



A Balance Sheet of the Influence and Impact of UN Ideas

The United Nations and its family of organizations have made many contributions to thinking and policymaking in relation to economic and social issues. But a central question is, of course, “so what?” What have been the results and impact? In our capstone book for the United Nations Intellectual History Project series, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (2009), we drew upon our experience as co-directors and generated a balance sheet of the assets and the debits of the record.

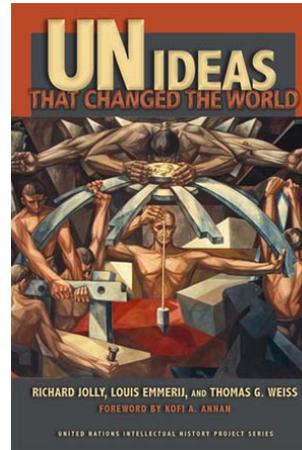
Assessing the impact of ideas is not easy. For our balance sheet, we focused on five ways in which ideas can make a practical difference to policy and action. These are by building international consensus for action; gaining professional endorsement; mobilizing civil society; winning financial backing; and becoming part of the programs of UN institutions with responsibilities for follow-up action.

Overview of the Impact of UN Ideas

We developed our assessment of the nine ideas in the book to determine the extent to which the UN’s conceptual and intellectual work has made a significant difference and had influence. For instance, we teased out the pioneering roles of the world organization in broadening the perspective of economic and social development, from early concerns with human rights and gender, to priorities of national and international development, to the management of global resources and the need to develop sustainable strategies that combine environment with development. We have also noted the UN’s recent calls for action that combine continuing economic development with preserving the world’s ecosystems from the consequences of greenhouse gases, global warming, and climate chaos. Our analysis has taken us beyond the economic, the social, and the environmental, as we have become persuaded that development, human rights, and human security should be viewed holistically.

The UN has often pioneered ideas in these nine areas—as shown in the capstone book as well as in fourteen other individual volumes of the project. Admittedly, by emphasizing that

there are three UNs (see Briefing Note #3)—member governments, staff members, and closely associated NGOs and experts—we have enlarged what we count as the world



organization’s contributions. But this has not been with the intention of giving a positive gloss on the UN’s results but rather to take into account the reality of the contemporary international system. Many key ideas have indeed been initially formulated or articulated by distinguished experts as members of UN panels or as work commissioned at the request of UN staff

or less often by governments. In other words, they were often commissioned by the Second or by the First UN—by the international civil servants on the payroll or by member states—but carried out by the Third UN.

“Multiplier effects” have also played an important role in increasing the impact of UN ideas. The UN Development Programme’s (UNDP) annual *Human Development Report* and UNICEF’s reports on *The State of the World’s Children* achieve part of their global visibility and impact by widespread dissemination, each in about 100,000 copies in English, French, and Spanish and other languages as well. This has often been accompanied by media launches of these publications in the 100 or so countries in which the UNDP and UNICEF have field offices.

One needs to assess the impact of ideas over a relatively lengthy period of time. For instance, the creation in 1994 of the Office of a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has added considerably to the UN’s influence and effectiveness. In fact, the proposal to create such an office was made in 1947 but only approved at the Vienna conference on Human Rights forty-six years later. This shows the difficulty of making quick assessments of how UN ideas have an impact—and the importance of timing.



A few broad points can be observed about the nature of the UN's impact in the realm of ideas.

The strongest areas of international consensus—at least in rhetoric—are those in the areas of human rights, social development, women's rights, and empowerment. Here the United Nations has clearly played a major role in generating ideas and influencing the international climate of opinion, although its influence has often been considerably less in implementation and practice, which in any event must take place at the country level. These also are areas in which considerable interest and support exist from professionals and civil society, and for which growing resources have been allocated. However, the lack of financial support in relationship to the size of the tasks usually means that clout has been limited, even with strong rhetorical support from both governments and other donors.

The balance sheet is also increasingly positive in the area of the environment and climate change. Since the 1970s thinking about the environment has evolved considerably, from the UN's early influence in putting environment and development on the international agenda and in giving the topic sustained and growing attention. The Earth Summit in 1992 passed Agenda 21, which included the Framework Convention on Climate Change and led to the Kyoto Protocol, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and a Statement of Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests. It also agreed that a Commission on Sustainable Development would monitor follow-up and planned two further governmental meetings to do this, the 1997 General Assembly's special session and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, in Johannesburg. As the effects of climate change become more visible, this is increasingly seen as the main and sometimes the only item on the global agenda. In fact, climate change is only the most evident of a range of highly important issues, most of which are gathering increasing support from governments and gradually—too gradually, it is true—making an impact.

The UN's impact in the area of humanitarian affairs and human security has also been pioneering and effective. There are signs of increasing support for the United Nations to have a leading and active role, notwithstanding

the tendency for major powers to go ahead in certain areas with or without Security Council approval. But it is also true—in major conflicts like Afghanistan and Iraq and even more so in less visible conflicts—that UN action and support is sought as necessary for international legitimacy. Early in 2009, there are some twenty peacekeeping missions supported by the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations—over sixty since 1948. With approved budgets of over \$8 billion, some 120,000 UN personnel are now engaged in these operations, including over 90,000 military troops, police, and military observers, some 19,000 civilian personnel, as well as some 2,000 volunteers. The interrelations between economic development, human security, and human rights are now recognized by most actors.

The UN has had less influence in the matters of international economic solidarity and, after 1980, in relation to national development strategies. Here, the policies of the Bretton Woods institutions have dominated and moved to center stage, promoting neoliberal economic policies and leaving the world organization increasingly on the sidelines. The considerable costs of this distribution of labor were visible even before the current global crisis: lagging economic growth in the poorest and least-developed countries; rising global inequalities between these countries and wealthier ones; and levels of education, health, and social protection and human development that have fallen short of international goals, especially in the poorest countries and among the poorest people.

At the time of writing, the world is in severe recession and likely to be prolonged. The ghosts of the 1930s are frequently evoked. It represents in and of itself a fundamental critique of the extreme neoliberal policies pursued since the 1980s. As we make clear in Briefing Note #10, UN institutions have long championed alternative approaches which, if implemented, might have avoided many of the problems that we have faced in the past and are now facing with a vengeance.

Counterfactual #1: The World without the UN and Its Ideas?

Another way of considering the impact of UN ideas is to imagine where the world might be



without the world organization or with one set up to act solely as a forum with no capacity for generating ideas of its own. It would be a markedly different UN, with a minimum of staff, expert in bringing groups with differences together and helping them to resolve these differences but with few ideas of their own. It would be a strange form of international body, although not totally different from the type that extreme critics of the current world organization put forward as the sort they think would be better.

In this world of the counterfactual, what might have happened to the ideas that the UN in its existing form has helped bring to fruition? In the economic arena, the need for rules and regulation to facilitate international trade and other economic transactions of the global market would probably have generated a more limited range of institutions that would be not so different from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Union, and the many other regional economic organizations.

Indeed, in the economic arena, if the world organization did not exist, much of it would have had to be invented, if not in 1945 then in about 1960, with the ending of colonies, or in the 1970s, with the floating of the dollar and the surge of oil prices. A series of ad hoc meetings among the wealthier countries to cope with wide-ranging issues of such vital economic importance to themselves would rapidly be seen to be inadequate and something more representative and more permanent would have been created. But beyond the economic imperatives required for facilitating international trade and global markets, some of what the UN does in other areas would also be required and thus need to be re-created: for instance the UN's work regarding international public goods as well as human rights and humanitarian concerns.

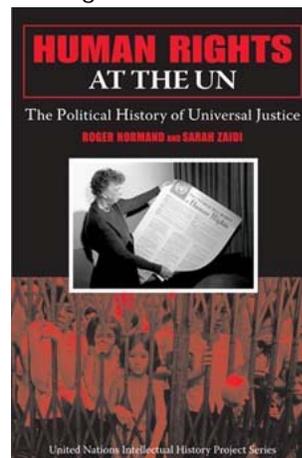
Providing public goods in the form of rule setting and regulation would be needed in areas of health, food, and agriculture, weather and meteorology, civil aviation, and maritime law if the UN did not exist. Economists describe meeting these needs as the provision of international public goods because they are needed by individual countries and their populations and for the efficient functioning of the global system. At the same time, they are beyond the capacity of the global market to offer,

because individual countries lack the incentive and the capacity to provide them on the scale required. This is in part because of the “free rider” problem—all will benefit from the provision, and none can be excluded from benefitting, even those that refuse to pay. To ensure such public goods, many specialist organizations would need to have been invented if they did not already exist as part of the UN system.

Indeed, many such specialist institutions were created long before the current generation of postwar organizations. Examples include the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, which was founded in 1902 and transformed into the Latin American arm of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948 when it was renamed the Pan American Health Organization. There are other earlier international organizations like the Universal Postal Union and International Telecommunication Union, whose origins lie in the mid-nineteenth century.

It is when we come to human rights that what might be lost in a world without the UN becomes more evident. Even a world focused solely on economic efficiency and free markets would be under public pressure to invent an organization to advocate for some rights. The

UN, however, embraces a panoply of human rights not solely for reasons of economic efficiency or political necessity but as a reflection of the vision and humanity of its early founders. And today the issue of human rights reflects the continuing concerns of many governments and the continuing pressures of many citizens and NGOs. The founders of the UN came to these concerns by reacting against the evils of World War II. These origins are brilliantly reflected in the Preamble of the Charter and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



Such vision and idealism is also reflected in the mandates and work of the UN funds and specialized agencies—for instance, UNICEF and the UN Development Fund for Women, the UNDP and the World Food Programme, as well as the



WHO, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the International Labour Organization. They are also at the core of the work of the offices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which deal with the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples as well as the prevention of torture and genocide. These important and highly visible efforts are in the forefront of the world organization's work. But because their mandates put human values ahead of economic concerns and market efficiency, they often clash with the dominant interests of governments and market priorities and they often call for more political and financial support than governments are prepared to provide.

Hence, although one undoubtedly can imagine a world without a body to such concerns, it would be a much poorer and, at its core, much less human and humane world than the one to which the present United Nations aspires and at its best contributes to and achieves.

Counterfactual #2: A More Creative UN?

The present UN often fails and it often achieves far less than its mandate and the vision of its founders. In this regard, it is not dissimilar from national governments and their militaries or banks and mortgage companies. Part of the reason is inefficiency and weak institutions and staff that do less than they might or governments that provide less financial support than required. But these are not the only causes. Often part of the reason for the UN's failure to fulfill its mandates or achieve its goals is that the mandates and goals are too visionary, or at least go far beyond where most governments are prepared to go.

Recalling the world organization's lofty vision and ideals is no defense for its inefficiencies or weaknesses. Nor is it a reason for suggesting that the United Nations could not have done better in formulating ideas or in ensuring follow-up. Most of the volumes in our series have identified areas and ways in which the UN could indeed have done much better. Our oral history interviews of nearly eighty distinguished individuals have identified many specific ways in

which such improvements could be made. Here we summarize six of the most important:

- The UN would be more efficient and effective if there were less interference from governments in the process of recruitment and promotion, including to the most senior positions.
- Greater use needs to be made of objective and up-to-date techniques for attracting, selecting, appointing, and promoting the best and the brightest to the UN from the widest and most diverse possible pool of candidates.
- More creative work is needed on issues of political economy in areas where the international system is failing—why and what can be done despite present political forces and constraints. This is crucial in the current economic and financial crisis.
- More sustained attention is needed on the measures required to achieve a more egalitarian international system and to national policies that combine redistribution with growth. A better distribution of global wealth and the benefits of growth can hardly be ignored in a world with the present glaring and growing gaps of power as well as income.
- Far more work is needed on the conditions necessary to create stability and democracy in weak and failing states.

Finally, better promotion of UN ideas would have helped in all of the areas of its work. The world organization should have ensured far greater outreach for the part of its work where it has originality and comparative advantage—work outside the box of neoclassical economic orthodoxy and the encouragement of multidisciplinary work in areas where economic issues interact with human rights, human security, and human development

Conclusion

Certainly the UN's work in the area of ideas and policy could have been better. But it could also have been smothered by caution, controlled by



secretaries-general or governments who allowed little scope for creativity within the secretariat and lacked any vision, and dominated by dogma. This could have happened so early in the world organization's life that many nonstate actors could have become disillusioned and discouraged about the UN's potential.

Instead, throughout its life, the United Nations has managed to attract the participation and commitment of many with outstanding intellectual or leadership capabilities to work for the Second UN and engage actively with relevant parts of the First and Third UNs. The Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the continuing commitment to humanitarian values and missions in many parts of the UN system remain central to the world organization's work. At each stage of its life, individuals and a number of key governments have argued passionately for maintaining this vision and for applying the UN's founding values to the contemporary international system. The UN could have gone the way of the League of Nations. It did not. Many members of the First, the Second, and the Third United Nations should be praised for ensuring the continued existence and relevance of the world organization.

The UN's achievements have also helped. Our balance sheet shows that throughout its six-and-a-half decades, the world organization has played a pioneering role in the world of ideas—and that ideas have been among the most important of the UN's contributions. Many of the core ideas have achieved remarkably quick impact, but even those that have been rejected, sidelined, or adopted only rhetorically after long periods of time have emerged and have often been ahead of the curve. The UN's effectiveness can never be judged within only a short-term horizon. With support from governments and civil society and creativity and strong determination from staff members, the best may still be to come.

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