



INTERVIEW No.8

An Interview with Ambassador Lars-Hjalmar Wide, Chef de Cabinet of the President of the 60th U.N. General Assembly

By Irene Martinetti
September 12, 2006

On September 11 2006, the 60th General Assembly (GA) of the U.N. was brought to a close. Following the momentum created by the World Summit in September of 2005, when all Member States agreed that the U.N. system needed substantial reform, the work of the 60th GA has been driven by the important task of reforming the U.N. according to the agenda set by the Outcome Document. The President of the GA, H.E. Mr. Jan Eliasson, and his Office have thus been heavily engaged in the negotiations to bring about such reform. In particular, the discussion on the reform of the management of the U.N. has ignited much controversy. I interviewed Ambassador Lars-Hjalmar Wide, Chef de Cabinet of the outgoing Office of the President of the 60th GA who has been following the process of management reform closely, to find out what stage the process is at and what challenges lie ahead for the 61st Presidency of the General Assembly.

In answer to my question suggesting that the U.N. management reform process might have served as a magnifying lens of the North South divide, Ambassador Lars-Hjalmar Wide vigorously replies: "This has indeed been the biggest obstacle for us to overcome. There is a clear degree of mistrust among the membership....The Group of 77 (G77) fears that the management reforms could be counter to their interests" he continues, "a process subject to an agenda driven by the western/industrialized countries to refocus the activities of the U.N., from development towards other issues such as security or counterterrorism. The G77 sees management reform as a cost cutting exercise that would go on reducing the budget of the organization." These fears, he explains, have caused the developing countries to closely watch the reforms and protect their interests by trying to block the process, while the US, EU and Japan have instead been pushing strongly for its advancement. The task of the Office of the President has been to "make both sides realize that what we are looking at is not a smaller U.N., but a more efficient and effective one. A U.N. more adequately equipped to address the real issues. We have tried to sell to both sides that we are not talking about cost cutting or drastic shifts in a political direction but about trying to achieve management reform in the best way. In order to do this we need a higher degree of trust. It is not a question to do less development, but to do it better."

The Office of the President of the GA has thus put a great deal of energy in the process of building trust amongst Member States in order to advance the reforms. Ambassador Wide finds that these efforts have been quite fruitful as "there is now less mistrust between the groups than at the beginning of the reform process." On the one hand, he says "those that have been pushing very strongly for reforms have realized that they need to have a more realistic approach." For instance, he explains, they realized that the Mandate Review as it was originally conceived in the Outcome



Document was perhaps too ambitious an undertaking. On the other hand, the G77 is “now communicating more effectively that they are also in favor of the reforms.” While previously there was the impression that the G77 would have blocked all controversial reforms, they instead showed that “they are able to reach agreement, as it happened with the Fifth Committee in the early summer, thus showing that they can work and work constructively...We have been able to increase confidence and approach management reforms realistically” he point outs.

Although Ambassador Wide’s assessment of the work of the 60th Presidency of the GA in terms of the achieved reforms is quite positive, he also admits that “we are satisfied to the extent that we kept on track the management reforms, but we are not fully satisfied because I sincerely thought we would be able to reach a little bit further. Nevertheless, we are happy with the fact that the general awareness of the need for reform has been confirmed over this year and the divisions in the house on how to approach the reforms have been overcome, thus allowing for a process to be set in motion.” Responding to my concern that the momentum brought about by the World Summit could be lost with the beginning of a new GA session and thus the reform of the U.N. would suffer from the lack of political force, he declares himself quite optimistic that it will not be so. He expresses confidence that an important process has been put in motion which will certainly continue. Most likely, “the change of the Secretary General (SG) will represent a factor that could slow the process. But it is only fair that we leave the new SG time to take command of the organization. In the meanwhile, there are many reforms that can be carried out without the Secretary General, such as oversight and accountability, the modernizing of the IT system or the revision of human resources rules and regulations. Many issues can be developed, elaborated and implemented even without the supervision of the SG so I hope that the momentum will not be lost and serious work can be done starting from this fall.”

In fact, he continues, amongst the big challenges that lie ahead for Ms. Haya Rashed Al Khalifa of Bahrain, President of the incoming 61st session of the GA, will be to keep the momentum and “continue on the track decided with the Outcome Document....I believe this will be possible because many reports will be coming out soon that will have to be dealt with and that will keep the momentum going.” An important challenge that Ms. Al Khalifa will have to face, which is not directly part of the management reforms but related to it, “will lie in the review of the scale of assessment of the membership. A decision will have to be taken in the Fifth Committee before the end of this year.”

With respect to management reforms, Ambassador Wide indicates that an important achievement during the 60th session has been the establishment by the Secretary-General of the Ethics Office. The Ethics Office, which works on financial disclosure policy, whistleblower protection and the general reinforcement of ethics within the U.N. system and Secretariat “was made operational at an early stage and it is already up and running. It is now busy collecting the information necessary for the financial disclosure policy and its other activities.”



Having been able to set in motion the process of Mandate Review represents a further achievement of this Presidency, Ambassador Wide asserts. “There are still divisions on how to approach the issue” he adds, “but, at least, we have a database¹ and we have established working methods, an *Ad Hoc* working group was established and it is digging deep into the mandates....We hope that we will be able to go to Phase II with the review but an agreement has not been reached.” He adds, “...the Co-Chairs are in the process of conducting consultations and they have presented an outline of guiding principles.” He points out that this is still an ongoing process and “even though we do not reach total agreement right now, we hope that we will do so in the next few weeks so that in the early days of the 61st session some kind of general agreement should be reached on how to proceed to look at all the mandates.” Considering that reviewing all 9000 mandates one by one is unthinkable, he sees the ongoing limited process reviewing 7% of all mandates as a significant exercise that will help to define working methods and establish a certain degree of confidence in the process among Member States “so that, hopefully, we will be able to build on this and broaden the exercise.”

This Presidency has also established the important practice of meeting monthly with the Office of the President of the Security Council. As Ambassador Wide points out “this had not been done previously. The Offices exchanged information about our work programs. There was constant communication between the Offices, especially in regards to the selection of the Secretary General.” Even though the Ambassador admits that the GA has not had great influence on the work of the Security Council, he believes that meeting monthly “is an important process that should be further developed and built upon....This interaction is important to coordinate the work of the main organs of the U.N.” He adds, “earlier this year during the encroachment debate, when some members of the GA felt that the Security Council was debating issues that really belonged to the General Assembly, such as procurement, the need for some kind of coordinated approach became clear.” Hence, it is obvious that more coordination between the main organs of the U.N. is needed “not only between the GA and the Security Council but also the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) should be included. A *modus vivendi* should be found on how to work together.” Accordingly, this Presidency has also held informal meetings with the ECOSOC but it has not become an established practice as with the Security Council. He adds, “the idea would be to have all three organs meet regularly,” even though he points out “when you start codifying such practices and formalize the process, it can become more arduous than working informally. At least, I think, we got off a good start meeting with the Security Council.”

With respect to the resolution adopted on Wednesday September 6th on the Revitalization of the General Assembly, Ambassador Wide finds most significant the section on the selection process of the Secretary General. “In this resolution the role of the General Assembly is reconfirmed, within the framework of the Charter there is more space for the Member States to have a more active role in the selection and form their own opinion of candidates without it being exclusively an affair of the Security Council.” A step forward in this sense, was that during the monthly meetings between the

¹ The database of Mandates is available at <http://webapps01.un.org/mandatereview/searchStart.do>



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Office of the President of the GA and that of the Security Council, “there was an exchange of information on the process. We did not mention candidates but rather discussed on how to make the process of the selection of the Secretary General more transparent. However, the main principle laid out in Article 97 of the Charter that the General Assembly appoints the Secretary General upon the recommendation of the Charter of course remains unchanged.” In the next session of the GA, there will be consultations amongst Member States to decide whether or not to reconvene this ad-hoc working group. “There are different schools of thought here,” Ambassador Wide explains. “Some believe that we should...implement this resolution before we start the discussion again, others believe the Revitalization of the GA should be an on-going discussion.”

In terms of oversight and accountability, a report from the Secretary General is expected to be delivered soon but since “there is a high degree of commonality in the views among Member States with respect to this issue,” this reform is not particularly controversial and should be accomplished more easily.

As to the heated debate on the enlargement of the Security Council, Ambassador Wide believes that the Office of the President of the GA needs “to take the role of active listeners because we want the Member States to be in the driving seats in this debate and put forward ideas. This approach has been helpful because it has led to a situation where debates have been held with a positive and constructive tone.” He confirms that the time is not yet ripe for specific decisions and it will take some more time before an agreement can be reached.

The resolution on the revitalization of the GA encourages the Office of the President to submit a report on “lessons learned” to the incoming President to ensure some continuity. Asked to produce an improvised report on “lessons learned,” Ambassador Wide replies “the main lesson learned is that we should work in the most transparent way possible. Despite the fact that some groups still prefer making deals behind closed doors, the Office should insist for the work of the General Assembly to be open, transparent and inclusive.”