

Introduction: The UN at 70, and the UK

Richard Jolly and Michael Askwith

2015 marked the 70th anniversary of the UN, a good moment for reflection about the strengths, weaknesses and priorities for change needed in the world's most all-embracing international organisation which had already existed for over three times longer than the League of Nations. Such reflections are needed from each of the UN's member countries – and in this IDS Evidence Report, they are insider reflections by UK citizens who have in different ways spent much or all of their careers working for or closely with the organisation, often in many parts of the world.

The three Witness Seminars organised in May and October 2015 and January 2016 capture both personal experiences in a wide diversity of countries and situations, and informed thinking about the international organisation, both of its past and its future. Most of the pieces end with recommendations about ways to strengthen the UN – and, in particular, ways in which the United Kingdom as a major funder and permanent member of the Security Council, could use its influence and resources to help the UN better to adapt to meet future challenges.

The full records of these Witness Seminars and much other background material will be added to the archive records of the UN kept in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, as part of the UN Career Records Project (UNCRP) and are thus available both historical and further research purposes.

Box 1 What is a Witness Seminar?

'Witness seminars are best described as exercises in oral history. Key participants meet around the seminar table to discuss and debate the issues surrounding the chosen topic as they remember them. Witness seminars thus operate as group interviews, chaired by a senior academic, which are recorded. These recordings are made available to scholars.

ICBH Witness Seminars are widely regarded by contemporary historians and social scientists as among the most useful and innovative forms of oral history. They often prove to be of more value than one-on-one interviews because of the interaction between witnesses stimulated during these discussions. They have been adopted by other institutions, both in Britain and abroad.'

Michael Kandiah, Director, Witness Seminar Programme, Institute for Contemporary British History (ICBH), King's College, University of London

By their nature Witness Seminars ask individuals to review their experiences, with frankness and openness. By definition, their judgements on many issues will be subjective, without the footnotes or sources expected in a normal scholarly article. Their opinions are all the more interesting and important because they have emerged from real experiences. We hope articles in this IDS Evidence Report live up to this – though more than usual, we must point out that the opinions expressed here represent the views of the authors and participants in the Witness Seminars, and not necessarily those of the IDS, the UNA or BAFUNCS.

This report starts with Part A. **Global perspectives:** Mark Malloch-Brown, as a former UNDP Administrator and UN Deputy Secretary-General and the UK's most senior former UN official reflects on 'A UN Career, the UN's Four Lives and the Challenges Ahead'. This is followed by reflections on 'The Lessons of Leadership in the UN' by Margaret Anstee, who in a UN career of 41 years became the UK's most senior woman in the UN and first woman to be appointed to Under-Secretary-General. 'A Personal Reflection on Managing Crises' by Alan Doss follows, with 'The Role of Human Rights – The UN's Elusive Third Pillar' following by

David Whaley, who stresses the need for increased attention to human rights in all areas of the UN's work. Natalie Samarasinghe reviews the data on 'UK Representation Within the United Nations System' and the need for the UK to continue to provide highly qualified nationals to provide the leadership and quality of service which the organisation requires for the next phase of its development.

In **Part B Witness Seminars**, the report includes a number of papers drawing on themes and discussions of each of the Witness Seminars.

- *WS1 on Development Cooperation* includes four papers starting with Robert England's 'Reflections and Experiences from the Country Level' reconciling the challenges of promoting international norms and national priorities at country level, followed by John Burley's similar experience at agency headquarters level in 'The Specialized Agencies of the UN: New Challenges and Roles for the Twenty-first Century'. Michael Askwith then draws lessons from his practical experience in the use of UN coordination mechanisms and the tools required for enhanced coherence and impact in 'UN Coordination: Strengthening Coherence, Impact and Tools'. Stephen Browne finally provides some further forward thinking on 'The Future of UN Development Assistance – Norms, Standards and the SDGs', based on the substantial research of the FUNDS project.
- In *WS2 on Humanitarian Action*, Martin Barber provides an overview of the themes discussed in 'People at the Centre of Humanitarian Action: Challenges for the United Nations and Donor Governments'. This is followed by Angela Raven-Roberts focusing on 'Globalising the Local: Enhancing Support to Local Institutions for Humanitarian Response', Nicola Dahrendorf on 'Putting People at the Centre of Humanitarian Action: Empowering Women and Girls', Jeffrey Crisp on 'An End to Exile? Refugee Initiative and the Search for Durable Solutions' and ends with Adam Robert's piece on 'The UN and Humanitarian Action: What Have We Learned?'.
Jeremy Greenstock's concluding remarks focus on 'Lessons and Recommendations from Seven Decades: International Peace and Security'.

In **Part C Recommendations** of each of the three Seminars are brought together.

It is hoped that this IDS Evidence Report will contribute to reminding readers of the many roles UK citizens have played and still play in the UN – and perhaps encourage persons at earlier stages of their careers to consider ways their skills and commitments can contribute to the UN. In addition, it is hoped that the policy implications from these Witness Seminars will be of use both to the UK government as well as the UN System. Finally, it is hoped that the collection of reports, records and papers accumulated during the Witness Seminar programme will serve as a valuable historical and analytical contribution to the UN Career Records Project and repository libraries of UN materials.