



The UN: the Challenges Ahead

The world is in a serious recession—the worst since the 1930s and engulfing all regions of the world. There are many longer-term causes and consequences of the ongoing financial and economic crises. And, notwithstanding the piecemeal injection of trillions of dollars, euros, and pounds into the banking system and gigantic levels of fiscal stimulus by governments, nobody knows when and how it will end.

In spite of the magnitude of this crisis and its clear international dimensions, most of the initial search for remedial action has consisted of western political leaders conferring among themselves. Through most of 2008, the focus was on western action to tackle the western dimensions of the crisis. Nor was much attention given to the way poor people were being affected in poor countries. Apart from two meetings of the Group of 20 (G-20), in December 2008 and April 2009, consultation with countries beyond the West has been very limited. The Bretton Woods institutions let alone the United Nations have been AWOL or at best on the sidelines of mainstream decision-making.

The West's approach to the crisis demonstrates only too clearly the narrow perspectives within the economic and financial community's dominant powers. As the crisis has spread, it is becoming apparent that these limited perspectives are inadequate to solve the global problems presented. The president of the General Assembly is organizing a summit meeting in June 2009 and has invited all UN member countries to participate in the search for broader perspectives, broader solutions, and widespread support. Major reforms of international approaches and institutions are needed, as many commentators and political leaders around the world have pointed out.

The findings of the United Nations Intellectual History Project have already underlined the value of a truly global perspective and identified key issues that need to be made part of solutions to the current crisis—and into reforms of existing international mechanisms and institutions to prevent a recurrence. These include some issues already on the conventional agenda:

- stronger international regulation of financial and economic operations
- mechanisms to avoid extremes of instability transmitted in the operations of the global financial and economic system
- measures to help maintain short-term stability while moving toward long-run sustainability
- reform of representation within international organizations, to give more weight to the emerging economies and to poorer and weaker countries

But other issues have hardly been mentioned, such as measures for the accelerated advance by the poorest countries and for improved living standards of poorest people. In short, a new look at the mandates, operations, capacities,

and representativeness of global institutions is necessary. Global stability, long-run sustainability, much greater equity, and serious attention to human rights need to be built into the mandates and operations of all international organizations.



If this seems too visionary, one needs to remember and take courage from earlier experience. The proposals

presented at the Bretton Woods conference in 1944 were bold and intellectually brilliant, drawing on the best minds of the times and going far beyond the conventional analysis and wisdom of the day. So also were the ideas and recommendations of the three major UN economic reports issued over 1949-51 directed toward full employment, economic development, and international economic stability. Fears of repeating the 1930s and the confident hopes of building a new postwar world inspired innovative thinking.



Today, the world is more complicated and so are the challenges. And urgency is added to the present challenge by both the depths of the recession and the growing realization that planetary survival requires finding ways to tackle a broader range of major challenges ahead, over the medium to longer run. These include global warming and climate change but others challenges too.

Ten Global Challenges for the Next Decade—and Beyond

The final chapters of *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (2009) identify ten major challenges:

- Finding ways to reverse or slow global warming and climate change
- Extending global governance to embrace a multipolar world
- Providing support to fragile states
- Developing more effective regulation of the global private sector and new ways to balance regionalism with globalization
- Moderating inequalities in global development
- Responding to population expansion and international migration
- Bridging international divides of culture and identities
- Shifting the definition of the security challenge from state sovereignty to the protection of individuals
- Strengthening concern for culture and human rights in development
- Improving the quality of education worldwide

Finding ways to reverse or slow global warming and climate change: The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has done a remarkable job over two decades, issuing four major reports to persuade politicians and the world at large that the present cycle of climate change is extremely serious and human-made and requires unprecedented action in all

parts of the world. This is an illustration of the United Nations at its best, drawing on the scientific community to put governments on notice that urgent action is required.

Extending global governance to embrace a multipolar world: Incorporating the new economic and political giants into the international system is both a challenge and an opportunity. The days of the “unipolar moment” are coming to an end, less because the United States is declining but because other countries are ascending. This is obviously the case of China and India but also of Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, and Nigeria further down the line. A multipolar world, or perhaps a non-polar one, needs also to achieve better representation of Japan and Russia, as well as of the EU as a whole. A multipolar world could become more balanced and stable than one in which a single country can determine policies for all. But it will take skillful action and political leadership. The results from balance-of-power competition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries do not inspire confidence that a multipolar world will necessarily be more peaceful and just.

Providing support to fragile states: This encompasses international responses to the thirty to fifty countries that are unable to guarantee stability and basic services to their populations. Many have central governments whose sole existence takes the form of membership in the UN and control of the capital or the main export industries. These difficult challenges require a UN response that promotes democracy, and accelerates development. In war-torn states the UN may also need to be involved in peacemaking and peace-building activities grounded in the responsibility to protect doctrine. Even more complicated, the UN needs to find ways to prevent the effective takeover of governments in these countries by rent-seeking groups representing no more than their own profit seeking interests.

Developing more effective regulation of the global private sector and new ways to balance regionalism with globalization: Both require finding appropriate mixtures of private and public sectors within a vast variety of economic and cultural contexts. Globalization over the last two decades has been driven by the private sector with few holds barred—and the recent crisis has made clear some of the costs. The unfettered autonomy of the private sector is in



sharp contrast to the national and international approaches of the UN's first four decades. It is also in contrast to regionalism, which has been mainly a public sector-driven phenomenon in which the private sector plays an important role but is controlled regarding many issues by the regional equivalent of the state, as illustrated by the European Union and its debate with Microsoft. In recovering from the crisis, global governance needs to be strengthened to counterbalance the private sector internationally, just as regionalism has, or is getting, such powers of regulation at regional level.

Moderating inequalities in global development: The growing gaps and inequalities between and within countries are a direct cause of poverty and despair for millions of people, the ingredients of a dangerous cocktail of social unrest. These conditions also tend to generate sympathy for terrorism. Reducing inequalities between and within countries as part of development, therefore, is not only morally compelling but also one of the elements of a sensible strategy to address the root causes of terrorism and international migration. Its remedy would help solve two problems simultaneously.

Responding to population expansion and international migration: World population is projected to increase by another 2 to 3 billion over the next fifty years, which will put new and enormous pressures on the Earth's ecosystems. Most of the additional billions of people will be living in developing countries. Moreover, the world's fast-growing middle class aspires to the consumption patterns of developed countries. Population pressures will also increase current problems such as unemployment. The challenge of migration reflects the "pull" of economic opportunity in better-off countries combined with the "push" of lack of economic opportunity in sending countries, often compounded by forced displacement resulting from violent armed conflict. Urgent action is needed to develop a global response, channelling policies into more humane and economically attractive directions.

Bridging international divides of culture and identities: Cultural divides—perceived and real—between the global West and the Islamic world are currently the most visible, but there are others, often involving clashes of competing radical ideologies. While many argue that the

divides are a transitory phenomenon caused by the fallout from the war on terrorism, it is urgent to get a better grasp of the underlying issues to prevent them from becoming entrenched.

Shifting the definition of the security challenge from state sovereignty to the protection of individuals: The responsibility to protect is an emerging norm that attracts more and more attention. A global protection force to protect endangered individuals within countries would be a step in the right direction. There is also the need to put approaches to disarmament again on the UN agenda, especially in the context of rapidly rising military expenditures in many countries. These issues are ever more pressing, whether one's lens is traditional international security or human security.

Strengthening concern for culture and human rights in development: Culture has been largely absent in the development debate. There is a need for the UN to better understand the links—cultural and others—between human security, human rights, and development. UN analytical and operational work at the country and regional levels can do much to provide richer perspectives of national and regional problems and better understanding of ways forward. This is especially true for new issues such as national policies designed to respond to global warming and energy-saving strategies, rights-based policies, and education for global understanding and tolerance.

Improving the quality of education worldwide: There is a need for more attention to the quality of education at all levels. The full contribution of education—for mothers, for the development of the individual, for building tolerance and global understanding, and for progress in general—cannot be realized without paying more attention to education content and quality. Teachers are under-paid, buildings are collapsing, and children are in the fields instead of classrooms. Education has been often turned over to the private sector in places where most families do not possess the resources for books let alone tuition. What future is there for future generations?

An Intellectual and Action Agenda for the UN



Each of these global challenges defines intellectual issues for analysis and research to guide necessary action. The research and analysis agenda can be translated into five broad themes on which the UN system needs to work in the years to come. How best to

- Promote global human solidarity
- Enhance opportunities for people in poorer countries
- Prevent conflict, build peace, and foster human security
- Sustain the planetary ecosystem
- Strengthen global governance

All five mega-areas are essential and ought to be on the UN's intellectual agenda for multidisciplinary and interrelated research. Moving to sustainable development and sustainable ecosystems should be combined with accelerating economic growth in the poorest and least developed countries—and thus with change in the global pattern of growth. Nothing captures better the urgency and difficulties of human survival with dignity than moving ahead to protect the world's ecosystems.

Research does not mean turning the UN into a university or think-tank. It means recognizing that the world organization has already encouraged or sponsored new thinking and analysis on many problems—and that the resulting ideas for policy have often been among the UN's most important contributions. Nor does it mean that the world body should undertake all the research as desk studies in UN headquarters; rather, much of it must be done in the field. The UN's role is to ensure that the research is done and done well, with results promoted and debated, in ways which reach and influence those with the power to take action.

But for the UN's future support of research and new thinking to be effective, several things are required:

- Those involved will need to maintain the difficult and always tenuous balance between vision and realism. The United Nations Intellectual History Project has shown that this balance underlies the best of the UN's past work—and it needs

to be maintained in the future.

- Interactions among the “three UNs”—member states, staff members, and NGOs and experts—will remain vital for the UN's effectiveness. Just as scientists have taken the lead through the IPCC in formulating the risks and consequences of global warming and climate change, many global problems will require similar partnerships of government experts and independent scientists, supported by committed NGOs. Other agencies of the UN system could undoubtedly establish IPCC-like research structures in other areas of inquiry.
- The media needs to play a stronger role in mobilizing concern and communicating ideas and findings to the general public.

Adequate amounts of international funding must be available, especially for support of global public goods. As a global public good—an important economic concept—research must receive international support. Global public goods have the quality that all countries can receive benefits from such them, whether or not the country or its citizens contribute to their creation or use. They are freely available, and there are no additional costs in permitting others to benefit. Much of the international work of the whole UN is a form of global public good, including its efforts to create a more sustainable global ecosystem. This raises the problem of generating the required revenues, in ways that are seen to be equitable in relation to use and ability to contribute. This too is a research problem as well as a political task.

Strengthening the UN's Intellectual Work

The United Nations Intellectual History Project has identified a number of priorities for improving the world organization's research, analytical, and policy work:

- The UN should do more to foster an environment that encourages creative thinking, penetrating analysis, and policy-focused research of a high



intellectual and critical quality. This has implications for recruitment and promotion. The quality of staff members is essential, and will depend on more professional procedures in recruitment, appointment, promotion, and organization of responsibilities.

- The UN needs to pursue a bold and forward looking intellectual agenda. Inevitably, this will raise the problem of not being able to please all member states, which in turn means that the UN will need to seek more free spaces and intellectual autonomy for its research and related publications. Gunnar Myrdal, the Economic Commission for Europe's first executive secretary, said that the proudest achievement of his ten years at the helm of that regional UN body was the intellectual autonomy he negotiated for producing the annual economic overview. Some of the UN's best work has taken place when senior staff have been liberated from the need to check documents before publication with boards or donors. Today, this may well require special "safety zones" within organizations—such as UNRISD, WIDER, and the UNDP's Office of Development Studies. In such "zones" serious work can go on in an environment free from daily urgent matters where controversy can be identified and analyzed, not simply suppressed.
- The UN should seek alliances with centers of expertise—in academia, think tanks, government policy units, and corporate research centers. Just as the UN is a world center for tying countries together, so it must also be a place to network outstanding thinking. This calls for high levels of intellectual leadership.
- Governments need to provide more financial resources for UN research, analysis, and policy exploration as a high priority. The terms on which such finance is provided is crucial, not only to ensure availability but also to ensure sustained commitments without strings, explicitly designed to encourage free thinking and exploration of new ideas

and approaches.

- The UN's intellectual agenda should be designed for impact. It should address real problems of significance in ways that go to the heart of solutions. Basic research is best done in universities, but many elements of applied research can and should be done within the UN.
- Strengthening the means to disseminate new ideas, analyses, and proposals is equally important. Outreach for a core of high-visibility reports has sometimes been very impressive. At the same time, too many high-quality analyses languish on book shelves or in filing cabinets. Discussion should not only be in intergovernmental settings but in capitals with governments and among such diverse constituencies as NGOs, business, the media, and members of civil society.
- Finally, there is an important institutional challenge. Rethinking and improving professional relations between the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions is needed in order to encourage better exchanges of ideas and experiences and a less skewed allocation of international resources. Since 1980, the donor community has increasingly channelled funds to and through the Bretton Woods institutions and followed their lead in terms of policy and action, both internationally and at country level. This emphasis has often led to neglect of UN ideas, policies, and approaches and, in turn, to the lack of the very attention and support that produces work of quality. Our assessment shows the many ways that UN contributions have been neglected in key areas in which the Bretton Woods institutions were not active or, equally important, in areas in which subsequent events have shown that these institutions' earlier policies were too narrow, misguided, or wrong. The need now is to achieve a better balance between the World Bank, the IMF, and the UN in contributing to policy leadership.



Conclusion

For the future as for the past, governments must not lose sight of the world organization's intellectual contributions. UNHIP has shown:

- Ideas embodied in analysis, policies, and action have often been among the UN's most important achievements.
- UN intellectual contributions in the economic and social arena have had more impact and success than often acknowledged or realized, including setting paths that others have followed.
- The urgent and inescapable international challenges of the future underline the importance of UN reform and for strengthening the institution's capacities for the twenty-first century.

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