

**A Summary of the Discussion at
the Geneva Diplomatic Book Circle (GDBC) on the topic of
“Ideas can be made: The UN Contribution to the Discourse on
Development”
Thursday 28 June 2007 at the Palais des Nations.**

PARTICIPANTS:

- **Mr. Amr Aljowaily** (First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Egypt in Geneva)
- **Mr Yves Berthelot**, (Senior Research Fellow at The CUNY Graduate Center and Co-director of the UNIHP)
- **Ms Jo Butler**, (Chief Intergovernmental Affairs and Outreach Service, UNCTAD)
- **Mr Heiner Flassbeck**, (Director, Division of Globalization and Development Strategies, UNCTAD)
- **Mr Khalil Hamdani** (Director, Division of Investment, Technology and Related Financial Issues, UNCTAD)
- **Dr Jovan Kurbalija** (Director, DiploFoundation)
- **Mr Victor Ognivtsev** (Senior Economic Affairs Officer, Division on International Trade in Goods and Services, UNCTAD)
- **Mr Thomas G. Weiss** (Co-director, UNIHP; Director, Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies and Presidential, Professor, Political Science; The Graduate Center, The City University of New York)

The interactive round table discussion titled “Ideas Can Be Made: The UN’s Contribution to the Discourse o Development” formed part of the dialogue on the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP). The project aims to document the history of the institution by combining records of first hand accounts and with scholarly studies using these primary sources.

Thomas Weiss, Co-director of UNIHP, introduced the discussion by explaining the nature of the project. An archive of 79 interviews has been collated recounting the history and individual experiences of staff and experts in the organization, mostly focusing on the first thirty years of the UN. These interviews were recorded between 1999 and 2006, each interview ranging from two to twelve hours long. The individuals represented 35 countries, half from the North and half from the South, and with women representing a quarter of the total number.

These accounts divide into three categories: firstly there are personal perspectives of those who worked in the UN, reflecting cultural and linguistic diversity of staff, and the diverging interests in serving the Secretariat as opposed to national interests. The second part explores the big events that have influenced the ideas, norms and principles that have shaped the

development of the UN by governments and civil society. Finally the third part looks at the ways non-governmental organizations have influenced UN processes and the role of leadership in UN institutions, particularly observing to what extent outside experts have been able to penetrate UN bureaucracy to facilitate the UN's effectiveness in the world. These transcripts have been recorded onto CD ROM with indexing and search facilities so they can be used for research. A set of books commissioned by individuals and institutions which use these sources complete the documents in the UNIHP. The book circle aimed to draw conclusions on this literature in discussing the UN's ability to generate ideas and thus contribute to the discourse on development.

Weiss noted that ideas can be generated in several ways. These include the ways in which issues are framed, redefining interests and self-definitions, new ideas bringing together parties who would not normally align themselves together (for example, issues on the environment or landmines) and finally through ideas becoming imbedded in institutions. Yves Berthelot, a coordinator of UNIHP continued the discussion by commenting that many ideas made global come through regional commissions due to the specificity of issues on a regional basis. He cites examples from the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Economic Commission for Africa, and the Economic Commission for Western Asia, where discussion and ideas on issues such a population and inequality took place before these reached the agenda at a global level. He states that these regional discussions led to an exchange of ideas between East and West and between North and South and integrated political and non-political issues. At statistician by profession Berthelot also emphasized how statistics can drive the global agenda, but there is a need to interpret statistics meaningfully rather than thinking the statistics can replace ideas.

Talk during the round table discussion turned to the origin of ideas. Weiss stated that often the focus on intellectual history is to think of who came up with an idea first. However, it is more useful for the UN to look at the process of bringing ideas forwarded and how these can be shaped or distorted. Also, it is important to consider whether new ideas only come through the necessity for problem solving or whether inspiration comes through other means. Comments were also made about the importance of language in framing ideas to find solutions, for example such terms as 'land for peace' and whether ideas that matter are good ideas. Extending this discussion, participants noted that often the South has been marginalized in intellectual history as much of the thinking on the relationship between ideas and the material world have come through certain ideas on civilization which adhere to norms in the North.

Discussion also focused on whether the structure of UN meetings was conducive or inhibited intellectual creativity and the generation of ideas. It was agreed that the procedural practices are important in influencing how openly views could be discussed and new ideas nurtured. Both small-scale and large scale solutions were put forward, an example of the former being a suggestion to streamline the way the notes are prepared for chairpersons at the organisation. An ideas for large scale changes put forward was the

inclusion of more actors – apart from international civil servants – in the dialogue and negotiations: civil society, private business and parliamentarians all need to be involved in the decision making process.

Suggestions were put forward for a more informal style of meeting so to be inclusive to other actors; perhaps UNCTAD could hold a Davos-style meeting to engage non-state actors in an informal setting. The former Secretary General Kofi Anan had been particularly active to engage many actors to bring around understanding on several issues. The point was raised that one cannot always take structures from the private sector and transpose them on intergovernmental institutions, as the objectives of each type of organisation differ. Also, there still exist reasons for protocol and formality, especially among business leaders. For example, the delivery of a serious statement requires the appropriate level of decorum. Participants also discussed how ideas that change the status quo are presented. If this is done in a public forum often the reaction elicited is defensive as representatives do not want to be seen to lose face. Therefore a culture of critical appraisal and openness needs to be fostered in the UN system to allow freer discussion on new ideas, firstly in private meetings and then moved to the public domain.

There was extensive conversation on the role of civil society in the UN decision making process, particularly in the context of UNCTAD. Jo Butler argued for the greater participation of civil society at UNCTAD in order to cultivate a multi-stakeholder approach. As it is no longer a treaty making body there is more need to incorporate civil society in the dialogues held by the organisation, to build consensus and generate ideas for development objectives, rather than have input *ex-poste*, once decision have been made by governments. Currently UNCTAD has also been involved in studying reversal in investment; creative ideas on the freedom to invest have fed into the dialogue of the G8 where UNCTAD policy recommendations are discussed at the highest political level. However, it is important to remember that the UN is in a position to air and disseminate ideas.

Butler also stressed the need for good governance and accountability of NGOs which represent civil society at negotiation fora. Berthelot cited the example of the participation of civil society in the Aarhus convention, where they pressed for access to information, justice and environmental protection.

Creative solutions are often sought on trade issues which tend to be highly technical and complex, agreements on which can be binding. UNCTAD was at the forefront of discussing trade in services within the context of development which has shaped current negotiations on the General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS). Yet UNCTAD must be mindful of reflecting the interest of its member states which may limit the generation of ideas according to the current political environment. The analogy was used of whether UNCTAD needs to focus on the forest or the trees. Butler argued focus had been drawn away from macro-level issues (the forest) where UNCTAD needs to work on intergovernmental machinery as well as micro-issues (trees) based on technical cooperation and research.

A major area of improvement in UNCTAD's work to generate ideas is its communications and information unit. Issues need to be presented in a dynamic manner to engage the interest of not only the press but the multitude of electronic publications. Ideas need to be encapsulated coherently to make them relevant to the outside world. Currently there is only a small group of individuals involved in this area, and greater resources are required for a broader outreach campaign by UNCTAD.

Finally participants in the book circle were asked to comment on what the new wave of ideas would be in the future and which individuals or organisations would bring forward these ideas. A major topic area discussed was the environment, particularly an emphasis on ideas needed to locate alternative energy sources (not biofuels) and the concept of "green oil". There needed to be an awareness of the rights of future generations and environmental rights. It was agreed that the private sector may be the driving force in this change, generating ideas for more environmentally sustainable energy sources as these will be profitable in the long-run. Other areas for new ideas included mobilizing youth in developing countries, adapting to emerging powers from the developing world and incorporating corporate responsibility in the multilateral fora. The multilateral process itself was seen as a source for new ideas in order to promote intergovernmental discussion and find an effective balance between the state and the private sector. A view was expressed that currently there exists self-censorship which does not allow new ideas to emerge from the secretariat. The UN needs to promote the use of outside experts on a short-term basis, with no vested interests in the UN, to bring about change and create an environment conducive to exchange ideas. The discussion ended with an emphasis that UNCTAD is in a position to play a constructive role in helping the nations adapt to the changing geo-politics of the modern world and the dynamics of investment, trade and development.

The event was followed by the farewell party for Mr. Amr Aljowaily, who conveyed this session as well as inspired creation of the Geneva Diplomatic Book Circle.