

Summary note

Report of the Secretary-General's Task Force on the Functioning of the Office of the President of the General Assembly

Introduction

The report of the Secretary-General's task force (A/70/783) on the functioning of the Office of the President of the General Assembly (OPGA) is commendable and points in the right direction on how to strengthen the OPGA. The 70th President of the General Assembly (PGA 70) is resolutely committed to transparency and accountability and indeed the report has recognised the initiatives the President has already taken to improve the functioning of the OPGA in this regard.

This note summarises key elements of the remarks made and points raised by the President and his Chef-de-Cabinet at the 7 April 2016 meeting of the Ad-hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly. This note is not prescriptive. It is intended only to complement the efforts of the Co-Chairs of the working group and to assist member states in their deliberations on how best to respond to the contents of the report.

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

The areas for action discussed below could in many cases be commenced immediately by the Secretariat in cooperation with OPGA. A General Assembly mandate in support of these actions would be very valuable but waiting for this should not necessarily delay implementation.

Codes of conduct and other ethical considerations

- The **General Assembly should develop core principles of conduct for Presidents of the General Assembly (PGAs)**. PGA 70 has already committed to [principles of conduct](#) and posted these on his website. This could serve as a model for future PGAs and his office stands ready to assist member states in devising principles that could become universal.
- **PGAs should be required to provide financial disclosures** on assumption and completion of their duties. PGA 70's finances are already a matter of public record in Denmark and could be disclosed formally through the existing UN financial disclosure programme at the completion of his duties to establish this practice.
- The UN **Ethics Office should be given a clear mandate to provide an induction briefing to all PGAs and all members of the OPGA** prior to the assumption of their duties.

Improving the efficacy and transparency of the trust fund and regular budget

- **Voluntary contributions to the OPGA should be channelled into the UN trust fund** established for this purpose to the greatest extent possible (OPGA 70 has taken this approach). To make this process easier, OPGA70 worked with the Department of Management to ensure that the trust fund would be open for future PGAs from the day of their election and to reduce the programme support costs (PSC) levied on the trust fund to 7 per cent. A Department of Management or a General Assembly decision to **reduce the PSC**

on the trust fund to zero and to consistently make the Trust Fund available from the date of election to the incoming President would give an even stronger incentive for contributions to be channelled to it.

- An inability to access programme budget resources from the date of election leaves the incoming President dependent on external financial sources for the preparatory period. The Secretary-General should request that **programme budget resources be made available to the PGA from their date of election**. This would complement the above action already taken to open the trust fund from the date of election.
- Mandating the **continuing practice of reporting trust fund contributions online**, as practiced by PGA 70, is an important step. For the **vetting of private contributions should also be undertaken**, however, the Global Compact will need a specific mandate and vetting capacity to be able to undertake this. No private entity has so far contributed to OPGA 70's trust fund.

Strengthening institutional memory and staff structure of the OPGA

- Written **terms of reference for all OPGA personnel should be standardised and formalised**. Terms of reference exist for all members of OPGA 70 and formalising and archiving this will be very worthwhile.
- **Record keeping** that is standardized is also vital and should be implemented immediately by DGACM. Greater clarity is needed for the OPGA from the beginning of the session on how this is conducted.
- Creating an additional P5 regular budget position or filling the current **P-5 regular budget position in the office for a period of up to 3 years**, and focusing the position on preserving continuity of 'office management', would support improved institutional memory in OPGA.
- Alongside the foregoing, a broader **re-profiling of the office** within existing resources, to improve the functioning of the OPGA and make it less top heavy could also be considered. While it could be argued that responsibilities of the Chef-de-Cabinet exceed that of a D2 level staff member, it is not clear why the OPGA has three regular budget posts at the D level. What is most needed in the OPGA is a core staff on multi-annual contracts at the "P" level, as well as continued General Service Staff support.

Open and transparent reporting on activities

- PGA 70 has applied transparency and openness to all of his activities. He has ensured a steady flow of information on his substantive activities to Member States, conducted regular meetings with regional groups and committee chairs and published the outcomes of many meetings online. He has also published details of his travel. A General Assembly mandate for future **PGAs to follow this practice and to record this information in a systematic and consolidated way together with a financial statement, in an end of presidency report as suggested by the Secretary General's report** would be a positive step forward.
- **Handover reports** are already provided at the end of the term of all PGAs as a matter of course yet these have varied in content and approach. These should be made systematic,

archived, and presented in a consistent format (with help from the Department for the General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM)).

POTENTIAL FOR ACTION IN THE MEDIUM TERM

The balance between voluntary funding and regular budget funding for OPGA

- Discussion of the resources available to the OPGA through the regular budget needs to be understood as a question of “balance” between operational budget resources and voluntary contributions rather than a question of the overall “level” of funding.
- The conclusion of the report that unspent balances of the regular budget for past OPGAs indicates that additional regular budget resources are not required is somewhat misleading. In fact, some of these unspent balances are due to the fact that they arise at the end of the annual budget year at the end of a biennium, a mere four months after the GA session has begun. OPGAs are not always fully aware of the balance of their regular budget at any given time as this information is provided only periodically to OPGA by DGACM
- Currently the balance of funding for OPGA is skewed toward voluntary contributions. For example, OPGA 70 will utilize approximately \$950,000 in voluntary cash contributions. This includes contributions to the trust fund and direct funding from Denmark for office running costs. By contrast just under \$326,000 is available under the regular budget.
- If it was possible to accurately estimate staff costs for the entire OPGA an even larger imbalance would become evident, as approximately two thirds of the OPGA staff are seconded directly from member states.
- The major disadvantages of a funding model for OPGA that is overly reliant on voluntary contributions are:
 - high transaction costs encountered every year by OPGA associated with securing the vast majority of resources of the office such as trust fund contributions and member state secondments; and
 - an over reliance on the resources of the PGA’s sponsoring member state to fund the OPGA, particularly while the OPGA is being established, which could disadvantage developing countries.
- Discussion as to whether to increase the regular budget allocation for the OPGA is entirely up to Member States and not something that will be covered in this paper.

Ensuring a more greater number of core staff within the OPGA

- OPGA 70 is servicing 16 General Assembly mandates, 7 high formal high-level events, three High Level Thematic discussions and 20 informal General Assembly meetings without additional resources. Each of these processes is lengthy and time consuming often involving supporting Co-Chairs through intergovernmental negotiations, organising a major high-level event and managing complex and extensive stakeholder consultation and participation (the expectations around which only continue to grow). Mandates continue to be assigned to the

OPGA with no allocation of commensurate resources. This shifts costs that in the past were born by Preparatory Committees on to the OPGA without any consideration of any programme budget implications.

- In this context and with over 80% of OPGA staff changing each year, it is recommended that **consideration be given to increasing the number of core staff in OPGA from within existing resources.**
 - This is not to underestimate the value of member states secondments, which should continue, nor to discount the assistance provided from DGACM.
 - Rather, it is to propose an improved model for the OPGA that would reduce transactions costs, retain vital institutional memory in-house, increase the number of UN Secretariat Staff with direct reporting lines to OPGA, and avoid dependency on a large start up budget and core of personnel from the sponsoring member state.
- These posts should be at the P4-P3 level and include General Service Staff so that the office retains a strong core of staff who are able to ensure continuity of the primary functions of the OPGA within the office itself including financing, administration, knowledge of General Assembly processes, liaison with Member States and the UN system and stakeholder engagement.
- The experience of OPGA 70 strongly suggests that locating these ‘continuity’ resources outside of OPGA results in information gaps each time a new PGA takes office.
- Specifically, this could be achieved through establishing three year secondments from across the UN system to the OPGA in key positions and by importing some of the three posts currently located within DGACM into OPGA.

The term of the PGA

- The timing of the term of office for the PGA should also be examined. **A term commencing 1 January and ending 31 December** would greatly assist with strengthening institutional memory. The hand over in September only weeks before the General Debate is at times chaotic and puts too much pressure on OPGA and the Secretariat to manage each year. Another option would be to **commence each session on 1 August each year.**

Additional financial reporting and oversight

- Contributions made to the OPGA from outside the trust fund, such as by the sponsoring member state or through in-kind contributions, should certainly be transparent. However, ensuring that this is done in a practical way that does not over burden future OPGAs with heavy compliance obligations will also be important.
- The establishment of a technical oversight body for the OPGA needs to be examined further. It would be important that such a body not add an additional layer of complex administration that creates a barrier between the OPGA and the General Assembly to which it is ultimately accountable.