

Excerpted from *Transforming the United Nations System: Designs for a Workable World* (TUNS), by Joseph E. Schwartzberg, United Nations University Press, 2013.

## UNITED NATIONS REFORM (Preface and Chapter 1)

Since the founding of the United Nations in 1945, there has been much talk about reforming its Charter and working methods, but remarkably little action in doing so. In fact, the UN Charter was designed to prevent reforms that would diminish the power of the leading victorious nations in World War II, the so-called P-5: China, France, the Soviet Union (now Russia), the United Kingdom and the United States. That arrangement has worked reasonably well for those powers. But repeated failures by the UN to deal effectively with such major global problems as weapons of mass destruction, genocide, mass migrations, climate change, and global pandemics have significantly strengthened the determination of enlightened world citizens to reform the present system.

### Our Changing World

Since the UN's founding in 1945, we have seen:

1. a great rise in the number and importance of international and regional agencies;
2. economic and social globalization, with much greater roles for non-state actors, especially MNCs (multi-national corporations) and NGOs (non-governmental organizations);
3. the subversion of local cultures;
4. new voices, especially among youth, demanding political, economic and social justice, and widespread terrorism when those voices are ignored;
5. a revolution in communication technology, enabling the virtually instant spread of new ideas and information to all parts of the world.

### Questions of Design and Perspective

The design of decision-making agencies contributes greatly to the quality and legitimacy of the decisions that they make. But, to put it mildly, there are many major problems with the way in which the UN was cobbled together by the great powers in 1945 and in the ways by which new global agencies have been added ever since. Throughout the UN system the principal units of decision-making are individual nations. But these vary enormously in population, wealth, culture and political orientation. At the founding of the UN, the dominant perspective of the Charter was that of the powerful nations of the Western world (now seen as the "Global North"), but most members of the UN, by far, are nations of the "Global South."

#### Choices for the Rich (the "Global North")

**Option A:** Isolationism coupled with nationalism, looking only after one's own national interests and relying on military might to keep potential enemies at bay.

**Option B:** Patronage of poor nations, allocating a small portion of one's resources to meeting the world's needs (enough to maintain others as dependent clients, but not enough to bring about major changes).

#### Choices for the Poor (the "Global South")

**Option A:** Fatalistically accepting the continuation of global injustice and adopting policies acceptable to the powerful.

**Option B:** Violently demanding justice (with the consequent likelihood of being crushed).

**Option C: Globalism; working for needed changes in our system of global governance to promote democracy and justice.**

## Rethinking Sovereignty

Article 2 of the UN Charter states: “*The Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.*” Steadfast adherence to this principle, especially by nations that are politically weak, has proved to be a major impediment to Charter reform. But is this seemingly simple principle, originating with the 1648 Peace of Westphalia -- following Europe’s devastating Thirty Years War and subsequently diffused by colonial powers throughout the world -- still optimal for our complex, interdependent planet?

Whatever a nation’s type of government may be – on a spectrum ranging from truly democratic to autocratic – the Westphalian system of sovereignty conveys to that nation the right to govern exclusively over a specifically bounded area. Attempts by outside agencies, including those of the United Nations system, to legally abridge this right (among others) are almost always considered unacceptable. Nations zealously seek to preserve their *unfettered* sovereignty. While the Westphalian system, at times, worked more or less well, present-day threats to global security and sustainability make it necessary for us to reconsider adherence to the idea of unfettered national sovereignty in the contemporary world.

Although the Westphalian system *theoretically* empowers nations to control the flow of people, goods, services, money and ideas across their borders, in *practice* they do so rather poorly. Ways are almost always found to enable laundered money, migrants, black market merchandise, drugs, sex trafficking, propaganda, armaments, and other “bads” to evade government regulations. Additionally, behind-the-curtain influence peddling often enables agents of foreign governments and powerful and unscrupulous multi-national companies to influence national policies in profoundly undesirable ways.