Ahead of the Curve?
UN Ideas and Global Challenges

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and Thomas G. Weiss

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poverty and deprivation—has never been properly documented. This book takes a huge step forward with an intriguing and insight-filled story, showing indeed how ideas "ahead of the curve" have often been among the UN’s most important products.

Kofi A. Annan
Secretary-General

Acknowledgments

As the three directors of the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP), we would like to acknowledge the assistance of many people without whose helping hands and enthusiastic support this book would not have appeared in such a timely fashion.

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We would be remiss if we did not mention the late UN economist Sidney Dell, who in 1980 mapped out a twenty-volume project to document the UN’s economic and social contributions. Yet he never secured the financing to complete more than one small volume before his death in 1990. We trust that he would be pleased with our efforts to follow in his footsteps.

We are extremely appreciative of the generosity of the governments of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Sweden and of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Without their support, this book and this project would have remained where it had been for too many years: on the drawing boards. Finally, we also wish to express our appreciation to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which made the Pocantico Conference Center available for a week in July 2000, during which time the rough draft of a manuscript took its present form.
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Needless to say, we ourselves are responsible for any remaining errors in fact or interpretation.

Abbreviations

ACUNS  Academic Council on the UN System
AIDS  Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AFDB  African Development Bank
AFL-CIO  American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
ADB  Asian Development Bank
CDP  Committee on Development Planning
CEA  Council of Economic Advisers
CIEC  Conference on International Economic Cooperation
CIS  Commonwealth of Independent States
COMECON  Council on Mutual Economic Assistance
CSD  Commission on Sustainable Development
DAC  Development Assistance Committee
DESA  Department for Economic and Social Affairs
EBRD  European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC  European Community
ECA  Economic Commission for Africa
ECE  Economic Commission for Europe
ECLA  Economic Commission for Latin America
ECOSOC  Economic and Social Council
EPTA  Expanded Program of Technical Assistance
EU  European Union
FAO  Food and Agriculture Organization
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FDI</td>
<td>Foreign Direct Investment</td>
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<tr>
<td>G-77</td>
<td>Group of 77</td>
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<tr>
<td>GATT</td>
<td>General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade</td>
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<td>GNP</td>
<td>Gross National Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>HDI</td>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIPC</td>
<td>Highly Indebted Poor Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBRD</td>
<td>International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDA</td>
<td>International Development Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDB</td>
<td>Inter-American Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDS</td>
<td>Institute of Development Studies [Sussex]</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFAD</td>
<td>International Fund for Agricultural Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFI</td>
<td>International Financial Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labor Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>INSTRAW</td>
<td>International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPC</td>
<td>Integrated Program for Commodities</td>
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<td>IPPF</td>
<td>International Planned Parenthood Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISEF</td>
<td>Intensified Smallpox Eradication Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITO</td>
<td>International Trade Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MERCOSUR</td>
<td>South American Common Market</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North American Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAM</td>
<td>Non-Aligned Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIEO</td>
<td>New International Economic Order</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTB</td>
<td>Nuclear Test Ban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODA</td>
<td>Official Development Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPEC</td>
<td>Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPPS</td>
<td>Purchasing Power Parity</td>
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Abbreviations:

- SALT: Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
- SAP: Structural Adjustment Program
- SDRs: Special Drawing Rights
- SUNFED: Special United Nations Fund for Economic Development
- TNC: Transnational Corporation
- U.K.: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- UN: United Nations
- UNCED: United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
- UNCHS: United Nations Center for Human Settlements
- UNCTAD: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
- UNDP: United Nations Development Program
- UNEP: United Nations Environment Program
- UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Control
- UNHCHR: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
- UNIDO: United Nations Industrial Development Organization
- UNIFEM: United Nations Development Fund for Women
- UNIFP: United Nations Intellectual History Project
- UNRISD: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
- UNU: United Nations University
- U.S.: United States of America
- USAID: United States Agency for International Development
- U.S.S.R.: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
- WEP: World Employment Program
- WFC: World Food Council
- WHO: World Health Organization
- WIDER: World Institute for Development Economics Research
- WTO: World Trade Organization
Introduction

- The Project
- The Literature
- The Challenges
- The Approach
- The Book

This is the first publication from the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP). This project was born from the conviction that after fifty years it was time to identify and trace the economic and social ideas that have been launched or nurtured by the UN family since 1945. The Cold War’s end led to a substantial growth in scholarly and policy interest in the political and security activities of the world organization. There has, until now, been no such increase in the economic and social arena. It is time to begin to right the balance.

Most observers think primarily about the political and security institutions and individuals when mention is made of the UN. Nobel Peace Prizes awarded to the UN for these activities come to mind, including to Ralph Bunche, Dag Hammarskjöld, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and UN peacekeepers.

But the UN’s economic and social institutions have quietly been making an impact, often with more success than in the political and peacekeeping arenas. Indeed, two development agencies, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), have also been recognized with Nobel Peace Prizes. More importantly from the point of view of this intellectual history, nine Nobel Prize laureates in economics (Jan Tinbergen, Gunnar Myrdal, Wassily Leontief, James E. Meade, Arthur Lewis, Richard Stone, Lawrence Klein, Theodore W. Schultz, and Amartya Sen) have spent a substantial part of their professional lives working as UN staff members or contributing to UN ideas and activities.

We should be clear about what we mean when we speak of the “United Nations.” We see the UN as an entity, for all its differences and diversity. There are
common elements—including solidarity with the vulnerable, concern for universal human rights, and other common values like commitment to peace and sustainable human development. The Bretton Woods institutions are included as a counterpoint for much of our argument, and de facto they have considered themselves somewhat apart from the main UN system. Our assumption is that what is most needed is a history of economic and social activities coming within the purview of the main UN institutions. The work of the specialized agencies will be brought in to the extent that they are, or should be, directly related to global programs and by virtue of the coordinating responsibility of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This book, and indeed the entire UNHPI, will not provide an institutional history of the main UN organizations operating in the economic, social, and human rights arenas; rather, it will treat their contributions as and when relevant to the pursuit of ideas central to UN debates over the past half-century.

Did the big and important ideas come from within the UN system? Or did they originate outside and were then "picked up" by the world organization? Whatever their origins, what happened to ideas once they were embraced by the international civil service and within UN structures of ongoing debates and conferences? Were they debated and discarded? Were they discussed, distorted, and then adopted? And, of course, what happened once they became policy as resolutions, declarations, conventions, or treaties? Did they matter to states, corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals?

The UN has no comprehensive history and no in-house historian; the archives of the UN and its specialized bodies are often in a sorry state. Brian Urquhart, one of the first recruits to the secretariat, who served for four decades, told us: "One of the troubles with the UN, which you are now rather belatedly remedying, is the fact that it never had a historical section." This is still needed. There are a few institutional histories, but no systematic overall effort has ever been made to document the UN's compelling story, especially in the area of economic and social development. Many of the early pioneers of economic and social ideas are aging or have died. There is an actuarial imperative to our efforts to help recover the institutional memory, particularly through oral histories.

Why were we driven to launch this project at the dawn of the twenty-first century? As lifelong participants in and observers of multilateral development work and diplomacy, it had struck us for some time that the UN story deserves to be better documented if it is to be better understood and appreciated. The Bretton Woods institutions in this respect are far ahead. The World Bank published two massive histories—one on the occasion of its twenty-fifth and the other (two volumes and more than 2,000 pages) of its fiftieth anniversary. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has an in-house historian who ensures the capture of its place in history with regular publications.

Introduction

We decided to take the plunge. Once the decision was made to fill the gaps, we opted for an intellectual history—a history of ideas. An institutional history is still needed, especially for those agencies and organizations that have not yet documented their own histories in sufficient depth. Institutions are, of course, a key part of the environment that helps to generate, promote, select, and discourage ideas. However, we ourselves bring in institutions inssofar as a given organization at a particular moment helped launch or polish an important idea.

For instance, our discussion of international trade and finance traces the role of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in order to reflect the radical new ideas that challenged orthodoxy about the distribution of benefits from the international economic system. Similarly, it would be inconceivable to discuss children's rights or the environment without examining inputs from the UNICEF and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). In these cases, getting the history right would be impossible without an emphasis on these institutions as well as on such personalities as Raul Prebisch, James Grant, and Maurice Strong.

Granted, there is no adequate historical study of the origins and evolution of ideas cultivated within the UN and of their impact on wider thinking and international action. "But," the reader may well ask, "why is it ideas, and not institutions, that are being analyzed?" A social scientist might query, "So what?"

Ideas and concepts have clearly been a driving force in many areas of human progress. They are arguably the most important legacy of the UN. They have set past, present, and future international agendas for the economic and social arena. The lack of attention to the UN's role in generating or nurturing ideas is perplexing. As Oxford University political economist Ngaire Woods summarized: "In short, ideas, whether economic or not, have been left out of analyses of international relations.3 Many political scientists, especially analysts of international political economy, as well as economic historians are rediscovering the role of ideas in international policy making. We say rediscovering because the study of ideas, although relatively new in analyses of international politics and organizations, is common bill of fare for historians, philosophers, students of literature, and economists."

We do not worry long over the copyright for any particular idea, which is almost always futile. Observers are still arguing whether Alexander Graham Bell deserves credit for inventing the telephone because so many others were toying with the same idea at about the same time. For us, the important fact is that an idea (like the telephone) exists. The project's bottom line consists in analyzing the evolution of key ideas and concepts about international economic and social development born or nurtured, refined or applied under UN auspices. Their origins will be traced, and the motivations behind them as well as their relevance, influence, and impact will be assessed against the backdrop of the socioeconomic
situations of individual countries, the global economy, and major international developments.

The Project

The UNHID has two main components. The first is a series of commissioned books about the major economic and social ideas or concepts central to UN activity, and which in our judgment are most salient at the beginning of this century. These will be written by experts based in research institutions worldwide and will be published in the project’s series with Indiana University Press. They cover the following global challenges under which pertinent ideas will be traced: human rights; international trade and finance; international development strategies; the global commons; global governance; quantifying the world; transnational corporations; development assistance; the gender revolution; human security; and development perspectives from the regional commissions.

The second component consists of some seventy-five in-depth oral history interviews with leading contributors to the development of crucial ideas and concepts within the UN system. As we go to press, we have already conducted about twenty of these, which focus on five areas. The first is primarily biographical. Here we ask about influences on an individual’s educational and professional interests and career choices, as well on his or her own ideas regarding social and economic issues.

The second area explores an individual's evaluation as to whether and how particular global occurrences have affected the development of new thinking. Here we specifically refer to such major events as the UN’s founding and earlier experiences by the League of Nations during the Great Depression, decolonization, the founding of the Group of 77, and the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall.

Third, we ask about how well various UN organizations, with which an individual has been affiliated throughout a career, have adapted to these global events. For instance, what ideas emerged in response to particular problems or crises? What ideas were discarded as a result of specific world events? Here we explore, for example, the link between the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and the oil price hike in 1973, or sustainable development and evidence about ecological deterioration.

Fourth, we seek to trace what happened to critical ideas within the UN system and what factors may have affected their life span and ultimate policy impact. Specifically, we are asking interview subjects for their opinions about the importance within the UN of leadership, the quality of the international civil service, the dynamics of global conferences and eminent commissions, the support or opposition of particular governments and regional groups, and of course the influence of North-South relations during the Cold War.

Introduction

The fifth cluster of questions serves as a synthesis and asks individuals to identify particular UN ideas that have had an impact on international politics and why. Here we ask interviewees to express their opinions about the most crucial challenges, conceptual and operational, for the UN at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

We have quoted in this book a few insights from those whom we have already interviewed. Many more will appear in a forthcoming volume in this series containing key excerpts from interviews, tentatively titled UN Ideas: Views from the Trenches and Towers. Oral history with individuals who have held key positions as staff members, consultants, researchers, or diplomats in and around the UN are especially useful in identifying ideas that never got beyond a conference room or that never made it into a document, as well as in explaining the evolution of a prominent idea that was spawned or nurtured by the world organization. We are aware of the problems in concentrating on what specialists call “elite history,” but we have decided to begin with these interviews first because senior officials and diplomats have frequently been opinion-leaders, and their ideas set agendas. Except for the role of the UN secretary-general, too little analytical attention has been paid to the role of leadership within international secretariats. Later, and with more resources, it would be desirable to interview other knowledgeable persons at various levels of seniority within and outside the UN. Ours is a pragmatic first attempt to help build an institutional memory about economic and social development.

The perspectives from key individuals are especially important because so few have written in detail about their own participation in and reflections on events. Their “stories” about what happened in bureaucracies and the corridors of international gatherings are an important source of knowledge and insight. As mentioned earlier, one justification for our efforts is to rectify a woeful lack of attention within international organizations to archives and to learning. Thus, the project is encouraging the establishment of international networks among archivists and researchers using UN documents, including career records of UN staff. The project’s published books and oral history interviews, in an electronic form as yet to be decided upon, will be disseminated to serve as original resources for future generations of scholars and practitioners.

At the end of the present phase of the UNHID we have committed ourselves to drawing the lessons from the contents of commissioned books and oral histories. This synthesis volume, tentatively titled The UN and the World of Ideas, will capture the first five years of work by our extended research family.

But we have also decided to stick out our necks now and write this synthesis avant la lettre. Here we set out how the UN system has reacted with policy ideas to major global challenges, and we try to identify the areas where the UN was ahead of or behind the curve. What do we mean by this? First, an idea itself can
be so unusual as to be in front of the conventional wisdom of the time or so timid as to sustain orthodoxy. For instance, decolonization was certainly ahead of its time at the Charter’s signing in 1945, and this idea fired imaginations and accelerated the pace of independence. In contrast, the general UN timidity in the face of the worldwide promotion of liberalization and privatization in the early 1980s was so politically correct with the major economic powers as to be behind the curve. The UN resumed a leadership role in the 1990s in developing a more nuanced position, emphasizing human and social concerns. Second, an idea can be so far ahead of its time that it is more of an aspiration than an effective guide to policy. For instance, many of the demands contained in the mid-1970s call for a NIEO fell on deaf ears, at least among the major powers. Moreover, when we state that the UN “succeeded” or “failed,” we try to distinguish between the “two UNCs”—the arena where states make decisions and the international service. The decision-making arena for states is more and more pluralistic. States are still the main decision-makers, and national interests have not receded as the basis for making decisions, but NGOs and the private sector are playing an ever larger role. Success or failure of this UN depends upon government perceptions of raison d’état and the accompanying political will or lack thereof.

The second UN is composed of semi-independent secretariats, including outside experts, whose job descriptions include research and idea-mongering. Success or failure of this second UN is not totally independent of governments, and hence of resources and support. Nonetheless, there is more room for maneuver and autonomy, particularly in the intellectual and advocacy realms, than is often supposed. And one of our propositions is that individuals and leadership matter.

Our first attempt to determine whether or not the UN’s ideas were ahead of their time follows in the pages below. We hope that readers’ appetites will be sufficiently whetted to peruse the other volumes to be published by Indiana University Press over the next few years and to engage in discussions with us about this overview story, as we see it, before the research in the commissioned studies becomes available.

Early publication is not without risks. We have decided to go ahead with this volume for four main reasons. First, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, whose foreword graces these pages, has urged us to do so. Second, the authors of the dozen books about big ideas whom we have commissioned also asked for guidance. Third, putting together this book has drawn to our attention challenges, ideas, and personalities that might otherwise have escaped us. And fourth, this first effort will, we hope, encourage readers to communicate with us to debate what we have put down and to present their own contributions.

**The Literature**

What, then, is an intellectual history, and how does one go about writing one? Although the term can have a variety of meanings, “intellectual history” seeks to explain the origins of particular ideas; trace their trajectories within institutions, scholarship, or discourse; and in some cases, certainly in ours, evaluate the impact of ideas on policy and action. What we seek to explain is the role of the UN as an intellectual actor.

Our journey follows a stimulating yet difficult path into the theoretical literature of ideas and their policy impact. The relevant literature for this project can be grouped usefully into three categories. The first is institutionalist approaches, such as Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane’s analyses of foreign policy; and Kathryn Sikkink’s analysis of developmentism in Latin America. The second consists of expert-group approaches, which include Peter Haas’s epistemic communities, Peter Hall’s work on analyzing the impact of Keynesian economists, and Ernst B. Haas’s work on knowledge as well as more recent work by Sikkink on transnational networks of activists. The third category consists of constructivist such as Alexander Wendt and John Ruggie and those more influenced by the Italian school of Marxism, such as Robert Cox and his followers. A brief overview is in order.

Institutionalists are generally concerned with how organizations shape the policy preferences of their members. Ideas can be particularly important to the policy-making process during periods of upheaval. In thinking about the end of World War II or the Cold War, ideas provide a conceptual road map that can be used to understand changing preferences and definitions of vital interests. The institutionalist approach helps us to understand the dynamics among ideas, multilateral institutions, and national policies. It also enables us to begin thinking about how such institutions as the UN influence elite images, as well as how opinion-makers influence the world organization by themselves serving as sources of ideas. They often do this by being recruited into the world organization as staff, consultants, experts, and chairs of special commissions.

The second category of literature examines the role of intellectuals in creating ideas, of technical experts in diffusing them and making them more concrete, and of all sorts of people in influencing the positions adopted by a wide range of actors. 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 can have an impact on policy by clarifying an issue from which decision-makers may deduce what is in the interests of their administrations. They can help to frame the debate on a particular issue, thus narrowing the acceptable
range of bargaining for 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 well-known work on the nature of scientific revolutions. The third body of literature, comprising the work of constructivists and critical theorists, seeks to determine the potential for individuals, their governments, and international institutions to change rather than be robots whose behavior is predetermined by material conditions. The so-called critical approach—which views the work of all organizations and their ideologies, including the UN, as given by material conditions or as instruments to maintain the status quo—is particularly pertinent. One of the reasons for this project is to examine over the past half-century how ideas about economic and social development—and here the UN system has nurtured a large number—have called into question the conventional wisdom.

The Challenges

Five questions often arise about existing approaches to the study of ideas and international organizations. We list them below, with a brief indication of how we deal with them in our own approach.

1. We begin with a classic: Which comes first, the chicken or the egg, the idea or the policy? Most approaches do not explain the sources of ideas, just their effects. They rarely explain how ideas emerge or change, with the exception of pointing to technological innovations. By ignoring where ideas come from and how they change, we cannot ascertain cause and effect. Do ideas shape policy? Or does policy push existing ideas forward and perhaps even generate new ideas that may emerge in response to that policy or action? Do ideas serve, after the fact, as a convenient justification for a policy or a decision? A prominent Scottish historian of political thought, Quentin Skinner, raised these issues thirty years ago: “The social context, it is said, helps to cause the formation and change of ideas; but the ideas in turn help to cause the formation and change of the social context. Thus the historian ends up presenting himself with nothing better than the time-honored puzzle about the chicken and the egg.”

2. A second question is whether ideas are mere products, or whether they have a life of their own. We trace the trajectory of ideas within the UN and examine how individual leadership, coalitions, and national and bureaucratic rivalries within it have generated, nurtured, distorted, and implemented particular ideas. At the same time, we also hope to discern how ideas, in and of themselves, have helped to shape policy outcomes at the UN.

Introduction

A third and long-standing debate among intellectual historians is whether an idea should be analyzed in light of the historical and social context within which it emerged and evolved, or whether it can be understood on its own, without reference to context. We are partisan of the former school and thus assume that economic and social ideas at the UN cannot be properly understood if divorced from their historical and social context. The birth and survival of ideas in the UN—or their death and suppression—invariably reflect events and are contingent upon politics and the world economy. We would be remiss to treat ideas merely as abstractions. Being familiar with context should enable us to understand better the constraints surrounding ideas as well as the opportunities afforded by them. For example, some come in the form of funding possibilities. Researchers who have sought support from foundations or governments have long understood that the “atmosphere” at the time of grant applications is crucial to securing adequate resources to pursue an idea. It should come as no surprise that atmospherics help to explain why certain ideas make a specific difference at a specific moment in time. They may also help to explain why ideas and their institutional sponsors may be “ahead of” or “behind” the curve in terms of their political and operational salience, whatever the intellectual attractiveness and persuasiveness of an idea.

A fourth question is when to begin tracing the trajectory of a particular idea. We can only agree with Woods that “very few ideas are very new.” At what point in its life or in which of its many possible incarnations should one begin to study an idea? Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard point out that postwar modernization theory aimed to transform individuals from “superstitious and status-oriented beings to rational and achievement-oriented beings.” But the idea of creating a new person is older than development theory. It could be traced back to the efforts of the earliest colonial missionaries, the Enlightenment, Karl Marx, or, for that matter, to God with Adam’s rib in the Garden of Eden.

A related issue concerns ownership. The difficulty of identifying a single individual or institution responsible for the creation of an idea is one illustration of this problem, which is manifest in the overlapping processes of multilateral affairs. An idea often evolves and ownership becomes more widely shared through group processes, which is particularly pertinent within multilateral institutions where a multiplicity of geographic and other groupings is the only way of doing business and widespread ownership is indeed a goal of deliberations. Hence, we are not undertaking the type of historical analysis pioneered by Arthur Lovejoy, who sought to trace an idea “through all the provinces of history in which it appears.” Rather, we pick up an idea at the time it intersects with the UN. And even within the world organization’s history, there are relevant antecedents that can be treated only cursorily.
A specific project on this theme is being directed by Desmond McNeill and Morten Bøks at the University of Oslo. They are seeking to map precisely how five development ideas (the informal sector, sustainable development, governance, social capital, and local knowledge) have penetrated and been interpreted by eight intergovernmental organizations: World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), ILO, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), African Development Bank (AfDB), IMF, and World Trade Organization (WTO). Their goal is to track how these ideas were adopted, adapted, distorted, or suppressed in the process. McNeill and Bøks are persuaded that "few doubt the power and influence of these institutions," but "we know next to nothing about why some particular ideas are taken up by institutions in the multilateral system."221

The fifth and final question relates to the influence of ideas versus that of the carriers of ideas. There is little consensus about which—in our case, the ideas or the key individuals in key UN organizations or forums—are more influential. This is particularly relevant for our treatment of experts. It can be argued that the more influential the members of an expert group or the greater their access to governmental policy-makers, the greater the odds that their ideas will be adopted, irrespective of the ideas' inherent value. Ideas presuppose agents, and at the UN they cannot be divorced from agents, which is why we are documenting through oral histories the role of individuals in the evolution of international economic and social development.

Notwithstanding the methodological bumps in the road, ideas are important determinants of change. Because of their multiple uses and meanings, they are important objects of study. This project takes seriously the proposition that ideas, both good and bad, have an impact. We take our inspiration from John Maynard Keynes, who wrote of "scribblers": "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood."225

The Approach

In addition, we should declare our own normative agenda, which extends beyond improving our understanding of the sources, evolution, and impact of key ideas. We seek insights in order to improve the UN's future contribution to economic and social development. More specifically, we hope to understand better the role of the UN as an intellectual actor and the processes in the multilateral marketplace of ideas, in order to identify workable strategies and tactics. The reason for this effort lies behind a comment from Jeffrey Garten, dean of Yale University's School of Management, about UN efforts to broker a pact among transnational corporations, labor associations, and watchdog NGOs. "There are just a huge number of issues that have to be addressed globally and there is no real infrastructure to do it," he said. "They can only be dealt with in partnership agreements between governments, business and non-governmental organizations."226

Understanding how important the UN's past role has been in disseminating and generating ideas to respond to global challenges requires responses to four questions. First, what have been the key economic and social ideas contributed by the UN? The answer to this first question is, in many ways, necessary background for the others. For us, "ideas" are defined as beliefs held by individuals that influence their attitudes and actions toward economic and social development, which, as mentioned earlier, are analyzed when they intersect with the UN.227 In this volume we concentrate on a few of the biggest themes, which we believe have emanated from the UN and made a difference. We selected them in interactions with a host of formal and informal advisers, including our own International Advisory Council. This does not mean that our list is complete or sacrosanct. A central concern in choosing topics is that the ideas were considered, wisely or unwisely, to be relevant by those engaged in the international debates of the time. Among the many possibilities, we have given priority to those that we consider have continued relevance for public policy in the new millennium. This explains our "future-oriented history," which some have criticized as being an oxymoron, others as leading to methodological bias. We defend the choice as a pragmatic decision that allows us to proceed with ideas that have currency.

Second, we ask, What were the sources of these ideas? Were they initiated within or substantially nurtured from the UN? Were they generated by specialized agencies? Were they first articulated by eminent individuals or distinguished commissions? Were they developed within the context of lengthy preparations for global conferences, or perhaps within parallel forms organized by NGOs? If so, what portions of them about economic and social advancement were generated within the UN system? If a particular idea was developed within the UN, did a key individual bring it with him or her and subsequently lobby effectively for its organizational adoption? Or was the idea the result of ongoing group negotiating processes? Was there a two-way street, or were international secretariats more the real generators of ideas than groups of countries were?

What ideas were brought from outside the UN system and were then promoted by the UN? If an idea originated outside, did it emanate from academe or outside expert groups? What about NGOs? Did an idea emerge in response to a particular event or crisis? Did an idea originate within an elite, or was there a "mass base" reflecting widespread popular support and enthusiasm for a particular idea, as there was for the UN Charter and for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? The inter-war period raised awareness of what was not yet labeled...
"interdependence," which contributed to calls for international cooperation. Did some economic and social ideas originate in the UN because of awareness from a critical mass of people about a connection between peace and development? For instance, what role was played in establishing functional agencies by the conviction that the Great Depression and severe economic dislocation and political instability should and could be mitigated? To what extent did this postwar conviction drive research, analysis, and action?

Third, what happened to particular ideas within the UN? The answer depends on tracing the trajectory of concepts, good and bad. Why was a particular idea discarded? Was it too controversial? Was it too simple or too complex? Were its backers not influential enough? Even if disputed and discarded, did the discarded idea return in another guise?

In tracing the evolution and distortion of an idea, intellectual and political leadership within UN secretariats is key. Institutional rivalry, particularly within the UN system proper and between it and the Bretton Woods institutions, are crucial variables. Tensions within and among diplomatic coalitions are still another important and under-documented factor.

Fourth and finally, what impact, if any, have particular ideas had? If so, how? There are, in our view, at least four measurable ways in which ideas can have a substantial influence on policy. These propositions will be tested throughout the UNHIPS's lifetime.

The first is that they can change the nature of international public policy discourse and help states to define and redefine their interests to be more inclusive of common concerns. For example, ideas about dependency and the concept of "center-periphery," which were developed by Latin American economists within the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in the 1950s, fundamentally altered the discourse on modernization. Also, the growing emphasis on the idea of human rights in the UN reflects in part a redefinition of respect for individuals as part of the identity of responsible sovereign states.

The second type of influence is that ideas can provide a tactical guide to policy and action when norms conflict or when sequencing or priorities are disputed. The necessity to broaden the narrow orthodoxy of neo-liberalism with the requirements for a "human face" on structural adjustment is one such dispute in which ideas provided a road map to navigate between conflicting needs. Another example of a clash in norms in which ideas are useful is to override state sovereignty with military force in cases of genocide, mass murder, and displacement.

The third kind of impact is that ideas can alter prospects for forming new coalitions of political or institutional forces. For example, UNCTAD's call to take seriously the declining terms of trade and the NIEO became the glue of solidarity in the South. The common heritage of humankind provided a way to form unusual partnerships among states and NGOs. The Integrated Program for Commodities (IPC) provided the framework for producers and consumers, and subgroups within them, to come together in new ways.

The fourth influence is that ideas can also become embedded in institutions and thus perhaps challenge not only the founding principles of those institutions but also help in setting future agendas. The establishment of new agencies—for example, UNEP or the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)—is one manifestation, as is "mainstreaming" of issues and the creation of new units within established organizations. And as Cox notes ruefully, "Institutions take on a life of their own." A better understanding of how ideas become embedded is essential, because this impact can be observed. In this regard, we hope to comprehend better the UN's own decision-making style and determine whether and when it has a comparative advantage in the formulation and diffusion of ideas. But we also need to clarify in what ways the institutionalization of ideas in the UN system has an impact on policy formulation elsewhere, particularly in governments. Strong leadership and acceptance by key institutions give power to ideas and impose a consensus by facilitating funding and implementation.

The Book

It is fascinating, and often amazing, how many times the UN system has been ahead of the curve. As the reader will discover in subsequent pages, this is true with respect to the early ideas on development, on international aspects of environmental problems, population and technology, women's issues, international and national development policies, and trade and finance. The League of Nations had discussed employment policies during the 1920s and 1930s, and the postwar UN contributions were pioneering. The inclusion of human rights in the Charter and the adoption of the Universal Declaration in 1948 appear, in retrospect, mind-boggling, or in the words of Stéphane Hessel, an early UN recruit, who sat at Eleanor Roosevelt's side in 1948 and later became Ambassadeur de France, "what makes the second half of the 20th century such an important moment of world history." And we could go on.

There have also been many instances when the UN has been behind the curve. This is true, for instance, in the case of HIV/AIDS, global income gaps, or Uruquhart's candidate for the worst idea, Julian Huxley's "sex at high altitudes." In determining whether the UN system has been ahead of or behind the curve, we explore successes and failures. There is a necessity, if we wish to come to grips with
the world organization's duty to swim against the tide and make room for unconventional ideas. In short, our portrait of the intellectual history of the UN includes warts and all.

We thus hope that readers now have a sense about our approach to "UN Ideas," but what do we mean by "Global Challenges" in the subtitle? There are problems that are widely perceived as sufficient threats to upset the economic and social (and eventually also the political) balance worldwide, even if a problem is circumscribed or regional. "Perception" is of the essence here, and by whom, because not everyone or even the most important governments may agree that a given problem poses a truly global threat. The time frame is also consequential. If a problem is tackled in a timely fashion, what might become a serious challenge can be postponed or even vanish. Of course, a problem may not be an immediate risk, or it may take longer to come to a head than was originally predicted; that does not make it less serious.

After this introductory discussion of the role of ideas and international institutions, this book proceeds through eight chapters in which UN ideas and global challenges are interwoven, followed by a brief chapter of conclusions. Chapter 1 analyzes the four powerful founding ideas of the UN: peace and negotiation in place of war, decolonization in place of domination, human rights in place of repression; and economic and social development in place of poverty. Chapter 2 examines the 1960s, when development became the main item on the agenda of the UN system and developing countries increasingly coalesced as a group. Chapter 3 looks into ideas to help confront the employment challenge and promote basic needs in the 1970s. Chapter 4 examines the global conferences under UN auspices of the 1970s and 1990s in which such new ideas as sustainability, gender, and habitat were placed on the international agenda. Chapter 5 analyzes the financial and social crises of the globalization era, with their intellectual criticisms and alternatives. Chapter 6 looks into the collapse of the Socialist bloc. Chapter 7 examines widening income gaps, particularly among regions and countries, and proposals to tackle this phenomenon. Chapter 8 analyzes the crises of national and global governance.

This book is somewhat different from the commissioned books and the other two overarching volumes that will follow in this series. It starts with global challenges and asks whether the UN responded with a creative framing of the issue and workable policy ideas. In future publications the ideas themselves will be the prism through which history unfolds more slowly and with far more documentation than we can permit ourselves here.

This first attempt to map the UN's intellectual history results from significant but inevitably, as yet, insufficient archival research, brainstorming, reflection, and interviews. We expect that this brief effort to sketch essential elements of the project's analytical framework will generate a lively discussion that will strengthen and sharpen our focus on the role of the UN as intellectual actor. But we underline that this book is our first rather than our final word, which will only be completed after the last book has been written. Even then, we will no doubt wonder if we could have done better.

Many observers are more than willing to regurgitate the philosopher George Santayana's incantation in Life of Reason that "they who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." However, those who support research normally are cock toward history, even historical inquiry such as ours that has policy implications for human survival with dignity in the new millennium. We thus are extremely appreciative of the financial generosity of governments and private foundations that have made this book possible. We are grateful for their confidence. We trust that they will be satisfied with this first product. As always, we welcome comments and suggestions from our readers.