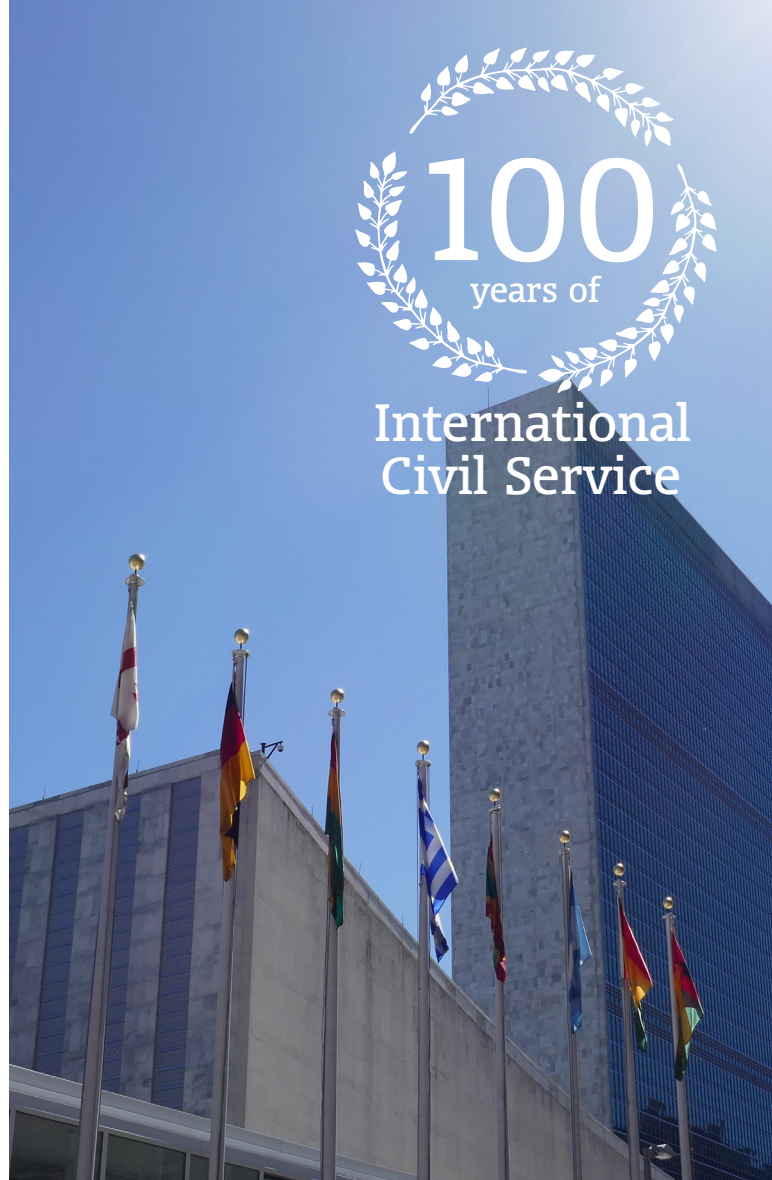




International
Civil Service



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Turning Points: Defining Moments for the International Civil Service at the United Nations

Alanna O'Malley

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2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, an appropriate juncture at which to assess not just its historical achievements and failures, but a moment to consider different views of the organisation. One feature of the system which has lacked significant or sustained analysis is the position and functions of UN officials and experts who actually carry out much of the work. Flying under the radar, from New York to Nairobi and from Santiago to Sydney, men and women have toiled for decades in the international civil service to deliver the policies of the UN, while developing a series of political practices and experiences to enhance its work.

The integrity and development of the international civil service deserves sustained analysis, especially in the context of any discussion of UN reform. From 1945 to the present day, it is possible to chart moments of crisis and opportunity which have both enhanced and limited the efficacy of UN experts and officials. Some of these key moments arose from the evolving international context in which they took place. Others came directly from attempts to change the rules of the organisation and actions governing the work of the UN's international civil service. This paper explores how these so-called turning points influenced, both directly and indirectly, the development of the international civil service.

An Auspicious Beginning

The first major turning point in the operation of the Secretariat was with the employment tribunals of the 1950s. UN staff are primarily governed under Chapter XV of the Charter, specifically Article 97-101. These short paragraphs outline the basic principles and structures for the organisation and government of UN staff. Perhaps the most important principle comes from Article 100 which explicitly underlines the requirement for UN staff to remain neutral: 'the Secretary-General and the staff shall not seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the Organization'.¹

This question of the impartiality of UN staff was brought into question in the years following the establishment of the organisation when the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation began interviewing staff members about their political preferences,

especially those who were citizens of countries which had communist or socialist regimes. This was the era of McCarthyism in the US during which there was significant political repression due to the fear of the rise of communist influence within American institutions, largely in the context of the accelerating Cold War.

As a response, the UN established its **United Nations Administrative Tribunal** in 1950 which was an in-house mechanism designed to resolve internal staff conflicts and to act as the final arbitrator of disputes which arose. This was an important mechanism which created both a system of appeal for UN staff but also insulated them from incursions into their autonomy from the member-states that the FBI investigation had highlighted the dangers of. Crucially, the Tribunal was the first moment that forcefully asserted the independence of the Secretariat as a neutral, international body that was bound by its own rules, rather than those of any member state. In addition, it signified that UN officials could generate policies based on the principles of the Charter that further developed the independence of the Secretariat and protected them from outside interference.

Tragedy and Clarity

It was during these years of Dag Hammarskjöld's tenure as Secretary-General (1953-1961) that further clarity emerged about the purpose and independence of the Secretariat. On 30 May 1961, Hammarskjöld delivered his infamous address at Oxford University entitled: **'The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact'**. Given at a politically sensitive moment when the UN was embroiled in one of its most controversial and costly peacekeeping missions ever in the newly-independent Congo², he detailed the principles and the importance of the international civil service, which, he argued embodied the essence of internationalism as a whole. He emphasised the importance of the independence and neutrality of the officials who worked for the UN and pointed to the ethics of public service, rather than national interest, and what he termed the 'integrity and conscience' which was at their core.³

However, this speech also became highly significant as a turning point because Hammarskjöld was killed in a mysterious plane crash in the Congo less than four months later in September 1961. His ardent defense of his Secretariat staff, and the articulation of his vision of how UN personnel should operate, and with which principles, came to be viewed as one of his most significant contributions to internationalism, and a roadmap for the development of the international civil service thereafter.

Expansion and Reform

Hammar skjöld's leadership simultaneously inspired others to seize upon the potential of the Charter. Many initiatives for the expansion and reform of the structures and mechanisms of the Secretariat were then led by Member States and UN officials from the Global South. Three important developments can be identified in the 1960s under the leadership of Secretary-General U Thant: the creation of the **Special Committee on Decolonization (Committee of 24)** in 1964, the establishment of the **United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)** in 1962 and the development of the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** in 1966.

These new agencies established permanent institutions within the UN system that were both impactful and problematic in different ways. Crucially, what linked them together was their focus on social and economic development and their formation at the high point of the decolonisation process. Membership of the UN swelled during the 1960s due to the advent of newly independent states, most of which were vociferously anti-colonial. These members brought with them a clear agenda for global reform and sought to realise the potential of the UN in the areas of development and human rights as an expansion of the principles of decolonisation.

UN officials such as Raúl Prebisch, the first Secretary-General and creator of UNCTAD, and Ralph Bunche who worked with the Committee of 24 (Special Committee on Decolonization) through the UN Trusteeship Council, believed that the Charter contained untapped potential for shaping world order. They sought to expand the programs and institutions within the UN, thereby expanding the agency and capacity for action of many UN staff members, while instantaneously expanding the number, scope and experiences of the staff system around the globe.

These new roles and functions essentially created more authority, space and capacity for UN officials and experts to implement programs and policies more effectively, while also in some cases giving them more autonomy to directly connect the political level of the Secretariat with the implementation level in the field. This was important in giving voice to alternative models of global order, which differed from the liberal international world envisioned by the Great Powers in 1945. Significantly, these years marked the high-point of challenging this vision through UN institutions, as more space was created to debate the meaning and realisation of policies and practices developed by these programs.



Ethics and Accountability

The beginning of the 1990s heralded a period of optimism and enthusiasm for international organisations, not least the UN which elected the Ghanaian Kofi Annan as Secretary-General in 1997. To a certain extent, this renewed hope in the ability of the UN to preserve international peace and security came from the wider context of the ending of the Cold War, and the rise of Third Way politics which advocated a more humanitarian worldview.

Within the organisation, this initially led to the extension of peacekeeping activities in various theatres around the world and the creation of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in 1991. There was also a renewed focus on the humanitarian functions of the UN including the establishment of the Department of Peace Operations and the Peacebuilding Support Office in 1992 and the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1993. But following the failure of the organisation to prevent or contain the genocides which took place in Rwanda in 1994 and Bosnia in 1995, this optimism was brought to an abrupt end.

In response, Kofi Annan created the **UN Ethics Office**⁴ in 2006 as a direct response to scandals that emerged from peacekeeping missions that generated allegations of corruption among UN staff.⁵ This was another significant turning point for the Secretariat because it created

space and opportunity for whistleblowers from within the ranks to safely report incidents of discrimination, harassment, sexual abuse and abuse of authority.

The provisions to protect whistleblowers were aimed at insulating staff members and encouraging them to report all forms of misconduct with the aim of improving the functioning and transparency of the organisation. It was also designed to enforce the rules of conduct for staff members, which had in many instances been violated during the difficult missions and myriad of challenges the UN faced in executing its mandates. This was another important turning point because it helped to dispel the idea that UN staff could operate without impunity and created a mechanism for improving the internal functioning of the system as a whole.

Inclusion and Representation

It is gradually becoming evident that recent years have rendered increased responsibility and pressure for UN staff and experts. On the one hand, this has provided significant opportunities to continue to innovate within the system and ensure that the UN does more for the world's most vulnerable, with the expansion of its functions and the creation of new offices such as those mentioned previously. It has also given rise to a global dialogue on internationalism, its value, the status of the liberal world order and the UN's role in global order.



The current Secretary-General António Guterres has sought to open the UN to traditionally disenfranchised actors such as the youth with the creation of the UN Youth Agenda 2030.⁶ It is highly significant that the UN@75 celebrations are being marked by a series of global dialogues around the world in an effort to engage global populations with the UN's work. This represents a side-stepping of the Member States as the UN seeks to revitalise its image and legitimacy among individuals to the extent that it has created a feedback mechanism⁷ for people to communicate directly with the UN. This is certainly an effort to generate more public trust and transparency within the UN, but also represents an alternative route of communication and action for UN staff members, allowing them to interact more directly with global populations, without the filter of bureaucracy through the Member States.

On the other hand, however, there has been a pattern of resistance towards reform among the Member States, as frustration and disillusionment with the UN has spread. The wider context of a lack of public trust in institutions which has arisen since the 2008 global financial crisis, including a swing towards populism and right-wing conservatism, has contributed towards this turn away from the UN, but crucially not necessarily a sense of fatigue among its staff and experts.

This has led the Secretariat to engage more with alternative sources of cooperation including academia and research institutions. One interesting development has been the creation of the **UN Academic Impact Initiative**⁸ in 2010 which seeks to bring together higher education experts and practitioners to help promote UN goals and mandates. This gives relevant academics access to the Secretariat from outside, but also helps UN staff to proliferate their ideas, mandates and policies in educational settings.

At the time of writing (May 2020), the world is engulfed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. What we have seen so far is two-fold. On the one hand, there is the beginning of a turn back towards UN institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO) and a resurgence of interest and trust by many in their functions and the advice of their experts. On the other, however, the WHO and the Security Council have been severely criticised by others for acting too late or ineffectively to stop or slow down the spread of the pandemic. Although it is too early to tell, it may be that we are on the cusp of a new turning point which will either demonstrate the vitality and legitimacy of our international institutions or lead to a breakdown and total structural reform of the current system. Either way, it will be a challenging time for the UN and those that serve it.

Endnotes

¹ Chapter XV, Article 100, UN Charter.
<https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-xv/index.html>

² On the Congo crisis, see Alanna O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation, America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo crisis, 1960-64*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018);
Lise Namikas, *Battleground Africa: Cold War in the Congo 1960-1965* (Stanford C.A., Stanford University Press, 2013).

³ Dag Hammarskjöld, 'The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact, Lecture delivered to Congregation at Oxford University, 30 May 1961.
https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ics_100_no_4_oxfordspeech.pdf

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/ethics/>

⁵ Secretary-General's Bulletin, 'Protection against retaliation for reporting misconduct and for cooperating with duly authorized audits or investigations,' 19 December 2005, United Nations Secretariat
<https://undocs.org/ST/SGB/2005/21>

⁶ 'Youth 2030, Working with and for Young People,' Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth,
https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/18-00080_UN-Youth-Strategy_Web.pdf

⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/un75/join-conversation>

⁸ <https://academicimpact.un.org/content/about-unai>

About this publication

This publication is part of a series issued by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation commemorating 100 years of international civil service, which originated in 1919 with the birth of the League of Nations.

The series features inspirational and reflective think pieces on the concept of the international civil service by former and present United Nations' officials, as well as representatives from civil society and academia.

It relates to the Foundation's work on leadership, which strives to kindle a constructive dialogue on how to foster and secure visionary and principled leadership in the UN.

The Author



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