

# FIFTY YEARS ON: THE UN AND ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AN OVERVIEW

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On the occasion of its 50th birthday, the United Nations is under scrutiny as never before. Many voices have been assessing the performance of the UN and making proposals for its reform and future, swelling to a crescendo in this 50th anniversary year. If the UN had one dollar to spend for every word written about UN reform, world poverty would rapidly become a distant memory. It has been suggested that we now need something like a reader's guide or clearing house for such proposals. All the same, we feel that this Bulletin is distinctive. The contributors to this volume – combining analytical training with practical experience of the UN system – have new ideas and new proposals to put forward. While many other contributions – especially those starting from a very critical attitude to the UN – concentrate on the more political functions of peace making and emergency action, this Bulletin concentrates on the role of the UN in economic and social development.

## **'BIG BANG' OR PATCHWORK REFORM?**

Not even the most radical critics of the UN are suggesting that it should be abolished. All agree that if it did not exist today it would have to be reinvented. On the other hand, not even its most fervent supporters suggest that, after 50 years of change in the world the UN is not in need of change and reform to make it more effective and equip it for the tasks of 1995, and indeed of 2045. Within this agreed middle ground, there is plenty of room for dissent as to the degree of reform needed – 'Big Bang' radical reform or more gradualistic patchwork ('status quo plus') changes – and as to the areas where reform is most needed and the specific measures suggested. Such diversity is reflected in this Bulletin; no attempt has been made to make the contributors conform to any particular approach to reform in their respective areas. If the protection of biodiversity is a legitimate and important task for the UN, it was also considered important to preserve it for this Bulletin. There is, of course, no inconsistency between mixing both radical and patchwork reform in a more comprehensive reform programme (such as this Bulletin represents when read in totality). When the UN was established

fifty years ago, this in itself was an act of 'Big Bang': 'status quo plus' was excluded because the status quo had been swept away by the war.

When we assess the successes and failures of 'the UN' and talk of reforming 'the UN', it is not always clear to whom exactly the advice or criticism are addressed. What is 'the UN'? The 185 governments which vote in the General Assemblies of the UN and its many agencies? The G7 countries which control the purse strings of the UN system and thus determine the scope for its activities and its effectiveness? The Secretariats and their leaderships? The central organization in New York or its vast network of agencies? 'We the peoples ...' (in the opening words of the Charter)? The operational technical work – in organizations such as the World Meteorological Organization or International Civil Aviation Organization, the FAO early warning system of crop failures, the work of the Statistical Office of the UN and other organizations in providing internationally comparable data etc? All these are largely non-controversial but often forgotten in more critical comments – Or the UN in its attempts to provide macroeconomic coordination and achieve agreement on broad guidelines and targets at summit level? 'The UN' is clearly all of these things. The comments and proposals in this Bulletin are also variously addressed to different recipients but it is clear that essentially the responsibility for the effectiveness of the UN rests with the member governments.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS AND SUCCESS STORIES**

The achievements and success stories of the UN are numerous, particularly in the fields of social and human development which the UN system (in the narrower sense, excluding the Bretton Woods system) has especially made its own. Here progress has been striking. Whether measured in terms of general, child or infant mortality, access to basic education, literacy, access to clean water and sanitation, the social distance between nations has diminished as a result of rapid, widespread advances in the South. To quote only one example: smallpox, a scourge for 6,000 years and which killed some

two millions a year only 30 years ago, is now eradicated; and major progress can be reported for polio and guinea-worm. During the past year, three million tons of food has been distributed to victims of conflict and disaster, thirty million refugees and displaced persons have been provided with food, health care and shelter. Even in the 'lost decade' of the 1980s, as many as 1.3 billion people for the first time gained access to clean water. The share of the UN in these great achievements cannot be quantified but it has clearly played a leading role. Fifty years ago Arnold Toynbee said: 'our age is the first generation since the dawn of history in which mankind dared to believe it practical to make the benefit of civilization available to the whole human race'. Judged by this standard the achievements of the UN are considerable.

To be sure, there is still a long way to go. 190 million children are still chronically undernourished and 12½ million still die each year under five years old. New health threats like AIDS threaten to take the place of those which have been eradicated. The economic – as distinct from the social – distance between nations, and within nations, has increased rather than diminished, and the least developed countries are increasingly being marginalized. The successes in terms of human development still have to feed through into GNP terms although even in the GNP terms of the market calculus the 50 years of the UN have been a period of unprecedented growth for the South as a whole and the period as a whole. The marginalization of Africa on both the market and the human calculus is part of this large unfinished agenda to achieve Toynbee's goal. But we are on the way.

### **THE UNFINISHED AGENDA**

Whatever the successes, it is the unfinished agenda, the distance still separating us from Toynbee's goal, which seems to attract more attention than the distance already covered. Perhaps rightly so – but it does mean that the critical voices emphasizing failures tend to be overweighted against those listing successes. The failures are in conspicuous political and macroeconomic fields, whereas the successes are in less visible social and welfare terms.

The problem of coordination plays a major role in the literature on UN reform. This is also reflected in the contributions to this Bulletin. It is recognized that internecine war is destructive whether it is due

to lack of coordination between governments, between North and South, between the Bretton Woods and UN systems, or between the various agencies of the UN system. Some contributors take a cautious line, feeling that there is a danger that over-centralization and top-down 'coordinated' control of all UN development work would harm the culture and appeal of specific agencies which have become recognized contributors in their respective areas – UNICEF could be a specific example. Here again some degree of diversity in approaching development may be not only inevitable but even desirable. Would the world be better if all economic policy were coordinated by the World Bank – or by the IMF (with which at times even the World Bank has differed)? Moreover, the call for even tighter coordination is curiously at variance with the free market philosophy of the times – in which competition and diversity is encouraged and central planning is condemned. Surely comparative advantage and value added should be the tests by which the worth of individual parts of the UN are judged? Other contributors emphasize more the dangers of fragmentation and the need for a central point of coordination and a more rational distribution of functions, for example in the field of food security.

### **BETTER COORDINATION**

Also when better coordination is demanded it becomes important to specify to whom the demand is addressed. Since all agencies involved are essentially supported and controlled by the same governments, better coordination is a matter not only of inter-governmental coordination but also of coordination of the different departments concerned within each government. There are certainly examples at present of the same governments speaking with different voices in different agencies. It is all too easy to concentrate criticism of lack of coordination and firm management on the Secretariats who cannot answer back. This is not to deny that better internal management within the UN system is an essential part of any reform. One of the contributions includes a figure showing how the overarching common goal of poverty reduction, by the logic of the different approaches involved, leads to a natural allocation of functions between the major UN agencies.

One of the proposals aiming at better coordination and more effective macroeconomic management is to establish an Economic Security Council or

Economic and Social Security Council as a counterpart to the present Security Council. This is based on the undeniable fact that there are economic and social threats to peace as well as military threats, and that prevention of conflict will often require action in the economic and social field. This proposal coming from various sources is also reflected in the contributions to this Bulletin. There are two contributions firmly advocating such a new body but there are also others urging caution and suggesting less drastic alternatives. We have previously referred to the distinction between 'Big Bang' radical reform and gradualistic patchwork reform: those advocating the establishment of an Economic Security Council would belong to the former school and those suggesting less radical alternatives would belong to the latter. The proposal that the United Nations should establish an international contract system to regulate the volatile global capital market is clearly in the category of major reforms.

## **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF WAR**

The problem of economic and social consequences of war and conflict (as well as natural disasters) is high on the reform agenda. While this Bulletin concentrates on the role of the UN in economic and social development, it does not disregard opportunities for linking relief and development (the subject of an earlier Bulletin). This is dealt with particularly in relation to food security and humanitarian aid to victims of war and disaster, but also arises elsewhere in other contributions. Conflict poses a major challenge to the UN mandate for relief as well as development. The World Food Programme is an example of the way in which UN agencies with essentially a development mandate have been shifted into aid for emergencies and thus inevitably involved in the problems of operating in areas of war and ethnic conflict on the borderline between peace keeping and development. The problems of resources for the UN also largely arise from the cost of peace keeping and associated humanitarian action in areas of war and conflict. The change from development and project-based activities to more programme based emergency action raises problems of management as well as resources for all UN agencies, including the Bretton Woods system.

The same is true of the rise of other new tasks not foreseen 50 years ago, such as environmental problems. The contribution dealing specifically with

this issue presents the mixed picture of success and failure which is also typical of the UN record in other areas. But the new key role of the UN in safeguarding the environmental sustainability of development is also involved in several other contributions, for example the role of UNCTAD in representing environmental factors in trade policy in a complementary relationship to the new WTO.

## **ORGANIZING SUMMITS**

One of the new functions of the UN which seems to be widely supported – although not exempt from criticism – is the organization of summits at which broad targets and guidelines as well as broad, if often vague, commitments have been made in such areas as social development, children, environment, population, food security, etc. This continues a tradition of the UN to serve as a forum of discussion and a source of new ideas, even if implementation is in other hands. The establishment of targets, such as the reduction of child mortality or pollution, or percentages of aid and domestic government expenditure of developing countries to be devoted to health and education, can easily be derided. But such targets quantified in implementable terms can serve as a basis for national plans of action and for monitoring progress or lack of progress. They can raise public consciousness of the issues involved and thus put pressure on national governments and increase popular participation. They can also serve to put neglected issues back on the international agenda: the forthcoming Employment Summit would be an example.

The specific problem of the relations between the Bretton Woods system and the rest of the UN system is taken up in several contributions. The present situation is felt to be unsatisfactory, amounting to a faultline running through the UN system which is in urgent need of repair. One of the reasons for the highly unequal distribution of support and resources given to the two systems by the financially powerful countries is the difference in voting systems which gives the G7 countries firm control of the Bretton Woods institutions but not of the UN and the other UN agencies. One suggestion is the introduction of a common voting system which would be somewhere halfway between the Bretton Woods system of a dollar-a-vote and the UN system of a country-a-vote. Such a reform would come under the heading of 'Big Bang' reform, since it would require the abandonment of cherished positions on both sides,

and changes in the respective Charters and Terms of Agreement of all the agencies. The present situation has led to two different cultures within the two multilateral systems and also to the pursuit of two different development paradigms: market-friendly growth and structural change on the one hand and people-friendly human security and welfare on the other hand. These two paradigms ought to be complementary rather than pursued separately or even antagonistically in the two systems.

### **COMMON VOTING SYSTEM**

A common voting system is also advocated as creating a more level playing field in the allocation of resources between the two systems. At present the UN system outside the Bretton Woods agencies suffers from a vicious circle: lack of resources makes the work more difficult and less effective and this lack of effectiveness in turn becomes a reason for withholding resources or shifting them to the other system. In one form or another it becomes essential to break this vicious circle; in this connection some of the contributors bring up the question of providing resources for the UN by means of international taxation. Such taxation is proposed for international 'bads' such as taxes on pollution, or short-

term speculative currency transactions (the Tobin tax), but also for the utilization of global common 'goods', e.g. the resources of the sea or taxes on air travel. Although such proposals for international taxation are not necessarily linked to financing the UN, they are also discussed in that context.

We believe that on all these issues the readers of this Bulletin will find useful suggestions for strengthening the role of the UN in the cause of human development. All the contributions reaffirm the vital role of the UN in the various areas of economic and social development and show ways in which its badly needed leadership can be established and restored. The contributions also contain both explicit and implicit – in most cases explicit – emphasis on the need for further exploration and research on the various ideas and proposals put forward. May we express the hope that the research community will feel tempted to pick up some of this research agenda.

We have earlier said that if the UN did not exist, we would have to re-invent it today. But this Bulletin shows that we would have to re-invent it in a different form to cope with the problems of a changed – and changing – world.

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## **THE UN AND BOSNIA**

Historians often identify 1935-6 as the critical moment of failure of the League of Nations – when the reluctance of the international community to take action over Italy's invasion of Ethiopia marked the moral failure of international action and the League. The parallels with today in Bosnia are uncomfortably close. Though the UN is said to be failing, in truth it is that the main powers of the Security Council are unwilling to take collective action, in spite of overwhelming evidence of human rights abuses. In the New York Times recently, a photograph of a Jewish family being expelled from Warsaw in 1943 was put side-by-side with a Bosnian mother and child being expelled from Srebrenica (one of the so-called safe areas).

The weakness of UN peacekeeping reflects the acute failure to provide the UN with the means to carry out its assigned tasks. The UN military experts had estimated that the protection of the UN safe areas in Bosnia would require 34,000 soldiers. The Security Council only agreed to 7,000 and far

fewer than these were actually provided. Whose failure is this 'UN failure'?

The question is this. With the moral failure of military intervention under the name of the United Nations, is there a role and possibility for the humanitarian parts of the UN to keep alight a small candle of moral integrity? Can this indeed keep alive moral credibility of international action? Could humanitarian action show the lie of trying to maintain moral credibility through moral action? Is there anything else that can or should be done?

The humanitarian actions of the UN in former Yugoslavia, while neither perfectly principled nor uniformly successful, have been consistent and sustained. For almost four years humanitarian workers from many nations have delivered food and medical supplies, tarpaulins and waterpumps to help tens of thousands of ordinary people. These UN workers, national and international – with NGO counterparts from many nations, have put

themselves on the line, risking body and soul in a struggle to provide help to all in need, without fear or favour of nationality, religion, race, age or sex. Surely the moral integrity of UN action has been upheld by these efforts, which have closely followed the principles of the charter and the convention on human rights?

These humanitarian actions have been maintained even while fighting has been raging. Though success is limited, there is a basic moral integrity of the humanitarian efforts which merits respect.

All of this underlines the importance of the UN in shifting to much more emphasis on economic and social actions, focused indeed on human development for individuals rather than political and military security of the boundaries of sovereign nations. So far this message has been made primarily on the grounds of the ultimate importance of individuals over nations and sovereignty. But the Bosnian tragedy provides a further argument of *real politik*. If countries which spend billions of dollars every year on military weapons are unwilling to use them in the defence of human rights, perhaps economic and social action remains the only area where consistent and committed international response is practically possible.

There is also a strong economic case of cost benefit for this view. World military expenditure still amounts to some \$750 billion each year, about \$600 billion in the industrial countries. The nuclear weapons purchased or maintained with this enormity of expenditure are too dangerous to be used (thank God), while non-nuclear conventional weapons and troops are, in many cases, politically too controversial to be used. Certainly the risk of industrial country soldiers being killed has often become a major argument against involvement of developed country troops as UN peacekeeping forces. In contrast, the total humanitarian efforts cost about \$5 billion. And humanitarian workers, being committed volunteers, are often willing to go to places where the military fears to tread.

The UN Charter set out a vision of peace and justice maintained and sustained by a process of law and international negotiation in place of the rule of force. We still need to make a reality of this vision, even more so with the opportunities given by the end of the cold war. But given the obvious difficulties, as shown by events in former Yugoslavia, might the case be given more attention as to the way to make practical progress in the struggle to build effective internationalism.

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