I. Introduction

1.1. Background to the research

The United Nations Organisation at the beginning of the 21st century is different from the Organisation which emerged more than 60 years ago. The number of member states has increased from 51 founding members in 1945 to 191 up to day. The United Nations Organisation has grown from a group of countries which have committed themselves voluntarily to safeguard peace, to an international organisation with several headquarters and a wide range of missions around the globe. This world organisation works with all different kinds of partners (governments, other international organisations, civil society groups, private sector companies etc.) on equally different activities. Consequently, the United Nations Organisation is a work place for a constantly growing number of people who come from different parts of the world, belonging to different cultures and religions.

Simultaneously the criticism of this world organisation has increased. Today’s United Nations Organisation is considered being lame, inefficient, and costly. A legitimate question therefore is whether or not the structure of this organisation and its staff can keep up with the new needs and requirements induced by a changing environment?

Numerous attempts have been made to reform the United Nations Organisations. The latest reform proposal was initiated by the former Secretary-General, Kofi Annan (2006), who suggested reforms in six areas: people, leadership, information and communications technology, delivering services, budget and finance, and governance. The detailed measures formulated in the proposal aimed to enable the organisation to make better use of its managerial and human resources. Interestingly, Mr. Annan mentioned a reform of the personnel system on the first place suggesting reforms in recruitment and career development. These suggestions also alluded to a reform at the management level and of the leadership situation.

Unfortunately this reform package was not passed because the majority of the member states voted against it. This vote shows the fragile side of this huge intergovernmental organisation which is financed by states and therefore the very same states have the power to induce change, or block it. As formulated by one interviewee: „The UN is very weak, it is a receiver of political and economical realities.”

However, this does not mean that there is no remedy whatsoever.

In management literature, the importance of teams and groups is accentuated as a factor increasing the performance of organisations as well as the performance
of individuals. Numerous studies have shown that teams and groups decisively contribute to innovation, quality of service, cost reduction and increased productivity. Whilst a lot of research into teams and groups in internationally operating companies has been conducted, only rudimentary empirical research into the functioning of teams and groups in international organisations has been undertaken so far. Consequently, the contribution of this research is to assess the state of the art of team and group work in management literature and at the same time to investigate what kind of group and/or team work is practised in five Organisations of the United Nations. This study then attempts to highlight triggers and barriers for team and group work in five Organisations of the United Nations and aims at developing propositions and a model of analysis specifically addressing these triggers and barriers. Summarising, the two central research questions are:

- What kind of team and group work exists in five United Nations Organisations?
- Which factors are a trigger, a barrier, and/or influence team and group work in this context?

Answering these two questions leads to develop:

- Propositions comprising the organisational, group and individual context
- A model of analysis
- Managerial implications

The type of question (how and why team and group work is/is not practised in five United Nations Organisations), the explanatory purpose of this study (e.g. the identification of triggers and barriers for team and group work) and the focus on contemporary events led me to apply a qualitative research design. 50 semi structured interviews with predominately Austrian staff in five Organisations of the United Nations based in three locations were conducted for this case study. The interview data was analysed using the constant comparison method developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and as explicated by Boeije (2002).

1.2. Structure of this study
This study is structured along the following chapters:
Chapter II provides an overview of management literature referring to team and group work and discusses in a critical review the controversial findings. The salience of missing definitions in literature is the main point of criticism. Chapter III covers the research methodology, method and explains the research design.
This chapter also discusses the sample and the context of research describing the five Organisations under investigation. Chapter IV presents empirical findings based on the analysis of 50 semi-structured interviews in five Organisations of the United Nations. Based on the empirical findings a theoretical model of triggers and barriers for team work is presented in chapter V. This study concludes with chapter VI which raises a discussion of research findings, managerial implications and limitations of this study.

Figure 1: Structure of this study

Source: author