

THE UN AND IDEATIONAL LEADERSHIPS

Abstract

The article takes as its point of departure the programmatic point developed in the introduction to *Ahead of the Curve* – that the UN's role in producing ideas should be contextualised, that is be seen as not only the source of ideas, but the carrier of ideas originating in some other source. The author finds several of the contributions that he has been able to read very strong analytically and empirically. But on some issues a few of the contributions could have been addressing the programmatic point more consciously; one example is population policy. The author also argues that the position of the UN, for instance in the public opinion, is a matter that could have been addressed more extensively in order to measure the impact and the legitimacy of the world organization in a situation where major reorganization of it is on the international agenda.

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The Intellectual History Project is a most timely and useful initiative. It is high time that the history of the UN's ideational contribution to vital issues in global development was subjected to systematic description and analysis. This is particularly appropriate as one of the purposes of the project is a normative one: to design ways by which 'to improve the UN's future contribution to economic and social development' (Emmerij *et al.*, 2001: 10). No one could do that job with more insight and devotion than these several *grand seigneurs* of the international development community, in cooperation with one of the leading scholars on global governance.

In the introductory chapter of *Ahead of the Curve?* Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas G. Weiss set out the analytical perspective of the project. Their approach is clearly an open and eclectic one. It proposes to look at the UN's role in producing ideas on how to solve global challenges by suggesting several possible explanatory factors, and by contextualising the role. Institutions,

experts and individuals may all make contributions as the source of ideas, or as their social carrier. No idea evolves without an agent to promote it, nor do ideas emerge and agents work in isolation from their social and political environments. Moreover, the authors argue, it may be difficult to trace the origin of an idea, its inventor.

I fully support this choice of analytical perspective. And I would like to say up front that the analytical texts that I have been able to read so far convince me that the results that the project presents are very interesting and also mostly quite convincing. But my task should not be confined to representing the admiration and praise that the authors so well deserve. It is rather to dig into some of the issues that they raise and that I believe present the reader – or at least this reader – with some puzzles.

I therefore start by noting that one of the tests of the usefulness of the project will be the extent to which authors of the various reports have demonstrated collective loyalty to it. Since I have not had the opportunity to read much of those reports my comments will be limited to the first book and the papers presented at the Oslo seminar in December 2004.

The perspective that Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss present invites us to look at the role of the UN not necessarily as the inventor of ideas but as a place where ideas meet with politics, bureaucracies, individual leadership and coalitions and become generated, nurtured, distorted – and eventually implemented. In order to understand the role of the UN one needs to ask not only what key ideas have been contributed by the organisation, but also what ideas were brought into it from outside the UN and were promoted by it. Furthermore one would, according to the authors, want to know what happened to these ideas within the UN, and finally what impact particular ideas have had. According to the authors there are at least four measurable ways in which the ideas can have a substantial influence on policy: they can change the nature of international public policy discourse; they can provide a tactical guide to policy and action when norms conflict or when sequencing of priorities are disputed; they can alter prospects for forming new coalitions; and they can become embedded in institutions, challenging or changing established principles and set future agendas.

This represents an ambitious programme. Hence the authors, who are at the same time the directors of the project, propose to undertake a less ambitious, much more limited task by picking up an idea ‘at the time it intersects with the UN’ (*ibid.*: 10). Noting that introductory and programmatic summary of the authors’ posi-

tion I make the linkage to the issue that is highlighted in the book and some other reports of the UNIHP project: whether the UN has been ahead of the curve. And the first puzzle I see is that the linkage is not very well accounted for in some of the texts that I have read.

There are at least two separate issues here. The first is how it is possible to address the question of whether or not the UN is ahead of the curve while at the same time assuming that the UN may take on an idea at any one of the stages of its trajectory from invention to implementation. In what particular sense is the UN assumed to be 'ahead'? Is it being the first to come up with an idea? Is it being the first to take it on from some other source and give it political legitimacy? Or: may it still be said to be ahead if the idea intersects with the UN only after having been circulating in various other agencies and environments for some time?

In the book, and in some of the articles presented in this volume, there are several examples where the author claims that the UN has truly been ahead, but where it is not sufficiently clear in what sense it is ahead. It is of some interest whether the whole of the UN is ahead or simply one or some of its units. But that is not necessarily a vital matter. Both may apply; that is apparently why Jolly for instance concludes that one may remove the question mark behind the title of the first book even before completing the whole series of studies. He and Emmerij agree that the UN has been consistently ahead of the curve on many of the key issues on development policy, whereas the Bretton Woods (BW) institutions have often been behind. The puzzle that this represents – the UN has the right ideas but the BW institutions get the money to implement the wrong ideas – is not really that much of a puzzle, and the authors are aware of it. The explanation is found in the power structure and the fact that 'the Washington Consensus' had the support of hegemonic power, and 'the New York 'dissenters' did not.

But how about the situation where power invents or promotes the 'right idea' and the UN goes along with it? This is something that is normally associated with the Security Council and the security area, but it has also happened in the development area. Before I continue let me hasten to add that I will not comment on the normative issue – whether an idea is 'right' or 'wrong' – in the following. One illustration that I find most convincing is the introduction of the modernisation paradigm into the international development discourse and the UN (see Toye and Toye – 'From Multilateralism to Modernisation' – in this volume). It offers a vivid illustration of

an instance where a new idea coincides with one constant factor, the hegemonic power, and one variable one, the policy of that power *vis-à-vis* the UN, to produce an entirely new curve – that of the rise of modernisation theory to become hegemonic international development policy. In the process a variation of structuralist theories were introduced as a ‘counter-theory’ or as an attempt to blend modernisation with other ways of thinking.

Another example of the UN being ahead of the curve that is referred to by both Emmerij and Jolly is population policy. Jolly observes ‘a slow awakening [by the UN] in the 1960s’, starting seriously only after the Bucharest conference in 1974. According to Sending, the fact is that the initiative was primarily taken in the United States, although new ideas on population policy also came from other sources in the 1940s and 1950s, such as in an international network of demographers (Sending, 2004).¹ Initiated by private individuals and associations of researchers, and later on gradually developing a broader base with the active assistance of the large foundations, paralleled by the work of public institutions from the Department of Defense to USAID, new population policy - and birth control in particular – was eventually endorsed and promoted by the US government, which had the necessary clout to make population control measures widely accepted internationally. In the process it succeeded in bringing many governments in developing countries on board and getting them to adopt action programmes largely financed by US money. These were rather instrumental in making the Bucharest conference and other policy-making initiatives a relative success.

It is possible to view the role that US agents, including the US government, eventually played in the area of population policy as closely linked to the role of these actors in introducing the modernisation paradigm in the development arena. The two were to a large extent built on the same rationale, although some population policy agents also brought the ideas associated with women’s liberation into this policy area.

In the case of environmental policy, the authors’ account of the evolution of that issue-area appears largely correct. Emmerij (in this volume; see also *Ahead of the Curve?*) describes first the foun-

1 A more detailed analysis is found in his doctoral dissertation, *How Does Knowledge Matter? The Formation, Content and Change of International Population Policy*, PhD dissertation, Department of Administration and Organization Theory, University of Bergen, 2003.

dation of development policy in the work undertaken in the late 1940s and the 1950s and then points to how the development agenda was gradually linked to environmentalism starting in the 1960s and taking off in the early 1970s. Here I believe that the authors make an effort to live up to their own strategic parameter – to study an idea at the time it intersects with the UN. Development and environmental (that is, ecological) perspectives represented two separate trajectories, which the UN attempted to unite at the Stockholm Conference in 1972, after preparations by the ‘development gurus’ among others. There is no doubt that the UN has been important in forging a link between the two trajectories, in particular through its role in work to establish ‘sustainable development’ as a uniting agenda. While Emmerij does not mention it, Jolly attaches to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) a particularly important role in making that connection possible.

Here I note an interesting reciprocal downplaying – sometimes amounting to outright scepticism – of the independent international commissions, by the authors, and of the role of the UN, by their peers. Commenting on the WCED the authors write: ‘The role of reports from such commissions of eminent persons is disputed, but this one had an impact’ (Emmerij *et al.*, 2001: 92). While I agree with their view of the WCED, the rationale for their much more negative view of the commissions in general is not transparent. Having noted this I should add that the eminent persons referred to reciprocate by demonstrating a correspondingly negative view of the UN.² If one leaves aside the reports issued by commissions appointed by the UN secretariat in 1949 to 1951, which Emmerij does mention, there have been a dozen other such independent commissions on development-related issues, from the Brandt commission at the end of the 1970s (Independent Commission on International Development Issues, 1980) to the most recent (World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, 2004). Only a few of them were directly under a UN institution; most were independent, financed by governments directly and having their own secretariats. Several of them claim that *they* were the ones ahead of the curve, and some say bluntly that the reason they are independent, and wish to remain so, is that the UN system is too slow, too understaffed and too political to advance new ideas rapidly enough.

2 This is transparent both in Willy Brandt’s and in Gro Harlem Brundtland’s memoirs; for reference to them and a detailed analysis of the two commissions they led, see Hveem (2005).

Neither of these partisan positions is an acceptable one. The controversy between them, perhaps to some extent nurtured by inter-institutional competition or by personal jealousy, is not that interesting either. It is more interesting to look at the issue as one of tracing a phenomenon from idea to implementation, examine how various agents relate to it or, as *Ahead of the Curve?* programmatically puts it, look at how, where and when the process of introducing a particular idea intersects with the view held by a particular agent and what sort of contribution the individual agents make to the promotion or demolition of the idea. If such an approach is pursued I believe it will become evident that both the UN and the commissions play a role in producing, reproducing or disseminating one and the same idea.

That assumption might be strengthened if the analysis were extended to mass public perceptions and not confined to the elite and expertise levels as most of the UNIHP has decided to be. As a matter of fact public opinion polls consistently show favourable attitudes to the UN in both North America and Europe, and in some countries in the South in which similar polls have been taken. Thus, in representative polls that are periodically taken by *Eurobarometer* across the EU, there is in the population a consistent and robust identification with and trust in the UN.³ In fact the UN is ranked higher than the EU itself and certainly higher than the respective nations' governments as an entity in which people put their trust. The pattern is certainly the same in Norway, and indeed there is a much stronger general support for the UN in the United States than is reflected in the US government's policy on the UN. Whereas on average about three-quarters of Europeans express positive views on the UN, 70 per cent of Americans do the same (PIPA, 2004).

Clearly question marks may be attached to such survey data. How salient are the perceptions and the evaluations they demonstrate? Are questions framed in too general a way to reveal real and robust attitudes? These points are obviously relevant. A majority of supporters of President George W. Bush in the US believe that his administration supports the Kyoto Agreement and that it gives much more in official development assistance than it actually does. There are other misperceptions around. But then the issue is still whether there is an untapped reservoir of strength in the recorded support for the UN in the populations of some of the major powers. Even in the South, where the UN is often associated with

3 See http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/index_en.htm

Northern policy and practice, or with failures such as in Rwanda, there is potential in the support that may be created after successful UN interventions through peacekeeping or peacemaking operations, or relief and reconstruction programmes such as the post-*tsunami* programme.

Success in handling the distributive effects of globalisation may be one more general source of potential popular support in the future. Emmerij simplifies the analysis of the driving forces behind the phenomenon by stating that globalisation is driven by private actors whereas regionalisation is state-driven; the reality is definitely more complex.⁴ On the other hand he is right in arguing that the hegemony of liberal economics is over; the downturn started after the financial crises at the end of the 1990s. Quoting Gerry Helleiner, Emmerij points out that the neo-liberal economists certainly had a point: there had been too much state emphasis in the development discourse. However, they went too far in the other direction. The experience of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) is one proof of that, and according to Emmerij UN institutions were the first to see the danger: UNCTAD of the financial crises, ECE of the negative effects of the Big Bang in former Eastern Europe and Russia. The latter institution had a gradualist approach to the transition countries, but it was probably too far ahead of the curve.

Emmerij also rightly points out that timing is essential, and he refers to timing in particular with regard to the ability to associate with those who hold power and to adjust to context.⁵ ‘Good ideas do not always win out, and being ahead of the curve can mean that your time has not come... The UN (=ECE) had the better ideas by proposing a gradual approach. But the “big bang” won the day because of political and financial reasons.’ An additional explanation is that the neo-liberals used a political argument which was both intellectually seductive and politically convincing in the prevailing neo-liberal environment: if you did not go for a big bang but went for gradualism, the Russian *nomenclatura* would block reforms, which would come to nothing. What you got instead was a takeover by newly rich elites, with a *mafia* sharing the spoils; this did not happen (to the same extent) in the few countries in Central and Eastern Europe that had a relatively democratic basis on which to build – such as Hungary and the Czech Republic.

4 Hveem (2000); see also Rugman and Verbeke (2004).

5 For a similar argument with respect to the role and impact of the international commissions, see Hveem (2005).

In summary, the authors should be applauded for offering a long-awaited account of the role of the UN in international development. It is very interesting reading, and offers, as one would expect, new insight into many issues and events. But the account of the UN's role overall is perhaps slightly too positive, a little uncritical. And the analysis is sometimes not conducted in accordance with the research strategy set out in the introduction to *Ahead of the Curve?* But maybe the reports not yet published (or not known to this author at the time of writing) will make up for that deficiency. The fact that the Secretary-General in 2004 appointed a high-level panel to look into the organisation, and that the panel suggested several radical measures to be taken, may be interpreted as an act of self-criticism.

Having observed that, I would like to add that the point of reference whenever the role and impact of the UN is critically evaluated and assessed should be a counterfactual point: what would the world, generally speaking, and in the various issue-areas of world affairs, have looked like *without* the UN?

In any assessment of the UN's role it is important to consider efficiency and effectiveness as well as its resources and power. As reform of the world organisation has become an urgent matter, the counterfactual question reminds us that concerns with organisational efficacy, decision-making capability and implementation capacities should not make us forget that the UN still has an important role as a public arena, a rostrum from which to voice frustration or hope, and as a public laboratory in which new ideas and policies can be tested. Nor should the possibility be excluded that the popular support of the world organisation that is reported in the polls in the world's most powerful countries is a sign that most people look beyond the issues of efficacy and power and have some of these other parameters in mind.

If that is the case then the message of the UNIHP apparently has a larger potential following among NGOs and the public at large than it has among the elites.

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