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May 08, 2005

Weekly Top 10 List: Top 10 Things the UN Does Well
Posted by Suzanne Nossel

This will take a look at the top 10 things the U.S. does well or, in a few cases, not quite "well" but at least better than any other organization out there. The approach of D-Day on John Bolton makes this as good a time as any to remind ourselves why the UN matters and some of the ways that we count on it.

1. **Food Aid.** This is an easy one. The UN's [World Food Programme](#) is among the most effective multilateral bodies bar none. They feed 104 million people a year in 80 countries. They feed people in war zones, natural disaster situations, health emergencies, and just plain poor countries. They've also got brilliant and creative people like [Richard Wilcox](#) and [Tony Banbury](#) (both former colleagues) on staff who are constantly trying to up the organization's game, Richard by building a futures market for natural disasters and Banbury by making sure the world delivers on its promise to tsunami victims.
2. **Aid to Refugees.** Also easy, because the [UN High Commissioner on Refugees](#) is another star in the UN galaxy. There were 17 million asylum-seekers, refugees and the like in 2004 who got help from UNHCR. They both help refugees directly and work to ensure that governments meet their responsibilities to these displacees. The organization got one of its first ever major bouts of [bad press](#) in February because of allegations of sexual harassment against its head, Ruud Lubbers, a former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, who was forced to resign. But nothing Lubbers did undercuts the efficacy or value of UNHCR's work.
3. **Protecting Children.** Although I still remember the days of holding back my pennies from their contribution boxes on Halloween because the organization was thought to be one-sidedly pro-Palestinian, UNICEF has built a reputation as an advocacy and service powerhouse, with [programs ranging](#) from immunizations to AIDS prevention to education and protection against exploitation.
4. **Peacekeeping.** The UN has [16 active peacekeeping missions](#) right now, in places like Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Lebanon, Liberia and Burundi. Make no mistake: in most of those places if the UN weren't there, no one else but the marauders would be and the peace or relative peace being kept would have disintegrated long ago. The history of UN peacekeeping is checkered for at least 2 reasons: a) vague mandates and inadequate resources decreed by the countries on the UN Security Council and b) poor planning, management and capabilities. On the latter front (the only front which the UN *qua* UN can do anything about), the organization has made real progress based on a [2000 reform report](#). While holes still exist, a most-improved-player award is in order here.
5. **Intervenor of Last Resort.** In peacekeeping but also more broadly, the UN gets involved in messes when noone else will. The meltdowns in [Congo](#) and [Liberia](#) are prime examples. When the U.S. and Europe have no interest in getting involved, and there's no regional player with the will and capabilities, the choice is often letting slaughter and mayhem continue untrammled, or throwing the problem to the UN. The UN deserves credit for taking on these quagmires.
6. **Running Elections.** The UN has quietly built an impressive capacity to run elections under tough circumstances. This was put to the test in Iraq where, due to security concerns, the organization was able to deploy [only a small fraction of the staff it thought it needed](#), yet still managed to pull off January's historic polling. The organization has also managed successful first-ever polls in places like East Timor and Afghanistan. This Spring it was revealed that the electoral assistance division is mired in a host of [management problems](#). But still, they seem to get the job done.
7. **Reproductive Health and Population Management.** The UN has built a great specialty in mother and childhood health, family planning, and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. The [UN Population Fund](#) is widely respected, and is credited with helping to drastically reduce infant and maternal mortality in more than 100 countries. Unfortunately due to its [global gag rule](#) designed to prevent health care workers from even talking about abortion, the Bush Administration has [deprived UNFPA](#) of funds needed for this vital work.

8. **War Crimes Prosecution.** This is a fairly new line of business for the UN. The Tribunals it has set up for the [former Yugoslavia](#) and for [Rwanda](#) have had their share of delays and management problems but, all in all, they are respected, have developed important case law on genocide and human rights and have provided a measure of justice that is taken very seriously by the people of affected regions. The UN is still experimenting with new judicial models for places like [Sierra Leone](#) and [Cambodia](#). The UN deserves credit for the progress it is making in this area, another arena in which its hard to imagine any other country or body taking the lead to the same degree.

9. **Fighting AIDS.** The UN is the leader when it comes to the global battle against HIV/AIDS. Between the [World Health Organization](#), [UNAIDS](#), and the [Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria](#) the UN is at the heart of every aspect of dealing with the epidemic, from heightening awareness to raising funds to making sure appropriate programs for prevention and treatment are implemented. The UN has wisely recognized that the organization itself cannot shoulder this one alone, and has set up the [Fund](#) and other mechanisms aimed at drawing governments, other multilaterals, NGOs and corporations into the fight.

10. **Bringing invisible issues to the fore.** Were it not for the UN, an awful lot of suffering around the world would go even less noticed and addressed than it does today. [Landmine victims](#), [Marburg fever](#) and [cholera](#) sufferers, [child soldiers](#), modern-day [slaves](#), [lepers](#) and thousands of other populations beleaguered by one or another either visible or obscure plight have a place to turn at the UN.

None of this is to say that the UN does anything perfectly, or that there isn't a pressing need for [reform](#). Its hard to overlook the common theme that emerges above involving good organizations and functions that are nonetheless beset by serious and often embarrassing management shortcomings. While many of the UN's problems can be blamed on its Member States, poor oversight and lousy personnel practices are the responsibility of the UN Secretariat and Kofi Annan. Its a good illustration of how the UN's weaknesses get in the way of people recognizing the body's many strengths.

As you know, I am guest-blogging this week on [Dan Drezner](#). Check out that site for some items that ought to be on the UN's list of strengths, but aren't, and for my best assessment of who and what is to blame.

May 08, 2005 at 07:28 PM in [UN](#), [Weekly Top Ten Lists](#) | [Permalink](#)

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» [Things the UN Does Well](#) from Owen's musings

Very interesting post at Democracy Arsenal reminding us of ten things the UN does well.... [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on May 10, 2005 1:04:34 AM

» [UN's strengths](#) from Random Ravings

A while back someone asked what the UN did well and what they were successful at. As it happens, Democracy Arsenal has posted The Top 10 Things the UN Does Well. Here it is: 1. Food Aid. 2. Aid to Refugees. 3. Protecting Children. 4. Peace... [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on May 10, 2005 11:46:48 AM

» [UN and AIDS](#) from AIDS Matters

As United Nations critics line up during the confirmation of John Bolton, it is important to remind ourselves that the international agency does a number of things very well. The blog Democracy Arsenal lists 10 Things the UN Does Well. #9 on the list is [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on May 10, 2005 1:41:34 PM

» [Tio saker FN gör bra](#) from p-blog ::: pierre andersson

Suzanne Nossel på Democracy Arsenal listar tio saker som FN gör bra. I en tid då FN-systemet med jämna mellanrum döms ut som värdelöst, korrupt och ineffektivt känns det som en välkommen påminnelse.... [\[Read More\]](#)

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» [The League of Nations](#). from Tim Worstall

Noted this comment at Democracy Arsenal: the 0 th law of things the UN does well: It continues to exist and is still a

viable conduit of International, multilateral communication. As a contrary proof: consider world history after the demise [\[Read More\]](#)

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» [The US or the UN?](#) from Tim Worstall
Something [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on Jun 2, 2005 8:54:16 AM

Comments

the 0 th law of things the UN does well:

It continues to exist and is still a viable conduit of International, multilateral communication. As a contrary proof: consider world history after the demise of the League of Nations.

Posted by: manoppello | [May 09, 2005 at 12:46 PM](#)

From the WFP website:

News Release

26 April 2005

QUICK U.S. RESPONSE ALLOWS WFP TO CANCEL RATION CUT IN DARFUR BUT FUNDING STILL CRITICAL

KHARTOUM – The United Nations World Food Programme announced today that thanks to a rapid donor response, the agency will not be forced to carry out expected ration cuts in May for close to two million people living in Sudan’s western region of Darfur. The reprieve follows WFP’s warning three weeks ago of impending ration cuts due to a lack of funds which remains a concern.

As a last resort due to severe under-funding, WFP had planned to halve the non-cereals part of the daily ration for general distributions in Darfur in May. **However, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Food for Peace has stepped in and redirected to Sudan around 14,000 metric tons of non-cereals already on the high seas.**

“We are extremely appreciative of the urgent efforts made by the United States to prevent ration cuts at such a critical period,” said Ramiro Lopes da Silva, WFP’s Representative and Country Director in Sudan. **Even before this new donation, the United States has contributed 60 percent of the food and 50 percent of cash towards WFP’s emergency operation.**

...

(emphasis added)

You were saying?

Posted by: rosignol | [May 10, 2005 at 02:17 AM](#)

The much-criticized oil for food program wasn't such a monumental failure as it seems in the media, at least not on the UN's part:

<http://www.oilforfoodfacts.org/>

Posted by: Escapist | [May 10, 2005 at 08:07 AM](#)

Three cheers for the United Nations (and three boos for Bolton). But don't minimize the need for fundamental reforms at the august international body. The UN has accomplished much despite a fundamental contradiction at its core: its membership does not match its mission. Although it is theoretically committed to peace, democracy, human rights and development, the UN's members included myriad warlike, undemocratic, human rights abusing backward states who cling to membership based on outdated notions of sovereignty. Time to seriously consider reconstituting the body by making democracy a requirement for membership (sorry China). If not that, at least support a democracy caucus within the UN or an alliance of democracies parallel to it to begin the organizational revolution.

Posted by: DonkeyHawk | [May 10, 2005 at 01:54 PM](#)

I'm sorry, but this list infuriates me for what appears to me to be willful blindness.

Food Aid? Leaving aside the problems of dictators allocating such aid to cronies and related problems of food rotting in storage at docks, the question is why 80 countries and 100 million people persist year after year in requiring handouts. The aphorism about teaching a man to fish rather than giving a man to fish would seem appropriate. The biggest impact on famine in our lifetimes was made not via UN redistributionist handouts but by Nobel Winner Norman Borlaug for his work in the "Green Revolution" of India. (And Mexico, and other places where he, the Ford Charitable Foundation, and other United STATES (not UN) efforts were supported by local authorities.

Refugees? Tell it to the boat people of Vietnam who spent decades, bore children, and clung to hope in camps in Thailand and Singapore only to be SENT BACK, at last, to the tender "mercies" of the Communist gov't they'd fled. (John Kerry participated in "resolving" this lingering issue, by the way; one of his more tangible accomplishments in the US Senate.) For that matter the UN has made remarkable strides -- not -- in assuring the rights of Palenstinian refugees to resettle in the friendly climes of Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia ...

"UN Peacekeeping" has become synonomous with child rape and standing by watching genocide. "Reproductive Health" means less about reducing clitoralectomies and more about gender-selective abortions. "Prosecuting War Crimes" means Milosevic stays on trial for years, makes the judge and prosecutors look less competent than those at the OJ Simpson trial, and actually enhances his image among his violent racist fascist supporters. "Fighting AIDS" means diverting resources away from eradicating malaria and so mismanaging anti-polio programs that the disease has now mutated into a form that re-threatens the whole world.

I understand that the UN has outgrown the facility in New York City and is attempting to acquire a new larger more modern, more secure and more suitable complex. I wish them much success -- and that they will locate such a faciilty in Paris, where it may be properly appreciated.

Posted by: Pouncer | [June 02, 2005 at 11:35 AM](#)

Very nicely done. I'm doing a counterplan for debate about extraordinary rendition and human rights, and this helped a ton for my net benefits. Thanks again.

Posted by: Steve | [December 13, 2005 at 11:34 PM](#)

What about disarmament? It did a great job in Africa and Yugoslavia.

Posted by: Sarah | [January 12, 2006 at 02:32 PM](#)

I love this site it helps me so much! Keep up the great work!

Posted by: Andrew Spark | [March 29, 2006 at 05:48 AM](#)

Your #1 point: Food Aid.

Sorry to tell you, but FOOD AID is one of the main causes for hunger in Africa.

Kenya, which had been self-sufficient until the 1980s, now imports 80 percent of its food, while 80 percent of its exports are accounted for by agriculture. In 1992, European Union (EU) wheat was sold in Kenya for 39 percent cheaper than the price paid to European farmers by the EU. In 1993, it was 50 percent cheaper. Consequently, imports of EU grain rose and, in 1995, Kenyan wheat prices collapsed through oversupply, undermining local production and creating poverty.

...

Far from ending hunger and promoting the economic interests of small farmers, agricultural liberalization has created a global food system that is structured to suit the interests of the powerful, to the detriment of poor farmers around the world.

Or see : <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty/FoodDumping.asp>

Posted by: Sebastian | [December 07, 2006 at 06:20 PM](#)

I like to earn the [World of Warcraft Gold](#) very much, I want to have a lot of [warcraft gold](#) in the game, i do not satisfy the old equipment and so i have to [buy wow gold](#) to buy the new equipment to make me strong. If i am very strong in the game i can get some [cheap wow gold](#) as the rewards in the game. So i like the game very much.

Posted by: [wow gold](#) | [December 24, 2008 at 11:50 PM](#)

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