



UN “Voices,” UNIHP’s Oral History Archive

The United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) was born in 1999 because it was high time to trace the economic and social ideas that have been launched or nurtured by the UN system. The project has two main outputs, a books series and an oral history archive (see Briefing Note 1). While the other briefing notes summarize the specialized topics and policies found in the seventeen volumes commissioned by the project, this one details UNIHP’s efforts over the last decade to capture the “voices” of crucial UN participants.

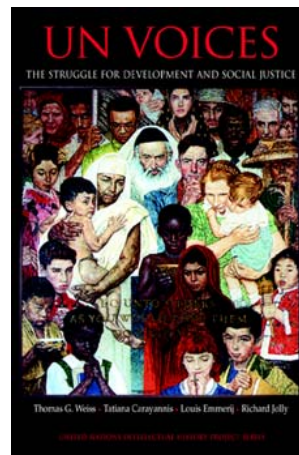
Why? Many of the individuals who have struggled in the cause of international cooperation have had largely undocumented careers and experiences that are essential for the historical record of the last six-and-a-half decades. And as important for the future of multilateralism, the oral history archive seeks to introduce the human side of the world organization by making more accessible the people who animate the United Nations.

Since the outset, the project has sought to maintain the classic distinction between the “two UNs”—one comprised of member states and a second comprised of secretariats—and then to integrate what we call the “third United Nations,” the actors that are closely associated with the world organization but not formally part of it. This “outside-insider” UN includes nongovernmental organizations, academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions, and other groups of individuals (see Briefing Note 3).

The contributions from people, individually and collectively, to the intellectual history of the world organization has been the project’s central preoccupation, both from the oft-ignored “second UN” of semi-independent secretariats as well as from outside experts and consultants of the “third UN” whose job descriptions include research, policy analysis, and idea mongering. They are capable, under certain circumstances, of leadership and influence that can alter international outcomes. We have consistently marshaled evidence that individuals and leadership matter—for international cooperation as for all human endeavors. Success or failure in implementing ideas is, of course, not

independent of governments, resources, or political support. Yet there is more room for maneuver and autonomy, particularly in the intellectual and advocacy realms, than is often supposed; and that reality emerges clearly from the project’s oral history archive.

In *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (2005), Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly put forward narratives



from some seventy-five individuals who have spent a substantial part of their professional lives in United Nations affairs and helped shape the organization’s thinking about development and social justice over the last six-and-a-half decades. Their stories, qualities, and commitments reveal a picture not of tired bureaucrats but rather of a focused and highly experienced group of professionals with an

extraordinary range of involvements in national and international life. There are secretaries-general and presidents, ministers and professors, social workers and field workers, as well as diplomats and executive heads of UN agencies—men and women from countries all over the world.

The voices represent a small and incomplete sample of those found in and around the United Nations—and even among those included, there was space only for a small selection of their experiences. And there are thousands of others who contribute and have contributed to the international struggle for a better world but whose voices are unheard. But *UN Voices* takes a step toward correcting the historical record.

Most students and scholars do not experience the UN first-hand but usually only through news clips and op-eds, websites and textbooks. To them, the world organization thus seems more a collection of boring bureaucrats than a creative center of gravity for international problem solving.



UN Intellectual History Project



Briefing Note Number 2 ■ June 2009

This oral narrative provides an antidote by giving life, color, and imagination to the experiences of individuals. The voices reflect the expectations, events, and efforts of people who contributed to the economic and social record of the UN's life and activities. Whether it was the idealism of the UN's early years, the anguish of the Cold War, or the initial euphoria and then the uncertainties of the post-Cold War era, the voices recall how their perceptions of events evolved over time, how tumultuous experiences forced themselves into public consciousness, and how they themselves changed perspectives through knowledge, exposure, experience, and the passage of time. A flavor of these reflections can be found in the short quotations in the accompanying box.

UN Voices has three parts. Part One, "Individuals and Backgrounds Make a Difference," introduces the cast of characters through their biographical material, which permits exploring an individual's family, educational, and professional background and career choices, as well as her or his own ideas regarding social and economic issues. The formative years and social backgrounds of these individuals were critical in determining subsequent views. Childhood, family, and religion play essential roles, as does education, particularly at the university level. Initial encounters with foreign languages, cultures, and international careers are yet other crucial factors. Rich and intriguing sets of experiences help dispel facile stereotypes. Backgrounds of poverty or silver spoons, for instance, are both well represented, but a commitment to justice and a better world emanates distinctly from the voices regardless of backgrounds. However committed to nationalism and patriotism, those we interviewed display a palpable passion for international cooperation. Nonetheless, differences abound. Indeed, any earlier thoughts about simple generalizations have vanished in compiling this collection.

Part Two, "Hope, Creativity, and Frustration," moves chronologically from the interwar period of uncertainty, the turmoil of World War II, and the hopeful founding of the next generation of universal organizations to the of tumult following the end of the Cold War and the increasingly globalized world at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In between, decolonization and the broadening of development aspirations led to an expansion of the UN's influence on ideas and

action, followed by a period of frustration and defensiveness in the 1980s. Decades are an arbitrary way of dividing history, but they proved useful organizational devices. Economic and social ideas promoted by the world organization since 1945 are mapped to probe the intersection of power, politics, institutions, and the acceptance or rejection of significant

Reflecting on the role of ideas, **Margaret Joan Anstee** summarized six UN roles with memorable alliteration. The UN can develop or promote ideas by serving as a *fount* (creating them), *font* (blessing or legitimizing them), *forum* (discussing them), *funnel* (channeling them into action), and *fanfare* (promote them). Afterwards, and with her usual sense of targeted irony, she added *funeral*, in recognition of the many ideas put quietly to rest after international debate.

Of the many differences between the UN and the Washington-based financial institutions, **Gamani Corea** commented on a twist for intellectual history: "The developing countries can never look at the Bretton Woods institutions as ones in which they could exercise the kind of influence they have in the UN where they have the strength of numbers....So, this is all the more reason why the UN should emphasize the intellectual caliber and quality of its work."

In reminiscing, **Janez Stanovnik** captured what drove the post-war generation: "The United Nations in my time, and before 1952 when I was in New York, and later on, but in this early period the UN was a true family of sincere believers, which it is not anymore. Everybody in the UN Secretariat at that time had a wartime story of his own....[and was] committed to never having war anymore, never again. We were lucky to survive, but we had a moral duty to honor the victims."

In describing how the UN and its ideas helped to influence popular language, **Gert Rosenthal** said: "It is usually a cumulative process, where some seminal ideas which tend to be discussed among a very limited group of people, sort of bursts into the public consciousness, through media, through word of mouth, through documents. And all of a sudden, maybe two, three, five years after the document came out, everyone is repeating some of its main points as if they were gospel."

In examining the link between ideas and institutions, **Adebayo Adedeji** cautioned: "There is no doubt that once you establish an institution, in this society of ours in the world in which we live today, they are like cemeteries. You can't remove the graves. They become permanent...So one must be very careful and not rush to establish institutions."



ideas.

Part Three, “The World Organization, Ideas, and Twenty-First-Century Challenges,” breaks from the preceding chronological presentation. Here individuals explore the nexus of ideas, international public policy, and enhanced multilateral cooperation.

The voices of interlocutors speak for themselves. They are poignant and amusing, insightful and forward looking. Some are selfless, some self-serving. These personal accounts reflect despair and hope, tragedy and triumph, blindness and insight. International cooperation is so necessary yet so distant. Readers discover our interviewees at both their heroic and less exalted moments. Professional training, national origins, religious upbringing, class backgrounds, and ethnic and gender identities shaped attitudes and efforts. Many of our interviewees disagree among themselves, and the text does not shy away from highlighting such differences. Views are often unvarnished and refreshing. Moreover, where memories attempt revisionism, the authors have pointed out different interpretations for historical accuracy.

Who are the persons whose memories form this archive? A little over half of them served directly in the international civil service. They come from thirty-five countries, covering all of the world’s regions and most of the UN’s major language groups. A third of those interviewed spent part or all of their careers in academia, and a quarter or so in government service in their own countries. A fifth are women, in part a reflection of the paucity of women in positions of influence in and around the UN until recently. Most have advanced degrees, and about half studied economics, undoubtedly reflecting our focus on issues of economic and social development.

In terms of geographic distribution, a little over half trace their family origins to the industrialized “North,” and nearly half to developing countries (Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America) in the “Global South.” Ten percent come from the former “Eastern bloc,” and forty percent from the “West.” Nearly one quarter of them experienced the dislocation that comes with growing up a refugee of war, or in political exile. And many share strong recollections of their families’ experiences during the Great Depression and World War II. And

virtually all of them express powerfully the importance of international cooperation in improving the lot of the have-nots.

The choice of persons to interview inevitably was subjective. The project’s co-directors chose persons in senior positions who were able to reflect on several decades of experience—but this selection meant missing younger persons. The focus on economic and social development thus omitted many, but not all, whose experiences were primarily in peacekeeping and humanitarian action. The emphasis on ideas meant underplaying the contribution of many doers, not because they have not often generated important ideas, but because their contributions are less frequently written down and accessible. Moreover, actuarial tables entered the selection of those interviewed—twelve of those interviewed have subsequently died—but the memories of what it was like to be a pioneer in international cooperation remain.

This final list reflected inputs from our International Advisory Council and from authors commissioned to write books. We sought balance and diversity—countries of origin, backgrounds, gender, and viewpoints. In the end, the budget and a publishing deadline limited the interview pool. The sample was not, in a conventional sense, scientifically representative—undoubtedly an illusory goal given the many individuals who have participated in UN development work. The sample contains, however, individuals with an openness of mind and a broad enough exposure to intellectual currents and UN debates to reflect candidly on what was an utterly unusual and intense period of experimentation with multilateral cooperation since 1945.

Readers are beneficiaries of another decision made at the outset, and one that distinguishes this oral history from many others. We rejected the anthropological and sociological convention of anonymity for interviewees and also insisted that everything in the approved transcripts could be used *immediately* by us and other researchers. Much would have been lost in hiding identities or in closing what was available until after the deaths of those interviewed.

No decision comes without a price. Without the shield of anonymity or of confidentiality only dropped at some distant date, some elements of frankness were sacrificed. Paradoxically, the



UN Intellectual History Project

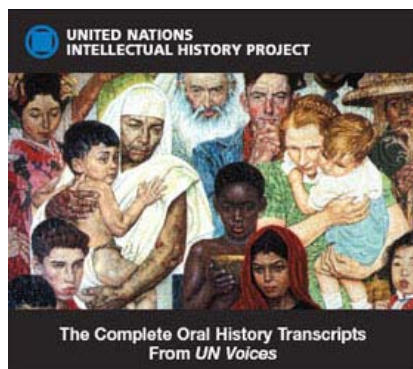


Briefing Note Number 2 ■ June 2009

definitive “oral” history is what appears in the approved and revised written transcripts rather than what originally was recorded during interviews. Because no material would be sequestered even temporarily from public scrutiny, there is occasionally, although not all that frequently, a discrepancy between what was recorded and what is found in the approved transcription. In the vast majority of cases, modifications actually heightened the historical accuracy and added clarification to the oral interview. In only a few cases was lively and highly critical material lost.

The first interviews took place at the end of 1999, and by the end of 2003 virtually all were completed. On average, interviews were four hours long. The briefest lasted an hour; some were as long as twelve hours, taking place over several sessions. In all, almost 350 hours were recorded. The book *UN Voices* contains only a small portion of this material and does not include the interviews of the project’s co-directors.

The complete and indexed transcripts, in the form of a searchable “electronic book,” are available upon written request from the project’s offices (see our website www.unhistory.org). In April 2007, the project produced a CD-ROM of the transcripts with indices and photos for all interviewees so that the complete oral histories available to researchers worldwide. The importance of this archival collection cannot be



over-emphasized as there is precious little institutional memory at the UN, and few resources are devoted to capturing the historical

record. The archives across the UN system have been neglected, and few people write their memoirs after they leave or retire. This collection helps compensate for this woeful lack of attention to the UN’s history.

Ronald Grele and Mary Marshall Clark, the former and current directors of Columbia University’s Oral History Office, guided our

efforts at the outset and advised that, for the “conversational narrative” to emerge, it is critical for the interviewer to be well prepared. Prior to interviews, a project researcher helped scour archives, personal papers, and secondary material and ready us to make the best use of limited time with an interviewee. Only by reading what had been written either by interviewees or about them and their contributions were we able to construct questions that guided the conversations. Conversations were informed by our own understanding, as analysts of and participants in, the history of United Nations ideas.

Lengthy sets of prepared questions often gave way to the flow of a conversation, which gathered a momentum of its own. Interlocutors often responded with unanticipated but rich information that sparked a different line of questioning than anticipated. Additional facts may have been lost in this process, but they were offset by increased intensity and emotion. Above all, an oral historian learns to listen. We always wanted more, and we wanted to push deeper. A sense of intimacy made certain questions easier to ask, others harder. At the end of the day, however, the controls were in the hands of the interviewees. A significant number of them spoke with a refreshing candor about their experiences, their colleagues, and themselves. A sense of self-criticism was evident much of the time, as well as emotions and thoughts that had rarely been shared with others or certainly not in public.

Neither the book nor the CD-ROM is hagiographic. Colleagues appear warts and all. Every story is different; each voice is unique. The recorded conversations and corrected transcripts encapsulate a story within the UN’s story. The structure and subtlety of language in each interview, including his or her sense of irony and of imagery, provide a first-hand account of a personal and professional voyage through the intellectual history of the United Nations. The interviews in the project’s archives thus provide an essential element in solving a key puzzle in contemporary affairs, namely which ideas eventually become part of international discourse, policy, and action, and how.

Thomas G. Weiss, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly