

Powerhouse of Ideas: The United Nations Intellectual History Project

A Review Article

D. John Shaw *

Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges

by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss.
2001, 257 pp., \$ 59.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper)

Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions

edited by Yves Berthelot
2003, 408 pp., \$ 74.95 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper)

UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice

by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai, and Frederic Lapeyre.
2004, 387 pp., \$ 65.00 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper)

The UN and Global Political Economy. Trade, Finance, and Development

By John Toye and Richard Toye.
2004, 393 pp., \$ 75.00 (cloth); \$ 29.95 (paper)

Quantifying the World: UN Ideas and Statistics

by Michael Ward.
2004, 256 pp., \$ 70.00 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper)

INTRODUCTION

‘Ideas are a main driving force in human progress, and ideas have been among the main contributions of the United Nations from the beginning. ... at its best, the United Nations has always been rooted in powerful ideas reflecting human concerns and aspirations’. Thus, writes Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary-General, in his Foreword to *Ahead of the Curve?*, the first volume of the United Nations Intellectual History Project

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(UNIHP) series. It is uncommon today to think of the United Nations as a powerhouse of ideas concerning global economic and social development and humanitarian action. While much has been written about the UN and its activities, relatively little has been said about its intellectual contribution to the world of ideas. This lacuna is now being filled by the UNIHP.

There could scarcely be a better time to launch this project. However dedicated the professionals of the UN system are, and however vital their mission, the UN shares the fragility common to most multilateral institutions. Critics veer between contempt for international bodies like the United Nations and unrealistic pronouncements on what they ought to do from forging the peace to lifting people out of poverty. It has become commonplace to say that our global institutions are not up to the challenge of our unprecedented global interdependency. The reason for this mismatch lies partly in schizophrenia. Sometimes scorn is poured on the UN, and it is starved of resources. Sometimes it must have superhuman strength, and it is lumbered with impossible objectives which, if not achieved, leads to more criticism and less resources. Part of the problems also lies in the fact that there is no comprehensive history of UN activities in the formulation of development ideas and action programs to set the record straight. The fact remains that the UN is the only truly global institution dealing with global challenges that are likely to increase in the future. There has been notable achievement but much remains to be done. And a new round of discussions are now taking place of reform measures to strengthen the role of the UN system to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

I. THE PROJECT

As the directors of the UNIHP ⁽¹⁾ point out in *Ahead of the Curve?*, it is surprising that there is no comprehensive history of the UN family of organizations, either institutional or intellectual. Faced with this major omission, they decided to launch an ‘intellectual history’. Many might be turned off by the project’s title. That would be unfortunate. By calling it an intellectual history, the directors have deliberately focused on a ‘history of ideas’ as nurtured by the UN rather than on an institutional history, which is still needed, especially for those UN bodies that have not yet documented their own histories in sufficient depth. ⁽²⁾ The project was launched in 1999 as an independent research effort, guided by an international advisory council of eleven distinguished individuals ⁽³⁾, and with financial support from five foundations and eight governments. It is resulting in a major publication achievement. Twelve more books (see Annex) in addition to the five already published are planned analyzing the major economic and social development ideas or concepts central to UN activities or key ideas and norms linked to international peace and security. Two of the books by the project directors at the beginning and end of the project are described as ‘overarching studies’. The other volumes have been commissioned from one or more authors selected for their intimate knowledge of the topic concerned. All books are to be published as a special series by Indiana University Press. In addition, in-depth oral history interviews have been conducted with leading

contributors to the development of crucial ideas and concepts within the UN system, excerpts of which are to be published in one of the UNIHP volumes.

II. HISTORY OF UN IDEAS

In the first volume of the UNIHP, the project directors remind us that ‘four powerful sets of ideas’ emerged from the conference in San Francisco in 1945 that gave birth to the United Nations: peace, independence and the sovereignty of nations, development, and human rights. (5) The widely held conception at the creation of the UN was that the establishment of economic order and justice was a precondition of peace and that the UN could help achieve this by promoting economic development, which was written into the UN Charter. They note: ‘It is fascinating, and often amazing, how many times the UN system has been ahead of the curve’ (although they also note the instances when the UN was behind the curve) with respect to such concepts as the early ideas on development, on international aspects of environmental problems, national development policies, and trade and finance. The UNIHP publications show how much vision and creative thinking emerged from the small band of first generation UN leaders and how great was the input of their colleagues and academic consultants, many of whom were awarded Nobel prizes (6). The post-war UN contributions were pioneering, including the inclusion of human rights in the UN Charter in 1945 and the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948.

UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice provides a remarkable synopsis of the history of UN ideas in a very restricted space. The reader is taken through the foundations of UN development thinking and practice of the 1940s and 1950s, including the early work on trade and development, measures for the economic development of developing countries, domestic savings and foreign capital, and the development of technical assistance. In the 1960s, which, following the proposal by President John F. Kennedy, was designated as the first UN development decade, themes such as the UN’s work on development planning, the role of education in economic development, and the opportunities and challenges brought by science and technology were explored. In the 1970s, the focus was on equity in development, when the issues of employment and basic needs, a new international economic order, the environment, and women and gender issues in development were debated. The 1980s saw the marginalization of the poorest countries when contentious issues like the debt crisis, the ‘Washington Consensus’ and structural and sectoral adjustment, and the problems of the least-developed countries were confronted. The UN reaction to the policies that were introduced was very timid indeed. The 1990s saw the rediscovery of a human vision of development, when human development was seen as a new integrating framework and the issues of human rights and national and global governance were addressed. It was also a time when increasing resources and attention were turned to collective security, peace-making and peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and humanitarian interventions and their interface with development in a continuum of action. The UN voice in the development field re-emerged mainly through the annual *Human Development Reports* of the UNDP and the UNCTAD *Trade and Development Reports*.

The authors emphasize that the contributions of the UN to development thinking and practice must neither be understated nor overstated but the UN has been an intellectual pioneer in issues of economic and social development much more often than is often recognized. They state, 'There can be little doubt that the three greatest intellectual contributions of the United Nations have been human rights on a global scale, purposeful development in developing countries, and ideas for ways to improve economic relations between richer and poorer countries, which initially focused on improving the terms of trade'. Over its first three decades, the UN produced many ideas about economic growth and development that focused on national development and living standards, which, if implemented, would have substantively diminished the income gap between rich and poor countries. These early ideas were taken much further in subsequent decades and broadened into other fields. For the first time in human history, the UN projected the view that development was the responsibility of all nations. The UN Charter speaks of the need to employ 'international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all people'. The UN Declaration of Human Rights states: 'Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized'. Subsequently, the UN has acted as the central forum for the discussion and negotiation of practically all major initiatives for development.

The UN has also contributed more than any other body to broadening the notion of development to include issues such as employment, the reduction of poverty, fairer distribution of the benefits of growth, participation in decision-making at different levels, gender equality, child development, social justice, and environmental sustainability. National development planning was promoted within an international development framework, which compelled countries to carefully assess their major and long-term problems, prioritize objectives, and establish targets. Foreign aid to accelerate economic growth in poor countries was an area where the UN made unique contributions in its first two decades. And the UN decision to identify the problems of the least-developed countries as a special case and develop specific proposals in response to their needs was original and positive. Perhaps the most important theoretical work of the UN concerned the importance of trade for developed, as well described in *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance, and Development* by John and Richard Toye, a father and son team with complementary expertise in political economics and historical analysis. It is to the credit of the UN that as early as the 1950s it linked disarmament and development, both in analysis and policy recommendations. On issues of gender and children in development and the environment, the UN brought about a sea change in global opinion. Another important contribution related to the transition of the centrally planned economies into capitalist market economies. But perhaps the greatest contribution of the UN system to development was in shifting the thrust of strategies from an almost exclusive emphasis on increasing economic growth to a preoccupation with improving living standards. Throughout the 1960s, the new UN message went forth that development was defined as 'growth *plus* change' (original emphasis). Change, in turn, was defined as social and cultural as well as economic, and qualitative as well as quantitative in nature. This led to greater insight into the importance of the human factor in development and the urgent need to mobilize human resources, the greatest

underutilized asset of developing countries. Sustained and equitable development depended not on the creation of wealth but on the capacity of people to create wealth. In this context, the issues of gender and human rights have assumed heightened importance and human development, in its widest sense, has been at the heart of the UN efforts.

But there have been omissions (in the sense of areas that are important but that were long neglected by the UN) and missed opportunities along the way. AIDS, narcotics, international migration, and the debt burden of the poor countries are issues that are identified where attention was ‘too little and too late’. There are other cases that should have been tackled but have to this day not received the attention they deserve. Alternatives to the Washington Consensus (a shorthand expression for stabilization and structural-adjustment policies advocated by the Bretton Woods institutions and major industrial countries to solve the problem of developing countries), actions to control the excesses of free trade and capital movements, and the policies and strategies to strengthen development institutions and legal frameworks and property rights and control corruption are cited as examples.

The UNIHP volume on *Unity and Diversity in Development: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions* surveys the history of the five UN regional commissions – Africa, Asia and the Far East, Europe, Latin America, and Western Asia – and the ideas they have developed since they were established. It also examines how they have approached their mission of assessing the conditions of regional economies and making prognoses about the future. It describes how each commission has added local perspectives to global debates over economic development and brought an authentic regional voice into the UN.

Four main conclusions are drawn from the UNIHP publications in summarizing the UN’s efforts to influence the rate and pattern of economic growth and the human situation in developing countries. First, the UN has exercised ‘considerable influence’ in setting goals and benchmarks, notably in the social sectors, which have been ‘largely or considerably achieved’. Second, success has been greater in those sectors where the UN agencies had field staff and programs and where they were able to back up ideas and goals with ‘catalytic support’. Third, the UN has exercised a worldwide influence through its advocacy and the support provided by some of its specialized agencies. Lastly, and less positively, the results have been ‘patchy, uneven, and, for many countries, generally slower than the ambitious goals set by the international community’. For this, ‘the blame must be shared’ by the UN and the countries concerned. The IMF and the World Bank are singled out for criticism for not having supported the UN goals and for focussing on a narrower set of economic objectives.

III. A FORWARD VIEW

The project’s original sub-title was ‘a forward looking history’. The intention is not to produce new findings and research for its own sake but to seek insights in order to improve the UN’s future contribution to economic and social development and human security. More specifically, the project directors state ‘we hope to understand better the role of the UN as an intellectual actor and the processes in the multilateral marketplace of

ideas, in order to identify workable strategies and tactics'. Through the UNIHP, they have succeeded brilliantly.

Regarding the future, they quote from the UN secretary-general's *Vision for the New Millennium: We the People: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century* (UN, 2000) in identifying some basic priorities: sustained growth, poverty reduction, employment generation, combating HIV/AIDS, upgrading slums, bridging the digital divide – 'in short, building structures for global equity and greater solidarity'. They question whether the concept of development is comprehensive enough or is still too 'economistic'. They conclude that 'Inspired leadership is essential, as is humility to learn from the richness and diversity of experience around the world. Long may the UN remain at the center of this challenge, a challenge that is at once human and global.

The UNIHP can make an important contribution toward to process of UN reform that is now being considered. The Secretary-General's reform program for renewing the UN in 1997 did not go far enough in that it did not include the UN specialized agencies, including the Bretton Woods institutions. The UN Charter reflected the concept of the UN as the authoritative centerpiece of an international system. Under the Charter, the UN specialized agencies, including the IMF and World Bank, were to be brought into relationship with the United Nations, with the UN as the senior and active leader of a cooperative system. It was also envisaged that the specialized agencies would be concentrated with the UN in one place and architectural plans were drawn up in 1947 for that purpose. But this was a not realized. Instead, the UN specialized agencies and other UN bodies were set up in different locations, with their own autonomies, mandates, financial arrangements and governing bodies, making coordination of action within the UN system difficult, if not impossible. This has led to institutional incoherence in pursuing complex, multi-faceted concepts such as sustainable development, food security and nutrition with well-integrated and cohesive action programs. There is no international body dealing systematically with global questions in matters of economic and social policy and the triumvirate of the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization, as they function at present, are not up to the task.

The role of the UN will become even more important in the years ahead as interlocking problems such as food security, water, employment, money and debt, energy, international migration, environment and climate change, communicable diseases, and human security – all with global dimensions, demanding global solutions – take their toll. Hence the indispensable need for some form of multilateral, global economic and social management to draw up a coordinated policy for global action with agreed priorities. The need for stronger cohesive action throughout the UN system has been a constant theme, for which a number of prescriptions have been made, including: establishing a central 'brain' as a policy center for development; identifying one UN organization as the 'hub' of the UN system's development work; creating a system-wide computerized information system covering the work of all UN bodies; and establishing a common UN development service. More recently, a proposal was made to create a new 'Economic and Social Security Council'. A major impediment is that this would require changes to the UN

Charter. An alternative might be for the current functions of the UN Security Council to be enlarged to include global economic and social policy issues.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

What are some of the lessons for the future that are emerging from the UNIHP? The project shows that the UN has done an enormous amount of pioneering and creative work in helping to shape development thinking and practice. This role needs to be preserved for the future by maintaining a UN environment in which creative thinking and policy analysis can flourish. The Millennium Development Goals established by the UN General Assembly in 2000, with an immediate and special focus on poverty reduction, have set priorities for development ideas and analysis. But poverty reduction is only part of a wider agenda of development, which impacts on its achievement. The UN will need to ask many questions when it comes to broader issues of development theory and practice. One of the most important areas for the UN's future work and analysis will concern better and fairer management of the global economy, for which the UN has both a need and an obligation to develop and maintain a supporting global statistical system that can provide the information required for better tracking the international system. And improvement in implementation to translate thinking into practice will need to be carried out.

In *Quantifying the World: UN Ideas and Statistics*, Michael Wards argues that good data serve to enhance a perception about life as well as to deepen an understanding of reality. He assesses the UN's contribution to international efforts to standardize national statistics and stimulate their accurate collection, analysis and dissemination, including pioneering work on GNP and a standard system of national accounting for which Richard Stone, a key adviser, received the Nobel prize. The UN's work in this field is more influential than is often realized because both popular and professional perceptions of progress and problems are influenced by available data. This assessment of 50 years of the UN efforts as well as current needs provides a better understanding to quantifying national and global challenges in the years ahead.

The 60th anniversary of the UN in 2005 provides an important opportunity to stimulate additional exploration of the UN's record by academics and graduate students, governance and policy analysts in both the developed and especially the developing countries. As well as producing the wide range of publications, the UNIHP intends to sponsor lectures, conferences and seminars. The directors and all those involved in the UNIHP are to be congratulated for initiating a project that is long overdue. So too does Indiana University Press for publishing the UNIHP series in a clear and highly readable format.

Footnotes

- (1) The three project directors are Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss – a Dutchman, an Englishman and an American – with distinguished academic and UN careers.
- (2) The UN system includes some 15 specialized agencies, eight funds and programs, nine functioning commissions, five regional committees, four standing committees, and a number of expert bodies.
- (3) The eleven members of the UNIHP Intellectual Advisory Council are: Galal Amin, Margaret Joan Anstee, Lourdes Arizpe, Eveline Herfkens, Enrique Iglesias, Andras Inotai, Thandika Mkandawire, Gert Rosenthal, John G. Ruggie, Makoto Taniguchi and Ramesh Thakur.
- (4) Further details of the UNIHP can be found at the Web site: www.unhistory.org.
- (5) See, e.g., Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *FDR and the Creation of the U.N.*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997; Peter Baehr and Leon Gordenker, *The United Nations: Reality and Ideal*, New York: Praeger, 1999; and Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation. The Founding of the United Nations*, Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview Press, 2003.
- (6) These early pioneers included: Sidney Dell, Celso Furtado, Wassily Leontief, Nicholas Kaldor, Michal Kalecki, Lawrence Klein, W. Arthur Lewis, Raul Prebisch, James Meade, Gunnar Myrdal, Juan Vazquez Noyola, Theordore Schultz, Hans Singer, Richard Stone, and Jan Tinbergen

Annex. Forthcoming UNIHP Publications

UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice. By Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly (2005). *

Human Security and the UN: A Critical History. By S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong-Khong (2005).

The UN and Human Rights: The Unfinished Revolution. By Sarah Zaidi and Roger Normand (2005).

The UN and Development Cooperation. By Olav Stokke (2005).

The UN and the Global Commons: Development Without Destruction. By Nico Schrijver (2005).

The UN and Transnationals, from Code to Conflict. By Tagi Sagafi-Negad with the collaboration of John Dunning (2005).

Women Enrich the United Nations and Development. By Devaki Jain (2005).

The UN and Global Governance: An Idea and Its Prospects. By Ramesh Thakur and Thomas G. Weiss (2006).

The United Nations: A History of Ideas and Their Future. By Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss (2006).

Collective Security and Peacekeeping. **

Conflict Prevention. **

Humanitarian Interventions. **

- * Contains excerpts from the UNHIP oral history interviews.
- ** Authors to be commissioned.