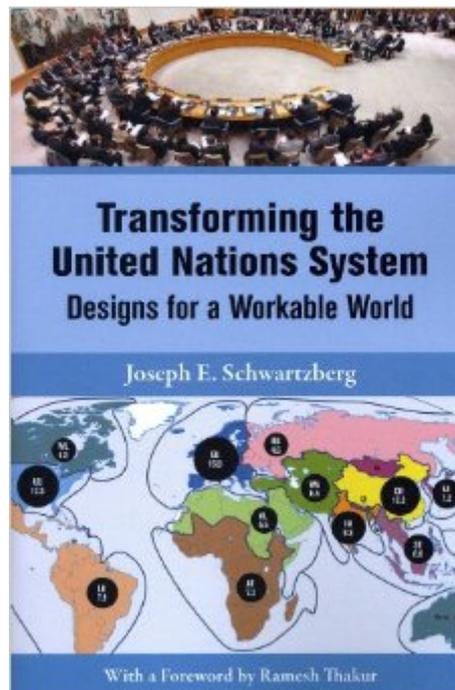


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Transforming The United Nations System: Designs For A Workable World



Synopsis

Global problems require global solutions. The United Nations as presently constituted, however, is incapable of addressing many global problems effectively. One nation–one vote decisionmaking in most UN agencies fails to reflect the distribution of power in the world at large, while the allocation of power in the Security Council is both unfair and anachronistic. Hence, nations are reluctant to endow the United Nations with the authority and the resources it needs. Extensive reform is essential. This analysis is rooted in the proposition that the design of decisionmaking systems greatly affects their legitimacy and effectiveness. Joseph Schwartzberg proposes numerous systemic improvements to the UN system, largely through weighted voting formulas that balance the needs of shareholders and stakeholders in diverse agencies. It indicates ways in which the interests of regions can supplement those of nations while voices of nongovernmental organizations and ordinary citizens can also be heard. In numerous contexts, it promotes meritocracy and gender equity. The book's aim is not to create an unrealistic utopia, but rather to establish a workable world in which the force of law supplants the law of force; a world committed to justice and continuous yet sustainable development. The author argues that, given the many existential threats now confronting our planet, the time frame for decisive action is short. The task is daunting and success is not guaranteed, but in view of the urgency of our situation, we can find ways of mustering the will, imagination, and resources to do the job.

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Customer Reviews

Transforming the United Nations System: Designs for a Workable World. By Joseph E. Schwartzberg, Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University Press, 2013. ISBN = 9789280812305. 364 pages with extensive front matter, back matter (bibliography and index) and many maps, tables and diagrams. This was among the last books published by the UN University Press before it went out of business, which is testament to the book's importance to the UN system, and to the profound challenges that the UN faces today fulfilling its ideal missions with an organizational structure created in 1945 by the major powers that won the largest war in human history. That noted, Professor Schwartzberg did the best any scholar could to address obvious flaws in the current system (like five vetoes on the Security Council) and more obscure problems (such as how tiny island and municipal nations have the same weight in the General Assembly as great powers). His book is very clearly and lucidly written, unlike most academic books. But it also qualifies as path-breaking material to 20 well-known international academic endorsers and even some practitioners like former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and former US Ambassador to the UN Thomas Pickering. It includes dozens of ideas for reform, revitalized funding, and improvement of function. The most revolutionary is replacing the "one state = one vote" principle used in the General Assembly (which makes tiny Nauru, Monaco and Singapore equal in power to China, the USA and Russia). One predictable result is that few people care what the UN General Assembly says about things. This big step is compounded in his Chapter Four on the UN Security Council where decisions are made about life, death and war issues.

Like most of my fellow citizens, I have limited knowledge of the United Nations. That the UN exists is certain; that there are various opinions about it is certain as well; but even with its 70 year history and global presence, few of us, including the most vocal critics, have more than superficial knowledge of what we think the UN is. Transforming the United Nations System, Designs for A Workable World by Professor Joseph Schwartzberg provides a superb opportunity to learn more about the abundant problems and the even greater potential for the United Nations system in our ever more complicated world. My introduction to the book came through a book discussion group where a number of us, mostly amateurs in the topic, met to discuss the volume chapter by chapter. The key words in the book title, in my opinion, are "Transforming", "System" and "Workable". The author draws on knowledge gained from his very long career as university professor to give a basis for understanding the United Nations system, then making, in each chapter, personal recommendations for transforming that system towards a more workable world. There is much meat as well for academics and policy wonks. As one might imagine, on a planet with 193 countries and

7.3 billion people, the opportunities for criticism of the United Nations are endless, as are the opportunities for improvements in the existing framework to help make our world a more workable place on which to survive and thrive. A legitimate question, in my opinion, is "Without a United Nations, what is an alternative?" In my opinion, the time is long past when any person, or any nation, could suffer under the delusion that some omnipotent entity could rule the world.

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