretariat Independence and Reform' in T.G. Weiss and S. Daws (eds) *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, Oxford University Press (2007) 170.

[32] Bill Richardson, quoted in J. Laurenti, 'Kofi Annan's UN Reform Measures to Do More with Less Print:
A UNA-USA Assessment of the "Track One" Initiatives', United Nations Association of the USA < https://www.globalpolicy.org/un-reform/32288.html>.

Secretary General, and the establishment of a staff Code of Conduct. The United States, as well as other developed countries, was of the view that more needed to be done to reduce posts, streamline bureaucracy and reduce costs. Of course, the need to consider the US position brought with it criticism that the Secretary General too closely followed a US-led agenda, one that focused on security and neo-liberal policies.[33] Another major constituency was the developing states. These states would decide whether many of the reforms, which required consent through the UN General Assembly, would be brought forward. The demands of developing countries included a renewed focus on issues such as development cooperation and poverty alleviation, and often clashed with the goals of the United States. Annan's reforms therefore had to include enough cost-cutting and streamlining to satisfy the United States while being attuned to the needs of developing countries, whose backing was needed to implement much of the agenda.

The other important constituency was the Secretariat itself and the UN staff. This includes both the senior levels of management in the UN system, but also the many staff members working in the organization throughout the world. Annan saw that changes in the bureaucracy could lead to much more significant changes throughout the rest of the system. Importantly, as Cox points out, the two constituencies are interrelated: "The executive head's relationship with the bureaucracy determines his capability for action and initiative. His relationship with the national constituents determines the political support he will have for his action and thus the limits to which it can go."[34]

### 3.3 UN Reform Agenda

Upon taking office, Annan initiated a study that would review the effectiveness of the UN machinery, with a view to implementing a reform agenda. The first document containing a blueprint for reform was titled 'Management and Organisational Measures',[35] submitted to the Member States in March 1997. In this document Annan set out two tracks for reform. The first related to internal management issues, which could be implemented by the Secretary General immediately. The second track contained more long-term changes, including those that could be implemented by the Secretary General but would need to be agreed upon by the Member States. The UNSG underlined the argument that reform was never an end in itself, and that it was always undertaken in order to help the UN achieve its broader goals. One of the pressing challenges facing the UN at the time concerned budgetary issues. Management reforms were aimed, in part, to help address this issue. This included a significant reduction in the number of posts. The aim also existed to shift resources from administration to economic and social programmes.

More specific proposals were set out in the report titled 'Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform' in July 1997. [36] This package was viewed as "the most extensive and far-reaching reforms in the 52-year history of the organization."[37] The Report set out the reform programme undertaken by the Secretary General in the first six months, and included reforms that had already been implemented, as well as those that would take more time, or required the support of the Member States. These reforms were aimed at changing the

---

[33] "The results brought some modern management into a cumbersome bureaucracy, but they also made the UN more conservative and less democratic, by shaping it to a neoliberal, security-driven US agenda." 'Secretary General Kofi Annan's Reform Agenda - 1997 to 2006' <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/226/32283.html>

[34] R.W. Cox, 'The Executive Head: An Essay on Leadership in International Organization' *International Organization*, 23(2) (1969).

[35] Management and Organisational Measures, March 1997.

[36] *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform,* Report of the UN Secretary General, 14 July 1997, A 51/950.

[37] M. Müller, *Reforming the United Nations: The Quiet Revolution*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers (2001) 108.

leadership and management of the UN, to add new confidence in the organizations' member states, but also to "revitalize the spirit and commitment of its staff."[38] The objective of the report was to identify ways that the organization could "more effectively and efficiently meet the challenges that lie ahead as we enter a new century, and a new millennium."[39]

The Report pointed towards some of the problems that were holding the UN back from achieving its objectives. Although the report highlighted significant achievements of the UN, it argued that the organization had become "fragmented, duplicative and rigid, in some areas ineffective and others superfluous".[40] It pointed to issues such as the Cold War and bloc politics as one of the factors that prevented the UN from implementing its role under the Charter, particularly in the field of international peace and security. After the end of the Cold War, the UN was called upon to increase its activity in these fields, especially in the field of peacekeeping, as the UN became the international community's "emergency service". Once this period of increased activity had begun to dissipate, the Report argued, it was time to reassess how it could meet its goals more effectively. The Report highlighted that this could only be done through reform at the upper level of the organization's management: [t]he fundamental challenge is to fashion a leadership and management structure that will result in a better focused, more coherent, more responsive and more cost-effective United Nations."[41] Another strong theme was the need to achieve unity of purpose for the organization, to ensure more coherence and consistency across the various departments, funds and programmes.

The Report noted that the UN General Assembly (UNGA) is the body that embodies the "universal and democratic" character of the UN. Many of the reforms were aimed at making the UNGA's work more effective and able to respond to threats and challenges. In particular, it focused on improving the relationship between the UNGA and the Secretariat, which had lacked cohesiveness. One of the main proposals was to streamline the agenda of the UNGA and to focus legislative debates according to key themes. The streamlined agenda of the UNGA was focused on ensuring that the issues it dealt with remained those that are most important and pressing, and that agenda items that are no longer of high priority can be removed. Another important proposal was that initiatives and commitments of funds specify time limits. These "sunset provisions" could then be renewed through the explicit approval of the Assembly.  This has the benefit of ensuring that certain initiatives would not continue for decades with no end in sight. A problem of putting initiatives on this short-term basis, however, is that they require re-authorisation by the UNGA, which means debates may resurface, especially on politically sensitive issues. A further reform proposal sought to realign the division of responsibilities between the Secretariat and the UNGA.

Not all of the reform proposals were met with immediate support, however, and it was the task of the Secretary General to convince major groups of the adequacy of his proposals. The Secretary General met with major groups following the July 1997 General Assembly in order to explain this reform agenda.[42] This included the Group of 77 (G77), the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries (NAM) as well as the EU. These different groups had different interests. The G77 sought to strengthen the UN in the field of development, and saw the UNGA as leader in this role. It sought to restore core economic issues to the UN and to restore the role of the UNGA in the formation and implantation of macro-economic policy. In pursuing these reforms, Annan aimed to satisfy the multiple constituencies discussed above. The demands of developing countries included a renewed focus on issues such as

---

[38] *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*, 2.
[39] *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*, 2.
[40] *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*, 11.
[41] *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*, 12.
[42] M. Müller, *Reforming the United Nations: The Quiet Revolution*, Martinus Nijhoff  Publishers (2001) 121.

development cooperation and poverty alleviation; developing states were particularly wary of moves that it saw as further enhancing the power of Western states in the UN. The proposals to 'open' the UN to greater cooperation with civil society and business, for instance, were viewed as allowing the influence of business within the organization. Another reform to address the concern of developed countries included the merging of departments in the economic and social area.

Because of the size and complexity of the reform proposals, Member States needed time to consider them in more detail. They were discussed, for instance, in the UNGA Committees, as well as in informal discussions. Although the reform proposals were presented as a package deal, states sought to discuss each of the reforms separately. Many of the changes that had been implemented by the UNSG under the UNSG's own authority could be accepted. For certain other reforms, developing states had particular issues and reservations. For example, the call to restore the "balance" between the tasks of the Secretariat and the UNGA was viewed as creating an artificial division of labour. While there was support for creating the position of Deputy Secretary General, there was opposition to the idea of this post being focused on the transition from peacekeeping to post-conflict peacebuilding. Rather, it was argued that the focus of the position should be on development issues.

The UNGA gave its approval to the first part of the reforms in November 1997, following a period of review and negotiations on the reforms. UNGA Resolution 52/12 A on 'Renewing the United Nations: a Programme for Reform' addressed the reform proposals that could be implemented by the UNSG without the need for Member State authorisation. Many of the reforms aimed to restructure the Secretariat in order to reduce administrative costs. The second part of the reforms was approved in December 1997 through UNGA resolution 52/12 B. While this implemented the reforms proposed by the UNSG, the resolution was still a step in the reform process. Some proposals, such as the use of sunset provisions, were to be deferred until the UNGA's next session.

One of Annan's most comprehensive set of reforms was set out in the March 2005 report 'In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All'.[43] These reforms were aimed at larger issues facing the UN, such as terrorism, financing and development, Security Council reform, as well as the replacement of the Human Rights Commission. Although Annan urged that the proposal be treated as a package, Member States, particularly the United States, sought to provide revisions to the proposal. The package was soon watered down considerably, and by the time of the Millennium+5 Summit in September 2005, the text no longer contained strong calls for reform. The Report included a long list of proposals, but the final part of the report, titled 'Strengthening the United Nations', specifically addressed ways that would allow the UN to better meet the challenges set out in the Report. The Report notes that since 1997, many of the reforms undertaken to reform the structure and culture of the UN had been successful. In addition to the more streamlined structure, the Report notes other achievements since 1997, such as more effective and better coordinated programmes, working partnerships with civil society, the private sector and a range of non-state actors, as well as better designed UN peacekeeping missions. The Report highlighted that significant changes were still to be made, particularly in professionalising the Secretariat as well as ensuring greater coherence among various UN representatives. The Report emphasized that such change could not be reduced to reform at only the upper layer of management: "reform, if it is to be effective, cannot be confined to the executive branch. It is time to breathe new life also into the intergovernmental organs of the United Nations."[44] The Report called for the UNGA to be "revitalised" so that it avoided working on overlapping issues, but addressed the major challenges of the day, in a rapid

---

[43] In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all.
[44] In Larger Freedom, para. 157.

and timely manner. Regarding the UN Security Council, the Report again emphasized the need for reform, including the changes proposed in the report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. This included the call to broaden the membership of the UNSC, and to increase the democratic nature of the body. The Report came not long after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Indeed one of the challenges facing the UNSG at this time was how to respond to the unilateral use of force by the United States in that particular case, in which multilateral institutions had been bypassed and suffered damage to their reputation. The Report importantly emphasized the need for multilateral institutions in addressing security threats, particularly through the UN. Proposals that would have put more power in the hands of the UNSG were often resisted, however. Much of this resistance came from the developing countries, which saw any move of power away from the UNGA as not serving their interests. Weiss argues, however, that increased discretionary authority would be in the interests of developing states, since many UN projects are located among these populations and governments.[45]

Another management reform proposed by Annan was contained in the 2006 report 'Investing in the United Nations'.[46] The report noted the fundamental differences between the UN at the time and when it was first established, but also highlighted that much of that change had occurred in the previous decade, most notably in the expansion of peacekeeping and other missions. The report argued that "[s]uch a radically expanded range of activities calls for a radical overhaul of the United Nations Secretariat — its rules, structure, systems and culture."[47] Recalling previous efforts at reform, the report noted that these tended to address the symptoms of the weakness of the Secretariat, rather than address its cause. The theme of the report was that previous reforms were small and progressive, but in order to address the new challenges faced by the UN, much more invasive changes were needed. The report highlighted 23 specific proposals in the areas of investing in people, leadership, information and communication technology, new ways of delivering services, budget and finance, governance and "investing in change". The report, for instance, sought to increase staff mobility across different areas.

The report was met with resistance, most notably from UN staff. Annan received a vote of no confidence from the UN Staff union.[48] One of the more controversial proposals was to explore outsourcing a number of tasks. The report was more positively received from Western states, including the EU and the US. The American Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton responded to the report, stating that "We think the secretary general's call for radical overhaul of the secretariat is the right objective."[49] One of the criticisms of the reports agenda was that it had been too highly influenced by the Bush Administration. Developing countries, however, were not in support of many of the proposals. In particular, they sought to protect the prerogative of the General Assembly and the member states in setting the direction of the organization. On 8 May 2006 the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/260[50] in which it rejected most of the proposals. Attempts to address some of the concerns of the developing states, including abandoning measures that would move powers from the General Assembly to the Secretary-General, failed to satisfy major groups in the UNGA, such as the Group of 77 .

---

[45] T. G. Weiss, *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It*, Polity, (2008) 196.
[46] *Investing in the United Nations: for a stronger Organization worldwide*, Report of the Secretary-General, A/60/692, 7 March 2006.
[47] *Investing in the United Nations,* above note 46, summary.
[48] 'U.N. union hands Annan a 'no-confidence' vote', *NBC News*, 3 October 2006.
<http://www.nbcnews.com/id/11757909/ns/world_news-americas/t/un-union-hands-annan-no-confidence-vote/>.
[49] 'Annan Offers His Blueprint to Make the U.N. More Efficient' *The New York Times*, 8 March 2008.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/08/international/africa/08nations.html?_r=0>.
[50] UNGA Res 60/260, *Investing in the United Nations: for a stronger Organization worldwide*, 8 May 2006.

It should also be noted that 'Investing in the United Nations' came at the end of Annan's tenure and at a time when Annan was facing severe personal criticism about his management. The mismanagement and corruption in the UN's "oil-for-food" programme, as highlighted in the Volcker Report, had hit Annan's reputation. The report criticised Annan for inadequately investigating the affair, and 'Investing in the United Nations' was in part a response to this report, which had pointed to poor management in the organization. Some of the recommendations of the Volcker report, such as a establishing a new post of chief operating office, were not included in Annan's reforms. Annan had also faced criticism over his handling of other scandals, for example, for accepting a report clearing Dileep Nair, UN Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services, of charges of political corruption and sexual harassment. Further reform would have to be taken up by Annan's successor, Ban Ki- moon.

The changes discussed above mostly concerned specific reforms to the structure and management of the UN. One change that made a lasting difference was the move towards a cabinet system, which brought together senior officials of the secretariat, agencies, funds and programmes.[51] But discussion on Annan's role during this period is concerned not only with these types of changes, but also with the ability to infuse the UN with a sense of direction, something that was sorely needed in the years following the end of the Cold War. For instance, Annan saw that human rights and development should play an important role in the development of policies and sought to "mainstream" these goals throughout the UN system. Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, Annan noted that "I have sought to place human beings at the centre of everything we do – from conflict prevention to development to human rights. Securing real and lasting improvement in the lives of individual men and women is the measure of all we do at the United Nations."[52] Today this kind of language seems self-evident. But the role of the UNSG in pushing the importance of these values at a time when the UN was finding its way should not be underestimated. One of the roles of the UNSG, and leaders of international organizations generally, is to identify and prioritise certain aims and objectives. These goals, often included in the mission statement or founding document of an organization, must then be given effect through various policies. It is this mainstreaming of human rights, development and democracy in UN policies that can be viewed as one of the main legacies of Annan.

When discussing the role of executive heads, Schechter suggests that "it might not be too much to say [Annan] was a global change agent."[53] Annan was highly sensitive and adaptive to the political processes of the membership, including the important role of the US political system. Although antagonism did exist, especially following the Iraq war, part of Annan's success stems from this ability to identify and address the multiple constituencies. However, the period marked by the end of the Cold War gave way to a new era. Annan had a vision for this post-Cold War UN, one that could serve universal values, human rights and development. In the field of security, for instance, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine that was developed during this period had universal values as part of its core. While much of the real change came about through reforms to the management and structure of the organization, Annan emphasized that this was never an end in itself, but was driven by the need to make the organization work more effectively.

---

[51] T. G. Weiss, *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It*, Polity,(2008).
[52] Nobel Lecture by Kofi Annan, Oslo, December 10, 2001. <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2001/annan-lecture.html>
[53] Schechter, above note 13, 265.

## 4. Conclusion: Individual Leadership as a Driver of Change

Change and reform of global institutions has stalled, particularly without strong leadership shown my Member States. While meaningful reform can only take place through changes initiated by the Member States of these organizations themselves, this paper has argued how individual leadership shown by the executive head of an organization can also be a driver of change. Research on the role of leaders of international organizations tends to look at change in terms of the growing autonomy and actorness of the organization. Cox concludes in this regard that "the executive head plays a key role in converting an international organization conceived as a framework for multilateral diplomacy into one which is an autonomous actor in the international system"[54] Indeed, this role of the executive head in creating a separate identity of the organization is now widely accepted. The role of the executive head in driving change and reform, particularly when faced with resistance from the Member States, is a topic that requires greater discussion.

All political leaders must deal with various constituencies. One of the issues faced by leaders is how to address these different actors. Are they to be viewed as obstacles to be overcome, as parties that need to be convinced and persuaded, or as a necessary part of the system, to which reform must be adjusted? Annan was acutely aware of the constraints of his position. These stemmed from the nature of his position, from the bureaucracy of the organization, and from the different interests of the Member States and other important constituencies. Annan was uniquely suited to dealing with these various constituencies and was able to bring about change in the organization despite obstacles posed by these various parties. Viewing constraints as something that needs to be accommodated and managed, rather than challenged and confronted, can have certain downsides, however. It can lead to a lack of vision, meaning that much of the status quo is not seriously challenged. Much more meaningful reform, such as the reform of the UN Security Council, could not be achieved during Annan's tenure.

The traditional dichotomy between "manager" and "leader" that is used in the literature might be useful when discussing executive heads, in order to identify different leadership styles and characteristics. In reality, the two parts of the position are closely interwoven, and successful executive heads have been able to combine their role of executive and political leader. In the example of Kofi Annan, change in the organization was first implemented through relatively minor changes regarding staffing and funding, which paved the way for more meaningful and thorough changes to take place later. Much of the reform agenda, particularly the reform of the UN Security Council, remains unimplemented. Yet the change that took place during this period should not be seen as limited only to funding and structural change, but should also take into account the change in culture of the organization, the reinvigoration of the staff and management, and the creation of a strategic vision for the organization. Such leadership in international organizations seems to be sorely missing today. While we continue to wait for the leaders of the Member States to initiate steps that would reform global governance, the executive heads can play a significant role in driving reform. This requires political and diplomatic skill, the ability to identify and overcome obstacles, and to serve and persuade multiple constituencies.

---

[54] Cox, above note 11, 229.

The **Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies** is an interdisciplinary research centre of the Humanities and Social Sciences recognized as a Centre of Excellence at the KU Leuven. It hosts researchers from law, economics, political science, history, philosophy and area studies. The Centre initiates and conducts interdisciplinary research on topics related to globalization, governance processes and multilateralism, with a particular focus on the following areas: (i) the European Union and global governance; (ii) human rights, democracy and rule of law; (iii) trade and sustainable development; (iv) peace and security; (v) global commons and outer space; (vi) federalism and multi-level governance; (vii) non-state actors and emerging powers. It hosts the InBev Baillet-Latour Chair EU-China and the Leuven India Focus.

In addition to its fundamental research activities the Centre carries out independent applied research and offers innovative policy advice and solutions to policy-makers.

In full recognition of the complex issues involved, the Centre approaches global governance from a multi-level and multi-actor perspective. The multi-level governance perspective takes the interactions between the various levels of governance (international, European, national, subnational, local) into account, with a particular emphasis on the multifaceted interactions between the United Nations System, the World Trade Organization, the European Union and other regional organizations/actors in global multilateral governance. The multi-actors perspective pertains to the roles and interactions of various actors at different governance levels, which includes public authorities, formal and informal international institutions, business enterprises and non-governmental organizations.

For more information, please visit the website www.globalgovernancestudies.eu

Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies
Huis De Dorlodot, Deberiotstraat 34, 3000 Leuven, Belgium
Tel. +32 16 32 87 25
Fax +32 16 37 35 47
info@ggs.kuleuven.be