# NINTH SECRETARY-GENERAL TAKES OFFICE AMIDST CLARION CALLS FOR CHANGE

Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss

António Guterres was chosen on merit and takes over the United Nations during an especially turbulent period and after a decade of low-key leadership and low staff morale. The "first" UN of governments includes the five veto-wielding members of the Security Council (P-5) that are stoking conflict, flouting international humanitarian law, breaching territorial sovereignty, and whose publics are turning inward. The "second" UN of organizations is helping to relieve the plight of tens of millions of people displaced by wars and poverty, but is viewed by many from inside and outside as slothful and disjointed. The need for an effective world organization has never been greater, but current crises and long-standing shortcomings are exposing its weaknesses.

Constant feedback is needed from the "third" UN, in whose name the world body was created. This fourth FUNDS global survey reflects the concerns of the global public and proposes a host of changes for the new Secretary-General and his transition team to consider.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS

*Today's UN is more ineffective than effective; it is considered least effective in the Middle East and North Africa.*

*Peacekeeping and peacebuilding are the UN's most important functions.*

*The new Secretary-General's most immediate priority is "addressing urgent crises of conflict and human displacement."*

*UN staff consider that a review of the effectiveness of the UN development system was the most important organizational priority.*

*The Secretary-General's two most important staffing priorities are to fill the highest posts on the basis of merit and to protect potential whistle-blowers.*

*There should be at least two Deputy Secretaries-General with specific line responsibilities.*

*Organizationally, the highest priority should be a review of all mandates for all UN entities.*

*After five years, there should be closer integration of the UN's main functional pillars.*

*The UN should increase the use of social media and engage more frequently and closely with the global public.*

The fourth FUNDS biennial global survey of perceptions of the UN was undertaken at the end of 2016. It attracted over 2,700 respondents from 154 countries. The breakdown by gender was 59/41 male/female. The largest cohort of respondents was from the private sector, followed by academia, UN staff and non-governmental organizations (see Figure 1).

The general tone of the respondents was negative about the operational effectiveness of the UN today, in all but its peace operations. But the survey also sent some clear and constructive messages about the future direction of the world organization.

**Figure 1**: Breakdown of respondents by profession
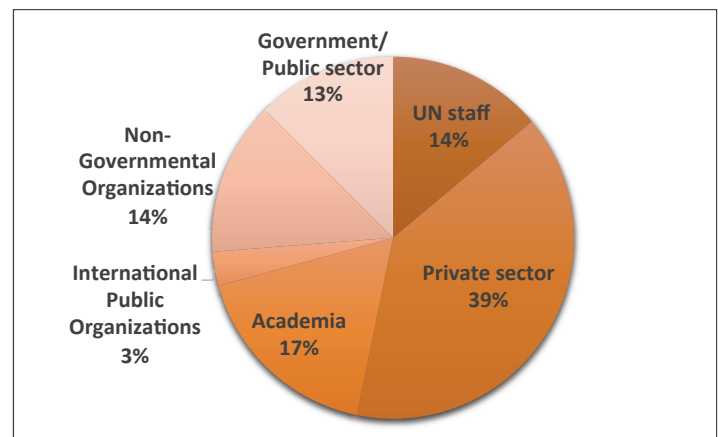


## EFFECTIVENESS

A majority of respondents (63 percent) considered the world organization to be ineffective, against 41 percent effective (see Figure 2). The pattern was similar among those from high income, emerging, and developing countries. Those working in government and the public sector were more positive than UN staff. Among the major regions, the most negative feedback was from the Middle-East and North Africa (72 percent ineffective); the most positive were from North America.

As in previous FUNDS surveys, peacekeeping and peacebuilding were considered the UN's most important functions, followed by human rights and justice (see Figure 3). However, there were important differences by region, gender, and profession. UN staff considered sustainable development to be the highest UN priority as did those from developing countries (and male respondents) who also placed sustainable development ahead of human rights. Many respondents also wrote in climate change as a sustainable development priority.

> *"Ensure strong follow-up on the Paris Agreement and encourage commitment to the target of only 1.5° C of overall warming."*

> *"Effective monitoring of the Paris Agreement on Climate change."*

> *"Draft a process to monitor and to promote the progress of the Agenda 2030."*
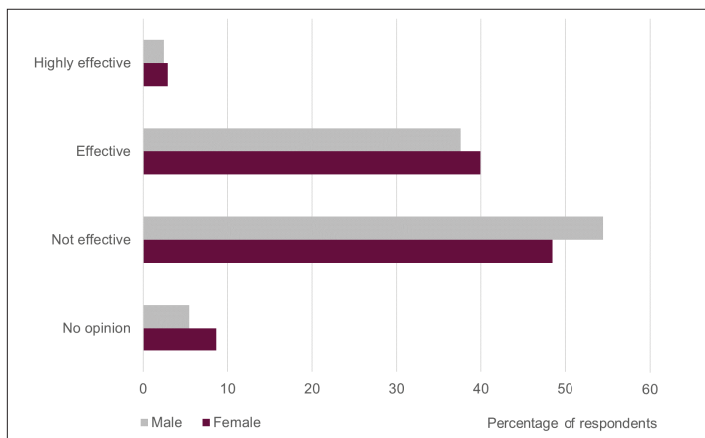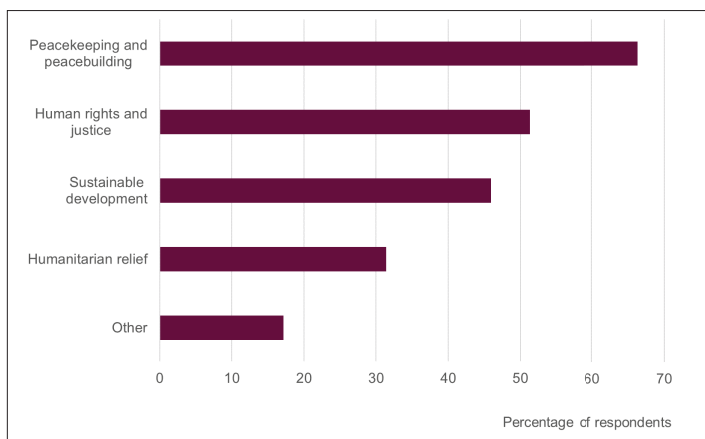
Figure 2: Overall Effectiveness of UN



Figure 3: Most Important UN Functions



## PRIORITIES FOR THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

Respondents from every region in the survey found that the Secretary-General's most immediate priority was "addressing urgent crises of conflict and human displacement." It was ranked even higher by female than male respondents. Allied to the settlement of these global crises was the need for a new agenda for peace and implementation of the peacekeeping and peacebuilding proposals made by panels and approved by the General Assembly in 2015. Among professional groups, however, UN staff considered that a review of the effectiveness of the UN development system was even more urgent (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The Most Urgent Priorities in the Secretary-General's First Six Months
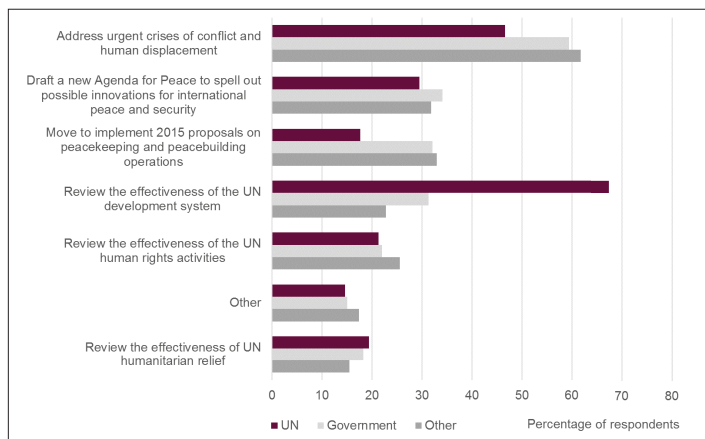


Looking inside the world organization, the top two staffing priorities were the protection of whistle-blowers and the appointment of senior posts based on merit. Respondents who find the UN less effective emphasize especially the need for merit-based senior appointments. Given the traditional jockeying for key positions by the P-5 countries, the appointment of key under-secretaries-general will present a special challenge for António Guterres and be his first acid test of a willingness to run risks to enhance the UN's effectiveness. Female respondents gave a high rank to the promotion of gender equality within the secretariat. Among UN staff, however, there is a greater preoccupation with staff performance and promotion (see Figure 5).

> *"More careful selection of heads of departments. The organization needs visionary, charismatic leaders rather than petty minded, insecure micro-managers."*

> *"Increase the oversight of USG and ASG performance and audit the performance of UN agencies for efficiency and effectiveness. UN has too many small initiatives that NGOs can do better, with low cost."*

> *"Improve gender balance at D2 / ASG / USG level—at least at USG level, we should have a 50/50 gender representation."*

Figure 5: Immediate Staffing Priorities
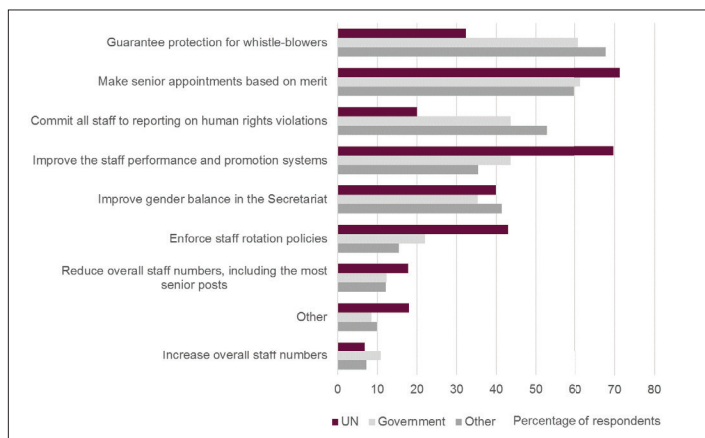


The first and most important appointment is the Deputy Secretary-General. The survey provided three options: no designated line responsibilities; specific responsibilities; or two or more persons with specific line responsibilities. Respondents revealed a clear preference for

the appointment of two or more deputies, undoubtedly in response to the hitherto amorphous nature of the post and the need to devolve to senior staff key responsibilities for the different functions of the UN. Various reform proposals, for example, have been calling for a development coordinator for almost five decades.[1] (See Figure 6.)

> "The SG to be in charge of Peace and Security and Human Rights. One DSG is responsible for UN Development System."

> "One DSG should focus on system wide review, coordination and action."

Figure 6: How Many Deputy Secretaries-General?
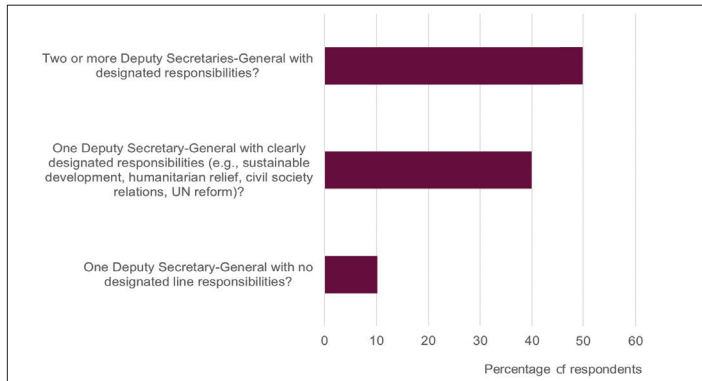


Priorities for organizational action gave the highest ranking to a review of the mandates of UN entities (48 percent), coupled with the need to revisit previous reform proposals. The review of mandates was supported across almost all regions. Pursuing the Delivering as One (DaO) principles and identifying innovative funding sources was considered more important than reducing the actual number of UN entities. The survey thus considered that the UN system was ripe for reform, while retaining its overall structure in the short-term (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Immediate Organizational Reforms
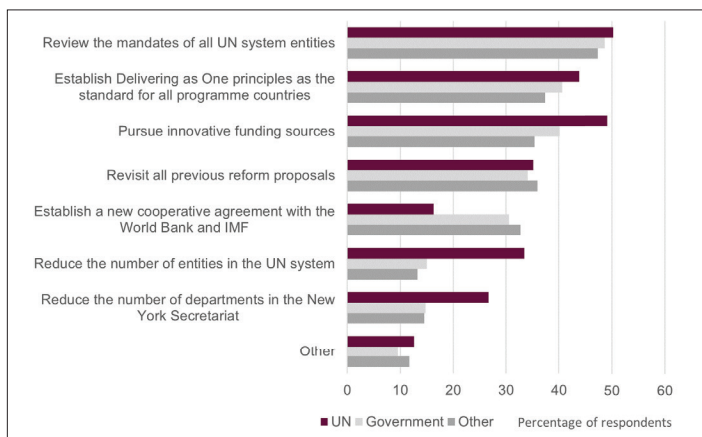


### AFTER FIVE YEARS...
In looking ahead to the most desirable achievements at the end of his first term, the survey gave the highest priority to closer integration of the four main UN functions: peace and security, sustainable development,

human rights and justice, and humanitarian relief. This concern undoubtedly was a clear reflection of continuing frustration with UN silos. Working in parallel invites duplication and waste and itself compromises the UN's effectiveness.

> "A key task for the UN will be to break silos in order to be more effective across functions, thus a new Agenda for Peace and Development would be important."

> "Merger among UN system—there is too much duplication & waste of money."

> "Review mandates of specialized agencies and set up clear guidelines to avoid duplication and overlapping of mandates. This can lead to reduction of staff."

> "It is high time to abolish some of the regional commissions, for example ESCAP and ECE."

> "Address country level divide between the UN's role in development/ humanitarian and in peace-building/political conflict resolution."

The second ranking was given to effective monitoring and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (especially favoured by UN staff respondents) and monitoring the Paris Accord on climate change. More than a third of UN staff also called for fewer organizational entities, reflecting seemingly a readiness for more radical internal reform than is commonly perceived (see Figure 8).
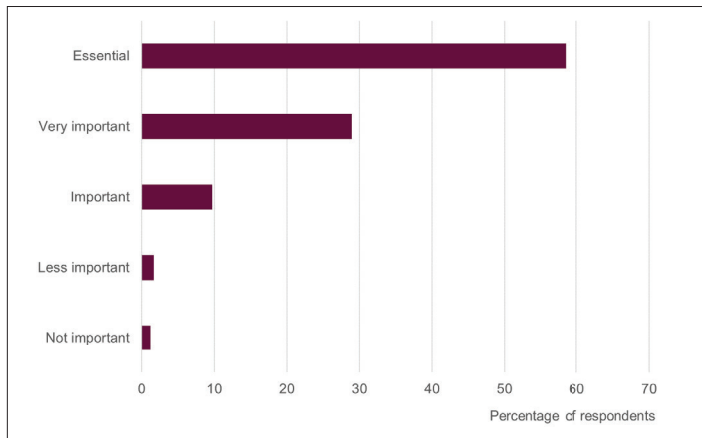
Figure 8: Most Important Achievements after Five Years
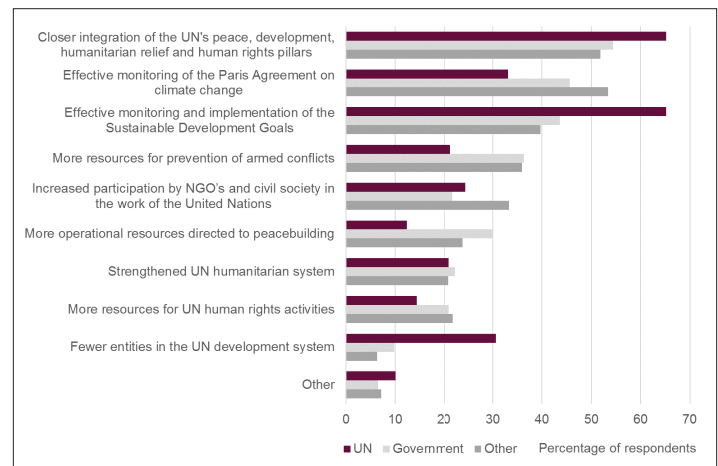


### COMMUNICATIONS
The survey revealed the importance attached to the UN's connecting more closely and regularly with the public if it is to retain credibility (see Figure 9). The most popular proposal by far was the expanded use of social media, the choice of almost 60 percent of respondents. Two-fifths of respondents wanted to recruit more staff with modern media experience. One third of civil society respondents considered regular town hall-style meetings—like the ones held in July with the candidates to become Secretary-General—to be desirable. These proposals were ranked higher than the more traditional communications methods involving UN ambassadors, press conferences, and UN television (see Figure 10).

**Figure 9**: Importance of the Engaging Ordinary Citizens to Maintain and Enhance the UN's relevance and legitimacy?



Percentage of respondents

**Figure 10**: How to Increase Public Awareness of the UN



Percentage of respondents

■ UN  ■ Government  ■ Other

## IN SUM...

The clamor for at least change and even transformation has never been stronger, and the world organization should open itself more often to feedback from the global public if it is to understand better the current levels of concern expressed by our respondents. The arrival of a new and highly experienced Secretary-General on 1ˢᵗ January 2017 provides an unusual opportunity to review a host of proposals for UN reform and stave off the danger of further marginalization. The history of relatively bold moves by most secretaries-general in the post-Cold War era provide hope for António Guterres in 2017.[2] Amidst the toxic politics of many countries turning inward, the world can ill afford a weak and unresponsive United Nations.

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## NOTES

1. Stephen Browne, "Why the UN Cannot Deliver as One (and How It Could)," *FUNDS Briefing #43*, December 2016.

2. Thomas G. Weiss and Tatiana Carayannis, "Windows of Opportunity for UN Reform: Historical Lessons for the Next Secretary-General," *International Affairs* 92, no. 2 (March 2017): 1-18.

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## RECENT FUNDS BRIEFINGS

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