

A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to indicate specific geographical locations.

ECOSOC IS Dead, Long Live ECOSOC

THOMAS G. WEISS
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- Since its inception in 1946, the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has witnessed an increase in membership and agenda items that has turned ECOSOC into the UN's most unwieldy and least significant deliberative body.
- Legions of piecemeal ECOSOC reform efforts have amounted to little, and this author makes the case for four changes that would dramatically alter the ways that ECOSOC, and more broadly the United Nations, conducts business.
- ECOSOC should move beyond the North-South quagmire and toward issue-based and interest-based negotiations. Moreover, as the UN system has more and more moving parts and is completely decentralized, ECOSOC and the system would achieve more with less through centralization and consolidation.
- ECOSOC should also pursue the UN's comparative advantages and not be on the defensive. G-20 and other groups could help infuse ECOSOC and the UN more broadly with political dynamics that are representative of contemporary global power to the benefit of all. Lastly, ECOSOC should realize that policy ideas and research matter. The system that ECOSOC oversees should provide more intellectual leadership about the fundamentally changed nature of contemporary problems and their solutions.

1. Introduction

Discussions about reforming the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) began shortly after it gathered for the first time in 1946. UN member states approved structural changes in 1965 and 1973 (expanding membership from 18 to 27 and then to 54, the current size), but increases in power have not accompanied increases in size.

The boldest proposals for change consist of turning ECOSOC into a different sort of “council,” akin to the Security Council—the UN’s only principal organ that sometimes has teeth to back up “decisions” instead of merely making “recommendations.” The Commission on Global Governance was the first visible group of eminent persons to propose such a change in their 1995 report *Our Global Neighbourhood*. As part of preparations for the September 2005 World Summit, the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change reiterated this call in their 2004 report *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*. Not surprisingly, no such change was agreed; and ECOSOC lacks the wherewithal to ensure compliance with its recommendations.

To be fair, there has been more adaptation by the United Nations over time than many recognize. Indeed, the world organization’s founders might well not recognize today what they created in 1945. In particular, ECOSOC’s portfolio reflects a vast institutional and substantive terrain that covers not only an ever-expanding list of specialized agencies, programs, funds, and assorted bodies linked directly to economic and social development but also an ever-growing list of agenda items. ECOSOC’s purview of development policy now includes everything from security crises (which undermine development) through peace-building efforts (which after war are stepping stones back toward a more normal development path). The council also seeks high-level engagement by member states with international financial institutions, the private sector, and civil society.

In short, there is virtually nothing that is not on ECOSOC’s agenda, and this principal organ has a dizzying array of possible partners among its constituents. Moreover, it also suffers from the UN’s wider culture in which process invariably trumps results. Apparently, if only we get the consultations and the processes right, then better outcomes will necessarily

follow. Nothing better illustrates this non-sequitur than the seemingly never ending discussion of reforming the UN Security Council that took up about 95 percent of diplomatic energy before the 2005 World Summit, predictably to go nowhere. Conversations about ECOSOC reform suffer from the same malady.

By accretion ECOSOC has become what may be the UN’s most unwieldy and least powerful deliberative body. Periodically a “new” ECOSOC is announced, but the updated version invariably resembles previous ones. The succession occurs seamlessly and without substantial change—hence, the title of this essay. Few UN bodies have been the butt of more jokes. Since 2006, however, this long disparaged principal organ may have gained a second lease on life as an international forum with special pertinence for monitoring the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as furthering system-wide coherence. Can anything actually be done with ECOSOC, perhaps the only international forum that brings together in a comprehensive way the economic, social, and environmental issues that are integral to development policy?

This author sees little value added in trying to answer that question by assessing the pluses and minuses of possible but insignificant changes in pursuit of General Assembly resolution 61/16 on “Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council” of January 2007. Current conversations revolve around a different agenda for the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) or the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) or better links with the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC). Rather, I explore four broad-gauged changes that could and should dramatically alter the ways that ECOSOC, and more broadly the United Nations, conducts business: closing down the North-South theater; pursuing consolidation not coherence; emphasizing comparative advantage not defensiveness; and realizing that policy ideas matter.

2. Closing Down the North-South Theater

A fundamental reason behind mediocre performances by ECOSOC and other UN bodies stems from the diplomatic burlesque that passes for negotiations on First Avenue in Manhattan or the Avenue de la Paix in Geneva. Launched in the 1950s and 1960s as a way to open diplomatic space for countries on the margins of

world politics, the once creative voices of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 developing countries have become prisoners of their own rhetoric. These counterproductive groups—and the artificial divisions and toxic atmosphere that they create—constitute almost insurmountable barriers to diplomatic initiatives. Serious conversation is virtually impossible and is replaced by meaningless posturing in order to score points in UN forums and media at home.

Moving beyond the North-South quagmire and toward issues-based and interest-based negotiations is an essential prescription for what ails ECOSOC and the United Nations. Fortunately, states have on occasion breached the fortifications around the North-South camps and forged creative partnerships that portend other types of coalitions that might unclog deliberations in ECOSOC and elsewhere.

Examples of wide-ranging partnerships across continents and ideologies include those that negotiated the treaties to ban landmines and to establish the International Criminal Court. Landmines mobilized a very diverse group of countries across the usual North-South divide as well as global civil society under the leadership of the World Federalist Movement and the usually reticent International Committee of the Red Cross. The idea of a permanent criminal court had been discussed since the late 1940s but received a push after the ad hoc tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda; the shortcomings (including costs and the burden of evidence) demonstrated the need for a permanent court that could also act as a deterrent for future thugs. The 60-country, like-minded coalition gathered in Rome in 1998 represented a formidable and persuasive group that joined forces with the 700 members of the NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court; and the ICC treaty moved ahead vigorously in spite of strong opposition from several permanent members of the Security Council.

These breakthroughs in security and human rights were mirrored in the economic arena by the Global Compact, which seeks to bring civil society and transnational corporations into a more productive partnership with the UN. It is a successful effort to move beyond shibboleths about the dangers of the global market, which was seen as a neo-imperial design from the advanced capitalist North and thus outright rejected by the global South. The Compact suggests how ECOSOC could evolve.

One bridge across the so-called North-South divide would involve enhanced transparency. While major problems still exist for any hard-nosed implementation of the Universal Periodic Review within the Human Rights Council, a variation would be worthwhile for ECOSOC. Why not require a universal periodic review of commitments to the Millennium Development Goals for the 54 elected members of the council? Rather than a voluntary system that allows member states merely to report what they wish on the topics that suit them, would it not make sense to move toward more transparency with independent and across-the-board scrutiny of the wealthy and poor, of industrialized and developing countries?

While they were discredited during the Iraq War, serious international politics invariably involves “coalitions of the willing.” Less posturing and role-playing is a prerequisite for the future health of the world organization. The results-oriented negotiations on landmines and the ICC and the operations of the Global Compact suggest the benefits of more pragmatism and less ideology in international deliberations, and that such a reorientation is not impossible for climate change, development finance, nonproliferation, reproductive rights, and terrorism. Within international institutions, we should be seeking more diverse and legitimate coalitions of the willing around specific policies. The tired North-South rhetoric of the past is unproductive in tackling global problems and thus should be relegated to history’s dustbin. Within ECOSOC, policy debates and negotiations can and should reflect issues-based and interest-based coalitions.

3. Pursuing Consolidation Not Coherence

It is hard to take seriously documents and resolutions about “system-wide coherence,” growing from the last major study commissioned by outgoing Secretary-General Kofi Annan—the 2006 report *Delivering as One*. The overlapping jurisdictions of various UN bodies, the lack of coordination among their activities, and the absence of centralized financing for the system as a whole make bureaucratic struggles more attractive than sensible cooperation. The UN’s various moving parts work at cross purposes instead of in a more integrated, mutually reinforcing, and collaborative fashion. Not to put too fine a point on it, agencies relentlessly pursue cut-throat fundraising to finance

their expanding mandates, stake out territory, and pursue mission creep. Fundamental change and collaboration are not in the bureaucracy's interest; turf battles and a scramble for resources are.

The UN's organizational chart refers to a "system," which implies coherence and cohesion. In reality that system has more in common with feudalism than with a modern organization. Frequent use also is made of the term "family," a folksy but preferable image because, like many such units, the UN family is dysfunctional.

Consolidation is anathema as officials rationalize futile complexity and react to incentives from donors to go their own way. Individual organizations focus on substantive areas often located in a different city from other relevant UN partners and with separate budgets, governing boards, organizational cultures, and independent executive heads. An almost universal chorus sings the atonal tune praising decentralization and autonomy; and ECOSOC is one of the main concert halls for this cacophony.

Yet the kind of reform that almost occurred in 1997 in the humanitarian arena illustrates what would be plausible if donors backed centralization with resources instead of speaking out of both sides of their mouths. At that time, Maurice Strong proposed pulling together the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees with relevant parts of UNICEF, the World Food Programme, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). That proposal lasted until the sky was falling, at least according to agency heads. "Coordination lite," the UN's perpetual solution to overlap, was supposed to improve delivery and protection. The powerless Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs resulted—a warmed-over version of a previous concoction, the Department for Humanitarian Affairs.

Without counting the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—*de jure* but not *de facto* components of the world organization—over 50,000 UN officials spread out in 15 different headquarters in various countries and in some 1,400 representative offices worldwide command annual budgets of some \$ 16 billion but are largely indifferent to other family members. They constitute ECOSOC's portfolio to foster so-called system-wide coherence. Competition and duplication necessitate ever more elaborate and expensive oversight. Current efforts revolve around

creating "One UN" at the country level but the collective memory is short. In the early 1990s, 15 unified offices were created in the former Soviet Union but rapidly were undermined by agency rivalry.

Opinion among development specialists reflects the desperate need for change although typically leaving the system alone is the only real option because inertia is so overwhelming and support seemingly is lacking for any real shake-up. A recent independent survey conducted by the Future of the UN Development System (FUNDS) Project received over 3,000 responses from every part of the globe and from the private sector, NGOs, academia, and governments. Respondents, 90 percent located in the global South, agreed that the UN's neutrality and objectivity were strong suits but decentralization was by far the defining weakness. Asked about 2025, over 70 percent agreed that there should be fewer UN agencies with dramatic changes in mandates and functions, including stronger NGO and private-sector participation. Nearly 70 percent supported the appointment of a single head of the UN development system although views were split about a single headquarters. Almost 80 percent sought a single representative and country program in each developing country.

ECOSOC's operating style itself is a microcosm of failed efforts at restructuring. Proposals to create a single governing board for myriad special funds and programs, for instance, are met with guffaws. The decision to create UN Women in July 2010 was an encouraging institutional breakthrough of sorts. While no formal UN institution has ever been shuttered as an anachronism, at least UN Women consolidated four previously weaker and autonomous units focusing on gender equality. It would have been an even more crucial precedent had the consolidation also included the UN Population Fund. Billed as an effort to pool resources and mandates, the new UN Women did not only not fold in the largest operational agency with an impact on women's lives but also created yet another executive board (albeit with non-traditional donors). Was it not possible to consolidate executive boards? Do we really require an eleventh one specifically to engage in what essentially amounts to theological disputes on gender issues?

The UN system remains more wasteful and weak than it should be; indeed, much of what passes for "reform" amounts to wishful thinking. I could refer to vintages

and bottles, but perhaps a better metaphor is George Bernard Shaw's description of a second marriage—the triumph of hope over experience. We need to get more from ECOSOC and the system through centralization and consolidation rather than hoping for the best from ad hoc serendipity and fortuitous personal chemistry.

If donor countries would back their rhetoric with cash, then consolidation and centralization rather than endless chatter would result. The mobilization of “coherence funds” for use by UNDP resident coordinators for the eight country experiments with “Delivering as One” appear to have been crucial carrots to foster more centralization and seem to have worked. But donors normally are inconsistent; their contrariness in the various corridors of UN organizations is legendary. The very countries that bemoan the world organization's incoherence also field delegations to different UN entities, which acquiesce in widening mandates and untrammled decentralization of responsibilities to an increasingly chaotic and competitive field network.

4. Emphasizing Comparative Advantage Not Defensiveness

Rather than being defensive and feeling uneasy about the maturation of the G-20, ECOSOC needs to think hard about its own comparative edge. Rather than viewing the new powerhouse as a threat, the UN in general and ECOSOC in particular should think of the relationship as symbiotic and not competitive. More generally, it is crucial to augment different country configurations for different problems and to stop insisting on fixed memberships, and especially universal participation, for every agenda item. Minilateral forums will not replace universal ones, but the former can galvanize progress in the latter.

To date, reactions in ECOSOC and elsewhere in UN circles have been to look for ways to ensure that the United Nations and the 172 states that are non-G-20 members are included at the “high table.” Predictably, several non-G-20 states formed the Global Governance Group (3G); cries of illegitimacy and exclusion were omnipresent. Mention of a possible secretariat for the G-20 (rather than the ad hoc organizational measures of changing host countries) sends shivers down the UN's institutional spine.

Many if not all global challenges require global norms, policies, institutions, and compliance. As such the universality of the United Nations and the resulting legitimacy of its decisions remain enduring political strengths. The most pressing question for ECOSOC is, how can G-20 deliberations help it and the UN perform better and reform faster?

In the midst of the 2008–09 financial and economic meltdown, the G-20 shifted away from being a photo-op for finance ministers and became a serious institutional actor. Decisions in spring 2009 not only resulted in the infusion of substantial funds into the International Monetary Fund but also gave life there and at the World Bank to long-sought governance reforms that provide more representation for developing countries. These results benefited all 192 UN member states. Complaints about the G-20 process are hollow if the outcome is a more stable global economic order in which all countries and even ECOSOC can pursue other objectives. Indeed, the one-state-one-vote interpretation of Charter Article 2 is merely one way to frame the sovereign equality of states and desirable routes to enhanced global governance. With 80 percent of the world's population and 90 percent of the world's GDP, the argument that the G-20 lacks legitimacy is far-fetched. The G-7 lacked legitimacy; the G-20 does not.

If the G-20 were to develop a stance on institutional reform, no international organization could easily resist. Multilateral agreements within the United Nations will increasingly be based on “minilateral” consensus reached first among a subset of key states. A unified G-20 stance on climate change or pandemics, for example, could jump start subsequent negotiations and help garner wider consensus quickly. For years the global South along with Germany and Japan have sung in unison that the Security Council and other intergovernmental organizations represent the past and not the present. With the urgency of the Great Recession receding, the November 2010 session in Seoul reverted to the former photo-op mode. However, the G-20 and other groups could help infuse ECOSOC and the UN more broadly with political dynamics that are representative of contemporary global power to the benefit of all.

5. Realizing Ideas Matter

ECOSOC as a whole as well as the development organizations reporting to it should integrate an oft-ignored reality into deliberations and priority setting: ideas and concepts are a main driving force in human progress and arguably the most important contribution of the United Nations over the last 65 years. This conclusion emanates from a decade of research by the independent United Nations Intellectual History Project whose directors (Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and the author) summarized their findings from 17 books and an oral history in their 2009 *UN Ideas That Changed the World*.

The system that ECOSOC oversees should provide more intellectual leadership about the fundamentally changed nature of contemporary problems and their solutions; it should seek to bridge the deepening gap between scientific knowledge and political decision-making. Because policy research and ideas matter, the world organization should enhance its ability to produce or nurture world-class public intellectuals, scholars, thinkers, planners, and practitioners. UN officials are typically considered second-class citizens in comparison with counterparts from the Washington-based international financial institutions. This notion partially reflects the resources devoted to research in these institutions as well as their respective cultures, media attention, dissemination outlets, and the use of the research in decision making.

Reality is different. Nine persons with substantial experience within the United Nations and its policy discussions have won the Nobel Prize in economic sciences—Jan Tinbergen, Wassily Leontief, Gunnar Myrdal, James Meade, W. Arthur Lewis, Theodore W. Schultz, Lawrence R. Klein, Richard Stone, and Amartya Sen—whereas only one from the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, has done so. But he had resigned from his post at the Bank in protest of its development policies and is now deeply associated with UN policy work. And this list is in addition to individual Nobel Peace Prize winners who worked for years as staff members of the United Nations: Ralph Bunche, Dag Hammarskjöld, Kofi Annan, Mohammed ElBaradei, and Martti Ahtisaari. In total, some fifteen organizations, diplomats, and statesmen associated with the United Nations have also won a Nobel Peace Prize. No other organization comes even close to being such a center of excellence, a fact

missed by many politicians, the media, and a world public looking for answers to global predicaments.

In order to have ideas and the people who produce them taken more seriously, a number of priority steps should be taken to improve research, analysis, and policy work. ECOSOC might well put on its agenda steps to: facilitate staff exchanges from universities and think tanks for original and synthetic research; create space within the UN system for truly independent research and analysis; increase interaction and exchanges between the analytical staff of the Bretton Woods institutions and the UN economic and social departments and offices; ensure more effective outreach and media promotion activities so that the economic and social research produced by the UN reaches more audiences and has more impact on the decisions of economic and finance ministers around the world; and transform recruitment, appointment, promotion, and organization of responsibilities as an integral part of a new human resources strategy to exert intellectual leadership.

Despite a rich tradition of contributions from various UN agencies and organizations, the system's full potential for policy research and analysis has scarcely been tapped. Cross-agency collaboration is too rare; research staff in different parts of the world organization reporting to ECOSOC seldom venture beyond the walls of their departmental silos. Regular, mandatory gatherings for sharing research and ideas could reduce parochialism. ECOSOC should establish a research council to expand opportunities for information-sharing and collaboration, and reduce the chances of redundancy and the pursuit of different projects at cross-purposes.

The UN should seek as many alliances as possible with centers of expertise and excellence—in academia, think tanks, government policy units, and corporate research centers. Human resources policy should also do more to foster an atmosphere that encourages creative thinking, penetrating analysis, and policy-focused research of a high intellectual and critical caliber. The model of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change could well be replicated for other issues. The intellectual fire-power of staff members is essential, which will depend on improvements and better professional procedures in recruitment, appointment, and promotion. These nuts-and-bolts issues of operational alliances and staffing

affect directly the quality of policy outputs from all of the organizations reporting to ECOSOC.

By definition, if any of them pursue a bold and forward-looking policy agenda, they cannot please all 192 member states all of the time. Calling into question conventional or politically correct wisdom requires longer-term funding. Encouraging free thinking and exploration of ideas and approaches is vital but not cheap. Ideally donors should provide multi-year funding for research and analysis, with no strings attached, through assessed contributions; but voluntary funding is more likely. In any case, conversations about the system-wide need for such policy autonomy should be on ECOSOC's agenda.

Without first-rate people and adequate funding, messages typically are watered down to satisfy the lowest common intergovernmental denominator. We have learned since 1990 from the howls often greeting the annual *Human Development Report* that intellectual independence can be tolerated. This experience suggests that researchers can be liberated from the need to check analyses before publication with boards or donors. The widespread use of such a procedure will require "islands" or "safety zones" within which serious and independent analysis can take place not only away from daily tasks but also without fearing the loss of income or publication because one or more governments are irked. The tolerance for controversy should be far higher; academic freedom should not be an alien concept for researchers working for organizations reporting to ECOSOC from within secretariats working on twenty-first-century intellectual and policy challenges.

6. Conclusion

Commissions, high-level panels, task forces, and summits come and go. Fundamental reform and transformation of the UN system will not result from incremental thinking and tinkering. The inertia and interests to be overcome in ECOSOC are especially formidable. Indeed, Sir Robert Jackson undoubtedly turns over in his grave with some regularity because he began his 1969 evaluation of the UN development system by writing that "the machine as a whole has become unmanageable in the strictest sense of the word. As a result, it is becoming slower and more unwieldy like some prehistoric monster." That

lumbering dinosaur is now 40 years older and not yet adapted to the climate of the twenty-first century.

It is hard to be sanguine about implementing the suggested changes in ECOSOC's operations: closing down the North-South theater; pursuing consolidation not coherence; emphasizing comparative advantage not defensiveness; and realizing ideas matter. Without them, however, the lack of coherence damages credibility and gives rise to further public cynicism. Institutional fragmentation and competition lead not only to wasteful overlap and redundancy but also to issues falling between agencies. At the same time, individuals and states can be as strong as the institutions that they create. There are plenty of things wrong, but many can be fixed.



About the Author

Thomas G. Weiss is Presidential Professor of Political Science at The CUNY Graduate Center and Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies. Past President of the International Studies Association (2009-10) and Past Chair of the Academic Council on the UN System (2006-9), he has written or edited some 40 books and 175 articles and book chapters about multilateral approaches to international peace and security, humanitarian action, and sustainable development. This essay draws on his latest single-authored volume, *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Global Policy and Development
Hiroshimastrasse 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | New York Office
747 Third Avenue | Suite 22B | New York, NY 10017 | USA

Responsible:
Dr. Werner Puschra, Executive Director, FES New York

Tel.: ++1 (212) 687-0208 | Fax: ++1 (212) 687-0261
www.fes-globalization.org/new_york/index.htm

To order publications:
jlandt@fesny.org

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