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How United Nations ideas change history

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Abstract. This article considers the United Nations (UN) as a creator and facilitator of innovative ideas in world politics. It thereby breathes new life into the world organisation's overlooked characteristics: the quality and diversity of its intellectual leadership, and its value-based framework for dealing with the global challenges of our times. The nature of UN ideas are examined – the good, the bad, and the ugly – while recognising that most have multiple origins and various carriers, and it continues by assessing impact. Three types of UN ideas – positive, normative, and instrumental – are discussed. Positive ideas are those resting on hard evidence, open to challenge and verifiable. Normative ideas are beliefs about what the world should look like. Instrumental (which some might label 'causal') ideas are often about what strategy will have what result or what tactic will achieve a desirable outcome, usually less verifiable and with a normative veneer. The article then examines nine UN ideas that changed the world, before illustrating the significance of this by examining two counterfactuals: a world without the world organisation and its ideas as well as with a more creative institution.

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Ideas are a main driving force in human progress and also one of the world organisation's most important contributions over the last six and a half decades, which is the central finding by the independent UN Intellectual History Project.[1] The project's seventeen volumes and oral history archive provide substantive accounts of the UN's work in major areas of economic and social thinking and action, as well as in related areas where the boundaries of peace and development intersect – namely, human security, human rights, preventive diplomacy, and global governance.[2]

This research has breathed new life into the UN's overlooked characteristics: the quality and diversity of its intellectual leadership, and its values-based

[1] This article draws on Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[2] See S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong-Khong, *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) and Bertrand G. Ramcharan, *Preventive Diplomacy at the UN* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). The project's volumes cited in this article are published by Indiana University Press with the exception of Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws (eds), *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Full details are available at: {www.unhistory.org}.

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framework for dealing with the global challenges of our times. The project's decade-long effort has explored areas omitted or undervalued in textbooks about the world organisation or units of the UN system – namely, the ideas, norms, and principles that permeate the world body's atmosphere. The results provide an argument that flies in the face of UN bashing, a favourite sport not just in Washington's Beltway but elsewhere. Unlike popular wisdom – graciously stimulated by the mass media – the UN is more than a rigid bureaucracy without sparkle, wit, or creativity. Nor is it merely a travelling circus, a talk shop, and paper-pusher. These perceptions and on-and-off-again tales of corruption sustain an unbalanced view even if elements of such criticism strike close to home on First Avenue in Manhattan. But we cannot judge a portrait about Boeing or Airbus that concentrates on its employees' globe-trotting, internet surfing, or wasting of resources without mentioning the quality of products, the bottom line, and plans for the future. A fair depiction of an enterprise or an international organisation is incomplete and misleading without a discussion of its goals and achievements, including intellectual leadership.

International organisations live or die, thrive or shrivel up, by the quality and relevance of the policy ideas that they put forward and sustain. It is essential to examine the good, the bad, and the ugly. This article begins by examining the nature of ideas, albeit recognising that most (especially those of the world body) have multiple origins and various carriers, and it continues by assessing their impact. Following a listing of nine UN ideas that have changed the world, the world body's under-appreciated role is illustrated by examining two counterfactuals: a world without the UN and its ideas as well as a more creative institution. The conclusion explores how to improve the UN's intellectual output and punch.

The nature of ideas

To most people, the UN is unitary; but the real organisation consists of three linked components that interact. Inis Claude long ago distinguished the arena for state decision-making, the First UN of member states,[3] from the Second UN of staff members and secretariat heads who are paid from assessed and voluntary budgets. The Third UN of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), experts, commissions, and academics is a more recent addition to analytical perspectives.[4] This broader embrace of what constitutes the world body is not only a more accurate reflection of reality but also crucial to understanding the itinerary of ideas. It is noteworthy that this history does not include the private, for-profit sector that has essentially been missing in action in relationship to the UN's past intellectual contributions. A foundation for a 'Fourth UN' has been laid with the Global Compact and other traditional ones like employers at the International Labour Organisation, which will certainly be a more substantial part of a future intellectual history.

[3] Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Swords Into Plowshares: The Problems and Prospects of International Organization* (New York: Random House, 1956), and 'Peace and Security: Prospective Roles for the Two UN', *Global Governance*, 2:3 (1996), pp. 289–98.

[4] Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, and Richard Jolly, 'The "Third" UN', *Global Governance*, 15:1 (2009), pp. 123–42.

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What do we – in this article, my use does not connote the 'royal we' but rather my close collaboration with Richard Jolly and Louis Emmerij that makes it hard to separate our collective responsibility for what follows – mean by ideas? Ideas are notions and beliefs held by individuals and institutions that influence their attitudes and actions, in this case, toward economic and social development. Such ideas mostly arise as the result of social interactions among people or groups within any of the three UN or among them. Often ideas take more definite shape over time, sometimes as the result of research, often through debate or challenges, other times through efforts to turn ideas into policy as well as experiment by putting them into practice.

Three types of UN ideas – *positive*, *normative*, and *causal* – are worth distinguishing. Positive ideas are those resting on hard evidence, open to challenge and verifiable. That the countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) spent about 0.3 per cent of their gross national income (GNI) on development assistance in 2009 is an example. Normative ideas are beliefs about what the world *should* look like. That these countries *ought* to implement the long-standing UN target of spending 0.7 per cent of the GNI on development assistance or that there should be a more equitable allocation of world resources are examples. Causal ideas are often about what strategy will have what result or what tactic will achieve a desirable outcome, usually less verifiable and with a normative veneer. At the UN, causal ideas often take an operational form – for instance, the calculation that over 0.5 per cent of GNI will be needed as official development assistance (ODA) to realise the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Causal ideas can be specific, but they usually are much less than full-blown theories.[5] 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 causal way to improve international justice.

UN ideas have set past and present international agendas within economic and social arenas and will do so for future ones. The lack of attention to the UN's role in generating or nurturing ideas is perplexing, as Ngaire Woods tells us: 'In short, ideas, whether economic or not, have been left out of analyses of international relations.'[6] Many political scientists are rediscovering the role of ideas in international policymaking. We say *re*discovering because the study of ideas may be relatively new in analyses of international politics and organisations but is common bill-of-fare for historians, philosophers, students of literature, and economists – that is, analysts who see forces at work besides sovereign states selfishly calculating their interests.

The political science literature on the role of ideas that informs this inquiry can be grouped into three broad categories. The first is institutionalism – such as Judith Goldstein's and Robert Keohane's analyses of foreign policy[7] and Kathryn

[5] Morten Bøås and Desmond McNeill, *Global Institutions and Development: Framing the World?* (London: Routledge, 2004).
[6] Ngaire Woods, 'Economic Ideas and International Relations: Beyond Rational Neglect', *International Studies Quarterly*, 39 (1995), p. 164.
[7] Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (eds), *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

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Sikkink's on developmentalism in Latin America[8] – and is concerned with how organisations shape the policy preferences of their members. Ideas can be particularly important for policymaking during periods of upheaval. In thinking about the end of World War II or of the Cold War or post-September 11th challenges, for instance, ideas provided a conceptual road map that can be used to understand changing preferences and definitions of vital interests for state and non-state actors alike. This approach helps 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 focuses on the approaches and interactions of various groups, including Peter Haas's epistemic communities,[9] Peter Hall's Keynesian economists,[10] Ernst B. Haas's purveyors of knowledge and power,[11] as well as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's more amorphous transnational networks of activists.[12] 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 all sorts of people in influencing the positions adopted by a wide range of actors, especially governments. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a powerful recent illustration of such influence because the network of world-class volunteer scientists from several disciplines translate scientific findings into the language comprehensible by policymakers.

Networks of experts influence a broad spectrum of international politics through their ability to interact with policymakers irrespective of location and national boundaries. Researchers working on climate change or HIV/AIDS, for instance, can have an impact on policy by clarifying an issue from which decision-makers may explore what is in the interests of their administrations. Researchers also can help to frame the debate on a particular issue, thus narrowing the acceptable range of bargaining 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, efforts by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to shed light on human impact on the natural environment borrow from Thomas Kuhn's often-cited work on the nature of scientific revolutions.[13]

[8] Kathryn Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions: Developmentalism in Argentina and Brazil* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[9] Peter M. Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), pp. 1–36; and Peter M. Haas, Robert O. Keohane and Marc A. Levy (eds), *Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective International Environmental Protection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

[10] Peter A. Hall (ed.), *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism Across Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[11] Ernst B. Haas, *When Knowledge is Power: Three Models of Change in International Organizations* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and see Peter M. Haas and Ernst B. Haas, 'Learning to Learn: Improving International Governance', *Global Governance*, 1:3 (1995), pp. 55–284.

[12] Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[13] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

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The third category consists of so-called constructivists such as Alexander Wendt[14] and John G. Ruggie.[15] They seek to determine the potential for individuals, especially members of governments and international institutions, to be active agents for change rather than robots whose behaviour merely reflects previous theories and accumulated experience. Also relevant are the critical approaches of those influenced by Antonio Gramsci and the Italian school of Marxism, such as Robert Cox and his followers.[16] They, however, view the work of all organisations, including the UN, as heavily determined by material conditions and supportive of the *status quo*.

Irrespective of how one weighs the value of these three bodies of literature, individuals and organisations and their ideas matter. The UN system has spawned or nurtured a large number of individuals who have called into question conventional wisdom as well as reinforced it. Indeed, the very definition of what passes for 'conventional' at a particular point in time in various regions of the world is part of the puzzle that we have only begun to address.

In addition, numerous questions typically circulate about the importance of ideas. First, which comes first, the idea or policy and action? Most approaches do not explain the sources of ideas but rather 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, cause and effect are uncertain. Do ideas shape policy, or do they merely serve, after the fact, as a convenient justification for a policy or a decision? Or does policy push existing ideas forward, and perhaps even generate new ones that may emerge in response to that policy or action? Quentin Skinner raised these issues forty years ago: '[T]he 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 that the time-honored puzzle about the chicken and the egg.'[17] We are agnostic and eclectic.

Second, are ideas mere products, or do they have a life of their own? For us, it is the latter; and our volumes have tried to trace the trajectory of ideas within the UN and examine how individual leadership, coalitions, and national and international bureaucratic rivalries within the UN have generated, nurtured, distorted, and implemented particular ideas. At the same time, it is crucial to discern whether and how ideas, in and of themselves, have helped to shape policy outcomes at the UN.[18]

Third, should an idea be analysed in light of the historical and social context within which it emerged and evolved? For our part, we argue that economic and social ideas at the UN cannot be properly understood if examined on their own,

[14] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[15] John G. Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
[16] See, for example, Robert W. Cox (ed.), *The New Realism: Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997); Robert W. Cox, with Timothy J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (eds) and trans., *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).
[17] Quentin E. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), p. 42.
[18] See Ramesh Thakur and Thomas G. Weiss, 'UN "Policy": An Argument with Three Illustrations', *International Studies Perspectives*, 10:2 (2009), pp. 18–35.

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divorced from historical and social circumstances. The birth and survival of ideas within the UN – or their death and suppression – invariably reflect events and are contingent upon world politics and the global economy.

Fourth, when should one begin to trace the trajectory of a particular idea? Could anyone disagree with Woods that 'very few ideas are very new'?[19] 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 post-war modernisation theory aimed to transform individuals from 'superstitious and status-oriented beings to rational and achievement-oriented beings'.[20] But the idea of creating a new person is far older than development theory. It could be traced back to the efforts of the earliest missionaries, the Enlightenment, Karl Marx, or, to God with Adam's rib in the Garden of Eden. We are agnostic about origins, which make little difference to determining impact.

Fifth, what about copyrights and patents? Analysts are still arguing whether Charles Darwin or Alfred Russel Wallace should be foremost credited with the theory of natural selection, and whether Alexander Graham Bell deserves credit for inventing the telephone because so many others were toying with the idea at about the same time. The difficulty of identifying a single individual or institution responsible for the creation of an idea is even more manifest in the complex world of multilateralism. An idea evolves and ownership becomes more widely shared through group processes. Within multilateral institutions, anonymous documents or ones ghost-written for organisational heads are the rule; and widespread ownership is a goal of deliberations.[21] Hence, it seems futile to undertake the type of historical analysis pioneered by A. O. Lovejoy who sought to trace an idea 'through all the provinces of history in which it appears'.[22] Rather, it is more pragmatic merely to pick up an idea at the time it intersected with the UN.

Sixth, what is the influence of ideas versus the carriers of ideas?[23] There is little consensus about which – in this case, the ideas or the key individuals from the three UNs – are more influential. Yet, Thomas Risse's framing seems on target, 'ideas do not float freely'.[24] Or for Sheri Bermann, ideas 'do not have any independent impact by themselves, as disembodied entities floating around in a polity'.[25] They need institutions, actors, and opportunities. This is particularly relevant for our treatment of experts and the outside-insiders of the Third UN, many of whom go through revolving doors with experiences in government, secretariats, and the private sector. It can be argued that the more influential the members of an expert group or the greater their access to governmental policymakers, the greater the odds that their ideas will be adopted, irrespective of

[19] Woods, 'Economic Ideas and International Relations', p. 168.
[20] Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (eds), *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 17.
[21] See Ramesh Thakur (ed.), *What Is Equitable Geographic Representation in the Twenty-first Century* (Tokyo: UN University, 1999).
[22] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Torchbook, 1960).
[23] See Albert Yee, 'The Causal Effects of Ideas on Policies', *International Organization*, 50 (1996), pp. 69–108.
[24] Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 185–214.
[25] Sheri Bermann, *The Social Democratic Moment: Ideas and Politics in the Making of Interwar Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 22.

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their inherent value. The impacts of ideas (for good or ill) presuppose agents, and at the UN they cannot be divorced from agency – which is one reason that we documented through oral histories the role of individuals in the evolution of international economic and social development.

In short, our comparative advantage is not as philosophers or patent attorneys. The important fact is that an idea exists and has entered into the arena of the UN. The bottom line results from analysing the evolution and impact of key ideas, especially how international economic and social concepts have been nurtured, refined, and applied under UN auspices. They exist, and they matter.

Assessing the impacts of UN ideas

It is essential to examine how UN ideas exert influence, and how and when they fall flat. The late Barbara Ward wrote: 'Ideas are the prime movers of history. Revolutions usually begin with ideas.'[26] Even more to the point, political theorist Daniel Philpott's study of sovereignty demonstrates that revolutions for even this building block of international studies too are driven primarily by the power of ideas.[27] For instance, we are in the midst of an upheaval in which state sovereignty is becoming more contingent on upholding basic human rights values, in which states have obligations and not just rights.

Ideas lead to action in many ways. While the process is rarely linear, the steps run from the creation of new idea to dissemination to decisions by policymakers to implementation and on to impact and results. We can observe how UN ideas exert influence:

- changing the ways that issues are perceived and the language used to describe them;
- framing agendas for action and definitions of self-interests;
- altering the ways that key groups perceive their interests – and thus altering the balance of forces pressing for action or resisting it; and
- being embedded in institutions, which thus adopt responsibility for carrying the idea forward and become a focus for accountability and monitoring.

The formulation of statistical norms and guidelines provides a concrete example of how the four ways usually operate simultaneously but not necessarily in tandem when setting standards. In *Quantifying the World*, the late Michael Ward traced the development in the early 1950s of the System of National Accounts (SNA), which provided guidelines that even today enable and encourage countries to calculate gross national product (GNP) and other core economic indicators in a standardised way – thereby providing an economic snapshot of economic performance. Agendas for economic policy and action are thus defined in country-after-country, which in turn has unleashed pressures for better use of economic resources as well as for more attention to social and other indicators. The SNA was embedded in

[26] Cited by Mahbub ul Haq, *Reflections on Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 204.
[27] Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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the work of the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) and UN Statistical Office (UNSO). Thus in all four ways, the UN's early work on the SNA has sustained its influence over the following decades. Ward concludes that 'the creation of a universally acknowledged statistical system and of a general framework guiding the collection and compilation of data according to recognised standards, both internationally and nationally, has been one of the great and mostly unsung successes of the UN Organization'.[28]

Another example is the formulation and adoption of goals for development. Since the launching of the First Development Decade in 1961, the world organisation has debated, adopted, promoted, supported, and monitored a succession of quantified and time-circumscribed goals, serving as both national and international guidelines for economic and social development. In total, some fifty such goals have been agreed, the first being for educational expansion and acceleration of economic growth. Later goals for subsequent decades have covered reductions in child mortality, improvements in human welfare, efforts in sustainable and equitable development, and support for these efforts by the expansion of development assistance. The most well-known probably are the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for poverty reduction by the year 2015.

A review of performance shows that many such goals have had considerable impact, more than most people realise. The idea of setting objectives and standards is, of course, not new. But setting internationally agreed targets as a means to foster economic and social development is a singular UN achievement. The results have been far from complete successes but rarely total failures. A few, such as the goal in 1967 for the eradication of smallpox or in 1980 for a worldwide reduction of infant mortality and for increases in life expectancy, have registered resounding successes – 'complete achievement' in the case of small pox eradication and 'considerable achievement' in the other two.[29]

The most serious failures have been in sub-Saharan Africa and the least developed countries. The other weakest performances have been in levels of development aid among the industrialised countries of the global North. Except for Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden – and in the last few years, Luxembourg – developed countries have consistently failed to achieve the 0.7 target for concessional transfers to developing countries in general and fallen short of the specific targets for aid to the least developed countries. But even here, the existence of the goal helped bureaucrats and do-gooders in some countries striving to reach the target and also resulted in their putting pressure on or at least trying to embarrass their stingier Western partners.

We can assess the impact of UN ideas on goal setting. Have the goals altered the ways development is perceived? Here the answer changes over time. The early

[28] Michael Ward, *Quantifying the World: UN Contributions to Statistics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 2.

[29] By the year 2000, 138 countries had brought infant mortality to below 120 and 124 countries had raised life expectancy to 60 years or more, two of the goals set in 1980. A full assessment of the achievements in relation to the fifty goals are found in 'The Record of Performance', in *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice*, by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai, and Frédéric Lapeyre (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), chap. 10. Differences among regional thinking can be found in Yves Berthelot (ed.), *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

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goals for education, set at meetings organised by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1960s, were in part preaching to the converted – countries newly independent or about to be independent, already with demands for educational expansion high on their political agenda. The UNESCO goals for rapid expansion at all levels did not so much shift perceptions of development but helped give international legitimacy to national ambitions that might otherwise have been treated by colonial powers as unrealistic and even unjustified. The goals for economic expansion of the First Development Decade were certainly treated as over-ambitious when first set – even though, like educational goals, in many countries they were in fact exceeded.

Expectations about performance in the 1960s raised the stakes in later decades, and economic performance increasingly fell below the most ambitious economic targets. By the 1980s, UN economic goals were sidelined by the shift of economic power and influence to the Bretton Woods institutions, which introduced programmes of structural adjustment and stressed economic and financial targets at the country level rather than social outcomes. Given the disastrous declines in rates of economic growth and levels of economic performance that followed, it is startling that considerable improvements nonetheless took place in health, water, sanitation, and child mortality if not in education. These experiences, especially the failures of economic adjustment in the 1980s and early 1990s and the accusation that they were imposed from outside rather than adopted by countries themselves, accounts for the shift by industrialised countries and the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, IMF) in the late 1990s towards accepting outcome goals in general and the adoption of the MDGs in particular.

These illustrations show how UN goals have influenced the ways that development has been perceived and influenced agendas for action by governments and their aid agencies, by local and international NGOs, by foundations and corporations. Goals have also served over the years as a focus for mobilising coalitions of interested partners. This is clear with respect to the MDGs but other goals have also served the same purpose: for instance, goals for the expanding aid toward the 0.7 per cent target, for debt forgiveness, and for priorities for women and children.[30]

New ideas and priorities have also led to the creation of new institutions to emphasise previously ignored issues – UNCTAD for trade, UNIDO for industrial development, UNEP for sustainability, UNIFEM for gender, and so on. And new ideas have also led to new emphases within existing organisations, usually called 'mainstreaming' – the insertion of new thinking into existing institutions and programmes or significant restructuring of an existing institution to make room for a new idea.

Nonetheless, the generation and spread of ideas is a necessary but insufficient condition for meaningful change. Sometimes UN ideas have spread but often with too little effect. Why do some ideas gain traction while others do not? Morten Bøas and Desmond McNeill have analysed how ideas evolve as they move among

[30] See Olav Stokke, *The UN and Development: From Aid to Cooperation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

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international institutions. New ideas may spread, especially if they are gaining support from governments and the Third UN. But in doing so, they are likely to be adapted and modified by the institutions into which they are moving – to fit their existing priorities, programmes of work, and paradigms. As Bøas and McNeill demonstrate, the processes of adaptation, negation, and distortion of ideas to make them fit existing agendas has often lead to perceptions of change rather than to genuine transformation. Their analytical effort is called 'CANDID' – the Creation, Adoption, Negation and Distortion of Ideas in Development, which summarises the key elements of the process.[31]

Adopting more recent work by McNeill and Asunción Lera St. Clair about moral variables,[32] five factors seem pertinent in giving some ideas clout and largely sidelining others: international consensus and legitimacy; professional endorsement and interest; non-governmental support; and financial backing. The fifth – and perhaps the most important for the longer run and certainly the most criticised in anti-UN circles – is the extent to which the UN organisations or institutions in which the idea is embedded take responsibility and initiatives for implementation. Here, even a critical theorist like Robert Cox, who spent twenty-five years in the ILO, suggests that the very existence of new institutions could challenge the rigidity of existing norms. '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.'[33]

The UN has 192 member states and multiple moving parts, and it is rare that all five factors come together. Perhaps the main occasions were at the beginning, when the very idea of founding the world organisation stirred professional and non-governmental enthusiasm and received strong financial backing from the richest country in the world. At that juncture, the politics within deliberative bodies were less divisive. The Cold War was raging; but the West and, at the time, supportive partners in Latin America were very much on the same ideological page. Thereafter, the influx of newly independent states in Africa and Asia along with the evolution of Latin America away from a pro-American stance changed the dynamics, and the North-South divide made many ideas highly controversial, even toxic.

The creation of the SNA described above is a case where Cold War divides, though disruptive, were insufficient to prevent or even slow ideas and action. The staff of the Statistical Commission was mostly drawn from developed Western countries, including all the directors, and drew heavily on leading statisticians and economists. Not surprisingly – and most professionals would argue properly – the guidelines matched the priorities of industrialised rather than developing countries; and the priorities of market economies dominated those of the non-market economies of the Soviet bloc even though the UNSO published analyses on how comparisons could be made. Thus, backed by a dominant international majority

[31] Bøas and McNeill (eds), *Global Institutions and Development*.
[32] Desmond McNeill and Asunción Lera St. Clair, *Global Poverty, Ethics and Human Rights: The Role of Multilateral Organisations* (London: Routledge, 2009).
[33] Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Loius Emmerij, and Richard Jolly, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 420.

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with professional and financial support, the proposed SNA spread rapidly ahead in most parts of the world.

Other ideas that arose within the UN have not had such backing, especially following the establishment of the Group of 77 in the lead-up to the first UNCTAD in 1964.[34] Work on trade policy, debt relief, transnational corporations, and the formulation of targets for aid and the needs of the least developed countries had little clout in spite of being derived from detailed analyses. Proposals were strongly backed by developing countries while the main developed countries distanced themselves. NGOs often provided support and, since the 1980s, increasingly so. But clout has been feeble because the main donor countries and, often, mainstream professional economists resisted.

The phenomenon of opposition or weak support for UN ideas on economic and social policy from the mainstream of the economics profession requires reflection. Even before the current crisis, many have thought of economics as the 'dismal science' whereas others regard it as social science royalty because of its robust theory, evidence base, and ever more sophisticated econometric techniques. Whatever one's bottom line, it is safe to say that mainstream development economists have mostly stuck to the tools and perspectives of neo-liberal analysis. Outside this mainstream, there has been a vocal professional minority, especially in developing countries and somewhat in Europe, as well as sometimes economists and social scientists working within other disciplines or multidisciplinary frameworks.

The Bretton Woods institutions mostly have navigated within this mainstream – to some, explained by their overlapping interests with those of industrialised countries that provide the bulk of the funding. Although all such generalisations present problems, it is fair to say that the UN has mostly approached development issues by swimming outside of mainstream economics, in part reflecting the political priorities and broader interests of the majority of its member states from the global South. Another important factor has been a much greater pressure of non-economic professions in many UN organisations – the medical professions in the World Health Organization (WHO), agriculturalists in the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), labour experts in the International Labour Organization (ILO), a diversity of educationalists and other scientists in UNESCO, and professionals of a wide variety of backgrounds and country experience with children in UNICEF, of nutrition in the World Food Programme (WFP), and of development and management administration in the UN Development Programme (UNDP). This diversity has meant that the UN system as a whole has approached development from wider perspectives than the economists working for the Bretton Woods institutions.

At its best, the result of pulling together different professions has challenged received wisdom and improved thinking about international policy options. And sometimes, as with the UN's early economic work on the need for concessional finance for poorer countries and the proposals for the Special UN Fund for Economic Development (SUNFED), the world organisation's work persuaded more orthodox economists at the World Bank or the IMF to think again. But on

[34] See John Toye and Richard Toye, *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance, and Development* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). See also Tagi Sagafi-nejad in collaboration with John Dunning, *The UN and Transnational Corporations: From Code of Conduct to Global Compact* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

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other occasions, as with *Adjustment with a Human Face* for which UNICEF and the Economic Commission for Africa clamoured in the 1980s, adoption by the Bretton Woods institutions has been slow and lukewarm.[35]

Nine UN ideas that changed the world

Space here does not permit doing more than enumerating the nine ideas in which UN efforts have altered the ways that global issues are perceived and addressed. The argument in *UN Ideas That Changed the World* draws on the evidence from one or more of the commissioned volumes. Hopefully the chapter titles provide a sufficient flavour to whet the reader's appetite to examine, or even buy, the project's volumes about these significant ideas: 'Human Rights: From Aspiration to Implementation'; 'Gender and Women's Rights: From Empowerment to Equality'; 'Development Policies: From National and Regional Perspectives to Beyond'; 'International Economic Relations: From National Interests to Global Solidarity'; 'Development Ideologies: From Planning to Markets'; 'Social Development: From Sectoral to Integrated Perspectives'; 'Sustainability: From Protecting the Environment to Preserving Ecological Systems'; 'Peace and Human Security: From States to Individuals'; and 'Human Development: From Narrower to Broader Horizons'.

We have teased out the contributions by the UN in broadening the perspective of economic and social development, from early concerns with human rights and gender, to priorities and perspectives of national and international development to the management of global resources and the need to develop sustainable development strategies. The subtitles of the chapters also indicate that ideas are not static but change considerably over the UN's history. We have also noted more recently the UN's calls for action to combine continuing development with preserving the world's eco-systems from the consequences of greenhouse gases, global warming, and climate chaos.[36] Moreover, as mentioned already, the analysis necessarily goes beyond the economic, the social, and the environmental because development, human rights, and human security intersect and should be viewed together.

Our overall balance sheet maintains that the UN has often led the charge with pioneering ideas. Admittedly, the 'three UNs' enlarges what we count as the world organisation's specific contributions. However, that is the reality of the contemporary international system, of fledgling global governance.[37] Many key ideas are those that were often initially formulated or articulated by distinguished experts as members of UN panels or as work commissioned by UN staff or by governments. Examples are the first ideas about the construction of a global and consistent economic order that came out of the three committees that reported between 1949

[35] For a trenchant analysis, see Robert Wade, 'Japan, the World Bank and the Art of Paradigm Maintenance: The East Asian Miracle in Political Perspective', *New Left Review*, I/217 (1996). For a critique from a former insider, see Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2003).

[36] Nico Schrijver, *From Destruction to Development: The UN and Global Resource Management* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[37] See Thomas G. Weiss and Ramesh Thakur, *Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

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and 1951,[38] or more recently those on climate change presented by the IPCC,[39] or in between by Hans Singer on the terms of trade or UNCTAD staff on debt problems. In other cases, the UN's contributions have been less in providing the initial spark of creativity than in challenging the way a problem is framed – as with the ILO missions on basic needs in the 1970s.

Many times and on many occasions, UN contributions have been multiplied by using the system's capacity for disseminating and promoting ideas. The UNDP's annual *Human Development Report* and reports by UNICEF on the *State of the World's Children* or by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on *The State of the World's Refugees* achieved part of their global visibility and impact by being subsidised and disseminated widely – hundreds of thousands of copies in English, French, and Spanish and often other languages as well. There were also media launches in the 100 or so countries in which the UN system has country offices. Other than a few academic blockbusters written by such authors as Joseph Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs, or Paul Collier, few scholarly publications could have achieved such outreach. This global dissemination was increasingly reinforced by UNDP support for national and regional reports, taking the human development methodology and applying it to country problems and situations – another illustration of how ideas matter.

If the nature and impact of UN ideas are not clear enough, it is instructive to situate the overall balance sheet by asking two questions: Where would the world be without the UN and its ideas in the economic and social arena? Could the UN have done better, in follow-up or in crafting the ideas themselves? *UN Ideas That Changed the World* provides answers for the nine ideas and demonstrates the extent to which UN ideas have had influence. Here it is useful to think through two counterfactuals.

Counterfactual # 1: The world without the UN and its ideas?

One way of considering the impact of UN ideas is to imagine where the world might be without a world organisation or with one solely set up as a passive convener, with no capacity for generating or nurturing independent ideas. It would thus be a markedly different UN, with a minimum of staff, presumably only ex-diplomats to bring groups with differences together and help to resolve them but with few ideas of their own. It would be a strange and impotent international body although not totally different from the type that extreme critics, including such members of the flat-earth society as John Bolton and John Yoo, put forward as the sort of world organisation that they would prefer. Such a stripped-down UN would be more limited even than the League of Nations, which had staff members in a number of specialist areas, including some who did pioneering work on nutrition and food security as well as on economics, work that has almost always

[38] UN, *Measures for Full Employment* (New York: UN, 1949); *Measures for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries* (New York: UN, 1951); and *Measures for International Economic Stability* (New York: UN, 1951).

[39] See especially Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Summary for Policymakers of the Synthesis Report of the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC* (Geneva: IPCC, 2007).

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been hailed as some of the best things that the League, weak in more political areas, achieved.[40]

In this counterfactual, what might have happened to the ideas that the UN has framed, massaged, and sometimes put into practice? In the economic arena, the need for rules and regulations to facilitate international trade and other economic transactions would have generated a more limited range of institutions, not so different from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the EU, and other regional organisations. If the world organisation did not exist, it would have been invented, if not in 1945 then about 1960 with decolonisation, or in the 1970s with the floating of the dollar and the surge of oil prices. A series of *ad hoc* meetings to cope with wide-ranging issues of vital economic importance only for the wealthiest of industrialised countries would rapidly be seen as inadequate and something permanent with universal representation would have been created.

The evolution of the G-8 into the G-20 in September 2009 reflects the fact that wider, not narrower, membership is a necessary feature of world politics. Whatever the advantages of economic consultations among the upgraded G-20 that accounts for 90 per cent of the world's GDP, only the UN can formulate global norms, set global standards, make global law, and eventually enforce global treaties. The G-20 certainly is more representative and potentially effective than the Security Council for which there are endless proposals for reform that go nowhere. The new G-20 encompasses 4.2 billion people (instead of 900 million in the G-8), but another 2.6 mainly poor people are left out. And they and their governments are a prerequisite for solving most global problems. The G-192 has advantages that the upgraded G-20, *ad hoc* coalitions of the willing, and various proposals for 'leagues of democracies' do not. The policy preferences of the countries that count will need to be endorsed globally. The range of links between the G-20, on the one hand, and the universal UN, on the other hand, represents a potentially rich research vein.

Cynics might comment that a narrower focus would have been little different from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) or its replacement, the World Trade Organization (WTO), which indeed have commanded the respect and support of industrialised countries. However, the WTO at present employs over 600 staff, just shy of the dimensions of the League of Nations in the 1930s. Most of the staff are economists and lawyers, many engaged in producing research and statistical reports in areas in which the UN over a much broader field is also engaged. The WTO takes the rules of the game as fixed and tries to interpret and enforce them while the UN tries to produce alternate policy ideas for new situations. The notion that international organisations engaged solely in facilitating interactions rather than contributing substantively – including questioning the fairness of the rules of the game and who sits at the gaming table as well as whether it is level – is not viable for an international institution that has universal membership.

But beyond the economic imperatives required for facilitating trade and the functioning of global markets, some of what the UN does in other areas would

[40] See Jolly, Emmerij, Ghai, and Lapeyre, *UN Contributions*, pp. 169–219.

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also be required and need to be recreated. Two examples could illustrate this reality, namely the UN's work in international public goods as well as human rights and humanitarian concerns.

Providing public goods in the form of rule setting and regulation would be required in such areas as health, food, and agriculture, weather and meteorology, civil aviation, and maritime law. Economists describe them as such because they are needed for individual countries and for the international system.[41] At the same time, global public goods are beyond the capacity of the marketplace because individual countries lack the incentives and the capacity to provide them on the scale required – in part because of the classic 'free rider' problem. To ensure public goods, many specialised functional organisations would need to have been invented if they were not already part of the UN system. Indeed, many such institutions were created long before the current generation of post-war organisations. Examples include the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, which was founded in 1902 and transformed into the Latin American arm of the WHO in 1948 and renamed PAHO, the Pan American Health Organisation; and earlier international organisations like the Universal Postal Union (UPU) and International Telecommunications Union (ITU), whose origins are in the mid-nineteenth century.[42]

But beyond purely economic imperatives, some of what the UN does in areas with a values-orientation would certainly have had to be recreated. The human rights arena clearly illustrates how the world would be poorer without the UN.[43] Even a world focused solely on economic efficiency and free markets would be under public pressure to invent an organisation to embrace some rights. The UN, however, embraces the entire gamut not for reasons of economic efficiency or political necessity but as a reflection of the vision and humanity of its founders.

Such vision and idealism are also reflected in the mandates and work of the UN funds and specialised agencies – for instance, UNICEF and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UNDP and the WFP as well as UNESCO, WHO, FAO, and the ILO. They are also at the core of the work of the offices of the UNHCR as well as of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), including activists' dealing with the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples as well as the prevention of torture and genocide. These are important and visible efforts in the forefront of the world organisation's work. And because their mandates put human values ahead of economic concerns and market efficiency, they often clash with the dominant interests of governments and market priorities, and they often call for more political and financial support than governments are prepared to provide.

UN institutions are obviously not without problems; and implementation lags far behind rhetoric. But the fact that human values are emphasised and sometimes are placed ahead of economic concerns and market efficiency is far from trivial.

[41] See, for example, Scott Barrett, *Why Cooperate? The Incentive to Supply Global Public Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg, and Marc A. Stern (eds), *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[42] See Craig Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance since 1850* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

[43] Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

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One undoubtedly can imagine a world without such concerns. But it would be much poorer and much less human than the one to which the UN aspires and, at its best, contributes to and achieves.

Counterfactual #2: A more creative UN?

Recalling the lofty vision and ideas of the UN offers no defence for its inefficiencies or a justification for its weaknesses. Nor is it a reason for suggesting that the world organisation could not have done far better in formulating ideas or in ensuring their follow-up. The project's volumes and oral history interviews of nearly eighty individuals contain specific suggestions for ways in which the UN could indeed have done much better.[44] Here, three substantive ones are highlighted that provide food for thought regarding the 'what if' of a more intellectually creative world organisation.

First, more creative work could have been done on political economy in areas in which the international system is failing. Economic weaknesses about how the global system limits opportunities for the poorest countries is one such crucial area that has become even more pressing as a result of the ongoing global economic and financial crisis. Inadequate progress toward the goals of sustainable development and environmental protection is another, which seems more acute as a result of evidence about climate change that appears almost daily. Biases in aid along with the lack of coherence in the global trade system and the failures of industrialised countries to make good on their public commitments to a free and open international economic system are issues that remain critical as does the lack of incentives for measures of disarmament and development. The fact that such ideas have little chance to be implemented in the immediate term is not a reason to give up the good fight for more solidarity and a better and less conflict-ridden world.

Across all these areas, more sustained attention could have been given to measures required to achieve a more egalitarian international system and to pursue national policies that combine redistribution with growth. It may sound hopelessly naïve even to utter the acronym 'NIEO' (New International Economic Order). Nonetheless, the sentiments that motivated the quest for framing an alternative to the global economic order in the 1970s and a fairer distribution of global wealth and the benefits of growth can hardly be ignored in today's world. Glaring inequalities are even worse than three decades ago; and the economic and financial meltdown of 2008 has hurt most of those on the bottom who already had too little.

Second, far more work could have been done on the conditions to create stability in weak and failing states – a crucial requirement, especially in Africa. Even if international inequities were reduced, far more fulsome efforts also are required to address glaring inequalities within countries. Since 2006, the effort to pull together UN inputs in the Peacebuilding Commission is an encouraging sign that preventing a return to war has emerged as a priority, but here too inequalities within fragile states continue to menace any return to stability.

[44] The complete transcripts of the oral history interviews are available on CD-ROM: UN Intellectual History Project, *The Complete Oral History Transcripts from 'UN Voices'* (New York: UNIHP, 2007).

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Third, better promotion of UN ideas would have helped in *all* areas of its work. Production of new ideas is one task, but the distribution and dissemination of key UN reports to academics, policy analysts, and the media is also crucial. Outreach and distribution, including translation and subsidies, for high-visibility reports have sometimes been impressive, but too many quality analyses languish on bookshelves or in filing cabinets. Following UNDP's example of disseminating its annual *Human Development Report*, the world organisation as a whole should have ensured far greater outreach for the part of its work where it has originality and comparative advantage – work outside the box of neo-classical economic orthodoxy. The encouragement of wide discussions of multidisciplinary work is especially essential in areas in which economic issues interact with human rights, human security, and human development. The UN could and should have engaged in a broader debate over the weaknesses of Bretton Woods dogma and the Washington consensus. Even those convinced that such approaches are broadly correct now recognise that some of the UN's past work often led to crucial new insights into the weaknesses of mainstream thinking.

The UN could have been better and done more in all these areas. There is still time. How could this happen?

Improving UN intellectual output

Part of the reason for UN failures to fulfil mandates or achieve goals is that they are too visionary, or at least go far beyond where most governments are prepared to go. Meanwhile, the vast majority of analysts in international studies focus on one obvious explanation, the lack of political will among member states.

The concern here is not to throw up our hands in despair but rather to examine where change is possible, and an essential component of the preceding counter-factual consists of improving the intellectual quality of the Second UN.[45] Inefficiency and weak institutions and staff do less than they might, and governments provide less finance than required. We could have a more effective world organisation if there were more intellectual firepower and less interference from governments in the process of recruitment and promotion.[46]

The most visible champion of the Second UN was Dag Hammarskjöld whose speech at Oxford in May 1961, shortly before his calamitous death, spelled out the importance of an autonomous and first-rate staff. He asserted that any erosion or abandonment of 'the international civil service [. . .] might, if accepted by the Member nations, well prove to be the Munich of international cooperation'.[47] His clarion call did not ignore the reality that the international civil service exists to carry out decisions by member states. But Hammarskjöld fervently believed that

[45] See Thomas G. Weiss, Tapio Kanninen, and Michael K. Busch, *Creating Sustainable Global Governance for the 21st Century: The UN Confronts Economic and Environmental Crises Amidst Changing Geopolitics* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Occasional Paper No. 40, 2009).

[46] This argument is based on Thomas G. Weiss, 'Reinvigorating the International Civil Service', *Global Governance*, 16:1 (2010).

[47] Dag Hammarskjöld, 'The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact', lecture delivered to Congregation at Oxford University (30 May 1961), reprinted by Clarendon Press, Oxford, quotes at p. 329 and p. 349. Available at: {www.un.org/depts/dhl/dag/docs/internationalcivilservant.pdf}.

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UN officials could and should pledge allegiance to a larger collective good symbolised by the organisation's light-blue-covered *laissez-passer* rather than the narrowly perceived national interests of the countries that issue national passports in different colours.

The long-standing policy of setting aside UN staff positions for officials approved by their home countries belies integrity. Governments seek to ensure that their interests are defended inside secretariats, and many have even relied on officials for intelligence. The influx in the 1950s and 1960s of former colonies as new member states led them to clamour for 'their' quota or fair share of the patronage opportunities, following the bad example set by major powers and other member states. The result was downplaying competence and exaggerating national origins as the main criterion for recruitment and promotion. Over the years, efforts to improve gender balance have resulted in other types of claims, as has the age profile of secretariats. Virtually all positions above the director level, and often many below as well, are the object of campaigns by governments.

How many people are we speaking about? Professional and support staff number approximately 55,000 in the UN proper and in agencies created by the General Assembly, and another 20,000 in the specialised agencies. This number includes neither temporary staff in peace operations (about 125,000 in 2010) nor the staff of the IMF and the World Bank group (another 15,000). These figures represent substantial growth from the approximately 500 employees in the UN's first year at Lake Success and the peak total of 700 staff employed by the League of Nations.[48]

Neglected personnel issues are relevant because people, like ideas, matter – for good and for ill. In spite of its slavish image, international secretariats do more than simply carry out marching orders from governments. Thus, it is clear that this position differs with three analysts who dismiss 'the curious notion that the UN is an autonomous actor in world affairs that can and does take action independent of the will and wishes of the member governments'.[49] There is considerably more room for creativity and initiative than is commonly believed. UN officials can present ideas to tackle problems, debate them formally and informally with governments, take initiatives, advocate for change, turn general decisions into specific programmes, and implement them. They monitor progress and report to national officials and politicians gathering at intergovernmental conferences and in countries in which the UN is operating.

Thinking through the counterfactual of a more creative UN requires us to imagine what the world organisation would be if it aggressively maintained its ability to produce or nurture world-class public intellectuals, scholars, thinkers, planners, and practitioners who could aspire to Nobel and other prizes. Members of UN secretariats are typically considered second-class citizens in comparison with the researchers, thinkers, and practitioners from the World Bank and the IMF. This notion partially reflects vastly differing resources devoted to research as well as their respective cultures, media attention, dissemination outlets and the use of the research in decision-making.

[48] Thant Myint-U and Amy Scott, *The UN Secretariat: A Brief History (1945–2006)* (New York: International Peace Academy, 2007), pp. 126–8.

[49] Donald J. Puchala, Katie Verlin Laatikainen, and Roger A. Coate, *UN Politics: International Organization in a Divided World* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), p. x.

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At the same time, reality is often different. Nine persons with substantial experience within the UN and its policy formulation processes have won the Nobel Prize in economic sciences – Jan Tinbergen, Wassily Leontief, Gunnar Myrdal, James Meade, W. Arthur Lewis, Theodore W. Schultz, Lawrence R. Klein, Richard Stone, and Amartya Sen – whereas only one from the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, has done so. But even he resigned in protest and is now deeply associated with the UN in New York. And this list is in addition to UN organisations and individual Nobel Peace Prize winners who worked for years as staff members of the UN: Ralph Bunche, Dag Hammarskjöld, Kofi Annan, Mohammed El Baradei, and Martti Ahtisaari.

In short, the UN requires ideas and the people who produce them to be taken more seriously. Improved research, analysis, and policy work would permit the Secretary-General and the system as a whole to play more important roles in world political, economic, social, and environmental decision-making. To this effect, the world organisation should implement three changes in human resources management.

First, human resources policy should do more to foster an environment that encourages creative thinking, penetrating analysis, and policy-focused research of the highest intellectual calibre. The quality of staff members is essential and will depend on improvements and better professional procedures in recruitment, appointment, promotion, and organisation of responsibilities. Some progress has been made, such as the establishment of a system of national competitive examinations for entry-level recruitment as well as internships and junior professional officer programmes – but even here competence is not the only criterion for those who have passed the exams or applied for the training efforts. But there could also be a continual infusion of young or senior scholars for fixed periods to the UN. This could be brought about through exchange procedures from universities and think tanks around the world, not just from the West. It would benefit not only the UN while these visitors were in residence but also the future research agendas of scholars thereafter.

Second, independent research and analysis requires space within the institution. Whenever the UN pursues a bold agenda, it is unable to please all 192 member states all of the time. Calling into question conventional or politically correct wisdom requires longer-term funding that sympathetic donors should provide. A less skewed allocation of international resources toward the IFIs is a place to start. The terms on which such finance is provided are of crucial importance, not only to ensure availability but sustained multi-year commitments without strings. Encouragement of freethinking and policy exploration is vital but not cheap.

Typically, messages are watered down to satisfy the lowest common intergovernmental denominator. The example of the *Human Development Report* suggests that independent teams could be liberated from the purported obligation to check analyses before publication with boards or donors.[50] Given the current 'culture' of the world body and the reluctance of its Secretary-General to ruffle any diplomatic feathers, this may well require 'safety zones' within UN organisations – where serious and independent analyses can take place, freed from daily urgent matters and where controversy is tolerated.

[50] See Craig Murphy, *The UN Development Programme: A Better Way?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 232–62, and Khadiha Haq and Richard Ponzio (eds), *Pioneering the Human Development Revolution: An Intellectual Biography of Mahbub ul Haq* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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Third, the UN should seek as many alliances as possible as well as borrow personnel from centres of expertise and excellence – in academia, think tanks, government policy units, and corporate research centres. A prominent location for dialogue and for knitting together the international cooperative fabric, the UN also should be a place to network outstanding thinking. Independent international commissions beginning with the 1969 Pearson report on *Partners in Development* as well as the more recent High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change have had research secretariats,[51] and this kind of independent staff borrowed from universities and think tanks but loosely affiliated with the UN should become a permanent feature of the organisation but with frequent and regular turn-over in personnel. Another possible route would be to replicate the experience with climate change by the IPCC and pool world-class expertise from a variety of disciplines for such global challenges as pandemics, finance, proliferation, and terrorism. Basic research is best done in universities, but many elements of applied research can and should be undertaken within the UN.

Conclusion

Even the harshest critic would admit that the UN's intellectual work could have been poorer. It could have been totally smothered by caution and controlled by Secretaries-General who allowed no scope for creativity by members of the Secretariat, lacked any vision, and were dogmatic. This could have happened so early in the world organisation's life that many non-state actors became definitively disillusioned and discouraged about the UN's potential for social change.

Instead, the world organisation has managed to attract participation and commitment from many people with outstanding intellectual or leadership capabilities to work for the Second UN as well as engage actively with relevant parts of the First and the Third UN. At each stage of its life, individuals and some governments have argued passionately for maintaining the original idealistic vision and for applying its inspirational values to the contemporary but ever-evolving international system. The United Nations could have gone the way of the League of Nations; it did not.

The UN's achievements have helped, including the impact of its ideas. Throughout its over six-and-a-half decades, many of the world organisation's core ideas have had remarkable impact; and even those that have been rejected, sidelined, or adopted only rhetorically after long periods of time have emerged, not unscathed but intact. Politically unacceptable to many powerful countries at first, they often later became part of mainstream international discourse. Readers should, for example, recall everything from climate change to gender equality; from concessional loans, debt relief, and other special measures for least developed countries to putting people at the centre of development; from the role of a high commissioner for human rights to human security and removing the license to kill from the attributes of sovereign states.

[51] See Commission on International Development, *Partners in Development* (New York: Praeger, 1969); and High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* (New York: UN, 2004).

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The UN's effectiveness cannot fairly be judged from a short-term perspective. The past record provides a benchmark on which future improvements could and should be made. Perhaps as much as any recent event, the ongoing global financial and economic meltdown, which the late John Kenneth Galbraith might well have dubbed 'the great crash 2008',[52] made even clearer what many previous crises had not – namely the risks, problems, and enormous costs of a global economy without adequate international institutions, regulation, democratic decision-making, and powers to bring order, spread risks, and enforce compliance.

The world body's role as an idea-monger provides some 'good news' that deserves to be better known and understood. Its contributions to economic and social thinking, policymaking, and action have been more successful than generally appreciated, or 'ahead of the curve' as the title of the UN Intellectual History Project's first volume puts it.[53] In short, the UN has distinctly influenced the ways that we as academics and, more importantly, states think and talk about issues, frame agendas for action, and constitute coalitions as well as the ways that both new and reformed public and private institutions deal with global problems.

That is how UN ideas have changed history.

[52] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash, 1929* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954).
[53] Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

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