

Society for International Development, the North–South Roundtable and the Power of Ideas

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ABSTRACT *Richard Jolly gives a short insider history of The North–South Roundtable, which has played a leading high profile role in the work of the Society for International Development for over the three decades.*

KEYWORDS *Pearson Report; human development; energy; ODA; United Nations; gender*

Nearly everything which works today began with an idea and a small group of people committed to its realization. Take the case of slavery. Two hundred years ago, nearly everyone thought slavery was part of nature. Who would have thought that as improbable a group as a small bunch of Quakers, dedicating themselves to its abolition would succeed. Or consider colonialism. Who would have thought a hundred years ago, that it would be gone. Our visionary perspective is the true realism and that is what we must pursue (Barbara Ward, speaking to the North South Roundtable, December 1980).

Introduction

The North–South Roundtable (NSRT), founded in 1977, rapidly emerged as a leading part of the Society for International Development (SID), with a high international profile. Over the three decades of its existence, it has held nearly 40 international meetings and issued many publications. It became an important part of the unofficial ways in which development policy and UN actions were debated and sometimes decided, a high level but non-official network. In my account I look at the NSRT rapid rise and success, at who were its key actors and funders, its main themes and try to assess if it has achieved long-term impact along with the lessons for the future.

Origins and inspiration for the NSRT

Although the NSRT emerged in the mid-1970s as part of the reforms of SID, its origins go back to the Pearson Report, *Partners in Development*, issued in late 1969.¹ To give the Pearson Report publicity and stimulate attention to its recommendations, Barbara Ward organized two conferences in 1970, making great efforts to invite many of the new generation of development professionals and activists as participants. The commission had been chaired by Lester Pearson, who had just retired as prime minister of Canada and himself one of the founding visionaries of the UN. Other members included the

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economist W. Arthur Lewis, who had earlier played major roles in advising the UN on development and who later was to become the first Nobel laureate in economics from a developing country. Saburo Okita, one of the best-known Japanese economists and a longstanding supporter of SID, was also a member.

Among the group of senior economists preparing the Pearson Report were several who were later to be active in SID and the NSRT: Sartaj Aziz (Haq, 1988), Dharam Ghai, Pat Blair, Carlos Diaz-Alejandro and Goran Ohlin. The more than 170 participants included Mahbub ul Haq, Enrique Iglesias, Gerry Helleiner, Reg Green, Michael Bruno, Samir Amin and a number of persons already more established in development such as Hollis Chenery, Albert Hirschman, Harry G. Johnson, Paul Hoffman, I.G. Patel, Dudley Seers, Hans Singer, Jan Tinbergen, Robert Triffin and Robert McNamara, then head of the World Bank. Many other persons who had or were about to play important parts in SID were also present, including Chief Adebo, Irving Friedman, Jim Grant, Maurice Strong and Ponna Wignaraja.

In the views of many present, the Pearson Report represented the end of one era rather than the beginning of the next. The Commission had been created to prepare 'a Grand Assize' on the experience of aid-led development in the 1960s. Instead, the report was dubbed by some at the conference as 'a grand illusion', making a growth rate for developing countries of 6 percent per annum in the 1970s central to its recommendations along with an increase of aid to 0.7 percent by 1980 from each developed country, of which 20 percent should be provided through international institutions and with total transfers to developing countries of 1 percent of GNP.

The report made many other recommendations. But it was rejected in spirit by most of those present, who signed a Columbia Declaration, for not having focused too narrowly on growth and for being far too timid in its recommendations. Even if these recommendations were fully implemented, global inequalities would continue to grow as would poverty and the numbers without adequate health, education, housing and other essentials. Internationally, the focus on aid and partnership

needed to be shifted to an agenda of serious change in the unequal relationships between developed and developing countries, with reductions in tariffs and discriminatory trade barriers, adjustment of the terms for debt repayments, and the provision of more additional through such measures as the creation of more Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) by the IMF.

Among the other critiques of the Pearson Report, one concerned the process. Rather than produce one major report attempting to deal with all the issues of development in one document, Mahbub ul Haq argued that it would have been far better to have created something like the Trilateral Commission. This latter was a high prestige body which met two or three times a year with the object of exploring how to achieve better economic relationships between the US, Europe and Japan. Improving relationships between developing and developed countries, Haq claimed, needed a similar body, with intellectuals and policy-makers taking up in successive meetings, key themes one by one, thus not overloading the agenda of any individual meeting but at the same time, building up over time a coherent, interlocking set of proposals.

Thus was born the idea of NSRT, the North-South Roundtable. In the end, the NSRT was established by SID in 1977 as an independent body for policy analysis and dialogue. Initially, some 150 persons were invited to be members. Barbara Ward was chair and the first meeting was held in Rome in 1978 and the second in Colombo a year later. It was to be 'an intellectual forum for the advancement of a constructive dialogue between North and South, developed and developing, rich and poor nations, in search of a more just and secure world order' (Haq, 1988).

The power and vision of leadership – Barbara Ward, Mahbub ul Haq, Maurice Strong and Khadija Haq

Four people, all with powerful personalities, provided strong leadership to the NSRT in its first decade: Barbara Ward, Mahbub ul Haq, Maurice Strong and Khadija Haq. Each knew, respected and admired each other, yet each in various ways was fundamentally different.

Barbara was an economist, internationalist and intellectual, a deeply committed Catholic Christian, a member of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, frequently hobnobbing with the Vatican. For all of us who got to know her, she was a saint – though in a deliciously worldly sense. Her eyes sparkled, she smiled and winked with a knowing look, she won over absolutely everyone, young and old, men and women, children too. Our own son, when aged four, once lunged playfully at her with a stick. Barbara smiled and to his total surprise, effortlessly parried the blow. When Alison my wife asked how she had done this so skilfully, she commented that she had gained a blue in Oxford for fencing. She had also sung – so well that some had wanted her to go professionally into opera. Instead, she started writing books on politics and economic affairs and in 1939 joined *The Economist* and within a short while was foreign editor, a post she held for most of the years of the Second World War. Afterwards she became ever more international, strongly supporting the Marshall Plan, moving to Ghana and becoming an early promoter of development.

Barbara never lost her journalistic ability to explain the most complex economic issues with clarity, verve and a light touch. But she did so much more than this. She brought to her analysis perspectives given by what she called the inner and outer limits of the world economy – minimum needs to avoid poverty as the inner limit and environmental capacity as the outer limit – and then mapped out what could and needed to be done in a world cut through with North South and other inequalities. Every two or three years over the 1970s, she produced another best-seller, putting across in vivid, powerful prose the messages of the UN's first round of global conferences: *Only One Earth – the care and maintenance of a Small Planet* (for the Stockholm Environment conference of 1972), *The Home of Man*, for the Habitat conference in 1976, *Progress for a Small Planet*. Her last book, published in 1979, two years before she died).

Mahbub ul Haq, also inspirational, was more the economist's professional, though no less brilliant in writing. Soon after receiving his first degree

from Lahore, a degree from Cambridge and a doctorate from Yale, he was back in Pakistan working in the National Planning Commission, for which he rapidly became Chief Economist. In 1970, he became special adviser to McNamara, the president of the World Bank, a position he held in the early years of the NSRT. Over the 1970s, he was Director of the Policy Planning and Program Review department of the World Bank and the main voice in encouraging McNamara to put poverty and basic needs at the top of the Bank's priorities. When McNamara left the World Bank, Mahbub left too in 1982 – back to Pakistan where he quickly became Minister of Commerce, Planning and Finance.

In 1989, still the visionary behind the NSRT, Mahbub was persuaded by Bill Draper to join UNDP where he founded the Human Development Report. He stayed until 1995, before returning to Pakistan, to become with Khadija, his wife and intellectual partner, founder director of the South Asian Centre for Human Development. Tragically, he died on a brief visit to New York in 1998. But the vision of Human Development lives on, captured in his *Reflections on Human Development* and every year, in a new Human Development Report. In addition, some 550 National Human Development reports have been issued in over 130 countries, there is a *Human Development Journal* and a Human Development and Capabilities Association with over 600 members.

Maurice Strong, the third Chairmen of the NSRT, is again totally different, but quietly and organizationally inspirational. He is the businessman-entrepreneur, a self-made millionaire from modest beginnings, a creator of institutions and for many years a dollar-a-year adviser to the Secretary General of the UN. He became founder President of IDRC, then of CIDA, after which he organized and chaired the Stockholm Conference on the Environment, then became first Executive Director of UNEP. While Chairman of the NSRT, he served as executive coordinator of the Office for Emergency Operations in Africa (OEOA) from 1985 to 1986, during which time he organized a North–South Food roundtable on the Crisis in Africa and two food roundtables in Khartoum and Nairobi. In 1992, he was asked to chair the

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Earth Summit, 20 years after Stockholm. He was heavily involved with UN reform under Kofi Annan.

Khadija Haq, Mahbub's close collaborator, intellectual partner and devoted wife was the fourth. Khadija throughout the life of the NSRT was Executive Director of the NSRT as well as being Chairman for its last decade. She maintained the focus and inspiration and contributed herself to the NSRT's work, especially on gender issues. She also provided the steady hand of administrative efficiency and organization. This meant that the NSRT over its years had demonstrated a remarkable output of publications: twelve books, eight Roundtable Papers and 25 Roundtable Reports.

These were the undoubted leaders. But there were many others of us – about 80 more or less permanent NSRT members, half from the South and half from the North. Although it is invidious to mention names, some must be listed to indicate the range and level of those from the South who often came: Ismail Sabri Abdalla, Adebayo Adedeji, Oscar Arias, Lourdes Arizpe, Ali Attiga, Drag Avramovic, Sartaj Aziz, Jagdish Bhagwati, Arthur Brown, Shahid Burki, Mary Chinery Hesse, Gamani Corea, Kenneth Dadzie, Beatriz Harrette, Prince Hassan Bin Talal, Lal Jayawardene, Uner Kirdar, Carlos Massad, Don Mills, Enrique Iglesias, Idriss Jazairy, Sonny Ramphal, Nafis Sadik, Marie Angélique Savané, Manmohan Singh and Cesar Virata. From the North should be mentioned Robert Berg, Maggie Catley-Carlson, Hollis Chenery, Harlan Cleveland, Louis Emmerij, Richard Gardner, Jim Grant, Sven Hamrell, Ivan Head, Gerry Helleiner, Ryokichi Hirono, John Lewis, Musha Mushakoji, Mark Nerfin, Sadako Ogata, Saburo Okita, Jan Pronk, Sadig Rasheed, Gus Ranis, Jean Ripert, Doug Roche, Bengt Sæve-Söderbergh, Horst Schulmann, John Sewell, Frances Stewart, Paul Streeten, Maurice Strong, Carl Tham, Maurice Williams and Bernard Wood.

In addition, others were invited to the more specialist meetings, depending on their expertise and the themes to be tackled. As explained, it soon became clear that meetings of 30 to 40 led to better discussions than larger ones. Smaller meetings also cost less to run! Over the years, probably four or five hundred persons participated in NSRT

meetings, many in positions of influence and leadership for development. They were selected because they had expertise in the topic under discussion, were willing to engage in dialogue and were open to new ideas and thinking.

Funding and connections

With this high-powered leadership, the NSRT never lacked resources. Most of its support came from a diversity of aid donors and foundations, including the Canadian International Development Agency, the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Development Research Centre of Canada, the Netherlands Government, the OPEC Fund, the Swedish International Development Authority, UNDP and the World Bank. Many institutions hosted individual meetings, covering all or some of the costs. Those contributing papers and other participants were, of course, not paid for their contributions, so this could either be measured as a further contribution or used as an example of the economy of the NSRT's operations.

At times, the availability of funding for the NSRT became a source of some tension with the rest of SID, for which obtaining funds was generally more difficult. At one point, a proposal was made for the NSRT to share its funding or to be financially integrated with SID. This led to a period of tension and quite some acrimonious debate, culminating in 1997 when the NSRT separated from SID and was established as a legal entity based in the UK. Notwithstanding, one must note that the NSRT, over most of its life, kept links with SID, publishing a joint issue of *Development* and engaging SID members in its activities. NSRT in particular featured strongly at the SID Triennial World Conferences contributing greatly to the visibility and intellectual contribution of SID in the international development community.

Main themes

The NSRT agenda² was always forward looking, focused on one or other of the issues on the policy horizon, with a progressive cutting edge. International issues by definition were central, as were measures and policies that would respond closely

to third world needs. But though progressive, the NSRT was never narrowly ideological, nor wildly unrealistic. Khadija Haq describes Mahhub as having ‘a voice of moderation, of realism, seeking a middle ground’ (Haq and Jolly, forthcoming), qualities which characterized much of the NSRT’s work and recommendations.

Over the years, there was a definite evolution of themes and working method. The founding meeting in Rome in 1978, with Barbara Ward in the chair, took on the global challenges, though with hindsight it might be characterized as something of the last gasps of the calls for NIEO – the New International Economic Order. Even so, it was neither ideological nor dreamy and unrealistic. How could it have been with such a luminary in the chair and with the participation of so many people of first hand experience as well as intellectual brilliance.

The second meeting in Colombo mapped out a future workplan for the NSRT. It was proposed that regular North–South summits be held, with five priority areas: food, energy, technology, transfer of resources and the elimination of absolute poverty. But it was soon realized that meetings of the full Roundtable were both expensive and too large for effective communication. So the process was changed from large meetings once a year to a more continuing process, with specific themes pursued in small, issue-focused roundtables. This became the form for most of the 1980s, with smaller roundtables meeting on Energy, Food, Money and Finance, Trade and Informatics. At the same time, full meetings of the NSRT were combined with the tri-annual meetings of SID. This had the additional advantage of breaking down the sense of divide, between the regular and much larger SID membership and the smaller, more select NSRT membership, which, inevitably, was felt by many to be something of a self-selecting elite.

Energy roundtables

The smaller, more focused roundtables were often bold in analysis and thinking and in the policy recommendations they reached. Energy, for example, was the first of the smaller RTs to be held, exploring actions that could be taken to respond

to the oil crises of the 1973/4 and 1979/80. This RT showed how the mal-distribution of energy use was directly related to the mal-distribution of world income and wealth. Developing countries needed to undertake a comprehensive assessment of their energy needs. Developed and oil exporting countries needed to provide more financing to enhance third world production, with more effort in technological development for renewable and non-renewable energy supplies.

Energy and Development Policy Issues and Options reviewed the evolution of global energy supply and demand since the 1950s, emphasizing both overlaps and conflicts of interest. The messages were taken to Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka for policy dialogues. Later, a regional energy dialogue meeting was held in Santiago with six participating countries from Latin America. These interactions made clear that developing countries were often depleting their non-renewable resources, while doing too little by way of national energy planning, project assessment, technical screening and building management capacity. To respond to the insufficiency of international support, the RTs proposed the need for an energy development bank.

Food, famine and the African crisis in the 1980s

Three food roundtables in the early 1980s focused on issues of food security, small farmer food production and international action. One major conclusion was that food security would only be achieved with increased food production in developing countries, especially by small farmers, which would lead to a better balance in world food production. International action was also vital, in support of improved terms of trade and of more substantial grain stocks and emergency food aid financing. Nutrition, entitlements and rural food for work projects needed to be part of these plans.

All this was set out in 1981–1983, contributing through Maury Williams to the work and policy debates of the UN’s World Food Council. Little was it realized at the time that famine was about to strike 26 countries of Africa in 1983 and 1984.

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But then in 1984, as part of the UN's relief effort, Maurice Strong, already Chairman of the NSRT, was appointed executive director of the UN programme of Emergency Relief and Development. The NSRT also responded. UNICEF organized in New York a meeting of the Food Roundtable to explore how to apply the ideas of Amartya Sen, for providing cash aid in famine situations in place of or in addition to imported food aid. This was tried in Ethiopia, with modest results.

Then as part of his role at the helm of organizing relief, Maurice Strong organized two African food roundtables in Khartoum and Nairobi in 1986, focused on actions to avoid recurrence of the famine. Again, the importance of the small farmer in the frontline of defence against famine was a major conclusion, along with stronger moves towards self-reliant patterns of African development, supported with an international compact for long-term recovery and development. In Sweden, a NSRT consultative meeting was held to explore international arrangements for support of recovery and development and, in particular, key roles for the World Bank, the need for additional aid and better donor coordination. Among major conclusions were needs for additional aid to the African frontline states and the impossibility of African recovery without 'decisive action to relieve African international debt'.

Would that one could record that these actions were implemented with strength and persistence. Instead today, two decades later, one can only conclude that the recommendations were broadly on the right lines but were too often ignored and when not ignored, implementation failed. This is not explained by the NSRT pontificating from some ivory tower. The food roundtables were held with international policy-makers in New York, with African ministers and policy-makers in Khartoum and regionally in Nairobi. All this was followed soon after by a consultation with donors in Bommersvik in Sweden.

The formal conclusion of UNPAAERD – the UN's Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development – is that policies were misguided, aid insufficient, debt relief too late and implementation at country level mostly inadequate. This is not the place for a detailed

assessment, which would take far too long. But the cost of these failures deserves to be underlined. Sub-Saharan Africa has become the region of longest and deepest economic failure. With few exceptions, Africa is the sick man of the global economy – with many (more than 30) countries poorer than one, two or three decades earlier. History will record this as one of the great scandals of the late 1980s and 1990s, the era when triumphalism over globalization was in headlines year after year.

Money and finance roundtables

The need for better scheduling of debt repayments had emerged in the conferences on the Pearson Commission Report – and indeed, at the first UNCTAD conference in 1964. By the 1980s, after the surge of oil prices in the 1970s, and the surge of borrowing and third world debt that had followed, debt servicing became a major issue in the 1980s, reinforced by the crisis in Mexico in 1982.

Three money and finance roundtables were held in the 1980s – in Istanbul, Santiago and Vienna. Taking off from the issues of external debt and shrinking global liquidity, these roundtables soon became immersed in the pressures of short-term adjustment and the way in which the international financial system was forcing the poorest and weakest countries to shoulder most of the burdens of adjustment. This of course reflected a Keynesian view of the issues – and, indeed, many of the roundtable members were still largely Keynesian in their backgrounds and perspectives. But though far from adopting the fashionable monetarist views of the time, the members were also forward-looking, not locked in outmoded ideology. So the three Statements that emerged from the roundtables included many other recommendations.

- Systematic restructuring of developing country debts was needed.
- Private banks were contributing too little to world liquidity, so new SDR allocations were needed along with additional concessional flows of finance to developing countries.

- Adjustment policies needed to be expansionary, not contractionary.
- IMF conditionality should focus not only on monetary and financial measures but also on output, employment and quality of life indicators.
- A new multi-lateral round of trade negotiations was needed, aimed at increasing market access for the exports of developing countries.
- With increasing interdependence, the world needed to strengthen and broaden multilateralism that was too monolithic.

Roundtable meetings NSRT meetings, like those of the full NSRT, never lost sight of the big picture – in sharp contrast to the country level operations of the Bretton Woods Institutions over this period. Many of the Money and Finance Roundtable members included persons well established in international financial institutions, public or private. Accordingly, the recommendations also included bold measures for further advances in the management of these institutions. The first meeting explored how such institutional reform could contribute to more successful adjustment and development. The second emphasized how 'Ad hoc debt rescheduling sidesteps basic problems which can only be solved by a worldwide reduction of interest rates, interest stabilization schemes and a ceiling on debt servicing.

The theme of international institutional reform was repeated in Vienna and in a final meeting in New York, where these issues were elaborated further. This declared that the fundamental objective was to combine equilibrium in medium-term external accounts with long-term growth and development. To achieve this, major changes in the world trading and financial systems were needed to ensure growth with equity. This led to some bold recommendations: (i) linking repayment terms with commodity price and interest rate fluctuations, (ii) reducing real interest rates, (iii) limiting or cancelling the debts of the poorest countries and (iv) alternative conditionality, through an extended time horizon, country tailored adjustment packages and a wider set of performance criteria. The recommendations concluded that a new Bretton Woods conference should be convened at the earliest opportunity.

How influential were these recommendations? At the time, one must admit, many achieved little traction. On matters of money, finance and adjustment the RTs and the NSRT were swimming against the strong currents of the neo-liberal tide of the 1980s. Moreover, as the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer bluntly stated in 1992, 'The principal – though undeclared – objective of the Western World's debt strategy, ably coordinated by the IMF, was to buy time...' (Toye and Toye, 2004: 260).

So, there was little willingness to change direction, although shamed by the evidence of the deteriorating human situation in many countries of Africa and Latin America, the semblance of a human face was painted on adjustment policies by the World Bank at the end of the 1980s. Even so, IMF policies were barely changed at all. Indeed, as the UK Chancellor explained in 1992.

Time was needed not only to enable debtor countries to put sensible economic policies in place but also for the Western banks to rebuild their shattered balance sheets to the point where they could afford to write off their bad sovereign debts. For it was perfectly clear that the vast bulk of these debts would never come good even though there was an understandable conspiracy of silence over admitting this unpalatable fact (Toye and Toye, 2004: 260).

Thus it was only in the mid-1990s that the donors and the Bretton Woods Institutions began seriously to explore issues of debt forgiveness and only at the end of the 1990s, were such policies adopted – after many millions in the churches and non-government groups worldwide had begun to call for serious action. Even so, debt in developing countries today, even in the poorest countries, is far from all forgiven and written off. The recommendations of the Money and Finance RTs and the NSRT were too far ahead of their time.

Human development, including human security

By the mid-1980s, a human focus had emerged as the common theme of most of the NSRT's work. Mahbub decided that some sessions focused directly on Human Development were needed, to define more precisely what human development

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meant and to explore agendas for action. This led to three roundtables: in Istanbul in 1985 on The Human Dimension of Development; in Salzburg in 1986 on Adjustment and Growth with Human Development and in Budapest in 1987 on Human Development in a Changing World. Each led to a Statement of policy conclusions and a few months later to a volume, presenting the papers and summarizing the discussions, edited by Khadija Haq and Uner Kirdar. These were important forerunners of UNDP's *Human Development Reports*, which emerged in the 1990s, with the creation of UNDP's Human Development Report Office and the launch of the annual series of such reports.

Important as were these three major conferences, the coherence of their intellectual creativity should not be overstated. They brought together some pioneering thinkers – Frances Stewart, Andrea Cornia, Gus Ranis, Meghnad Desai, Paul Streeten – who later would play major roles in the creation of the HDR. No doubt some of the foundations of the HDR were laid. But it was no more than that. The major construction, the succession of annual HDRs, the HDI and other indices, the full flowering of the human development creation in the 1990s had to await the concentrated effort and full time commitment of Mahbub ul Haq, Amartya Sen and the other early members of the HDRO, with the above members involved as consultants and Inge Kaul as chief of the UNDP team.

There is one sub-theme of human development that deserves a special mention. In January 1990, shortly before the launch of the first HDR, a NSRT was held in Costa Rica, on the theme of The Economics of Peace. In fact, it could better have been entitled Human Security in the Post Cold War World. The host was Oscar Arias, then President and recently awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. It was a distinguished and highly experienced gathering – with Robert McNamara, Olesegun Obasanjo, Douglas Roche, Inga Thorsson, Brian Urquhart, Maury Williams and Jim Grant – as well as Mahbub and Khadija. I was chairman at the time.

The Berlin Wall had come down in November 1989 and discussion and the subsequent recommendations looked to the post-Cold War world –

emphasizing that a new approach to security was needed, a shift from the defence of national borders by military means to a focus on human security, defined as the protection of people from a wider range of threats by a diversity of measures. Along with this was a major call for reductions of military spending, to free resources for the support of action over a wider front.

Costa Rica, in this respect, served as an inspiration and a demonstration of possibilities. At that time, the country had just completed 42 years without an army – proving that such an approach could be realistic politics and a highly beneficial one, freeing resources needed for education and health for all, even to the provision of computers in half the primary school classrooms. Later in 1994, several of the recommendations of the NSRT found their way into the Human Development Report which that year focused on human security. HDR1994 also had a special contribution from Oscar Arias, which called for a peace dividend, channelling the savings from wider measures of disarmament into peace education, demobilization of soldiers and other actions to establish security on a more sustainable basis.

UN reform

In the early 1990s, several meetings of the NSRT explored how to strengthen the UN. In part these were linked with the Nordic project of the time, which was investigating UN reform. An initial NSRT meeting in Tarrytown, with the participation of many senior UN staff members and government representatives, was followed by four panel sessions held in the UN Trusteeship Council, at which participants in the roundtable reported ideas and findings to a wider UN audience. The topics of these panels give a flavour of the discussions and conclusions: strengthening the UN, as the focus of efforts of reform; lessons of the Office for Emergency Operations for Africa and the subsequent UN Programme of Action for African Recovery and Development for Africa in the 1990s; lessons from previous attempts at UN reform and Goals and Strategies for the 1990s. Some of these meetings and reports led to articles in SID's journal *Development* volume 42 no. 3.

So much water has subsequently flowed under the bridge of UN reform – often undermining the UN's foundations rather than achieving much new – that summaries of the detailed NSRT recommendations seems inappropriate and, in any case, is something of an acquired taste at this point. (Although it might be useful as a research project.) Suffice it to say that the emphasis was on the need for strengthening the UN in relation to the post-Cold War challenges of a world of increasing interdependence; for making human development the integrating frame and priority for UN agencies and organizations and as a means of tackling fragmentation; and for more attention to new issues of long-run human security, including ecological security and sustainability. One particular recommendation was the need to restore a better balance with the Bretton Woods Institutions and to end the marginalization of the UN in the economic and social fields.

The final NSRT on the theme of UN Reform was held in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, the site of the original founding conference of the IMF and the World Bank in 1944. This NSRT was held a year before the 50th anniversary, so its results could contribute to thinking about the changes now required and the results were published as a book, *The UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions: New Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*. Again, one of its major themes was the need for an integral view of the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions taken together and for achieving a better balance and more effective relationships between the UN, the World Bank and the IMF. But there were many other specifics: the need for a world social charter, for a development security council, for more democratic management of the Bretton Woods institutions, for more attention to human development, for longer term perspectives, more influenced by the different needs and concerns of the different world regions, including developed countries in the North; for a new framework for development cooperation; and for a UN agency for the advancement of women. It was a tall order, but no bolder than the remarkable vision which had guided the founders of the Bretton Woods Institutions in the same Bretton Woods Hotel, nearly half a century earlier.

The impact of the NSRT

How can one assess the impact of the NSRT's work? The sheer range of issues covered is enormous, as is the volume books, reports and papers. The final reports alone comprise three decades of background papers, debate, summarized conclusions and policy recommendations. Moreover, the context has changed and was continuously changing – sometimes for the better, but often not. In some respects, those of us concerned with development and human development are grappling with the same issues as 30 years ago, though again in a changed and changing context. We operate in a moving field.

Some things can however be said. First, the NSRT was true to its title and aim. The roundtable took on most of the major issues at the heart of North–South relationships – energy, food and agriculture, technology, money and finance, as well as debt and trade. The institutions playing the key roles heart in North–South relationships were also brought into virtually every roundtable, critically evaluating their operations, reaching conclusions and making recommendations about how they could be improved. More generally, issues which would now be termed those of global governance were explored, with a view not only of how to improve their functioning in ways which would benefit people in developing countries but in ways which would also bring benefits to people in richer countries. In all this, the NSRT was true to the vision of SID when the NSRT was founded in the 1970s.

Secondly, over the years, several of the perspectives on development debated and promoted by the NSRT in its early years have moved from the periphery to the mainstream. Poverty reduction, passionately argued in the NSRT from the beginning (and by Dudley Seers and Mahbub ul Haq in SID a decade before that) is now part of the global consensus on development policy, in a way which it was not before 1996. Similarly debt relief, called for by the NSRT and its roundtables consistently over the 1980s became a serious option towards the end of the 1990s, when it was taken up and pushed by a major coalition of NGOs. Human Development likewise has become widely known and widely adopted at country level, at least as

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the topic for national reports and analyses, if not yet as mainstream national and international policy for implementation.

One must not, however, think of impact as if influencing policy is a linear process (as sometimes imagined). Rarely is a policy-maker, whether minister or civil servant or international functionary simply waiting for a new idea or policy recommendation to drop onto his desk. Nor is such a person in a position, mentally, administratively or politically, to take a new idea, weigh it up and decide then and there whether to implement it – or not, as the case may be. Influence and impact is far more complex, both in practice and subsequently to assess. Indeed, linear models of decision making are more misleading than helpful.

The UN Intellectual history project has identified four ways in which ideas have impact:

- By changing the ways issues or problems are perceived.
- By defining lines of action and agendas for policy.
- By altering the ways in which different groups perceive their own interests and thus influencing what ideas and policies they might support.
- By becoming embedded in institutions in ways which ensure implementation over the longer run.

Can one apply such a frame to the ideas and recommendations emerging from the NSRT?

As mentioned, there are major areas where development perspectives have changed – and where the NSRT has played its part in showing the way and spreading the word. There is no need to claim that the NSRT was *uniquely* responsible for these shifts – clearly it was not. Mahbub and many others of the NSRT and of other groups were active in many other ways and other institutions. But it would be just as wrong to suggest that the NSRT played no part in the changes.

Similarly, the NSRT clearly helped to define agendas for action, especially to provide specifics ways in which the new perspectives could be turned from a good idea or approach in general to a frame for policy and measures for implemen-

tation. Again poverty reduction, debt relief and human development are clear examples. But the NSRT came up with many more ideas to turn generalities into specifics, including doable specifics, or as Jim Grant liked to say, 'actionable specifics'. The 20/20 proposal for restructuring both government budgets and aid allocations of donors in order to generate the resources needs for meeting human development goals in the 1990s was one such idea. Although not implemented over the longer run, it became a focus for serious policy discussion for several years, with strong support both from UNICEF and from the Norwegian and Japanese governments. It was used as a guideline for assessing budget allocations in some 25 developing countries and in at least two or three developed countries. Many other ideas emerged from the energy and money and finance roundtables as well as from the discussion for UN reform.

The NSRT discussions also helped to promote ideas and mobilize support among the NGOs and among more sympathetic governments. Although it is not easy to identify the unique contribution of the NSRT, the roundtable – and SID more generally – certainly helped to shift perceptions of possibilities and how these could be in the interests of donors and countries more generally. This is hardly surprising. Many meetings of the NSRT included senior policy-makers from the major donors, developing countries or from international agencies. They were part of the discussion and they took away ideas and conclusions from the meetings. It would be surprising if they had not often been influenced to see issues or think about the interests of the groups they represented in new ways. Noteworthy were the special NSRT meetings called to explore policies within the UN itself: one in CEF in 1982, which gave birth to UNICEF's programme for child survival and development over the rest of the 1980 and the one on cash in place of food aid in the mid 1980s, which led to a trial programme in Ethiopia a few months later. The NSRT on migration in 1990 was specifically held to explore possible issues for UNHCR to take up, shortly after Sagato Ogata had taken over as the new Commissioner.

Lessons learnt

Finally, ideas get embodied in institutions, in ways that provide a mandate and responsibilities for implementation. In terms of action, this can mean hitting the jackpot. But even so, implementation is never so simple or straightforward – and experience shows that there are still risks of distortion and diversion in the process. Unless, the interests of those with power and resources are perceived to be aligned with the new ideas, the hopes may not be fulfilled, at least not entirely. But again human development is one clear case where the institutional embodiment of the idea has recorded some clear success. UNDP established an office for human development, for 17 years an annual Human Development Report has been published, the report has achieved remarkable outreach and media attention, some 550 National Human Development Reports have been produced, along with regional human development reports for all the main regions of the world. Major praise must go to Mahbub ul Haq and to Amartya Sen, but many others and the NSRT played their parts. No two men are islands unto themselves, no matter how brilliant.

At the time of writing there may be a second. In the mid-1980s, Khadija Haq strongly promoted the idea of a UN agency for women, along the lines of UNICEF for children. This stirred much controversy at the time, including among women participants. Now in 2007, it seems that the new Secretary General is moving towards institutional changes that would bring together UNIFEM, INSTRAW and the Division for the Advancement of Women, under a single post graded at the Under-Secretary General level. Although not exactly Khadija's original proposal, it recognizes the institutional need and in its broad form goes a long way to implementing the original vision.

In short, the NSRT over three decades has been an important influence on development thinking and policy-making. Its contributions and impact may often be difficult to assess and measure with precision. But by its membership, its publications and the power and eloquence of its leadership, it has made a significant mark, perhaps especially in keeping alive idealism in the development community and vision for a world of justice and greater humanity.

But is this enough? Could the NSRT have achieved more impact? This can only be properly answered by coming back to its vision – of a world of less poverty, less inequality, greater justice, human rights, more equitable international relations. The NSRT was operating in a world where these values were mostly marginal to those of the economic and political interests of richer countries, trans-national corporations and the Cold War. To have been more realistic, the NSRT would have had to explore opportunities for action within these narrow boundaries. Although it did make some headway on occasion and perhaps slightly more within international institutions (which, at least rhetorically, shared some of the same values and objectives) to have achieved major influence would have required shifting the NSRT's goals and objectives. In the light of what was politically possible, the NSRT could only maintain its vision by working to bring home the failures, costs and in-efficiencies of the present world order and to seek to change perceptions of what was needed and what could be gained by a new and better set of global arrangements.

Moreover, the NSRT was operating in an intellectual climate given by totally different values and strongly supported by different forms of analysis. In a way which only recently is becoming clear, the dominant ideologies of the Cold War era – West as well as East – were supported and extended by research institutes, universities and other intellectual centres in ways which reinforced the *status quo* along with dominant economic and political interests. This is by no means a new thought. But the extension and permeation of these influences may have gone much further and be more interconnected than is often realized. In the West, game theory not only underpinned Cold War strategy but strengthened neo-liberal economics, sidelined notions of public service and institutionalized tough-minded bargaining and real politik in international negotiations. With the rise of monetarism in the late 1970s, Mrs Thatcher could boast that she had 'scuppered' any talk of a New International Economic Order. In parallel Friedrich Von Hayek was arguing that individual selfishness would create 'a self-directed automatic system' and that 'altruism just doesn't

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come into it'. And since the 1960s, James Buchanan, another Nobel Prize winning economist, had been demolishing the very idea of public duty and public action towards some common public interest.

Although by no means fully accepted, this background was highly influential for developed country policy-making over the period in which the NSRT was operating, especially within the United States and the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, inspired by the vision and intellectual brilliance of Barbara Ward, Mahbub ul Haq, Maurice Strong and Khadija Haq, the NSRT pursued

a different track. To them and to most NSRT members, poverty in the world was a tragic reality – but one which could be alleviated and eventually eradicated by intelligent action. Human rights provided guidelines for action and obligations that could and ought to be followed. Similarly working to greater justice in the world, moderating global inequality and seeking more equitable international relations are intelligent objectives that deserve the support of people of good will throughout the world. The NSRT worked hard to keep alive this vision and this mission. The task remains.

Notes

- 1 Partners in Development (1969), This account also draws on Barbara Ward *et al.* (1971).
- 2 In summarizing the themes, conclusions and recommendations of the NSRT, I have relied heavily on the two major reports prepared by Khadija Haq: *North South Roundtable: the first decade (1978–88)* and on *North South Roundtable: an intellectual journey through two eventful decades (1978–1997)*. In a number of cases, I have also drawn on the books and reports of individual meetings.

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