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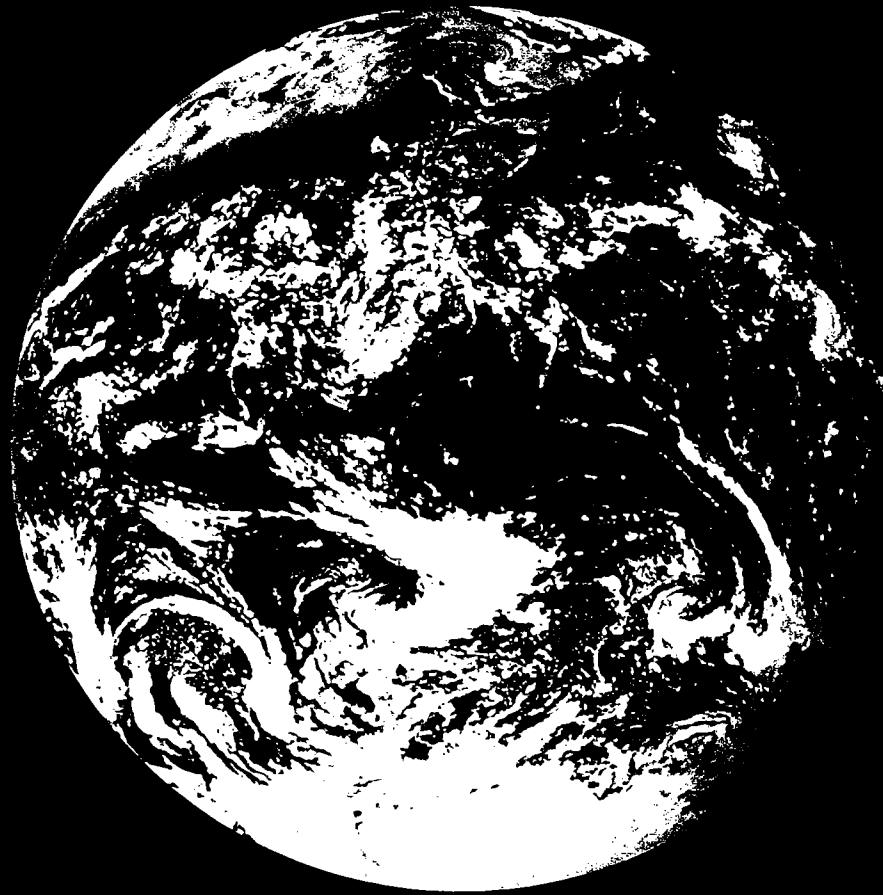
# UNITED NATIONS REFORM

**LOOKING AHEAD AFTER FIFTY YEARS**

EDITED BY

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# Contents

Acknowledgements	x
Foreword <i>Anatol Rapoport</i>	<i>xi</i>
Part I UNITED NATIONS REFORM: PROLOGUE	
1 An Agenda for United Nations Reform <i>Geoffrey Grenville-Wood</i>	2
Part II THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM	
Commentary on Part II <i>Michael Oliver</i>	26
2 A Year in the Life of the General Assembly: 1993 Session <i>Newton R. Bowles</i>	30
3 United Nations Reform: A Systems Approach <i>Dietrich Fischer</i>	59
4 Third-Generation World Organizations <i>Hanna Newcombe</i>	78
5 A United Nations Parliamentary Assembly <i>Dieter Heinrich</i>	95
6 Reforming the United Nations Administration <i>Robert I. McLaren</i>	100
Part III PEACE AND SECURITY	
Commentary on Part III <i>Henry Wiseman</i>	110
7 Peacekeeping and Canadian Policy <i>Geoffrey Pearson</i>	112
8 From Peacekeeping to Peace Making <i>John C. Polanyi</i>	121
9 Somalia: Learning the Hard Way <i>Newton Bowles</i>	131
10 Keeping Watch for Peace: Fact-Finding by the United Nations Secretary-General <i>A. Walter Dorn</i>	138

11	A United Nations Peace Force <i>Arnold Simoni</i>	155
12	Law, Politics and United Nations Enforcement of Peace <i>K. Venkata Raman</i>	158
Part IV HUMAN RIGHTS		
	Commentary on Part IV <i>Craig Scott</i>	168
13	The Vienna World Conference on Human Rights <i>Laurie S. Wiseberg</i>	173
14	Human Rights and Gender Equity <i>Shirley Farlinger</i>	183
Part V ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT		
	Commentary on Part V <i>David Runnalls</i>	202
15	UNCED and the Globalization of Civil Society <i>Peter Padbury</i>	207
16	On Reforming the Global Environment Facility <i>Robert O. Matthews</i>	218
17	Environmental Politics, Trade and United Nations Reform <i>Urs P. Thomas</i>	229
18	The Role of the IMF and the World Bank in International Development <i>James Busumtwi-Sam</i>	248
Part VI INTERNATIONAL LAW		
	Commentary on Part VI <i>Ronald St.J. Macdonald</i>	268
19	International Law as a Language for International Relations: Legal Reform and the United Nations <i>Paul D. Paton</i>	270
20	The Establishment of an International Criminal Tribunal: Is the Time Ripe? <i>Sharon A. Williams</i>	287

Part VII RECOMMENDATIONS

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 21 | Recommendations to the Commission on<br>Global Governance<br><i>Science for Peace Workshop on United Nations Reform</i>           | 302 |
|    | Commentary on Recommendations to the<br>Commission on Global Governance<br><i>William H. Barton</i>                               | 305 |
| 22 | Canadian Priorities for United Nations Reform<br><i>Canadian Committee for the Fiftieth Anniversary<br/>of the United Nations</i> | 309 |

Part VIII UNITED NATIONS REFORM: EPILOGUE

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 23 | The United Nations of the Future<br><i>Douglas Roche</i> | 318 |
|    | Glossary of Acronyms                                     | 322 |
|    | Bibliography on United Nations Reform                    | 323 |
|    | About the Contributors                                   | 328 |
|    | Other Books from Science for Peace                       | 336 |

## Commentary on Part IV

Craig Scott

A common theme unites the two chapters in Part IV: human rights, the UN, and the politics of inclusion – that is, the need rigorously and systematically to make questions of representation and participation central to the collective project of giving effective content to the concept of human rights within the institutional order of the United Nations. In turn, each paper can be read as cohering with a broader tendency within late 20th century social movements, at least in North America, to struggle to give content to the ideal of the *universal* moral worth of every person through a critical focus on the need to inject the *particularity* of experience and perspectives on the world into the processes (social, political, legal and economic) and institutions that have the power to influence or dictate the allocation of entitlements and responsibilities in the name of various conceptions of justice. Within this frame of reference, the universality of human rights as a substantive commitment involves a procedural corollary, namely that the elaboration and implementation of the substantive content of human rights requires an ethic of universal inclusion of persons or their representatives in the institutional processes that give concrete shape to what human rights mean. The democratic premise is that more inclusive process will generate (more) just substantive outcomes. The result of this approach is that a critique of human rights concepts, doctrine or machinery fuses with a critique that focuses on the question of which actors and sectors of society control the process of making human rights a reality. Who is in and who is out? Whose self-image and partial interests become hegemonic in the name of a universal ideal? These are the forms of inquiry that characterise much of fin de siècle critical discourse and community-based political and social movements. In the Western world, such discourse has come to be variously labelled, in pejorative terms by some and in empowered terms by others, as the “politics of difference”, the “politics of recognition”, the “politics of identity” and the “politics of voice”. For present purposes, I shall refer to the politics of inclusion.

Yet, it is important to note that neither of the following papers privileges procedural inclusiveness over substantive commitment; rather, the latter conditions the former. If we know that the world (including the world of the UN) is organised in such a way that certain perspectives are

privileged, the call for inclusion appeals to the ideal of universality that is being compromised as the basis for an imperative need to introduce a kind of counter-privileging energy into the system. In this sense, we can justify a notion of the priority of perspectives as structured by an over-all substantive commitment to the elimination of suffering, of intolerance, of cruelty. Those who we have every reason to believe disproportionately endure suffering, bear the brunt of intolerance and are subjected to cruelty are the ones whose voices not only should be heard in an act of levelling the playing field but also should be given priority on the basis that they know of what they speak.

Laurie Wiseberg, as the director of Human Rights Internet, was an active and tireless participant in the event that she critically describes in her paper, the *World Conference on Human Rights* held in Vienna in the summer of 1993. She discusses a number of different relationships defined in terms of inclusion/exclusion, including the fascinating debate over whether Australia should be identified as a part of the Western (and Other) regional group or part of the Asia Group. She also alludes to, while not discussing in detail, the fundamental inside/outside dynamic that characterized the entire Vienna Conference. According to this dynamic, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) convened in one part of the UN complex (downstairs) and state delegations in a separate part (upstairs). This prompts Wiseberg's wonderfully evocative metaphorical sub-title of "Upstairs and Downstairs: Everything a UN World Conference Ought Not to Be". This architectural insider/outsider split level arrangement was subsequently replicated in the way in which the final *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* was drafted, namely in closed session open only to states (and representatives of various UN bodies) and barred to NGO representatives.

The most extensive and significant discussion by Wiseberg of the politics of inclusion pertains to the way in which such a politics played itself out within the organisation of the *NGO Forum* at which marginalized NGOs (mainly from Southern grassroots organisations) "wanted and demanded more than token participation" and succeeded in prompting a kind of people's revolution "which forced the Joint Planning Committee [the organising body for the NGO Forum] to resign and led to the election of a new and more representative NGO Liaison Committee...". As Wiseberg puts it, the leaders of many established NGOs who currently take up so much of the space in giving content to human rights from the non-state sphere "believe[d] they kn[e]w best because they regularly walk the UN corridors". Wiseberg's critique of the capacity of the human rights movement itself to reproduce patterns of exclusion and subordination that

are mirrored in relations between states (North/South) and in transnational societal relations generally (rich/poor) is a sober reminder that 'human rights', as with all abstract concepts that seek to project a progressive message (equality, freedom, justice, dignity, community), are not self-defining. They are intimately bound up in the social production of knowledge from which claims of truth are generated. In this regard, Wiseberg's paper goes far in dispelling a complacent belief that the simple inclusion of more NGO participation and representation within the UN institutional order is, unproblematically, a good thing. Instead, we must be aware that indiscriminate inclusion in many instances serves only to reinforce privileged perspectives about what count as human rights and as human rights violations.

Shirley Farlinger's paper nicely complements that of Laurie Wiseberg in her emphasis on the exclusion of women in all facets of the international order. As she puts it, "when women look at this new era they find themselves largely invisible in decision-making bodies, both global and local". Her paper opens with the reminder that "women" have been implicitly excluded from the "human" in the real world of human rights. The lack of representation and participation of women at every stage and in every facet of activities relevant to human rights has made possible a stultification of the potential of the concept of human rights to help forge a more just world. It is male experience that has predominated in creating "the" human rights perspective(s) on the world.

One strength of Farlinger's paper is that she identifies the absence of women as a phenomenon occurring at every level: within the United Nations bureaucracy; within the apparatus of states; and, consistent with the Wiseberg paper, within organisations of civil society (which overlaps to some degree with the NGO movement). She spends some time illustrating both how gender deficits might be creatively eliminated and how such attention to fairer representation might be expected to stimulate new solutions to old problems (such as civil war) and to allow us to perceive 'new' problems that need prioritized attention (such as violence against women). Much of her paper has a utopian flavour to it, but therein lies its power. Is it really out of the question to take seriously Farlinger's suggestions that we consider a gender partnership model according to which "the Secretary-General's responsibilities [would be] ... split in two and a woman ... chosen in addition to a man" or to consider the similar suggestion of Johan Galtung, to whom Farlinger refers, that half of the members of UN peace-keeping missions be women?

A second strength of Farlinger's essay is her attention to the structural,

largely economic, realities that are constitutive of the power relations that have always defined and continue to define human relations. A focus on achieving justice through attention to representation and participation in all decision-making contexts is necessary but cannot be taken as sufficient. In the same way that Wiseberg's essay gives prominence to the appalling lack of financial resources allocated to human rights matters within the United Nations, Farlinger notes that "[even] if all the top positions at the UN were occupied by caring, concerned women (and not all are caring or concerned), this would be an improvement ... [b]ut it would not be enough to stem the tide of global degradation, if the present structures remain." It is in this context that Farlinger refers to "the Other Government" of international capital, a term coined by James Laxer.

Wiseberg focuses on the Vienna *World Conference on Human Rights*. Farlinger also places considerable emphasis on the potential of United Nations world conferences (apart from Vienna on human rights [1993], there is Rio de Janeiro on environment and development [1992], Cairo on population and development [1994], Copenhagen on social development [1995] and Beijing on women [1995]) to provide moments of opportunity for making advances, if only small ones, towards greater justice. Each holds out some hope for a meaningful alliance between the human rights NGO realm and the institutions of the United Nations. Farlinger, however, is more optimistic than Wiseberg. In her discussion of what transpired at Vienna, Farlinger is inclined to see a link between "more than 2700 delegates from 1500 NGOs from around the world [coming] and critiq[ing] the draft document" and "women's rights ...now being integrated into all human rights work" (at least according to the recommendations contained in the *Vienna Conference's Plan of Action*); Farlinger goes on to conclude her essay by saying that she "believe[s] that a reformed United Nations and an energized, gender equal society can transform society and restore the Earth." Unfortunately, the utopian force of this statement is unlikely to be matched in the empirical unfolding of events, at least in the near future. As an on-site observer of the Vienna conference (an academic member of the delegation of Canada), I can attest to the fact that the network of women's NGOs was singularly effective (as compared to other NGOs) in normatively barraging the Vienna interstate process, despite the organisational barriers described above. However, as a wider collectivity, the NGOs at Vienna displayed what Wiseberg correctly refers to as a "lack of coordination and strategic thinking" with respect to how the NGO process of deliberation was to interact with the interstate negotiations over the Vienna draft text. The rifts that appeared in Vienna amongst the NGOs

extended to a collective stalemate and indecision over the most appropriate approach to take to that interaction. On the one hand, the NGOs could have organised around creating their own alternative declaration and plan of action in the manner of the alternative treaties that were produced by the NGOs in attendance at the Rio *Conference on Environment and Development*. On the other hand, they could have rigorously based their work on the draft interstate text and sought to influence the negotiations on that text as much as possible. Cogent justifications can be advanced for either strategy. However, in the end, a lack of consensus resulted in neither of these strategies being pursued with any vigour; the *NGO Forum* fell between two stools. When the September 1995 Beijing conference takes place, it will be interesting to see whether a fruitful and effective NGO-UN interaction will occur or whether the problems of Vienna will reproduce themselves to one degree or another.