

Development Thinking and Practice: Reflections on Future Contributions of the United Nations System

Abstract

The article discusses fundamental development challenges facing the United Nations system today and in the future: challenges related to the global economy, to the notion of development and to the functioning of the UN system. The author notes that there is an urgent need to strengthen global economic and environmental governance. Critical questions are raised with regards to prevailing development models. A broader, more people-oriented approach is required including cultural and social dimensions. Special attention is paid to the controversial family and the evasive gender equality. Finally, reforms of the main UN and the World Bank are discussed.

Keywords: culture, development, economic development, environment, family, gender equality, global governance, Human Development Report, human rights, social development, Millennium Development Goals, UNESCO, United Nations, UN reform, women, World Bank

1. Introduction

The future of the United Nations¹ can be discussed from various angles. One approach is to assess what is most likely to happen in the light of existing power relations and the policies of member states. Another approach – and the one I will choose – is to consider what ought to take place in the light of development challenges facing the world today and in the future. In a brief article it

Torild Skard

Guest Researcher,
NUPI, formerly Deputy
Secretary-General, MFA and
Director, UNESCO and UNICEF

1 The 'UN', the 'UN family' or 'UN system' is made up of
(a) the UN Secretariat and principal organs,
(b) the UN programmes and funds, specialised agencies and commissions, and
(c) the financial or Bretton Woods institutions: the World Bank group and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
Here (a) will be referred to as the 'UN proper', while the 'main UN' will include (a) and (b), but not (c).

is impossible to cover all challenges, but some important issues will be discussed related to economic and social development in the Third World, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, and the workings of the UN system.

2. The UN System

Before discussing the contributions of the United Nations system, it is necessary to take a look at the system itself: what characterises it, and what comparative advantages does it have?

It is no easy task to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the United Nations. The organisations constituting the system are so numerous, so interwoven with myriads of other actors and so ingrained in our thinking about international affairs that it is difficult to see what they really do. As a global endeavour the UN system is unique. It is at the core of the international community, striving to shape the world into a community in the proper sense of the word and to organise joint action. With universal membership, government representatives and staff from all over the world working together to reach common aims, and global networks of individuals and institutions, the UN is an extraordinary example of international cooperation. This is an achievement in itself. Although it is not fully representative, the UN family is far ahead of most organisations. Clashes of interest are the order of the day, but agreements are nevertheless hammered out and action taken, though the degree to which action is effective can leave much to be desired.

The development challenges facing the world cannot be tackled by the United Nations alone. Individual governments, non-governmental and civil society organisations, private business, media and academia – all can and must contribute.

But the UN has a crucial role in providing international leadership, sustaining global norms and ensuring worldwide mobilisation and outreach. During the last half of the 20th century, the United Nations provided an arena for the joint handling of global challenges. For those issues that we have to manage collectively in a globalising world, the UN is the preferred vehicle. In relation not only to peace and war, but also to fundamental human rights, including the rights of women, the development of Third World countries, population issues and environmental protection, it is impossible to imagine the efforts we have seen nationally as well as globally without the UN taking the lead. The UN raised issues of common concern, collected information and developed ideas, organised joint

action, mobilised resources and contributed to the solution of short- and long-term problems. UN organisations channelled financial and technical assistance, particularly to poor countries, gave advice on policy issues and supported development activities. As an intergovernmental body, the UN can negotiate with governments and perform tasks no government (however strong) can do alone. The system is hampered by serious weaknesses and deficiencies and very much remains to be done, but without the efforts of the UN family, we would have known much less about the challenges, lacked strategies to confront them and made less progress with problem-solving.

The industrial countries – with only 20 per cent of the world’s population, but an estimated 80 per cent of GDP² – dominate the world economy and the global debate. The United Nations is the only international arena where the developing countries – with 80 per cent of the world’s inhabitants – can assert themselves and present their claims. With a voting structure based on one nation, one vote, the main UN, including the UN proper, the specialised agencies,³ programmes and funds, can base themselves squarely on human rights, give priority to human needs and pay special attention to the weak and the poor. The main UN is important as a forum for ideas and debate that would otherwise be suppressed. It can play a catalytic role, pointing out and supporting neglected concerns. It can draw upon a wide range of sectoral organisations and an extensive field presence to promote a broad, well-adapted development agenda. In a world more and more driven by commercial interests and profit, the main UN can support research and development activities that represent other values and interests. It can also be an agent for change, though its action might be slow and curtailed in many ways. Inadequate as it might be, the main UN represents the people of the world, striving to promote peace and justice, development and welfare, defending the rights of the powerless and deprived against arbitrariness, exploitation and abuse.

Formally the Bretton Woods institutions are part of the UN system, but they are basically different from the other organisations.

2 Based on population data and estimates of gross domestic product, GDP, from 2002 (UNDP, 2004: 155, 187). Industrial countries include the high-income OECD countries, Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

3 The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is an exception with a tripartite governing structure based on governments, employers’ and workers’ groups. None of the organisations are based on the principle of one person, one vote.

They are financial institutions with the main task of providing loans, not grants, and voting rights are according to members' shares, that is, wealth, giving the rich, industrial countries a dominating position. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have different functions. Only the Bank is actually a development institution, though the IMF has in fact become a central player on the development scene during recent years. Being both a bank and a development institution the World Bank has a more ambiguous role than the main UN. It does not have the same formal commitment to human rights. It provides important resources to developing countries, but the approach is basically economic and the focus is on a limited set of economic goals.

Since the 1980s, the importance of the IMF and the World Bank has increased, while the main UN has been weakened. Backed up by the Western powers, the Bretton Woods institutions provided financial support to poor indebted countries and at the same time imposed structural adjustment programmes to restore economic growth. The programmes, based on orthodox neo-liberal economic policies, were disputed, due to their conditions and negative social consequences. The World Bank reviewed and gradually modified its policies, but core approaches were largely maintained.

3. Growing Challenges

Particularly during the last two decades, the challenges related to globalisation, the global economy and international economic management have grown.

Progress in developing countries during the second half of the 20th century was generally dramatic and unprecedented (Jolly *et al.*, 2004: 185–188, 204, 247–256; UNDP, 2004: 129, 280–281; UNICEF, 2004: vii, 1). Real per capita incomes more than doubled and poverty decreased.⁴ Life expectancy was lengthened and education expanded. However, during the last two decades, poor countries lagged behind, income distribution worsened and the gap between the richest and the poorest countries widened.⁵ At the turn of the century,

4 Poverty measures vary according to definitions, cut-off lines, etc. Generally, income poverty rates and even absolute numbers have fallen, but during the last two decades absolute numbers have increased particularly in Europe and Central Asia, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 1997: 15–23, 2003: 42; World Bank, 2001: 15–29, 2003: 2).

5 Measuring global gaps is complicated and the results depend considerably on the measures used. The absolute gap in average income per capita between rich and

there was still massive human deprivation. The number of least developed countries (LDCs) had doubled, amounting to one fourth of the world's nations. Most Latin American, African and transition countries had low or negative economic growth with stagnant or declining living standards for the majority of the people. More than one billion people survived on less than a dollar a day.

Globalisation is an extremely complex and varied process, entailing benefits as well as problems. But because of the way the global economy now works, many developing countries, particularly the small and weak, experience more problems than benefits. Private financial flows are not usually directed to poor, unstable countries, while capital and brains easily flow out. Natural resources are exploited, but export earnings often remain low and debt burdens high. Human and financial resources for development purposes are scarce. During recent years, development aid has amounted to less than half of the 0.7 per cent target.⁶

In 1974, the UN General Assembly supported the introduction of a new international economic order, NIEO (UN, 1974a and b), but mighty industrial countries strongly opposed changes in international power relations and a redistribution of incomes and assets. A group of 'likeminded' countries, including Norway, were in favour of a new order and kept the NIEO on the agenda for a long time. But the results were meagre and even the 'likeminded' sometimes had problems when moving from principles to practice (Utenriksdepartementet, 1992: 37–46). Gradually, concerns about global governance and disparities were put aside.

During recent decades, Western countries have been deeply involved, directly and indirectly, in the economies and politics of many poor countries, exploiting resources and curtailing the sovereignty of governments, but concepts such as 'imperialism' or 'neo-colonialism' have not figured high on the UN agenda. There were glaring excesses of international trade and capital movements, but initiatives to improve global governance did not lead to a strengthening of the UN system. On the contrary, the main UN was weakened at the same time as the global challenges grew. The influence

poor countries widened enormously. The relative gap overall fluctuated within a relatively narrow margin, but there were considerable regional differences. The gap between the richest 20 countries and the poorest 20 has doubled in the last three decades, according to the World Bank (World Bank, 2002: 2, 183).

6 The United Nations in 1970 adopted the target of 0.7 per cent of donors' gross national product for official development aid.

of the transnational corporations (TNCs) increased enormously, but the UN programme on TNCs was closed down early in the 1990s. UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) followed up on issues related to international trade and finance, but lacked resources and clout. In 1999, the UN Secretary-General established a global compact with UN agencies, companies, labour and civil society organisations to promote human rights, the environment and a more sustainable and inclusive global economy. The network is an innovation that might entail positive changes, but it does not measure or regulate the behaviour of transnational corporations.⁷

4. Global Management

A fundamental challenge for the UN system today and in the future concerns management of the global economy.

During the 1990s, the emphasis on poverty increased and 1997–2006 was declared the first UN Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. This is important, but not enough. The causes of the increasing disparities at global and national level, of the polarisation among regions and countries and the marginalisation of the poor must be analysed and addressed. But there is limited information about international economic operations and there are no global arrangements to manage, guide or regulate the action. The UN Millennium Declaration underlined the importance of good governance both within each country and globally. It called for a multilateral trading and financial system that was open, equitable, rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory (UN, 2000d). But it remains unclear how this is to be achieved. The responsibility lies with many different actors, not least the powerful, rich nations, although the majority of developing countries also have a role to play.

The challenge for the UN is to strengthen the focus on the need for global governance, increase the knowledge and understanding of the global economy, analyse alternative ways of organising the economy, consider measures to prevent or reduce negative repercussions of globalisation on poor countries and people, and promote actions to this effect. Measures that need to be taken or reinforced include: strengthening of research, technology and information focused on the needs of developing countries; extension of assistance to small countries dealing with large transnational corporations; further elaboration of global statistics to track the international sys-

7 See www.unglobalcompact.org

tem; exploration of more effective debt relief strategies; and development of innovative ideas to tax capital movements or polluting activities – just to mention a few.

Proposals to improve global governance must be seriously considered, even if there is resistance among Western governments. Such proposals were included in the Nordic reform projects in the 1990s, but have not been actively pursued by the Norwegian government in recent years (Nordic UN Project, 1991; Nordic UN Reform Project, 1996; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004a and b). The UN Secretary-General has suggested various measures to promote a more enabling environment for people-centred development and improve management of the global economy, including proposals for a strengthening of the role of the UN, particularly ECOSOC (the Economic and Social Council) (UN, 2000c: 8, 2002: 8 and 2004c: 54–56, 2005a: 18, 43–45). More far-reaching governance proposals have been made, including the establishment of an economic security council, an expanded role for UNCTAD, reduction of the power of the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO (World Trade Organisation), even abolishment of the World Bank, creation of a world financial authority, a global central bank and an investment trust and transfer mechanism (Childers and Urquhart, 1994; Commission on Global Governance, 1995; Griffin, 2003; Storm and Rao, 2004; UNDP, 1999).⁸

Environmental sustainability is closely related to the global economy, financial flows and terms of trade, the exploitation of natural resources, production and consumption patterns. Different bodies both within and outside the UN system are dealing with various aspects of the environment, but the problems – climate change, deterioration of soil and water, and depletion of fisheries, forests and biodiversity – are generally not being reduced. On the contrary, they are increasing at an alarming speed, as a result of production and consumption patterns in the rich countries and transfer of these patterns to the rest of the world.

There are now more than 400 regional and universal multilateral environment treaties in force,⁹ and the environmental conferenc-

8 Questions related to global governance are discussed among others in Emmerij et al., 2001: 197–204; Development and Change, 2003, Vol. 34, No. 5: 789–807, 2004, Vol. 35, No. 3: 547–612, No. 5: 1037–1091; Jolly et al., 2004: 309–314.

9 Some of the most important are the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the Convention on the Conservation of Migrant Species

es in Rio in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002 sharpened the focus on the challenges, linking the environment to broader social and economic issues. But there is considerable reluctance, not least among rich, industrial countries, to establishing compulsory mechanisms for enforcement and allocating resources in anything like the amount needed. Sustainable environment was included among the Millennium Development Goals and several indicators will be used to monitor progress, but there are – typically – no time limits related to these goals.

Increased emphasis and additional efforts are urgently required to make production and consumption environmentally sustainable in both industrialised and developing countries. It is high time to consider, among other things, the organisational set-up of the UN system itself and means of creating more effective action and synergies. Examples are the creation of a world environment agency with broader functions and more resources than the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and an environmental governance body – possibly combined with an economic security council – at the highest level of decision-making in the UN proper. In his latest reform document the UN Secretary-General has made some, though limited proposals along these lines (UN, 2005a: 19–20, 56–57).

5. What Kind of Development?

Particularly during the last two decades, the main emphasis of development efforts has been very narrow, and the focus has been first of all on economic growth and a limited set of economic goals. Social aspects of development have been sidelined. The main UN has been critical, though not always very outspoken, about the dominant approaches and has called for a broader, more people-oriented notion of development: adjustment with a human face, to use the expression coined by UNICEF (Cornia *et al.*, 1987).

An important initiative was the Human Development Report, HDR, published annually from 1990 onwards by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme, 1990–2004). The objective was to analyse how economic growth translated – or failed to translate – into human development. The reports brought together de-

of Wild Animals, the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention to Combat Desertification.

velopment concerns and human rights, placed people at the centre of development and defined human development as the broadening of choices. Freedom of choice was combined with the need for national and international action to strengthen human capabilities by improving nutrition, health, literacy, training, and civil and political rights. The reports analysed global trends and focused among other things on the growing disparities between rich and poor. A human development index, HDI, composed of indicators of life expectancy, education and income, was used to rank the world's countries (UNDP, 1990). The reports attracted considerable attention and laid a basis for the UN Millennium Assembly in 2000.

Acknowledging not only the achievements, but also the failures of development efforts so far, the UN tried at the Millennium Assembly to gain support for a new course. The Millennium Declaration established important principles and guidelines for future action and the response was more positive than foreseen. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were supported by all member states and the Bretton Woods institutions in addition to the main UN (UN, 2000c and d).

The MDGs represent a significant step forward, making poverty reduction a central objective and including important social targets: the improvement of health and education. Achieving the goals is a formidable challenge, requiring extraordinary efforts from both donors and developing countries. It remains to be seen how the Millennium priorities will be integrated into development models and policies. The list of MDGs is a simplified skeleton taken out of the context of much broader issues. The goals do not present a complete development agenda. Important aspects are missing and means to reach the goals unspecified. Development is an extremely complex process, far more complex than many people tend to think. Even a relatively broad notion of development, such as the one promoted by the Human Development Reports, does not capture all the intricate and intertwining dimensions of development within the context of the world's nation states. And each country is unique. Economic bases, social structures, population composition, political systems, cultural values and traditions vary – not only from one country to the next, but often within the framework of each country.

The basic question is: what *kind* of development? Or what kind of society? Human progress can take place with different patterns of economic and social change. But modernisation in developing countries has often been pursued according to foreign (capitalist or socialist) models, introducing infrastructure and institutions, manu-

facturing industry, technological advances, consumer goods and amenities from industrial countries in a rather haphazard way, without much regard for local conditions or traditions. Neo-liberal economic policies were developed in the capitalist West under circumstances that differ markedly from those in poor Third World countries. Nevertheless, the policies were introduced worldwide with the assumption that one size fits all.

The development paradigms and policies pursued particularly during the 1980s and 1990s failed, despite revisions, to live up to expectations with regard to rapid economic growth and poverty reduction. In fact, some 60 to 80 developing and transition countries have suffered declines in their level of output and living standards over the last two decades (Jolly *et al.*, 2004: 310). Most serious were the failures of economic growth and the widespread deprivation in LDCs, above all in sub-Saharan Africa. The reasons for this are many and complex. Industrial countries failed to live up to their commitments with regard to the transfer of resources, debt relief was insufficient, terms of trade were unfavourable and many poor countries experienced political instability, mismanagement and conflict.

But there is also a need to reconsider the notion of 'development', particularly in relation to poor countries. Many people in the West take for granted that developing countries should become as similar as possible to the industrial nations, and people in the South often try to copy Western lifestyles, associating them with a higher material standard. But Western modes of production and consumption are environmentally unsustainable, particularly on a large scale, and are not adjusted to other continents with their own social, economic and ecological challenges. Travelling extensively in sub-Saharan Africa, I have been struck not only by the widespread poverty, but also by the marginalisation of the peasantry, the extent of the rural exodus, the galloping urbanisation, the miserable slums and the mass unemployment. Further, socio-cultural cleavages are often dramatic, between the past and the present, original and colonial, modern and traditional, foreign and local, village and town, old and young, and these give rise to tensions, insecurity and discontinuities that must have a negative impact on societal evolution. The widespread depreciation of traditional cultures and social patterns does not make the situation easier (Skard, 2003a). To promote balanced and durable responses to internal and external challenges, giving people a chance to live longer, less burdensome and more fulfilling lives, it is evident that new development models and approaches are needed.

Missing culture

Prevailing development models are heavily influenced by their cultural origins. Analytical tools, indicators and ideas concerning progress, modernity and development tend to leave out the cultural environment in which change is supposed to take place. Local lifestyles, value systems and beliefs are ignored and the cultural implications of modernisation efforts unacknowledged.¹⁰ The narrow, top-down, standardised economic approach needs to be replaced by broader, more flexible notions of development, giving room for socio-cultural dimensions and different policies according to local aspirations and conditions. The equation of development with modernisation and modernisation with Westernisation should be broken and development brought into its proper cultural context. Defining development objectives and modalities should also become a more participatory process, involving the populations concerned.

Culture can be defined in different ways. It can refer to the entire way of life of a society, encompassing its spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features (UNESCO, 2001). Or it can be defined in subjective terms as the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society (Harrison and Huntington, 2000: xv). In any case, balanced and sustainable development can be achieved only if cultural aspects, in particular central cultural values, are an integral part of development strategies. Many development efforts have failed, their effectiveness has been reduced or they have had negative consequences, because local capacities and practices, values and aspirations have been neglected, underestimated or thwarted. In development circles, 'culture' is often associated with local culture, which is basically perceived as an impediment to 'progress'. But local cultures are extremely diverse and multifaceted. There are cultures with a pervasive subordination of women and cultures that assign women a much higher status than they have in the West¹¹ – just to mention one example. Cultures may be the custodians of important humanistic values, or they may permit serious breaches of human rights. In any case, a firm cultural foundation may be a source of creativity, energy and empowerment, while disregard of cultural prescriptions can create alienation, conflict and violence.

¹⁰ Culture as an area of neglect in development policies is also discussed in Jolly et al., 2004: 210–215 and 308–309.

¹¹ Local cultures assigning women a high status have existed in many parts of the world, including West Africa (Skard, 2003a).

The integration of culture and development is far from easy. Besides definitional problems, culture is difficult to grasp and quantify. It forms part of highly complex contexts and interactions, is all-embracing and at the same time distinct. It is specific for each people, but may nevertheless contain universal features, though these are not always acknowledged. Cultural dimensions may be extremely sensitive, touching upon national, ethnic and personal identities and self-esteem. In a United Nations setting, references to culture, in particular criticism of specific patterns of conduct, have often been experienced as delicate and counter-productive. Such references may be seen as expressions of the view that a given culture is inferior to others or does less to safeguard the well-being of its people. The situation is particularly delicate when Western countries require changes in Third World cultures, easily awakening suspicions of 'cultural imperialism'. Efforts have therefore been made by the UN to remain 'culture-neutral', and to mention cultural occurrences only in brief and general terms, without reference to any specific country or region. This approach has facilitated the adoption of global resolutions and recommendations. But the cultural contexts do not disappear. When it comes to the implementation of measures, cultural dimensions have to be dealt with in one way or another.

In the 1940s and 1950s there was considerable interest in culture as a crucial element for understanding societies. As colonies gained independence, UNESCO initiated projects to strengthen the appreciation of and respect for cultural identity particularly of Third World countries, by preserving history and the cultural heritage and promoting dialogue between civilisations. But the integration of cultural factors into economic development was both difficult and controversial. UNESCO was not very development-oriented and in the 1970s the organisation was generally discredited due to management problems and political conflict. The culmination came when UNESCO published a study of the international flow of information and the role of the (Western) mass media. The media were infuriated, the US and the UK withdrew from the organisation and it ended up in a rut.

In the 1980s, there was a revival of interest in culture, due among others to the increasing globalisation and human mobility, and UNESCO and the UN proper made joint efforts during the Decade for Cultural Development (1988–97) to promote a cultural dimension in development. The report of the World Commission on Culture and Development was a milestone (UNESCO, 1995) and was followed up by the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversi-

ty (UNESCO, 2001). In addition, a Convention on cultural diversity is being prepared.

The challenge is to integrate cultural dimensions into development activities, not just support limited, isolated activities, and to promote changes in such a way that they do not imply a general depreciation of existing values and traditions. UNESCO has contributed to concepts and tools for a cultural approach to development (UNESCO, 2000a and c), while several UN organisations and bilateral donors such as Norway have made efforts to promote participatory development processes and include cultural aspects in their programmes. UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) and UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) have integrated cultural variables into programmes related to human rights, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health. Here they try to combine respect for specific cultures, ethnicities and religions with the promotion of internationally accepted human rights, including gender equality (UNAIDS, 2001; UNFPA, 2004). In other areas, however, including educational policies, cultural dimensions are often lacking or remain weak (Skard, 2004a and b). There is evidently a need for extended collaboration across the UN system to promote a more integrated approach.¹²

A social being?

Social dimensions are also weak or missing in predominant development models. In relation to the idea of rational economic man the Human Development Report represents an important step forward, with its perception of people in a social context (Douglas and Ney, 1998: 61–69). The Human Development Index is based on social indicators describing infrastructures that enlarge people's choices and strengthen their capabilities. Life expectancy, a good indicator of public health, results from commodities such as clean water, adequate sanitation, satisfactory medical practice and nutrition. Education is a good indicator of access to information, while purchasing power indicates the individual's prospects of acquiring material goods. The index thereby suggests to what extent the en-

12 Attempts were made when the Director of UNDP's Human Development Report Office, Sakiko Fakuda Parr, wrote about cultural indicators in the World's Culture Report (UNESCO, 2000c: 278–283) and the Human Development Report 2004 focused on 'Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World' (UNDP, 2004).

vironment enables people to develop their potential and lead creative lives (UNDP, 1990: 1 and 2004: 127–138).

The index is ingenious in the simple way in which it provides information about important aspects of people's living conditions. But the point of departure is basically individualistic. The indicators are 'social' only in a certain sense. They refer to environmental factors increasing the capacity of individuals to ensure their well-being. But the individuals are basically alone, much like economic man. Their social lives – the social structures into which they are embedded, their contact with other people, group affiliations, etc. – are not included in a systematic way. Some Human Development Reports have brought social dimensions into the analysis, focusing on themes such as gender equality and democracy (UNDP, 1995 and 2002), but the individualistic bias is nevertheless felt. The full richness of human social life is not part of the picture.

If humans are social beings, relationships are fundamental. Freedom of choice is extremely important, but does not take place in a social vacuum. From the moment of conception we depend on other people, and our relations with them are basic not only for our material, but also our emotional and spiritual well-being. It can be argued that social factors promote or inhibit an individual's freedom of choice and therefore can be considered in this frame of reference. But such an approach does not do justice to the importance and complexity of human social life. Community with others gives meaning and direction to our endeavours. Freedom is impossible without social security and power relations affect our choices. In addition to violence and war, social isolation and the lack of recognition are among our toughest ordeals. The freedom of choice paradigm does not take properly into account, either, the fact that the 'people' deciding on options are not always well-functioning adults. What about children and youth, the ill, handicapped and elderly whose dependency on others is acute, not only to lead a satisfactory life, but to survive – and what about those who must meet their needs?

A range of social issues

Social development has been a cornerstone in the work of the main UN since its inception, headed by ECOSOC and the Social Commission (later the Commission for Social Development). Over the decades, the main UN emphasised the social aspects of development to ensure that the central target remained a better life for all people. Research and data-gathering were organised and their fo-

cus was social issues: poverty and hunger, health and education, women and children, population, environment and human settlements, drug control and crime prevention, social integration, science, culture and communication. To promote social integration, special attention was paid to youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, minorities and indigenous populations. In recent years, HIV/AIDS has become a key issue. In the different areas, international norms were formulated and recommendations for action adopted. This work was extremely important, influencing attitudes and broadening the scope of development activities. A basic problem was that the social issues often remained fragmented. It was very difficult to integrate social and economic policies into a comprehensive notion of development, due among other things to resistance from professional economists and to entrenched, short-term economic interests.

As it became clear that the structural adjustment policies could not solve outstanding social problems and, in fact, created new ones, the main UN made efforts to bring social issues back to the fore. A number of world conferences were organised during the 1990s, dealing with human rights, women and children, food and education, human settlements, population, environment and LDCs (Emmerij *et al.*, 2001: 80–119; UN, 2000a: 157).

The Copenhagen Social Summit in 1995 presented an inclusive social agenda, placing poverty reduction, expansion of employment and social integration at the top in order to achieve safe, stable and just societies. An extensive programme of action was adopted and in 2000 further initiatives were agreed upon (UN, 1995a and 2000b).

In 2004, the ‘Copenhagen + 10’ report noted that progress had been less than expected and was uneven between regions and particularly across countries. Furthermore, situations of inequality remained pervasive and there was no all-encompassing approach to development. The aims of full employment and social integration had largely been put aside if not ignored entirely. The UN Secretary-General made a number of proposals to achieve more people-centred development including a proper integration of social and economic policies, better management of the social dimensions of the interdependence of nations in an increasingly globalised world and a renewed conception of the relations between the public and the private spheres and the role of States (UN, 2004c: 2–4, 54–57). But the international political climate had become more difficult, due among others to changes in US policies. So the Copenhagen +10 meeting held a low profile, seeking to reaffirm earlier recommen-

dations more than taking new initiatives. Only a brief declaration was adopted, underlining some general principles and calling for renewed commitment to continue the implementation of the Copenhagen programme (UN, 2005b:1–2). The programme is very comprehensive, so governments do not lack a basis for action. The challenge is to walk the talk, change national and international policies and carry out concrete measures. Here the main UN has an important role to play, providing dynamic leadership, stimulating innovation and supporting efforts, but reinforced mandates, competence and resources are needed.

6. The Controversial Family

Many social issues deserve further comment. Within the limited space available one question only will be highlighted: the role of the family in the development process. The contributions of families have often been overlooked or devalued in development paradigms and policies. This was also the case at major conferences during recent years and is mirrored, for example, in the Millennium Declaration and the Dakar Framework for Action for Education For All (UN, 2000d; UNESCO, 2000b; Skard, 2004a). Attitudes in many quarters are reserved. The family is often seen as a ‘conservative’ force in society, promoting traditional roles and values, maintaining subordination of women and children and even entailing oppression and abuse.

It is important to have a more nuanced view of the family. Families are not only different around the world, but they perform different functions: some are indispensable for human survival and well-being, while others may be in contradiction with accepted human rights. Families are often viewed through the prism of the rights and responsibilities of the individual. In addition, the collective dimensions should be appreciated, relating to the identity, security and affiliation of the members. Families may preserve fundamental values, but they may also be a dynamic source of change.

The family has traditionally been the basic social unit for the bearing, care and socialisation of children, for production and consumption, for affiliation and solidarity and for assistance to the weak, sick and elderly. But families globally have undergone rapid transformation as a result of technological and medical advances, and social and economic changes, including spatial mobility and migration. Changes vary from one part of the world to another, but practically everywhere, changes have led to social problems, because

families have become less able – or willing – to provide for the needs of all their members. In the West, families have typically lost a number of tasks, being reduced to small, unstable units with functions mainly related to childbearing, consumption and solidarity, and even these often to a limited extent. In sub-Saharan Africa, large, extended families still survive, but are often geographically dispersed, because members have to move to earn a living. In many countries, poverty, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS are destroying social structures and the number of female- or child-headed households has increased dramatically (Adepoju, 1997: 8; UNICEF, 2004; UN, 2004b).

By proclaiming 1994 as the International Year of the Family the main UN tried to bring the family into development (UN, 1989). The aim was to strengthen, not a particular family structure, but the functioning of families, and governments were encouraged to formulate national action plans to strengthen their livelihood. The World Summit for Social Development proposed measures to help the family in its supporting, educating and nurturing roles contributing to social integration (UN, 1995a: Programme of Action paras 8, 39–40, 80–81). Various UN organisations increased their focus on the family, but the forces undermining family functions and the consequences of this need to be better described and analysed. A particularly pressing need is to understand how transformations impact on the affiliation and care of family members: children, the sick and elderly, but also adults generally. There is reason to believe that in many cases needs are not properly catered for. In poor countries, many children are neglected, exploited or abused. Even in better circumstances, the support that family members receive may be greatly reduced. When families are dispersed or fall apart, women are often left with the total or main burden of caregiving, in many cases in a context of insufficient or non-existent care services (UNICEF, 1998: 27–31, 2001 and 2004; UNFPA, 1998).

Globalisation is putting the squeeze on care and care labour. In a globally competitive economy with fiscal pressures on the state, how can people find time and resources to care for each other and for those who cannot provide for themselves, and how can costs and burdens be distributed equitably between men and women, families, communities and the state? (UNDP, 1999: 77–83). Questions also arise regarding the conditions under which children should grow up so as to be able to lead meaningful and constructive lives. The problems in the West of children and youth not knowing how to make use of their liberty, and elderly people suffering from so-

cial isolation, are warning signals that the solutions promoted so far by industrial countries are not necessarily the best. All these issues should be given more attention by UNFPA and UNICEF, in addition to the UN proper. And as they are wide-ranging, they should be part of the concerns of many UN and other organisations dealing with human development.

7. Development only for Men?

In spite of efforts over many decades, the integration of gender or women's perspectives into development models and activities is still very incomplete.

In 1945 at the San Francisco conference where the United Nations was founded, there were only 14 women among the 535 delegates and advisors,¹³ but together with male allies they managed to get 'equal rights of women and men' into the Charter (Skard, 1986: 94–96). A Commission on the Status of Women was created, but its work remained in the shadows for a very long time. A new wave of feminism in the United States and Europe in the early 1970s brought the issues to the fore and the first international women's conference was organised by the UN in Mexico in 1975.

The Mexico conference called on the international community to accord importance and priority to measures that would improve the situation of women worldwide (UN, 1975: paras 182–212). A group of member states, including the Nordics, followed up and the UN proper became a driving force for gender equality. Several international women's conferences with extensive government, NGO and media participation were held during the 1980s and 1990s and a Convention against discrimination of women was elaborated (UN, 1975, 1979, 1985, 1995b). UN organisations established focal points and adopted policies and strategies to promote gender equality. The issues received increasing attention all over the world, women organised, governments ratified the Convention and activities were implemented. But women-related programmes and projects were often isolated and of limited significance.

An important task was the recruitment of women as professionals and leaders in the UN system. Organisations varied, but gradually numbers crept upwards. In the main UN, two organisations

13 One of the women was my mother, Åse Gruda Skard. She was a child psychologist and the only woman in the Norwegian delegation. Among the others were seven from Latin America, two from Great Britain, one from the US and one from China.

(UNFPA and the UN Institute for Training and Research, UNITAR) achieved 50 per cent women among professional and higher-level staff in 2004, and in eight organisations (including UNAIDS, UNESCO, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Food Programme, WFP) women accounted for more than 40 per cent. But nine organisations (mostly technical agencies) had less than 30 per cent. In the World Bank there was only 25 per cent female senior management and technical staff (UN, 2004a: 4–5; World Bank, 2004b: 7). The UN Secretary-General played a crucial role in appointing women as heads of funds and programmes,¹⁴ but with one exception (Gro Harlem Brundtland in the World Health Organisation, WHO, 1998–2003) the specialised agencies and financial institutions have always been led by men.

The recruitment of women staff is important, but not sufficient to ensure that women's interests are actively promoted by UN organisations. A review of gender focal points in the UN system in 2002 (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002) showed progress, though often limited, and there was great variation. Moving from rhetoric to reality is evidently no simple matter. Many organisations needed to clarify policies and approaches and implement much more systematic and comprehensive measures. Generally, the strategy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all programmes and projects was not very effective. The strategy was not widely understood and accepted, know-how was lacking and resources far from sufficient.

Globally, it is agreed that women's equality is a prerequisite for development and peace. Much more insight has been gained into women's lives and unacknowledged problems have been brought to light. Issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence against women and inequality of power in gender relations have been brought to the centre of global and national debates. Women have acquired access to national assemblies and governments, and laws and regulations have been adopted to strengthen the status of women. Their health and education have improved and fertility rates have declined. But very much remains to be done. In economic terms, the gender divide is still widening. There is a larger female

14 Nafis Sadik, UNFPA, 1987–2000; Sadako Ogata, UNHCR, 1990–2000; Catherine Bertini, WFP, 1992–2002; Elizabeth Dowdeswell, UNEP, 1993–98; Carol Bellamy, UNICEF, 1995–2005; Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, UN-HABITAT (United Nations Human Settlements Programme), 2000 - ; Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, UNFPA, 2000 - ; Ann Veneman, UNICEF, 2005 - . In 1998, the Secretary-General also appointed a female Deputy Secretary-General, Louise Fréchette.

presence in the labour market, but at the same time the terms and conditions of work for many have deteriorated. Women earn less, are more often unemployed and generally poorer than men. The fact that they have productive as well as reproductive roles is all too rarely recognised. Everywhere women constitute a minority in decision-making bodies. Most illiterate adults are women and most out-of-school children are girls. Despite legislation, violence against women is increasing. AIDS is taking a devastating toll of women and girls and trafficking has become a worldwide plague (UN, 2005c; UNRISD, 2005).

Including gender equality in the MDGs was a remarkable step forward (UN, 2000d). The empowerment of women was placed centre stage, but the comprehensive, holistic Beijing programme was not included, only a limited set of goals, mainly related to health and education. These may serve as a basis for crucial interventions, but it does not necessarily mean that gender issues become central in development thinking and practice, and that inequalities will be adequately addressed (Skard, 2003b). When the UN Secretary-General's report on the implementation of the goals was released as a preparation for the Millennium+5 meeting in September 2005 (UN, 2005a), women's groups from around the world expressed their disappointment. Gender equality was not integrated in a cross-cutting and substantive way throughout the report.¹⁵ Verbal support at the highest levels has evidently not been translated into systematic efforts ensuring that all policies and programmes are gender-sensitive and contribute to gender equality. Further endeavours, more effective strategies and increased resources are necessary. The organisational units dealing specifically with women's issues¹⁶ have a vital role to play, making sure that the questions are not sidelined, developing knowledge, learning lessons and supporting catalytic action. Reorganisation of the UN must not lead to a weakening, but on the contrary to a strengthening of these crucial functions.¹⁷

15 IWTC Women's Globalnet 275, April 12, 2005.

16 Such as the DAW, Division for the Advancement of Women, the CSW, Commission on the Status of Women, the CEDAW, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, and INSTRAW, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women.

17 In the last report including reform proposals from the UN Secretary-General gender equality is mentioned in connection with national strategies for development, but not reform of the United Nations (UN, 2005a).

8. Improving the UN System

'We the Peoples'

The United Nations Charter was an effort to express the ideals and common aims of all the peoples whose governments joined together to create the organisation. The challenge of representing all the peoples is indeed daunting, some would say impossible. Nevertheless this claim represents the fundamental basis on which the UN system is built, and the universal membership and worldwide concerns give the system strength and legitimacy.

Many factors influence the development of the United Nations system. One factor is the support it gains from the people of the world and the governments representing them, the extent to which they perceive the UN as useful instruments for promoting common aims. However, lack of knowledge about the system is a striking feature in many countries. Even in countries that are staunch supporters of the UN, such as Norway, ignorance and misconceptions are widespread among decision-makers as well as the ordinary public.

Coming out of a war situation and being a small country surrounded by great powers, Norway during the post-war years felt a strong need for an international system of law and a peace-promoting organisation like the United Nations. The UN's first secretary-general, Trygve Lie, was Norwegian and the government pursued active pro-UN policies. A strong UN Association was created to inform the Norwegian public and above all children and youth about the UN and international cooperation. This contributed to a solid rallying around the United Nations in the Norwegian population, but not necessarily an in-depth understanding of the UN system. UN documents generally have limited circulation and relatively few Norwegians have been employed in UN organisations. The mass media cover UN activities mainly in crisis situations or when there is reason for criticism. The lack of information led to the establishment of two multilateral research programmes in the 1990s, but their scope was limited. The UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) book series therefore represents a very important source of information. The challenge is to share the findings with a broader public.

The governing bodies of UN organisations may be criticised for the weak links of many governments to their populations and in the main UN for the overrepresentation of small states, but the organisation has an unprecedented representation of a wide range of peoples. A fundamental challenge for the system is to maintain and

if possible strengthen its representativeness – while at the same time promoting greater efficiency in decision-making and operations. Reform of bodies such as the UN Security Council and the Executive Directors of the World Bank is pressing in this regard – both requiring greater participation of developing countries.¹⁸

The recruitment of staff in the UN secretariats is another key issue – hiring people of outstanding quality and at the same time ensuring geographical representation, particularly at headquarters, and gender balance. Here member states must assist, promoting the competence of staff, not only pushing forward their own nationals. Progress has been made with regard to women, but efforts must continue. Regarding geographical distribution, the challenge is not only to hire staff from different developing countries, but people who speak international languages other than English and have a profound knowledge of Third World societies and cultures.

International, regional and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are extremely varied, but they can create valuable links between the UN system and civil society in different countries. Popular views and concerns can be shared and special experiences and competence brought to the work of the UN organisations. NGOs can be outspoken watchdogs for human rights and both supplement and correct the action of the UN, bring new and unacknowledged issues to light, mobilise public opinion and promote new forms of action. Particularly as regards women's issues, population and the environment the interaction between NGOs and the UN has been crucial.

Many NGOs cover a narrow range of issues and are dominated by Western interests and perspectives, but the increased emphasis on civil society during recent years together with the expansion of the Internet have led to a flourishing organisational activity across the globe. The large UN conferences, including special NGO fora, have contributed to an extension of networks in developing countries. The relationship between the UN and affiliated NGOs has developed significantly. NGOs have increasingly become partners in policy and programme matters and work with the UN community to help achieve the objectives of the Charter. The growth in numbers gives rise to logistical problems, though, particularly at global

18 The UN Secretary-General has made proposals in this regard in his last reform document (UN, 2005a: 22, 42–43). Johan Galtung has gone much further proposing a UN People's Assembly (elected by the people) and a UN Corporate Assembly in addition to the present General Assembly to strengthen global democracy (Galtung, 2004).

level and some governments wish to limit the NGO participation.¹⁹ Although organisational arrangements might be changed, care should be taken not to reduce the NGO role as an international democratic force, giving voice to people who otherwise are not heard.

UN collaboration with the business community has been extended during recent years. At times, when the main UN is being starved financially, it is tempting to mobilise resources from private companies, all the more so as these should contribute their share to the solution of common problems. It is also important to influence corporate values and actions. But a prudent approach is required. There should be no naivety with regard to the goals and agendas of private business. These are very different from those of the UN system and at times in clear contradiction with them. Requirements related to openness and accountability also differ. The forms of interaction and in particular decision-making processes should therefore be carefully managed to avoid an undermining of UN aims and legitimacy.

UN reform

The UN system has deficiencies and weaknesses. There are structural problems, but also poor management, inappropriate organisational cultures and inefficient staff. At the same time the organisations are being confronted with different and growing challenges. How can the system be strengthened and modernised to be able to deal with outstanding and new issues in a constructive way?

The tensions between might and right, between the rich and strong minority and the poor and powerless majority are always there, in addition to the disagreements that necessarily arise in multicultural settings. The balancing acts might at times seem impossible. But the challenges do not disappear by themselves. They must be addressed and the question is how the UN system can play its role in an effective way.

Reform processes are as old as the UN system itself and must continue, be redirected and reinforced. In this respect, member states must take collective responsibility, not concentrate on promoting their national interests. The Nordic countries have during the last decade elaborated several sets of proposals for organisa-

¹⁹ More than 2,600 organisations now have consultative status with ECOSOC and may send observers to meetings, comment on documents and discuss with the UN secretariat.

tional reform in the economic and social fields (Nordic UN Project, 1991; Nordic UN Reform Project, 1996; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004a). The Nordics cannot be accused of dubious motives, and their proposals were based on extensive studies and discussions.²⁰ They contributed to organisational change, but the measures were limited in scope. After taking office, the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has mobilised extraordinary support for a relatively ambitious reform agenda related to the UN proper, as well as the programmes and funds (UN, 1997 and 2002). And in 2005 he has made further proposals (UN, 2005a).

A decisive group of actors consists of the top leaders of the different UN organisations. Again and again it has been demonstrated how important their role is with regard to the effectiveness of the system. It is difficult to change the selection procedures, which are marred by many weaknesses; nevertheless, the emphasis on competence must be maintained and reinforced so as to ensure the best possible leadership. Geographic rotation is – and should be – basic, but nationality cannot be the sole criterion (Uruqhart and Childers, 1996). Further, forms of collective leadership should be considered, to improve management and decision-making.

The main UN has been an intellectual pioneer in issues of economic and social development, much more than is often recognised, although there have been omissions and distortions in its work. The UNIHP underlines the importance of a UN environment in which creative thinking and policy analysis can flourish. Leadership and management systems must promote such reflection and analysis (Jolly *et al.*, 2004: 276, 303–304). But there must also be adequate funding: general funds that give room for intellectual innovation, and earmarked funds for specific projects. At a time when general funds are being reduced and earmarked funds are concentrated on large programmes rather than more limited projects, the necessary support may be difficult to obtain. This issue should be carefully considered by donor agencies.

The dramatic underfunding of the main UN is a fundamental problem. The annual budget for the core functions of the UN proper amounted in 2000 to about 4 per cent of the New York City's budget and nearly a billion less than that of running of Tokyo's Fire Department (UN, 2000c: 54). The budget for an organisation like UNESCO is comparable to that of the municipal school budget in a

20 In 2004 the proposals were presented by a group of member states including Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

city like Oslo or an opera house in a European capital. Attempts to enforce reform by reducing or withholding financial contributions have in many cases weakened the organisations instead of reforming them. To make the main UN work according to its mandate there is an acute need for a substantial increase in resources on a predictable, continuous and assured basis, combined with systematic efforts to improve efficiency and results. Donors need to honour their commitments with regard to the level of development aid and seek to improve funding mechanisms (see, among others, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004a). On their side, developing countries must actively support UN reform.

The main UN and the World Bank

In contrast to the World Bank and the IMF, the main UN, including the UN proper, the specialised agencies, programmes and funds, has played an important role in trying to broaden the notion of development. During recent decades several specialised agencies have functioned less than optimally, while the Bank has received increased funding, extended its range of action and expanded its sectoral expertise. It has surpassed among others UNESCO and FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation) with regard to its use of educational and agricultural experts. Recently it was decided to give the World Bank a grant facility under IDA (International Development Association), further strengthening the Bank in relation to the main UN. And this comes in addition to arrangements such as the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which have been created as alternatives to the UN and thereby undermine it.

Countries such as Norway have always been behind the main UN and supported a balanced UN system. It is of vital importance that the pluralism of the system is perceived as an advantage, not a weakness, and exploited in a constructive way so as to promote broad and flexible development models well adapted to local conditions in developing countries. There is, particularly, a need to balance the economic thinking of the World Bank with other approaches. Collaboration and coordination within the UN system (including the Bank) need to be strengthened and reorganisation might be fruitful, but this should not lead to conformity of approaches and practices. To achieve creative pluralism, several of the specialised agencies need to be strengthened: improve their internal management, focus more on development issues and become more results-oriented.

Particularly urgent is the reform of UNESCO and its cooperation with development organisations. The five-year evaluation of UNAIDS can provide an example of constructive change processes in UN organisations (UNAIDS, 2002).

The work of the World Bank has changed fundamentally in the course of its existence. Established as a bank to promote private foreign investment, it gradually became an aid agency assisting economic development. During the 1980s and 1990s, in connection with the economic crises and debt problems, it took on a more normative and political role, intervening in national policies outside its mandate as a financial institution, promoting liberalisation, privatisation and market-friendly measures in general. Some administrative adjustments followed, but an independent evaluation should consider if the Bank still has a constructive role to play in the area of development, and in case it has, what the role should be and how the Bank's structure and functions should be changed accordingly. As a minimum the Bank needs to adapt better to a broad development agenda, become more effective in poverty reduction and more responsive to the needs of poor countries and peoples. Even if the Bank pursues economic goals, the social sciences should gain importance to ensure the integration of economic policies and social goals. A rethinking of approaches is required in the light of development shortcomings. Economic policies need not be orthodox neoliberal; and, in any case, alternatives should be elaborated – preferably with contributions from other organisations or institutions – so as to give recipient governments greater choice and ownership.

In addition to the main UN and NGOs, donors such as the Nordic countries tried to persuade the World Bank to focus more on social and environmental issues. The Bank took on board ideas related to poverty reduction and employment creation, human development, gender equality and environmental protection (World Bank, 1990–2004a), although the impact on country lending was slow and often limited. Lending in the social sectors increased markedly. But the self-sufficiency of the Bank is a problem. Preferring to do things by itself, it competes with the main UN, rather than benefiting from and strengthening it. In the area of UN coordination and reform the Bank is also a reluctant partner. Some people have squarely proposed abolition of the Bank. But poor countries need funds, and the question arises if these can be made available on more favourable conditions by other means.

Institutional changes are often cumbersome and slow, but experience shows that a limited number of actors can sometimes make

a difference, introducing important innovations despite complexities and resistance. Such changes may come from member states (for example, the 'likeminded countries' promoting gender issues) or from within the UN system (for example, UNICEF's 'adjustment with a human face' or the reforms implemented by Secretary-General Kofi Annan). Although they may be few in number it is extremely important that some member states – those that cannot be accused of only promoting their own national interests – are seriously concerned with the UN system and willing to take or support action to improve it: to engage in innovative thinking, initiate studies, develop and promote proposals for change and contribute actively to their implementation. This constitutes a special task for small or medium-size nations both in the South and the North.

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