

The recruitment Policy of United Nations Staff

There is no doubt that the United Nations ought to have a recruitment policy for its Secretariat. A coherent set of methods is needed to secure 'the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity', as stipulated in the Charter itself, while at the same time paying due regard to the need to recruit 'on as wide a geographical basis as possible'. Unfortunately, no such policy exists. The influences working against the establishment of one are so powerful that it is surprising that some progress could still have been achieved. This recent progress, although modest and moreover severely compromised by the financial crisis besetting the Organisation, is a paradoxical development that calls for some explanation.

The first and most important obstacle to the definition of a recruitment policy is the *ambiguity of the role entrusted to the Secretariat*. The Secretariat is recognised in Article 7 of the Charter as one of the principal organs of the United Nations, and this is an improvement on the League of Nations, but the provisions dealing with it, in Articles 97 to 101, give no clear indication of its role or, more specifically, of its powers of initiative - apart from what they say about the Secretary-General's political responsibilities in relation to the Security Council. The countless mandates given to the Secretariat in General Assembly resolutions calling on the Secretary-General to carry out programmes, most of them consisting in drawing up reports, never specify the degree of imagination, boldness or creativity that is really required. In most cases, particularly in the economic and social spheres, Member States regularly criticise the Secretary-General for not proposing precise conclusions and recommendations, but the slightest suggestion capable of being construed as the adoption of a political position contradicting the views of a few delegations is also severely criticised. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to define the kind of international officials which are needed: are they expected to be obedient, neutral servants or intelligent, creative managers? It is impossible to answer this question.

The fact is that, despite innumerable resolutions calling on the Secretariat to display exceptional qualities of management, economy and efficiency, and encouraging self evaluation and self-criticism, despite the ritual references to Article 101, par. 3, of the Charter, *it is hard to believe that delegations* - of Member States rich or poor, socialist or capitalist - *attach real importance to disposing of a high-calibre Secretariat* and are decided to ensure that they obtain one by defining a personnel policy. The difficulties are accentuated by the fact that Member States have divergent political positions on the geographical distribution of posts and the appropriate status of international civil servants.

All delegations consider the Secretariat as a forum of diplomatic activity where it is desirable to exert maximum influence. It might be said, to paraphrase Clausewitz, that Member States' rivalries in relation to the Secretariat are the continuation of diplomacy by other means. That is why it was so difficult to secure the adoption in 1980, by consensus, of part II of Resolution 35/210 modifying the formula used for calculating 'quotas'.¹ But delegations do not all share the same degree of commitment to the need to maintain 'fair geographical distribution'. The most underrepresented Member States, apart from a few recently independent small countries, are the Soviet Union, the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and Japan. Those that are overrepresented, on the other hand, include not only Western countries but many developing countries.

This first divide relates to all posts to which the geographical distribution principle is applied. The second, which focuses on senior posts in the Secretariat (at director, assistant secretary-general and under secretary-general levels), bears a closer relationship to the traditional divide between the 'Group of 77' and the developed countries. For all the persevering efforts of

¹ This formula, comprising a membership factor, a population factor and a contribution factor, still gives preponderant weight to the third, but less than in the past, since the weightings of the first two have been increased. Until 1986, on average, 36% of points were determined by factor 1, 7% by factor 2, and 57% by factor 3. In 1987 the percentages were changed again, under General Assembly Resolution 42/220, with an increase to 40% for the membership factor and a reduction to 5% for the population factor, directly linked to each Member States' population.

successive Secretaries-General to increase - out of all proportion - the number of senior posts (it rose from 145 in 1962 to 388 in 1982),² there is a general feeling among the developing countries that they are unfavourably treated in this respect by comparison with the rich countries, especially the Western ones. The third and last divide is between those countries that look upon international civil servants as national civil servants made available to the Organisation for limited periods and those that maintain that the international civil service must be independent of States. This is the classic divide between socialist countries and Western countries. The former are known to be in favour of fixed-term contracts whereas the others maintain that permanent contracts are the best way to uphold Article 100 of the Charter and provide scope for career development.³

It is these purely political considerations that prevent Member States from taking much interest in establishing rational recruitment methods: in the struggle for getting posts, scant regard is paid to principles unless they serve the interests that one is seeking to advance. But the phenomenon that could be defined as *'the superposition of bureaucracies'* is much more influential in undermining all attempts at coherence. A distinguished professor of international law once deplored the fact that *'the League of Nations has been abandoned to the diplomats'*, but the UN Secretariat is much more dependent on the national diplomatic bureaucracies. The General Assembly, through its Fifth Committee, is the only true employer of UN officials since it, not the Secretary-general, fixes their salaries and determines their terms of employment and career arrangements. The consequences of having such a *'collective employer'* are serious. Whereas administrative issues, especially UN Secretariat personnel issues, are clearly not top priorities for governments, they do have importance for all foreign ministry administrations. The main reason for this is not just that it is part of their instructions to ensure that they get their due *'geographical representation'*. It is above all that they derive invaluable flexibility and power from having an additional set of posts at their disposal. Appointments can be used not only to confer favours but also to displace unwanted staff. And the incentives to use this outlet are all the greater in that many UN posts, especially the senior ones, are much sought after because of the scales of pay - higher than national scales in many countries - or the prestige they carry. Some diplomatic careers are even organised on the basis of a combination of national postings and secondments to international organisations, which is often a means of accelerating advancement. Lastly, of course, the ability to place a protégé in the UN, even in a very modest post, is also a valued form of influence and power.

A sort of osmosis has therefore developed between national diplomatic services and the UN Secretariat, to a much greater extent than in the case of specialised agencies, which are in a better position to invoke the technical nature of their activities as a defence against attempts to place diplomats on their staffs. Something of a *'diplomatic ideology'* has even developed at the UN, the thrust of which is that there is no higher dignity than that of Ambassador, holders of this title being by definition capable of taking up any high-ranking post, even in a technical field. This naturally generates a bias in favour of *'generalists'* at the expense of other professionals, whether economists, social scientists or even more humble finance or personnel professionals. The consequences of this disregard for technical competence are all the more serious in that over 50% of the Secretariat's activity relates to economic and social matters and 30% to complex management problems, correct solutions to which would call for specialised training in the techniques of management, planning, budgeting, finance and evaluation.

This subordination of the Secretariat to ideology and to the problems of national diplomatic bureaucracies is made easier by the fact that the Organisation's structures and established traditions lend themselves readily to the influence of external political pressures. The Charter and the Constitutions of the other Organisations of the United Nations system have vested the executive heads of the Secretariats with virtually dictatorial powers over their staff, in that they are not limited by any rules. Nowhere in these Constitutions or in staff rules and regulations is any methodological framework established for recruitment, advancement, career development or training. These texts contain nothing more than indications on the various types of contract and

² Out of these totals, the number of assistant secretaries-general and under secretaries-general rose from 20 in 1962 to 51 in 1982, while the total strength of administrative staff increased by only 30%.

³ In June 1988 the USSR announced its intention of changing its policy in this regard, coming closer to the Western view. This significant change will probably be followed by all the socialist countries.

conditions of pay. This leaves great scope for arbitrariness in regard to career development and to recruitment opportunities.

The vacuum left by this lack of formal rules is filled by practices characterised by an unspoken consensus on a number of principles that are diametrically opposed to the spirit of the Charter and by a power struggle to gain control of the allocation of posts. Agreement was reached readily on recourse to 'local' recruitment and cooption. It is in fact quite exceptional for candidates to be recruited without having had the opportunity to make themselves personally known to the services concerned, and preference is therefore given systematically to people who live near the Organisation's offices or have spent some time with them, studying or on training courses. Recruitment missions to Member States are exceptional; it is only in the case of a few large countries that are particularly underrepresented (the USSR or Japan) that they are organised systematically. The dominant practice has in fact been *to identify posts available for candidates known in advance instead of seeking to attract large fields of candidates qualified to fill vacant posts*. Clearly, the latter method ought to be the rule. Because of the technical content of some posts, it has to be used from time to time. But bad habits continue to prevail in the majority of cases. Finally, no principle has been established on the level of grade at which preference ought to be given to external recruitment; whenever a vacancy arises, it is apparently the accepted practice to look to fill it first from within the UN and then from associated Organisations before resorting to external recruitment. In fact, whenever a vacancy arises, the relative merits of internal and external recruitment are reconsidered afresh.

It is only to be expected in such circumstances that there should be very strong external pressure from everyone who thinks he is in a position to 'sponsor' candidates. The United Nations Secretary-General himself - all Secretaries-General have complained about this - is under constant pressure, not only from permanent missions but from the entire international political community. And very often this pressure is brought to bear not only over senior posts but over the most modest ones, including those in the general services category. Moreover, it is experienced at all levels of the hierarchy: in fact, it is enough to belong to the UN or to one of the delegations accredited to it to be regarded as having at least partial control over recruitment and to be approached accordingly. This is the normal way with organisations that have no mandatory objective recruitment procedure.

The result is a temptation to allow considerations other than the quality of candidates or their geographical origins to impinge on the exercise of recruiting power. It is therefore hardly surprising that, at the highest level, there should be a tendency to regard the recruitment of individuals recommended by influential people as part of the 'small change' of diplomacy that may not be enough to modify a political attitude but will at least secure a more benevolent or less aggressive posture on a few difficult issues. In the 'voluntary funds' and the operational funds attached to the UN,⁴ recruitment to certain posts is tending to take on almost commercial characteristics, with the volume of contributions paid determining the level of 'drawing rights' on posts, conceded to Member States.⁵

It is hardly surprising in these circumstances that fierce battles are fought within the Organisation over recruiting powers. The most classic confrontations in this regard are between the personnel office and the line departments; each of the two camps has its own priorities, the former seeing the maintenance of geographical distribution criteria as its first responsibility and the latter claiming to be more concerned about individual candidates' abilities. In fact, these confrontations are very often power struggles over candidates who are already known.

Constructing some of the elements of what could become a 'recruitment policy' seems therefore paradoxical, in conditions of such anarchy. And yet, some progress has been made, since the UN now has:

1. a system of recruitment by competition which has become the rule for grades p. 1/p. 2 (the lowest levels in the hierarchy of professional staff); it is based on an internal competitive

⁴ The geographical distribution rules do not apply to these funds in the same way.

⁵ Such a system is naturally conducive to inflation in the numbers of senior posts, which are the most attractive to Member States' bureaucracies. For instance, the UNDP (United Nations Development programme) has fourteen posts at ASG or USG level, which is manifestly excessive in relation both to its overall staff complement and to its resources.

- examination (for 30% of posts) and external national competitive examinations (for the remaining 70%)
2. a recruitment roster made up of lists of qualified and available candidates of all nationalities, which is in the process of being perfected
 3. resolutions that have laid down the principle of the need to adopt objective recruitment methods for grades at all levels
 4. a system for organising career development that is currently being set up.

The organisation of competitive examinations for the recruitment of young professional staff is undoubtedly the most significant and most important reform. The progression in General Assembly decision-making towards generalised application of the competitive method of recruitment for professional staff in grades P1/P2 was a long and difficult process.⁶ Rule 4.3 of the Staff Rules had already contained a stipulation to the effect that selection had, as far as possible, to be based on prior competition. The principle of competition was approved in a not very explicit manner in a decision dated 18 December 1974. Resolution 33/143 of 1978 was more specific, making provision for category G staff wishing to make the transition to category P, 30% of the total number of P1/P2 posts to be filled being reserved for them; this Resolution also recommended the use, in consultation with the governments concerned, of recruitment methods based on competitive examinations for the rest of the grade P1/P2 vacancies. But it was not until Resolution 35 / 210 adopted in 1980 that it was decided that recruitment in grades P1 and P2 would as a general rule be based on competitive examinations. This Resolution, which confirmed that 30% of these posts were to be reserved for promotion by internal competition, set up arrangements for external competitive examinations to be conducted nationally and required candidates to have at least university degree level qualifications.

What is perhaps more surprising is that this Resolution was actually applied. Since 1980 competitive examinations for the transition from category G to category P have been held each year, with an average of about 30 vacancies available. As for the external competitive examinations, by 1985, with the financial crisis looming, they had really become the rule. Following first experiments in Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1974, then in Japan and the United Kingdom in 1975 and France in 1979, these competitive examinations were extended systematically for recruitment to an increasingly large proportion of P1/P2 posts. It was estimated that, by 1985, non-competitive recruitment to P1/P2 posts subject to geographical distribution would have ended. In the selection of countries, preference was naturally and logically given to underrepresented countries: in 1982 there were six: Mauritania, Ivory Coast, Suriname, Brazil, Federal Republic of Germany and Japan; in 1983 there were eight: Japan, USSR, Libya, German Democratic Republic, Norway, Ukraine, Federal Republic of Germany, Czechoslovakia; in 1984 there were seven: Japan, Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Papua-New Guinea, Antigua, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia. These competitive examinations were now being held annually. It will be noted that successive competitive examinations were held in Japan, the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy, these being countries with very large 'quotas' but still seriously 'underrepresented'. At the same time, extension of this procedure to the socialist countries could be regarded as a real innovation, since these countries had been systematically opposed to competitions until they were introduced.

Recruitments to P1/P2 posts accounted for a little over a third of total annual recruitments at all grades: about 120 posts out of 300. A slightly larger number of candidates have so far been recruited through internal competitive examinations than through external ones, but it should be noted that the competition for the transition between categories G and P was brought in two years before widespread use started to be made of external competitive examinations. The four internal competitive examinations held from 1979 to 1982 resulted in 177 promotions out of a total of 524 P1/P2 appointments in that period. In the first years of external competitive examinations there were only about a hundred recruitments, including 44 in 1983, but recruitments via this channel

⁶ The Secretariat's staff is made up essentially of two categories: professional staff, with grades ranging from P1 up to P5, plus two Director grades, D1 and D2; general services or category G, with grades running from G1 to G7. Departmental heads are generally 'off scale', at ASG (Assistant Secretary-General) and USG (Under Secretary-General) levels.

were expected to rise rapidly as a proportion of the whole and it was hoped that they would number about 80 a year from 1985.⁷

The external competitive examinations in all countries have seen large numbers of candidates in relation to posts available: in 1982, for instance, there were more than 500 candidates in Brazil for seven posts, 105 in Ivory Coast for three posts, and so on. The number of Member States wanting competitive examinations to be organised in their countries soon rose to such a level that the Director of Personnel was obliged to start a waiting list.

It should also be mentioned that vacancies to be filled by competition are classified by 'occupational group', and different technical tests are set according to whether the examination is for finance or personnel administrators, economists, or specialists in political affairs, social affairs or information. The importance of the departure marked by adoption of this approach can readily be gauged in the light of what was said earlier about the bias in favour of 'generalists', which has predominated until recent years. The United Nations has now defined 14 main occupational groups, and these are used as the basis for selection.

Such a radical change in patterns of thought and behaviour could not of course have been carried through without difficulties and very strong resistance to the reform. The staff associations, representing a larger proportion of general services staff than of professionals, at first opposed competitions, then tried to make out a case for 'simplification' of the internal competitive tests, and finally argued that the competitive examination should be replaced by alternative methods. The Administration itself was divided between those who were hostile to competitions, being unwilling to accept the curtailment of their share of 'control over recruitment', and those who showed great courage and resolution in playing their part in setting up the necessary machinery. In the event, this machinery worked perfectly, with competent, dedicated selection boards and no hint of irregularity, despite the exceptional organisational difficulties that had to be coped with.

Another innovation was the recruitment roster. Its introduction too was marked by many difficulties and misgivings. Having been started without a clear predetermined method, the register at first recorded all candidatures and was used above all to recruit technical cooperation experts. It held up to 10 000 names. Later, it gradually became clear that here again there were mechanisms involving techniques that needed to be mastered: in particular it was necessary to compile a classification by occupation, so that posts of given types and potential candidates could be matched up with each other, and to keep the list permanently up to date so that it contained only candidates who were genuinely interested and available. These aims now appear to have been achieved. It still remains to supply the computer with lists of valid candidates, particularly from under represented nationalities. Advertising is now being used to this end. In providing the personnel office with the means with which to produce a reasonable number of qualified candidates of appropriate nationalities for any vacancy to be filled by external recruitment, this register should mean that it will be possible, in the P3 to P5 range, to put an end to the irregular practice of seeking out posts for recommended candidates.

Application of the principle, recognised and adopted by the General Assembly, that objective recruitment methods should be used could consist either in gradually extending competitive examinations to other grades, P3 for instance, or in introducing written tests in addition to the traditional interviews, where there could be some improvements in technique, for all posts from P3 to P5. This is still a long way off. Official adoption of the "recruitment plans" concept no doubt led to the production of forecasts, mainly on the subject of the nationalities from which it was necessary to recruit in order to arrive at a fair geographical distribution within a three-year time-span. However, the arrangements set up need to be further refined.

Finally, the gradual introduction of a career development system would undoubtedly be the most effective course of action towards the establishment of a genuine recruitment policy. On the level of principle, some progress has been made in this direction: 'career' has become an accepted concept, and the Secretary-General has undertaken to set up a 'career development plan'. This is undoubtedly an ambitious scheme. It would entail classifying all posts, and their incumbents, in occupational groups, defining average rates of advancement, fixing maximum proportions of

⁷ However, 'inflationary' classification is threatening the very existence of the P2 grade, since the number of posts at this level is falling dangerously as a result of upgrading of posts to P3.

recruitments per grade, and setting up an in-service training or retraining system, but above all it would entail securing a consensus on the new rules and machinery. Before the financial crisis, such an exercise seemed just about within the bounds of possibility.

In 1985, therefore, there seemed to be a roughly equal balance between the forces in favour of modernisation and rationalisation of recruitment methods and those in favour of maintaining the status quo. But that was the year that saw the start of the financial crisis affecting the Organisation,⁸ which has continued into 1989 and shows no signs of ending in the foreseeable future.

The crisis has led to a freeze on recruitment, which has naturally delayed the modernisation process. At the same time it has prompted fresh studies and new recommendations. It would seem too soon to make an assessment of its long-term consequences. However, a few comments can be made on the basis of the information available at the end of 1988:

- a) First, the combination of economy measures and cutbacks in staffing levels decided upon in 1986 has led to a very sharp slowdown in recruiting. Between 1 April 1986 and 31 March 1988 the total number of external recruitments for posts subject to geographical distribution was 199 (176 using budgetary funds, 23 using extrabudgetary funds), representing about 100 recruitments a year, only a third of the average during the preceding years. The breakdown by grade shows that recruitments to junior posts predominated: 56 at P1/P2, 49 at P3, 41 at P4, 18 at P5, 17 at D1, 9 at D2, 3 at ASG and 6 at USG.
- b) The competition procedure seems to have been adhered to during this period: the bulk of p. 2 vacancies appear to have been filled by successful candidates from previous competitive examinations.⁹ In 1988 further competitive examinations were organised in Greece, Japan, Mexico and the USSR, for about 25 new posts altogether. The competitive examinations for transition from category G to category P have continued during this period.¹⁰
- c) The recruitment policy that has been followed since the crisis has not been in line with the recommendations made by the group of high-level intergovernmental experts set up under General Assembly Resolution 40/237 to examine the administrative and financial functioning of the UN. In its report published in August 1986 (Official Documents, 41 st session, Supplement No. 49 (A/41/49)), this group, known as the 'Group of 18', made numerous recommendations on staff matters. These include: a substantial reduction in staffing at all levels (15% of the overall number of posts entered in the ordinary budget over a three year period and 25% of ASG and USG posts funded out of the ordinary budget or extrabudgetary resources (recommendation 15); restatement and reinforcement of various recruitment principles and methods. Recommendation 15 stated inter alia that in drawing up the staffing reduction plans, the Secretary-General should be mindful of the ever-present need to recruit new staff, particularly in the junior professional category, to ensure that the Secretariat's structure remained dynamic. The number of staff recruited at PI, p. 2 and P3 should not fall below the average number of staff recruited into these grades in 1982, 1983 and 1984. However, this recruitment should be balanced by a corresponding reduction in staffing, so that the objective of a net 15% reduction can be achieved in three years.
The figures given above show that this part of the recommendation concerning the continuation of recruitment was not followed, the bulk of the actual reductions (shown as 13% in the 1989-1990 budget) having been achieved by attrition (in other words by not filling posts becoming vacant).
- d) The main points in the other recommendations concerned with personnel (recommendations 41 to 62) related to:

⁸ The United Nations has always been in precarious financial circumstances, because many Member States are late with payments. The current crisis stems from the United States' refusal since 1985 to pay the full amount of their contribution (25% of the ordinary budget), the US Congress being displeased with the Organisation's activities. This has led to economy measures, including a slowdown in recruitment and cutbacks in staffing.

⁹ However, the Secretariat has not published any statistics on this.

¹⁰ It is impossible from the published statistics to establish the number of posts involved or whether the rule limiting the number of posts available through these internal competitions to 30% of the total number of P2 appointments has been complied with.

- extension of competitive examinations to P3 posts
- the establishment of objective methods and clearly defined criteria for recruitment of posts not filled by way of competitive examinations, at P4 and P5 in particular, based on the use of individual tests designed to ascertain candidates' drafting ability
- establishment of career development plans
- revision of the staff rules and regulations currently in force to take account of resolutions and decisions already adopted by the General Assembly and the group's own recommendations; - application of these rules and regulations to all UN entities under the Secretary-General's overall responsibility, i.e. the Secretariat and the Organisation's subsidiary bodies.¹¹

To date, none of these recommendations has been acted upon, and there is little chance in present circumstances that they will be in the foreseeable future. Here as in almost all other areas, the financial crisis has not been a catalyst for reform. Resistance by secretariats accustomed to their routines^{12?} has so far withstood all efforts on the part of those who are aware that the UN ought to have a Secretariat of exceptional quality recruited in accordance with the principles set forth in the Charter. The crisis has therefore helped to bring about a further decline in the average level of competence in the Secretariat (the number of qualified staff leaving - particularly economists who have not been replaced - has risen considerably), and this has contributed to marginalise the United Nations still further, in the economic and social fields.

To sum up, the elements of a rational recruitment policy for the UN have been clearly defined, but it will be necessary to await better days - or perhaps a still deeper crisis - before this policy is applied.

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¹¹ The main ones being the UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and the WFP.

¹² Moreover, the Secretariats are encouraged to behave in this way by the attitude taken by the Member States, which, by the pressure they exert, daily contradict the principles that they have collectively approved in Resolutions.