Introduction

By the late 1930s the League of Nations was in obvious trouble. It was unable to adjust to the pressures for change coming from the international system. It also did not keep pace with broader multilateral developments. The League folded as the Second World War erupted.

It was in the midst of the Second World War that foundations were laid for the creation of a United Nations. In August 1941, just months before the US entered that war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt joined British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in putting together what became known as the Atlantic Charter. This charter formed the basis for the drafting of the Declaration of the UN, which was signed on 1 January 1942 by some 26 governments. The underlying reason for this declaration was the perceived need, by the leaders of the Allied forces (the US, Russia, Great Britain, France and China), to introduce a more permanent system for ensuring general global security after the war was over.¹

When the UN came into being in 1945, while its membership included states from Latin America and Asia that were not party to previous attempts at interstate organization, it was still not by any stretch of the imagination a universal body. In fact, 51 states were present at its founding – representing those governments that had either signed the UN Declaration or had declared war on the Axis powers before March of 1945. The number of UN member states has grown to 185 today, but the current structure of the apex body of this organization, the Security Council, for the most part continues to reflect the Second World War’s victorious powers’ attempt at institutionalizing the immediate post-1945 world order.
It took the culmination of colonization and the agitation of states and peoples sympathetic to the needs of the marginalized underdeveloped world for an approximation of universal multilateral organization to emerge, with expanded goals of maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, achieving international cooperation in solving international socioeconomic, cultural and humanitarian problems, encouraging and promoting respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all and becoming the centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in order to attain the above common ends. Later, other goals were added, such as protecting the global commons and encouraging democratization across the globe. One could argue that this multilateral organization was, from the beginning, an embryonic global governance mechanism. The basis for this argument can be found in the breadth and complexity of its structure, the scope of its agenda and its institutional foundation.

The UN system: characteristics of a complex transorganization

It is important first to establish what the UN system is as a means of laying out the conceptual framework within which this organization is analysed in this study, for its character and nature will tell us a tremendous amount about the possibilities of changing and reforming its structures and processes. The primary concern here is to provide a useful thumbnail sketch of this complex transorganization so that the reader can gain a sense of some of the difficulties which any organizational change programme will have in the UN context.

One of the primary difficulties in bringing about rational change and consistent management policies in the UN has to do with the complexity of the organization. The UN system is, first of all, rather unique among the genre of organizations. There is no other organization in the world that has 185 member governments as governors, ‘the equivalent of a Board of (185) Directors, each with a particular set of interests and priorities’. No other organization has the requirement that it must do its work in six official languages. The UN is also the only organization in the world that is required to employ citizens of 185 nationalities and that has a working agenda which covers almost ‘every facet of the human and planetary condition’. As Urquhart and Childers observe, the UN is expected to handle this enormous task on a budget which provides less funds per year than western children spend at Christmas.