

# UNIHP: Intellectually Ambitious and Politically Important

## Abstract

This article is an invited comment on the UNIHP initiative. The UNIHP is praised as a timely historical project and as a source of alternatives in the fields of development and human security. The importance of the combined normative and informative function of the UN is noted. The UNIHP is encouraged to study how the general public and the media relate to the UN, and how the UN presents itself to the peoples of the world.

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Let us first celebrate that the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) is launched. Several volumes have already been published. They inspire old as well as more recent UN constituencies around the world. It seems necessary, not least in our time, to renew our commitment to democratic multilateralism. We need to go ‘back to basics’ and this project will facilitate our intellectual and political search as well as research.

Celebrations should be accompanied by gratitude, first and foremost to the pioneers of the UN who are now also pioneering the Intellectual History Project. They have the quality of combining decades, almost a lifetime, of being participants in, contributors to, and observers of the UN system. And they are of course scholars, now located (the word ‘embedded’ cannot be used these days) in academic institutions. Those responsible for funding this effort should also be thanked.

The project is timely. The UN needs this kind of attention. There is an element of evaluation in it, an evaluation also of UN member states and other constituencies. I wish to share with you, very briefly, a hope, belief, and sometime experience of mine: that the participatory hammering out of ideas, norms and agendas at the UN and by it is perhaps its most important contribution, function, or even instrument. Why? Because for an intergovernmental organisation, where member states are sometimes obsessed with their sovereignty and relative power, and the same member states (therefore?) restrict their funding of the organisation, it is by way of ideas, norms

and agendas that member states can be inspired, trained and challenged in concerted action. Accountability rests primarily with each member state. The record of the UN is like compositions; member states are the orchestras.

The project reminds us that 60 years ago the UN was chartered to work for peace, independence and human rights. (Personally I have always wanted the preamble to the Charter of the UN to be learnt like a catechism by all!) We are also reminded that the UN as a system is diverse, even fragmented. The project refers to the first, the second and the third UN, which means first the member states, or governments, second the secretariat (or secretariats?) and third the NGOs, now called civil society organisations. I would have preferred adding a fourth UN: the concerned citizens of the world, taxpayers funding the multilateral system willingly or not, professionals and lay people who directly or indirectly, individually or collectively, are exposed to the deficiencies or violations of – precisely – peace, independence, development and human rights. Concerned citizens expect the UN to act, to be competent, relevant and timely. We know the constraints and dilemmas of UN action as well as inaction. But the UN constituencies of the world, their expectations, level of information, opinions and commitment are in ways that should be explored by the project also part of the UN. Remember the Charter's reference to 'We the peoples...' To pursue this point a little further: will there be an attempt to review how the UN over the years has presented itself, by word and image via public media?

Another perspective of, and on, the UN would refer to its functionings: as a global political forum, its agenda setting, its development of normative instruments, its providing of information, be it intellectual inputs in the form of reports or papers, or statistics; and finally, to UN operations in various fields, limited as they may have been, compared to needs and even demand.

We must remember that the League of Nations lasted 20 years, then failed to prevent another World War. For 60 years the United Nations has in a much more complex and populous world facilitated diplomacy and only reluctantly resorted to military means of conflict management. Conflict prevention rarely makes history. How will the Intellectual History Project handle this dilemma?

Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly have emphasised the ways in which the development agendas were defined and enhanced by major UN conferences. These conferences have increasingly involved not only member governments but also the concerned citizens already mentioned. The issues of women in development and

gender equality are examples. So are the summits, the special sessions, commissions panels, and expert meetings. Plans of action, normative statements, even conventions are frequent outcomes that eventually affect member state populations.

The gaps between ideals and realities on the ground are reflected in reports and statistics. Intra- and international transparency is increasing. The project has rightly decided to focus on this aspect of UN activity. UNDP's *Human Development Report* (HDR) is a particularly interesting case as intellectual history, and as an intellectually, rather than politically generated paradigm shift. Conceptual tools are important: the human development index was dramatically different from per capita gross national product (GNP) figures in content and development message. With the HDRs, first launched in 1990, women were seen both as statistical categories, as victims of maldevelopment and as actors and agents of development. 'Human development reporting' was itself engendered. Inter- and particularly intranational inequalities would no longer be concealed. Gender issues were highlighted and legitimised. Let me offer an anecdote: I came to the UNDP in the late 1980s to work for 'women in development'. I was told by an enthusiastic colleague that women should now be harnessed for development because, so far, women had been bypassed. My mandate, however, fortunately referred to women as participants and beneficiaries of all UNDP activities.

More important: the HDRs inspired similar reports regionally and by individual states, despite the initial criticism of them by some UN ambassadors. They had seen these reports as blatant violations of UN etiquette because they referred, by name, to internal affairs of sovereign member states.

Then to the Bretton Woods institutions–United Nations relationship. The emphasis on and dilemmas of sovereign member states are fundamental features of the UN system. The different weighting of votes in the World Bank and the UN explains some of the differences between the two. The uneasy relations between these institutions is reflected in several of the UNIHP volumes published so far, with particular reference to the discussion in this issue of the FDS of the 'Washington consensus' and the 'New York dissent' (the contributions by Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly). The issue was development models: the Bretton Woods institutions' economic model fundamentalism as against the multidisciplinary and more empirically grounded positions of the UN and at the UN. But how come the same member states act so differently in the two

sets of fora? Is it because they are differently represented, by their Ministries of Finance and their Ministries of Foreign Affairs or Development Cooperation respectively? Is representation now better coordinated, even changing? Will the recent acceptance by the World Bank of the UN Millenium Development Goals change its operations? Or is it an act resembling cooptation?

Incidentally, it will be interesting to see if, when and how the World Bank will match the UNIHP.

Emmerij and Jolly, in different ways, provide information that enables us, the concerned citizens, to 'stand on the shoulders of the past'. 'Contributions to ideas and thinking' are given in a table that demonstrates how important it has been for the UN to persist, to maintain institutional memory and to return to ideas 'when their time has come'. We can deplore opportunities missed, such as the New International Economic Order (NIEO), or the more recent Economic Commission for Europe's proposals for a more gradual transition in former communist countries. 'Contrafactual history writing' seems to be fashionable even among serious historians these days. Will the UNIHP venture into this? What if the NIEO had been realised? Or the labour-intensive growth idea? Or the more gradual reform of state-run economies in the 1990s? Not to mention all earlier proposals to harness the arms races and invest in development. According to the *New York Times* some weeks ago the Iraq war has cost the USA alone US\$225 billion so far. For 2004 the cost was expected to be US\$95 billion. All development assistance in the world (ODA) amounts to US\$68 billion a year. The UNDP struggles, in vain, to reach just US\$1 billion in core funding.

For the sake of security in all its aspects we need more initiatives in the UN system to understand the interdependence between disarmament and development and to assess the cost and consequences of military action. To address what lies ahead in more effective and creative ways the UNIHP may well become an important source. Already it has produced relevant guidance on one of the most challenging and disputed issues of our time: globalisation. As an example, Louis Emmerij's eight proposals will indicate paths that are different from those just 'saying no to globalisation' and leading nowhere.

I conclude where I started, with a sense of gratitude as well as admiration for an intellectually ambitious and politically important, and hence future-oriented, history project.