

The Future Intellectual Agenda of the United Nations according to the WAAS Survey.

I- The Agenda

A- Introductory remarks

Rather than just undertake or administer the process for setting the agenda, one must pay careful attention to establishing the “initial conditions” of the process, as the design and the initial conditions will determine the outcomes. This sounds easy. It is not. Few people have the requisite skills.

A strategic foresight stance is needed – one that is focussed on identifying, exploring, understanding and dealing with that which is trajectory-altering – be they forces, trends, decisions or events -- while there is still time to act creatively and pro-actively. To take a strategic stance means that you must look for and focus on system-breaks and frame-changes, rather than on better practice within today's frames of reference. Such a stance will allow you to cut through the noise of the early 21st Century and deal with that which is truly important to the future of humankind. To take a foresight stance means that you must probe the emerging future in ways that are beyond the present capacity of our normal institutions to see, think and act. You must take with utmost seriousness that democratic processes and practices routinely lead to overshoot – the identification of trajectory-altering trends and events long after it is too late to act creatively and pro-actively. The syllogism is as follows: (a) democratic processes and practices focus on consensus views; (b) consensus views consistently identify result in overshoot; and, therefore, (c) democratic processes routinely result in overshoot.

Those involved must first engage, explore and answer this question, “Just where are we in history? What are the great strategic forces, trends, uncertainties and challenges of our

time?" This is the question of relevance-to-history that necessarily lurks behind any responses to the question about any intellectual agenda, i.e. the UN's intellectual agenda must identify, face and deal with the strategic (trajectory-altering) dynamics of the 21st Century. If it does not, the efforts will necessarily be beside the point. While some good things will happen, human disaster will not be avoided.

Those involved must engage with one another in some form of deliberative dialogue – face to face or via the web – a process that allows participants to refine their views in light of encounter with one another. Serious dialogue is the means to inter-subjective agreement – which is the key to creating persons and communities that are capable of knowing reliably. Increasing the degrees of reliability in what the UN takes to be “known” about its intellectual agenda and its situation in history, is, of course, what we are after. Otherwise, all one will get are a mess of somewhat conflicting views that do not obviously add up to anything.

It follows that an essential requirement to create an intellectual agenda is the development of a serious capacity – personal and institutional – to undertake and sustain intellectual work at a strategic meta-level. The UN shares this challenge with virtually every country and type of organization. Very few persons, let alone, organizations are able to undertake this type of work today. Far too much of the intellectual work today, in or outside of the UN, reflects an operational, as opposed to strategic foresight stance; it extrapolates recent trends rather than forecasting turning points.

Arising from the above, the UN needs to develop, debate, share and commit to two serious lists: (a) the top strategic issues that are facing the humanity and (b) those facing the UN. Such lists do not now exist. Accordingly, human efforts cannot be organized around truly strategic work. The UN has lists of urgent operational issues, both for the world and itself. It shows little strategic sensibility or capability. Again, the UN is not

worse positioned than most other institutions in this regard. Therefore, by committing to becoming an organization that has a serious strategic capability, the UN can become a role model.

Below follows a list of priority items for the Agenda, some strategic, others "merely" operational.

B- The Proposals

- 1- Clearly, the "Global Eco System and who will survive the certain disaster?" is high on the Agenda. One member asks himself whether this should not constitute the only intellectual agenda for UN affirmative action in order to resolve this mind-boggling matter within the next five years. "I really don't mean this to come under any Assistant Secretary General's domain but the UN system as a whole. If my statement appears to you childlike please help me to grow."
- 2- The UN must initiate a global initiative to include an international component in the curricula of schools. A globalized world requires that countries slowly adjust their national education systems to the global challenge of improving mutual cultural and religious understanding as well as more familiarity with emergent new technologies. All too often national education systems promote a highly nationalist view of history (either portraying the country as a mere victim or a benevolent perpetrator). There is also a problem in the teaching of religion and of ideas that focus on the views of the dominant cultural group in the country and neglects the views of other cultures. Students often leave school ill-equipped to judge recent political, economic and technological developments. The UN should therefore start a global initiative to include an international component into national teaching and increase the share of new knowledge (training teachers and providing the necessary material).

- 3- The UN must ensure that NGOs also become more accountable, stick to facts and are less opportunistic. Non-governmental actors on the global stage have played an important role in creating awareness of important issues. Yet, they also often have their own private agenda. NGOs that are in a mature stage (meaning that the issue of their initial advocacy work has largely been addressed) tend to broaden their issue-portfolio and, at the same time, become more extreme on the issues that are being addressed in response to their protests. Often they pick issues that have economies of scope (they reach the largest possible audience that could potentially feel affected, e.g. free trade, biotechnology, globalization) at the expense of issues that are directly relevant to local people. Their public attention-seeking activities, therefore, tend to export world-views. Even though they claim to fight for social benefits in developing countries, they only provide psychological benefits for people in affluent societies. This is particularly important in view of the fact that NGOs must continue to play the important role of effective watchdogs to unveil corporate and government abuse of the environment and the poor.
- 4- The development of a new integrating science that focuses on exploring and understanding long-term cultural change, evolution and transformation. Such an understanding is the intellectual foundation required to identify the emerging realities of the 21st Century. In other language, the strategic issues on which the human future now hangs are no longer primarily engineering and finance issues, or even environmental issues – although these remain vitally important – they are now the meta-issues of the humanities and social sciences.
- 5- Often one sees arguments for specific, culture bound, or even religiously defined criteria for science, particularly for the social sciences. This is detrimental to the scientific endeavor. The only way for science to progress and for individual scientists to develop is the

acknowledgement of and participation in the universal scientific discourse, the recognition of the value of both pure and applied science. The former leads to augmentation of knowledge, which is an intrinsically valuable and precious quality of civilization. Moreover, all too often pure research leads to useful applications, sooner or later (often later), as history of science abundantly illustrates. The latter is motivated by a practical problem and may lead to a useful product, instrument, method or procedure. Science can and should also deal with salient societal issues and problems. Among the most important are: 1- Peace and détente (social psychology of conflict control and prevention) 2- sustainable development (environmental, medical and economic sciences should work together to cope with the problem of growth of world population and preservation of the environment and nature for the next generations). 3- creating a multicultural world (make use of the knowledge of cultural anthropologists, social psychologists, historians and jurists).

- 6- The lengthening of the life cycle is probably the most important social issue for the coming two or three decades. Advanced industrial nations are "aging" societies, confronted with developing "young" nations. In fact, also the latter will be "aging" within a few decades. The real global issue here is in fact not one of aging, but of "counter-aging": the extension of life, productive and better life, well beyond the ancient and current definitions of who are "old people". The cultural, social, economic, political changes ahead of us in this field are immense (see on this issue the European Papers on the New Welfare – the Counter-aging Society).
- 7- (i) How do we build a truly secular world society?
 (ii) How do we reduce exploitation at all levels?
 (iii) How may we ensure access to high-quality education to all, at all levels, everywhere?
 (iv) How do we govern diversity and cultivate a basic

- unity amidst this diversity, recognizing that homogeneity leads to extinction and diversity leads to evolution?
- 8- (i) The clash of civilizations, as exemplified by September 11, 2001, and its aftermath in the USA, Western Europe, the Middle East, Afghanistan and other places around the world. A framework must be created to identify, discuss and develop action steps around these issues.
 - (ii) Nuclear disarmament - The world is at risk
 - (iii) Comprehensive review of the continent of Africa - Oil, corruption, governance, famine, and wars.
 - 9- A more ambitious intellectual exploration of ways to make non-proliferation and arms reduction regimes more effective and significant is of the essence. Secretary General Kofi Annan rightly considered lack of progress in these areas to be the biggest UN failure of recent years.
 - 10- The UN has retreated in having an intellectual agenda regarding multinational corporations and the global economy/ecology/polity. The emphasis must be balanced and not a one sided "us against them" effort.
 - 11- How the UN can increase economic growth in developing countries: "How can I make money...", weekly site visits to villages and a program available (via the Internet) to worldwide audiences. Each week, a team of experts from the UN, World Bank, NGOs, etc will visit a different village, will engage in a brainstorming session, and offer specific and practical ideas that villagers can use if they want to make more money.
 - 12- The Secretary General to convene an advisory group of journalists, think tank leaders, and foundation and communications industry executives to assess how new communications technology can accelerate international policy discussions, learning, agenda-building, and the evaluation of new ideas among government and NGO professionals.
 - 13- The Secretary General, together with the Director General of UNESCO, to convene a Science Education working group. This Group would include Presidents of

leading scientific societies and foundations interested in science education, with the mandate to 1- evaluate current resources, and 2- achieve international (online) curriculum resources for K-12 science and mathematics education that are equal to the best in any country.

II- Initial Conditions

There is no system-wide intellectual agenda, save those put forth in Summits, such as the Millennium Development Goals (which has an inferred hypothesis of development and which actually preceded the intellectual work to substantiate them). Whatever dispersed intellectual activities do take place are not truly strategic in the sense explained in Part I-A above.

Thus, the UN could stand coherence in its policy/research agenda, an attempt at cross-agency assessments to create more significant policy/research initiatives, incorporation of science in a much wider way than just social science, and more strategic considerations of translating policy and scientific research into multinational and national practices. On the coherence side, the making of a truly UN intellectual agenda, would result in far fewer initiatives, but those surviving initiatives would be of far greater consequence.

Once the UN pursues a consistent intellectual agenda, it faces the problem of not being able to please all member states. Many UN reports are not very exciting to read because every interesting message or argument must be watered down to the lowest common denominator. Therefore the UN should seek more intellectual autonomy in order to pursue a truly strategic intellectual agenda.

No compromise on recruiting the best of the crop in order to implement the Agenda once it has been created. Fifty percent of the staff of UN and its agencies should come from the world's intelligentsia. If that cannot happen, the UN and its agencies

must sponsor meetings to carefully identify intellectuals around the world who satisfy the following criteria:

- (a) They are nationally and internationally recognized experts in their own area.
- (b) They have wide-based knowledge, interest and expertise.
- (c) They are familiar with the major problems around the world.
- (d) They are articulate but not opinionated.
- (e) They have impeccable honesty, integrity, and commitment to transparency.
- (f) They have high public credibility.

There are no strategies or even approved practices for how to work with other research communities in the UN. The largest corporations in the world operate in numerous strategic alliances, but the UN does not when it comes to research (and much else). One advantage of a real intellectual agenda for the UN would be that it could be shared with scientific bodies to stimulate cooperative activities.

There is thus a need for several initiatives:

- 1) at attempt at coherence and thus a coordinating or at least inventorying role for the Secretariat;
- 2) developing synergies between policy shops across the UN system;
- 3) more transparency in creating UN policy/research agendas; and
- 4) a larger role of administering and managing policy and research and less of a role for performing such research in-house.

The United Nations University (UNU) has failed to impact the quality and the kind of research and whatever intellectual agendas there are in the system. UNU was set up almost thirty years ago to do precisely that. However, it has pursued an independent path. It is a lost opportunity.

Once again, the above considerations come from members of the World Association of Art and Science and were sent to us at the beginning of January 2007. They are only very slightly edited.

Louis Emmerij

The following has been added by Bob Berg. These are points that strike him, more than me, as important. They come all from the replies of WAAS members that I had discarded in the above note.

1. Encourage agencies to spawn universities and thinktanks as IMO has done. (This goes to the point as to whether the UN has an institution-building strategy with its policy work.)
2. Design UN activities for impact. Involve key policy communities and officials in the research process to better assure utilization of the results. Include adequate resources to effectively market results.
3. Restrategize the MDGs as they ignore the roles of entrepreneurship, higher education and technology. The goal should be to create a vibrant, tax paying middle class.
4. The MDGs will need to have momentum and political/substantive expectations better tailored for individual cases. It does no good to be ideological that all goals can be fulfilled in all cases. This is the path to failure and to castigating all governments who do not achieve all the goals.
5. The history of the UN's work with world religions needs to be compiled and lessons learned by the UN. (This is part of trying to be a bridge-builder between cultures.)
6. Encourage the best attributes of civil society, which in many issues is the UN's sole ally.
7. There are no mega-strategies for research currently in the UN, no formal alliances on policy were surfaced in this exercise. All of this is counter to what has been demonstrated as vital for the academic and commercial

sectors. Four recommendations: 1) attempt coherence, which, of course, will require inventorying and some system of coordination; 2) develop synergies between UN policy shops across the system to develop some economies and clearer divisions of labor; 3) be more transparent in the creation and conduct of UN research; and 4) shift to administering as opposed to personally conducting policy work, i.e., rely more on external centers and networks of intellectual strength. A special need is UN-World Bank collaboration to replace unproductive rivalries.

Washington DC,
March 2007.