



As leader of the United Nations (UN), the Secretary-General is responsible for ensuring that the organisation is capable of solving the world's most significant and complex problems.

Secretaries-General have an important role to play in driving governments to address climate change, promote sustainable development, tackle mass atrocities and protect fundamental human rights. Through their mediation efforts they can help to prevent and stop wars, and serve to uphold the values and ideals of humankind, embodied by the UN Charter.

The role has grown significantly in scope and importance since the UN's creation. At present, the Secretary-General works with 193 Member States, leads over 40,000 staff, and oversees the work of 30 UN funds, programmes and agencies, which deal with a wide range of global development and humanitarian issues. Surprisingly, while the UN and its responsibilities have increased substantially over the past 70 years, the selection process for its leader has been defined, if at all, by customary, informal and outdated practices.

The case for urgent reform

Unlike other international organisations, the UN has virtually no established, public rules or formal criteria for selecting the Secretary-General. Instead, the 1945 UN Charter and a resolution passed the following year by the UN General Assembly continue to provide the only formal and very broad provisions for the appointment process of the Secretary-General.¹

Candidates are nominated by governments, after which the Security Council agrees on a final nominee – usually the result of secret bargaining among the five permanent members of the Council, subject to their individual vetoes. The General Assembly then confirms the final nominee by a majority vote. There is no systematic and transparent reporting during the process, including information on which candidates are being considered. Civil society and the general public are not involved at all. To date no woman has ever served as Secretary-General.

For the past 20 years, a large majority of governments have agreed that the current process is unsuited to choosing the best possible candidate to lead the UN.² Eminent commentators have long considered it too opaque and out of step with modern recruitment practices.³ The process is at odds with the UN's own standards and ideals, while giving too much power to the Security Council and its permanent members.

Given the seriousness of the challenges confronting the world and the recognised inadequacies of current practices, there is an urgent need to reform comprehensively the way in which the UN's membership chooses the Secretary-General. The selection process must be changed to meet the higher standards of transparency and accountability that UN Member States and civil society have called for.

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A better process, a stronger UN

With the term for the current Secretary-General ending in December 2016, the international community has an historic opportunity to use the intervening period to improve the selection process. There is significant scope for change as many of the current practices are informal and flexible, having evolved over time, and do not require an amendment of the UN Charter - notoriously difficult to obtain.

A mandate to lead

Member States have stressed the need to make the selection procedure more robust, particularly at a time when global cooperation is needed more than ever. From climate change to armed conflict, terrorism and pandemics, many of the world's defining problems transcend borders. Yet the world is increasingly polarised. Relying on government coordination through regional groups or informal fora such as the G8 or G20 is grossly insufficient if we are to solve problems that require the involvement of all the world's countries.

A more open and inclusive selection process, that engages all Member States, could give future Secretaries-General a stronger mandate, which in turn would boost their ability to mobilise support for, and drive forward, the UN's agenda. A more inclusive process would help revitalise the UN, enhance its effectiveness and credibility, as well as reaffirm its global authority and popular appeal.

A mandate to act

A longer, single term of office would further strengthen the UN Secretary-General's role. It would provide future candidates with the required political space to develop and implement a more independent, long-term and visionary agenda. Removing the need to campaign for re-election and the constraints that this imposes would also give future Secretaries-General the leeway required to be bolder in pushing for this agenda to be implemented.

A commitment to change

Suggestions to reform the selection process have been repeatedly proposed and supported by the majority of the General Assembly's members.⁴ In 2009, the UN's own Joint Inspection Unit report on the selection and conditions of service of executive heads in the UN system reaffirmed these calls for reform. But the UN, including the General Assembly, is yet to implement its own recommendations. This is due in part to a lack of political will, and insufficient time accorded to considering reforms ahead of appointments.

The upcoming appointment in 2016 provides an ideal moment for the UN's membership to demonstrate its commitment to find the best leader for the UN.

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Recommendations

Principles

Reflecting best practices in the selection of other top public leaders,⁵ the selection process for the next UN Secretary-General should be:

- Focused on producing the best possible candidate
- Held in a timely and structured manner
- Based on formal selection criteria and qualifications
- Designed to promote gender parity and grounded in best practice on equality and diversity, including encouraging candidates from all regions
- Transparent to the wider UN membership
- Transparent to civil society, the general public and media
- Inclusive for all members of the General Assembly and open to appropriate input from civil society

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Process

A comprehensive reform of the selection process for future UN Secretaries-General should include all of the following ten points:

1. The position and qualifications should be advertised in all countries with a call for nominations by Member States, parliaments and civil society organisations and a closing date for nominations.
2. The UN should publish a formal list of selection criteria. These criteria should stress that the best person, male or female, should be chosen irrespective of their region of origin (see Annex).
3. A clear timetable for the selection process should be made public as early as possible by the President of the General Assembly and President of the Security Council to coincide with the call for nominees.
4. A list of all the official candidates and their CVs should be published by the President of the General Assembly at the end of the nomination phase, and by the President of the Security Council when it considers its list of preferred candidates.
5. The President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council should be jointly responsible for regularly updating the UN membership and general public on the selection process once the full list of candidates has been announced.
6. All candidates should make clear their leadership vision and goals for the position. This should include policy priorities and a commitment to selecting senior UN officials on the basis of merit, irrespective of their country of origin.
7. Once the names of all candidates have been announced, the General Assembly should organise a series of open sessions that will enable Member States as well as the public and media to scrutinise candidates and their platforms.
8. The General Assembly and Security Council should insist that candidates do not make promises to individual countries on senior appointments and Member States should undertake not to seek such promises.
9. The General Assembly should request the Security Council to present two or more Secretary-General candidates for the General Assembly to consider.
10. The term of the Secretary-General should be limited to a single and non-renewable period of seven years.

Annex: Selection criteria for choosing the UN Secretary-General

The UN should adopt a set of formal criteria and qualifications. This should be made public and guide all stakeholders in proposing candidates and in selecting the best-qualified individual to become Secretary-General of the United Nations.

It should include:

- A comprehensive understanding of, and demonstrated commitment to, the purposes and principles of the UN Charter including peace and security, human rights and development.
- The possession and display of the highest qualities of moral authority, independence, integrity and courage.
- A demonstrated capacity for moral, intellectual and political leadership of an international organisation and capacity to provide leadership to the wider UN system.
- A proven ability to manage a complex international organization.
- Sophisticated diplomatic, mediation and problem-solving skills.
- The public speaking and media skills required to be an effective and inspiring global communicator.
- Proven multicultural understanding and sensitivity to equality and diversity.
- A track record showing a willingness to work with civil society and all other relevant stakeholders.

Notes

- 1 The UN Charter (Article 97) merely states that the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly (GA) upon the recommendation of the Security Council. GA resolution 11/1 (1946) recommends that the Security Council puts forward one candidate to the General Assembly but does not stipulate it. This has simply been the practice to date and could be changed with a new General Assembly resolution.
- 2 Zahran, Mohamed, Fall, Papa Louis & Roman-Morey, Enrique. *Selection and Conditions of Service of Executive Heads in the United Systems Organizations*. UN Joint Inspection Unit, Geneva 2009. JIU/REP/2009/8
- 3 See, for example, Urquhart, Brian. *The Next Secretary-General: How to Fill a Job with No Description*. Foreign Affairs (September/October 2006)
- 4 These include the following resolutions, all adopted by consensus: GA resolution 51/241 (1997), GA resolution 60/286 (2006), GA resolution 64/301 (2010) and GA resolution 67/297 (2013).
- 5 Security Council Report Special Research Reports No.1: Appointment of a new Secretary-General - (February 2006) and No. 3 Appointment of the UN Secretary-General (May 2011)



1 for 7 Billion is a global campaign supported by organisations and individuals committed to getting the best UN Secretary-General

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