

VISIONARY CONVERSATION
PROFESSOR THOMAS G. WEISS - Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for
International Studies, CUNY Graduate Center,
and author of *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It*
8 September 2010



The conversation facilitator, Ms. Alisa Clarke, introduced the organization Global Vision Institute (GVI), and Mr. Weiss as the GVI Visionary for the day's event.

With respect to outlining a UN system fully reflective of the UN's core values, Mr. Weiss noted that values were clearly one sense in which it could be viewed but another could be a multilateral system actually capable of implementing the UN Charter's values. While idealists may get disappointed in not seeing these great aspirations fully realized, there have been small steps such as recently with the responsibility to protect, and this was better than no progress, even if it meant some degree of apparent double standards in the way the system has functioned.

In terms of whether global government would be closer to reflecting the UN values, Mr. Weiss pointed out that there was a clear difference between global governance (the current state of the art term) and global government. Importantly, whereas they both existed at the national level, at the international level there were no mechanisms to ensure compliance—that is, no government, and there is need for an overarching central authority to give strength to the new sets of relations of interdependence and create a viable international system.

Regarding support for such an evolution, Mr. Weiss expressed the opinion that the very trans-boundary nature of current problems should serve as an impetus although there was little evidence to date of such a realization among the world's major powers. It seemed that deeper change only happens after great conflagration, such as after World War I and II, when creative thinking as well as experiments with international institutions were precipitated. Drawing reference to the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, he said that the response to that meltdown had been superficial—the root causes for the problem were not addressed. He also noted that the G-20 activity in this area could be seen as a significant new experiment to deal with the crisis, but without a more fundamental re-evaluation of the financial architecture business-as-usual resumed. It may be that climate change might induce a more significant shift in thinking and institutional responses.

On the question of options for creating a more values-driven culture in the international system, there were several key considerations, as outlined in his book:

1. Moving beyond national sovereignty as the core element of global interaction, and this would be the “hardest nut to crack.”
2. Breaking down thinking in terms of stereotypical North-South divide.
3. Ensuring that the UN system functions more as a coherent unit than as disparate fiefdoms. On this issue, he noted that the creation of UNWOMEN as the umbrella UN body to address women’s and gender concerns was merely a continuation of past “functionalist” practices of addressing issues separately and creating a separate lobby for funds and influence. What was needed was a more centralized set of agencies, with grouping under the core areas of UN work such as humanitarian functions, environmental functions, etc. Member states (especially donors) claimed they were seeking efficiency and more impact, but they tolerated this kind of dispersed delivery.
4. Having staff in the UN used differently. This would include moving away from strict national quotas in recruitment criteria in favour of integrity and competence (as specified in the Charter) with regional quotas being applied, reducing the number of permanent contracts (since staff lose touch with the areas of specialization and reality), regular postings to the field (ensuring rotation), and the continual inflow of younger staff

Mr. Weiss said that his own role, following ten years in the UN Secretariat, has been to look at UN behavior and misbehavior objectively, analyzing and sharing the facts and information. He has not lost hope that this can make a difference.

The follow-up discussion covered the following:



With respect to a vision for the international system,

one representative from the World Federalist Movement (WFM) noted that body’s work towards a more democratic system of global governance. It was more driven by principles than structure, including the principles of subsidiarity (with problems being addressed at the most local level first) and democracy, promoting weighted voting and other configurations.

Regarding the reality to be addressed, a senior UN staff participant lamented the lack of a legitimate global constituency represented at the UN, since it seemed that representatives at the UN were derived from an elite divorced from the reality of their own constituencies; as such, true democratic governance at the global level was weak. He also expressed concern that the conversation between the UN Member States and the international community was less than productive since it was based on pre-determined talking points and did not allow for organic exchange and getting to the heart of addressing common issues. Moreover, creative solutions which disturbed the status quo of power relations e.g. land reform or resource transfer, were not actively entertained in international community deliberations or even advocated by international human rights organizations, and may be dismissed as “leftist” approaches.



In terms of options for the way forward, the WFM representative saw progress in the growth of regional governance mechanisms such as the European Union, and expressed the view that global environmental governance could be one possible way forward. Additionally, the UN was still much needed and could gain greater legitimacy and support through more dynamic approaches such as more directly people-controlled funding, and promoting global citizenship, especially in countries where anti-UN sentiment was strong.

On the G-20, from his perspective a greater role for the G-20, including a possible secretariat, would be dysfunctional and unrepresentative, serving a purpose more as an incubator for new governance mechanisms. Mr. Weiss, however, saw merit in the fact that the grouping represented a significant proportion of the global population (80 %) and global economy (90%); hence, if a decision was made about attacking climate change and other environmental crises, the potential for coming up with effective solutions to pressing global problems conceivably would be better than in a universal gathering.

It was also felt that the UN Secretary-General could take up a stronger role as a moral authority on questions such as the composition of the Human Rights Council.

Participants also drew attention to the legitimacy of involving parliamentarians more in the UN, and in particular viewed the Inter-Parliamentary Union as more representative of their constituencies, and thus as a possible model in this regard.

The point was made by several civil society representatives that there was value in harnessing global public opinion, including creating a greater interface between the broader public and the UN. One example of this was the use of the internet to submit to the Security Council the concerns of citizens in South Korea and elsewhere about the need for independent investigations into the sinking of a ship.



On how as individuals we can in our own roles make a more values-oriented international system a living reality, one participant reiterated that the quality of interaction in the international community was critical, and there was need for greater synergy. As such, processes needed to be different, and more participatory, such as the current process, and with more senior levels of commitment for facilitating exchange in new ways. Another participant promoted the idea that everyone could work within their capacity and with greater responsibility to ensure change and moral leadership.

The facilitator encouraged all participants to have as a take-away question how each of them in their own sphere of influence could contribute to these and other processes, towards more meaningful values orientation in the international community.

GVI wishes to thank Mr. Weiss and all representatives and participants for their contribution to a spirited and stimulating session.