



## Origins of the United Nations Intellectual History Project

Many view the United Nations as a rigid bureaucracy without sparkle, wit, or creativity. The general public—stimulated by the mass media—often sees a traveling circus, a talk-shop, and a paper-pushing enterprise. On and off there are tales of corruption. Our project shows that this is a very uneven view of the world organization. How would we judge a story about Boeing or Airbus that only concentrates on its employees globe-trotting, discussing the problems of the day, or sending e-mails to one another without mentioning the firm's longer-term results, the quality of its products, and its plans for the future? In other words, a story of an enterprise is incomplete and misleading without a discussion of its goals and achievements, including its intellectual leadership.

Amazingly, such an intellectual history did not exist for the United Nations. Existing historical work mostly concentrated on the UN's political and security side, not its activities in economic and social development. Our original purpose was to complete the record in this area. Ideas are at least as important for this area as for international peace and security. However, because of the relationships between development, security, and human rights, our United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) has been broadened to embrace the political and security side, and three of our later volumes have dealt with human security, preventive diplomacy, and global governance.

In 1999, we embarked as an independent endeavor. We benefited from the confidence and financial support of both eight governments and five foundations that, like us, could not believe that this history had not yet been written (see the box on page 4). We structured UNIHP as a diptych, or a painting with two panels. The first consists of a series of sixteen books while the second panel is concerned with oral history and offers a volume with excerpts from the oral histories as well as the complete transcripts. Each of these is sketched below.

### Eleven Topical Volumes

As the titles of the books in the UNIHP series make clear, we opted for a thematic approach,

asking what ideas and conclusions for policy have been contributed by the world organization over the sixty-five years of its existence. Eleven subjects were selected that each led to a book in the series at Indiana University Press. These are listed in the box below.

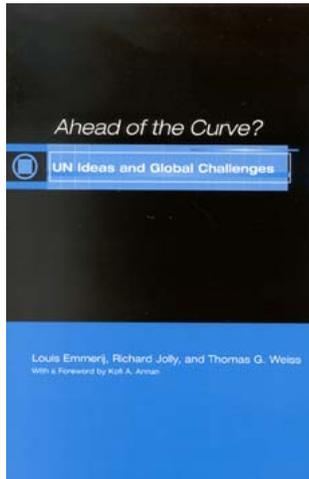
#### BOOKS BY TOPIC

1. Michael Ward, *Quantifying the World: UN Ideas and Statistics* (2004).
2. Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai, and Frédéric Lapeyre, *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (2004).
3. John Toye and Richard Toye, *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance, and Development* (2004).
4. Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (2005).
5. S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong, *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History* (2006).
6. Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (2008).
7. Bertrand G. Ramcharan, *Preventive Diplomacy at the UN* (2008).
8. Tagi Sagafi-nejad, in collaboration with John Dunning, *The UN and Transnational Corporations: From Code of Conduct to Global Compact* (2008).
9. Olav Stokke, *The UN and Development: From Aid to Cooperation* (2009).
10. Ramesh Thakur and Thomas G. Weiss, *The UN and Global Governance: An Unfinished Journey* (2009).
11. Nico Schrijver, *The UN and the Global Commons: Development without Destruction* (2010).



## Six Overarching Volumes

Another five volumes are different. The first book was by the three co-directors of the Project: Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G.



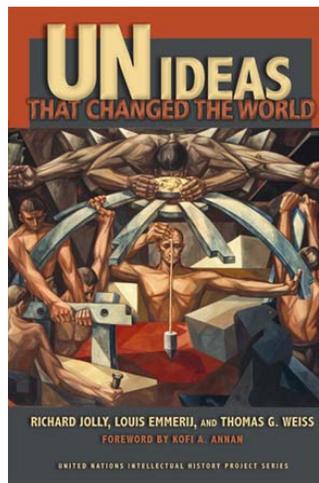
Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (2001, also available in French, German, and Arabic). This is a synthesis *avant la lettre*, or our first effort to spell out the propositions that have guided this effort. The second book was edited by Yves Berthelot, *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional*

*Commissions* (2004, selected chapters available in Russian and Spanish), which is a combination of institutional and intellectual history. It covers each of the UN's regional economic commissions (with contributions from Adebayo Adedeji, Yves Berthelot, Blandine Destremau, Paul Rayment, Gert Rosenthal, and Leelananda de Silva) and traces for each of the most significant policy ideas that emerged since their establishment.

A third volume by Weiss, Emmerij, and Jolly joined by Tatiana Carayannis was *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (2005), which contains the most compelling extracts of the oral history component of the project. As such, it presents the main thoughts of the seventy-nine personalities whom we interviewed—who have played a role in contributing to or carrying forward ideas within the UN and occasionally suppressing them. The Complete Oral History Transcripts from *UN Voices* are available on a CD-ROM from the UNIHP secretariat housed at The Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies of The CUNY Graduate Center. A fourth book was edited by Weiss and Sam Daws, *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* (2007), which is a reference volume of the world organization containing contributions from almost fifty leading scholars and practitioners.

The fifth volume by Emmerij, Jolly, and Weiss, *The Power of UN Ideas: Lessons from the First 60 Years* (2005), was written for the UN's sixtieth anniversary and was a preview of the Project's capstone book (available on our Web site). The sixth and final volume is a synthesis of the lessons from the Project's efforts over ten years, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (2009). A consolidated index of topics treated in the volumes will be available in 2010 on the project web site, [www.unhistory.org](http://www.unhistory.org).

There is no single way to organize research, and certainly not for such an ambitious project as this one. After numerous consultations and conversations with experts, including the International Advisory Board for the Project, we took responsibility for commissioning volumes from world-class authors. All were given freedom and responsibility to organize their own digging, analyses, and presentations. For each volume, the three co-directors along with an independent team of peer reviewers commented upon the accuracy and fairness in presenting the ideas, depicting where they came from, how they were developed and disseminated within the UN system, and what happened with them.



The final texts are the responsibility of the people who authored them. Clearly had others been in the directorial driver's seat, there undoubtedly would have been different emphases and different authors. Others will build upon our series and go well beyond these fledgling footsteps. This intellectual history project is the first, not the last, installment in depicting the history of

the UN contributions to ideas.

## Oral History

The second panel of the UNIHP diptych consists of oral history. Oral history is a tricky instrument and requires careful preparation and double-checking. Memory is unreliable, and sometimes a person might consciously or unconsciously want to change or to hide certain events. Our



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interviews mostly involved two or three weeks of careful preparation, and we structured our interviews to encourage frank discussion, including questions probing reasons why the UN may have failed as well as succeeded. This has led to oral histories, which are anything but hagiography. Those interviewed (including the three of us) appear warts and all. Every story is different; each voice is unique. The complete transcripts are separate documents to be remembered as such. The recorded conversations and corrected transcripts encapsulate a story within the UN story. The structure and subtlety of language in each person's interview, including the interviewee's sense of irony and of imagery, provide a first-hand account of a personal and professional voyage through the intellectual history of the United Nations.

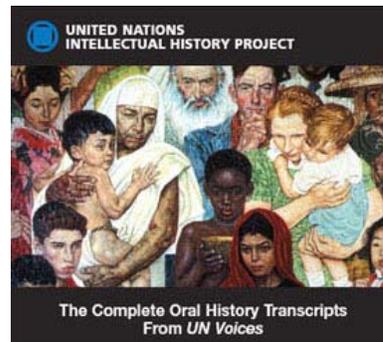
Outsiders—especially the next generation of students and scholars—rarely experience the UN first-hand but usually only through sound bites and editorials, Web sites and textbooks. The world organization thus seems more a collection of boring bureaucrats than a creative center of gravity for human and political interaction required for international problem solving.

The authors of the different volumes have used the oral histories, and selectively inserted excerpts, to do what they do best, namely to give life, color, and imagination to the experiences of individuals and to extract the meanings that each attaches to them. These complement the research; they do not substitute for it. Whether it was the idealism of the early years of the UN, the anguish of the Cold War, or the initial euphoria and then the uncertainties of the post-Cold War era, our participants recall how their perceptions of events evolved, how tumultuous experiences forced themselves into public consciousness, and how they themselves changed their perspectives through knowledge, exposure, experience, and the passage of time. Oral history, with all its difficulties, offers fascinating insights, both of the UN's personnel and of what has made the UN a creative organization.

Who are the persons whose memories form our oral history? A little over half of them served directly in the international civil service. They come from thirty-five countries, covering all of the world's regions and most of the UN's major language groups. A third of those interviewed

spent part or all of their careers in academia and a quarter or so in government service in their own countries. A fifth are women, in part a reflection of the paucity of women in positions of influence in and around the UN until recently. Most of the interviewees have advanced degrees, and about half studied economics, undoubtedly reflecting our focus on issues of economic and social development.

In terms of geographic distribution, a little over half trace their family origins from the industrialized North, and nearly half from developing countries (Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America) in the global South.



Ten percent come from the former Eastern bloc, and forty percent from the West. Nearly one quarter of them experienced the dislocation that comes

from growing up as a refugee or political exile. Many share strong recollections of their families' experiences during the Great Depression and World War II. And virtually all of them express powerfully the importance of international cooperation in improving the lot of the have-nots.

Our choice of whom to interview inevitably involved subjectivity. We chose persons in senior positions who were able to reflect on several decades of experience, but this meant missing younger persons of the next generation. We focused on the development and promotion of ideas, underplaying the contribution of many doers, not because they have not often generated important ideas, but because their contributions are less frequently written down and accessible. Others would undoubtedly have selected some of the same but other persons as well. Again, we are pleased with the results and do not apologize for our selection. The voices resonating in our oral history are inevitably a small and very incomplete sample of those found in the United Nations. We can do little more than remind readers that there are thousands of others who contribute and have contributed to the international struggle for a



better world but whose voices are consequential even if inaudible.

## Conclusion

It should be underlined that we have *not* written an institutional history of the United Nations and its component parts. For example, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or the Food and Agriculture Organization make appearances when they have contributed ideas or insights, but readers looking for in-depth treatments will have to go elsewhere. We have also been delighted that since we began our project, a number of others within and outside the UN have embarked on other histories of the organization, including institutional histories of UNESCO, the World Food Programme, and the International Labour Organization. Long before our own efforts, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank had each produced a number of volumes documenting their own experience. We welcome all such efforts and list these and others on our Web site. If, as we believe, the UN's experience since 1945 forms a vital part of the beginnings of what will extend into a longer and fuller record of global governance in the twenty-first century, the importance of the early years cannot be overstated.

Just as independent investigations must be made of an organization's management and financial performance, organizations that are in the business of global action and policy advice must be subject to independent scrutiny with regard to the existence and soundness of their ideas. An organization may become intellectually impotent without an effort to come to grips with the historical record. It may sink into routine analysis of data and studies undertaken elsewhere, unable to add its own autonomous contribution. In other words, an important contribution of any intellectual history is to identify what is needed to attract outstanding people to the organization and how to ensure they work in the conditions and with the incentives required to encourage fresh thinking and creative research and policy initiatives focused on future challenges.

Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss

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