

STUDY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

for

TRANSFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM: DESIGNS FOR A WORKABLE WORLD

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Unit 3: A World Parliamentary Assembly (p. 36-63)

Why Is This Important? (p. 36)

The opening words of the UN Charter are “We the peoples,” but nowhere else in the Charter is the role of the people(s), as opposed to that of governments, mentioned. This conventional view that people are represented via their respective national governments is often invalid. In practice, the “democratic deficit” has been profound.

Key Issues (p. 36-38, 59, 61)

Presently, the UN lacks a true legislative organ. The General Assembly may be regarded as a proto-legislature. It has deliberative and advisory capability, but it cannot enact binding legislation. It represents *nation states*, rather than people. If the GA were to become one house of a bicameral body, whose second house, a World Parliamentary Assembly (WPA), representing people -- analogous to the US Senate and House of Representatives, respectively -- the resultant creation would enable the UN to provide voices for those whose lives are impacted by its decisions. A WPA, Boutros Boutros-Ghali observed, *"could invigorate our institutions of global governance with unprecedented legitimacy, transparency and accountability."*

With a WPA and other reforms in place, we could expect a world in which people of different nations would be more inclined to listen to and learn from one another, in which states would be less prone to violent conflict, and in which a revitalized UN would be better able to address the needs of all the Earth's inhabitants.

OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME:

- The large number of member states from which representatives would have to be elected
- The exceedingly skewed distribution of their population and economic capability
- The exceedingly large number of constituents that would be represented by individual parliamentarians
- The diversity of their languages and cultures
- The wide variation among nations in respect to their past experience and current practices relating to democratic governance

Obtaining agreement within the UN that a WPA is necessary is unlikely to come about without substantial and persistent pressure by civil society on the governments of progressive member nations. Those nations, in turn, would have to take the lead in promoting the WPA idea within the GA, whose assent by a 2/3 majority would be essential. (Note that Security Council approval would not be needed – p. 38)

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Is criticism of the democratic deficit in the UN system justified? Why do you hold your opinion, pro or con? If the latter, do you agree that a WPA could be effective in resolving this deficit?**
- 2. Could a WPA give minorities, including indigenous peoples, a voice at the UN? If so, how?**
- 3. How might a WPA impact transparency, effectiveness, and legitimacy within the UN system?**
- 4. What concerns might block or stall the creation of a WPA? Would the creation of a WPA threaten national sovereignty?**
- 5. If universal membership is envisioned, what influence would non-democratic states have? Should participation be restricted to delegates from democratic nations? What are the arguments, pro and con?**
- 6. How long might it take to persuade a 2/3 majority in the GA that a WPA would be beneficial? What actions can civil society organizations and progressive member nations take to move this idea forward?**

Possible Solutions (p. 38-59)

The book proposes the following evolutionary approach:

Stage 1 (p. 38-45): An advisory body with parliamentarians (MWP) chosen by national governments

Such a body would be a politically expedient, near-term solution, biased in favor of both demographically small states and major donor nations. The number of seats advocated for each country would be determined based on population, UN dues paid (in proportion to GNI) and the “sovereign equality of nations” principle. UN members with more than one seat would be expected to assign seats with due regard to the breakdown by parties within their legislatures. The WPA at this Stage would be endowed with only advisory and consultative powers.

Stage 2 (p. 45-58): A popularly elected body with gradually increasing legislative competence

We propose a system of “degressive proportionality” to determine the number of seats per nation. In such a system the number of constituents per legislator increases as a nation’s population increases.

Stage 3 (p. 58-61): a maximally democratic system (one-person-one-55vote), in which country boundaries are often ignored and the number of constituents per MWP is roughly equal everywhere

The entire world would be divided into a set of “electoral fields,” each with four to ten popularly elected seats filled in accordance with some agreed-upon system of proportional representation. Some of these fields would consist of portions of given nations, others would comprise a single nation and some would combine a number of small neighboring nations.

QUESTIONS:

- 1. If you question the desirability and feasibility of the book’s evolutionary approach to creating a WPA, with three stages of development, what is your suggested alternative and why do you believe it would be preferable?***
- 2. STAGE 1: To what extent would you regard representation by members of national parliaments, or by individuals appointed by national governments, a desirable development?***
- 3. STAGE 1: How much power should be granted to a WPA in the initial stage of its existence? Should it be authorized to enact binding legislation? Or should it play only an advisory role? Why do you hold the opinion that you do?***
- 4. STAGE 2: Why do you / don’t you accept the idea of “degressive proportionality” (p. 49-54)? Why do you / don’t you accept the idea of “proportional representation” (p. 54-56) for political parties within the delegations of nations with more than a single seat?***
- 5. STAGE 2: What would be required to enhance the WPA’s democratic credentials to such an extent that it would be given a role, along with the GA, in drafting and enacting binding legislation?***
- 6. STAGE 3: Do you believe that the proposed multi-seat electoral fields are a desirable and achievable goal?***