



Policy Brief

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Overview

The term accountability has come to be used increasingly these days at the United Nations as a key word in the Secretary-General reports, General Assembly resolutions, etc. However, accountability is by nature a “fuzzy” word and views are divergent on the concept, depending upon academic discipline. It appears to be a political reality within the United Nations that there may exist a certain mistrust between Member States over perceptions of accountability, the lack thereof, and ensuing policy implications and consequences.

With that background in mind, this policy brief first discusses conceptual matters, including the definition of accountability, the question of who bears accountability for what and to whom, and managerial accountability as well as political accountability in the context of the United Nations. This is followed by a presentation of a normative framework for strengthening UN accountability, with the hope that it influences the endeavours of practitioners and academics, alike, in respect to making the United Nations more accountable in the role of effective and efficient global governance.

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Accountability and the United Nations System

IN THE FACE OF NUMEROUS FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES existing in the world today, effective global governance has come to the forefront of the international agenda. Many hope and expect that the United Nations organizations can play a key role in helping international society to overcome or better manage these difficulties. Actually, UN Member States continue to assign the organization an ever longer list of critically important tasks. As a vital precondition to resolving or ameliorating the global problems and challenges of the twenty-first century, however, the many entities that find a place under the UN umbrella must themselves improve their efficiency and effectiveness. In this context, and in the context of UN reform in general, a growing demand has been placed, in recent years, on enhancing the accountability of the UN organizations.

The UN General Assembly, for example, in a recent resolution emphasized the importance of strengthened accountability in the organization and of ensuring greater accountability of the Secretary-General to the Member States, *inter alia*, for the effective and efficient implementation of legislative mandates and the best use of human and financial resources. Further, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in the conclusion of his annual report presented to the 61st General Assembly session (September 2006–August 2007), reiterated the importance of accountability by stating that the organization can become stronger and more effective only if it is better managed and more clearly accountable.

Concept of Accountability

Despite frequent use of the term, *accountability* is a sufficiently elusive concept on which views and opinions diverge. In part, the multiple approaches are rooted in the differing perspectives found in various academic disciplines, such as those of philosophy, public administration, political science, international relations and public international law. As Edward Luck has observed, “[T]here is no generally accepted understanding of what accountability entails or how it could best be measured, assessed or instilled in the Organization. Who should be accountable to whom for what?” In order to arrive at useful recommendations for reform, it is thus important to illuminate the contours of accountability, as it relates to the United

Nations, with a view to arriving at both common ground and cardinal issues for the analysis of accountability.

At the most basic level, it is enunciated that a few factors, including in particular ‘authorization’, constitute the foundation for accountability; namely, when an individual, a group or an organization is authorized and entrusted with some financial, human

Within this complex political landscape of the UN system, discussions on the question of accountability are inevitably more complicated compared with more familiar cases such as large corporations or government agencies. For instance, the standards to be used in bringing the distinct parts of the UN system to account are not as well-defined as one might hope, particularly

At this point, accountability means quite different things to different people

or other resources, that individual, group or organization ought subsequently to give an account of the use (or non-use) of the resources. Here, existence of a superior authority is presupposed, even if implicitly, as one that provides resources as well as guidance and direction.

In the UN context, the subject of accountability is immediately complicated. Not only is the UN system fragmented and immense in its size and scope of activities, but it contains a number of distinct power centers, including the Member States or the legislative organs (Security Council, General Assembly), and the specialized agencies. Then, of fundamental importance for grasping properly the concept of accountability in the UN context is to recall that government representatives, in adopting the UN Charter, are assumed to have acknowledged, even if tacitly, an authority of ‘the Peoples of the United Nations’. It is noted here that Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, in his address on taking the oath of office, declared, “Ultimately, we are all—Secretariat and Member States alike—accountable to ‘we the peoples.’” (SG/2119, GA/10558, 14 December 2006).

with respect to the more politicized dimensions of the organization. Trying to assess on what and how the UN acts, or fails to act, in response to situations of violence, human rights abuse or the like can be quite vexing, especially when circumstances on the ground change rapidly, as when political opportunities emerge for fleeting periods and then vanish. Moreover, the United Nations is frequently simply one of a significant number of actors, and complete resolution of the many problems laid before different parts of the organization may well be very difficult to say the least.

Those who refer to an accountability ‘gap’ or ‘deficit’ at the United Nations argue that, within this complex system, accountability ‘holdees’ have often failed to carefully assess what has occurred, and even less frequently have they communicated a comprehensible critique to accountability ‘holders’.¹ To move towards closing or narrowing such an accountability ‘gap’, or enhancing accountability as a key element for effective UN reform, it may be useful to divide the subject into two broad clusters of ideas: managerial accountability and political accountability. As defined below, they

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seem to apply to different facets of the operations of the organization and they speak to different challenges that the organization faces. Most important,

has been cited as the most notorious example of problematic managerial accountability in the United Nations in recent years, persistent questions

Legislative organs (Member States) and secretariats have a shared responsibility in strengthening both political and managerial accountability of the UN organizations

however, both managerial and political accountability must be enhanced in a concerted manner if the United Nations is to function efficiently and effectively to confront the manifold challenges of the twenty-first century.

Managerial Accountability and Political Accountability

The term *managerial accountability* may be familiar to students of business or public administration, and could be described, in the very simplest of terms, as accountability relating to managerial functions within public or private sector entities or organizations. More specifically, managerial accountability concerns holding those with delegated authority (i.e., secretariats, including executive heads such as the Secretary-General) accountable for the agreed actions taken in accordance with respective responsibilities, as well as for the performance and the manner in which the related programme was managed. One would ask how competently and efficiently was the project managed? In the context of the UN organizations, managerial accountability, with a proper delegation of authority within the frame of given mandates or policy directives, is applicable at all levels, from the executive heads such as the Secretary-General down to lower level managers/staff members. While the oil-for-food programme scandal

have been raised as well with respect to managerial problems within various peacekeeping missions and within an array of other UN programmes, agencies and departments. In each of these cases, the intra-organizational coordination and responsibility to manage properly administrative matters were very much at issue, but the processes of sound managerial accountability left a good deal to be desired.

Political accountability, by way of contrast, focuses upon the need to account for an organizational behavior to the constituencies and stakeholders impacted upon by its decisions, including both what it has chosen to do and not to do, all in light of relevant constitutions, mandates, policy directives, etc. In the UN context, political accountability could be defined in general as organizational accountability, namely as accountability of both legislative organs (Member States) and secretariats to any stakeholders, that is, to any groups, and ultimately to the 'Peoples of the United Nations', affected by the UN decisions, actions or inactions, "by what it chooses to do or not to do as well as by how well it does it" (Edward Luck). This would suggest that political accountability of the organization could be enhanced and made more meaningful should relevant stakeholders be involved, directly or indirectly, to the extent possible, particularly in UN decision-making

At a point when the UN is coming to play an increasingly ubiquitous and even indispensable role in addressing critical public policy challenges, its persistent accountability deficits threaten to undermine the prospects for sustained and effective international cooperation when it is most needed [and] accountability—or more often the lack of it—has become a pervasive and central challenge to UN reformers.

The distinction between what is managerial and what is political is rarely clean cut. The UN needs to do far better at both. It cannot move with assurance down either path, moreover, without substantial progress on the other. This will require a degree of joint effort and mutual confidence between the Member States and the secretariat.

Edward C. Luck, Professor of Practice in International and Public Affairs and Director of the Center on International Organization of the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University

processes. Namely, the guiding principle here will be that those affected in major ways by a particular decision, programme or action ought to have an important role to play in devising, or in revising, the policies and mandates of the organizations within the UN system. The fact that, to date, they are not usually involved in such a process points to a major shortcoming in the political accountability of the United Nations.

implementation of the authorized or mandated programmes. Nevertheless, legislative organs are also expected to perform governance or legislative oversight, meaning that the Member States oversee the secretariats in their management or implementation of the mandated programmes, assisted, usually, by oversight mechanisms.

What one could conclude from this is that legislative organs and secretariats are supposed to share responsibility

Accountability processes will have to be tailored to the wide variety of circumstances found within the UN

While political accountability and managerial accountability are functionally distinct, both of the key actors in the UN context, that is the legislative organs (Member States) and the secretariats, are involved, or should be involved, in both functions of accountability, sometimes in the intricate manner indicated below:

*With respect to the functions under political accountability, the legislative organs are mainly accountable for the mandates established as well as the results achieved. However, more often than not, a mandate is established, in practice, on the basis of, or by selecting, a certain policy from a basket of policy options which, *de facto*, the secretariats prepare or present, with or without delegated authority. In this connection, it is to be noted that the policies of the UN organizations are, in principle, to be formulated by the legislative organs, but, in practice, this may be happening less frequently.²*

With respect to the functions under managerial accountability, the secretariats themselves are mainly accountable for various managerial functions, including management concerning the

in strengthening the accountability of the UN organizations. This further underscores that there exists a legitimate need to treat political accountability and managerial accountability in a comprehensive manner in designing effective and comprehensive reforms on UN accountability.

A Normative Framework for Strengthening Accountability

For any entity that is assigned delegated authority to be seen as properly accountable, a [strategic] plan together with measurable goals and objectives must be defined, necessary actions by whom and at what cost (resources) to achieve goals must be identified, the work must be performed and its progress must be monitored, actual performance results must be communicated to the pertinent entities, and the assessment of results (evaluation findings) must be used to provide feedback for improving eventually future actions and performance. The premise is that if failings in whatever aspects, that is, if misconceived strategies, faulty

programme implementation, etc., are scrutinized, with the stakeholders informed, in the long term the

- indication of the key external factors that could affect the achievement of the goals

A normative general framework covering both managerial and political accountability can facilitate UN accountability

organization will be stronger for it. At the least, when an organization is effectively brought to account, one might expect to see a resolve not to repeat past errors.

While these fundamental principles should be applied to the organizations in the UN system, given the complexity of the UN system, no one-size-fits-all strategy exists that could be put into effect quickly and easily and that would markedly enhance the accountability of all the UN organizations. Accountability processes will have to be tailored to the wide variety of circumstances found within each organization.

With those qualifications in mind, however, to facilitate the strengthening of UN accountability as a whole, it would be useful to establish a normative general framework covering both managerial accountability and political accountability. Such a framework might encompass elements such as the following:

1. Formulation, by each organization, of a strategic plan, which would include, *inter alia*, each of the following:
 - clear articulation of quantitative and qualitative goals and objectives
 - policy statement of how these goals and objectives are expected to be achieved
 - anticipated accomplishments, including clear and logical indicators that can be used to measure achievement

2. Implementation of the programme, which would include performance management and measurements based on a performance-management system
3. Timely communication or reporting, coupled with enhanced transparency, to the states and non-state actors of the results, outcomes or performance, which should be based on an evaluation of the programme effectiveness in terms of achieving goals and objectives, as well as managerial efficiency concerning implementation of mandated programmes

Accountability for performance with a focus on results is a concept which governments are only beginning to come to grips with. There is a growing public perception that government programs do not deliver enough value for the tax dollars being spent. Whether or not this perception is true, there is also a growing feeling that many of government's operations are accountable only to themselves. As fiscal pressures grow, and government is forced to decide which programs to keep and which to reduce or eliminate, such decisions become more difficult when the results of those programs are unclear.

The time has come for government to focus on reporting on its organizational and program results. This does not mean that government will always achieve everything it plans. But being clear about intentions, measuring and understanding results, and making adjustments where necessary, would help assure taxpayers that their money is being spent wisely. A focus on results would also help to ensure that limited public resources ... are being applied in a way that provides the most value for taxpayers.

Deputy Ministers' Council Comments in *Enhancing Accountability for Performance: A Framework and an Implementation Plan* (British Columbia: Office of the Auditor General), pp. 5–6.

4. Feedback from the recipients, including relevant stakeholders, of the organization’s reports and other communications, as inputs for 5 below
5. Development (decision-making) of new (or revised) policies or mandates, by fully taking into account evaluation findings and critiques received, as the basis for the next new cycle of activities

other considerations in conjunction with the question of accountability relating to the UN organizations:

- conceptual distinction, if any, between political accountability and democratic accountability
- distinction between accountability and answerability
- distinction between responsibility, accountability and liability

Despite a number of barriers, accountability is not impossible in the UN system. “The UN is a dynamic and adaptable place.”

If properly managed, such a framework could be a continuous improvement process. In visual terms, it could form a spiral, moving constantly upwards, helping to bring about more relevant policies and mandates and better programme performance. All this may lead, in turn, to greater effectiveness and efficiency of the UN organizations. However, in order to realize this, a number of preconditions should be met, including, in particular, a need to ensure that policies or mandates of the UN organizations reflect, in one way or another, the diverse views and interests of the international community as a whole, through appropriate mechanisms to be established or strengthened, together with identification, in particular, of the relevant stakeholders in the respective fields. On the top of these, a kind of possible mistrust between Member States over the perception of accountability and ensuing policy implications and consequences should be a challenge to overcome.

Additional conceptual issues to be considered

Although not covered in this policy brief, the following are some of the conceptual issues which may require fur-

- relationship between transparency and accountability
- relationship between accountability, democracy and legitimacy
- distinction between managerial accountability and managerial control
- linkage between enhancing managerial accountability and performance of legislative organs

Conclusions

One critic noted, “organizations that are unaccountable finish up by being irresponsible if not corrupt, unresponsive to opportunities, and unintelligible to the public.”³ More than six decades after the founding of the United Nations, important work remains to be done with respect to the organization’s accountability. As former Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted, “A key ingredient of any successful organization is an ethical and accountable culture pervading its staff from top to bottom.”⁴ Perceptions of UN efficiency, effectiveness and credibility are closely related to accountability. And such perceptions will influence global governance and, in particular, the question of whether the United Nations will receive the resources and

be assigned the tasks that will place it at the center of international relations in the twenty-first century. Opinion polls suggest that ‘we the peoples’ often approve of multilateral action within the UN framework, as opposed to unilateral or allied or regional undertakings, but a significant number doubt that the organization is sufficiently accountable, and hence they question the wisdom of devoting more of their resources to it.

Certainly, the importance of the subject of accountability with respect to the organizations in the United Nations system warrants more serious attention than it has hitherto received. It is hoped that this policy brief will serve to identify some of the key principles and raise pertinent questions that practitioners as well as academics could draw on in discussions and endeavors related to strengthening accountability. Only when the accountability of the UN organizations is enhanced can we be confident that it will play an effective role in global governance in the years ahead.

Notes

1. Accountability ‘holder’ is an individual who is holding someone else accountable. Likewise, if there is an accountability holder, there must be an accountability ‘holdee’. See Robert D. Behn, *Rethinking Democratic Accountability*, The Brookings Institution, 2001, p. 220.
2. According to Robert D. Behn (*Rethinking Democratic Accountability*, The Brookings Institution, 2001, p. 64), “Civil servants do make policy. Typically, they disclaim that they are doing any such thing. They insist that they are merely filling in the administrative details of overall policies established by their political superiors”.
3. Rosemary Righter, *Utopia Lost: The United Nations and World Order* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1995), p. 281.
4. Kofi Annan, *Investing in the United Nations: For a Stronger Organization Worldwide*, A/60/692, 7 March 2006, p. 13, Box 1.

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Improved processes are an essential aspect of UN reform and necessary for the UN to play a vital role in future global governance.

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