

Ideas Matter: Voices from the United Nations

Abstract

This article is based on *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), a volume of oral history interviews with 73 individuals who were key to the evolution of UN development thinking. This article has two purposes: to provide a flavour of the UN story that those 73 voices tell in the book; and to discuss its central conclusions about the role of international organisations as intellectual actors. Oral history as method and product provides insights in solving a key puzzle in contemporary affairs – how ideas eventually become part of international discourse, policy, and action.

Keywords: United Nations, ideas, development, oral history, international organisations

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The story of UN contributions to development should be more familiar than it is. But many individuals who have struggled for greater multilateral cooperation have had largely undocumented careers and experiences that are essential to development history but largely absent from the historical record. This article is based on *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), which we wrote with Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly – a volume of oral history interviews with 73 individuals who were key to the evolution of UN development thinking. The essay provides both a flavour of the stories told in the book and the central conclusions about the role of international organisations as intellectual actors.

Our ‘voices’ constitute a resource for researchers examining a key puzzle in contemporary affairs – how ideas eventually become part of international discourse, policy and action. This is particularly

relevant as we approach the world organisation's 60th anniversary and a host of proposals for wholesale structural change are in the air (High-level Panel, 2004; Millennium Project, 2005; Annan, 2005). The UN and its specialised bodies and agencies have played a central role in bringing ideas and issues into the limelight on the world stage and formulating policies. We argue that this is the UN's comparative advantage, and that emphasis should be placed on intellectual creativity rather than on misplaced hopes of structural changes and Charter amendments.

UN outsiders – and especially the next generation of students and scholars – rarely experience the UN firsthand but usually through news clips and op-eds, websites and textbooks. The world organisation thus seems more a collection of boring bureaucrats than a creative centre of gravity for international problem-solving. The individuals whom we interviewed spent a substantial part of their careers in UN affairs and helped shape thinking about development and social justice over the last six decades. Their stories and commitments reveal a picture of professionals with an extraordinary range of past and present involvements in national and international life. There are secretaries-general and presidents, ministers and professors, social workers and field workers, as well as diplomats and executive heads of UN agencies – women and men from across the globe.¹ The narrators are an incomplete sample of key people found in the United Nations – and even among those included, we have space only for a small selection of their experiences. We can do little more than remind readers that there are thousands of others who have contributed to the struggle for a better world but whose voices remain unheard.

Our focus is on ideas because they are a driving force in human progress and may be the most important UN legacy. The lack of attention to the world organisation's role in generating ideas is perplexing, as the University of Oxford's Ngaire Woods wrote: '[I]deas, whether economic or not, have been left out of analyses of international relations' (Woods, 1995:164). We have employed the oral narrative to give life, colour and imagination to the experiences of individuals and to extract the meanings that each attaches to them. Whether it was the idealism of the early years of the UN, the anguish of the Cold War, or the initial euphoria and then the un-

1 The details about these individuals and other UNIHP information are available at www.unhistory.org.

certainties of the post-Cold War era, our interlocutors recall how their perceptions of events evolved over time and how tumultuous experiences forced themselves into public consciousness, how their own perspectives changed with knowledge, exposure and the passage of time.

We share the view expressed by *The Economist* in a review of a history of political thought: ‘You can record the 20th century as a story of astonishing technical progress. You can tell it as a rise and fall of powers, or as a painful recovery from modern society’s relapses into barbarism. But if you leave out ideas, you leave out what people were ready to live and die for’ (*The Economist*, 2004). Many of our interviewees agreed. ‘In some sense, ideas are the currency,’ Columbia University’s Michael Doyle, and a former assistant secretary-general, told us. ‘The UN has no power. It has good ideas. It convenes, it mobilizes, it inspires, it provides legitimacy. It is an idea shop. So at that level, ideas are very important. But at a different level, no one should think that you apply political science in public policy. It’s just not what happens. We’re responding, on the secretary-general’s staff, to what is happening out there in the world – to 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, to global poverty, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, to the need to protect children, the human rights agenda ... What the secretary-general and the best members of his staff are good at is seeing where these waves are coming from and identifying the ones to which the UN would add value, where the leadership of the secretary-general could make a difference, as it did on HIV/AIDS, on development issues, at least intellectually, on preventive diplomacy – trying to bring things together ... For that, ideas were useful.’

‘The UN is, of course, a practical body, and it is right that it would be mainly concerned with the urgent and the immediate,’ noted Harvard University’s Nobel laureate Amartya Sen during his interview. ‘Yet, it is also necessary not to be boorish in ignoring the ancestry of many of the ideas that the UN stands for and tries to promote. I think the UN has, taking the rough with the smooth, made good use of ideas, generally... As I have worked, over the decades, with different parts of the UN system, I have been impressed how some of them have been more explicit and more keenly aware of the sophisticated ideas that lie behind the day-to-day work and commitments of the UN. This can make a difference in giving intellectual depth to practical strategies.’

Lest the reader get the wrong impression, this book is not hagiography. Our interviewees appear, blemishes and all. Some are

selfless, some self-serving. Their personal accounts reflect despair and hope, tragedy and triumph, blindness and insight. Professional training, national origins, religious upbringing, class backgrounds, and ethnic and gender identities shaped attitudes and efforts. Many disagree among themselves. Their views are often unvarnished and refreshing, and we do not always agree with them.

The book itself has three main parts. Part One, 'Individuals and Backgrounds Make a Difference', introduces the cast of characters. This permits us to explore an individual's family, educational and professional background, and career choices, as well as her or his own ideas regarding social and economic issues. The formative years and social backgrounds of these individuals were critical in determining subsequent views. Childhood, family and religion play essential roles, as does education, particularly at the university level. Initial encounters with foreign languages, cultures and international careers are yet other crucial factors. Rich and intriguing sets of experiences help dispel facile stereotypes.

Part Two, 'Hope, Creativity, and Frustration', moves from the pre-World War II years of uncertainty, through the turmoil of the war itself and the hopeful founding of the current generation of universal organisations to the of tumult following the end of the Cold War in the globalising world at the dawn of the 21st century. In between, decolonisation and the broadening of development aspirations led to an expansion of the UN's influence on ideas and action, followed by a period of frustration and defensiveness in the 1980s.

Part Three, 'The World Organization, Ideas, and 21st Century Challenges', breaks with the preceding chronology and highlights what our interviewees said about the nexus of ideas, international public policy and multilateralism. Two chapters explore the international civil service and the power of ideas and people inside the UN, whereas another explores sources of ideas from 'outside' the world organisation – mainly from universities, independent commissions and NGOs. The final chapter contains conclusions and provides the raw material for this essay.

Here, we begin with an explanation of our use of oral history methods, and then profile those individuals who appear in *UN Voices*, some of whom also appear in this essay. The third and essential part of this article draws from the last section of the book and suggests evidence about four ways that ideas matter to multilateral cooperation.

1. Oral History as a Tool and a Product

The intention of oral history is to allow the voice of the interviewee, not the interviewer, to dominate. Nonetheless, we wished to compare and contrast perspectives across conversations, so our interviews followed a loose thematic structure within a biographical chronology. In presenting the material, we chose to go beyond the lengthy extracts from individuals in the popular oral histories of Studs Terkel (Terkel, 1984; 1970).² We imposed our own narrative on the text of *UN Voices* and to some extent in this article, so that readers are able to hear the voices but understand the main themes of international cooperation. As such, the extensive use of oral history evidence in this article naturally makes it read differently from the more conventional social-science journal article, based almost exclusively on written evidence or brief, more targeted interviews.

Although storytelling has been used worldwide to preserve family and social traditions, the use of recorded oral history as a method of social science research emerged with the advent of the portable tape recorder after World War II. Since then, oral history has become a method of data collection that cuts across the social sciences. It is a tangible *product* and not just a method. As a result of our questioning, new evidence was created, which can be analysed much like other historical documents. The value of oral history as a method of investigation is that it is qualitatively different from other written documentary sources such as reports, correspondence and diaries. Oral history allows for more nuance and passion than more antiseptic but objective scholarly prose. However, oral, like written evidence, must be verifiable and convincing (Ritchie, 2003: 117).

In selecting persons to interview, we sought balance and diversity with respect to countries of origin, backgrounds, gender and viewpoints. Our choice of interviewees was inevitably subjective. We chose individuals in senior positions who were able to reflect on several decades of experience – but this meant missing younger voices. We concentrated on economic and social development – and thus omitted many whose experiences were primarily in peace-keeping and humanitarian action. Our focus on ideas underplayed perhaps the contribution of many doers, not because they have not often generated important ideas, but because their contributions are less frequently written down and accessible.

² A similar effort depicts the AIDS pandemic (Bayer and Oppenheimer, 2000).

In the end, our budget and a publishing deadline limited the interview pool. Our goal was not to create a sample that was, in a conventional sense, scientifically representative. We are not even sure what that would mean, given the thousands of individuals who have participated in UN development work. Rather, we looked for people with a broad exposure to intellectual currents and UN debates, who would reflect candidly on experimentation with multi-lateral cooperation.

We also made another fundamental decision at the outset. We insisted that everything in the approved transcripts be used *immediately* by us and other researchers. Much would have been lost in disguising identities or in closing what was available until after the deaths of those interviewed. No decision comes without a price. Without the shield of anonymity or of confidentiality, it is likely that elements of frankness were sacrificed. Readers should also be aware that, paradoxically, the definitive *oral* history is what appears in the revised *written* transcripts.

In preparing for each interview, we scoured archives, personal papers and secondary material. Our colleagues at Columbia University's Oral History Office had advised that, for the 'conversational narrative' to emerge, such preparation was essential (Grele, 1991: 135). All except seven interviews took place in English. This was not 'linguistic imperialism' but a pragmatic decision to use a common research language. The passages of interviews conducted in French or Spanish were translated into English.³

2. People Matter

Who are the people whose voices we listened to and whose memories we tapped? A little over half served in the international civil service. They come from 35 countries, covering all of the world's regions and most UN major language groups. A third spent part or all of their careers in academia, and a quarter or so in government service in their own countries. A fifth are women, a reflection of the paucity of women in positions of influence at the UN until recently. Most have advanced degrees, and about half studied economics, undoubtedly reflecting our focus on economic and social development.

3 The transcripts of the oral histories have already informed six books produced by the project and will do so for the remaining volumes to be published by Indiana University Press. The complete transcripts, in their original language, will be made available on CD-ROM in 2006.

In terms of geographical distribution, a little over half are from the industrialised ‘North’ and the others from developing countries in the ‘Global South’. Ten per cent come from the former ‘Eastern bloc’, and 40 per cent from the ‘West’. Nearly one quarter experienced the dislocation of growing up as a refugee or in political exile. And many share strong recollections of their families’ experiences during the Great Depression and World War II. Virtually all express a powerful commitment to international cooperation to improve the lot of the have-nots.

We have sought to distinguish the ‘two UNs’ – the forum in which states make decisions, and the international civil service. Over the last six decades the decision-making arena for states has become more and more pluralistic. States are still the dominant actors in the UN, and national interests have not receded as the basis for making decisions; but non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector and other non-state actors are playing larger roles. Success or failure of the UN as an arena depends upon governments’ perception of their vital interests and the accompanying political will or lack thereof to move ahead.

We are especially interested in the often-ignored ‘second UN’ of semi-independent secretariats as well as outside experts and consultants whose job descriptions include research, policy analysis and idea-mongering. This second UN is capable, under certain circumstances, of leadership and influence that alter international outcomes. Individuals and leadership matter – for the UN as for all human endeavours. Success or failure in implementing ideas is, of course, not independent of governments, of resources, or of political support. Yet there is more room for manoeuvre and autonomy, particularly in the intellectual and advocacy realms, than is often supposed. ‘Human agency’ has become an important topic in the social sciences. We put it more simply in the penultimate sentence of the project’s first book, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges*: ‘People Matter’ (Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss, 2001: 214).

3. Ideas Matter

The final sentence of that book is the springboard here – ‘Ideas Matter’. What precisely do we mean by ‘ideas’? They are beliefs held by individuals that influence their attitudes and actions, in our case, towards economic and social development. Two types, *normative* and *causal*, are worth distinguishing at the outset. Norma-

tive ideas are broad, general beliefs about what the world should look like – that there should be a more equitable allocation of world resources, for example. Causal ideas are more operational notions, about what strategy will have a desired result or what tactics will achieve a particular strategy. At the UN, causal ideas often take an operational form – for instance, the target of 0.7 per cent of national income as overseas development assistance (ODA). Causal ideas are, therefore, more specific, but they usually are much less than full-blown theories (see Bøås and McNeill, 2004). For example, if we were to begin with the sweeping ethical proposition that the world should be more just, then the idea of a more equitable allocation of resources can be both a normative idea as well as one way to improve international justice.

Research on the role of ideas can be grouped into three broad categories. The first, liberal institutionalism – such as Judith Goldstein’s and Robert O. Keohane’s analyses of foreign policy (Goldstein and Keohane, eds, 1993) and Kathryn Sikkink’s on developmentalism in Latin America (Sikkink, 1991) – is concerned with how organisations shape the policy preferences of their members. Ideas can be particularly important to the policy-making process during periods of upheaval. When we think about the end of World War II, of the Cold War, or of the post-September 11 challenges, for instance, ideas provide a conceptual road map that can be used to help us understand changing preferences and definitions of vital interests of state and non-state actors alike. This approach helps us to situate the dynamics at work among ideas, multilateral institutions and national policies. It also enables us to begin thinking about how the UN influences elite and popular images, as well as how opinion-makers affect the world organisation.

The second category consists of expert-group approaches, which include Peter Haas’s epistemic communities (Haas, 1992: 1–36; Haas, Keohane and Levy, eds, 1992), Peter Hall’s work on analysing the impact of Keynesian economists (Hall, ed., 1989), and Ernst B. Haas’s work on knowledge and power (Haas, 1994; and see Haas and Haas, 1995: 255–284) as well as more recent work by Sikkink on transnational networks of activists (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). These approaches examine the role of intellectuals in creating ideas, of technical experts in diffusing them and making them more concrete and scientifically grounded, and of many people in influencing the positions of other actors, especially governments. Networks of knowledgeable experts influence a broad spectrum of international politics through their ability to interact with policy-

makers irrespective of location and national boundaries. Researchers working on HIV/AIDS or climate change, for instance, can have an impact on policy by clarifying an issue from which decision-makers may deduce what is in the interests of their administrations. Experts can also help frame debates by narrowing the acceptable range of bargaining positions in international negotiations. They can introduce standards for action. These networks can help provide justifications for alternatives, and often build national or international coalitions to support chosen policies and to advocate for change. In many ways, this approach borrows from Thomas Kuhn's classic on scientific revolutions (Kuhn, 1970).

The third category consists of so-called constructivists such as Alexander Wendt (Wendt, 1999) and John G. Ruggie (Ruggie, 1998). They seek to determine the potential for individuals, governments and international institutions themselves to be active agents for change rather than mere robots whose behaviour reflects the status quo. The critical approaches of those influenced by Italian Marxism, such as Robert Cox and his followers (Cox, ed., 1997; Cox and Sinclair, 1996; Hoare and Smith, eds, 1971), are also pertinent. These view the approach and ideologies of organisations, including the United Nations, as heavily determined by material conditions. As such, the UN system has spawned or nurtured ideas that have called into question conventional wisdom as well as reinforced it.

The voices from the oral history interviews that we quote here help substantiate four propositions about ideas (see Weiss and Carayannis, 2001). The first is that ideas can change the nature of international public policy discourse. The second proposition is that ideas can help states as well as individuals to define and redefine their identities and interests. The third proposition is that ideas can alter prospects for forming new coalitions of political or institutional forces. The fourth possible influence is that ideas become embedded in institutions and challenge not only the founding principles of those institutions but also help in setting future agendas. The establishment of new agencies is one manifestation, as is the 'mainstreaming' of such issues as rights and the creation of new units within governments and established organisations.

4. Ideas Change International Discourse

Ideas can influence international public policy by ploughing what becomes the acceptable middle ground for intellectual engagement. Stated in another way, they can change the nature of international

discourse – a necessary, albeit insufficient, step on a path leading to new policies and eventually to altered behaviour. The intellectual agenda, the public policy lexicon and the language of diplomacy look very different over time as a result of ideas promoted and implemented by the UN. What earlier was unthinkable may have become mainstream; and what earlier was received wisdom may have become obsolete. Dharam Ghai, the former director of the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) told us when ideas fly: ‘The idea has to have some power. It must be relevant. And it should fit the time. These days, things go very fast. The international development community is well connected. So when some good ideas come, either from within or from outside, and they are relevant and they make sense, people try to join the bandwagon... A lot of the time these things are in the air... A concept emerges which captures this... Then it spreads very rapidly.’

Ideas – even when misunderstood, distorted or misused – can be important, which is why we have tried to get a better handle on the UN’s impact on the intellectual marketplace. Samir Amin, speaking with us about his exposure to the UN as a development scholar over several decades, pointed to what had happened to his own notion of ‘de-linking’ and its subsequent influence on scholarly debate: ‘I am among those who are responsible for this expression... It strikes me as controversial and a poor choice. I mean the choice of the word, because in the social sciences, one inevitably uses the terms used in daily discourse which have a generally accepted meaning but may not have the same significance in the analysis that one is undertaking... I’m pressing my point of view because I have always, at least early on, defined what I meant by “de-linking” by making clear that it is not autarchy. It doesn’t mean “good-bye”, we’re emigrating to another planet, we’re breaking off all relations... It’s not that at all. It’s a strategic choice that involves subordinating foreign relations to the imperatives of progressive domestic change... I’ve had the experience of discussing this with [former Tanzanian president Julius] Nyerere who really appreciated the term...and I was quickly persuaded that he really did not understand it... The term “de-linking” has thus been totally integrated into the national-populist discourse...but in the process completely lost its rigor.’

‘It is useful to have words, even if they are not followed by deeds,’ said Stéphane Hessel, *Ambassadeur de France* with a lifetime’s experience in multilateral organisations including having worked as a young UN staffer with Eleanor Roosevelt in the late 1940s. ‘There is a tendency...to say that it is better not to have words if you don’t

have deeds... People who are not capable of having their words followed by deeds, should they therefore shut up? I would say the opposite. I would say that words carrying ideas have a long-lasting effect. If it had not been for people like Socrates or Hegel, we would not have the kind of view of the possible future of humanity that we do have. Therefore, it is good to have the Universal Declaration. It is good to have even a strategy for the Third Development Decade. They carry something which is wishful, wishful thinking. And one should, perhaps, not underestimate the fact that they do carry forward hopes and potential.'

Adebayo Adedeji, former executive-secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), continued in this vein: 'Good ideas never get forgotten. It may take a long time for them to impact on policy, but as long as they are sound they keep bouncing back until something is done.' Leticia Shahani, who chaired the second UN Women's Conference in 1985 and has attended the others, spoke about the crying need for the UN to remain relevant intellectually: 'I think this is a challenge before the leadership of the UN, to really seize those opportunities where its programs have international relevance. Some issues are "flavors" of the year or of the decade, and then other concerns replace them.'

Virendra Dayal, whose long UN career included being *chef de cabinet* for two secretaries-general, pointed to the relevance of human rights discourse for future idea-mongers: 'If you take, for instance, the ideas on human rights, there you can hardly say that the timing was perfect, and nor could you say that there was a great deal of packaging that was done. In fact, the ideas managed to survive in spite of the bad timing, and in spite of the third-rate packaging. They survived in spite of the Cold War and the apprehensions they caused among despotic regimes the world over. And the circumstances, in a sense, could not have been worse... Yet, because the ideas themselves were so remarkable, we have a body of normative law the likes of which the world has never seen before in respect of how human beings should be treated.'

The balance between the practical and the ideal in the battle of ideas was 'not a false dichotomy' but a preoccupation for Jan Pronk, the former Dutch minister and deputy secretary-general of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) who is currently the Secretary-General's Special Representative in the Sudan: 'I have seen so many proposals, publications, ideas based only on what ought to be the case, in the view of the author. Most of them are non-starters from the very beginning, not taking into account

power realities nor the economic reality of the day. So, you have to make a combination between what you think is feasible and what you want to be done.’ Pronk recalled the advice of his own mentor, Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen, who always said to his collaborators: ‘I want to change reality, but my time horizon is the next five years. I won’t set targets for 20 years from now. They would be just theoretical aims, and I wouldn’t know how to accomplish them because the instruments are not yet available. Then I’ll refrain from it, let others do it.’

The evolution of development discourse at the UN was interpreted by Janez Stanovnik, the former president of Slovenia and UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) executive-secretary. ‘The route in between the idea to the action,’ he said, ‘is not very straight. You may have, among academics, a certain line of thinking. Let me say Keynes’s doctrine is suddenly affecting the entire academic world. Everybody was Keynesian in the 1950s and the 1960s. This then got translated into development policies...[by] Robert Solow, or Hans Singer, or Raúl Prebisch, or Sumitro [Djojohadikusumo] in Indonesia, or Evsey Domar... This then influences also the delegates who are all educated in universities, or by their own life experience. They are part of this intellectual atmosphere, which is being created. Then, of course, this is reflected in UN discussions. The dialogue among the delegates in the UN leads to intellectual compromises.’

Ideas percolating within the UN can also help to influence popular language. Gert Rosenthal, formerly Guatemala’s permanent representative in New York and UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) executive-secretary, described how: ‘It is usually a cumulative process, where some seminal ideas which tend to be discussed among a very limited group of people, sort of bursts into the public consciousness, through media, through word of mouth, through documents. And all of a sudden, maybe two, three, five years after the document came out, everyone is repeating some of its main points as if they were gospel... For example, in all capital cities of the world today, you will see special arrangements for handicapped people on curbsides, access to busses, and preferential parking. And those are ideas and commitments that were born in the UN.’

Juan Somavia, currently ILO’s director-general and former Chilean permanent representative, emphasised that for most issues civil society has led, but that the UN has played ‘a very fundamental role as a legitimizer of ideas that are nascent, of things that are

out there... The moment the UN begins discussing an issue, and it becomes part of programs, and institutional debate, et cetera, then it legitimizes something that otherwise could be perceived of as marginal in society.’

Secretary-General Kofi Annan listed a number of areas in which he thought that the UN shaped discourse – the environment, development assistance, governance – but pointed to one in particular: ‘We have defined what development means, what development should mean for the individual through our *Human Development Reports*. It is not a question of statistics. You are dealing with health, you are dealing with clean water, you are dealing with education, and all that. So we have given a functional and meaningful definition to poverty and development, which wasn’t there before. And I think this is very important for policy-makers and for people who want to measure progress’.

Harvard’s John Ruggie mused about the difference between using ideas in a classroom at Columbia University on New York’s Upper West Side versus in a conference room as UN assistant secretary-general on the East Side: ‘That’s what you do with ideas, you try to persuade. But in the first instance, as an academic, you can live with just persuading yourself. You can convince yourself that sooner or later others will catch on to how smart this really is. But you can’t do that here. If you don’t persuade others right away there isn’t any tomorrow.’

Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brazil’s president when we interviewed him but a former UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) researcher as well, stated that the broadening of the concept of development to include social aspects was ‘a consequence of United Nations presence across the world in order to enlarge views on what the government role is, and also the concept of equitable development, and the Stockholm conference, the Rio conference, and now the Johannesburg conference, plus the women’s conference in China... All this, I think, has a direct effect on social science in general, even when the persons are not aware of the fact. But the renewal of the issues and themes was very important, a subject matter to be taken up by universities, and by political parties. I think this was a very important role played by the United Nations’.

Our interviewees variously praised or scorned the pro-Third World posture of UNCTAD, but it clearly was in the eye of many intellectual storms. Its main contribution was as an incubator for many dramatic changes over 40 years in the way that we talk about

trade, finance and development. Rubens Ricupero, its secretary-general when we spoke with him and who spearheaded the published history of the agency (United Nations, 2004), insisted on historical context: ‘Fifteen years ago, when I was working in the Uruguay Round, very few people in the industrial countries would admit in public that the world trading system was full of imbalances that worked against the poor. Even today, the Americans don’t recognize it officially. Despite this, nowadays, it has become so widely accepted that it is practically what Antonio Gramsci would describe as a philosophy that became commonplace... Nowadays, not only all the NGOs are saying that, but the World Bank, the IMF, Clare Short [then UK international development secretary], all the ministers of development cooperation are saying that. I hope that UNCTAD was in part responsible for the change.’ With an element of satisfaction, he concluded: ‘Much of what the World Bank is doing now on trade is very close to what we have been saying.’

5. Ideas Redefine State and Non-state Interests and Goals

One special concern was to permit our narrators to illustrate the impact of ideas over time on the willingness of governmental and international bureaucracies to embrace, or at least consider, the perspective of common interests rather than narrower ones. This kind of impact includes the ability of new ideas to provide a tactical guide to policy and action when older and existing norms conflict, or when sequencing or priorities are disputed.

As a former head of state, Guido de Marco had an excellent vantage point from which to observe the impact of human rights ideas, both universal and European, on Malta: ‘I think I was strongly influenced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I was even more influenced by the Charter of Human Rights of Strasbourg. Here we have a court for human rights whereby human rights are not only something for domestic application, but nations agree to subject themselves to a court of human rights, which has its seat in Strasbourg. Indeed, the very first act which parliament approved, when I became minister for justice and the interior, was that the Charter of Human Rights, the Charter of Strasbourg, the European Declaration of Human Rights, became part of domestic law in Malta. I wanted to ensure not only that Malta is bound internationally through the Charter of Human Rights, but that Malta is also bound domestically by the Charter of Human Rights.’

The notion that democratic states have a long-term national interest as well as moral responsibility to promote human rights was christened ‘good international citizenship’ (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998: 847–870) by Gareth Evans, Australia’s foreign minister in the late 1980s, who helped give it more concrete form for humanitarian issues as ‘the responsibility to protect’ (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001).⁴ It is this vision that underpins, for instance, Canada’s human security agenda with its conviction that there is a relationship between the provision of basic rights and wider international security (Axworthy, 2001). For advocates of good international citizenship, the promotion of justice is the key to lasting order even if they also ‘must convince others of their case, their competence, and their motives’ (Linklater, 2000: 493). The UN Charter, of course, was a clear statement of the need for calculations of common interests rather than narrower mathematics that stopped at national borders.

Ideas are slender arrows in the quiver of those seeking to take aim and ultimately reach an important enough issue to engage state interests. Nonetheless, a number of UN arrows have struck home. Nafis Sadik, a prominent leader on women’s issues and former executive head of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), illustrated: ‘We say that population and family planning is a huge success story for the UN. To get government to change policy is very difficult, and in a sensitive area where there were so many hang-ups, so many different points of view, so many sensitivities. There were religious sensitivities, social-culture, there was also this North-South suspicion. There were customs, and norms. To have made the change in getting all countries to have a family planning program without imposing anything on them, just by advocacy and demonstrating to them the need. That was quite a big achievement.’

Speaking about his own experience with the National Human Rights Commission of India where he went after retiring from the UN, Virendra Dayal spelt out the concrete link between ideas bandied about internationally and their local impact in South Asia: ‘These are ideas which, I think, have grown in our souls because of our work in the UN. But the interesting thing is this, they are not ideas which have grown only in the soul of UN people. They have radiated from the UN. My colleagues in the commission are, after all, justices of the Supreme Court of India. The chairman of my commission wrote a judgment when he was still Supreme Court chief justice,

4 See also the accompanying research volume (Weiss and Hubert, 2001).

saying that even if India is not a state party to X or Y international instrument, if there is nothing to the contrary in domestic law, India must consider itself bound in its conduct by those international laws and treaties... We were not a signatory at that time to the relevant convention having to do with the rights of women... He said, 'If there is nothing to the contrary in domestic law, then we must consider ourselves bound by international treaties on these matters.' So the UN's centrality, as a kind of a center of the planetary system from which radiate great ideas, must never be underestimated.'

Lourdes Arizpe, an anthropologist and feminist who was assistant director-general for culture at the UN Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), pointed to the political relevance of such norm-building efforts in Mexico: 'Even though it brings out resolution after resolution, so that you can paper the whole building with them, as I've heard it said, these resolutions place a mirror in front of governments and people... I've seen it in many meetings, where the powerless Indian groups or women's groups have actually taken documents from...the United Nations, and presented these to the officials from their governments, and have forced their governments to be more accountable because there exists this document which has been signed and ratified by a majority of countries in the world, showing that this is the way that governments should behave, or corporations should behave, or men should behave.'

Leticia Shahani reported on how many UN ideas had been instrumental for her own country: 'The North-South dialogue had helped the Philippines, a state that has been tied closely to the United States, sharpen our identity with the developing world.'

When Dharam Ghai was in Vietnam as part of a team assessing UN contributions to capacity-building for poverty reduction he was struck by the impact that ideas had had: 'One of the things that came out was how seriously the Vietnamese took the world conferences... First of all, advocacy was very important, on environment, gender, participation, poverty, and governance. As recently as the late 1980s, in Vietnam, poverty reduction was regarded as a diversion from economic development. They used to say, "This poverty thing is the product of global imperialism. The moment imperialism is brought to an end, poverty will disappear." Subsequently, they became converts to poverty reduction, and they have done an excellent job. I think the UN conferences and advocacy played an important role in their conversion!'

Another specific illustration came from Janez Stanovnik: 'The Brundtland Commission has had tremendous impact on governmen-

tal policy thinking. Documents of my little country's government now always speak of "sustainable development". I think that the "father" of this thinking is Nitin Desai, who was economic adviser to the commission. Certainly Sonny Ramphal has had a contribution to that. But theoretically as an economist, it was Nitin who was the "think tank," let me say. These I wanted to give as examples where ideas which are being germinated within the secretariat or with the secretariat's wisdom by appointing the right persons from outside the world to write the right kind of reports, which then come on the governments' table.'

As many of our interviewees found themselves in national administrations at some point in their careers, other personal experiences illustrate this kind of impact. One of the more disputed notions over the years has been setting targets. This operational idea, which some dismiss cavalierly as valueless, has influenced the way that governments do business (Jolly *et al.*, 2004: 247–275). 'Targets help, if they are the results of a political process involving not only bureaucrats, but also civil society. In countries where that has been the case, the 0.7 per cent target for ODA has been reached and maintained. That is how we did it in The Netherlands', noted former minister Jan Pronk. 'Quantitative targets also help countries to scrutinize each other. That is true, for instance, for trade liberalization targets, but also for climate change targets... Finally, targets should not be input oriented, but result oriented. The ODA target is not ideal, because it refers to an input – aid. Citizens will be much more convinced about the need of setting output targets, to halve poverty, to eradicate disease, to decrease child mortality, and so on.'

Lourdes Arizpe's voice was crystal clear in assigning responsibility: 'I find it terribly unjust to blame the institution, when many of the faults that are criticized do not come from the institution, but from the governments, because they have certain interests, and therefore pressure the institutions to behave in a certain way... It happens where governments put their national interests above the interests of having an institution that can manage spaces of negotiation in a global environment. But I think it is this myopia – short-sightedness of some countries that think it is in their interest to weaken the United Nations, because it gives them a greater power of acting, without being accountable... In the long term, it's going to be detrimental to that power because there is going to be no way of rationally solving all the conflicts that they are giving rise to in an interdependent world precisely by ignoring the human rights and the democratic principles that they supposedly espouse.'

In moving from the international to the national level, the itinerary and speed of ideas varied depending on the issue. UNIFEM Executive-Director Noeleen Heyzer told us: ‘The UN became the place where women could bring issues ignored at the national level into the international spotlight to be addressed by national governments.’ And she commented why that mattered: ‘When the ideas took a powerful form, they got recognized and accepted, because it spoke about women’s lives... With these international norms, women pressured for the revisions of national norms and policies based on international standards. We worked so hard to ensure that decision-making in the courts and in the criminal justice system also changed because of new legal standards and norms. So ideas became action which changed people’s lives.’

Rubens Ricupero noted how the contents of discussions in Rio de Janeiro – no longer the capital but still the heart of his home country – had had an impact on national policy: ‘The United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, the Rio Summit, in 1992, was a very important event in Brazil, because it was the first time Brazil abandoned a defensive attitude on the environment. Brazil has many problems on the environment, both in the Amazon and in the big industrial cities. There had been a tradition of defensiveness. This time, Brazil decided to host the conference as a way of raising public awareness for the issue. It had a tremendous impact. It helped give a boost to this environmental movement in Brazil.’

Gert Rosenthal noted that during the ‘fever of the Chicago School’s ascent, one of the things that was being said about ECLAC was the enormous damage that the commission caused in Latin America by pointing governments in the wrong direction. Mario Vargas-Llosa used that accusation a lot when he was running for president of Peru – a little like satanizing ECLAC for having condemned Latin America to poverty. And that is a little unfair, because what ECLAC did was interpret what was happening and wrapped it up in a conceptually coherent proposal. And to think that they were that influential that they could push all the governments off in the wrong direction is crazy’. In Rosenthal’s judgment, Latin America’s powerful industrial entrepreneurs, along with a small, but high-paid segment of the blue-collar working class, pressed for and received protective measures for a longer period than was economically healthy. Thus, he concluded, ‘there is a lot of misconception also as to what the UN did and didn’t do. And there are also misconceptions on what the original ideas of the UN were, and what

sort of adaptations of those ideas were that somebody borrowed heavily from outside but put them in a nicer wrapping’.

Max Finger, a former ambassador who spent almost 20 years at the US permanent mission in New York, remarked that ideas mattered even in the capital of the remaining superpower: ‘That is where I think the main role of the UN should be. Not in overriding Washington, which is the spirit of NIEO, but in feeding ideas that Washington can think about and come up with a response...IDA happened. Trade preferences happened. The World Food Programme happened. And these were all ideas that came from the UN environment and penetrated Washington.’

Noeleen Heyzer provided another illustration about the impact of ideas on government policy, specifically involving NGOs in helping to brief the Security Council: ‘We worked extremely hard to put the whole issue of women, peace and security onto the Security Council agenda. The Security Council is an extreme case of a highly controlled arena and it is very difficult to put various issues on their agenda. To change the dialogue and to put in new issues that changes people’s thinking is not easy... We used what is called the Arria formula...to allow real consultation... We brought women – the nongovernmental groups, and women themselves who were affected by conflict, to talk to the members of the Security Council to prepare for the Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. UNIFEM’s role was to get the space and to help women clarify their messages. We became the mediator of different worlds. It is not easy for different worlds to understand one another, I’ve learned. Therefore, we try to prepare the ground, help the women to crystallize their voice, make sure that their message is heard by members of the Security Council, and determine what the Security Council needs to hear before they can make certain kinds of decisions.’

‘In a funny way that isn’t always clear and certainly does not have a uniform pattern, the ideas percolate through, and eventually influence outcomes. That is a very Keynesian view,’ admitted Gerry Helleiner, Canada’s foremost development economist now a retired professor at the University of Toronto. ‘The power of ideas is greater than the power of vested interests.’ He then quoted Lord Keynes – ‘in the long run we are all dead’ – as a prelude to his own bottom line: ‘But that doesn’t alter the fact that ideas do move things as well as interests.’

6. Ideas Facilitate New Coalitions

Ideas can catalyse political and institutional forces, which alters the prospects for forming new coalitions that can tip the balance in favour of modest, and sometimes more dramatic, changes in policy. In thinking about sustainability, for example, Jan Pronk told us: ‘A new coalition sets through, with the help of different groups, which in the past were antagonizing each other.’

In determining how ideas are crystallised, Heyzer noted the importance of new partners’ coming together around an idea: ‘How do you create solidarity for the idea? How does it emerge? If I use the experience of the women’s conferences, it was trying to birth an idea out of collective discussion so that it is alive, and when it finally emerges everybody recognizes it as their own. It is creating a space, it is valuing different perspectives and creative discussion for the emergence of that idea... And then it is also the timing... But it is more a site, a space issue, and also a legitimacy issue. The UN system provides legitimacy for marginalized groups to have a powerful space for the articulation of their ideas.’

Alistair McIntyre, a former UNCTAD deputy-secretary-general who recently retired as vice-chancellor from the University of the West Indies, pointed out that putting together coalitions is unpredictable: ‘So the whole business of orchestrating a conference, and bringing an issue to international attention, requires much more attention to the marketing side than international institutions are typically capable of doing. And they don’t build coalitions that can do it for them... NGOs can help; but you can’t rely on NGOs alone... You have to try to find other constituencies – the private sector, the labor movement, farming communities, farming organizations. You have to disentangle the whole web of organizations in a country and see what is the best combination of forces you can mobilize for your particular aim. But we don’t have that kind of capacity in the UN at all.’

Bernard Chidzero was the first black African resident representative of UNDP and became minister in a newly independent Zimbabwe after leaving his post as UNCTAD’s deputy secretary-general. He provided an example of how the Integrated Programme for Commodities (IPC) and the Common Fund helped foster South–South cooperation and thus helped to solidify an emerging coalition – in spite of the fact that the IPC itself was never adopted: ‘In failure we succeed, because it lets us know our weaknesses and therefore how to overcome those weaknesses by taking necessary remedial measures. I do not think that this thrust of effort on commodities, or generalized preferences, for instance, to allow prod-

ucts of developing countries, particularly processed products, into markets of industrialized countries... was to no purpose, or achieved no results. No, on the contrary, it coordinated the different positions of developing countries so that when they went to negotiate, either bilaterally or within the multilateral institutions, such as the GATT, they would be singing the same tune if you want – or making sure that the consensus was not eroded by individual interests creeping in.’

Michael Doyle said that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were an idea that brought together disparate elements around common objectives: ‘The MDGs are the platform under which the UN Development Group (UNDG) convenes. This is UNDG’s work. UNDG is the place where the World Bank, the IMF, UNDP get together for their policy meetings. The MDGs provide a “constitution”, if you will, for the UNDG. That was one part. The MDGs also provide the agreed-upon country framework for development planning. This is the template through which the World Bank, the IMF, the regional banks, the bilaterals, and UNDP talk to a member-country about its development strategy. This is the template by which a country’s development is measured... And there were compromises. The most notorious one was that we had to leave out reproductive rights. I’ve had dozens of women’s organizations write me letters, cc’d to the Secretary-General, explaining why this was a retrogressive step: how could you possibly justify leaving out reproductive rights? And that was a very hard one. The reason was, reproductive rights were not in the Millennium Declaration, Catholic countries and the Islamic countries said “No”, and the United States wasn’t very much in favor either.’

The coagulation of new coalitions and partners around various environmental issues has been continual since the Stockholm conference. Paul Berthoud, who was part of the initial team in Nairobi assembled by Maurice Strong and served in numerous UN capacities, looked back: ‘One of the things which fascinated me in UN-EP – and it is very much relevant to the evolution of ideas – was the way in which...developing countries were brought into this venture of the environment. It is quite on the record that developing countries had been very skeptical about the whole idea... “Why don’t you do that in OECD? That’s your problem, not ours.” Now the genius of Maurice Strong was to go to them and tell them, “Look, poverty is your worst pollution, so why don’t you come and join. We are talking about the same thing.” And it worked.’

Perhaps the best indication that ideas are important is when they are seen to endanger fixed positions, which mobilise groups for *and*

against them. Nafis Sadik told us a story about traveling to Rome to see the pope on the eve of the Cairo Population Conference. In spite of the Vatican's well-known hostility to most population control measures, she was not really apprehensive because the Holy See had participated in all of the preparations: 'So I went in, and the pope was really not – you could see that he was not very happy. He started by asking me did I know that this was the year of the family. To him it seemed like this was the year of the disintegration of the family... "Why have you taken this different approach to your predecessors?" [he asked] ...I said, "No, not really, except that I have moved from a top-down demographic approach – and this has evolved in the two years of the preparatory process, with NGOs and expert-group meetings – to an individual needs approach". He said, "That is what I mean. There is no such thing as individual needs and rights in this. It is couples' needs"...The Vatican then organised meetings with Muslim groups in Rome – several of them. They called all these very conservative religious leaders. They sent out delegations to all the Muslim countries. I mean, they carried out a huge demarche around the world against the conference.'

A reflection from Pronk about coalitions is intriguing for those who think that change comes only from the top down: 'No idea is sustainable in itself if it does not have an appealing value to people who are not in the system. Anti-apartheid and nondiscrimination are examples of issues raised from below, not by the elite, not by intellectuals, but by people and victims themselves.'

Lourdes Arizpe embroidered on this theme by arguing that it was essential to create space for both elite and grassroots groups to come together in new ways: 'I would strongly argue that respect for other cultures does not imply discarding a global vision,' she said. 'We need both... It is a question of negotiating how the two come together. And there are all the mediating levels of the nation-state, of the regional unions or trade agreements, and of international institutions. This is why I think it's so risky that the United Nations has been left aside on so many questions in the last few years, because the United Nations is there to create the spaces so that the different powers can negotiate. If this space is forced to become subordinate to other powers, then there is no longer any space for negotiations to take place. The greatest risk for the world today is that negotiation becomes impossible.'

7. Ideas Become Embedded in Institutions

In social science jargon, ideas can become ‘embedded’ in an institution and influence its agenda. Thus, they can challenge not only the founding principles of institutions but also set future agendas. In fact, ideas so embedded can take on a life of their own and then foster or impede further change. Enrique Iglesias, the president of the Inter-American Development Bank and former ECLAC executive-secretary, mentioned that some of the earliest ideas in his regional commission had inhibited creativity by becoming ‘ECLA’s Talmud’. He went on to say that ‘social ideas deal with real life problems that are very different from the ones envisioned in laboratories’. He referred specifically to the experience of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, his friend and then Brazil’s president, whose ideas also ran into ‘limits of power and the difficult circumstances of the national and international reality’.

An institution is thus a visible manifestation that an idea has ‘arrived’. Institutional building (or ‘aggrandisement’ according to critics, including many of our interviewees) is the veritable stuff of bureaucratic battles. Ideas can be used to build empires, however small or large.

Robert Cox, an ILO official for a quarter of a century before becoming a prominent political scientist in the US and Canada, suggested that on occasion the existence of new institutions could challenge the rigidity of existing norms. He also noted that pursuing such a strategy inevitably entailed risks. ‘I guess the reason why new institutions are created,’ he states, ‘is that those people who feel that the new idea is important are doubtful that they are going to be able to put it into action through the existing institutions. It is the rigidity of existing institutions that leads to the idea that if you want to start something new, you have to create another institution. Then the hope of some people would be that by creating another institution, you can inject some part of that idea into the existing institutions – that they should play along with it. And they should be influenced by its existence and take account of it in their programs and work out collaborate relationships and so forth, which is sort of an ideal formula.’

Leticia Shahani noted two crucial examples of the institutionalisation of ideas because UNIFEM and INSTRAW ‘were children of the Mexico Conference’. Having served as a Dutch minister of development cooperation on several occasions, Pronk told us why the ideas from new institutions and various women’s gatherings had made a difference to him and his government: ‘Gender became an

essential aspect of the criteria for the allocation of aid, because it was generally understood that poverty had become feminised – with consequences for children – and also that women are the one and only driving force in a people-centered, bottom-up development process.’

The ‘C’ in UNCTAD refers to what amounts to a perpetual ‘conference’. An observer thus might very well ask, ‘What is a better proof of waste?’ But Rubens Ricupero saw the creation in 1964 of a ‘counter-GATT’ as an essential institutional development in world politics: ‘UNCTAD had to be motivated by an ethical imperative –that is, to try to always look at things from the development perspective and giving more attention to the weak and vulnerable... This idea, this ethical imperative, this search for more justice in trade relations had been at the origin of UNCTAD and would have to be there always.’

Gamani Corea built on the thoughts from his successor as secretary-general in Geneva and recalled his first conference at the helm, UNCTAD IV in 1976 in Nairobi: ‘There were ideas, which were not on the negotiating table; they were not winners as you said, but were kept alive in one form or another and kept popping up from time to time.’ Corea also recalled the importance of keeping his institution’s ideas away from financial decisions: ‘The idea of converting UNCTAD into a specialized agency, to the best of my knowledge, arose after the UNIDO example in the later 1970s. Some of the leaders of the G-77, the stalwarts, thought that UNCTAD too should follow suit and become a specialized agency. I remember resisting... UNCTAD got its strength from its link with the General Assembly and the UN. Our influence and our ability to be effective would be greater if that link was kept. If it became a specialized agency with its own budget there was the prospect of people being able to withdraw from the membership and to cut the budget.’

The late Johan Kaufmann, speaking from the perspective of the Dutch foreign ministry where he spent his career and later wrote about multilateral negotiations, valued the ideas advocated by that first conference. They continued to be discussed precisely because a permanent secretariat was established. He thus took exception to the joke that UNCTAD really stood for ‘Under No Circumstances Take Any Decisions’.

Cox recounted how a useful idea, once institutionalised, can become trapped and perhaps ultimately killed depending on organisational culture. He pointed to the proposal to launch an Institute for Labor Studies, an idea supported by David Morse, the long-serv-

ing ILO director general (1948–69), to push the ILO to be more self-reflective. ‘The idea there, in my mind, was that an institution that has become successful in its routine becomes, in some ways, a prisoner of its success and goes on doing the same thing in the same way because it has worked. But, if it no longer is really dealing effectively with the issues that you can now perceive, then maybe it needs to be changed. And the idea was that you set up an institute which is geared to research primarily, but also to a kind of – training is not really the right word – educational effort among people who might be in key positions in the social policy field. Then you could develop a kind of critical mechanism to which the ILO, in its routines, might react in some way and be a means of introducing change.’

In looking back over the UN’s experience with ideas taking institutional forms, Sartaj Aziz (now vice-chancellor of Beaconhouse University in Lahore) drew on his experience as a civil servant, both international (as the president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, IFAD) and national (including several ministerial portfolios in Pakistan): ‘Obviously all of the things that have happened – positive things that have happened – have their base in some bright, brilliant ideas, like the basic needs approach, for example, or World Employment Programme, or the link between poverty and hunger, or a new initiative to bring OPEC into the mainstream of funding for IFAD... But the task of converting ideas into an operationally meaningful framework requires an opportunity to develop the idea... In the case of the World Food Conference, for example, although the conference accepted the link between poverty and food, if IFAD had not been created how would you operationalise that idea?’

In retrospect, Margaret Snyder (who founded ECA’s research arm on women before becoming UNIFEM’s first head) noted that her instincts had been correct in getting an institutional base for women’s research: ‘Aida [Gindy], Molly Bruce, and others planned – I believe it was 1972 – the very first headquarters expert group meeting anywhere on Women and Economic Development. It was chaired by noted economist and Nobel laureate, Sir Arthur Lewis, and the expert was Ester Boserup... We were beginning to help put women on the world’s agenda, and certainly to make order out of all that was done in ECA.’ In reflecting back on the work of what would, in 1975, become the African Training and Research Centre for Women, she recognised that measuring women’s unpaid work contributions was important, but the organisational platform was

even more crucial: ‘We had data in all those areas; it was at the time the only work being done on a regional basis. It just wasn’t done... I guess I had the instinct not only for economic and social justice, but also for institutionalizing, so that there would be a long life for whatever was being done.’

Once embedded, ideas can sometimes burst forth in unanticipated ways. Berthoud argued that the expansion of the environmental agenda to include poverty was crucial at Stockholm: ‘But the consequence of that was, of course, that UNEP started with a very broad agenda... We inherited a broad sector of activity under the heading of “human settlements”, which was really what developing countries largely considered as their share in what UNEP was to be doing in the field of environment... In 1977 already, the Vancouver conference disassociated human settlements from the environment and created for that field a separate unit, [which] was a surprising move, and I have always been fascinated about the forces which were at play in that game. First of all, there was a very clear broadening of the concept by bringing human settlements within the realm of UNEP as an important element of an environmental program, and then, five years later already, one saw that this was really not congruent and human settlements had to be detached, separated... It is a fascinating tale about the clipping of wings of ideas within the UN system.’

Sotiris Mousouris recounted how the Centre on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC), where he spent many years, took shape: ‘Again, the idea of researching and eventually regulating them had been in the air for some time. The first step was convening the Group of Eminent Persons. Among the fifty or so witnesses was Gianni Agnelli of Fiat, who arrived at the *Palais des Nations* in Geneva by helicopter, and a host of others – including the president of IBM; the chairmen of Pfizer, Du Pont, Unilever, Pechiney, and Nestlé; the vice-chairmen of General Motors, Siemens, Exxon, and Shell; labor leaders from the WFTU [World Federation of Trade Unions] and AFL-CIO; ministers; and last but not least professors... When we started drafting the report of the group, we also went for a couple of weeks to New Delhi. The chairman of the Group of Eminent Persons was a very wise Indian, L. K. Jha, who was governor of Kashmir. We worked with him, along with Somavia and the British Professor John Dunning... The first disagreements and conflicts appeared then... The report of the group recommended the establishment of a commission on multinational corporations and a center in the secretariat to be the focal point in the UN on the subject,

to collect information, make studies, and prepare a code of conduct and other international agreements. The center was to be independent, autonomous.’

‘ECLA institutionalized the whole thing in terms of statistics, to produce reports and information about nations,’ Cardoso told us. ‘Through ECLA, in Santiago and then in Mexico, a kind of new social segment, if not a class, has been trained. Now it is in America, but at that time it was in ECLA. Those who became finance ministers, planning ministers, and from time to time education ministers came from the same school. And they knew each other. So there was a kind of network. And ECLA was behind this network.’

While agreeing that institutions were key manifestations of the importance of ideas, Adedeji also cautioned: ‘If all ideas were institutionalized, you would have too many institutions around. There is no doubt that once you establish an institution, in this society of ours in the world in which we live today, they are like cemeteries. You can’t remove the graves. They become permanent. But that, in itself, may mean that even when experience has proven that the particular idea needs to be drastically reformulated, if not forgotten, the institution remains... So one must be very careful and not rush to establish institutions.’

8. Conclusion

As we go to press, the second George W. Bush administration is taking shape. There are no signs that it will be more congenial to the United Nations than was the first. Indeed, one might go so far as to interpret the nominations of John Bolton as US ambassador, and Paul Wolfowitz as head of the World Bank, a declaration of war against multilateralism – or at least a shot over the UN system’s bow.

In this context, an earlier conversation with Michael Zammit Cutajar, who served in many capacities including as the secretary-general of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has an eerie ring. For him the biggest challenge for the world organisation would be ‘to stay alive’. This resonated with other interviewees who, like us, also think that a healthy and functioning intergovernmental system is not a foregone conclusion. As such, remaining steadfast in the pursuit of unpopular ideas – for instance, of multilateralism in the face of the rampant unilateral tendencies unleashed in Washington and exemplified by the war in Iraq – clearly remains crucial.

At the same time, Ricupero provided an important historical reflection: ‘The UN is but a stage in a long process of evolution in human history—the search for an international organization of states. The UN only became feasible because it had behind it the power of the United States... The two occasions when the world tried to organize an international institution of states – in Paris after the First World War, and in San Francisco after the Second World War – the idea came from the United States. The difference was that in the first case, the U.S. was not entirely persuaded. It was mainly a personal idea of President Wilson. The U.S. finally did not join, and this was one of the major reasons why the League of Nations became a sort of European organisation, and finally, died away. The UN had a better destiny because it was not just an idea of Franklin Roosevelt, but it was also the expression of the thought of an outstanding generation of U.S. diplomats, politicians, and statesmen... This bipartisan support for a multilateralist diplomacy no longer exists.’ Ricupero continued with today’s context: ‘I don’t think Iraq will be for the UN what Abyssinia was for the League of Nations, because I believe that the UN will be able to survive... I believe that we are living in a very somber moment, and by no means am I trying to put a brave face on it. But it is important to make sure that, though fragile, the UN survives. It is important to keep it alive and hope that this trend in the U.S. will pass... If the major power in the world loses its interest in the multilateral approach, then there is no future for multilateralism.’

In late 2003 when establishing his High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, Secretary-General Annan’s none-too-hidden agenda was engaging Washington. No US administration will permit the Security Council, or any other part of the UN system, to stand in the way of pursuing its perceived vital interests. At the same time, the council and the system as a whole often serve American national interests and give the US cause to proceed cautiously and with international acquiescence, if not jubilant support. Depending on the issue, the stakes at hand, the positions of other potential allies, and the plausibility of collective action, Washington has the power to act either unilaterally or multilaterally (Patrick and Forman, 2002; Malone and Foong Khong, 2003). As the Bush administration discovered, however, ‘even imperfectly legitimated power is likely to be much more effective than crude coercion’ (Hurrell, 2000: 344).

In light of the sobering experience in occupied Iraq, perhaps the United Nations could become more appealing to Washington (Berdal, 2003; Tharoor, 2003; Albright, 2003). Moreover, there are nu-

merous other examples of shared interests, which include fighting terrorism (intelligence-sharing and anti-money-laundering efforts), confronting the global specter of infectious diseases (HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and SARS), pursuing environmental sustainability, monitoring human rights and criminal tribunals, humanitarian intervention, as well as pursuing weapons inspections and a host of other tasks in post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq.

The unfortunate reality of power means that if the United Nations and multilateral cooperation for development or any other purpose are to flourish, the United States as the globe's remaining superpower must be on board. The record of the first Bush administration gives pause even to inveterate optimists, however, amounting to what K. J. Holsti summarised as 'major assaults on [international] community projects' (Holsti, 2004: 316). The list is long, which in addition to the war in Iraq includes: abrogating the Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; withdrawing from the draft protocol for verification of the Biological Weapons Convention and from the Kyoto accords on global warming; subverting the International Criminal Court; rejecting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; failing to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child (one of only two countries not to do so); and resorting to predatory trade practices.

While the current moment and our own mood are dark, the kind of political commitment and internationalist orientation that existed the last time the US was as dominant on the world stage, right after World War II, could dawn again with appropriate vision and leadership. We hope that *UN Voices* helps point toward numerous ways to stimulate 'tactical multilateralism' (Boulden and Weiss, 2004). In any event, it is essential to emphasise the world organisation's ability to generate and implement progressive development ideas.

In awarding the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize to the United Nations and its secretary-general, the Norwegian Committee stated why ideas and people, and the UN as an institution with both, matter: 'Today the Organization is at the forefront of efforts to achieve peace and security in the world, and of the international mobilization aimed at meeting the world's economic, social and environmental challenges ... [T]he only negotiable route to global peace and cooperation goes by way of the United Nations' (United Nations, 2001–2002: 4).

UN Voices contains many lessons, but none is more critical than the importance of establishing and maintaining an environment in which creative thinking and policy analysis can flourish. As such, the world organisation should employ professionals of outstanding quality and give them the space to think and write independently;

support research adequately; reward originality as opposed to routine report writing; strengthen multidisciplinary and multi-agency dialogue; enrich analysis with field experiences; and avoid political correctness and orthodoxy of all stripes.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary, the priority challenges ahead in economic and social development require the United Nations to seize its comparative advantage – being an intellectual leader. This necessitates strengthening the institutional capacity to generate and disseminate original ideas. Proposals for UN reform make eyes glaze over, and most have tended to neglect the vital intellectual dimension, including the three main ones before member states in the next General Assembly (High-level Panel on Threats, 2004; Millennium Project, 2005; Annan, 2005).

Indeed, those to whom we have listened closely as they examined the first six decades of UN history illustrate just how many solid ideas and how many skilled people there have been. There could and should be more of both. They constitute, in our view, the world organisation's comparative advantage.

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