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Civil Society sits down with Secretary-General Nominees

One World Trust background briefs for the 1 for 7 billion campaign

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This series of background briefs have been written by scholars from around the world who are members of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS). The paper reflects the view of the author, in her or his individual capacity. It has been solicited as a contribution to the 1 for 7 billion campaign to make the appointment process of the United Nations Secretary General more open and inclusive, and thereby more accountable.

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The year 2016 is a rare year for leadership choices. The selection cycle for the United Nations Secretary-General synchronizes with the United States presidential election season – a once-every-twenty-year phenomenon. Furthermore, it is the first time that both the current UN Secretary-General and the current US President are each cycling-out. Daily we witness a near insurgency of the American electorate, both right and left, for “somebody different” this year. There is a similar tide rising at the United Nations to do things differently, as well, when it comes to appointing the next UN Secretary-General. And in pursuit of a voice against the Security Council’s permanent five members with veto power (P-5) establishment, civil society has secured a point of entry to the “Member States only” decision process.¹

The precedent-setting dialogues with Secretary-General nominees held in the General Assembly in April 2016 featured a break in standing protocol. Civil society individuals spoke many times as co-equals with UN Member States. None of the individuals were accredited to a Member State delegation, yet each participated in these on-the-record General Assembly meetings.

How did this come about? Through a painstaking winnowing of over 847 questions submitted online from around the world, a volunteer “Civil Society Committee” selected twenty-five questions presented via video from the far corners of the earth.

More to the point: Where was the authority for this invention? Partly this is the result of the activism of the current President of the General Assembly (PGA), Mogens Lykketoft, in implementing the Assembly’s decision taken in July 2015 for more transparency and wider participation in the selection of the next Secretary-General.² It drew upon its similar decision mandated eighteen years earlier.³ At that time, in 1997, the resolution was more political than practical: to criticize and perhaps challenge the Security Council P-5 members’ near-monopoly of the selection process after the public van-

1. See briefs no 1 and 2 in this series for more information on the formal rules for appointing the Secretary-General and how they have been applied so far.
2. GA Resolution A/Res/69/321 at http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/69/321, (accessed 1 May 2016). Calls for transparency and its related “sunshine” have been lauded by UN commentators, although a safe amount of exposure must be calibrated to allow for some shaded areas for preventing damage to the discretionary practices and prerogatives that keep the P-5 members from leaving the table altogether.
3. GA Resolution A/Res/51/241 at http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/51/241, (accessed 1 May 2016). The author negotiated this resolution on behalf of the US Delegation to the UN.

quishing of Africa's Boutros-Ghali for a second term in 1996.⁴

So, what was it in 2015 that energized the 193-member Assembly to revisit the call for more 'sunshine' on the Secretary-General selection process? Perhaps was it acting on the view that the Organization's legitimacy required more transparency and openness of this sort? Or, perhaps was it a proxy assault on the P-5 establishment by the "non-permanent 188" seeking more seats at the Council's table? Or, perhaps was it a trust-busting of the Security Council oligopoly – more specifically its veto-wielding P-5 members – most specifically the US and Russia; after all, why expose the important Secretary-General choice to the chills and spills of Cold War II underway in a Council numb to the urgency of Syria and other crises?

Generally, concern about the Security Council's relevance has emerged as a serious topic within both the political and academic communities. It has been charged as increasingly irrelevant to: the interests of the wider UN membership; evolving doctrines regarding socio-economic aspects within the maintenance of peace and security; and the interests of emerging stakeholders both within and outside today's international machinery.

Whatever the reason, "the peoples" that are the General Assembly in 2016 want a bigger role in the Secretary-General selection process.

As noted, Mr. Lykketoft made good on his word for openness upon his June 2015 election as President of the General Assembly's 70th Session. He formally invited nominations for Secretary-General candidates in formal correspondence co-signed by the President of the Security Council (at which time was the US Ambassador Samantha Power).⁵ Lykketoft dedicated his staff to this effort and developed innovative online resources detailing the process, the nominees, and developments.⁶ And, significantly, he requested the UN Secretariat's Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS) to institute a volunteer Civil Society Committee for admitting the public into the jury room.⁷

The Civil Society Committee was an innovation for ensuring broad and inclusive participation by private individuals in the selection of the proposed questions for Secretary-General nominees at the General Assembly dialogues that were held 12-14 April 2016.⁸ Committee volunteer applicants were reviewed by UN-NGLS in collaboration with interested civil society focal points of the UN System.⁹ By design, the twenty-two-member Committee incorporated regional, gender, and age balance, and a diversity of expertise.¹⁰

As noted above, the Committee reviewed 847 questions¹¹ received online from all corners of the world¹² and transmitted via Twitter, email, and other forms from February through March 2016. UN-NGLS usefully categorized them accordingly with the number of questions indicated in table 1.

Upon its first meetings, the Civil Society Committee developed the following criteria to bear in mind for the members of the Committee in their process to select questions to be asked to the nominees:

4. Kofi Annan was then appointed with the strong support of the United States, see brief no 2 in this series for more details.

5. See www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/08/15-Dec-2015_Appointment-of-Secretary-General-15-December-2015.pdf, (accessed 1 May 2016).

6. See www.un.org/pga/70/sg/, (accessed 1 May 2016).

7. See <http://unngls.org/index.php/80-home/2746-unsng-candidates>, (accessed 1 May 2016).

8. See <http://unngls.org/index.php/80-home/2746-unsng-candidates>, (accessed 1 May 2016).

9. Solicited via <http://www.unngls.world/>

10. The author served on the Civil Society Committee.

11. The complete list of questions can be seen at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1tWxfq24Axa9vdJYwLpEMJLywUkx9nVNeKQ4PtLbmUZQ/pubhtml>, (accessed 1 May 2016)

12. Solicited via <http://www.unngls.world/>

United Nations 285 (8)	Economic 42	Climate Change 12
Peace and Security 161 (1)	Leave no one behind 32 (2)	Education 10 (1)
Human Rights 95 (5)	Nominee's Ability 27	Nominee's Values 9
SDGs 72 (2)	Governance 21 (1)	Other 8
Nominee's Approach 49 (3)	Environmental 18 (1)	Health 6 (1)

- i. The UN Secretary-General is to perform in the United Nations as defined in the UN Charter, particularly articles 97 and 99¹³.
- ii. Factor the information on this UN web page about the role of the UN Secretary-General: http://www.un.org/sg/sg_role.shtml.
- iii. Select questions Member States might not ask.
- iv. Include some questions that people who do not engage at the UN could relate to (i.e. not complex lobbying language).
- v. Choose some that could give a good sense of the character, ability and values of the person.
- vi. Choose some that could provide insight on the candidate's views about the role of civil society in UN processes.
- vii. Seek to reduce duplication of topics.
- viii. The overall selection that the Committee decides upon must be regionally and gender balanced, with a diversity of topics.
- ix. Please review all questions carefully, and do not automatically bias your selections to candidates that you may know personally. Part of the purpose of this open application process is to provide opportunity to those who are not already well connected in UN processes.

After four iterations of voting by Committee members over two weeks right up to the dialogues, the Committee narrowed the questions to 25 (plus an additional 10 reserve questions) for the PGA's selection of two per nominee.¹⁴

As noted, efforts were made to provide a balanced sampling of the views of civil society. The selected questions-per-category results are in table 1 in brackets.

By region of questioner the sampling looks as in table 2, by gender of questioner as in table 3.

Europe 9	North America 8	Latin America 4	Asia 3	Africa 1
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Female 15	Male 6	NGO 4
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Here are the questions making the final cut:

- * Civil Society played a critical role in the design of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. How can the UN ensure that this unprecedented engagement continues during follow-up and review at the High-Level Political Forum?

13. See <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-xv/index.html>, (accessed May 2016).

14. The Committee worked remotely via teleconference using online tools under the direction of UN-NGLS staff for a hot-off-the-presses product by the dialogues that commenced on 12 April 2016. No resources were expended on the volunteer Committee members.

- * How will you reinforce the participation of civil society at the United Nations?
- * How will the new UNSG protect our digital rights to privacy & freedom of expression online?
- * How will you ensure that the sexual and reproductive rights of young people are promoted and respected?
- * How will you transform the UN as an institution to be more transparent, efficient, credible and ultimately more effective?
- * Young people don't hear the UN. Calls from the tribunes don't reach out. Facing injustice and socio-economic issues the youth emerges into its "own" world, we need to do everything to prevent the establishment of this "another" world. How will you go about discovering the potential of million young people around the world?
- * What do you see as the single largest challenge facing humanity? What concrete, practical steps can the UN take to address it?
- * How would you address the refugee crisis to ensure human treatment of refugees and stop the loss of lives? What would be effective and politically acceptable by the majority of States particularly in Europe?
- * World's sustainable development efforts are endangered by global health issues such as underlying antimicrobial resistance with pandemic proportions. From a position of the next SG, how would you respond to the need for cross-cutting collaboration among UN agencies in addressing these issues?
- * What's your understanding of the power of the Secretary-General?
- * During your career, what specifically have you accomplished to advance the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?
- * How do you plan to promote accountability for the entire UN system and each of the UN bodies?
- * Investing in youth and achieving SDG 10 starts at the UN's own doorstep: In 2012-13, more than 4000 unpaid interns were at Secretariat level alone. How would you make sure that internships are accessible to qualified young people from all different geographical and socio-economic backgrounds?
- * Approximately 62 million girls worldwide are out of school. What do you plan to do to change that?
- * Gender equality is cross-cutting but the UN bodies still treat it as optional. How will you ensure gender equality mainstreaming?
- * How would you guarantee that the UN responds to global and domestic challenges such as displaced and trafficked persons, social protection and poverty, and that human rights protection are grounded in fairness, justice, and equity?
- * Considering the 17 SDG goals, which all refer to critical issues for the international development agenda, how would you go about avoiding countries selecting "easy" issues? How can we make sure governments also address complex issues such as harmful traditional practices, and underlying gender inequality and control over women's sexuality?
- * A number of initiatives like the MDGs, the new SDGs and COP21 have ended in agreements signed by the member states how do you plan to enhance holding the individual member states and the regions to account, monitor progress and take corrective where needed?
- * What criteria would you use in making your senior appointments?
- * As Secretary General, will you seek the creation of a UN international court for the environment to enable global citizens to enforce climate change and other environmental agreements in line with Article 10 of the Rio Declaration?

- * How will you push to make countries and individuals more accountable for their lack of movement for Human Rights, Poverty relief, war crimes and general help that could possibly be implemented? Also the areas in dire need of compliance for change. What would your strategy be moving forward?
- * How will you represent global citizens, and not just member states?
- * What actions will you take to strengthen a human rights based approach within the UN system? In particular, how will you ensure that children's rights are protected and promoted?
- * Armed conflict and human rights abuses have resulted in the highest numbers of refugees, migrants and internally displaced people since World War II; as Secretary-General, how will the candidate, in support of the Refugee Convention, deliver on a new global approach to refugees based on international co-operation and an equitable sharing of responsibilities, and lead on reviewing the current structures for the governance of international migration while integrating human rights within them?
- * Environmentalists and human rights defenders help advance the UN principles in the ground. How will you ensure their protection?

Videos of the individual asking the question were broadcast among those posed live by Member States and are accessible via the UN website.¹⁵ The Member States' questions were routinely recycled to each nominee. This resulted in a combined total of over 800 inquiries posed from the floor over eighteen hours.¹⁶ Civil society's questions were different for each nominee. This provided as many views from civil society as possible for both the group of nominees and the General Assembly itself.¹⁷ Videos of the dialogues are accessible via the UN website.¹⁸ After the first hearings in mid-April 2016 more countries made nominations and the Civil Society Committee is being re-engaged to screen questions for a second round of Assembly dialogues taking place on 7 June 2016.

The PGA's invitation to civil society for its input was due in part to civil society's increasingly large shadow on the United Nations' doorstep. For instance, regarding the Secretary-General selection process, we see civil society sprouting new buds and branches in front of our very eyes in 2016, including online news magazines¹⁹, web-archived public interviews with nominees²⁰, academic lecture series²¹, and NGOs created to weigh-in on the Secretary-General appointment, such as UNSG2016²².

To say that the Civil Society Committee is a historic development may be an overstatement, since a precedent by definition is something confirmed in subsequent practice. Time will tell if the General Assembly's working methods evolve to include routinely civil society's "on demand" input into various Assembly considerations, formal as well as informal.

Nevertheless, the Civil Society Committee created a wake that could widen the public's access to the United Nations for enhanced participation in inter-governmental deliberations. This swell could eventually inundate the harbor above the few thousand Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) formally accredited through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This could allow

15. See <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6my54kL4fLla4TjqvsHtCx9m8NOwJDYm>, (accessed 1 May 2016)

16. It may bear mentioning here that various questions, from both civil society and governments, displayed a lack of understanding as to the Secretary-General's role, implying that the office had more power and resources than it does.

17. It must be recalled that the General Assembly, upon the Security Council's recommendation, has the authority in the appointment of the Secretary-General. That being said, it routinely rubberstamps the Security Council's recommendation (see brief nr 1 in this series).

18. See <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/>; search for dates 12, 13, and 14 April 2016.

19. The Center on International Cooperation, see <https://medium.com/unsg-2016>, (accessed 1 May 2016).

20. International Peace Institute see www.ipinst.org/tag/secretary-general-candidates, (accessed 1 May 2016).

21. Seton Hall University's Center for UN and Global Governance Studies see www13.shu.edu/academics/diplomacy/center-for-global-governance-studies/index.cfm, (accessed 1 May 2016).

22. See <http://sgselection2016.org/>, (accessed 1 May 2016).

civil society access to UN grounds beyond its designated ECOSOC berth, beyond its various off-shore moorings (namely, the many special UN sessions since the end of the Cold War), and beyond its infrequent permissions to come ashore for Security Council briefings and the like.

Yet something larger is looming. Unless civil society 2.0 feels partnered and purposed within international machinery, it will argue for its own version of the R2P (responsibility to protect) doctrine, that being the right to participate. The Organization must prepare itself for what could be a torrent of unwelcome civil society “interventions” into “governments only” spaces. If this comes to pass, historians of the Secretary-General selection process might chronicle the invention of the Civil Society Committee as populism’s Trojan horse in quest of the Security Council.

Alternatively, if the Civil Society Committee were but a mere footnote this year, it might feature routinely going forward. Assembly President Lykketoft’s opening to civil society might provide insight not only regarding the UN Secretary-General selection process. It could signal a successful populist insurgency against the powers-that-be establishment and result in something very different in the Office of the Secretary-General.

The One World Trust promotes education, training and research into the changes required within global organisations in order to make them answerable to the people they affect and ensure that international laws are strengthened and applied equally to all. Its guiding vision is a world where all peoples live in peace and security and have equal access to opportunity and participation.

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