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Assessing Administrative Reform for The United Nations

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) is considered one of the largest, multilateral bureaucracies ever constructed, with a strong commitment to international peace and security, human rights, humanitarian aid, sustainable development, and upholding international law. Within the UN's Secretariat, one of six principal organs within the intergovernmental organization, is the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The DESA provides intergovernmental support, analysis, and capacity building efforts for a wide range of social, economic, and environmental fields of study to best tackle global problems and craft effective policy responses. While the UN and DESA has been highly accredited and recognized for its work, scholars in the international community contest that the UN has lacked efficacy in policy implementation due to political influences. To explain this, scholars have researched into the policy practices of intergovernmental organizations. By exploring further into the UN DESA's bureaucracy and policy implementation, I can evaluate whether the DESA has been effectively working towards its sustainable development goals (SDGs), a critical mission to the department. Therefore, I can assess if administrative reform should be discussed for the UN DESA.

The early origins of the UN can be traced as early as the First World War, when President Woodrow Wilson first proposed the idea of the League of Nations to bring international cooperation, security, and lasting peace to the world. Under Wilson's Fourteen Points, a strategy for ending war and bringing armistice, he highly stressed the need for a "general association of nations," who can have "mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity." Such an idea like this was highly favored and rarely contested by countries, as the world was in desperate need for a solution to end the First World War. Wilson then continued to amplify his idea to diplomats and intellectuals, all of whom were in general agreement that a form of an

international, peace-driven organization was needed (The League of Nations, 1920). In spite of the League of Nations being successfully created in 1920, it unfortunately failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War and collapsed. Due to the failure of the League of Nations, the UN was born in 1945 with Wilson's legacy.

Overview of The UN and DESA

The UN is composed of six major organs that make up the organization's bureaucratic structure: The General Assembly; Security Council; International Court of Justice; Trusteeship Council; Economic and Social Council; and Secretariat. The Secretariat, in particular, helps conduct the day-to-day work within the UN, and has tens of thousands of international staff members working in over twenty offices, stations, and peacekeeping missions around the world. The Secretariat, most importantly, houses the DESA. The DESA provides three general activities to the UN: intergovernmental support; analyses; and capacity-building efforts. The DESA supplies intergovernmental support by facilitating major global conferences and summits in the economic, social, and environmental fields, as well as assists countries with finding a common ground and taking critical steps towards better development. The department additionally studies and compiles a range of economic, social, and environmental data and statistics to advise Member States, countries that affiliate with the UN through a membership, to make note of certain trends and craft policy solutions to tackle problems. The last major function in the department is assisting in finalizing policy drafts developed in conferences and summits into create tangible solutions to help support capacity-building efforts of Member States at the local level. Through the DESA's efforts, the department efficiently works towards its SDGs, a set of seventeen global goals (see Figure 1) adopted by the UN in response to end poverty, engage in

environmental conversation, and promote peace (United Nations: Department of Social and Economic Affairs).



Figure 1. “UNESCO and Sustainable Development Goals.” UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 14 Jan. 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>.

The structure of the DESA is comprised of a variety of actors, divisions, and offices that work towards the three pillars of sustainable development: social; economic; and environmental prosperity. The department’s executive leadership is comprised of three key players: The Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Liu Zhenmin; Assistant Secretary-General (ASG) for Economic Development, Mr. Elliott Harris; and ASG for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, Ms. Maria-Francesca Spatolisano. The USG is primarily responsible for managing the department and its divisions, like the Division for SDGs, advises the Secretary-General, the leader of the larger Secretariat organ, on the three pillars of sustainable development, and fosters key partnerships with governments, agencies, and civil society organizations (United Nations: Department of Social and Economic Affairs). The ASGs

help the USG to perform these taxing duties and responsibilities given their knowledge of expertise. Nonetheless, the DESA has twelve additional offices and divisions that address social and economic-related matters that are important for achieving the UN's SDGs. While the UN and DESA might appear as effective bureaucracies for conducting their intended international duties to reach the SDGs, scholars in this field question the strength of the UN's staff and political influence on policy making decisions from national administrators.

Staff and Policy Implementation

Despite most scholars understanding that international organizations (IOs) share policy advice with national decision-makers, others are interested in *why* certain policy recommendations may have more influence than others. Given the existing literature on IO policy advice, it is common to exhibit national and international institutions overlap when creating solutions to global problems. Increasing institutional overlap can actually create more opportunity for effective global policy solutions for a plethora of countries in need, as research has indicated. The more that international bureaucracies are in fact rooted within national bureaucracies, national administrative leaders can produce more tailored policy solutions to their country's issues and needs, which in theory will be more beneficial at tackling problems (Busch et al, 776-777). In fact, the research generated by Per-Olof Bush and his colleagues has proven that national embeddedness and tailored research both contribute to an international organization's succession at having more influence in policy advising and implementation (Busch et al, 787). To do this, IGOs hire international staff through a rigorous, merit-based process. While having a bright staff might be one component to effectively implementing policy, the staff will also have to conduct field research to collect data and information about the particular region and local problem. Without this knowledge, IGOs cannot bridge its global

policies in local communities. To take these existing initiatives further, IGOS will even co-implement their ideas with national administrators by combining their staffs (Eckhard and Parizek). Therefore, it would be reasonable to conclude that the UN DESA is performing its administrative, bureaucratic practices in its most efficient fashion.

In spite of having these practices in place, nothing has explained thus far why lesser developed countries continue to remain impoverished and underdeveloped whereas developed nations continue to grow and flourish. Therefore, I claim that the UN DESA is not effectively working towards its SDGs due to the *political interferences* in its policy implementation processes, which is also affecting the organization's reputation for resolving global issues. To unpack this notion further, I will first discuss Professor Kenneth Meier and his colleague's perspective on politics, bureaucracy, and successful governance, followed by a Pew Research Center study that examines into how different countries perceive the UN. By exploring into the insight of Professor Meier, in addition to gaining a brief insight on the global opinions about the UN, I can assess whether administrative reform should be conducted in the UN DESA.

Politics and Bureaucracy

Meier argues that major governance failures are political, and not bureaucratic. Therefore, the first step to better governance in any bureaucracy is to recognize the underlying political causes of the institution. By having political institution roots, rather than a public institution, bureaucracy can fail in providing clear policy goals, allocating resources to deal with a particular problem, and having sufficient autonomy for policy implementation. Meier therefore argues that rational bureaucratic response to political problems can create more governance problems, rather than resolving them (Meier et al, 1). Hence, political institutions discourage

bureaucratic goals, rather than encouraging them, which disrupts departments, like the UN DESA, to efficiently work towards its SDGs.

Meier discusses that scholars commonly discuss that governance problems derive from bureaucratic issues, consisting of problems such as inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and unsustainability. In spite of these issues, administrators are often misguided at seeing the significant issues with governance problems. In spite of these arguments, the existing body of literature does not explain why bureaucrats cannot effectively resolve governance problems to have a properly functioning bureaucracy. Meier therefore poses the following question: why is it that such successful responses to real problems are so rarely achieved and sustained? Meier explains that there are two arguments to best explain this: that failures of governance are actually failures of politics, not failures of bureaucracy; and the failures of politics interact with essential characteristics of bureaucracy that will generate a series of additional problems for governance (Meier et al, 2-3). Such problems reflect rational bureaucratic responses to the failure of politics in an organization (Compton & Meier, 2017, as cited by Meier et al, 2018).

Meier asserts in his article that chief executives, which can be compared to the UN DESA's USG and ASGs, have become more bureaucratized over time with the support of staff. As a result, chief executives cannot solve such problems occurring within the bureaucracy, which drives from three inherent limitations: executives are simply set up as a rival to legislatures, thus creating competition between the two bodies and unwillingness to collaborate with each other; executives also have brief time frames dictated by their electoral; and finally, elected chief executives are not good at implementation (Meier et al, 13). For these reasons, the UN DESA cannot look towards its USG and ASGs to improve governance and policy implementation for the SDGs. In spite of this specified drawback, Meier's solution suggest that

political reform should be conducted to best resolve bureaucratic issues exhibited in organizations, like the UN, as the problems exhibited in a bureaucracy are inherently political. By further examining into the opinions of developing countries on the UN and the United States, a developed country not in support of the UN's efforts, I can validate my argument that politics meddle with the DESA's bureaucracy and its policy implementation for assisting developing countries and achieving its SDGs.

Global Opinions

The Pew Research Center's study examines into the opinions under former President Donald Trump's administration, and those in the following developing countries: Mexico; Morocco; Ecuador; India; Colombia; and Nigeria to assess whether developed and developing countries have a different perception on the UN. According to the study's survey, it was found that the former Trump administration did not trust the UN. These results were derived from the former administration's conservative values, which asserted that state-sovereignty and national interests would be undermined by the works of global involvement. Interestingly enough, all of the developing countries conducted in the study exhibited a moderate to negative level of trust in the UN (Call, Charles T., et al). On a scale of zero to one, with zero representing no trust and one representing vast amounts of trust, Mexico, Ecuador, Columbia, and Nigeria have demonstrated a moderate level of trust in the UN, whereas India and Morocco lean towards a lower level of trust in the IGO (see figure 2). In addition to these findings, it was also found that countries exhibiting a more negative level of trust on the UN also had a negative level of trust on the United States' government, with trust averages as low as .43. Even for developing countries that had higher levels of trust in the United States government were just on the cusp of slightly trusting the UN, with trust averages as high as .59. To statistically visualize these two findings,

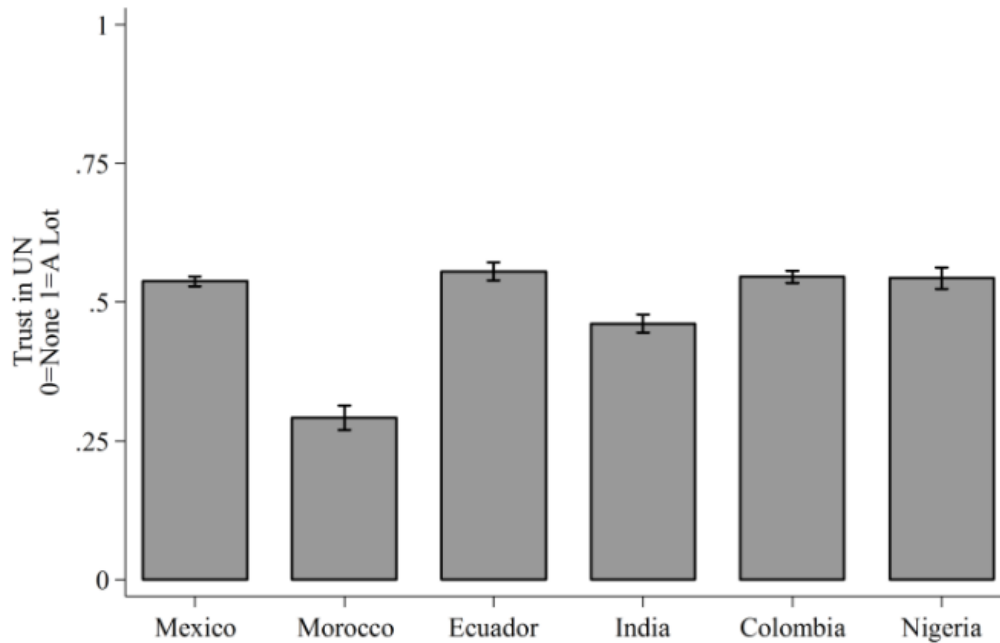


Figure 2. Average Trust in UN from 2012-2016. Graph from Call, Charles T., et al. "Is the UN a Friend or Foe?" Brookings, 4 Oct. 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/10/03/is-the-un-a-friend-or-foe/>.

a cross-national regression analysis was conducted to demonstrate that level of trust in the UN is dependent on the level of trust in the US government (see figure 3). Pew Researchers have inferred that developing countries behave in this matter because of a common misconception: the UN and US are both working towards a common agenda for relative gains (Call, Charles T., et al). The reason behind this connection can be illuded back to the influence of policy implementation – that is, international staffers will work with national staffers to best understand the local situation within a particular region to implement policy. Therefore, it can be logically concluded that developed nations have larger say on global policy implementation than developing nations, due to their politically driven agendas and authority in global conversations. Given this information, it can be agreed upon that there is a disruption in global policy implementation made by the UN DESA. Therefore, administrative reform should be conducted

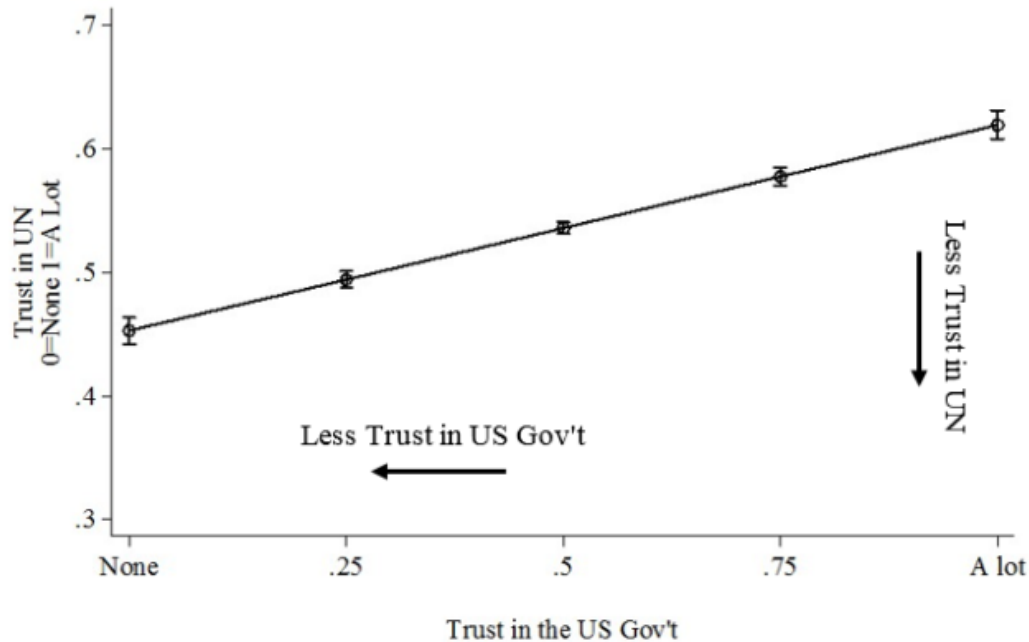


Figure 3. Average Trust in UN from 2012-2016. Graph from Call, Charles T., et al. "Is the UN a Friend or Foe?" Brookings, 4 Oct. 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/10/03/is-the-un-a-friend-or-foe/>.

in the DESA to reduce the interference of politics and to increase SDG policy implementation effectiveness.

Administrative Reform

To best reform the UN DESA administration, continuous improvement would be the most beneficial course of action to provide gradual, bottom-up changes to the department to reach its SDGs. Despite the two other strategies, downsizing and reengineering, continuous improvement provides a useful focus on improving the overall quality of the department's management, which is the leading actor in policy discussions and implementation for the UN DESA. Because the UN has grown to such an enormous size to support the goals and challenges in the international system, downsizing would not be a viable option as it would lessen the UN DESA's policy impacts in countries' local communities. While reengineering believes in starting over and creating a new foundation for better management and movement, continuous

improvement emphasizes product, organization, leadership, and commitment efforts, which is more worthwhile for the UN (Weted, 67). Because the UN DESA is especially goal driven to reach its SDGs, it would not make sense to demolish its existing, functioning system, in spite of its bureaucratic inconsistencies. Therefore, I find that continuous improvement would be the best strategy to reduce the amount of political interference shown in its bureaucracy to have more effective policy implementation for countries who truly need the assistance and aid, even if this process may be slow moving. In turn, the UN DESA can work more efficiently towards its SDGs.

Conclusion

Given the plethora of information about the UN DESA, staff and policy implementation practices, politics, bureaucracy, and administrative reform, it can be concluded that the DESA can effectively achieve its SDGs through political reform. By minimizing the number of political interferences in policy implementation, the DESA can have an efficient, functioning administration that best works towards its seventeen global goals in response to end poverty, engage in environmental conversation, and promote peace. As mentioned previously, political institutions discourage bureaucratic goals, rather than encouraging them, which disrupts the UN DESA to efficiently work towards its SDGs. Having political institution roots, rather than a public institution, in a bureaucracy can also fail in providing clear policy goals, allocating resources to deal with a particular problem, and having sufficient autonomy for policy implementation. When political reform persists, both international and national bureaucrats can better work together and produce more tailored policy solutions to countries' issues and needs.

By further acknowledging that administrations need more political reform than bureaucratic ones, bureaucracies alike and different can result in better effectiveness to conduct

their administration's goals and may even achieve greater than they were before. As learned from the UN DESA, any bureaucracy can learn to understand their administrative problems and make reform choices accordingly to best serve their constituents' interests and successfully achieve their bureaucratic goals.

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