

The History of Ideas: An Introduction to the United Nations Intellectual History Project

Abstract

This article presents the origins and the methodological framework of the United Nations Intellectual History Project and, hence, puts the subsequent substantive articles in the overall perspective of the Project as a whole. It explains the reasons for the two components of the Project. First, the writing of a number of books tracing the history of ideas launched by the UN by subject (international trade and finance, statistics, development thinking and practice, transnationals, gender, etc.). Second, oral history (detailed interviews of around 75 personalities who have played a role in stimulating or hindering the blossoming of creative ideas within the UN family of Organisations).

The article also gives the full list of publications already available as well as those that will be published over the next two years.

Keywords: History of the United Nations, ideas, publications, oral history, methodology, archives

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It may come as a surprise to many to learn that there is no comprehensive history of the United Nations family of organisations, institutional or intellectual. It is true that several specialised agencies have written or are in the process of writing their institutional history and this is indeed what all organisations must do. The author of this article, therefore, together with Richard Jolly and Thomas G. Weiss, decided to undertake the even more neglected task of writing an *intellectual* history, that is, a history of the ideas launched or nurtured by the United Nations. As lifelong participants and observers of multilateral development work and diplomacy, it has struck us for some time that the UN story deserves to be better docu-

Paper prepared for the NUPI Conference on The United Nations and Economic and Social Development: Past Performance and Future Challenges, Oslo, 2–3 December 2004. Parts of this article are based on Emmerij (2002: 653–655) and Weiss and Carayannia (2002: 31–34).

mented if it is to be better understood and appreciated. The Bretton Woods institutions in this respect are far ahead. The World Bank has published two massive histories – one on the occasion of its 25th and the other (two volumes and more than 2,000 pages) of its 50th anniversary. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has an in-house historian who ensures that its place in history is recorded, through regular publications (Mason and Asher, 1973; Kapur, Lewis and Webb, 1997; Boughton, 2001).

1. Ideas and Human Progress

Ideas are a driving force in human progress, and they might be the most important legacy of the United Nations for human rights, and economic and social development, as well as for peace and security. The lack of attention to the UN role in generating ideas is perplexing. But this neglect is part of a more general phenomenon. Indeed, as Oxford University political economist Ngaire Woods summarised: ‘In short, ideas, whether economic or not, have been left out of analyses of international relations’ (Woods, 1995: 164). Many political scientists, especially analysts of international political economy, are rediscovering the role of ideas in international policy-making. Rediscovering is the right word here because the study of ideas, although relatively new in analyses of international politics and organisations, is common bill of fare for historians, philosophers, students of literature and economists.

What, then, is an intellectual history, and how does one go about writing one? Although the term can have a variety of meanings, ‘intellectual history’ seeks to explain the origins of particular ideas; trace their trajectories within institutions, scholarship, or discourse; and, in some cases, certainly in ours, evaluate the impact of ideas on policy and action. What we seek to explain is the role of the UN as an intellectual actor.

Five questions often arise about existing approaches to the study of ideas and international organisations. The first question is: which comes first, the idea or the policy? Most approaches do not explain the sources of ideas, just their effects. They rarely explain how ideas emerge or change. By ignoring where ideas come from and how they change, we cannot ascertain cause and effect. Do ideas shape policy? Or does policy push existing ideas forward and perhaps even generate new ideas that may emerge in response to that policy or action?

A second question is whether ideas are mere products, or whether

they have a life of their own. We trace the trajectory of ideas within the UN and examine how individual leadership, coalitions, and national and bureaucratic rivalries within it have generated, distorted, and implemented particular ideas. At the same time, we also hope to discern how ideas, in and of themselves, have helped to shape policy outcomes at the UN.

A third and long-standing debate among intellectual historians is whether an idea should be analysed in light of the historical and social context within which it emerged, or whether it can be understood on its own, without reference to context. We favour the former school and thus assume that economic and social ideas at the UN cannot be properly understood if divorced from their historical and social context. The birth and survival of ideas in the UN – or their death and suppression – invariably reflect events, and are contingent upon politics and the world economy.

A fourth question is about when to begin tracing the trajectory of a particular idea. Ideas are rarely totally new. They do not come out of the blue. At what point in its life or in which of its many possible incarnations should one begin to study an idea? We decided to trace antecedents wherever we could and, hence, had to go back in time well before the beginning of the UN in 1945. A related issue is ownership. The difficulty of identifying a single individual or institution responsible for the creation of an idea is one illustration of this problem. We decided not to undertake the type of historical analysis pioneered by Arthur Lovejoy, who sought to trace an idea ‘through all the provinces of history in which it appears’ (Lovejoy, 1960). Rather, we pick up an idea at the time it intersects with the UN, and then trace its most important antecedents.

The fifth and final question relates to the influence of ideas themselves as opposed to the influence of those who put them forward (Yee, 1996). There is little consensus here. It can be argued that the more influential the members of expert groups are, the greater the odds that their ideas will be adopted. Ideas presuppose people, which is why we are documenting through oral history the role of individuals in the evolution of international economic and social development.

Ideas are important determinants of change. We take our inspiration from John Maynard Keynes, who wrote of ‘scribblers’: ‘The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood’ (Keynes, 1936: 383).

Our normative agenda is to seek insights in order to improve the

UN's future contribution to economic and social development. We are, therefore, writing a *forward-looking* history.

2. The United Nations Intellectual History Project

Most observers think primarily about the political and security institutions and individuals when mention is made of the UN. Nobel Peace prizewinners for these activities come to mind, including Ralph Bunche, Dag Hammarskjöld, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN peacekeepers, and recently Kofi Annan and the United Nations Organization.

But the UN economic and social institutions have quietly been making an impact, often with more success than institutions in the peace and security arenas. Indeed, two development agencies – the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) – have also been recognised with Nobel peace prizes. More importantly, from the point of view of this intellectual history, many Nobel Prize laureates in economics (such as Jan Tinbergen, Ragnar Frisch, Gunnar Myrdal, Wassily Leontief, James E. Meade, Arthur W. Lewis, Richard Stone, Lawrence Klein, Theodore W. Schultz and Amartya Sen) have spent a substantial part of their professional lives working as UN staff members and/or consultants contributing to UN ideas and activities.

The United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) is an independent activity located at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). It has, however, the full support of the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. The Project is supported financially by several foundations and governments.

UNIHP concentrates on the human rights and the economic and social arenas. However, while the work was in progress, Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked us to extend the coverage to include also the peace and security activities of the UN. We would thus cover the entire waterfront of UN activities. We are sympathetic to this proposal, but its implementation depends of course on attracting additional finance.

UNIHP has two components: (1) a series of books on specific topics, and (2) oral history. These are linked and mutually reinforcing. Concerning the first component, the three co-directors of the Project are writing five of the 14 planned volumes.¹ The other vol-

¹ If peace and security is to be included in the Project the series will expand to seventeen books!

umes are being written by one or more professionals, carefully selected for their scholarly credentials and intimate knowledge of the topic to be researched. Each topic has been identified by the co-directors in consultation with members of the International Advisory Council of the Project.² Under each of these topics the history of ideas launched by the United Nations family of organisations will be traced. Did the ideas come from within the UN Secretariat, or from outside the UN through governments, non-governmental organisations, experts or consultants? What happened to these ideas? Were they discarded without discussion or after deliberation? Were they discussed, adapted, distorted and then implemented? What happened afterwards? The whole series has been signed up and is being published by Indiana University Press (IUP).

Box 1. Book Titles in the UNIHP Series

By mid-2005, seven volumes in the UNIHP series will have been published, all by Indiana University Press. They are:

- (1) *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges*, by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas G. Weiss;
- (2) *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions*, edited by Yves Berthelot with contributions by Adebayo Adedeji, Yves Berthelot, Blondine Destereau, Paul Rayment, Gert Rosental, and Leelananda de Silva;
- (3) *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice*, by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai and Frederic Lapeyre;
- (4) *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance, and Development*, by John Toye and Richard Toye;
- (5) *Quantifying the World: UN Ideas and Statistics*, by Michael Ward;
- (6) *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*, by Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly; and
- (7) *Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty Year Quest for Equality and Justice*, by Devaki Jain.

The first six volumes have been summarised in subsequent articles in this issue of *Forum for Development Studies* by their main authors.

Two more volumes are in press. They are:

- (8) *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History*, by S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Fong-Khong; and
- (9) *The UN and Human Rights Ideas: the Unfinished Revolution*, by Sarah Zaidi and Roger Norm.

Five more volumes will be published over the next two years. They are:

- (10) *The UN and Development Cooperation*, by Olav Stokke;
 - (11) *The UN and the Global Commons: Development without Destruction*, by Nico Schrijver;
 - (12) *The UN and Transnationals: from Code to Compact*, by Tagi Sagafi-nejad in collaboration with John Dunning;
 - (13) *The UN and Global Governance: An Idea and Its Prospects*, by Ramesh Thakur and Thomas G. Weiss; and
 - (14) *The United Nations: A History of Ideas and Their Future*, by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas G. Weiss.
- Also, at the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the UN, a short and concise summary of provisional findings has been published by UNIHP: Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas G. Weiss, *The Power of UN Ideas: Lessons from the First Sixty Years*.

2 For the members of the Council and for general information on UNIHP, see our website at www.unhistory.org

As can be deduced from six books already published (see Box 1) and the articles in this issue, it is fascinating, and often amazing, including for us, how many times the UN system has been ahead of the curve. This is true with respect to the early ideas on development, on international aspects of environmental policies, population and technology, gender issues, international and national development policies, national accounting issues, trade and finance. The problem of the transition economies in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union after 1989 constitutes a special but not unique case where the United Nations Commission for Europe (UNECE) in Geneva advocated a gradual approach that most probably was the better policy advice (compared to the «big bang» approach that was finally adopted) (ECE, 1990: 5–26; see also ECE, 1991). We believe this to be the case also in the light of the fact that the ECE was the only place during the Cold War where East and West met and worked together on bread and butter problems, such as road transport, electricity grids, etc. However, as we know, the other approach – the ‘big bang’ approach – advocated by the International Financial Institutions and several very audible international consultants won the day. This was a missed opportunity.³

Other positive examples concern the employment problem and development issues in general. The League of Nations had discussed employment during the 1920s and 1930s, and the post-war UN contributions were pioneering. The inclusion of human rights in the Charter and the adoption of the Universal Declaration in 1948 appear, in retrospect, mind-boggling, or in the words of Stephane Hessel, an early UN recruit, who sat at Eleanor Roosevelt’s side in 1948 and later became *Ambassadeur de France*, it is ‘what makes the second half of the 20th century such an important moment of world history’.⁴

There have also been many instances when the UN has been behind the curve. This is true, for instance, in the case of HIV/AIDS, global income gaps, or Urquhart’s candidate for the worst idea, Julian Huxley’s ‘sex at high altitudes’.⁵

3 For further information on this important issue, see *Ahead of the Curve?* (Emmerij *et al.*, 2001). See also Berthelot, ed. (2004: Chapter 2) as well as articles by him and Louis Emmerij in this issue.

4 Oral history transcript of the interview with Stephane Hessel.

5 Oral history transcript of interview with Brian Urquhart. Of course, since space exploration has set in, Huxley’s ideas could appear very much ahead of the curve!

The second main activity of the Project is conducting oral history interviews with key participants in the evolution of UN ideas. Oral history is a method of research for preserving and creating knowledge of historical events as recounted by participants in those events. It also allows us an opportunity to identify ideas that never made it beyond closed-room discussions, and to explore the debates about and circumstances of their demise.

The Project uses the oral history method to understand better the UN contributions in the field of human rights and economic and social development. It will also serve to produce an archive of around 75 personal testimonies and recorded life narratives of individuals who served the world organisation in key positions as staff members, consultants, researchers, diplomats or as chairs or members of commissions. Thus, not only do the interviews serve as inputs to the first component, the book series; they also constitute an important product in themselves. There is, of course, a tragic urgency here because most of the actors are already very old.

There are shortcomings in concentrating on 'elite' history. One of the justifications for the effort is to rectify a woeful lack of attention to learning from the past. We acknowledge that there cannot be a single narrative from the past. This is the reason why we offer this critical – albeit subjective – perspective next to the series of books based on archival research. The importance of this collection of taped memories cannot be overemphasised, as there is precious little institutional memory at the UN (since few people record their memoirs on retirement) and even fewer resources to capture the historical record. These interviews will be made widely available in electronic form at the conclusion of the Project. A summary of them has been published in the book series entitled *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*.

A word on the state of UN archives may be in order at this point. Our authors, including of course the three co-directors, have been users of these archives, which are not in the best of condition. More human and financial resources must be invested in order to turn them into an efficient and effective working tool. They are easy victims of the successive rounds of savings that have characterised the UN over the last decades (see Box 2).

Box 2. The UNIHP Experience with UN Archival Collections

The archival records with which the Project has some experience include those in New York, Rome, Geneva and Santiago de Chile. Preservations of records, ease of access, and archival practice seem to vary widely from place to place and from institution to institution. Some of the problems that cut across all those collections appear to arise from inadequate funding, which makes preservation in adequate facilities, good staffing, and cataloguing technologies difficult. Another problem, at least until recently, has been that there were no rules governing the deposit of material in the archives so that on retirement staff members either took their material with them or destroyed it. Furthermore, because of restricted space, material has been either destroyed or files reshuffled and amalgamated, making the tracing of documentation difficult.

Despite the best efforts of the UN chief archivist and her staff, our authors have found the UN archives in New York disappointing: remote, inadequately housed, and underfunded. At the UNCTAD archives in Geneva, where a vast amount of material has been preserved, the process of classification is ongoing (and had not yet reached an advanced stage at the time of our visits), making searches difficult and haphazard.

The UN statistical files are locked away in a rarely visited cupboard in the UN Statistics Department in New York and reportedly only one person seems to know of their existence and of their general contents. There is scant evidence of how UN statistical data were compiled and aggregated and why the various series were produced in the first place.

Supporting UN archives is essential as they are a record of the first 60 years of pioneering efforts in global governance. It is our position that the funding constraints of UN archives are unacceptable. This woeful lack of attention to its archives is not good practice if the UN aims to be a knowledge-based institution and a repository of history.

It would be an excellent idea – and this was discussed among historians at Cambridge in December 2002 – to issue a statement and maybe even an appeal signed by an independent group of historians and others, emphasising the vital importance of the UN archives and the need for adequate support. Also, a liaison committee of historians, chaired by a prominent personality, could be established to relate to the UN Standing Group of Archivists responsible for the various UN archives. However, financial resources are of the essence.

3. Methodological Questions

Five questions, addressed in different ways in the books and oral histories, sustain our approach to examining the interface between ideas, the UN system, and international policy.

What are the economic and social ideas coming out of the UN, and which key ones should be analysed? – The answer to this is, in many ways, necessary background for the other central questions. For us ‘ideas’ are defined as normative or causal beliefs held by individuals that influence their attitudes and actions. They are analysed when they intersect with the UN – that is, when they appear as major thoughts or concepts in UN background documents, speeches or conferences. Normative ideas are broad, general beliefs about what the world should look like; causal ideas are more operational motives about what strategy will have a desired result or what tactics will achieve a particular strategy. At the UN, causal ideas often take an operational form, such as the target of 0.7 per cent of GDP to be contributed as official development assistance

(ODA). An example of a normative idea would be the call for narrowing the income gap between the rich and the poor countries, and more specifically that the international community bears a moral responsibility to promote social progress and better standards of living in all countries.

What are the sources of those ideas? – We locate some sources of ideas within international secretariats: individual leadership, UN research, reports of eminent commissions, global conferences, and inter-agency cooperation and tensions. If a particular idea was developed within the UN, did a key individual bring it with him or her and subsequently fight successfully for its organisational adoption? Or was the idea the result of ongoing group negotiation processes? Was there a two-way street, or were international secretariats more independent purveyors of ideas than groups or countries?

Obviously, we also examine which ideas originated outside the UN system, perhaps from expert groups, NGOs and national decision-makers as well as international secretariats (outside the UN family), or in response to a particular event or crisis. Some ideas originated within an elite, whereas for others, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there was a ‘mass base’ and rather widespread popular support.

What happened to particular ideas within the UN? – We examine why a particular idea was adopted, distorted or discarded. In tracing the sources and distortion of an idea, we explore the importance of leadership within the UN and specialised agencies as well as the contributions by international civil servants. We also look at the importance of institutional rivalries or coalitions, particularly tensions within the UN system and between the Bretton Woods institutions. The impact of rivalries or even of outright hostilities, within and among diplomatic coalitions, is another important and underdocumented variable. We also seek to determine how the ‘culture’ of the world organisation – for example, its institutional style and hiring practices – determined the decibel levels surrounding ideas, and thus influenced what ideas could be heard and eventually implemented.

What impact, if any, did particular ideas have? – Once adopted in original or distorted form, did ideas make a difference outside of the UN? If so, how? Potentially, even partial answers to this question could constitute an essential research finding. For even if ideas are one of the main legacies of the UN, harsh critics may well ask, ‘So what?’ We propose to reply with an examination of four ways in which ideas can have a substantial influence on policy.

Box 3. Concrete Examples of Methodological Problems

In 1975–76, the International Labour Organization developed and launched the so-called basic needs approach to economic and social development, as set out in Chapter 3 of *Ahead of the Curve? Where did this idea come from? Did it come from within the secretariat of the ILO World Employment Programme or did it originate outside of the United Nations? The origin of the idea is difficult to unravel. Already the psychologist Maslow, in a 1942 article, talked about basic needs as the lowest rung on a five-rung ladder that culminated in spiritual and cultural needs (Maslow, 1942). Ideas never develop in a vacuum. During the 1970s there were at least three places where the idea of basic needs was developed. One was at the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation that culminated in *What Now? Another Development*, published in 1975. A second place was in Argentina where the Bariloche Foundation publication *Catástrofe o nueva sociedad? Modelo Mundial Latinoamericano* (Herrera, 1977) dealt with an analogous approach. Finally, the third place was Geneva where the ILO prepared its 1976 World Employment Conference and produced a draft report in 1975 and a final one in 1976 (ILO, 1976) where the concept of basic needs took central place.*

It is impossible to disentangle the exact origin of the idea, although several individuals were involved in all three projects. And that is exactly as it so frequently is. An idea ‘suddenly’ appears in different places at the same time. It is ‘in the air’. However, for us at UNIHP the important thing is that in 1975–76 the idea interacted with the UN, which took the ball and ran with it. Not for long, however, because only a few years later the ‘new orthodoxy’ of the 1980s arrived!

A second example of a methodological problem is the enigma of paralysis – that is, absence of reaction – in the face of an idea that is oversold and hence becomes counter-productive. That was the case during the 1980s when an old economic paradigm took hold again with a vengeance. The neo-liberal resurgence did not get a strong response from within the UN. We had to wait until 1987 for a reaction to occur that came from an unexpected, and to an extent, marginal place within the UN – namely UNICEF, which produced the two-volume study *Adjustment with a Human Face*. Why so late and why so timid? Why did the UN not confront the Bretton Woods institutions head on? Why did we have to wait until well into the 1990s for a more systematic reaction to occur, including from within the World Bank, when it was very late for many countries? Was it the might of the industrial countries, which were sold on neo-liberalism, that UN secretariats found difficult to withstand? Was it the quality, or lack thereof, of UN economists during this period? Was it the timidity of the heads of agencies? All of the above would be too easy an answer. A clear answer to that question would be of the utmost importance for the future of the UN.

First, they can at times transform the intellectual environment, or at least change the nature of international public policy discourse. For example, the Prebisch–Singer thesis about deteriorating trends in the terms of trade of developing countries changed the discourse of the terms of trade debate fundamentally up to the present day. Ideas about *centre–periphery* and *dependency* that were developed by Latin American economists within ECLA in the 1950s and 1960s altered the discourse on modernisation theory, at least for a while. Second, ideas can provide a tactical guide to policy and action when norms conflict, or when sequencing and priorities are disputed, and thus help states define their interests. The necessity to balance belt-tightening with the requirements of a ‘human face’ on structural adjustment is one such dispute where UNICEF ideas provided a roadmap to navigate between apparently conflicting priorities and needs (Cornia *et al.*, eds, 1987). Third, ideas can make possible new combinations of political and institutional forces,

thereby altering prospects for forming new coalitions. For example, UNCTAD's early call to take seriously the Prebisch–Singer thesis (Prebisch, 1950; Singer, 1950) about declining terms of trade for developing countries and the context of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) became the veritable glue of G77 solidarity. Fourth, ideas can become embedded in institutions, and thus perhaps not only challenge the founding principles of those institutions but also set future agendas. The establishment of new agencies – for instance, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) or the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) – is one manifestation, as is ‘mainstreaming’ of issues and the creation of new units within established organisations. Finally, we explore whether the UN has unique attributes or a comparative advantage in creating, nurturing and diffusing ideas, or whether it has anticipated global and regional challenges in responding earlier than other organisations, governments, or individuals.

4. Concluding Observations

We contend that the ideas held by individuals, transnational groups of experts and activists influence UN economic and social activity; that the UN and its institutions influence national elites and their policies through these ideas; and that the UN learns and adapts through a collective and often anonymous decision-making process, which produces new ideas, and at times silences or resuscitates old ideas.

Failures are as important as successes if we are to understand the UN's role in facilitating consensus, and in perpetuating or exploding myths and reigning orthodoxies. The effort to document UN ideas – both the ‘successes’ and the ‘failures’ – is one means to foster more fruitful international discussions, negotiations and common approaches.

The approach outlined illustrates that we are writing a *future-oriented* history. We are standing on the shoulders of the past in order to peer into the future and see its contours better.

Finally, a word about how the reader can get involved in UN-IHP and how he can obtain the output, such as books and oral history transcripts. Our website (www.unhistory.org) gives individuals and groups a chance to tell their story and their own experience with the UN, present policy ideas, and recount what happened to them. It also gives the outlines of the books, the full list of people interviewed, and how to obtain both the published books and the oral history transcripts.

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