

*REVIEW ESSAY*

## The UN Intellectual History Project: Review of a Literature



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In this article, I review the first seven volumes of an unprecedented history of ideas and the UN. This fascinating history covers oral interviews with key personalities as well as volumes on economic history, statistics, the regional commissions, and gender. Even at its midpoint, the project already presents conclusions of importance to reforming the UN so that it can play a stronger intellectual role. Indeed, the series attests to the UN's soft power in creating and fostering ideas that have shaped the world.  
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**F**or an organization so unique and important, the United Nations has paid surprisingly little attention to recording its own history. Many historical accounts of the organization exist, but none has encompassed its full breadth and depth. Perhaps the task is too large, although other international bodies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have undertaken it.<sup>1</sup>

The UN Intellectual History Project does not purport to provide a definitive, comprehensive history of the institution. However, with singular insight, the series provides a history of ideas: what the UN did to originate and/or foster important ideas, and what consequences those efforts have had. Too many debates regarding the significance of the UN have missed this fundamental point, searching only for the hard power impacts. The series challenges us to consider the soft power impacts of the UN as a major purveyor of ideas.

The Intellectual History Project is the innovation of its three codirectors, each with serious standing in the multilateral community: Louis Emmerij, Sir Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss. The project is independently organized, with oversight by an international advisory council of eminent personalities associated with the multilateral system. Funding has been provided by the Carnegie, Ford, MacArthur, Rockefeller, and United Nations Foundations as well as the Council of Geneva and the governments of Canada, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

The series, published through Indiana University Press, will consist of fifteen volumes. In this article, I review the seven books so far released. Another two are in press, and the last six will appear in 2006–2007. The project is also supporting the publication of *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, edited by Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws. CD-ROMs with extensive oral interviews with leading personalities associated with the UN will also be published. Given the magnitude of the project, my review can only touch upon highlights and reflect on a few cross-cutting issues. It may be hoped that specialists will in other writings give the individual volumes the detailed reviews they deserve.

At the outset, the series must be applauded for editorial excellence. Each of the books is clearly organized and each chapter nicely presented, with concepts well outlined and well summarized. The writing is lucid and at times eloquent. Scholars are treated to thousands of footnotes, but the texts can also be easily comprehended by intelligent lay readers.

### ***UN Voices***

As a starting point in this rich buffet, I would recommend the most unusual book in the series, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* by Thomas Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly (Indiana University Press, 2005). This volume synthesizes extensive oral interviews with seventy-four leading personalities in the UN's history. Those interviewed, including all living UN secretaries-general, are well balanced across various dimensions of the UN's work.

These diverse stories have been woven together masterfully. The book provides not only extensive insight into key turning points in the UN's history, but also an excellent rationale for the overall Intellectual History Project. The introduction immediately conveys the project's serious engagement with leading schools of thought about history and the sociology of ideas, embracing institutionalism (how institutions shape members), epistemic communities (how knowledge creators and disseminators shape policy), and constructivism (how ideas, norms, and identities shape change). The authors stress four propositions: that "ideas can change the nature of international public policy discourse"; that "ideas can help states as well as individuals and non-state actors define and redefine their identities and interests"; that "ideas can alter prospects for forming new political or institutional coalitions"; and that "ideas become embedded in institutions and thereby can challenge not only the founding principles of those institutions but also help in setting future agendas."<sup>3</sup>

The book opens with over 100 pages that synthesize and compare the lives of the interviewees. The second part offers a decade-by-decade account of the UN's history from the various viewpoints of those interviewed. A

third section reviews critical organizational issues of the UN, including the revolutionary idea of an international civil service, leadership issues, country groupings, and the blending of outside intellectuals and people inside the UN (e.g., through independent commissions, panels of eminent persons, nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], and the private sector).

The authors let their interviewees speak at some length and to great effect. For example, Viendra Dayal, *chef de cabinet* for two secretaries-general, is particularly eloquent on the complementarity of the Charter's emphasis on the equal rights of nations and the emphasis in the Declaration of Human Rights on the rights of individuals.<sup>4</sup> John Ruggie rightly highlights the flaws of locating the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) so far from the points of action.<sup>5</sup> Other interviewees speak about major shortcomings in key commissions (e.g., human rights) and terms of service (e.g., too much reliance on temporary contracts). Students of public administration will find these discussions thought provoking.

The book contains many insights from unusual personalities connected with high responsibility who have acted (sometimes stumbling, but often with determination) in the general direction of the good, creating history left and right, often against tremendous adversity both inside and outside the organization. Yet the book steers clear of self-glorifying history. Criticisms are amply present. The many interesting viewpoints carry the reader along so briskly and with such delight that one is disappointed that the book ends, even knowing that the series contains much more.

### ***Quantifying the World***

Next I would recommend reading *Quantifying the World: UN Ideas and Statistics* by Michael Ward (Indiana University Press, 2004). Readers who, like me, rarely browse the statistics shelf in bookstores may need some encouragement to open this book, but they will find it well worth reading. The volume impressively frames the UN's statistical work in the history of government statistics and firmly establishes the major contributions that the UN has made to expanding our understanding of humanity through statistics.

Demonstrating his wide-ranging intellect, Ward begins by linking a history of the field of statistics and a discussion of Claude Monet. He paints a world prior to the creation of the UN, when comprehensive knowledge of humanity was relatively limited, in part because the field of comparative international statistics was in its infancy. For example, prior to World War II, the International Labour Organization (ILO) collected employment statistics for only twenty-two countries, none of them in the developing world.

Ward speculates most interestingly about the direction that UN statistics (or, one might add, *any* UN activities) might have taken if another culture had

driven the organization at its beginning. However, the fact remains that the UN has Western cultural origins. Hence, the statistics developed reflected far more on the well-being of national economies than, say, on the quality of the individual's life, as might have occurred had Eastern culture been dominant.

This reflection could well be addressed to the series itself, given the heavily Western authorship of the seven books under review. The rest of the series will feature many more non-Western authors. This diversity will not only give greater cultural balance but also bring more views from people whose countries have had greater on-the-ground experience with the UN.

As Ward shows, the founders of UN statistics innovated in numerous ways to broaden and deepen our understanding of the world. The UN Statistical Office can count among its early contributions progress on systems of national accounts, trade statistics, demographic data, and the first significant statistics concerning global gender issues. Other UN agencies strongly supplemented this work with statistics on employment (the ILO), the human condition (the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] through the Human Development Indicators it devised), national rankings in development (the World Bank through its *World Development Report*), and numerous regional benchmarking studies.

Ward critically assesses such innovations and challenges one by one. In the process, he highlights three general themes that also surface in several other volumes in the series. First, the UN saw its greatest creativity and impact in its early decades. Second, the World Bank and the IMF came to challenge and overshadow the work of the UN. Third, there are serious ways that the UN can regain influence in the field of ideas.

After all, the UN provides an amazing array of statistics, but it is particularly poor in disseminating this output. Some inward-looking intellectual centers may not notice the UN's work, but public entities must market their wares a good deal better than the UN has done. It surely must raise eyebrows if someone like Jeffrey Sachs says that he discovered the richness of UN data only when he entered the organization as senior adviser to the secretary-general on the Millennium Development Goals.

Ward's book reminds us of the glory days of UN statistics and shows that UN statistical talent is still well positioned to do more. The field of comparative international statistics should be a dynamic field regularly seeking to assess humanity and the world in new, innovative ways. Statistics give the UN a source of greatly underappreciated soft power.

### ***Ahead of the Curve?***

With *Voices* laying out the history of grand UN ideas and *Quantifying the World* examining statistics as an important component in conveying ideas,

readers are well set to proceed to the three volumes on development theory and practice that the series has so far issued. The first published, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (Indiana University Press, 2001),<sup>6</sup> was written by the three project directors and chronologically sets out the role of ideas in the UN's history.<sup>6</sup>

The themes in this volume, like the core aims of the UN itself, are broad and stirring. The book starts with the original quartet of ideas (peace, independence, development, and human rights) and their development in the early years of the organization. Then come chapters on the rise of development in the 1960s, employment creation and basic human needs, UN conferences and global challenges, new social questions and policy alternatives, the collapse of the socialist bloc, widening global gaps, and governance. A concluding chapter looks at the UN and ideas more generally.

Much of the discussion is thought provoking and whets the appetite for more. For example, the discussion on governance (pp. 183–204) astutely indicates why this concept gained such priority in the 1990s. Among other things, both Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan asserted that traditional state sovereignty was contingent upon good behavior, so that the international system had leeway to intervene in cases of gross misbehavior. This evolving view on sovereignty has underpinned the recently approved Responsibility to Protect doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

The chapter entitled “Widening Global Gaps” (pp. 166–182) illustrates a key goal of the series: to assess past accomplishments and to identify areas where the UN needs to concentrate in the future.<sup>8</sup> The chapter begins by noting that “global consumption has risen sixfold since 1950,”<sup>9</sup> but equity in consumption has declined between and within countries. This is not only bad governance but calls for all the moral outrage that the UN can muster. Thus the discussion concludes that “urgent action is required to generate a more equitable distribution of resources and of opportunities within and among nations.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the authors list six proposals to address the “downsides” of globalization.<sup>11</sup> That all of these proposals originated outside the UN illustrates the need both for the UN to originate new ideas and for the organization to consider ideas from the outside more actively and systematically.

The authors close their discussion of sweeping themes by posing a question—answered in later volumes—as to whether the UN ideas were “ahead of the curve.” The answer, not surprisingly, is yes.

### ***UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice***

Next up would suitably be *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (Indiana University Press, 2004) by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij,

Dharam Ghai, and Frédéric Lapeyre. This volume begins with a lovely history of economic thought from Smith to Keynes, setting forth the intellectual heritage bequeathed to the development economists who worked in the United Nations. Then the book, like many in the series, takes a chronological journey through the UN's work, in this case on development theory and practice. Just as one notices new things each time one takes a familiar path, each journey through the decades since the founding of the UN, as four of these volumes take, provides new insights.

The early decades on this subject are particularly interesting, as they are less known to contemporary actors. The volume tracks, for example, how early ideas of development; trade and protection; and growth or equity shaped the creation of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, instead of the initially intended International Trade Organization).<sup>12</sup> It is startling that so much optimism on employment, industrialization, and other aspects of development could come from the UN at that time, given the then prevailing world economic conditions: a slowly recovering Europe; vast and neglected colonialized areas; huge and devastating turmoil in China and Russia; and the biggest economic power (the United States) unsure whether it would slip back into economic depression. It is also amazing that the UN made a major mark in so many areas in these early years while operating on paltry budgets.

The volume correctly reports a number of instances in the early years of strong US opposition to ideas that came from the UN, though the story deserves a bit more background than this volume provides. Much as oil-for-food casts a long shadow on current UN debates, so did the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) loom large in the thinking of the United States and other key actors in the early years of the UN. In fact, some in the Truman administration even considered channeling the Marshall Plan through the UN, but the abuse of UNRRA programs by the Soviets made US officials suspicious of the UN's development role. US reluctance to use the UN as a vehicle for development aid continued for many years.<sup>13</sup> That it took until the early 1960s for the United States to offer a number of constructive development proposals to the UN (e.g., suggesting that there be a UN Development Decade and proposing the World Food Programme) perhaps gives a perspective on how long it may take the United States and others to move from the shadow of the oil-for-food scandals.

The volume continues its history of development thinking and practice chronologically. In the 1960s, the UN contributed a stream of innovations regarding planning, industrialization, and trade issues, particularly in Latin America and through the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The 1970s saw the promotion of basic needs, the New International Economic Order (NIEO), and environment and gender issues.

The volume also excellently details how the concept of equity came into its own during the decade.

The 1980s, of course, were a disaster for development. The decade started promisingly with the summit at Cancún, where results were a lot closer to being realized than many people thought. UN efforts to resist the decline that engulfed most developing countries in the 1980s varied. The organization failed to achieve sensible debt relief, but its advocacy of “adjustment with a human face” did at last halt World Bank cuts to social development budgets.

The 1990s brought a major regional challenge with the freedom of Eastern Europe to choose its own destiny. This volume and others in the series recount how the UN Economic Commission for Europe urged a much slower pace of reform in the former Soviet republics, fearing a meltdown, which in fact occurred. The 1990s also saw a series of major UN initiatives<sup>14</sup> starting with the World Summit for Children (1990), which demonstrated how development initiatives could be accelerated by engaging the highest political levels. The Summit for Children alone yielded national actions that have saved about the same number of lives that were lost in World War II.

Late in the book, consideration is given to alternative perspectives on development that highlight considerations of culture. In this vein, the deconstructionist school urges that culture and other local considerations be much more prominent in development policy. The eloquent contributions of the anthropologist Lourdes Arizpe to this volume and to the *UN Voices* volume offer a taste of what is missing from a richer dialogue with other disciplines.

*Development Thinking and Practice* also includes two extraordinary presentations that should be included in the briefing books of representatives to the UN and in pedagogic materials used to teach about the UN. One is a nine-page presentation entitled “UN Economic and Social Goals, Target Dates, and Results Achieved, 1960–2000.”<sup>15</sup> This is the best report card I have seen on the topic, showing successes, failures, and many marks in between. The presentation does not attribute responsibility for the various accomplishments and failures, but it does show the numerous areas where, under stimulus from the UN, the member states have agreed to development targets. Even though a number of these goals have not been met, many did stimulate significant national progress. These precedents give pause for thought on how the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) could be redefined, particularly for the poorest countries, to more realistic levels, so that the MDG program, the developing countries, and the UN are not labeled as failures.

The second presentation<sup>16</sup> is entitled “An Overview of UN Contributions to Development.” Here the authors offer a summary assessment of the impacts (ranging from negligible to widespread) that the UN has had in a

wide range of fields. Their judgments surely can be debated, but it is helpful to have their sweeping overview.

### ***The UN and Global Political Economy***

The third volume on development issues is *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance, and Development* (Indiana University Press, 2004) by John Toye and Richard Toye. This book focuses on trade, finance, and development as the three main “encounters” between the North and South. The UN has often stood in the middle of these encounters, and this distinguished father and son team helps us better understand the interactions.

This is a tough-minded book that highlights what the authors see as a failure to live up to the early promise of the UN to promote equitable global economic policies. The Toyes argue that the Weberian conflict in bureaucracies between authority and power leads to a dilution of intellectual capacity to originate ideas. Thus they see both the UN and the World Bank as mainly disseminators rather than originators of ideas, with the Bank being better at disseminating. Then again, the UN has attracted ten Nobel Prize economists (mostly in the early years), while the World Bank has attracted but one. Moreover, a whole series of other UN economists have made major contributions without the award of a Nobel Prize. One thinks in this regard of Mahbub ul Haq, originator of the highly influential *Human Development Report* issued through UNDP since 1990.

*The UN and Global Political Economy* first examines the role of economic issues during the early years of the UN, with a particularly interesting account of the recruitment of star-studded economists at that time. Further chapters then recount the repercussions of McCarthyism on the UN and the shift of emphasis from notions of full employment to concepts of economic development. The book then extensively reviews how the UN pioneered work on terms of trade. This discussion offers, for example, an answer to the debate over whether Hans Singer or Raúl Prebisch was responsible for the highly influential thesis on declining terms of trade. Other chapters review UNCTAD, world monetary problems, and the conservative counterrevolution.

These issues are well known, but the Toyes put historic contexts around them, detailing the openings as well as the political constraints that could often advance or derail good ideas. The discussion of the debt crisis and structural adjustment in the 1970s and 1980s is particularly clear and enlightening. It shows the political constraints on the World Bank, the way the UN was outgunned by the Bank’s large research budgets and numerous staff, and other real-world factors that help explain why the Bank’s policies were so wrong, but so influential, and so late to change. As noted above,

the UN's bold confrontation with the Bank with respect to adjustment with a human face did help to halt the Bank's puzzling retreat from concerns with socioeconomic well-being and poverty. This is first-rate political history, although the critically important role of Richard Jolly (a prime originator of adjustment with a human face) is underplayed.

The book's final chapter, on lessons for the future, offers wide-ranging and bold prescriptions regarding topics the multilateral system should tackle. Yet it ends cautiously—too cautiously—by suggesting that, given bureaucracy's proclivity to exert control, it is probably not possible for the UN to return to a more prominent role in generating innovative ideas, unless through its more academic branches like the United Nations University (UNU) in Tokyo and its World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) in Helsinki.

### ***Women, Development, and the UN***

Work on gender could be one of the UN's most fundamental contributions to human betterment. Hence, it is extremely useful to have in the series *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest For Equality and Justice* (Indiana University Press, 2005), written by leading gender authority Devaki Jain with a foreword by Amartya Sen. The book offers an informative history of UN actions on gender issues and indicates how the UN helped stimulate the organization of the gender movement. Even those with some background on these matters (including myself, with years on the board of the Association of Women in Development, a major network of gender researchers) can learn a great deal. However, the analysis helped me understand only partly where the gender issue is and should be heading.

My main question, not answered in this book, is why, after the tremendous success of the quinquennial UN conferences on women and development from 1975 onward, the UN has undertaken no real follow-up since the 1995 Beijing Conference. Did the UN feel it had done all it could to accelerate the gender movement and did not need to add further momentum because, perhaps, a tipping point had been reached? Or was the organization exhausted after all the conferences of the 1990s and just could not think of another strategy in lieu of conferences? Or (as I suspect) have the Secretariat and the ministries concerned with women and development in the UN failed to build on the undoubted success of Beijing?

The conference issue can be flipped the other way, too. After all, if the gender meetings were such major successes in accelerating the empowerment of women in the world, should the UN not convene quinquennial high-level meetings for such tough issues as environmental sustainability? In a word, has the UN learned from its conference experiences? Does it

now have a better formula to accelerate progress on tough global policy issues?

In fact, Jain says that the Secretariat has shown indifference since 1995. Although true, it seems paradoxical that a sensitive secretary-general has let gender issues languish. Perhaps the gender issue has reverted to the national level since Beijing. Certainly, parts of the UN are working with gender units at the national level. Likewise, the regional commissions and the World Bank are actively working with national governments on a range of gender issues. Unfortunately, however, this volume does not cover these engagements across the UN family or assess their adequacy.

The question of ends should be key in an analysis of gender issues. Where should the movement be heading? The book is concerned more with the UN's role in creating and sustaining momentum than in its favorable position to help set the movement's direction. Increasingly, women and gender-sensitive men talk of "gender partnership," a reconciliation of the genders on the basis of equal status and joint endeavors. Yet this concept is strikingly absent from the book. But more important is the need for this history to suggest how the UN can help further this movement in the future.

The volume briefly covers the role of gender balance in the UN's staffing. Progress is said to be slow, but the numbers given in the book show much improvement in the past decade, particularly when measured against the interesting and widely accepted view that women can have policy influence when they constitute 30 percent or more of the staff. The figures given through 2004 show that women meet this threshold at each level of the UN's personnel except under-secretary-general (26 percent).<sup>17</sup> Still, the secretary-general's latest management reform package calls efforts to achieve gender balance insufficient and promises "strictly enforced compliance with gender and geography targets."<sup>18</sup> The UN cannot be taken seriously on gender equality if it fails to practice it internally.

Overall, how valuable has the UN been to gender empowerment and gender equity? This is a much more important question than the book's own test of whether the UN has helped the gender movement. Could a counterfactual scenario be applied to consider where the concept of gender equity would be if the UN had not so actively promoted it during the period 1975–1995? I suspect we would be far behind from where we are now. It will be interesting to see how the codirectors of the project view the UN's role in gender empowerment in the final volume of the series.

### ***Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas***

Edited by Yves Berthelot, *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions* (Indiana University Press,

2003) provides another extremely important dimension to the history of ideas and the UN. The volume indicates that the UN has long appreciated the importance of regional differences. The UN was prescient to construct regional commissions to examine the economic (and later social) conditions in each region and to help governments in each region learn to collaborate.

Given that the regional commissions are off the global screen (often even to UN headquarters itself), the material in this volume will probably be new to many analysts. The overview chapter of the five regional commissions is excellent. Their history parallels that of the UN as a whole in that they made some of their most telling contributions in their early years. For instance, the UN regional commissions gave major stimulus to the establishment of important regional development banks in Asia and Africa. Intellectual leadership was provided by such world figures as Gunnar Myrdal and Jan Tinbergen in Europe and Raúl Prebisch in Latin America. Later on, however, other regional and subregional institutions came into being and offered more sources of analysis. With this competition, the voice of the UN regional commissions was not heard as clearly.

It is striking how the regional commissions operate in different political contexts. In Latin America and Africa, there are also distinctive bodies based in the region itself, namely the Organization of American States (OAS) and the African Union (AU). In contrast, no such accompanying agencies exist in the Middle East and Asia. In Europe, where the UN Economic Commission for Europe once provided an essential bridge between East and West, the action has shifted to the European Union (EU). Thus, prospects for UN influence through the regional commissions are quite different for each region.

The two greatest possibilities for policy impact have lain in Latin America and Africa. Here the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has had opportunities to feed into the OAS, and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has operated alongside the AU (previously Organization of African Unity). ECLAC has concentrated largely on trade issues, and although the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has also been active in this area, the bridge of Enrique Iglesias as head, first, of ECLAC and then of the IDB ensured mutual respect between the two institutions. Moreover, ECLAC has generally benefited from first-class leadership. This is a critical point: a UN agency cannot provide intellectual leadership on the basis of an occasional great leader but requires a succession of excellent heads to acquire depth and long-term support from its members.

Such a scenario has not transpired in Africa. Unfortunately, the chapter on the ECA—written by Adebayo Adedeji, who was executive secretary of that commission longer than any other person—does not provide the required critical history. Why did the UN appoint leaders of such irregular

quality to ECA, arguably an entity more needed by its members than any other regional commission? There were high points, to be sure—Robert Gardiner, K. Y. Amoako, and Adedeji himself. But why were those three preceded and followed by such nonentities?

Since the chapter on ECA slights Amoako's contributions, in particular, mention must be made of the pioneering work pursued under his leadership. Amoako's term in office saw the rise of core concepts of peer review of governance that now lie at the heart of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Also important was the concept of mutual accountability in aid relationships, which has led to historic joint reviews of aid conducted by ECA with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Amoako moreover promoted new ways to benchmark governance, empowerment, and regional integration. His term marked the high point in the functioning of ECA.<sup>19</sup>

A harder analysis of the regional commissions would probably rely less on past executives of the commissions and more on informed observers. It would also look more to the future of the commissions. Does an ECE whose only real added value is to link Europe with Russia have a sufficient rationale? How can stronger oversight of the commissions be maintained? Finally, and most fundamentally, how can the regional and global levels of the UN operate with greater intellectual synergy?

## Summary Analysis

Having reviewed the seven volumes in turn, we are now better placed to make a general assessment of the United Nations' role in the history of policy ideas. Fortunately, the codirectors of the project have also published an interim summary of their work.<sup>20</sup> This sixty-seven-page booklet was issued in conjunction with the sixtieth anniversary of the UN in 2005. It was hoped that the leaders gathered for the anniversary summit might, as they set the future course of the UN, recognize the importance of ideas and people with ideas.

Emmerij, Jolly, and Weiss illustrate that their project is “forward-looking history”<sup>21</sup> by highlighting three challenges for the future of the UN. The first is intellectual—that is, the need for the UN to promote inquiries into matters such as the divide between the Islamic world and the West, comprehensive human security, environment and sustainability, the reduction of global economic inequalities, and measures to ensure genuine international competition. A second key challenge is to strengthen the participation of developing countries in the management of the global economy. Third is the challenge to return the UN to intellectual leadership with the generation and dissemination of original ideas.<sup>22</sup>

To meet these challenges the codirectors recommend that all parts of the UN system treat contributions to ideas and analysis as a major part of their work.<sup>23</sup> To this end, the UN needs to encourage and reward creative thinking of the highest quality. Recruitment and promotion policies should be geared to assembling leading professionals from different disciplines and from different national and cultural backgrounds. There can be no compromise in ensuring the top quality of staff. Likewise, increased financial support for research, analysis, and policy exploration should be a top priority. Such resources must be provided on a long-term basis and under terms that ensure flexibility and intellectual autonomy.

Strengthened dissemination of new ideas is equally important. UN outreach with a core of key reports is sometimes impressive, but too many analyses languish on bookshelves, on coffee tables, or in filing cabinets. The distribution of UN publications to libraries and the public is inadequate. Even the bookstore at UN headquarters holds few titles from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)—produced across the street— or from the regional commissions. Discussion should take place not only in multilateral settings, but also with governments and among such diverse constituencies as business, the mass media, and civil society.

These recommendations all hit the mark and lead to reflection. However, as the codirectors would agree, a full return to the days of UN predominance in development thinking is not possible. A lot has changed. True, in the late 1940s and 1950s, the UN was able to attract unusually strong intellectual leaders who made lasting impacts in significant areas. As Gert Rosenthal notes in his excellent chapter on ECLAC, the UN essentially had the field to itself in the early years.<sup>24</sup> However, subsequent decades have seen a huge growth in intellectual institutions that compete with the UN in the marketplace of ideas: academic bodies, regional agencies, think tanks, private sector policy centers, and government policy establishments. Furthermore, five decades back, the pool of highly skilled economists was considerably smaller and geographically more concentrated than today. And in the mid-twentieth century, many ideas had not yet faced the tough tests of application. In sum, the early years were an optimistic time when the UN could shine.

Then, as the authors of these volumes lament, the World Bank stole the limelight from the UN. Relations between the two institutions have indeed often been difficult, but do we need a more balanced assessment than this series provides? To be sure, the Bank was misguided in its structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s, and the UN rightly took them to task with its promotion of “adjustment with a human face.” At other times, however, the Bank was on track and the UN was more or less silent. For example, why did the UN not get behind the Bank more strongly in the 1970s when Robert McNamara was pushing the basic human needs development strategy and the United States had enacted basic human needs as the cornerstone of

its legislation and policies? Why did the UN give a tepid reaction when James Wolfensohn, in the 1990s, pushed for a higher role for civil society and popular participation? Improved relations between the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions are necessary to encourage exchanges of ideas and experiences.

The World Bank has been much better than the UN in defining its development stances. Its intellectual agenda is discussed at board meetings and so acquires standing. In contrast, the UN has lacked an official ideas-based agenda on development, a notable exception being the Millennium Development Goals. The World Bank is relatively more coordinated, whereas the UN is a family of institutions where the individual entities independently offer ideas.

A lot can be said for the UN's more pluralist *modus operandi*. Regional differences are arguably better addressed through regional commissions. Specialized agencies have their own production of ideas and their own specialized boards. Yet pluralism in the UN too often generates chaos in which critical ideas can get lost.

The need for a more coherent and comprehensive intellectual agenda on development has long been recognized. It was already stressed in the 1969 Jackson Report, where Sir Robert Jackson complained of his long search in vain for the "brain" that guides the policies and operations of the UN development system.<sup>25</sup> The UN has attempted various ways to coordinate an intellectual agenda in development—for example, by appointing directors-general of development, by designating the head of UNDP as the coordinator of development, and by creating a UN Development Group (UNDG). Yet none of these mechanisms has met the need that Jackson identified nearly forty years ago. Possibly the UNGD could yet become the center for devising new ways to coordinate the production and dissemination of the UN's intellectual output on development, while also ensuring that the best parts of the pluralism in the system are fostered.

The project codirectors also rightly stress the need for managerial excellence in the supervision of intellectual inquiry at the UN. For one thing, managers of UN policy research need to give more attention to mobilizing talent from outside the organization, rather than focusing unduly on in-house research. Moreover, leading policy thinkers within the UN must have ready access to the centers of policy power in the organization, rather than being marginalized in remote islands of policy research such as the UNU units and UNICEF's Innocenti Centre in Florence. In a word, then, UN managers must become more adept at understanding and promoting the process of producing and utilizing intellectual inputs. There is little time in the overmandated, overworked bureaucracies of the UN for managers even to survey the literature, let alone to help set new research directions. Improved management of intellectual processes simply must be put on the agenda of UN reform.

One important step forward in managerial strategy would be to rethink the results-based emphasis that is now being inculcated in most parts of the UN. The current approach shows little understanding that an influential idea could qualify as an organizational “result.” Without such an appreciation, the contribution of ideas will be undervalued when compared with the “hard” results of development projects. Under currently prevailing interpretations, the “results” orientation discriminates against intellectual activity.

To reiterate, though, to produce results in the area of ideas requires effective dissemination as well as production. Each year thousands of meetings under UN auspices produce thousands of publications. High-level meetings, summits, expert groups, and senior commissions abound. All of this experience surely must hold clues to the best practices of translating ideas into policy. When should the UN appoint expert groups? Should the UN now deploy other ways to generate and spread ideas—for example, through intellectual networks? What broader marketing lessons can be learned from the experience of some of the UN’s best-known publications? What is the best tool kit for idea creation and idea marketing for the new generation of senior UN officials?

Nothing needs these lessons of dissemination more than the UN Intellectual History Project itself. The volumes, handbook, and CD-ROMs deserve large audiences to, for example, convince the UN and its members of the need to organize the history of the institution. Without such a history there is no orderly way to answer persistent attacks by those who would cripple the UN. A depth of historical understanding would inform more effective reform processes as well. The project’s codirectors have encouraged individual UN agencies to conduct their own historical studies, but the Secretariat also needs to encourage good archival practice and other historical functions throughout the UN family of organizations.

In sum, the rich writings of the UN Intellectual History Project—2,600 pages so far—deserve scrutiny, incorporation in curricula, and further critiques. Codirectors Emmerij, Jolly, and Weiss deserve our deep appreciation. In an era preoccupied with hard power, this series highlights the soft powers of the UN: in the creation of ideas; in benchmarking series of data; in public campaigns and political mobilizations to disseminate ideas; and in dialogues to provide peer learning. In the long run of history, these may well turn out to be the UN results that matter most. 🌐

## Notes

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1. Cf. Edward Mason and Robert Asher, *The World Bank Since Bretton Woods* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1973).

2. For more information on the project, see [www.UNHistory.org](http://www.UNHistory.org).

3. Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 313–314.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

6. Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

7. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001). See also reports of the 2005 World Summit, High-Level Plenary Meeting, United Nations, 14–16 September 2005.

8. Emmerij, Jolly, and Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve?* chap. 7.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

12. Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai, and Frédéric Lapeyre, *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 17–44.

13. From personal conversations in the late 1970s with C. Tyler Wood, who sat on the small Central Committee of UNRRA (with such people as Lester Pearson), and who played a major role in the approval of the Marshall Plan. See oral history interview of C. Tyler Wood, Truman Presidential Library, [www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/woodset.htm#1transcript](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/woodset.htm#1transcript).

14. Including the Jomtiem Conference on Education and Development, the World Conference on Population and Development, the World Summit on Social Development, and the Beijing Conference on Women and Development.

15. Jolly, Emmerij, Ghai, and Lapeyre, *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice*, pp. 259–267.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

17. Devaki Jain, *Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 59, 150.

18. Report of the Secretary-General, *Investing in the United Nations for a Stronger Organization Worldwide*, March 2006, par. 25(c) and Proposal 1, p. 10, available at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

19. I authored the only major reviews of the commission's work: "Task Force on the Review and Appraisal of the Policy Orientation, Programmes and Management Capacity of the Economic Commission for Africa," November 1991; and its reprise, with Dominic C. Mulaisho and Brownson N. Dede, "Review of ECA," April 2004.

20. Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *The Power of UN Ideas: Lessons from the First 60 Years* (New York: UN Intellectual History Project, 2005).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

22. Ibid., pp. 61–62.

23. Ibid., pp. 63–64.

24. Gert Rosenthal, “ECLAC: A Commitment to a Latin American Way Toward Development,” in Yves Berthelot, ed., *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 176.

25. UNDP, *A Study of the Capacity of the United Nations Development System*, 2 vols. (Geneva: United Nations, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 12–13.