



Overcoming roadblocks in the Mandate Review

An interview with Ambassador Rosemary Banks of New Zealand, one of the Co-Chairs of the Mandate Review

by Lydia Swart *
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The interview took place at the mission of New Zealand whose public entrance and conference rooms combine a modern sleek look with distinctive pieces of Maori art. Ambassador Rosemary Banks herself clearly loves the artwork, including some stunning vases and intricately woven bags, which she showed to us with relish – in the process interrupting two meetings. We found her similarly unstoppable in her efforts to advance the mandate review process.²

In our interview, Ambassador Banks expressed confidence in the mandate review methodology that she and her Co-Chair Ambassador Kaire Mbuende from Namibia recently developed; indicated what we might expect from the process in the next few months; and shed new light on some of our impressions of the political dynamics in the General Assembly.

Until the current General Assembly Session, the mandate review process was dangerously politicized. Early on, Member States from the South voiced concerns about the scope of the exercise as well as suspicions that the review was probably an attempt to cut costs – at the expense of mandates dealing with development – and to further dispose of ‘politically sensitive mandates’ on, for instance, Palestine. Ambassador Banks feels that at this stage, the process has progressed well beyond such “knee-jerk” reactions.

The mandate review came out of the 2005 World Summit where Member States “resolved to strengthen and update the programme of work of the UN so that it responds to the contemporary requirements of Member States.” They agreed to conduct a review of all mandates³ older than five years (as of September 2005) in order to determine if they were still relevant, were not duplicative or overlapping, or could be considered completed.

Even the influential Co-Chairs of the review at the 60th Session, Ambassadors Allan Rock from Canada and Munir Akram from Pakistan, together with the dynamic President of the General Assembly (GA) at the time, Jan Eliasson, were not able to overcome the concerns and suspicions from some countries. But at the beginning of the 62nd Session, the current GA President, Srgjan Kerim, convinced Member States to accept two parameters that resolved the impasse: “politically sensitive” mandates would be respectfully dealt with, taking into account the perspectives of those Member States whose interests are directly involved, and any cost-savings from eliminating mandates in the area of development would be redirected to other development mandates.

In our interview, Ambassador Banks explained that the difficulties in the 60th and 61st Sessions were due to diverging perspectives about the main purpose of the mandate review. But towards the end of the 61st Session, a feeling grew across the various regional groups that the UN could not afford to fail at this attempt to rationalize the UN’s agenda. She agreed with our suggestion that an unsuccessful mandate review could seriously undermine the credibility of the UN.

Between the GA President, Co-Chair Ambassador Mbuende, and herself, it was agreed that a different methodology had to be developed to tackle the “big beast” of mandate review. There are, all in all, roughly 9,000 mandates identified in the Secretariat’s database of mandates. It seemed obvious to the three of them that the review had to be transparent, fact-based, and as objective as

possible, and they developed the methodology with this in mind. Initial consultations with Member States were encouraging, Ambassador Banks explained, and agreement was reached to start with the 279 mandates on humanitarian assistance.

The methodology evaluates mandates on the dual basis of the need to which they respond, and their delivery. Mandates are categorized as to whether they fully, partly, or no longer reflect current needs, and – in regard to timing, cost, and output – whether they are efficiently delivered, delivered but with duplication, or not being delivered.⁴

Ambassador Banks said that the methodology has been widely accepted by Member States and should be adaptable for other clusters. When this methodology was applied to the cluster of humanitarian mandates, 57% were considered to reflect current needs and also effectively implemented. Another 20% could be considered completed. The remaining 23% would benefit from consolidation, strengthening, or could require either updating or discontinuation.

We inquired about reported dissatisfaction among Member States that the Secretariat is unable to estimate how much resources are exactly allocated to each mandate. As a result, it would be difficult to assess how much savings, if any, could be achieved by the discontinuation or completion of certain mandates. Ambassador Banks noted that Controller Warren Sachs has responded to these concerns and suggested a way to make the resource linkages. The Department of Management will also update the mandate database which had not been updated since 2006.

Although the US has publicly affirmed in recent meetings that the mandate review is not a cost-cutting exercise, we noted that one nevertheless gets the sense in the GA's Fifth Committee (Budget and Administrative) that cost-savings appear even more important to the US than management reform as a whole. We also reminded her of US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad's remarks at the 8 April thematic debate in which he expressed frustration about the slow process of the mandate review and that any cost-savings should not be at the expense of mandates dealing with peace and security.⁵

Ambassador Banks characterized her experience of Ambassador Khalilzad's attitude in the mandate review as very communicative and open to suggestions.

We shared with Ambassador Banks the view of one delegate from the South who told us, as recently as a week ago, that there are enough Member States who do not wish certain mandates relevant to their countries to be reviewed and that he therefore felt that the mandate review would likely never be completed. Ambassador Banks remarked that she did not share this perspective at all. If there still is resistance, "it is not overt, not on the surface." In fact, she added, during the review of humanitarian assistance mandates, they actually did run into some so-called "sensitive" mandates and those related to Palestine easily survived the review. Furthermore, a number of Member States, including Djibouti, Sudan, and Tajikistan, have readily agreed that some humanitarian mandates related to their countries can be considered completed. Only in the case of the DRC is a reply outstanding, according to Ambassador Banks. We assume that internal turmoil in the DRC is probably the reason for this, rather than actual opposition to participation in the review.

Ambassador Banks provided an interesting example with regard to mandates that may actually require additional resources. A mandate related to the Comoros could not be fulfilled – according to both the country itself and relevant UN agencies – because not enough resources had been made available. The Co-Chairs will bring this case to the attention of the General Assembly, though she adds that as Co-Chairs, they cannot be advocates in this regard.



As to future plans, it had been envisioned to move on to mandates dealing with development, but the Co-Chairs have decided – based on consultations – that with 1,600 mandates, that cluster may be "too big a bite" at this time. It would be wiser, she said, to move to the mandates in the Africa cluster first, involving only some 60 mandates. Continuing to build mutual confidence in the process is of primary concern right now.

The Co-Chairs will shortly present their latest findings, including financial implications, on the humanitarian cluster. In that meeting they will also provide preliminary work on the next cluster.

Talking to Ambassador Banks, one has the impression that much has been achieved this year. A comprehensive methodology has been developed and applied to hundreds of mandates. No roadblocks have paralyzed the review in the humanitarian cluster and confidence in the review process appears to be growing. Nevertheless, the process is not moving as fast as some would hope, and some delegates have indicated in private that there still may be obstacles ahead.

1. Lydia Swart is the Executive Director of the Center for UN Reform Education. Faye Leone is a Program Officer at WFM/IGP and responsible for websites such as ReformtheUN.org and UNelections.org
2. Originally, her Co-Chair, Ambassador Kaire Mbuende from Namibia, would participate in this interview but he was called away on business.
3. Kofi Annan defined a "mandate as a request or a direction, for action by the UN Secretariat and other implementation entities, that derives from a resolution of the General Assembly or one of the other relevant organs." (A.60/733)
4. See the website of the GA President for documentation on the [Mandate Review](#) and [analysis](#) from ReformtheUN.org
5. The Security Council finished the review of its mandates, but it is unclear to us if this resulted in any cost-savings.

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