

# Introduction: The United Nations and Economic and Social Development

This issue of *Forum for Development Studies (FDS)* takes as its focus the United Nations and its role in stimulating and promoting international economic, social and cultural development. It arises from an international research and publishing programme – the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) – which consists of two main elements: studies that are published in a book series (published by Indiana University Press) and a series of recorded interviews with veterans who have made a difference in the UN system. By the end of last year, the first five of the 14 volumes in the book series had been published and four more were in the pipeline.

The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs invited the lead authors of the five published volumes and of one that was in progress to present the first results emerging from the programme. The conference – entitled ‘The United Nations and Economic and Social Development: Past Performance and Future Challenges’ – took place in Oslo in December of last year. In addition to the invited keynote speakers, panels that combined keynote speakers with Norwegian researchers and politicians (including the Minister for International Development, Hilde Frafjord Johnson) discussed the future of international development cooperation and of the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions.

It is the contributions to this conference – revised and rewritten after the presentations in Oslo and the referee process of the *FDS* – that are presented in this issue. A couple of the Norwegian participants have developed their contributions into fully-fledged articles that are included among the main articles (Torild Skard, Bjørn K. Wold) and a few other articles have been developed and

included in the Debates column (Helge Hveem, Gunnar Sørbo, Ingrid Eide). John and Richard Toye have brought the history of UN–US relations, provided in their first contribution, closer to the present time.

The issue starts with a presentation of the UNIHP by *Louis Emmerij*, one of its three co-directors. He presents the origins and the methodological framework of the project, which, as noted, consists of two components. The first is a number of books that trace the history of ideas launched by the UN by subject (international trade and finance, statistics, development thinking and practice, transnationals, gender, etc.). And the second is an oral history consisting of detailed interviews with 73 personalities who have played a role in generating, stimulating and promoting ideas related to economic and social development within the UN. The full list of publications already available as well as those that will be published over the next two years is also given.

In the next contribution, *Louis Emmerij*, lead author of the first volume of the UNIHP book series (*Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges*, 2001), discusses how the UN, over the years, has met the development challenges with which it has been confronted. On many occasions and for many decades, the UN has been ahead of the curve in the field of economic and social development, Emmerij argues. It has lived up to important challenges, such as providing an international development framework and clarifying the terms of trade debate in the 1950s, coming up with an alternative development strategy during the 1970s, and putting environmental, population and gender questions on the map. During the 1980s, however, the UN was on the defensive: the initiative shifted to the World Bank and the IMF. This was not to the benefit of developing countries, the author argues. In the 1990s, however, the UN came up with new and dynamic initiatives, he argues, with particular reference to the series of Human Development Reports and the Millennium Development Goals. When it comes to HIV/AIDS, however, the UN has been lagging behind and this has also been the case with regard to incorporating culture into the development equation, he concludes.

The performance of the UN system from an overall development perspective is also the core concern in the article by *Richard Jolly*, co-director of the UNIHP and lead author of a key volume in the book series (*UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice*, 2004). Over the 60 years of its existence, the UN has led the way in a large number of areas of economic and social develop-

ment, Jolly argues. It has made major and pioneering contributions – nationally and internationally – in the setting of development priorities, in analysing strategic issues, in developing a statistical system to quantify them and in the formulation of recommendations across a wide field of important policy matters.

With the benefit of hindsight, one can see not only that the UN has often led the way but that it has often also been right when others – in particular, the Bretton Woods institutions – have been opposed, doubtful or reluctant to follow. Yet, often – five, 10 or 15 years later – the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and others have changed their mind and moved to adopt the very policies or approaches that they had rejected earlier, the author observes.

Despite this evidence, the Bretton Woods institutions still receive overwhelming support and funding from the donor countries. In contrast, the UN funds and institutions are treated as marginal in matters of economic and social policy-making, receiving much less funding. The time has come for major rethinking and some redressing of the balance, Jolly argues. International action on development would be greatly advanced if policy-makers, especially those within donor agencies, gave more attention to the ideas of the ‘New York dissent’ and less to those of the ‘Washington consensus’, he concludes.

This overall perspective is also maintained in the article by *Torild Skard*, discussing fundamental development challenges that face the United Nations system today and will do so in the future: challenges related to the global economy, to the notion of development and to the functioning of the UN system. There is an urgent need to strengthen global economic and environmental governance, the author argues. She raises critical questions about prevailing development models. A broader, more people-oriented approach that includes the cultural and social dimensions of development is required. She pays special attention to the role of the family and the issue of gender equality, and ends with a discussion of reforms of the main UN system and the World Bank.

Then follows an article by *Yves Berthelot*, editor of another volume in the UNIHP book series (*Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions*, 2004). He – along with several other authors of this volume – has the benefit of drawing on the rich experiences of office in addition to experiences from research and research administration; Berthelot himself served for years as the head (Executive Secretary) of the Economic Commission for Europe. The article synthesises the lessons drawn

from the work on this UNIHP volume.

As suggested by the title of the volume, this perspective adds a new dimension to those briefly introduced, which share the overall perspective of the centre court. Confronted with the different realities of their regions, the UN regional commissions gave different answers to questions relating to regional cohesion, development, and regionalisation versus globalisation. Their analyses and policies often had an impact beyond the limits of the region where they were elaborated. Conversely, the commissions also acted as the regional arm of the UN, adapting some of its principles and agreements to regional circumstances. However, regrettably, the wealth of insights emerging from analyses and policies accumulated in the UN regionally and globally has not been used to elaborate an alternative development paradigm that would restore intellectual leadership to the UN, Berthelot concludes.

In the following two articles, *John Toye* and *Richard Toye*, the authors of another volume in the UNIHP book series (*The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance and Development*, 2004), analyse the relationship between the US and the UN, which for a number of reasons has been crucial to the way the UN has operated and fared.

In the first, the US strategy on trade, finance and development during the first years of the world organisation (1945–63) is analysed. During that period, the US strategy underwent two major reversals. After deliberately having established and cushioned the new international economic institutions inside the UN during the first formative years, the US moved, by the mid-1950s, to a defensive strategy on economic issues. One explanation offered for this change of strategy is the changed international situation: after the outbreak of the Cold War, the US feared ‘subversives’ in the UN. Another reason highlighted by the authors is that US pressure for European decolonisation, combined with UN multilateral procedures, empowered underdeveloped countries that contested the norm of non-discrimination in trade. As the number of developing countries in the UN grew, however, the US changed strategy once again. President Kennedy took a series of new initiatives for economic development in the UN – notably establishing the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Decade of Development. Justified in terms of Rostow’s modernisation paradigm, Kennedy’s revival of US leadership on development finance in the UN retained a strong anti-communist motivation and remained basically defensive in character, the authors conclude.

In the following article, the authors take the analysis of US strategy and tactics on to 1982. The birth of UNCTAD was seen by many as the start of a new era in international cooperation in the field of trade and development. For the US, however, it was a setback to its traditional trade policy, sustained because of fears of Soviet expansion in the Third World and the uncooperativeness of de Gaulle's France. When the oil price crisis put the US under greater immediate pressure, the Nixon and Ford administrations responded more robustly. However, it was not their more aggressive responses that saved the US, but rather the disunity within Third World ranks, and the economic circumstances that made debtors of many formerly militant developing countries, the authors argue. This explains how initial diplomatic defeats in the Kennedy and Johnson eras had been neutralised by the 1980s, they conclude.

For those readers who are not economists by training, the theme of the following two articles may appear exclusive and restricted to those with special insights and interests in the discipline of statistics. Nothing could be more misleading. The two authors provide a fascinating *tour d'horizon* that is easily accessible across disciplines. The approach chosen and the methods used when development is portrayed through statistical evidence become of crucial importance.

In the first article, *Michal Ward*, the author of another volume in the UNIHP book series (*Quantifying the World: UN Ideas and Statistics*, 2004), provides us with a selective overview of some of the key issues raised in his volume. He discusses the critical legacy of the UN in influencing, through its significant contribution to the development of an international statistical system, mainstream policy thinking in the crucial spheres of economic and, much later, social and environmental policy and analysis.

In the next article, *Bjørn K. Wold*, inspired by the work of Ward, describes and discusses recent efforts by the international statistical community to come to grips with today's challenges. During the first decades after the Second World War, the international statistical community, under the leadership of the UN Statistical Commission, developed and agreed upon a comprehensive economic statistical system, but failed to agree upon a system for social statistics. The use of Social Account Matrixes (or SAM models), social indicators and living condition surveys have been established as viable but separate traditions. The broad agreement on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and on the Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSS) has now created a demand, a challenge and an opportunity

for the global statistical community to develop, first, an integrated approach to monitoring the MDGs and PRSs and, second, a social statistical system, Wold argues. During 2004, the international organisations declared their commitment to the first of these steps. However, long-term commitment and implementation are needed as a response to the Millennium Development Declaration, he concludes.

*Thomas G. Weiss*, co-director of the UNIHP, and *Tatiana Carayannis* present a synthesis of the outcome of the second component of the project, the oral history interviews with 73 individuals who have played a crucial role in the evolution of UN developing thinking (*UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*, launched in June 2005). They provide a flavour of the UN story that those 73 voices tell and discuss the central conclusions with regard to the role of international organisations as intellectual actors. They conclude that oral history as method and product provides insights in solving a key puzzle in contemporary affairs – how ideas eventually become part of the international discourse, policy and action.

The debate continues in the Debate column. *Helge Hveem* finds several of the contributions to the UNIHP to be strong both analytically and empirically. However, on some issues the authors might have addressed more consciously the programmatic point developed in the introduction to *Ahead of the Curve?*, namely that the role of the UN in producing ideas should be contextualised: the UN should not only be considered as a source of ideas, but also as a carrier of ideas that originated elsewhere, he argues, with particular reference to population policy. The position of the UN, for instance in the opinion of the public, might have been addressed more extensively in order to measure the impact and legitimacy of the system in a situation where major reorganisation is high on the international agenda, he argues.

Discussing the challenges ahead for international development cooperation, *Gunnar Sørbo* argues that the increasing focus on security following the events of 9/11 is likely to shift aid distribution away from where it may have the largest impact on poverty. While the current (post-Washington) consensus on aid stresses the importance of good governance for aid effectiveness, the restrictive approach to aid in conflict-prone and conflict-ridden countries will have to be revisited. Another major unresolved issue is how best to support poor countries that perform poorly, especially failing states.

The title *Ingrid Eide* has given her contribution captures her conclusion and ends the discussion: ‘UNIHP: Intellectually Ambitious and Politically Important.’