Executive Summary

Introduction

Among many reasons given for the decline of confidence in the United Nations, one that has perhaps received insufficient attention is the organization's failure, despite many so-called "lessons learned" exercises, to make efficient use of the vast pool of knowledge accumulated within the UN system, and especially to channel it into coherent strategic planning. Accordingly, in June 2018, two parts of Oxford University (All Souls College and the Oxford Project on UN Governance and Reform) came together with the United Nations University (UNU) to hold, at All Souls, a symposium entitled "*From 'lessons learned' to strategic planning: new ways to use knowledge in the UN system*", which brought together current and former officials from various levels of UN policy and research units, think tanks, universities, and the governments of the UK and China.

The symposium highlighted major challenges facing those working for or with the UN in the peace-and-security, development and humanitarian fields. It identified specific knowledge deficits and defective internal processes in all three of those fields, addressed the role of new technologies, and produced several concrete recommendations for future action.

Challenges

The main challenges identified were the following:

A. The relatively technical and procedural nature of current **reform** efforts, which may produce improvements, but do not address the deeper structural problems in any of the three sectors examined.
B. The tendency for those occasional reform proposals which are genuinely bold and innovative to be **watered down** during processes of consultation with member states, and/or approved without the additional funding required to implement them.
C. The failure of the UN to **engage** meaningfully with other important global actors, including notably people with relevant academic expertise, and municipal authorities.
    - The former often do not have access to relevant staff in the UN system, and/or find it difficult to communicate usefully with them owing to differences in language, conflicting presentation styles and ideas for research; mismatch in timeframes between academic research and the UN's policymaking cycle; and lack, in many UN agencies and units, of the capacity, knowledge or drive to establish relationships with academia.
    - The latter are charged with managing the towns and cities – often mega-cities – in which a rapidly growing majority of the world's people now live; but the UN has yet to devise the mechanisms and processes it needs to engage with them in a systematic and structured way.

D. The lack of any coherent forward-looking **communication** strategy within the UN to highlight 'good news' about it (even though some agencies, funds and programmes are very well equipped to do this on their own sectoral activities) or to articulate its overall purposes and strategies and its relevance to the problems that both governments and peoples are struggling to confront. As a result of this, the UN is often ignored by news media, and when it is mentioned negative news stories tend to predominate.

E. The UN's failure to keep pace with the revolution in collection and processing of **data**:

- Current verification mechanisms are often too weak to ensure the reliability of field data, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states.
- There is a risk of focusing too much on quantitative data as an end in itself, at the expense of securing important qualitative data.
- The risks to confidentiality and security from the use of biometric and other data; inconsistent guidelines on the collection, storage and dissemination of data; and the question of who has access to it and who controls it, all need to be addressed more seriously at the international level.
- The UN's conservatism in absorbing unofficial and unstructured forms of data inhibits its capacity to keep up with the advantages to be drawn from multiple data streams. To shape better and more sophisticated analysis, and improved communications with the public, it needs access to much wider sources of data, notably those that lend themselves to improved visualisation techniques.

Recommendations

A. To the UN in general, and its member states:

- ***Data and new technologies:***
  - Continue to support the development of a normative framework for new technologies and consider involving the UN in advocacy for minimum acceptable international standards on the development of artificial intelligence.
  - Use new technologies to draw on existing institutional memory, lessons-learned reports, etc., in a more systematic way.
  - Use innovative and low-risk methods of learning, such as those used by technology companies, to prepare for future developments in technology.
  - Take the lead in gathering data in fragile and conflict-affected states and on diaspora remittance flows, working with academic experts in that field.
  - Continue to use and improve data to hold member states to account on delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals.

  o Facilitate dialogue among countries to better understand and articulate capacity gaps in technology, and the need for technology transfer between countries.

- ***Partnerships and collaborations:***
  o Establish more meaningful partnerships with new development actors, including notably China, India and other rising countries.
  o Forge better connections with the private sector, in part by encouraging more investment in poorer areas.
  o Collaborate with information and technology corporations in a more structured and consistent way to strengthen the UN's ability to benefit from new technologies, thereby allowing the UN system to make more effective use of its existing knowledge[1].

- ***Expand sources of knowledge:*** Gather information and knowledge from those most affected by policies, through a bottom-up participatory approach, using local sources of information to improve policy design and speed up service delivery.

- ***Bridge the gap between academia and the UN system:*** By creating academic advisory boards and in-house think tanks in UN agencies, encouraging secondments of personnel within the UN and between the UN and academia, and possibly establishing a structured interface ('nudge unit') between the two communities.

- ***Improve capacity:*** Provide dedicated teaching capabilities to improve evidence-based ways of working, through universities and UN training institutes like UNITAR and the UN Staff College

- ***Foster greater engagement:*** Work to make it less risky for the private sector to invest in development, through greater due diligence and innovative financial instruments, such as social impact bonds and pool funding mechanisms.

- ***Shift objectives:*** Step back from overall development delivery and focus on specific areas where the UN enjoys some comparative advantage in delivering results, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and fragile or conflict-affected states.

- ***Youth:*** Engage with and employ more young people within the UN, using them to explain how it can better answer the needs of their generation, and as

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[1] The discussions and recommendations of the Secretary-General's High Level-Panel on Digital Cooperation, co-chaired by Melinda Gates and Jack Ma, announced on 12 July 2018, may help with this.

messengers to make the UN's work better known through social media and other internet platforms[2].

B. Recommendations specifically directed to the UN Secretary-General and Secretariat:

• Revamp the Secretariat's overall communication strategy to be more forward thinking and articulate the vision of the Secretary-General.

• Be frank in managing expectations regarding peacekeeping operations with the Security Council and beyond, including being willing to 'say no' when member state-driven initiatives seem likely to fail or simply serve as fig-leaves for sub-optimal policies of convenience or neglect, as advised in the "Brahimi Report" eighteen years ago. Recent Secretaries-General were timid about this, but earned little gratitude from the permanent members of the Security Council, who have kept the UN mired in questionable strategies that often incur costs well beyond what was anticipated or budgeted for.

• Work with developing country champions and the G77 to revitalise watered down processes such as Financing for Development.

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[2] The UN Secretary-General has appointed a capable Youth Envoy, Jayathma Wickramanayake, but the supporting resources and infrastructure that would allow her to be fully effective seem lacking. This is a missed opportunity.