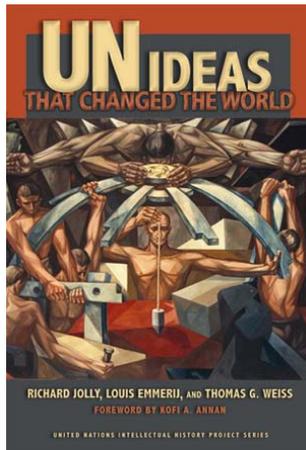




The “Third” United Nations

In addition to the 5,000 government delegates, members of the media, and other officials and staff at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945, some 1,500 participants came from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Since then the role of NGOs in the world organization has expanded, as evidenced by the 17,000 NGO participants at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio and the 32,000 at the 1995 women’s conference in Beijing, as well as the substantial increase in the number of organizations in consultative status with the UN from 41 in 1946 to 3,172 today. The important ongoing relationship between the UN and NGOs, and what is now a far more encompassing civil society, is a central theme in the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) series capstone volume, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (2009), by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss. It is also expanded in an article by Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, and Jolly, “The ‘Third’ United Nations,” first published in a 2009 article in the journal *Global Governance*.

The third UN—which includes not only NGOs, but also external experts, scholars, consultants,



independent commissions, and other individuals who regularly engage with the UN—adds a further dimension to Inis Claude’s distinction in his 1956 classic textbook, *Swords Into Plowshares*, between the first UN and the second UN. Claude distinguished the dual roles of the world organization as an intergovernmental arena and a professional secretariat. The third UN engages in advocacy, research, policy analysis, and idea dissemination, and members of the third UN are particularly well-placed to present and advocate cutting-edge ideas and policies because they are working for neither governments nor the world organization. All of the nine ideas presented in *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (see Briefing Note 4 on the

Balance Sheet) owe part of their influence to the support of the third UN and often, as with human rights or debt relief, to pressures for action from the third UN when governments were reluctant or cautious.

What is the Third UN and What Does it Do?

The boundaries of the third UN are fluid, as the interest, expertise, and engagement of members of the third UN wax and wane over time, and their interactions with the first and second UNs vary by issue. However, at the very least it is clear that the third UN is composed of individuals and organizations who are “inside-outsiders.” That is, they are not employed directly by a government or the UN secretariat, yet their work compliments that of the first and second United Nations. As outsiders, these members of the third UN are at liberty to make bold suggestions and critiques that insiders typically do not. In this respect, international civil servants are similar to the national civil servants of the governments in the first UN.

Membership in the third UN is increasingly dynamic, perhaps captured best by the image of a “revolving door” through which individuals regularly move among the three different UNs. For example, among those interviewed for UNIHP’s oral history are several persons who have had careers in all three. Before establishing his own UN-related NGO in Nigeria, Adebayo Adedeji was an academic who did research on the UN until he became a minister in the Nigerian government, after which he left to head the Economic Commission for Africa. Similarly, the late Julia Taft ended her career as the head of UNDP’s emergency assistance efforts after having headed the U.S.-based NGO consortium InterAction and also the U.S. State Department’s Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration. Likewise, Boutros Boutros-Ghali was a distinguished academic international lawyer in Egypt and then a government minister before becoming the sixth UN Secretary-General; and after leaving the world organization, he headed two NGOs in Europe.

However, in the project’s conceptual framework, the third UN does not include the



for-profit sector because the primary focus of business is not on any larger community of interests, but on financial bottom lines. Companies also have relatively little direct interaction with the first and second UNs in the context of the organization’s policy formulation and project execution. In addition, media organizations are not included despite their important role in disseminating and framing ideas because their principal purpose is to report events rather than creating or changing policy.

While NGOs comprise a crucial part of the third UN, experts play an equally vital role as a part of “knowledge networks” that create and transfer knowledge and influence policymakers. These networks often frame debate on a particular issue, provide justifications for alternatives, and catalyze national or international coalitions to support chosen policies and advocate change. For example, it is useful to examine the seminal UN reports from 1949-1951: *National and International Measures for Full Employment*; *Measures for Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries*; and *Measures for International Economic Stability*. Three panels of distinguished experts wrote these reports, which initiated the UN’s tradition of capitalizing on the expertise of teams comprised of important intellectuals from around the world. Since that time, numerous Nobel laureates have been included on the rosters of UN expert panels.

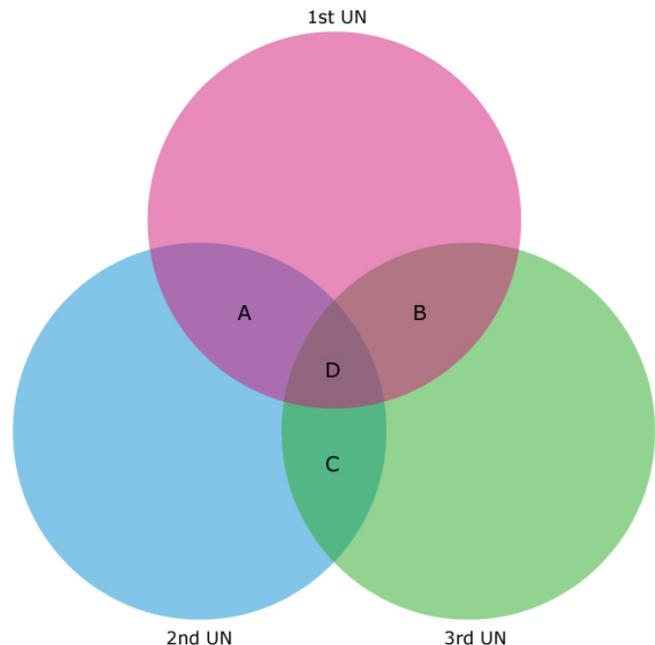
Finally, eminent persons, such as those on former Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, often raise some of the most vocal critiques and bold ideas facing the UN. There is a long tradition of this kind of expertise in the UN system, dating back to the 1969 Pearson Commission, named for the panel chair and former Canadian prime minister Lester B. Pearson. The tradition of naming such commissions after their chairs continues and includes those chaired by Willy Brandt, Olaf Palme, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Sonny Ramphal, and Ingmar Carlson. Weiss, Carayannis, and Jolly note:

These examples indicate the utility for international deliberations of a mechanism that takes visible individuals who made careers as senior governmental or intergovernmental officials, or both, but who

subsequently—as independent and usually prominent elders—are willing to voice criticisms at higher decibel levels and make more controversial recommendations than when they occupied official positions....They can formulate ideas beyond what passes for political correctness in governments and secretariats (133).

Interactions Among the Three UNs

The three United Nations interact and overlap in multiple ways as illustrated in the diagram below. These interactions are depicted in the overlapping area among the three circles, which captures state-secretariat interactions in “A,” state-civil society interactions in “B,” and secretariat-civil society interactions in “C.” The most important networked space for our purposes is “D” because within it individuals and private organizations of the third UN interact with the first and second UNs to influence or advance UN thinking, policies, priorities, or actions.



UNIHP’s decade of research has made clear that the three UNs engage in at least eight activities: debating, generating, legitimating, advocating, and implementing or testing ideas and policies; generating resources to pursue



new policies; monitoring progress in the march of ideas; and occasionally burying ideas and policies. The relative importance of the three UNs in these activities and their participation and interaction varies depending on how controversial or unconventional a policy or idea is.

Networks created between members of the second and third UNs often help to explain how ideas and policies change. For example, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) took up Francis M. Deng and Roberta Cohen's concept of "sovereignty as responsibility," and used it to lay the foundation of the emerging norm, the responsibility to protect, or R2P. In many instances, various constellations of the first, the second, and the third UNs constitute a like-minded partnership to move ahead on issues, with or without some member states, including major powers. Prominent examples include the 1997 convention banning antipersonnel landmines and the 1998 Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court.

In another variation, members of the second UN may sometimes turn to the third UN to formulate ideas that are controversial but propitious to place on the agenda and pursue when they come from nonstate actors. The concept of human development, which is central to international humanitarian aid, human rights, and economic development efforts, was developed by a key outside-insider, Mahbub ul Haq, and a supportive outsider, Amartya Sen, and was then adopted by staff within the UNDP and governments worldwide to guide policy choices. At times, members of the third UN provoke the ire of governments, as when some governments were upset with the attention drawn to their dismal human development rankings, published in the *Human Development Report*. However, these individuals working from within the third UN have the leeway to propel such controversial but invaluable ideas into the public arena, despite probable negative reactions from governments that come under unfavorable scrutiny.

Conclusion

Too little is known about the precise roles and impact of the third UN. In particular, future research should aim to fill three lacunae:

mapping networks; tracing movements of individuals; and measuring relative influence in specific settings. Understanding the third UN helps not only to explain how the relationship among the three UNs operates, but can also point the way toward better harnessing this interactive dynamic in response to contemporary challenges.

Thomas G. Weiss and Richard Jolly