



THE UN SECRETARY-GENERAL RETREAT 2009

New York, 7 September 2009

UN Secretary-General Retreat Synthesis

The 2009 Secretary-General's Retreat was confined to just one day, in two simultaneous locations, using a video link between New York and Geneva. It was a cost-efficient and climate friendly undertaking, cognizant of the challenges posed by the global economic crisis and climate change.

In its third year, this retreat is an essential exercise for taking stock, sharing ideas and proposing recommendations for how we can continue to fulfill our mandate and meet the needs of the people we serve. A very productive and engaging discussion considered three main topics: (i) strengthening accountability; (ii) improving communications; and (iii) becoming more effective and efficient (what we have called "doing more with less").

BREAKING DOWN TRUE BARRIERS TO ACCOUNTABILITY

We had a constructive discussion on accountability. There was general agreement that the policy suggestions contained in the background paper laid a useful basis for proceeding in this area. Participants wished to supplement those recommendations by making the following points:

First, although there are multiple lines and mechanisms of accountability within and across the UN system, the Organization is primarily accountable to (i) the Member States and (ii) the beneficiaries of our programmes. In this respect, there was emphasis on a participatory approach to accountability by including the views of our beneficiaries in assessing how the UN is performing in meeting their needs. Participants did, however, warn against the stifling and risk-averse effects of multiple and duplicating accountability mechanisms.

Second, there was an agreement on the need to establish a UN system-wide inventory on the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of all of its staff. In addition, a comprehensive system for performance evaluation, reward, and sanction is required keeping in mind that positive recognition is as effective as sanctions are in animating a system of accountability.

Third, it was also agreed that the UN must have reliable funding for the mandates that the Member States entrust to it. Accountability is closely tied to capacity to do what we are charged to perform. Along similar lines, we need to empower managers so that they have the decision-making capacity to fulfill the duties entrusted to them.

Fourth, participants felt that there needs to be a harmonization of accounting rules and reporting procedures which are often duplicative and can hamper productivity and substantive delivery.

Fifth, while the accountability dialogue seeks to ensure that we have measurable deliverables, some participants shared the view that we should look at the impact of results and not at results for their own sake.

Sixth, we need to create a forum of sharing lessons on best practices regarding accountability. Some participants also suggested that, where appropriate, an external audit or peer review could enhance a culture of accountability in the UN system.

Seventh, there is a need to have an open dialogue with Member States. Its precise form needs to be further defined.

Finally, participants endorsed the view that the UN continues to have an important role to play in reminding Member States and the wider international community that they should be accountable for the many time-bound commitments they have made, such as on the Millennium Development Goals and the anti-malarial bed-net programs.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS

Communications and how to improve it was considered a very timely issue.

While widely endorsing the policy suggestions found in the background paper, participants expressed the view that the UN needs to further develop a comprehensive communication strategy. This strategy should be two-pronged—one for internal staff and the other for the Member States and the wider public. Among other strategic considerations, such a strategy should take into account regional diversities and emerging realities.

First, with regard to internal communications, participants stated that information exchange within the UN system should be strengthened, more systematic and less confined within silos.

Second on external communications, many participants called for speaking more boldly and with clearer messages. Taking advantage of the diversity of talents available in senior managers, the UN should identify those who can play a more public role in representing the Organization with pride.

Senior managers can supplement the Secretary-General in this area, by stepping forward as knowledgeable and credible advocates for the UN, explaining its work and reaching out to particular sectors and communities.

They should do so also by addressing civil society, which is an important player in shaping global public opinion.

Third, in serving as spokespersons, we need to convey simple and candid messages that bolster the recognized brand that the UN possesses in the international community, especially highlighting captivating stories from the ground. It was noted that being outspoken, bold and candid contributes to earning respect and credibility from both the Member States and the global public.

Fourth, regarding the topic of communicating on reform: participants noted that while it is important to communicate the progress made in the area of reform for the Member States, we need to differentiate our message for the public, who may perceive repeated talk of reform as an indicator of weakness, rather than as successful adaptation to a changing environment.

Here, we need to speak of substantive delivery.

Fifth, it has been pointed out that both in internal and external communications, it is essential that we harness the efficiencies afforded by available or new information and communication technologies. Indeed, effective communications require effective information management.

DOING MORE WITH LESS

Participants presented candid views on what we need to do to perform better in an increasingly competitive, resource-scarce world. This was considered a critical topic since, as some participants stated, we are already being asked to do more with the same. Participants shared the view that agencies had an obligation to ensure that our beneficiaries receive the most with the little that does exist. Again, participants broadly agreed with the recommendations described in the policy paper. Going further, they discussed how:

First, the UN must nurture a culture of belt tightening, setting out incentives for frugality within the system, together with results-based budgeting.

Second, in terms of cost-saving, participants stressed the value of knowledge management in order to understand what works and what does not.

Some cost saving examples cited were: reducing Headquarters presence and the number of regional representatives, aggregating the supply chain, sharing services, outsourcing secondary work, closing unsustainable or redundant programmes. In this regard, it was suggested that a dialogue on best practices in cost-saving be initiated.

Third, participants called for greater engagement with Member States on their demands and expectations, as these can be conflicting and/or inconsistent. This dialogue would act as a means to share information on UN efficiency gains with Member States.

Finally, rather than rigid rules, flexibility is required to engage differently in different contexts. Participants expressed the need to be empowered to make changes, and to shun risk in this regard.

Participants expressed, on occasion with passion and conviction, their desire to take forward the recommendations found in the detailed background papers and in this statement. They committed themselves to ensuring that we make concrete progress on these issues, progress on which we can build further when we meet again next year. In so doing, collectively, we can and will continue to build a stronger and more effective Organization.