

70 Years After the UN's Declaration on Human Rights, the Struggle Continues Against Poverty, War, Disease – and Whistleblowers

The resignation last month of the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Erik Solheim, after an internal audit found that he had misused funds from the organisation, has been construed as a sign that the UN is serious about tackling wrongdoing within its ranks. However, this high-profile case should not distract us from the fact that waste, fraud and corruption are rarely punished in the UN system, and that the majority of offenders get away scot-free.

Solheim is accused of spending nearly half a million dollars on unnecessary travel within a period of less than two years. The audit showed that between May 2016 and March 2018 he spent 529 days travelling and only stayed in Nairobi, where UNEP has its headquarters, for about 20 per cent of the time.

Much of this travel was wasteful. For instance, in July 2016, he travelled to Paris for a one-day official meeting but decided to stay on in the French capital for a whole month (at taxpayers' expense). In the following two months, he travelled for 42 days to 24 destinations. One official trip to Addis Ababa was routed through Oslo in his home country Norway, even though the Ethiopian capital is just a two-hour flight from Nairobi. The audit report also showed that Solheim was not the only culprit – other senior managers at UNEP have been accused of spending a whopping \$58.5 million on travel alone over a two-year period – and this, from an organisation that advocates for the reduction in the use of fossil fuels.

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This blatant abuse of taxpayers' money is not new at the UN and Solheim's conduct is hardly unique. The differences between Solheim's case and others are: one, his case managed to reach the internal investigation stage, which only happens when there is political will to carry out such an investigation; two, the findings of the investigation were made public, which is usually not the case; the case against him was strong because the trail of misused funds could be traced through flight and hotel bookings, which is not normally the case when deceptive UN managers make UN money disappear without a trace.

One common way of diverting or stealing funds in the UN is to create phantom projects. Let me give you a personal example. Sometime in 2009, my boss at the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) called me into his office to tell me that he urgently needed to spend \$100,000 of donor money before the end of the year because if he didn't, he'd have to return the funds to the donor country. So he appointed me to manage a \$100,000 project that would result in a book on cities for which he said he would hire consultants from abroad to research and write such a book. The consultants (some of whom were friends of the boss's boss) were hired and a phantom book project was created.

Two months later, the book project was "closed" (without my knowledge, yet I was supposedly heading the project) even though no manuscript or book had materialised. When I realised that the project was fake and that money may have been diverted to a personal project, I reported the matter to the project/funds manager (a junior officer, essentially a

bookkeeper, who had no say in how money in the organisation was spent and who only followed the instructions of her bosses). There was no response and within hours of my email, the process of eliminating me from the organisation began. I suffered retaliation, threats of non-renewal of contract and a whole range of psychological warfare tactics that eventually made me leave the organisation. I realised then that I had inadvertently become a “whistleblower”.

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When I eventually took UN-Habitat to task through the UN Ethics Office – which was created in response to the Oil-for-Food debacle in Iraq, and which is mandated to look into whistleblower cases – I was enmeshed in a labyrinth of doublespeak and obfuscation that convinced me that the UN Ethics Office was created to muzzle and suppress whistleblowers so that the UN's reputation would not be tarnished. I got no support from the office; on the contrary, I was told, both by the Ethics Office and UN-Habitat's senior bosses, that the whole thing was a figment of my imagination. I have had to live with that “gaslighting” humiliation for the last nine years.

Millions of dollars have disappeared from the UN's coffers through such opaque practices, the fiddling of books, and even downright theft, but few of the culprits are reprimanded, fired or even identified. (Even Solheim was allowed to quietly resign.) On the contrary, whistleblowers find themselves out of a job or demoted.

For instance, senior UN officials implicated in the scandalous UN Oil-for-Food Programme in Iraq are still walking around

freely, enjoying their UN perks and benefits. A 2005 investigation led by Paul Volcker – who was appointed by the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan after a series of exposés about money being diverted from the programme appeared in the media – found that billions (yes, billions!) of dollars had been lost through a network that included Saddam Hussein, dubious foreign companies and individuals who paid bribes or received kickbacks to participate in the programme and UN employees who received bribes or chose to look the other way. Not one person identified as having fraudulently benefitted from the programme – it was supposed to help the Iraqi people cope with the sanctions imposed after Saddam invaded Kuwait – has been charged with this crime in any national court. (Saddam Hussein was eventually tried and executed by a kangaroo court, not for diverting funds from the programme, but for crimes he had committed against the Iraqi people.)

Meanwhile, the UN simply noted the findings of the Volcker investigation and UN member states continued with business as usual. Besides, by the time the findings of the Volcker investigation were made public, the United States and Britain, two of the five veto-holding powers in the UN Security Council, were embroiled in an illegal war in Iraq, which diverted the public's attention from one of the biggest scams the world has ever witnessed.

The Oil-for-Food Programme put a huge dent in the UN's reputation because of the scale of the theft, but this particular UN-managed initiative only got exposed because there were people within the organisation, such as Michael Soussan, author of *Backstabbing for Beginners*, and Rehan Mullick, a database manager, who were willing to blow the whistle on wrongdoing within the programme. Many smaller-scale thefts are taking place every day under the noses of UN bosses, and sometimes with their collusion.

The reason why such thefts and cover-ups are so common in the UN is that UN agencies are often deliberately vague about how

they spend their money. A NORAD-commissioned investigation in 2011 found that most of the UN agencies surveyed had difficulty explaining where their money had gone or to which specific projects, and that information about expenditure was either limited or fragmented.

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When internal investigations are carried out, it usually means that things have gone out of hand (or that enough people in the organisation are pissed off and are complaining), which is what happened with Solheim at UNEP and also at the UN's refugee agency in Uganda recently. An internal audit of UNHCR's operations in Uganda found that the agency wasted tens of millions of dollars in 2017 by overpaying for goods and services, awarding major contracts improperly and failing to prevent fraud and waste. In addition, thousands of blankets, wheelbarrows and solar lamps meant for South Sudanese refugees went missing. The UN agency also entered into inappropriate arrangements with Ugandan government officials. For instance, it paid the Office of the Prime Minister \$320,000, ostensibly to buy a plot of land to expand the government's refugee-handling capacity; yet the Office of the Prime Minister could not produce a title deed to prove ownership and the land is now being used as a parking lot.

Part of the problem is that UN agencies are expected to monitor, evaluate and audit their own programmes and projects – the poacher as game-keeper. Donors to the UN expect the global body to report on the the projects they fund. This is problematic because it means that UN agencies can easily

manipulate their monitoring and evaluation reports to suit their own agendas, needs and funding requirements. Besides, success is often measured by how much money was raised and spent, not on whether the project achieved its goals. There is, therefore, a desire to spend large amounts of money in the quickest way possible – even if it means travelling first class to a vague conference in a distant part of the world.

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Moreover, a project is not “closed” because it was successful (which should be the ultimate aim of any project); rather, it remains “ongoing” even when the situation on the ground has changed (which explains why there are still UN peacekeepers in Haiti even though the civil conflict there ended years ago). No one wants to know how many people's lives improved significantly as a result of the project or why the crisis that led to the project keeps recurring.

This explains why, year after year, the UN fabricates or exaggerates a humanitarian crisis in some part of the world. A few years ago it was Somalia; today it is Yemen. No one wonders why, if the UN has been so successful in stemming the scourge of war around the world the refugee crisis today is bigger than it was when the UN was established. To avert a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, would it not have been wiser to sanction Saudi Arabia for going to war with Yemen or to sanction the United States, the main supplier of arms to Saudi Arabia?

But these are the uncomfortable questions that UN bureaucrats – and the power wielders at the UN Security Council – do not worry too much about as they travel in luxury around the world to some god-forsaken country whose people will never be lifted out of misery because the UN will not have it any other way: too many UN jobs depend on people remaining poor, hungry and homeless.

What can be done to reverse this situation? Well, for starters, as the world celebrates the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human rights on 10 December, there has to be an honest discussion about whether the UN has fulfilled its mandate of promoting peace, human rights and development around the world. A scorecard would indicate success in some areas (e.g. smallpox eradication and child vaccination programmes) but dismal failures in others (e.g. wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen and genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica). If the UN cannot prevent wars and suffering, then what is its purpose?

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Secondly, we need to democratise the UN Security Council, which is currently the bastion of only five veto-holding countries – the United States, Britain, France, China and Russia – which also happen to be the world's leading weapons manufacturers and suppliers and who, therefore, have a vested interest in conflicts outside their borders. These countries decide which countries can go to war and which can't (which is why no sanctions were imposed on the United States and Britain when they went to war in Iraq). All permanent members of the UN Security Council should have an equal say in matters

concerning global security, and should be working towards preventing wars, not starting them.

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Thirdly, the UN's internal oversight system needs to be overhauled. The UN's internal justice systems, including the UN Ethics Office, should be abolished in favour of an external, independent mechanism that can provide the checks and balances that the UN so desperately needs. This mechanism, possibly in the form of a tribunal, would also allow UN whistleblowers to present their cases without fear of retaliation. Such a mechanism would, hopefully, also permit perpetrators of crimes committed by UN personnel to be brought to justice in national courts, rather than the current system that gives immunity to UN employees implicated in crimes and wrongdoing (which means they cannot be tried in any court, not even in their own country).

The UN cannot – and should not be allowed to – police itself. Given all the scandals at the UN, I think it is time an independent entity be entrusted with the responsibility of watching the world's watchdog.