

Underestimated Influence: UN Contributions to Development Ideas, Leadership, Influence and Impact

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Abstract

The UN has played a bigger and more influential role in development thinking and action than often realized. In contrast to the Bretton Woods Institutions, development approaches in the UN have been multi-disciplinary, focused on human concerns and, increasingly, linked to human rights. The UN's Global Conferences of the 1970s and 1990s mobilized worldwide attention to such central issues as environment, climate change, biodiversity, population, food security, employment, and the special problems of rapid urbanization. Over the years, the UN has also set some 50 goals for development, of which the Millennium Development Goals for poverty reduction and other human advances are only the most recent. International as well as regional and national action has been a consistent feature of UN analysis and policy recommendations—emphasizing actions to offset inequalities of economic and political power such as fairer trade

and concessional aid flows. For the future, the UN certainly needs reform but to build on its unique legitimacy in global governance and the positive elements in its record.

Keywords: United Nations, development goals, development ideas, human rights, human development.

Introduction

To many people, the UN is little more than a talk shop, a building of scurrying diplomats and overpaid functionaries, who after endless and tortuous politicized debates produce a few tiny mice in the form of banal resolutions and turgid prose. If and when the UN is faced with real problems of conflict, emergency, and human suffering, its actions seem almost always to be delayed, inadequate, or blocked by a veto.

Needless to say, this is a considerable oversimplification. In terms of staffing and budgets, the whole of the UN employs about the same numbers as the fire and police forces of New York City. And opinion surveys in the United States, one of the most skeptical of all countries toward the UN, consistently show that the majority of Americans hold a more favorable view of the UN than they do of the U.S. government and rate the UN's effectiveness significantly higher than that of Congress.

But probably the biggest public misunderstanding of the UN is the belief that most of its work is political, highly controversial, and focused on international disputes. In fact, four-fifths of the UN's work relates to development and international support in such vital areas as health,

agriculture, employment, population, and statistics. Coordination of international systems for reporting on weather, air traffic control, patents, disease and crop production, an ever more important part of a globalized world, are under the UN but hardly ever result in public disputes. Promotion of human rights often hits the headlines but less noticed are the vast numbers of country-by-country human development activities in support of children, women, victims of HIV/AIDS, and marginalized peoples and groups, like those with disabilities. At this level, the UN is only one actor among many—but because of its legitimacy, role and global outreach, the UN has often been a pioneer and leading influence on thinking and ideas about economic and social development.

The UN's founding principles

It was initially envisaged that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank would be an integral part of the UN system. But they began operations in Washington with little more than nominal relationships to the rest of the UN—and working independently of the UN Secretary General and the main UN structures. Much of the early work of the Bretton Woods Institutions focused on reconstruction in post-war Europe. In contrast, economists at the UN mostly worked on problems and policies in developing countries. To date, nine economists who

have worked in or closely with the UN have received Nobel prizes for economics, a record far in advance of the Bretton Woods Institutions.

UN Pioneering leadership in development

In its early years, the UN secretariat was “a hothouse for ideas” (Emmerij, Jolly, and Weiss 2001: 26–42) and early development thinking, well ahead of most other groups including universities. Some of the brightest economic lights of the day were brought into the UN (Toye and Toye 2004: 54), including: Michel Kalecki, Nicholas Kaldor, Sidney Dell, Arthur Lewis, Hans Singer, Gunnar Myrdal, and Raul Prebisch. The UN during 1949–51 issued three major and pioneering reports: *National and International Measures for Full Employment* (1949), *Measures for International Economic Stability* (1951) and *Measures for the Economic Development of Under-developed countries* (1951). The first two reports were important for international economic policy but the latter was the most directly related to development in its current sense.

The latter report focused on economic development, covering a wide field of issues: measures to raise agricultural and industrial production, the need for balanced rural and urban development, mass education and the need for support from taxation. The report boldly elaborated national

and international recommendations for accelerating development in developing countries, emphasizing the critical need for increases in investment beyond what could be raised from domestic savings. A large inflow of capital into the under-developed countries would therefore be required—and the report recommended that the World Bank should set itself the objective of lending \$1 billion each year, to be reached within five years. Even more boldly for the time, the report recommended that “some mechanism be created for transferring from the developed to the underdeveloped countries by way of grants-in-aid a sum of money increasing rapidly, reaching eventually a level of \$3 billion a year” (UN 2004a: 61, 84).

The recommendation for providing development assistance on concessional terms became a major and controversial issue which was debated within the UN over almost the whole of the 1950s. The very idea of concessional loans was strongly opposed by most developed countries – and by Eugene Black, President of the World Bank, who argued that the provision of resources at below market rates would lead to a misallocation of resources. On the other side, the need for substantial flows of concessional finance had the backing of several UN reports as well as by many developing countries (Bhouraskar 2007). In 1957 a compromise proposal was agreed. This was for a very much smaller fund with purposes limited to providing resources for intensive

surveys of resources, establishing training institutes in public administration, statistics, and technology; and establishing agricultural and industrial and productivity centers.

Ironically—and barely two years later—the U.S. proposed the creation of IDA, the International Development Association, within the World Bank Group. This would provide—and has now provided for more than fifty years—concessional loans to developing countries of exactly the sort proposed within the UN and so strongly opposed by the President of the World Bank. But this time IDA would be administered by the Bank and the main donors would fund it. This became the first of many occasions when the Bretton Woods Institutions took over ideas from the UN which initially they had strongly opposed.

The Prebisch-Singer thesis

The UN, from its first decade, has emphasized problems arising from the unequal economic relationships between poorer and richer countries and called for global and national action to offset the imbalances and inequalities which these create. Ideologically and theoretically taking

account of this asymmetry has marked an almost continuous difference underlying the economic work and policies proposed by the UN and by the Bretton Woods Institutions.

The Prebisch-Singer thesis—that the terms of trade between primary products and manufactures have been subject to a long-term downward trend—was one of the first theoretical arguments to explain these asymmetries. Hans W Singer, one of the early economists of the UN and Raul Prebisch, a senior and well-established Argentinean economist, working independently, formulated the thesis almost simultaneously, both drawing on empirical material. Singer in New York had been studying the long term terms of trade between primary products and manufactures, presenting his results in an internal UN document, together with a submission to the *American Economic Review* entitled “The Distribution of Gains between Investing and Borrowing Countries”, published in 1950. Prebisch, employed as a consultant to the UN Commission of Latin America—before becoming Executive Director—in 1950 published *The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems* (Toye and Toye 2004).

The Prebisch-Singer thesis has been controversial from the beginning. Initially, the thesis tended to be rejected, especially because primary product prices rose sharply shortly after publication as a result of the 1950–53 Korean War. These reversals in the long-run trend cast doubt upon

whether there was any trend at all. But by the end of the twentieth century, after fifty years of ever more sophisticated research, the professional consensus was to confirm the thesis (Sapsford and Chen 1998).

Unequal relations between richer and poorer countries—and between stronger and weaker countries—have retained a strong influence over thinking in the UN since 1945. Such asymmetries are found not only in trade, but in flows of capital, investment, technology, information, aid relationships, and in the operations of transnational corporations. The asymmetries are especially emphasized by poorer countries—just as they are still often dismissed or under-emphasized by richer countries. The differences in view have influenced the ideologies and professional work of the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions, especially because of the clear differences in representation and voting arrangements between them. Moreover, because of the broader mandates and non-economic concerns of many UN institutions, extending far beyond the economic focus of the Bretton Woods Institutions, the UN has always been more open to multi-disciplinary analyses of development issues, setting itself apart from neo-liberal economic analyses which have dominated the International Financial Institutions. This is an important part of the explanation as to why the UN and the Bretton Woods have often differed on the key elements of development and the priorities and strategies to which they often lead.

The 1960s and the Development Decade

In 1961, President Kennedy proposed in the UN General Assembly (GA) that the 1960s become a Development Decade. The GA soon passed a resolution calling for action to lessen the gap between developed and under developed countries, to speed up the process of modernization, and to release the majority of mankind from poverty.

The resolution called for a wide range of development actions: industrialization; agricultural development; the elimination of illiteracy, hunger and disease; the promotion of education and national planning to bring all of this together. Internationally, there would need to be an increase in the flow of public and private capital to developing countries as well as of their exports.

Interestingly, the resolution also added that resources released from disarmament should be used for the purpose of economic and social development.

The GA targeted GNP growth at a rate of five percent per annum, an estimate emerging from the UN secretariat. There was caution, however. Fearing that this rate was too ambitious, the resolution simply called for a rate of five percent *to be attained by 1970*, the last year of the

development decade. Contrary to expectations, however, this UN goal was considerably exceeded. Developing countries achieved an average of 5.5 percent growth *over the decade from 1961–70* and fifty individual countries, accounting for about half the population of developing countries at the time, reached or exceeded the five percent target.

The Development Decade served as a coordinating mechanism within the UN, at least to some extent. Each of the UN specialized agencies and funds contributed their own plans and programs toward the decade which were brought together in what became known as the blue book, *The Development Decade: Proposals for Action* (UN 1962).

Excluding the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), some fifty quantitative development goals with time-bound targets have been adopted by the UN since the 1960s. The goals have covered rates of economic growth, changes in the structure of developing country economies, amounts of development aid, and in the 1970s a goal for financial transfers from developed to developing countries. A number of basic human goals have also been adopted—from the expansion of primary, secondary and tertiary level education (which were the first UN goals adopted in 1960 at three regional conferences organized by UNESCO), to a range of other key goals for the reduction of infant and child mortality and under-nutrition of children, the

expansion of primary health care, access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and the elimination or reduction of key diseases (Jolly et al. 2004: 259-267). The most dramatic of all the goals was the one set in 1966 for the eradication of smallpox. Its achievement eleven years later has saved millions of lives and billions of dollars, which would otherwise have had to be spent each year on control and treatment. None of the other goals have been fully achieved—though impressive achievements have been recorded in the 99 percent reduction of polio cases, the 74 percent reduction of deaths from measles, and the substantial falls in mortality and morbidity from other communicable diseases. Only with a few goals has performance fallen consistently and a long way behind the targets: accelerated reduction of literacy, the reduction of maternal mortality, and the 0.7 percent goal for the transfer of developed country GNP as aid to developing countries (which has only been met by five developed countries).

This assessment is not to suggest that there has always been a close and direct link between the UN goals and country performance. Many factors have been at work and usually the influence of the goals set by the UN was only one. Nonetheless, this UN record deserves underlining, all the more so when set alongside two related considerations. First, until the MDGs, the Bretton Woods Institutions never formally accepted any of the UN goals. Secondly, the achievement of UN goals is arguably much better than the record of achievement of the almost 500 structural

adjustment programs formulated by the Bretton Woods Institutions over the 1980s and 1990s (Vreeland 2007: 73–111). Although structural adjustment was politically and economically more challenging to governments than pursuit of the UN goals, adjustment policies received many more billions of dollars of direct support from the IMF and the World Bank than was even given in support to the UN goals. Secondly, the Bretton Woods Institutions never formally accepted any of the UN goals, until the MDGs. International support for the MDGs today is all the more impressive for this reason.

The 1970s and after

Over much of the 1970s, there was some important refocusing of international development priorities. The ILO mounted a highly influential set of in-depth country employment missions assessing the situation in specific countries—Colombia, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia, and others. The Kenya report proved to be the most influential recognizing for the first time in an international document the positive roles of the informal sector. The report also proposed “Redistribution from Growth” as a strategy which over time could accelerate poverty reduction by channeling increments from growth into additional investments for the poorest in the form of education, health, and productivity-raising investments for the rural and peri-urban populations

(ILO 1972). These ideas began to permeate the UN system, focused in 1976 in the ILO's strategy of Basic Needs (ILO 1976). Basic Needs also received support from most of the donors and was formally endorsed by DAC, the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD.

Meanwhile, the World Bank in 1968 had appointed a new President, Robert McNamara, the former US Secretary of Defense, and was developing a new dynamism. McNamara soon became a powerful advocate for poverty reduction within the Bank and this lasted until 1981, when his term came to an end. In spite of McNamara's early reputation for being the paragon of modern management, the Bank's poverty focus died almost as soon as McNamara had left. According to the World Bank's own history, many Bank staff members referred to poverty reduction as the "favorite toy" of McNamara and Mahbub ul Haq, his close advisor. Even Hollis Chenery, the World Bank's distinguished Chief economist, initially resisted "the swing toward poverty lending seeing the notion of target groups as 'a boy scouts approach.'" Ernie Stern, the main power behind the throne of the Bank from the 1960s to 1990s, is quoted in his farewell speech as saying that he never really believed in poverty reduction as a goal. His view, he said was "that growth is the only solution to the reduction of poverty and inequalities" (Kapur, Lewis and Webb 1997: 240, 372).

Over the 1970s, UN made two major contributions to enlarging the world's development agenda. The first was through a series of high level global conferences which the UN organized: in 1972 on environment in Stockholm; in 1974 on world food problems in Rome and on population in Bucharest; in 1975 on women in Mexico City; in 1976 on urban problems and human settlements at the Habitat conference in Vancouver, and on employment in Geneva; and in 1979 on science and technology in Vienna (Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss 2001: 82-87). Each of these conferences added ideas, analyses, and a plethora of policy recommendations for both national and international action. The impact of such conferences is always difficult to assess—but there is little doubt that most of them expanded horizons and led to substantive changes of policy and actions over the long term.

The second initiative to expand the development agenda was without doubt less successful. Over the 1970s, the world economic situation experienced major disruptions. In 1971, the US abandoned the Bretton Woods agreement, suspending the fixed rate exchange of the dollar for gold. Two years later, oil prices soared—by three and a half times over 1973/4—in part, but only in part, the result of oil producing countries forming OPEC, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. Soaring oil prices transferred a bonanza of oil revenues to OPEC countries—some two percent of world GNP, three quarters of which came from developed countries, and

a quarter from developing countries without oil. For a short while, many developing countries and their supporters thought this might open the way to a New International Economic Order (NIEO). A Special Session of the General Assembly was held on this theme in the UN in New York in 1974, followed by at least a year of negotiations on the establishment of NIEO and a Programme of Action for the Reform of International Economic Relations. Initially there were hopes of movement and concessions—especially because the economies of developed countries had been thrown on the back foot by the size and impact of the oil price increases (GNP of the developed countries fell in 1974, after almost three decades of steady increases). But gradually it became clear that the OPEC countries were being persuaded to invest their bounty in developed country banks, in a process known as recycling the petro-dollars. The developed countries then indicated that there was little point in continuing even to talk and negotiations collapsed.

The long-run consequences for developing countries were serious—and perhaps also for developed countries. The vision of moving some way toward new measures of global economic management was lost—and with it, opportunities for ensuring global stability, steadier economic growth, more support for poorer developing countries and moves toward environmental protection. Instead, the OPEC countries became locked into financial and economic relationships with the industrial countries, which has limited their subsequent development,

increased global inequalities and added to militarization in the Middle East. Many of the largest OPEC economies are little richer if at all compared to what they were some 30 years ago, while their human development indices also collectively lag the most behind per capita incomes. And developed countries, faced in the twenty-first century with the need to adjust and rebalance their economies in relation to the growing strength of China, India, Brazil and other emerging economies, are having to rely upon global institutions which are still weak in the context of the new challenges of globalization. Global problems require global solutions¹—yet the chance of reform to strengthen global institutions and make them up to this task was missed in the 1970s, and several times since.

The 1980s and 1990s

The next two decades marked the apogee of neo-liberalism inaugurated by the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States and Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the UK. The U.S. and the UK led the way with national policies which inevitably were less pure than their ideologies proclaimed. But internationally there was a distinct sharpening in the application of neo-liberal ideology in the operations of the World Bank and the IMF. This spread to most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, usually as part of

conditions for obtaining structural adjustment loans from these institutions. The loans were needed to help pay interest on the high debts which had accumulated by the early 1980s. The loans had been built up in large part as a consequence of the soaring oil prices of 1973/4 and further increases in 1979 which had caused “the NOPECs” —the developing countries without oil—to pay much higher prices for their oil imports.

Combined with other factors, structural adjustment policies led to the 1980s becoming a lost decade for development in much of Latin America and most of sub-Saharan Africa—and in many countries this continued into the 1990s. Per capita income in Latin America, which had grown from 1960 to 1980 by eighty percent, then grew by only a miserable nine percent over the twenty years to 2000. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the results were even worse: over 1960-1980, per capita income increased by 36 percent; from 1980–2000, per capita income actually fell by fifteen percent (Weisbrot, Naiman, and Kim 2001). The result was that by 1996, no less than fifty-seven developing countries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa had lower per capita incomes than they had two or three decades earlier (UNDP 1996: 3).

This was not the case for most of Asia, which was developing in dramatic contrast. In 1978, Deng Xiao Peng introduced reforms into China, which step-by-step launched this vast country on

an accelerated route of economic growth. China's per-capita income more than doubled over the 1980s - doubled again by 2000 and yet again by 2011. Less spectacularly and beginning a decade later (in 1991), India adopted reforms which also increased substantially its economic growth rates—not quite to the same high rate as China but to rates significantly faster than India had achieved since independence. Smaller Asian countries also did well. Korea and Taiwan had already pioneered a fast growth development strategy in the 1950s and 1960s which continued. Gradually in the late 1980s and 1990s, many other countries of Asia followed suit, combining strong government economic leadership with selective market reforms.

In the UN, international debate over structural adjustment began in the early years of the decade—with ECA, UNICEF and ILO being increasingly outspoken. However, ILO was soon threatened by U.S. and other developed country opposition, which muted its more public opposition. But the ECA and UNICEF continued, criticizing the narrowness of adjustment policies, the negative impact on growth and the growing evidence of the human costs of cuts and setbacks. Both organizations presented alternatives. ECA put forward AAF-SAP, the *African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation*, endorsed by African Ministers of Planning and Finance (Adedeji 2004: 233-306). UNICEF in 1985 presented *Adjustment with a Human Face*, first as a lecture to SID and

later in a well-documented study (Cornia, Jolly and Stewart 1987), arguing strongly for incorporating support for the essential needs of children and other vulnerable groups in the making of adjustment policies. UNICEF presented the case based on human need but it also argued that if the purpose of adjustment was to rebuild an economy, it was illogical to cut back on health, education, nutrition and other needs of children which were among the most important forms of human investment required for sustained development.

In the 1990s, more general changes began which broadened and altered the development agenda, often again with the UN in the lead. First, were a series of summits, a revisiting of the themes of the high level global meetings of the 1970s, but this time raising the ante by holding the event at head of state level. The first of these was the World Summit for Children. Perhaps surprisingly, this was not a UN meeting as such, though held in the General Assembly and in the ECOSOC chamber in New York. At the time, UN Protocol had ruled that UN meetings had to be open to representatives at whatever level the government chose to send, and thus could not be specified as a Summit meeting. However, once seventy-one heads of State had attended the World Summit for Children, protocol was revised and the gates of UN competition were opened. Thus 108 heads of State came to the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, 117 for the World Summit for

Social Development in Copenhagen in 1994. By the time of the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000, 147 heads of State attended.

Secondly, the development agenda achieved more worldwide public attention. Summit attendance by heads of state guaranteed high profile notice in the media. Equally important, the summits and global conferences of the 1990s attracted participation from a growing number of non-government groups which further increased international awareness and influence. By 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio 2,400 representatives of NGOs took part, along with 17,000 others who joined in special activities organized by the NGOs. By the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, there were 5,100 representatives of 2,100 NGOs and 30,000 other individuals. Such large-scale participation of NGOs ensured follow-up, both by the direct involvement of so many individuals and by creating lobby groups and alliances for maintaining pressure on governments to implement the agreements to which they had signed.

Third, these summits and global conferences broadened the development agenda, updating the objectives and enlarging and deepening the issues formulated in the global conferences of the 1970s. There was usually also some sharpening of the commitments and goals agreed. These commitments covered the needs of children (New York, 1990), the environment—climate

change, biodiversity, desertification and deforestation (Rio 1992), population and development (Cairo, 1994), social development (Copenhagen 1994) women and gender (Beijing 1995), human settlements (Istanbul 1996), and food security (Rome 1996).

Fourth, OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, became seriously engaged. Initially encouraged by Japan, OECD pressed for the formulation of goals for the twenty-first century. This led to the preparation and then the adoption of a key document: *Shaping the 21st Century: the Contribution of Development Cooperation* (OECD 1996). This document assessed progress in a number of key areas over the 1980s and 1990s, as well as improving the contribution and focus of development assistance. The document then specified key goals to be achieved by 2015—in reducing poverty and making progress in primary education, gender equality, basic health care and family planning and in empowering women. Their significance is not that they were a forerunner of the MDGs—which in many cases had grown out of earlier UN conferences—but that by being put forward by OECD they were then taken seriously by the World Bank and the IMF and most donors. Indeed, the OECD document led to a new level of specific collaboration between the World Bank and the UN in the pursuit of goals, an unprecedented step which had eluded efforts of UN-Bretton Woods collaboration for more than four decades.

Fifth, and perhaps most important of all, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 opened the way for incorporating human rights into development. The Vienna Conference agreed long-awaited institutional changes for UN leadership and follow-up in support of the UN's many declarations and conventions of human rights. The post of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was agreed and an office established—some forty-seven years after the need for such a position had been identified by Rene Cassin, a French intellectual with long experience within the League of Nations (Jolly, Emmerij and Weiss 2009: 53). Partly because of this but also because women and gender, children, and other rights issues had become a growing focus for mobilization and action over the previous two decades, human rights entered the development agenda clearly and strongly over the 1990s. A “rights based approach to development” was adopted by many UN agencies and by a number of governments.

Human Development

Outside the conferences, the 1990s became a creative period for various parts of the UN. The UNDP launched the Human Development Report which put forth an alternative paradigm on the development agenda. Human Development was the joint creation of a distinguished economist,

Mahbub ul Haq, and a Nobel Prize winning economist-philosopher, Amartya Sen. The human development paradigm put people as the central focus of development, supporting this approach with a robust methodology and a sophisticated underlying philosophy. Human development was defined as an enlargement of human choices and a strengthening of human capabilities. This definition built on the basic needs approach of the 1970s but was less directive in defining the specifics of capabilities which needed to be strengthened and even less directive in defining human choices which should be broadened. These advantages stimulated human development as a field for active engagement and research. Some 750 National Human Development Reports have been produced in states, countries or regions, often focusing on particular themes such as rural development, women, democracy, or human security.

Equally important, the Human Development Report has continued as an annual publication with world-wide outreach, and with roughly a hundred thousand copies published each year in several languages. The second decade of the HDR produced what has been called the second generation of human development thinking, focused on the new technologies, deepening democracy, cultural liberty (Fukuda Parr 2008: 223–54).

The paradigm of human development has been of fundamental significance for the UN itself, though its potential has yet to be fully realized. Human development represents a comprehensive, philosophically robust paradigm for development, a positive alternative to the neo-liberal paradigm which has ruled over the mainstream for most of the post-war world, with increasing dominance since the 1980s. Although the UN has provided fairly continuous criticism of neo-liberal policies in action, and often some critique of the neo-liberal paradigm itself, it was only with human development that the UN has been able to offer a serious, positive, comprehensive and credible alternative.

Second, the human development alternative is multi-disciplinary, thus matching the professional multi-disciplinarity of the UN itself. Unlike the Bretton Woods Institutions, the UN engages with many dimensions of development through the diversity of institutions—its specialized agencies like WHO, FAO, UNESCO and ILO as well as its funds like UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, IFAD and most recently UN Women. Most of these bodies employ a few economists but many more professionals from other disciplines such as public health and epidemiology, agriculture, sociology, and anthropology. Simply to list this range of professionals indicates why so many of the UN agencies have often found the neo-liberal policies and orthodox economic development approaches of the World Bank and the IMF narrow

and misguided. Yet until the Human Development Report, there was no paradigm with sufficient generality and flexibility to provide an all-embracing frame within which these other professions and UN agencies could find a place.

Third, the human development paradigm embraces all the core values of the UN itself: human rights, gender equality, and non-discrimination in all areas, sustainability and equity between generations, multi-cultural sensitivity, and human security. Although each of these was recognized in the first few years and has been the topic of more detailed analysis in subsequent HD Reports, the full use of the paradigm in policy making has been overwhelmingly the exception rather than the rule.

Women and the girl child

Human Development of course, links closely with advances for women, gender equality, and the efforts to end gender discrimination. Following the First World Conference on Women in 1975 and the adoption a year later of the CEDAW, the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, women mobilized worldwide for their rights. The Conference itself had greatly stimulated this process when participants from many countries realized they

were not alone but part of a global movement with friends and colleagues, activists and allies around the world. The later UN World Conferences in Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing increased the momentum, as did the national, regional and international focus on CEDAW. Notwithstanding opposition, open and behind the scenes, remarkable progress has been made.

Within the UN, however, progress toward gender equality was mixed and slow. UNIFEM supported activities and programs at country level—and organized support for activist groups often when others were reluctant. UNDP’s HDR focused its 1995 report on women and gender, with the slogan that “unless development was engendered it was endangered” (UNDP 1995). In a heroically brave calculation, a figure was put together for the dollar value of all women’s work, inside and outside the formal labor force, probably the first time such a guesstimate was ever made at global level. The report calculated that if all contributions from labor in the world were included, from work outside the labor force as well as within, unremunerated and remunerated, from women and from men, the total would be approximately 70 percent higher than existing estimates of global economic output. The estimate was inevitably something of a back-of-the-envelope guesstimate although with some empirical input from time-use studies in fourteen industrial, nine developing and eight countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

These studies showed that women worked longer hours in total than men-and carried 53 percent of the total burden of work in developing countries and 51 percent in developed countries.

An earlier conceptual advance was the focus on “the girl child” by UNICEF. This concept had first been developed by asking what should be the proper role of UNICEF, a child focused agency, in working for gender equality. The answer was to focus on the “girl child” and the ending of discrimination against children and women over the whole of the life cycle (Black 1996: 183–214). This approach recognized that ending the results of discrimination could only be achieved over several generations, by gradually eliminating discrimination at every stage of a female life. A non-discriminatory approach would need to be maintained through childhood and education, puberty and adolescence through to young womanhood, choosing a partner, marriage, having children, and pregnancy and giving birth. In virtually every country at present, girls and women are set back by various forms of discrimination at one or other of these stages of life. Because the results of this became embedded in women physically, psychologically and socially, it may take up to three generations before the results of discrimination are fully “washed out”. Only then can a society look forward to all girls having equal opportunities to grow up and be nurtured without systemic discrimination. The development and application of this concept was a

major step forward intellectually and operationally in constructing a non-discriminatory agenda for development.

The 2000s

The Millennium Summit, like the entry into the millennium itself, was a brief moment of hope and expectation. More than 150 heads of state or government assembled at the UN in New York, the largest number ever assembled in one place before. In total, 189 countries participated, every UN member state. They endorsed the Secretary-General's bold and broad ranging document, which began with echoes of the Charter—“We the Peoples...”—and proceeded to set out the challenges likely to face the United Nations in the twenty-first century (Annan 2000). The Summit ended by endorsing the Millennium Declaration (UN: GA A/55/L.2), with eight chapters of commitments to future UN action: Values and principles; Peace, security and disarmament; Development and poverty eradication; Protecting our common environment; Human Rights, Democracy and Good Government; Protecting the vulnerable; Meeting the special needs of Africa; and Strengthening the UN.

In each of these areas, various initiatives were subsequently taken, usually with more promise than fulfillment, though not without some impact. In relation to development, the Millennium Development Goals, the MDGs, have been the most visible, kept on the global agenda by aid donors and other governments, backed up by sustained pressure from many international NGOs. Often less visible in the media, the UN remains at or near the center in the other areas of follow up, especially with respect to international negotiation, agenda setting, monitoring and periodic reporting. The typical and too frequent weaknesses in this process are usually the result of governments clinging to national sovereignty as the over-ride to their commitments to stronger global governance (Weiss 2009).

Human security

In terms of new thinking for development, human security has been an area of important advance, after the Millennium Declaration. Much of this grew out of the paradigm for human development. It was the 1994 HDR which first set out the concept of human security as follows:

For too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states. For too long, security has equated with threats to a country's borders. For

too long, nations have sought arms to protect their security For most people today, a feeling of insecurity rises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, security from crime—these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world (UNDP 1994: 22).

The 1999 Human Development Report on Globalization added financial security and food security. It argued that stronger regional and global governance is needed, if the insecurities in any of these areas are not to spread and multiply from country to country. Diseases do not need passports to travel – as seen with HIV/AIDS and with Avian bird flu—as well as with financial panics, financial instabilities, and flows of money at the touch of a computer button or with rumors of a downgrade in a country's rating.

Once the concept of human security was launched in 1994, the idea proved powerful, encouraged perhaps by the initial euphoria of the post-Cold War era. In 2003, a Commission was created headed by Amartya Sen and Sadako Ogata, the former head of the UNHCR. Their report, *Human Security Now* (UN 2003), elaborated the concept and analyzed how it could be applied, nationally and internationally.

In 2004, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, established a high level panel on *Threats, Challenges and Change* (UN 2004b). The panel identified clusters of major threats: Economic and social threats, including poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation; Inter-state conflict; Internal conflict, including civil war and genocide; Weapons of mass destruction; Terrorism; and finally Transnational organized crime. The panel made three important points about confronting these threats: prevention is always better and cheaper than cure, all the threats need collective not only unilateral action, and the United Nations has a key role in supporting all of these actions but to do so effectively the UN also needs strengthening.

A year later, Kofi Annan himself issued his own proposals for taking these ideas forward. He called his document, *In Larger Freedom—towards development, security and human rights for all*. This provided important guidelines for action (Annan 2005). Following these international initiatives were a number of country level actions. Almost twenty National Human Security Reports have been prepared, investigating what a human security approach might involve in such diverse situations as Kenya and Mozambique, East Timor and the Solomon Islands, Palestine and the Arab Region, Thailand and Afghanistan. Of these, the most innovative was the report on Latvia, which showed how human security could be made operational at country level. It did

this by mounting a sample survey of how individuals experienced a diversity of some thirty types of insecurities in their lives and how they ranked them in terms of seriousness. The second step was to explore the actions required to diminish these insecurities, both the objective risks and the influences on subjective feelings of risk. Together these identified actions for government, communities and non-government groups.

A related but separate development within the UN was the formulation of the doctrine of R2P—the Responsibility to Protect and the Right to Intervene. Albeit with intense controversy along the way, the General Assembly adopted a resolution in 2005, which marked a major step forward in defining state obligations and, when these fail, recognizing the need for international action. The doctrine for the first time in the UN sets limits on national sovereignty. These limits are defined by obligations of the state and its rulers to protect the peoples over which they rule. In the case of egregious failures of these obligations—for instance, genocide or inadequate reactions to the consequences of natural disasters affecting the mass of the population—the international community has a recognized right to intervene with Security Council approval.

UN Ideas that Changed the World – an overview

The above account highlights how the UN has been a pioneer in the area of economic and social development over the years since its founding. Much of UN's leadership has been in the creation, promotion and application of ideas. Indeed, the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP), a recently completed ten year venture, concluded that ideas were among the UN's most important contributions.

The summary volume of the UNIHP identified nine UN ideas whose impact had "changed the world." None of the ideas was an abstract conception, let alone a static notion. Each idea related to action and evolved over time, being elaborated and applied in different ways and in different contexts and, in the process, usually gained focus in relation to implementation. The nine ideas are as follows (Jolly, Emmerij and Weiss 2009):

Human Rights and Norms

1. Human Rights for All
2. Gender Equality

Economic and Social Strategies and Approaches

3. Development Goals

4. Fairer International Economic Relations
5. Development Strategies
6. Social Development

Integrated and Sustainable Perspectives

7. Environmental Sustainability
8. Peace and Human Security
9. Human Development

It was not suggested that the UN had originated all or any of these ideas. Indeed, few big ideas of economic and social consequence arise as some independently-inspired, “light-bulb moment” and the same has been true of the UN’s major contributions. Ideas such as human rights, preventive diplomacy, or environmental sustainability have multiple sources of creation and inspiration stretching back years or centuries. This long process of adaptation and change is helped on—and sometimes obstructed—by social forces, groups and occasionally by individuals.

The UNIHP identified four main ways in which UN ideas had gained traction and impact (Jolly, Emmerij and Weiss 2009: 41–47):

- By changing the ways issues were perceived and the language used to describe them.
- By framing agendas for action.
- By changing the ways that key groups perceived their interests, thus altering the balance of forces pressing for support and adoption of an idea (or resisting it).
- By becoming embedded in an institution or institutions which were then given responsibility for carrying the idea forward and becoming a focus for monitoring and accountability.

The UNIHP argued that explaining the process of developing, promoting or applying UN ideas in economic and social development involved recognition that there were three UNs at work rather than one. The first is the formal UN of government representatives; the second is the UN of staff members, often in positions of leadership and initiative, more than often the case of civil servants in national governments; and there is a third UN of experts, advisers, commission members and NGOs, not formally part of the organization but in fact closely involved and influential. In the creation and promotion of ideas, the UNIHP argued that usually the second and third played the crucial role.

Although the UN system has played a particular and unique role for each of the ideas, there have been common elements—giving them focus and legitimacy, showing their relevance to the contemporary world, shaping their international dimensions, promoting them widely, and often applying them in the UN’s own programs. In fulfilling these unique and diverse roles, the UN’s support for these ideas has “changed the world”, as the UN Intellectual History argued.

This claim can be illustrated clearly in relation to the first of the ideas—Human Rights, a norm and vision with a long history. Yet in its Charter and by the Universal Declaration of 1948, the United Nations established the bold notion that human rights were universal and applied to everyone in the contemporary world, thereby bringing a new and, for the time, extraordinary and immediate global legitimacy to these long-standing values. To fully appreciate this, one must recall the timing: the Charter and the Universal Declaration were each produced when imperial rule was still widespread, many countries were still colonies far from independence, and even in the United States many blacks did not have the vote. The contrast between these realities and the universality of the Declaration show how far ahead of the curve of history was the UN at the time (Normand and Zaidi 2008). And in the years following, UN pioneering in the area of human rights was reinforced by literally hundreds of more specific human rights treaties, creating a universal human rights legal system which embraces every child, woman, or man in

the world.² These rights have gained more operational influence and traction over the years, perhaps especially since the creation in 1993 of the post and office of the UN High Commissioner.

The UN's activities and international leadership relating to women, gender and CEDAW have been different—but equally far reaching, notwithstanding the mixed record of performance within the UN itself. As elaborated earlier in this chapter, the World Conferences on Women served as catalysts for world-wide mobilization of women and others around the newly agreed agendas. None of these would have reached the same impact without the legitimacy and capacity of the UN to organize on a global scale.

The next four ideas relate more directly to what is generally considered to be part of “the development agenda” —goals, fairer economic relations, development strategy, and social priorities. Here, the UN's contribution has been both as an international pioneer of thinking or practice and as a critic of mainstream development thinking, especially Bretton Woods and donor-driven orthodoxy. UN development ideas have often been at variance with and opposed by neo-liberal, free-trade or free-market economists, and by the World Bank and IMF. The UN's fifty goals for development, for example, were often criticized for being top-down and dirigiste,

for displacing market forces or for being little more than blue sky dreams. Similarly, the UN's analysis of unequal trade and other international economic relationships as set out in numerous reports of ECLAC, ECA, and UNCTAD have frequently been criticized by academic economists, donors, and by the Bretton Woods Institutions. And if not criticized, they were—and often still are—dismissed as “predictable in their conclusions” or simply ignored.

This is not the place for a detailed weighing of the various merits of these many arguments, which reflect economic and political ideology as well as the differences in the underlying voting structure and government influences between the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions. Here we make only one point—which is that over the years both sets of institutions have moved somewhat closer together, though more often with the World Bank (and to a lesser extent the IMF) moving more toward the UN on economic matters than vice versa. For instance, the UN took the lead in criticizing the narrow orthodoxy of adjustment policies in the 1980s. Later and gradually the Bretton Woods Institutions often moved to accept the criticisms and adapt to the UN's views, just as it had the proposals for concessional loans in the 1950s and did in the 1990s in accepting what broadly became the MDGs. Nonetheless, fairer trade and unequal economic relations (as opposed to free trade and free markets) remain a defining point of difference between the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions.

The final three ideas all show the UN's role and leadership in broadening development perspectives: environment and sustainability; peace, conflict prevention, and preventive diplomacy; and on an integrated view of human development. In all these areas, the development agenda has been enormously broadened. In the case of environment and sustainability, the UN's first initiatives were in the 1970s; organizing with strong Swedish support the Stockholm conference. This launched a series of international activities and initiatives, creating UNEP, setting up the Brundtland Commission in the 1980s, holding the Earth Summit in the 1992—and supporting all these with more detailed activities like creating the IPCC, the International Panel on Climate Change. Peace, Preventive Diplomacy and Human Security illustrate how increasingly these issues have entered the development agenda, with the UN elaborating ideas and mechanisms. The importance of the Human Development paradigm as an integrating framework for the whole of development has already been dealt with earlier in the chapter.

Conclusions

Over its life, the UN has made many contributions to ideas and thinking about development. Indeed, ideas may have been the most important contribution of the UN to development.

In pioneering and promoting new ideas in development, the UN has often been ahead of the curve and ahead of the Bretton Woods Institutions, even though the latter have received most financial support and attention from donor governments. The historical record shows that the UN has frequently led the way in formulating ideas and approaches for development which later—and often much later—the Bretton Woods Institutions have adopted.

Since the 1990s, there have been some actions to close the gaps between the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions, much relating to shared efforts in pursuit of the MDGs. Nonetheless, the relationships between these institutions, originally envisaged to be unified parts of international economic management, remains too far apart for efficiency and effectiveness. Stronger relationships should recognize the past contributions from both sides, but in particular recognizing the many ways UN has contributed positively to development understanding and expertise.

The increasing economic power and political importance of China, India, and other fast growing, emerging countries present new opportunities as well as new challenges for improving global economic governance. The UN's ideas on development, its record in elaborating these ideas with legitimacy and support underlines the need for ensuring that the UN has a stronger and more integral part in global governance for the future.

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Endnotes

¹ From the Stiglitz Commission, set up by the President of the General Assembly and which issued in 2009 its *Report of the Commission of Experts of the President of the UN General Assembly on Reforms of the International Monetary and Financial System*. This is only the latest of numerous reports from outside the UN and within which have set forth proposals for more effective management of the world economic system. Two of the most noteworthy in the years following the collapse of the NIEO negotiations include: *North-South: a Programme of Survival*, the report of the Brandt Commission in 1980 and *Our Global Neighbourhood*, the Report of the Commission on Global Governance in 1995, both of which set out recommendations for strengthening global economic management.

² For an overview, see www.bayefsky.com, The United Nations Human Rights Treaties.