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32 Specific Proposals to Make the UN Function Better

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An interview with Ambassador Bengt Säve-Söderbergh on the recently issued report from the Four Nations Initiative on Governance and Management

For quite some time, Ambassador Bengt Säve-Söderbergh – an experienced ‘old hand’ in the Swedish Foreign Ministry – had felt there was a need for reform proposals on UN governance and management to be formulated by Member States rather than by the Secretariat or outside experts. In 2005, this idea gained momentum, and in order to make it a representative effort, Sweden convinced three countries, one each from different regions, to join the initiative. Chile, South Africa, Sweden and Thailand share basic ideas about the functioning of the UN, Ambassador Säve-Söderbergh explained, and furthermore enjoy a good record among Member States. In September 2007, the report of the four nations, *Towards a Compact – Proposals for Improved Governance and Management of the United Nations Secretariat*, was presented to the membership at the United Nations.

Although divisions between the North and the South often cause negotiations to get stuck, Ambassador Säve-Söderbergh cautioned against lumping Member States together in this way. After all, he said, many positions of the US – especially under former Ambassador John Bolton – differ significantly from those of the EU. Thanks to transparency and inclusiveness, he felt, the usual mistrust was overcome in formulating the 32 proposals in the report. The Four Nations Initiative has been taken seriously by all Member States and he hoped that it has contributed to the improved climate among the UN’s membership.

Key to understanding the proposals in the report is the fundamental distinction between governance and management, Ambassador Säve-Söderbergh stressed, adding that Member States look at these differently than the Secretariat does. The report is very clear about this distinction, highlighting that Member States – the UN’s governors – should set priorities, provide guidance, allocate resources, and evaluate the performance of the Secretariat. On the other hand, the Secretariat – the management of the UN – implements the given tasks within the framework set by the Member States. When asked about the perception that Member States at times tend to micromanage the Secretariat, he pointed out that the proposals underline that although Member States define *what* should be achieved, the Secretariat has significant freedom on *how* to implement mandates. The Secretariat, however, has to be held more accountable on how it is accomplishing the mandates it has been given. Current performance reports do not provide Member States with sufficient information on such issues as efficiency, implementation, or corrective action that had to be undertaken. This leads to a feeling among Member States that there is lack of transparency from the Secretariat.

The main proposals in the report deal with how UN mandates are formulated, budgeted, implemented, reported on, and evaluated. Interestingly, the report not only admonishes the

Secretariat but urges Member States to review their own role as well. For example, Member States should be clearer and more precise when drafting mandates, pay their dues on time, provide the Secretariat with adequate resources, and fund all the UN's core activities from the regular budget.

Though not originally envisaged, proposals on human resources were later added. Ambassador Säve-Söderbergh suggested that dissatisfaction with the Security Council's five permanent members' habit of claiming senior posts was an important factor in deciding to include recruitment in the report. Furthermore, recruitment from the developing world needs to be improved as "surely there is enough talent out there." But apart from recruitment – which it was agreed should be based on merit – issues relating to assessing staff's performance, managerial accountability, and training are also covered in the report.

According to an independent expert on the Fifth Committee who is conducting a study on management and secretariat reform, Member States greatly welcomed the report's proposals to increase dialogue between Member States. Too often, Ambassador Säve-Söderbergh felt, Member States make up their mind too early in the negotiating process. He suggested debates in informal settings could potentially change the way in which Member States come to conclusions. Such dialogues could take place in between sessions of the Fifth Committee for instance. He admitted, however, that permanent representatives might not be willing to engage in such debates since management issues are "not as sexy" as Security Council reform.

Now that the Secretariat of the Four Nations Initiative has finished its work, I asked how the four nations will follow-up on their proposals. Ambassador Säve-Söderbergh indicated that the four countries will actively promote the proposals at relevant reform discussions. He is pleased that the President of the General Assembly, H.E. Dr. Srgjan Kerim, plans to have a debate or session on the proposals in March 2008. Asked whether he expects the upcoming Secretary General's report on results-based management to incorporate some of the proposals from the Four Nations Initiative, he answered with a chuckle that, "I do not know what religion the Secretary General adheres to but he promised us that our report would be his bible."